"By Jupiter's Cock!"

Spartacus: Blood and Sand, *Video Games, and Camp Excess*

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Spartacus: Blood and Sand began airing in January 2010 and quickly gained notoriety for its often explicit visual content. Barry Garron's piece on the season for *The Hollywood Reporter* reflects the views of many critics when he suggests that while the graphic depiction of sex and violence might be an increasingly acceptable means "to shore up a story" on film, television requires greater narrative depth, something Garron believes *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* lacks: "With such thin stories each week, it's small wonder that sex and violence are used to take up the slack" (Garron). Garron and his fellow critics may be missing the cue, however; *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*'s emphatic use of visual excess is intentional, allowing the series to operate as a vehicle for the pleasurable extremes that certain pop cultural texts often offer. Concomitant to this notion is the impression that while criticism concerning contemporary television has undoubtedly embraced a range of shows that combine genre elements with sophisticated and "adult" narratives (science-fiction in *Battlestar Galactica*, comic books in *Heroes*), there still exists an inability to engage with those shows that operate in a predominantly camp mode, those that place an emphasis on a type of excess that often revels in its own lack of seriousness. This limited range of critical approaches to a given show may be detrimental, as Susan Sontag suggests in her influential essay "Notes on Camp": "One cheats oneself, as a human being, if one has *respect* only for the style of high culture" (49). While lines such as "not if Jupiter himself were to open the heavens and dangle his cock from the skies" (Season 1: Episode 3) and the interjection noted in this essay's title suggest that *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* distinctly embodies a camp "love of the exaggerated," the construction becomes problematic when considering Sontag's declaration that "camp is either completely naive or else wholly conscious" (278, 280). *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* would seem to fall somewhere

in between these two poles, refusing an interpretation that might imply the show's creators are oblivious to the extravagance of the actors' characterizations or the stylization of the *mise en scène*, but also stopping short of the kind of self-knowingness that might allow for a reading of the show as wholly ironic and distanced in tone. Bearing in mind the nebulous nature of Sontag's use of the term, a more accurate way of understanding the show's camp elements might be found by referring to Sontag's writing on the particular dual nature of some camp artifacts:

> The Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice [281].

It is certainly possible to read *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* as pure artifice; as an "apolitical" show that, while possessing pretensions of offering serious commentary on the entrenched class system in operation within Roman society, operates more successfully as a visually pleasurable if excessive simulacra of a mass media-inspired version of Ancient Rome (Sontag 279). Conversely, it is likewise possible to read the series as wholly literal, in its intent, in its depiction of violence, in its characterizations, and even in the construction of its fantastic, soap opera-like plots. This dualistic, serio-artificial nature hallmarks *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* and its relationship to its own camp tendencies and sensibilities.

Though most critics were universally condemnatory of the quality of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, a slightly more ambivalent view of the show's successes and failures could be found in the acerbic *Guardian* television critic Charlie Brooker's review. While Brooker similarly notes the show's formulaic and repetitive narrative, which "consists of weekly kill-or-be-killed hack-and-slash encounters in the coliseum," the writer is able to appreciate the show's more intentionally lurid excesses on their own, pulp-influenced terms:

> *Spartacus* starts to improve exponentially until somewhere round episode five, where you stop enjoying it ironically and start to enjoy it outright. Yes, it may be the kind of show in which a tattooed warrior gets his face hacked off by a man armed with a hook; it may feature lines like "your wife has been fucked to madness by a thousand vermin cocks"; it may toss in pointless cameos for one-armed topless transsexuals — and all three of these things genuinely happen in the early episodes — but it's also not half bad. In fact I'd go as far as to say it actually gets quite good [Brooker].

In reading such a commentary one is brought back to Sontag's theory of camp, particularly its demarcation as an interpretative reading strategy. Writing in their preface to Sontag's essay in *The Cult Film Reader*, Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik note that Sontag suggests that camp prizes "travesty, *double entendre* [and] unintentional badness" (41). Indeed, Sontag's essay develops this assertion, with the author going on to propose that such an aesthetic prac-

tice inherently liberates the individual's approach to cultural artifacts: "The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement. Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste" (50).

