

## BOOK REVIEW

*STARZ Spartacus: Reimagining an Icon on Screen*. Edited by ANTONY AUGOUSTAKIS and MONICA CYRINO. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii + 249. Paper, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-4744-0784-7.

From October 2008 till the end of production in September 2012, I served as a historical consultant for the STARZ *Spartacus* series alongside Jeffrey Stevens. This academic volume analyzing *Spartacus* exists as part of the “Screening Antiquity” series through Edinburgh University Press, which includes volumes analyzing HBO’s *Rome*, the Ben-Hur films, and the American western. This volume brings together scholars from the fields of Classics, History, Gender Studies, and Film and Media Studies, and is divided into 13 chapters between 4 topics: Heroes and Heroism, Social Spaces, Gender and Sexuality, and Spectacle and Violence

Modern society provides numerous outlets for discussion and analysis of media. Reddit and Facebook groups, websites, blogs, Twitter accounts, and YouTube channels provide almost instantaneous reaction and analysis of media presentations. Thus, anyone looking for an analysis of the *Spartacus* series has multiple options. As an academic publication, it is hoped that this volume would elevate that discussion beyond what is regularly available, providing a greater depth of analysis and access to tools and resources beyond the average viewer.

Futrell’s chapter, “Memories of Storied Heroes”, is fantastic in its presentation and analysis on the use of narratives, counter-factual storytelling, personal identity, and power relationships within the show, to say nothing of its accuracy in terms of the amount of care and detail that was spent on the nature of slavery and Roman society in the show’s first season. Harrison’s chapter, “The Life and Death of Gannicus”, analyzes the character in terms of his initial subversion and ultimate adherence to standard media tropes; Daugherty’s chapter, “A New Crassus as Roman Villain”, analyzes the historiography around the historical figure’s characterization, as well as how the show builds tropes around this historical characterization to transform Crassus into the series’ villain; Raucci’s chapter, “Social Dynamics and Liminal Spaces”, explores the role of space and the show’s use of sets and set design as an element of narrative and characterization. It is telling that, despite having actively developed the show and its characters, I came

away from these chapters with a new understanding of what went into the show's production and into the production of narratives in modern media.

Other chapters within the volume fall more firmly under the heading of reception studies. Maurice's chapter, "Building a New Ancient Rome", traces the history of set design, how Rome has been visually portrayed throughout the history of film, and how that portrayal has affected narratives and public assumptions. McAuley's chapter, "Base Pleasures, Spectacles, and Society", discusses the presentation of violence and sexuality within the show, its basis within the primary sources, and what the modern critical reaction to that presentation reveals about modern mores and sensibilities. Gardner and Potter's chapter, "Violence and Voyeurism in the Arena", continues this theme, discussing not just the show's use of violence, but what the public's reaction to that violence reveals in terms of spectacle and voyeurism in the modern world, and how it compares to the presentation of these same themes in Roman primary sources.

Prince's chapter, "Draba's Legacy and the Spectacle of Sacrifice", remains firmly in the modern world, comparing the recent *Spartacus* series with the 1960 film, noting ways in which the two productions reflected the politics of their eras in similar ways. Strong's chapter, "The Rape of Lucretia", likewise remains firmly in the present with an analysis of the use of rape in modern media, and how *Spartacus* differs in its presentation. Finally, Potter's chapter, "Fan Reactions to Nagron as One True Pairing", looks at one of the show's central couples, Agron and Nasir, through an analysis of online fan-fiction, and how the show's presentation of this homosexual couple has allowed for a wider range of expressions regarding modern sexuality within the shows fandom.

The volume likewise contains chapters that highlight some of the difficulties and shortcomings of reception studies. Augoustakis chapter, "The Others", presents an effective discussion of how the show refocuses the audience's allegiance to characters outside of the normal range for these "sword and sandal" epics, but the chapter's analysis is only legible within a broader contextual understanding of the place of Rome in western cinema, a context that the author never provides or directly alludes to. Cyrino's chapter, titled "Upward Mobility in the House of Batiatus", notes that, in focusing on the Roman "middle class", the show breaks from the established trope of focus on either the extreme upper or lower ends of Roman society. However, the chapter is largely a summary of episodes and adds little to a discussion of its central observation; there's nothing in terms of academic content or analysis. Finally, Rodrigues' chapter, titled "From Kubrick's Political Icon to Television Sex Symbol", is by far the most problematic;

poorly sourced and lacking in necessary substantiation for its central premise, the article relies on little beyond broad stereotyping in its discussion of 1960s versus modern sexual mores and politics, offers little discussion and insight into its central premises, and concludes with a confused series of paradoxes and contradictions that defy clear explanation.

For the most part then, this volume succeeds in elevating the discussion and analysis of its subject, but not without some significant flaws and shortcomings. The volume has the ability to provide insight into the nature of media and the way we process and understand narratives about the past, despite occasionally slipping into mere observation lacking in analysis of its subject.

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