“Everybody Loves a Muscle Boi”: Homos, Heroes, and Foes in Post-9/11 Spoofs of the 300 Spartans

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“It’s Greek to whom?”
In 2007-2008, a significant accumulation of cinematic and other visual media took up a celebrated episode of Greek antiquity recounting in different genres and styles the rise of the Spartans against the Persians. Amongst them are the documentary The Last Stand of the 300 (2007, David Padrusch), the film 300 (2007, Zack Snyder), the video game 300: March to Glory (2007, Collision Studios), the short film United 300 (2007, Andy Signore), and the comedy Meet the Spartans (2008, Jason Friedberg/Aaron Seltzer). Why is the legend of the 300 Spartans so attractive for contemporary American cinema? A possible, if surprising account for the interest in this ancient theme stems from an economic perspective. Written at the dawn of the worldwide financial crisis, the fight of the 300 Spartans has served as point of reference for the serious loss of confidence in the banking system, but also in national politics in general. William Streeter of the ABA Banking Journal succinctly wonders about what robs bankers’ precious resting hours:

What a fragile thing confidence is. Events of the past six months have seen it coalesce and evaporate several times. […] This is what keeps central bankers awake at night. But then that is their primary reason for being, because the workings of economies and, indeed, governments, hinge upon trust and confidence. […] With any group, whether it be 300 Spartans holding off a million Persians at Thermopylae or a group of central bankers trying to keep a global financial community from bolting, trust is a matter of individual decisions. But these decisions are often influenced by events, peers, crowds, or a persuasive strong leader. Such a leader can convince others the best chance for survival or success is in overcoming fear and having confidence that together they can overcome the onslaught. Or, as Ben Franklin put it to his fellow revolutionaries, “We must hang together, gentlemen . . . else, we shall most assuredly hang separately.” (Streeter)

This assessment draws an image of bankers as last bastions of hope and confidence, as revolutionaries and fighters to a man: a curiously ambiguous image of the global finance market. Are the financial decision-makers carriers of hope or kamikaze fighters? If the bankers are the spearheads of a credible battle, who then is the enemy? “Confidence, like string, can’t be pushed. It must be pulled – by actions,” thus Streeter’s final statement of the
article. Even though the reference to the 300 Spartans stresses bravery in a just cause, there
remains the silent implication of the historical fact that all Spartans fell in this battle. In its
historical precedent, the action – called for in the article and warranted by referring to
Benjamin Franklin as reincarnated American revolutionary Leonidas-figure – led to sure
death. Certainly, no one wishes such a fate for these bankers and their profession.
This financial scenario, however, is neither one that I am particularly interested in here, nor is
it typical for the broad reception of the 300 Spartans in contemporary America. It nevertheless
shows to what extent the turbulence of the present is imbued by the notion of ancient heroism,
be it within economic, political, or cultural scripts. I am most interested in the latter of these
and will therefore focus on two such reinscriptions of antiquity in current filmic productions:
the two spoofs *Meet the Spartans* and *United 300* with Zack Snyder’s *300* serving as
intertextual foil against which to assess the comic quality of these two parodies. To be sure,
all three films are parodies, but of contesting partiality since only *Meet the Spartans* and
*United 300* push the parodic element to the point of excessive ridiculousness and can
ultimately be read as political satires on the American “War on Terror” in the aftermath of
9/11. These films are therefore instances of what Martin M. Winkler has called “the extremes
of unabashed embraces of the lurid and the ridiculous” within the longstanding cinematic
tradition of retelling ancient myths and archetypes that filmmakers have used “consciously in
order to comment on their own times” (3).
Accordingly, I wish to view these films as parodies not only in their formal style as aesthetic
interpretation of previous texts, but also and above all in their pragmatic functionality, i.e. to
address their respective ideological implications. As much as they can be called comic
parodies, it has to be stressed that they apply a mimetic technique that according to Jonathan
Culler implies “a serious statement of feelings about real problems or situations” (153). The
films’ specific moment of transgression results from the tension between formal double-
voicedness and political critique or, as Linda Hutcheon concedes: “Parody is a form of auto-
referentiality, but that does not mean that it has no ideological implications” (28). Indeed,
these films, I claim, are both highly self-reflexive in their aesthetics of parody and highly
ideological in their politics of insinuation.
Harking back to Greek antiquity is phantasmatic and mythologizing when the reliance on a
legend like that of the 300 Spartans is used to assess a current sensibility. Significantly
foreshortening the myth of Greece as cradle of western civilization, this brings antiquity to the
present in order to reenact fantasies of violence and male heroism without questioning the
underlying ethos of homosocial fraternity. The parodic invective – and the rhetoric applied in
Meet the Spartans and United 300 may be understood as such – opens up to an aesthetic and ideological minefield. Adapting the Greeks of former times to a universal “we” of our times here as in other cases of such referencing surely triggers the questions “it’s Greek to whom?” Scott Bravmann provocatively has posed this question in his study on Queer Fictions of the Past ruminating that “[o]ne important way of beginning to address this question is to consider alongside these metaphoric and literal ‘returns’ to Greece the use of new, or alternative, or resistant, ‘national’ discourses in the struggle over possible meanings for queer historical subjects” (61-62). Bravmann calls queer such subjects operating within imagined cultural geographies, when there occurs the contesting of a “false (or at least falsely universalizing) characterization of ‘Greece’ as a significant locus of cultural truth for us” (62). Adding to this, I would also claim as queer textual strategy such spoofing as performed in Meet the Spartans, where a historical allegory like 300 crudely gets counteracted and turned into its grotesque-comic opposite. We should ask, therefore, in what ways do these spoofs make fun of 300’s re-enactment of the belief in America’s Manifest Destiny (see Jon Solomon’s keynote) and the adjoining cult of Spartan heroism?

