

### *Spartacus, Gladiator, and Black Stereotypes on Film*

Donald Bogle's seminal history of African-Americans in cinema delineates 5 black stereotypes that have appeared on screen since the earliest days of film: Toms (subservient flunkies), coons (subservient fools), mulattoes (tragic victims of racial inferiority), mammies (female variants of Toms), and bucks (uncontrollable brutes). It is unsurprising that a film from the early twentieth century such as Cecil de Mille's 1932 *Sign of the Cross* would evince such stereotypes in its depiction of African "pygmy" gladiators who are both savage (bucks) and ostensibly ridiculous in stature (coons). I will demonstrate that Bogle's stereotypes continued to appear, despite changing social awareness of race in America, in the characterization of black gladiators even in the Civil Rights era in *Spartacus* (1960) and the contemporary *Gladiator* (2000).

In a key scene early in Stanley Kubrick's epic *Spartacus*, the eponymous hero is defeated in single combat by a black gladiator named Draba. When the small patrician audience indicates that Draba should kill Spartacus, the victor instead hurls his trident into the viewing box and attempts to attack the spectators. He is speared in the back by a Roman soldier and then dispatched unceremoniously with a dagger by Laurence Olivier's Crassus. His body is hung upside down in the barracks as a warning to the other gladiators.

The leftist credentials of the film are unassailable: The novel it's based on was written by Howard Fast while he was in prison for communist activities, and the screenplay was written and credited to Dalton Trumbo, a screenwriter blacklisted in Hollywood for alleged communist sympathies. Commentators such as Winkler (2007) have interpreted the dignified depiction of the black Draba as the catalyst for Spartacus' gladiator revolt as an implicit pro-civil rights gesture and break with previous film stereotypes of black characters. Girgus (2002), on the other

hand, places Draba and *Spartacus* within a genre of boxing movies which revolve around black athletes sacrificing themselves so that white counterparts may succeed. The film's civil rights gesture is thus revealed as a form of tokenism: Draba appears very briefly and speaks little before dying, and no other black character appears again on screen. Bogle (2003) doesn't even bother to describe the actor Woody Strode's performance as Draba, dismissing the part as that of a strongman in a loin cloth. In other words, Bogle recognizes Draba as a twist on the old stereotypical buck.

The Oscar winning film *Gladiator* (2000) appears to present a fuller character in the black gladiator Juba, played by the African actor Djimon Hounsou. Juba converses with the main character Maximus about life and religion, refers to an unseen wife and children, and survives in the end after Maximus dies heroically. A closer examination reveals that Juba is not a well developed character, but rather a modern variant on the Tom, namely the "Magical Negro."

Hughey (2009) describes the Magical Negro type as a socially inferior black character who uses magical powers to rehabilitate and redeem a "broken" higher class white man. All of these characteristics, including supernatural overtones, apply to Juba. The audience first sees Juba during Maximus' fever-dream in which they appear to move magically through time and space. Juba subsequently heals Maximus' infected shoulder by the counterintuitive (and seemingly mystical) application of maggots and some kind of gum that he takes from his mouth. For the remainder of the movie he counsels Maximus on the ways of the universe and how to achieve inner peace, until in the final scene he buries the dead Maximus' *lares* in the Colosseum and lays his spirit to rest. Juba thus has the veneer of being a positive, well developed character while displaying all of the hallmarks of the blithely subservient Tom from an earlier era of film.

I will need a projector.

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