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1. TITLE PAGE


TOPICS

- Other Areas of Social Science
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(History, Representations of Femininity in Popular Culture and Communication)

TYPE OF PRESENTATION

- Paper Session

SUMMARY

I will discuss how the US Television series Spartacus: Blood and Sand (premiered on Starz in: 2010- followed by a late prequel and a sequel) reflects upon the impact of gender equality and feminism in our contemporary popular culture.

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2. ABSTRACT

Spartacus is attested in several ancient sources (Plutarch, Appian, and Florus) as the leader of a rebellion against the Roman Republic (73 to 71 BC). Despite that none of Spartacus' historical representations overtly suggest that he aimed at reforming Roman society by abolishing slavery and promoting equality, he has inspired a number of intellectuals across times and cultures as an egalitarian leader. Marx, in the Manchester letter to Engels (1861), considered him a real representative of the ancient ‘proletariat’ and members of the German Spartacus League, a forerunner of the Communist Party of Germany. In contemporary popular culture, the most recent reception of the tale of Spartacus is the US Television series Spartacus: Blood and
Sand (premiered on Starz in: 2010- followed by a late prequel and a sequel), where he is also portrayed as a just and egalitarian leader.

In this paper, I will discuss how Spartacus (2010-) promotes social and gender equality as an ancient virtue within a contemporary context. Unlike Spartacus’ historical and other cinematic representations, women play a major role in the 2010-TV series either as slaves that join the rebellion, inspired by the egalitarian Thracian slave-leader, or wealthy Romans who oppose him. Despite incidental nudity, scenes of a sexual and violent nature, a TV MA rating for graphic violence, and strong sexual content in overexposed video stylization, I will show that female characters evolve from the older sexualized and objectified females of gladiatorial Sword and Sandals (e.g. Warrior and the Slave Girl: 1958) to strong and brave action heroines. Finally, I will discuss how the 2010- TV series reflects upon the impact of equality and feminism in the portrayal of the ancient world in our contemporary popular culture.

3. ARTICLE

Introduction
Spartacus is attested in several ancient sources as the leader of a rebellion against the Roman Republic (73 to 71 BC).¹ Despite that none of Spartacus’ historical representations overtly suggest that he aimed at reforming Roman society by abolishing slavery and promoting equality², he has inspired a number of intellectuals across times and cultures as an egalitarian leader.³ Spartacus has similarly inspired contemporary popular culture; his character and narrative of social struggle against the Romans feature in several Sword and Sandal films (including TV programs).⁴ The story of the revolt of the Thracian Spartacus has often been the platform for discussions of social hierarchies, equality, abolition of slavery and egalitarianism.

Older cinematic representation(s) of Spartacus have been examined previously from the scholarly perspectives of reception, context, budget and visual culture. Perhaps the most widely studied representation of Spartacus in popular culture is the 1960s film Spartacus (Stanley Kubrick). A recent edited collection by Winkler (2007) concentrated on the ideology behind Spartacus’ film-making, its aims and historical (in)accuracies, the portrayals of Spartacus and Crassus, its (distorted) reflection of the events of the first century BC. Among other aspects of representation, the volume discusses explicitly the film’s context: specifically the Cold War and further political

¹ Plutarch, Crassus 8; Appian, Civil Wars 1.116; Florus, Epitome of Roman History 2.8
² See: Plutarch, Crassus 8-11 and Pompey 21.1-2; Appian, The Civil Wars 1.14.111 and 116-121.1; Sallust, The Histories 3.96 and 98 (M) = 3.64 and 66 (McG); Livy, Periochae 95-97; Velleius Paterculus, Compendium of Roman History 2.30.5-6; Florus, Epitome of Roman History 2.8 (3.20); Frontinus, Strategies 1.5.20-22 and 7.6, 2.4.7 and 5.34; Orosius, History against the Pagans 5.24.1-8 and 18-19
³ Marx, in the Manchester letter to Engels (1861) considered him a real representative of they considered as the ancient 'proletariat', and members of the German Spartacus League, a forerunner of the Communist Party of Germany.

frictions in the Hollywood of the late 1950s.

In this paper, I will discuss the latest reception of the Spartacus’ story, the TV series *Spartacus* (2010-present) from a gender perspective. In spite of Spartacus’ historical and other cinematic representations, and the fact this is a primarily male-centered story within a traditionally male genre (in terms of primary sources and later reception) women play a major role in the 2010-TV series. I will demonstrate how female characters evolve from the older sexualized and objectified females of gladiatorial *Sword and Sandal* (e.g. *Warrior and the Slave Girl*: 1958; *Spartacus*: 1960) to strong and brave action heroines. I will argue that Spartacus can be used as an example of the changing fashions in the representation of femininity within the genre of *Sword and Sandal*. The embodiment and agency of women in Spartacus will be pitted against a rather more generic (and therefore stereotypical) representation of gender in gladiator film. Finally, I will discuss how the 2010- TV series reflects upon the impact of equality and gender studies in the portrayal of the ancient world within contemporary popular culture productions.