**Herodotus and the Legend of Heroic Sacrificial Death**

The historical origin of all mentioned films is first and foremost the legend of the Spartans’ uprising led by Leonidas against the Persian slave empire of King Xerxes of 480 B.C. Already Herodotus in his Histories, which serve as major source for the legend, speaks of Spartan manly heroism as best exemplified in the mythicized scenario of the “last stand”. This fight to a man in its later reception has either served to glorify heroic martyrdom as epitome of the Spartan democratic ethos or has led to acerbic criticism and deriding laughter of these exaggerated male virtues. Not only recent examples in the American context have called upon this heroic sacrificial death for contemporary political purposes; Göring also referred to the battle of Thermopylae to legitimize the battle of Stalingrad in 1943 as a fight of “no surrender” (qt. in Cartledge 192, see also Albertz 293-308). Herodotus relates the events of the battle of Thermopylae in his seventh book of Histories, written in the 5th century B.C. Even though the historical validity of Herodotus’ histories have been contested until today (on the one hand they are most detailed descriptions of historical events, on the other there is proof of fake “eye witness” accounts), the fascination with his “history” remains unbroken (see Hignett 105-148; Bradford; Szemler et al.; Fields). The books 7 to 9 are about the Persian Wars against Greece; book 7 ends with said battle marking the advent of the Second Persian War as well as the death of Leonidas I, who reigned as King
of Sparta from 490 to 480 B.C. Other historians such as Diodorus, Justin, Pausanias, and Strabo have also referred to the celebrated battle, but it was Herodotus’ text that served as blueprint for the legend. Herodotus therein claims that because of the news of Xerxes marching against Europe, the Greek decided to guard the mountain pass of Thermopylae “and so stay the barbarian’s passage into Hellas” (§175 [p. 1143]). While several Greek cities sent out troops, it was the Spartan army of Leonidas that is especially highlighted:

Each city had its own general, but the one most admired and the leader of the whole army was a Lacedaemonian, Leonidas, [who] had gained the kingship at Sparta unexpectedly. […] He now came to Thermopylae with the appointed three hundred he had selected, all of whom had sons (§204-205 [p.1168-1169])

The legendary army of “300” was the king’s bodyguard in case of war and it was supposed to be assured by selection (“all of whom had sons”) that in case of death the continuance of gentile Spartan families would not be endangered. After partial victories of the Greek, the final battle ended as known with the fatal surrender of the Spartan army. Three of Herodotus’ related events are important for later fictionalized adaptations like our films:

1) The killing of the Persian messenger, which Herodotus actually relates back not to Xerxes, but to his predecessor Darius: “To Athens and Sparta Xerxes sent no heralds to demand earth, and this he did for the following reason. When Darius had previously sent men with this same purpose, those who made the request were cast at the one city into the Pit and at the other into a well” (§133 [p. 1093]). All adaptations change this historical sequence, thus disregarding Xerxes’ forebodings and dramatizing the messenger’s violent death as one of the triggering moments of warfare instead.

2) The betrayal of a Greek renegade marks another instance taken up by all films: “The king was at a loss as to how to deal with the present difficulty. Epialtes son of Eurydemus, a Malian, thinking he would get a great reward from the king, came to speak with him and told him of the path leading over the mountain to Thermopylae. In so doing he caused the destruction of the Hellenes remaining there” (§213 [p. 1176]).

3) As a result, all but the Spartan troops retreated, which as Herodotus claims ensured the Sparta’s heroic superiority and its lasting, if tragic fame: “It is said that Leonidas himself sent them away because he was concerned that they would be killed, but felt it not fitting for himself and the Spartans to desert that post which they had come to defend at the beginning. I, however, tend to believe that when Leonidas perceived that the allies were dispirited and unwilling to run all risks with him, he told them to depart. For himself, however, it was not
good to leave; if he remained, he would leave a name of great fame, and the prosperity of Sparta would not be blotted out” (§220 [p. 1181-1182]).

The Persian messenger’s death, the Spartan betrayal and the heroic last stand are those motifs that are central for the ensuing adaptations and parodies. In what follows I am attempting a three-tiered reading of the film Meet the Spartans under varying guiding aspects, each holding differing generic/aesthetic, historical/political, and gendered/ethnic implications respectively. First, the film serves as parody on familiar American popular culture unearthing traditionally gendered Hollywood clichés like the myth of the male hero and its appending genre of the ‘last stand’-film as spoof or reigning cults of masculinity. A second closer textual reading of Meet the Spartans reveals the film as parody of Zack Snyder’s 300 where Leonidas is shown as ritually steeled soldier willing to sacrifice his life as ‘free man’. In the spoof, Leonidas has turned into a lusty, yet incapable macho leader instead. A last section will complementarily bring the short film United 300 into the discussion of Spartan heroism as gross clownery.