For Sontag this recognition of the operating practices of "bad taste" is integral to any understanding of the camp artifact, chief amongst the characteristics of which are a reliance on visual excess, often as a means of bringing attention to said artifact's constructed nature: "To perceive Camp in objects and person is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre" (41). Indeed, if there is one aspect of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* that immediately differentiates it from other contemporary television shows, it is its excessive nature. As Brooker notes, the show's depiction of explicit content is frequent, running throughout most episodes: "Roughly every 30 seconds someone gets an axe or sword in the face. Roughly every 20 seconds a woman bares her breasts. Roughly every 10 seconds someone grunts a four-letter word starting with either 'f' or 'c'" (Brooker). An early highlight in this respect is the episode "The Thing in the Pit" (1:4), in which a disgraced Spartacus must fight in the illegal underground pits of Capua and beat the infamous Ixion, a grotesque giant of a man who wields a club and has a tendency to cut off the faces of his fallen victims and wear them as a mask. Before encountering Ixion, Spartacus must defeat a range of lower-level fighters, which he proceeds to do in increasingly brutal ways, including skewering one with a large metal hook and bloodily puncturing the eyes of another. The extent to which this violence is warranted by the concerns of the narrative is a matter of subjective opinion, but it should not be forgotten that HBO's *Rome* was critically lauded, in part, for its authentic depiction of life in the ancient city, an authenticity, which as Jerome De Groot suggests, was achieved by "emphasis[ing] the dirt, squalor, and violence of the city, particularly shown in the explicit language, sex and violence" (199).

Whereas *Rome* may have managed to negotiate its often violent depiction of ancient civilization through claims to historical authenticity, this chapter argues that *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* takes a different route, portraying the acts of the violence between the show's often hyper-masculine central characters in such an exaggerated fashion that a television viewing audience is encouraged to read them as overtly fantastical. Indeed, I would argue that an appreciation of the penchant for excess integral to the pulp genre is crucial to an understanding of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* as a "successful" text. Thusly, in this chapter I will read the show as effectively borrowing both the Manichean storytelling techniques and visual extravagance that are often found in many video games as one of the most prevalent and popular instances of pulp in the early twenty first century. Of course, many contemporary video games are themselves often indebted to the sort of pulp fiction created by writers like Robert E.

Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the proliferation of comic book adaptations of their work, which are also reliant on visual and narrative excess. Students of popular culture need only familiarize themselves with hugely popular video game franchises such as *Halo* (Microsoft, 2001–present) and *Gears of War* (Microsoft, 2006–present) to see that the two forms have a long history of feeding into and from each other.

Given that they so often share the same domestic space, with LCD televisions increasingly functioning as visual display units for video gaming consoles, there has been surprisingly little analysis of the growing links between contemporary television and video games. Though a number of scholarly writers, including Geoff King, Tanya Krzywinska, Mark J.P. Wolf, and James Newman, have started to produce work that looks at video games from an academic perspective, widespread mainstream opinion still seems to be that while television is becoming an increasingly valid critical form, in comparison, video games remain inherently lowbrow, unworthy of being considered art, a belief that is perhaps best exemplified by Roger Ebert's declaration as such in the *Chicago Sun–Times*:

> To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic [Ebert].

This lack of critical attention obfuscates the influence of video games on today's popular culture, an influence unambiguously reflected in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*. In fact, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* stands as one of the first examples of television that actually "remediates" (to borrow a term from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin) elements of video games, constructing key elements of the show's design, structure, format, and even characterizations based on common forms found in video games. This is suggested by King and Kryzwinska in their seminal study on the interfaces between film and video games, *Screen-Play*:

> Forms such as games and cinema exist in complex and multidimensional relationships. In some respects, clear points of similarity can be identified. In others, divergences are sharp. In between, however, lie many shades of overlap, areas of relevance not just to the analysis of this particular conjuncture but to the interrelations between contemporary media forms more generally [30].