**Female representation within a male-dominated genre**

Of all the cinematic descriptions of antiquity, the Roman Empire on the big screen has been the most popular. Rome in popular imagination projects a variety of visual interpretations and meanings and it has been reproduced across different and disparate times and cultures. The idea of ancient Rome, city of power, intrigue, beauty, brutality and lust, has always attracted and entertained modern film audiences. Consequently, films about the ancient Roman world have been wildly popular and immensely profitable throughout the first century of the history of cinema, and the genre continues to show signs of strength.  

Within the context of *Sword and Sandal* the action hero is traditionally male with females largely cast in a supporting role. Hollywood filmmakers created historical epics with dramatic conflicts and realistic protagonists, or used it as a backdrop for a simplistic comic book-like heroic adventure tale. Within Hollywood and consequently mainstream popular culture, the genre of historical fantasy was popularized after the cinematic trend of the so-called *Pepla* (*Sword and Sandal*) of the 1950s and 1960s, featuring comic depictions of Hercules in Italian *Sandaloni*. Plots are based very loosely on mythology, legendary Graeco-Roman history, or the other contemporary cultures of the time, such as the Egyptian, Assyrian, Etruscan, etc. Most *Sword and Sandal* featured a supernaturally strong muscleman as the protagonist, such as Sampson or Hercules. These supermen often rescued damsels in distress and fought mythological creatures. The gentle giant characters, such as Hercules and Odysseus, were projected as ancient superheroes, parodies of the mythological heroes played mainly by American bodybuilders.

The representation of masculinity within the context of *Sword and Sandal* was based primarily on male bodies and bodily indications strength. Its projection in an ancient European (classical?) backdrop articulates masculinity within a specific historical context. Moreover, the very emphasis on the representation of the body suggests the

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construction and projection of a specific type of heroic ‘white’ masculinity (see Dyer 1997: 148-151 and Ahmed: 2004 for a criticism of whiteness studies). Indeed, the white muscleman of the Sword and Sandal and Peplum was clearly a gym or a competition product: a project of leisure and wealth with connotations of (self) objectification since the very sport of bodybuilding is subject to the spectator’s gaze. 7 Body-builder heroes are involved in battle but do not necessarily indulge into crude violence (see for example Steve Reeves in Le Fatiche d’Ercole: 1957 or Kirk Douglas in Spartacus: 1960). 8 Although the body-builder trend dies out in the early ‘90s the idealized image of the (tanned) white male hero with well-defined muscles is naturally projected also in more contemporary Sword and Sandal film. The occasional use of the green screen 9 is deployed for special (action hero) effects and digitally enhanced bodies, as in, for example, Gladiator: 2000; 300: 2004; Immortals: 2011; Wrath of the Titans: 2012.

Spartacus (2010-) is, then, in effect fulfilling the audience’s primary stereotypical expectations of a Sword and Sandal: the TV program focuses on the events within a ludus in the city of Capua, where there are male muscles and there is male action. The first season, Spartacus: Blood & Sand (2010), deals with Spartacus’ (Whitfield) enslavement in Thrace and his gladiator training in the ludus of Quintus Lentulus Batiatus (Hannah). It is followed by Spartacus: Gods of the Arena (2011), the prequel that puts the story of Spartacus in context through a narration of the rise of the Lanista Batiatus as a Dominus in the gladiator business. The second season (third in a row) Spartacus: Vengeance, (2012), depicts the aftermath of the slaves’ bloody escape from the ludus (gladiator school), and the final season, Spartacus: War of the Damned (2013), will focus on the further conflicts between Spartacus and his band of rebels and the Roman military led by Marcus Licinius Crassus.