Ribald Humor and Sandal Aesthetics: Meet the Spartans as Parody of American Popular Culture

The film Meet the Spartans is a co-production by Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer. Their teamwork as writers and directors includes other parodic films like Scary Movie, Date Movie, and Disaster Movie, but above all Epic Movie of which Meet the Spartans was first conceived as follow-up. In all these films, including Meet the Spartans, the duo Friedberg/Seltzer makes fun of common clichés of American film, television and popular culture. But in contrast to the other films, in Meet the Spartans they resort to the arsenal of antiquity to combine historical elements with thematic and aesthetic allusions to contemporary family comedies (Meet the Parents and Meet the Fockers, dir. Jay Roach, 2000, 2004), fantasy films like the Shrek-series, the James Bond-filmic style, the American Idol-talent show, and to the American media star cult (Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Sylvester
Stallone). While the film’s fecal and ribald humor brought disastrous reviews (a considerable box office success notwithstanding), one has to grant the film its successful over-the-top spoofing of precious and beloved gendered Hollywood clichés, especially when it comes to the cult of male heroism and the related heroic genre of the ‘last stand’-film with its variations of the sword-and-sandal film, the war melodrama, and the spaghetti Western (see Günsberg; Neale; Frayling). The genre of the historical epic in Meet the Spartans has been superimposed onto contemporary cinematic forms of popular male cinema leading to a parodic negotiation—and indeed clash—of reigning cults of masculinity.

In this sense, the parodic technique of Friedberg and Seltzer may be called “creative criticism” in Wes Gehring’s terminology. This significant trademark of American parodic films in general relies on the fact, as Gehring claims, “[that] the genre often has been considered as something less than important; it has been defined as a parasitic growth on true works of art […]” (4). Especially Friedberg and Seltzer’s favored use of wordplay, which in the guise of the joke already is a shortened form of parody, “may often seem the lowest form of literary art” (Davis 185, qt. in Gehring 4). Friedberg/Seltzer deliberately turn to this ‘trashy’ tradition of American parody employing all registers of bad taste joking. In the course of his ritual initiation into manhood, for example, Leonidas (Sean Maguire) of Meet the Spartans has to undergo a form of torture that is taken right out of the James Bond film Casino Royal. In a clichéd manner, the torturer, clad in trendy black, if blood-stained suit, tries to extract some bank account number from an utterly ignorant, loin-clothed Leonidas, who is taken to be the famous secret agent. Like in the Bond film, the perpetrator viciously assaults his victim, the difference being, of course, that while Leonidas writhes in great pain, he has no clue and thus no secret to hide, exclaiming in utter consternation: “Who the hell is Mr. Bond? I’m Leonidas!” For the spectator, the joke, which diegetically grounds on the misunderstanding of the two protagonists, arises predominantly on the level of the extradiegetic, namely by the clash of two starkly incongruent cultural epochs and filmic genres: the high tech agent thriller and the historical epic. The male initiation, which Leonidas according to his cultural tradition is supposed to undergo, is void of any meaningful significance and turns into mere caricature of male power play. This manner of comic contrast runs through the entire film and does not even stop short of the conjugal chamber. Here, the night before Leonidas leaves to fight his battle, he questions the prediction of the Oracle, who appears in the guise of the leading heroine from the US-series Ugly Betty. The ensuing dialogue again mixes thematic issues (the tragic hero’s serious doubts) with comic bedroom farce (the husband lacking sexual prowess while his emasculatingly sexy wife shows much
more cleverness) and pop-cultural reference (The Oprah Winfrey Show). Thus Leonidas’ wife Margo (Carmen Electra) responds to Leonidas request for advice: “There’s only one woman whose words you should listen to.” “Oprah.” “Your wife.” The broad array of spoofed objects transcends all restriction of space and time. The Greek setting remains the outer framework from which the plot evolves, but the many contemporary references all stem from a different historical time and a different cultural and geographical space, namely current American popular culture and politics. While Leonidas has to survive in the wilderness as part of his initiation as warrior, for example, he is miraculously provided with a sandwich from the fast food-chain Subway, which he finds too appalling to eat even though on the verge of starving. And deciding whether one of the sons is allowed to join his father in the battle force (historically false, because he is the only son and therefore prohibited to go to war according to Spartan law), the jury of a beauty pageant, spoofing the talent show America’s Next Model, crowns him as “Sparta’s Next Top Model” effectively allowing him to enter war and thus overturning Spartan law and turning him into a veritable pin up-boy warrior (see illustration).

![Image](image.png)

The film here as elsewhere exceeds the generic borders of parody in a strict sense. Parody, according to Gehring, “is based on triggering a viewer’s prior knowledge of a given genre or auteur, it is [therefore] important to showcase early on (through icons) which particular subject has been nominated for the user-friendly hot spot. Again, this accents the point that parody focuses on having fun with a given structure or text” (10). Undoubtedly, the film relies on the spectators’ specific filmic and/or historical knowledge, but the main parodic aim is not only the spoofing of historical events and their filmic representations. The films does that, too, as I will show shortly. Rather, my point here is that the film uses the backdrop of antiquity to make fun and indeed to criticize phenomena derived from diverse backgrounds and sources and as such is a “compound parody” (Gehring 13), i.e. an eclectic mixture of various genres.
and subjects being parodied. For that reason, I want to highlight two scenes, which prominently figure in all filmic versions: the killing of the Persian messenger and the “last stand”-battle scene.