While I intend to argue that *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* borrows liberally from the video game form, appropriating the form's aesthetic and narrative structures, I believe that this process of emulation is based on an approximation of generalized video game tropes drawn from a range of "non-genre" video games, including action-adventures, beat-'em-ups, and others, rather than a concerted imitation of any specific video game title or series. Though there have been a number of video games that arguably belong to the sword and san-

dal genre, such as *Shadow of Rome* (Capcom, 2005), *Conan* (THQ, 2007), and the *God of War* series (Sony, 2005–10), most contain visual and narrative elements that are lacking in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, most notably an overtly fantastical aspect to their plots. Rather, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* borrows more liberally from the generic structure of the video game itself, suggesting that it is the medium — and not any one specific derivation of said medium — that is paramount to not only understanding these structures within the series, but in truly considering their genesis as well.

Such co-option of the video game form is apparent in the second episode of the series, "Sacramentum Gladiatorum" (1:2). This episode picks up the central character Spartacus' story following the betrayal of his Thracian fighting unit by his Roman allies, who subsequently burn Spartacus' village to the ground, attack and rape his wife, and sentence him to death in the gladiatorial arena. Spartacus manages to survive the attacks of the arena's best gladiators and is bought by the gladiator manager Quintus Lentulus Batiatus. This archetypal structuring device is noted in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; yet a recurrent plot in which the protagonist is dispossessed of his or her home and familial relations at the start of the narrative by an evil force or individual, and then must attempt to re-acquire them through combat and adventure, is one that is likewise common in video game narratives, where it serves as a handy means of explaining the player-character or "avatar's" motivations in a sufficiently simplistic yet empathetic manner. In this second episode of the series, Spartacus must prove himself worthy of joining Batiatus' band of gladiators. The concept of a character having to acclimatize himself physically and mentally to the quest that lies ahead will immediately remind any avid gamer of the numerous training sequences of many contemporary video games, as King and Krzywinska note: "In the early stages of playing a new game ... a new interface may have to be mastered" (*Tomb* 32). The way in which the show proceeds to visualize these scenes has further echoes of so-called beat-'em-up video games such as *Streetfighter* (Capcom 1987–present) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway 1992–2009, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment 2009–present), in which players pick from a range of avatars and then pit them against one another on a two-dimensional (or more latterly, three-dimensional) plane. Indeed, the episode climaxes with Spartacus having to compete "one on one" against one of Batiatus' best gladiators, Crixus. Crixus' status as the champion of Capua suggestively aligns him with the tougher, more difficult "boss" characters that combat-based video games frequently offer up as staging posts on the player's journey to successful completion (a structural similarity that continues in episodes such as "Shadow Games" [1:5] with the character of the giant Theokoles). This second episode's indebtedness to video game convention is further emphasized through the visual presentation of this climatic battle; Spartacus must face Crixus on a small elevated wooden platform, forcing the men to adopt the face-to-face positioning familiar to any gamer: "Spatial restriction

is also an integral feature of many beat-'em-up and wrestling games in which fighting takes place in localized arenas, keeping combatants in close proximity to one another" (King & Krzywinska *Tomb* 77). Spartacus eventually triumphs over Crixus by pushing him off the platform, in a move that emulates the three dimensional beat-'em-up's "Ring Out!" winning conditions, whereby one player forces the other outside the boundaries of the designated play area, and testifies to the series' appropriation of conventions, both narrative and visual, drawn from the culturally lowbrow world of gaming.