The series is placed primarily in the city of Capua and has a more specific focus on the microhistoric aspects of life in the provinces of the Roman Empire, involving issues of domestic economy, the role of women and slaves and household and further social politics. 10 Unlike Spartacus’ historical and other cinematic representations, women play a major role in the 2010-TV series within the context of both micro and macro history. As the series progresses, there is a decent number of female characters that involve themselves in the male realm of a ludus. These are either slaves that join the rebellion, most notably Mira (Law) and Naevia (Seasons 1 and 2: Brandt and

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7 For bodybuilding as an sport that is centered on objectification and self-objectification see Davis and Weaving (2010) 105.
8 Spina (2008) 57-73: It has been suggested that peplum films were, initially, essentially serious and intended for an audience that expected a populist hero, but over time they became more like parodies
9 Green or Blue Screen: A special effects film technique involving filming actors against a blue screen on which effects such as computerized graphics can be added later (post production) and integrated into a single sequence (OED). For a discussion of the frequency and importance of digital enhancement in the series see relevant interview with the producers DeKnight and Tapert. http://www.fanbolt.com/headline/7264/Interview:_Steven_S._DeKnight_and_Robert_Tapert_from_Spartacus:_Blood_And_Sand/page2
10 Similar to the trends that HBO’s Rome (2005-7) follows in stretching the portrayal of microhistory through the imaginary reconstruction of the lives of two Roman soldiers: Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus as found in Gaius Julius Caesar, Commentarii De Bello Gallico 5.44. A similar trend has been recently deployed within the representation of the ancient world in exhibitions and museums (See for example: Life and Death in Pompey at the British Museum: 2013.)
Season 3: Addai-Robinson) inspired by the egalitarian Thracian slave-leader, or wealthy Romans who are initially opposed to him Such as Ilythia (Bianca) and Lucretia (Lawless).

**Agency, Sexuality, Action!**

In terms of style, the series is digitally polished in the style of 300, involving the use of green screen. It is indeed preceded by a statement that it is a ‘historical portrayal of ancient Roman society that contains graphic violence and adult content’. Incidental nudity and scenes of intense sexual and violent nature are present throughout and the show has a TV-MA rating. However, as opposed to traditional Sword and Sandal heroes and heroines are equally sexualized according to the producers and viewers. In an interview for the online magazine *fanbolt* in 2010, the producers discussed briefly their viewpoints on female representation as well as the demands of Starz in terms of explicit sexualization and violence.11 Steve DeKnight articulated that they tried to keep the spectator’s gaze within the limits of gender balance: ‘there is more eye candy for the women than there is for the men’.

Within the series women are represented lightly dressed as well as naked. So are men. In fact, both male and female characters in *Spartacus* (2012-) are equally objectified and used as eye candy, to the extent of pornography. Both gladiators and slave girls have things done to them. Their bodies are exposed and are therefore vulnerable. Their ‘mode of embodying’ to quote Butler (1996: 15) ‘embodies possibilities’. As intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body is a historical situation and is a manner of dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. To do, to dramatize, to reproduce, these seem to be some of the elementary structures of embodiment. Embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies, ‘a stylistics of existence’. This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities.

Classical culture had a very prominent, gendered idea of shame and honor within which a respectable citizen or his wife would not be presented naked or inappropriately touched. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, an emphasis on domination has led scholars to view expressions of Roman male sexuality in terms of a ‘penetrator-penetrated’ binary model; that is, the proper way for a Roman male to seek sexual gratification was to insert his penis in his partner irrespective of biological gender (sex). Allowing himself to be penetrated threatened his liberty as a free citizen as well as his sexual integrity. Women’s agency is gradually portrayed in visual culture and literature and is in part with their social status.12 Within the realm of social realism in *Spartacus* (2010-) objectification and agency is, similarly, not about gender but about social status. The lower the status (slaves, gladiators) the more readily available for passive, objectified, physical sexuality. Regardless of gender, lower classes are virtually and verbally exposed. Sexuality and agency are instituted through the stylization of the body and must be understood within the context of

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11 Producer of Spartacus Rob Tapert: retrieved at http://www.fanbolt.com/headline/7264/Interview:_Steven_S._DeKnight_and_Robert_Tapert_from_Spartacus:_Blood_And_Sand

12 For an overview of the older binary model and the politics of sexuality in ancient Rome see: David (2002), Hubbard (2003), and Langlands (2006).
performance and contemporary perceptions of gender and its (potential) objectification.

**Violence as Agency and Power?**

Women in (Spartacus -2012) as mentioned above, are indeed portrayed in microhistoric terms. There are prominent noble wives and daughters as well as slaves from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Mira is Iberian and Naevia is Phoenician, for example). When producer Steven S. DeKnight was asked about his female characters (Interview for *fanbolt*: 2010) he described some of the female characters in the series as ‘having power behind the scenes’ (Lucretia and Ilythia). And described his techniques of representations of strong femininity similar to those of Joss Wheddon, creator of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). In the third season, Mira proves herself skillful with bow and arrow joining the battle with the other slave rebels. In the future, the producers speculate the incorporation of a *gladiatrix*; in their own words ‘we want more strong women, fighting’.