In *300*, the Persian messenger who in the name of Xerxes demands Sparta’s submission gets thrown into the pit together with his entourage leading to the assault of the Persian army. In *Meet the Spartans*, the messenger (Rapper Method Man) is kicked into the pit as well. But the pit in the course of the film serves as waste dump for all kinds of other disposable subjects: various pop stars such as Britney Spears and the whole team of the talent show *American Idol* are put on trial and chucked into the pit as cultural garbage. Politicians such as George W. Bush face the same ordeal (see illustration). Actors mime those film-, television- and political icons thus varying a parodic technique that employs unknown actors instead of genre icons making benign fun of themselves through cameo appearances. *Meet the Spartans*, however, is a far cry from such a “friendly attack” (Gehring 9). The legendary betrayal of the Spartans by a Greek renegade, for instance, here features a hunchbacked Britney Spears impersonator (see illustration). The imitations are not only deliberately badly impersonated; the imitators or rather the referenced ‘icons’ being imitated also serve as satirical butt of many acerbic jokes.

This parodic strategy is even further heightened through diverse auto-referential allusions. In the hilarious bedroom-scene mentioned above, for example, Queen Margo quotes a review of
the film we are watching at the moment: “Harry Knowles at Ain’t It Cool News says this film is just a cheap rip-off of 300.” This makes fun of the film’s generic ‘bad’ style by performing this very style at the same time. Similarly, the battle scenes in Meet the Spartans are played out as comment on the constructedness of the film. The respective scenes in 300 were filmed in a complicated bluescreen technique, i.e. studio footage filmed in front of a bluescreen being filled up with visual effects in post-production. Meet the Spartans picks up this technique as diegetic motif and installs it as a strategy to be discussed and laughed at within the film.

Gehring comments on this self-reflexive parodic method claiming that “such movie self-consciousness represents the ultimate parody prick, since nothing affectionately deflates a celebrated genre or auteur faster than a comic reminder that this is, indeed, ‘only movie’” (16). Accordingly, when the Persian army appears on the battlefield literally, they carry bluescreens on which they multiply troops by switching on the screen animation like a light bulb (see illustration). This satirizes the heroism of the warriors as much as it comically exposes and subverts the spectacular film technique of its pretext.

Homo-Macho and Disco King: Meet the Spartans as Parody on the Spartan 300

He [Xerxes’ scout] saw some of the men exercising naked and others combing their hair. He marvelled at the sight and took note of their numbers. […] When Xerxes heard that, he could not comprehend the fact that the Lacedaemonians were actually, to the best of their ability, preparing to kill or be killed. What they did appeared laughable to him […] (§ 208-209 [1172] (see illustration)
Meet the Spartans is, in a strict parodic sense, a spoof of Zack Snyder’s film 300 (2007). But this opens an even wider-reaching network of intertextual and intercultural cross-references. Not only does Snyder’s film ground on the graphic novel by Frank Miller (1998), which accounts for the stylistic mix of monumental epic and animation film of both ensuing movies. 300 furthermore refers to Rudolph Maté’s film The 300 Spartans (1962), which in turn needs to be seen within the cultural context of the Cold War forging a trace of political dichotomization that runs through all later works in their respective depiction of ethnic and national otherness. Each of these works narrates the legend of the Spartan uprising of 480 B.C. led by Leonidas against Xerxes’ Persian slave empire. In 300 (both novel and film), Leonidas is represented as heroic soldier, steeled by manly initiation, who with his 300 selected Spartans is willing to fight to the last remaining man and who, while being deceived and betrayed, nevertheless dies as ‘free man’ on the battlefield of Thermopylae. In contrast, Leonidas of Meet the Spartans, is denigrated as lusty, yet hardly heroic macho with only a scraggly troop of 13 morons (see illustration).