The influence of video games is apparent throughout *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, most noticeably in terms of the show's prominent aesthetic signature elements. While those reviewing the show were quick to point out its use of state-of-the-art filmic techniques — including super imposition, wherein the placement of an image on top of another image creates a new effect; chroma key, which is a process whereby two images are merged together to remove a color or small range of colors; and "Bullet Time," in which virtual cameras are used to create a sensation of variable speed — critics failed to discuss these techniques' relationship to gaming. King and Krzywinska note in their chapter on spectacle in gaming that "qualities such as striking imagery and sound are important sources of pleasure in video games" (*Tomb* 124). They suggest that specific factors such as the visual and aural fidelity of a game are often of vital importance in inducing enjoyment in the player: "The qualities of graphical reproduction on-screen, combined with sound effects, can play a significant part in the establishment of many of the dimensions of games" (*Tomb* 124). This desire for greater levels of spectacle enabled by superior resolution and visual detail in the field of video games seems to be reflected in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*'s use of super imposition, chroma key, and "Bullet Time," where the techniques serves to create a video game like *mise en scène* that is removed from the more realist tendencies of television through its overt foregrounding of excessive artifice and visual stylization. Where much of contemporary television is characterized visually by a "self-consciously wrought *mise en scène*" and is "art-cinema derivative," *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* is defined by its pulpy, visceral excessiveness, perhaps ironically linking the show to John Caldwell's belief that television since the 1980's has become increasingly "defined by excessive stylization and visual exhibitionism" (Bignell 159, Feuer 145, 352). Indeed, while many commentators criticized the show for what they considered to be its repetitive utilization of techniques like super imposition and "Bullet Time," if *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* is re-considered as a series that is *intentionally* trying to emulate the often excessive visual conventions of video-gaming, then the repeated slowed-down blood splatters, to take one example, begin to seem like an apposite reflection of the central importance of significant and clearly discernible visual feedback in video games and closely resemble the slowed-down impacts of such seminal games as the later entries in the *Fight Night* series (EA, 1985–2009). In video games, it is often thought that the more visceral the indi-

cation of the success of a player's action, the more pleasure the player will derive from the game: "feedback can be dramatized on-screen — the spectacular death of an enemy blasted with a powerful weapon, for example" (King & Krzywinska *Tomb* 31).

Here again one is confronted with the relevance of camp. Mathijs and Mendik note that, "Sontag claims that camp is an aesthetic sensibility that is characterized by a high degree of, and attention for stylization, artifice [and] extravagance" (41). Sontag goes on to suggest in her original text that "Sometimes whole art forms become saturated with Camp," proposing that this tendency is more likely to occur in popular art forms such as pop music and cinema than it is in concert music because "it offers no opportunity, say, for a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form" (281). It does not seem too much of a leap to suggest that such a reading of popular art forms might be extended to video games, which, with their reliance on visual artifice, can be seen as a logical contemporary instance of Sontag's theories. This is not to say that all video games are camp; yet many of them do seem to embody an approach that echoes Sontag's belief that an extravagant artifice is foregrounded. In the case of many video games, this is often a concomitant factor in the "arms race" of ever increasing graphical advances that result in the promoting of excessive stylization as an effective means to demonstrate the product's technological superiority to that of its competitors.

This particular video game-inflected visual ethos of the show is evident from the pilot, "The Red Serpent" (1:1). As a result of the epic scope of this first episode, the viewer is shown a variety of environments, all of them created digitally with computer graphics; while on one level these backgrounds are meant to resemble "real" geographical locations (the Thracian village, Rome, the arena in Capua,) they are also heavily stylized to the extent that the viewer can be under little impression that they are meant to be considered as mimetically "realistic." Instead, the show appears to bring attention to its own artificiality by imbuing these locales with highly noticeable artistic flourishes — such as the proliferation of autumnal leaves in the orchard outside of the Thracian village — that seem to consciously evoke the "environments" of a video game such as *Okami* (Capcom, 2006) or a comic book panel. Indeed, one could argue that super imposition is an inherently video game aping technique, replicating the form's use of popular processes such as motion-capture, which attempts to capture the physicality of real human beings and map their movements on to in-game avatars, who then operate in landscapes created digitally by video game artists. Motion-capture has been an integral part of many video games since the mid to late 1990s, being used in examples as diverse as the golf simulation *Tiger Woods* series (EA, 1998 –present) to the complex and mature serial killer title *Heavy Rain* (Sony, 2010). Chroma key, or techniques that approximate the same sort of visual effect, are also increasingly being employed in video games; in *The Saboteur* (EA, 2009), the player must attempt to wrestle control of France

back from the Nazis. The process of freeing areas of France is reflected in a visual transformation from a drab grey landscape drained of color during the German occupation to a colorful and bustling metropolis when liberated. Such perceptible visual techniques speak to the increasingly symbiotic relationship between film and computer graphics, with both forms seeking to capitalize on the advances of the other in order to offer new and exciting creative and commercial possibilities.