The concept of women fighting is certainly not something new to the producers of Spartacus especially for Tapert who is also the producer of *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (1995-7). Xena is also dressed in a tight and short leather outfit and one could argue (along the lines of older feminist film theories like Mulvey: 1975 and 1981) that films typically reenact male domination of women by objectifying the heroine, using strong definitions by early feminist film theorists such as voyeurism, sadism, and the fetishistic representation of the female image. The male viewer ‘identifies with the active power of the erotic look of the male protagonist’ (Mulvey: 1975: 63- 68)

The argument that females tend to be objectified more than males in film, although reductionist, describes accurately certain features of traditional films. However, at the same time, in associating and interpreting physical power exclusively with males and passivity exclusively with females, if anything, reinforces binary gender models. The fact the character of Xena has been received by popular culture as a lesbian and a feminist icon, creating almost a new genre (*altfic: alternative i.e. non-heteronormative fiction*) puts gendered action heroes into perspective: Xena is a lesbian icon because she can fight. Again, I argue, this view is also a reductionist statement but indeed Xena has agency beyond her otherwise traditional female role. The opening sequence of the series describes Xena as a ‘hero’, not a heroine. It is never questioned on the series whether a woman can be a warrior. Xena is the favorite of Ares, the god of war, and she receives the respect of both her enemies and her friends for her skills in battle. Along similar lines, the shy, half-naked and objectified slave- girls of Spartacus learn how to fight throughout season three. And while towards the end of the season Naevia struggles to kill Ashur the audiences are expecting her comeback as a *gladiatrix* in season four.

**Popularity and Profit: (Sexy) bodies in action, brief recap and conclusion.**

Within the study of the reception of classics there has been a continuous emphasis on representation (materiality and embodiment) as a way of understanding and

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reconstructing the past. Given the current theoretical trends in international screen culture research, this article attempts a rather brief discussion of ancient social identities in a specific contemporary screen environment (TV). Spectatorship within the context of different screens is an interesting aspect of the show’s popularity. Unlike cinematic representations of the same story a TV series is a more complicated genre in the sense that its continuation depends on its success and popularity. On the one hand, within a TV series there is certainly more time for the characters to evolve and potentially be more complex. Secondary characters to an otherwise ‘male’ story (slaves, wives etc) would inevitably have more time to develop within three seasons of the series rather than in a 90-minute long film. Moreover, a film is largely depended on popularity for its success and continuation. Its distribution over Starz Network (officially) and promotion over the Internet (unofficially or via its projection through social media) makes it globally available and therefore a subject to global criticism and approval.

Historical reproduction in popular culture is a way of narrating the past through its representational elements (Rosenstone: 1995) and as a manifestation and materialization of the on-going construction process of social and cultural identities (Edensor: 1997). Accordingly, focus is placed on uncovering interrelations and frictions between historical and popular culture through comparative analysis of visual materialism and embodiment within film. Similarly, popular expressions of digital (film) ekphrasis (See Beachan 2012) discourses are not just ‘reflecting reality’ but are constituted within specific contexts according to particular relations of power (Foucault 1989: 376-7 and the testing of these foundations and building new extensions to the theoretical edifice as in Schatzki et al. 2001), proving that social knowledge (and consequently social realism in film) can sometimes operate as a historically current situated social practice. In any case one can imply that the representation of women in Spartacus (2010-) moves away from a traditionalist point of view that sees male characters as fighters and women as sexually objectified subordinate roles. It succeeds this by equally objectifying males and females and by developing (gradually) female characters to the gender-unconventional role of the gladiatrix- action heroine themselves.

Owing to the pervasive and increasingly interconnected nature of popular culture (Storey: 2006), Spartacus (2010-) indeed mirrors current discourses on gender representation and it can be further used to discuss the complex mechanisms of visual narratives of historically situated social identities within the sphere of popular culture. Fictionality as a cooperative art of communication between creator and audience, a formation of a propositional content which becomes the focus of a special kind of imaginative effort among participants (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 74) projects a far better outlook of gender within Spartacus (2010-) than in comparison to older Sword and Sandals. The very construction of the cognitive realm of ancient social culture is then altered from within the screened translation of its basic components – i.e. embodiment from the sphere of current reality to the domain of augmented social

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14 See Beacham (2012) 109-24 who observes the staging of Roman games and the audience-spectator dynamics, however not necessarily concentrating on social interaction or embodiment. In the context of screens, materiality and embodiment in the depiction of antiquity are well under-researched.
realism.

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