Leonidas’ deconstructed manliness on the one hand psychologically undermines the myth of the last Spartan as being brave and stalwart. The substitution of soldiers putting up a manly fight with dance contests, game shows and bluescreen animation on the other hand medially
satirizes the mythic setting. Together with his soldiers, Leonidas dances and sings throughout
the war scenario, and the Spartan warriors excel not as diehard fighters, but as homophilic
queens supervised by a ruler, who in his last night with his wife had to take a severe and
literally castrating blow as potent lover. In that conjugal scene, Leonidas’ heterosexual
masculinity is put under scrutiny by female Spartan witnesses, who laugh at Leonidas as “Ken
doll” pointing to the obvious lack of a (functioning) male sexual organ (see illustration). In a
wider sense, this also serves as reference to the cinematic cult of muscles, thus shifting the
focus from the hero’s male chest in the traditional sandal epic to his genitals: “For films with
so many scantily clad men, however, there is no sense of genitalia – that is, the viewer’s eye is
drawn again and again to the same feature of Hercules, and it is not his bulging crotch; it is
his chest“ (Rushing 180). In Meet the Spartans, there is plenty of crotch to pay attention to,
albeit most phallic insinuations are meant in a ridiculing manner suggesting a dysfunctional
heterosexuality.
Instead, Leonidas and his soldiers fondle, hug, and kiss each other, clearly enjoying their comrades’ physical closeness (see illustration). Holding hands, they pair up to march to war singing Gloria Gaynor’s gay anthem “I Will Survive” (see illustration). This gay cliché notwithstanding, the Spartans make fun of the ‘faggy’ Persians. The film, however, does not grant Xerxes and his army a great deal of narrative and visual space, and thus prevents any rash conclusions as to their sexual predilections. The focus remains rather on the Spartans and their interactions with one another as well as with the Persian enemies. In contrast to Zack Snyder’s representation of Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) as highly fetishized and sexually androgynous God-King, Xerxes (Ken Davitian) of Meet the Spartans has all the same fetishistic paraphernalia, but is denigrated as a fat, old, and thus desexualized caricature (see illustrations). Besides, the explicit allusion to the ‘mockumentary’ Borat, where Davitian played Borat’s obnoxious companion, turns Xerxes into a comically grotesque power figure. This filmic rereading of the Xerxes figure marks an essential parodic strategy, because one iconic representation of masculinity – the androgynous Oriental – is substituted by another – the grotesque comedian. And only the first of these representations can serve as a paradigm of homosexualizing the image of the foe. This stereotyping has been noted by several critics, who comment on Rodrigo Santoro’s appearance in 300 as “King Xerxes who’s dolled up with enough glittering threads and glossy makeup to make every David Bowie wanna-be from the mid-1970s chew his knuckles in fuming envy” (Seymor).
The numerous allusions to the homosexuality of the Spartans (and not of the Persians) in *Meet the Spartans* indicates a significant parodic turn that points towards the hiatus of a doubled historiography wherein ancient Greece is described as the founding model of Western civilization, on the one hand, and called upon as the grounding myth for the contemporary gay liberation, on the other. Whereas *300* applies homosexuality above all as habitual practice for the ethnically and culturally othered Persians (personified by Xerxes) and denies it for the Greeks, *Meet the Spartans* contrastingly installs the homosexual practice of the Greek antiquity for the Spartans queering it comically, however. This queering needs to be stressed, precisely because it exposes the peculiar gap in *300*: ancient Greek homophilia. Paul Cartledge asserts the consistent fascination with the social practices of the Spartans, including their institutionalized pederasty between a young warrior and an adolescent boy as part of a state-ordained pedagogical system (208). The Spartans practiced this educational method based on physical training – *agoge* – as integral part of a young man’s ceremonial masculinization: “Sharing in a lopsided partnership of this nature had for the junior party the force of an initiatory ritual, an essential step along the gruelling road to his achieving full manhood” (Cartledge 70). Not only does *300* eclipse the sexual part of the depicted practice of physical initiation, Leonidas also explicitly and disrespectfully comments on the other Greeks, especially the Athenians, as “philosophers and boy-lovers”. He distinguishes them from the martially potent – and implicitly ‘women-loving’ – Spartans and therefore falsifies a particular, but essential aspect of Spartan cultural history. *Meet the Spartans* twists the doubly denounced gender politics of *300* (androgynous Persians and pederast Athenians) into an affirmation of the Spartans as being full-fledged queer. Not the other Greeks or foreign Persians are “boy-lovers” or “dolled up”, it is the Spartans who are lustily, ludicrously, and sensuously gay. This also accounts for the switch from serious to comic parody, because by setting free the anarchic possibilities of sexual play, a “trans-contextualization” occurs, i.e. an inversion as a resignified repetition revealing the pretext’s ridiculousness. On the concept of comic ridiculing as parodic tradition, Linda Hutcheon claims: “As a subgenre of the comic, parody makes its model ludicrous” (51). But she also warns that any anarchic-comic parody may have an authorizing effect: “Nevertheless, parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized – authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert. Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence” (75). This brings a reading of *Meet the Spartans* to a crucial moment that did not occur in this manner in *300*:
Does *Meet the Spartans* really (only) laugh at the exaggerated heterosexual manliness of the Spartans in *300* or at ‘Greek love’ in more general terms?

Already in 1883, the British writer and critic John Addington Symonds wrote on Greek love as *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, thus the title of his small study. Symonds argument includes not only the thesis that Greek male homosexuality – *paiderastia* – was a gender specific, i.e. male practice and therefore causing a ‘problem’ for Greek ethics, but that this in turn also remained problematic for modern ethics, since this, as Jeffrey Weeks states in reference to Symond’s emancipatory thesis, means “to establish, by using the Greek analogy, that [male] homosexuality could be accepted as part of the social mores of society” (52, original emphasis). Homosexuality as universal ethics on the one hand and yet based on a segregated gender notion on the other, this obviously accounts for some of the ambivalences inherent in any reading of male homoeroticism in heroic genres, whether comic or otherwise. Even though harking back to a “Greek tradition” may serve as “potentially meaningful ‘guide for life’”, David Halperin warns: “If we are ever to discover who ‘we’ really are, it will be necessary to examine more closely the many respects in which Greek sexual practices differ from ‘our own’” (1-2, original emphasis). To complicate things even more, the disclosure of the lacunae in the pretext *300*, brought about through the parodic excess of Greek homosexuality in *Meet the Spartans*, may furthermore be reinforced by looking at yet another generic citation. Both films rely to a great extent on the tradition of the historical sandal epic, which in the Italian variation of the *peplum* films have gained enormous popularity between 1958 (starting with *Le fatiche di Ercole* by Pietro Rancisci) and the mid-60s.¹ Robert Rushing claims that here undoubtedly a ‘classical’ male genre has come into being that strongly implied subversive gender politics: How does a heterosexual male audience deal with the fact, he asks, that the *peplum* films show non-heteronormative spectacular performances of legions of almost naked, well-built, oil-shined male bodies?