While reviews of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* tended to praise John Hannah and Lucy Lawless's performances as the scheming Batiatus and his wife, they also singled out Andy Whitfield's characterization of the chief protagonist as weak: "Whitfield has the requisite physicality for the title role. Beyond that, it's hard to assess his performance because his character is so consistently two-dimensional" (Garron). Yet, like so much else in the show, Whitfield's acting takes on a different aspect when considered through the auspice of the video game. Whitfield's blankness is ideal for the viewer, who is used to assuming the position of the video game hero. As Joshua Clover suggests of Keanu Reeves' similarly "vacant" performance in *The Matrix*, "This is a bodily leap more than a cathexis; most video games, like most action heroes, ask more for a physical identification than emotional investment" (46). The reading of Whitfield as avatar rather than character is further reinforced in the series' tendency to cut between mid-angle shots of fighters in the gladiatorial scenes with close point of view shots of the fighters' faces meant to depict what is going on inside their helmets. Such editing allows the viewer to share the perspective of the characters, in a manner reminiscent of first-person shooters such as *Half Life* (Sierra Entertainment/Valve/EA, 1998 –present) or *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003), and more specifically combat-based games played from a first person perspective, such as *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* (Vivendi, 2004) and *Zeno Clash* (Valve, 2009).

The creators of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* also embrace, with a keen awareness, the homoerotic imagery prevalent throughout many video games (see *Gears of War*) and comic books (see any number of superhero or Robert E. Howard-inspired series) wherein the physically overdeveloped, muscular form of the male body is presented as a pleasurable spectacle for a predominantly male audience. Such images function as a means of imaginative empowerment, a vehicle of identification for those experiencing feelings of powerlessness. The opening of the episode "Legends" (1.3), in which Spartacus is initially dressed in little more than a jockstrap and proceeds to strap on his gladiatorial clothing and armor, sets the tone for what is to follow. Once dressed, Spartacus joins the other gladiators as they train for the arena, allowing, in tenuous narrative terms, for scenes of groups of scantily clad, muscle-bound men grappling with one another, with the profuse use of slow-motion in these scenes allowing for a further emphasis on the male body in the throes of physical exertion. The show's depiction and sexual objectification of the male body is most evident in

a scene midway through the episode, when the gladiators' bodies are explicitly put on show for an audience of eager male and female dignitaries as part of the pre-arena festivities organized by Batiatus. The sexualized nature of the display is made explicit when the scene culminates with one of the gladiators being instructed to perform sexual intercourse with a female slave for the viewing pleasure of the assembled Roman luminaries.

While the frequent depictions of semi-clad or naked male bodies might suggest an intentional ploy on the show's part to attract a portion of both a gay male and heterosexual female audience, it is interesting to note that this is perhaps not the primary impetus behind this representation. Instead, it would appear more correct to suggest that *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* employs a type of visual excessiveness with regards to its depiction of the male body as hypermasculine. Functioning in a similar camp manner to the "exaggerated he-manness of Steve Reeves [and] Victor Mature" that Sontag references, this representation highlights its own artificiality, relishing "the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" to such an extent that it is no longer threatening to a heterosexual male audience, who can instead take pleasure in the playful amplification on display (42).

While later episodes of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* see the show maturing somewhat, with the narrative deepening in complexity along with the characterization, the show's continued reliance on the camp excesses of video game aesthetic and narrative conventions results in a program that remains unusual in the contemporary television landscape for acknowledging and foregrounding its own artificiality. The fact is that the show seems quite happy in assimilating the cultural capital of such populist and critically elided forms and has so far proven commercially successful in reaching an audience familiar with such conventions. This may suggest a need for the reassessment of entrenched hegemonic approaches to television studies, one that recognizes the increasingly synergistic and digitized nature of contemporary television and the impact of video games on the pop culture mores of newer generations of television watchers.

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