The hero must assume pose after pose to showcase his muscles, even when he is ostensibly relaxing. […] He must also, of course, be clothed in a manner that shows off his physique – hence the name of the genre, the *peplum*, the loose-fitting, one-shouldered toga (but one should note that the peplum was an article of female clothing in ancient Greece.) Very quickly, however, the hero takes off his peplum in favor of more revealing costuming: at times, the hero appears to be wearing nothing so much as a miniskirt or a cloth diaper. (164-165, original emphasis)

¹ On alterity in American historical epics of this period see Jan Timmer, who claims that while laughing at the foreign ‘other’ in these films may weaken the foe’s dangerous side, there is also the pitfall of building up new hierarchies of identity and alterity by infantilizing the ‘other’ (347).
Especially battle and torture scenes allow for a depiction of the male body as spectacle. The *peplum* has this in common with other male genres such as the (spaghetti-)Western, the horror film, and war and sports films. And yet, in the *peplum* such scenes remain the exception. Instead, these films stage the male body as erotic object throughout their narrative, not only in scenes of heightened physical activity. From this generic specificity, Rushing draws the conclusion that (1) the *peplum* represents a sort of proletarian fantasy, (2) that it never was conceived of as a realistic, but rather as a postmodern ironic genre, and (3) that it may come across as democratic, but actually tends towards authoritarianism (166-167). Kenneth MacKinnon even claims the principle pleasure of the male epic with its spectacular display of the male body lies in a phantasmatic satisfactions of masculinity which allows for passivity as well as activity. While he remarks that the male epic coasts “close to an open acknowledgment of the male spectator’s eroticisation of the male” (184), Paul Roen goes on to praise the *peplum* as being “specifically tailored to suit the demands of a male homosexual audience” with the films’ dramatic emphasis on “rippling muscles, masculine camaraderie, and killing the bad guy (often as well-built as the good guy, and just as scantily clad)” (13). Hence the *peplum* goes “beyond gay camp, into the realm of softcore erotica” (Roen 13). Richard Dyer similarly attests the hybridity of this genre, but moves the discussion to the political: the ancient heroes in these Italian films were mostly played by American bodybuilders and should be seen within the context of a hegemonic discourse of the white, muscular male body. As such this steeled, trained body can be equated with an imperial desire for power:

In short, the built body and the imperial enterprise are analogous. The built body sees the body as submitted to and glorified by the planning and ambition of the mind; colonial worlds are likewise represented as inchoate terrain needing the skill, sense and vision of the coloniser to be brought to order. The muscle hero has landscaped his body with muscles and he controls them superbly and sagely; the lands of the muscle film are enfeebled or raw bodies requiring discipline. The built white male body and colonial enterprise act as mirrors of each other, and both, even as they display the white man’s magnificent corporeality, tell of the spirit within. (165)

It is evident to what extent the male bodies of the Spartans undergo such physical routine in all films, how they are trained to be war machines and put to use in the name of the nation. The pressing question remains, however: Who wears the sign of imperial power? Is it the Spartans, who as defenders of freedom are being turned into victims? Or the Persians, whose quantitative superiority compensate for their lack of individual bodily strength? The films
answer these questions, at least on the diegetic level, in different manners: 300 leaves no
doubt as to the physical superiority of the Spartans. Even though they succumb in battle, they
remain victors because of the “spirit within”. Meet the Spartans, with its portrayal of painted-
on abs, clumsy behavior, silly disco dancing and continuously showcased anal fixation (see
illustrations), obviously makes fun of diverse pretexts and pop-cultural contexts, but
ultimately the ambivalence cannot fully be erased as to whether on an extra-diegetic level this
does not follow the ambiguous logic of what Hutcheon has called a reinscription of the
ridiculed norm.

Perverse Persians? “Everybody loves a muscle boi” and Post-9/11 Panics

A muscle boi is king, a muscle boi is god,
a muscle boi will make you cream.
In the showers at the gym or strippin at the club,
he’s your very own steroid dream. [...] 
Straight boys love a muscle boi yeah yeah
Gay boys love a muscle boi yeah yeah [...] 
Who cares if there’s nuthin’ upstairs, 
he looks good in his underwear, 
and everybody, 
everybody loves a muscle boi! (Jinx Titanic)

A third approach of reading spoofs of the Spartan 300 tries to untangle the web of ambivalences by focusing on the performance of homoeroticism as it is crossed with oriental xenophobia. Here, another intertext gains importance: the award-winning short film United 300 (MTV award for best filmic parody), a double parody on 300 as well as United 93, the latter of which dealing with the 9/11-terror attacks. As the director of United 300, Andy Signore, commented at the MTV-award ceremony, the film does not make fun of a tragedy, but is meant as a tribute to all who fight tyranny (“2007 MTV Movie Awards”). The film, as the comment implies, both picks up on the threat of terrorism and yet transcends the limitations of hastily drawn discriminatory politics therein. The short film shows the 300 Spartans on board an airplane fighting terrorists, who want to highjack the plane to Germany. Just as the Spartans defended the pass of Thermopylae, they here block the entrance to the plane’s cockpit. A comic interlude occurs amidst the battle, when because of turbulences the “fasten seat-belts”-signs light up and all comply docilely. The enemy ‘troops’ fiercely fixate one another, but jump back to fighting action only after the signs are turned off again. Xerxes (Ken Gamble) wears the same “dolled-up” costume as his counterpart in 300, but is less of a muscled ‘hard body’, but more of a sleazy moron (see illustration). Significantly, his name has been changed to Jerxes, an allusion to both “jerk” and to “jerk off”. This parodic ribaldry is heightened by the fact that Jerxes has withdrawn to the restroom during battle. Sitting on his ‘throne’, he receives Leonidas. The ensuing dialogue is reduced to Jerxes’ complaint that all Leonidas does is shouting his part. This is also a comic comment on 300 and Leonidas’ noisy declamation therein. The reference to United 93, on the other hand, gets more obvious when Leonidas warns him about the plan to force the plane to land. Jerxes retorts, “We’ll be forced to land in Ohio!”, to which Leonidas only laconically answers: “Then tonight, we dine in Cleveland!” Jerxes’ final exclamation: “This is madness!” Originally, these were the words of the Persian messenger in 300 as Leonidas throws him into the pit. Here, Leonidas kicks him out of the plane into the air with the farewell: “This is United!”
United 93 (2006, Paul Greengras) serves as foil for the short film. It is a filmic account of the events on board the United Airlines Flight 93 that as part of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, did not as planned hit the Capitol in Washington, DC, but due to the passengers’ intervention was redirected to Cleveland, Ohio, where it ultimately crashed. In an extremely shortened, but highly allusive way, United 300 picks up various elements from this film and mixes them together with allusions to 300 into a wild slapstick parody. Not only the Spartans look silly on board an airplane with their ancient warrior costumes; the mixture of white terrorists in plain everyday clothes with their orientalized leader Jerxes in an antiquated costume also remains totally incongruent. With his queer gear, he rather matches his Spartans adversaries, of whom one passenger wonders: “Who are the guys in the underwear?”

The short film relies in its depiction of the Persian emperor on the homophilic androgyny of 300 twisting the stereotypical embodiment of ‘oriental perversion’ into a parody on the politics of Islamic terror. The ‘clash of civilizations’ that in 300 is represented through stylized scenes of violence and sexual innuendos tinged with a fascist aesthetics, here has been taken to its absurd extreme. In United 300 such crude humor unquestionably exposes and even subverts the homophobic racism and the politics of enemy stereotyping of its predecessors.

Already Rudolph Maté’s film of 1962, The 300 Spartans, has obvious links to the contemporary dealings of the Cold War and was perceived as a landmark of the anti-Soviet propaganda film: “This simply dripped with Cold War imagery, even to the extent of splashing across the screen uplifting slogans about the defence of freedom against slavery” (Cartledge 193). This film in turn served as inspirational backdrop for Frank Miller’s graphic novel, the adaptation of which by Zack Snyder has then been read as allegory of the “War on Terror”. Both films satisfy what Simona Slanička calls the desire for “grand narratives” in historical periods that are prone to great menace, “nämlich die 1950er Jahre mit der

Seth Tomko and Jenny Zimmerman, referring to Susan Faludi’s earlier prediction, have interpreted the scenes of violence in 300 not only as glorification of male violence and belligerence, but especially as adding fuel to the prejudices against the Middle East: “In 300, we see freedom-loving Occidental men standing for vaguely democratic self-governance against what can only be described as a mob of swarthy foreign invaders directed by a megalomaniacal religious fanatic intent on subjugating or destroying the birthplace of Western ideology. Even the sacrifice made by the 300 Spartans is made to seem glorious compared to the empty and treacherous temporary victory of the Persians” (14). There are, of course, also critics who believe that the film’s visual aesthetics are tribute to the graphic novel’s origins and thus generically imbued with exaggerations and foreshortenings, which actually suit the myth of this particular historical event quite well: “The battle of Thermopylae no longer exists as mere fact. By now it even transcends legend, moving onto the ground of myth, where action and motivations seem guided less by soldiers and generals than by the gods, who are teaching lessons about courage, sacrifice and freedom” (Petrakis).

The dominant reception of Greek antiquity as the cradle of western civilization and democracy has been contested and rejected, prominently by Martin Bernal, who in his revisionist study on the Black Athena speaks of the “fabrication of ancient Greece” as birth of European culture. As regards the Afro-Asian roots of Greek antiquity he demands “not only to rethink the fundamental bases of ‘Western Civilization’ but also to recognize the penetration of racism and ‘continental chauvinism’ into all our historiography, or philosophy of writing history” (2). He thinks it fatal to rely on the notion of a ‘racially pure’, i.e. ‘white’ ancient Greece for the sake of one’s own legitimization, especially when ‘race’ is marked solely as being ‘other’ while ‘we’ remain racially unmarked. This unmarked, but implicitly ‘white’ category then continues to be unquestioned as “a category of oppression operating through

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2 For the U.S., the Vietnam War is yet another such historical crisis era calling for “grand narratives”. See here especially Ted Post’s film Go Tell the Spartans (1978, based on Daniel Ford’s 1967 novel Incident at Mac Wa) about the early part of the Vietnam War in 1964. A unit of American military advisors in Vietnam prior to the major U.S. involvement find themselves caught in a helpless struggle against the Viet Cong. They are ambushed at a poorly-manned outpost that is near the scene of a massacre a decade earlier of French soldiers during the First Indochina War. The outpost is finally overwhelmed with only one American surviving. The film’s title refers to the Greek poet Simonides’ famous epitaph engraved on a commemorative stone at the burial ground at Thermopylae: “Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here, obedient to their laws, we lie.”

3 See also Dennis Behreandt’s remark on the release of 300: “For Americans, with troops on the ground in the heart of the ancient Persian Empire in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with speculation that the war will spill over into the Persian homeland of Iran, history seems finally, in some way, to have come full circle after almost 2,500 years. Instead of Sparta, now it is America that faces the threat from Persia. In its retelling of the story of Thermopylae, 300 embraces the mythos of the battle rather than the historical truth of the era, and in doing so becomes an elaborate bit of present-day pro-war propaganda” (Behreandt).
racial formations, racial ideologies, racialized fantasies, and racisms,” as Scott Bravmann (67) remarks. There can never be an ‘innocent’ treatment of antiquity, especially when it comes to reconstruct social definitions of sexuality, because they “cannot be severed from the larger cultural projects of the fabrication of ancient Greece and the particular set of meanings ascribed to it, including the heavy political and cultural baggage of deep-seated theories of civilization, discourses on national survival, and racial belief systems” (Bravmann 50). A limited approach to Greek antiquity that leaves aside the consideration of racist discrimination therefore repeats a historical fiction that has been retrospectively fabricated in the first place. It also reenacts the racisms as well as other sorts of discrimination inscribed into such fictionalization.

The films at stake here fall into a period when the U.S. under Bush’s rule gained strong support from a Christian fundamentalism leading to a – unsuccessful – proposal of a constitutional amendment in 2004 for declaring ‘gay marriage’ as unconstitutional. Had this proposal that was strongly supported by the President been ratified, it would have been the first amendment to the constitution to install a model for discrimination instead of eliminating discrimination. Even though the law did not pass, this effort nevertheless speaks of a cultural climate where it has become possible to repeal the already legalized possibility of a homosexual marriage in seemingly gay-friendly California. If a film like 300 represents the Spartans as white Greeks and the Persians as a hybrid mixture of Afro-Asian races, such mythicized stereotypes of inclusion and exclusion are invoked again allowing for analogies in contemporary politics. Robert Rushing ironically, yet succinctly points out the aesthetic-political agenda of 300 as pertaining to the tradition of the performance of ambiguous heteronormativity in the historical epic:

Snyder’s 300 presses the modern peplum into similar work, imaging a cruel and authoritarian society (the Spartans) who turn out to be the only defenders of “freedom” (the freedom of infanticide and rape, evidently) against barbaric hordes from the East (the Persians) who wish to destroy their way of life. This, too, presses present-day desires (that, say, the invasion of Iraq might have been justified) into a phantasmatic past in which the Spartans actually quote members of the Bush administration to justify their call to war: “freedom isn’t free,” declares Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey). (173)

Contrastingly, the two spoofs on 300 certainly push the Spartan legend to its absurd-comic extremes, unearthing the cartoonish qualities of a frozen myth in the case of Meet the Spartans and disclosing the exaggerated cult of maleness as part of the war machinery in the
case of *United 300*. If one additionally wants to view parody as educational means that not only grounds on humor, but also on negotiating deeper insights *through* humor (Gehring 3), both spoofs may be seen as satirical parodies. In this sense, they are more than just a parody on the aesthetic norms of their pretexts. They also address social norms and as such take part in the longstanding central agenda of satire. The Spartans dancing to war to Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” in *Meet the Spartans* and Jinx Titanic and his band *Super 8 Cum Shot* singing “Everybody loves a muscle boi” during the closing credits of *United 300*: these are unambiguously queer moments satirizing the present reemergence of an ancient cult of the male warrior. At the same time, these are instants of a queer alliance across the boundaries of nation, race, and religion as the claim “This is United!” already has suggested as parodic double entendre. Such code switches make serious fun of the politics of heteronormativity by queering the celebrated legend of the 300 Spartans. As satiric parody, the ‘just cause’ of the war on terrorism is thus disclosed as absurd battle against all that seems other, foreign, treacherous, barbarous, and perverse. Albeit waged in the name of freedom and democracy, the semiotic power of words and images inherent in such a war are dislodged and exposed as deeply anti-social, heteronormative and racist elements pertaining to a white supremacist and imperialist ideology of ‘we’.

References


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