»Then We Will Fight in the Shade«

Sparta, Comedy and Coming to Terms with Fearsome Otherness

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The Greek stand at Thermopylae in 480 BCE is one of the most famous battles in history. At the ›Hot Gates‹, a small, vastly outnumbered Greek contingent led by the Spartan king Leonidas and his 300-man bodyguard stood their ground against King Xerxes' Persian army which outnumbered them hugely.[1] The Greek historiographer Herodotus, the only contemporary source for the events of the 2nd Persian War, relates an anecdote about Spartan courage in his *Histories*[2]:

»[…] bravest of all was declared the Spartan Dienekes. […] he was told […] that the Persian archers were so numerous that their arrows would block out the sun. Dienekes, however, undaunted by this prospect, remarked with a laugh, ›Good. Then we will fight in the shade‹.« (Herodotus, Histories, 7.226.1-2)

The Spartans did fight and, after three days of heroic efforts, were cut down to the last man. Crucially, however, their sacrifice delayed Xerxes long enough for the allied Greek forces to be able to retreat and regroup. The Persian army marched on, but was soon defeated by the Greeks on land and

1 I do not intend to discuss the historical accuracy of *300* or the political intentions of its producer. For a detailed analysis of the battle at Thermopylae cf. Cartledge 2007.

2 Herodotus' anecdote is also one of the most famous examples of the Spartan laconic wit, Laconia being the *polis* territory that surrounded the city of Sparta. In Spartan education, a lot of weight was put on the training of oral expression. According to Plutarch (Lyc. 19.1), Spartan boys learned »to express themselves in a style sharp but mixed with grace and profound in its brevity« and Aristotle relates that »from childhood they learn to speak briefly, and also to mock and be mocked in a suitable fashion«. Even Plato mentioned the Spartan aptitude at repartee in his *Protagoras*, explaining that even if the Spartans might usually make a poor show in a conversation, they would hit home out of nowhere with a short, compressed remark as deadly as a shot (Protagoras, 342e).

at sea in three decisive battles: Salamis, Plataea and Mycale. But it was the Spartan stand at Thermopylae – not any of these battles – which would become the symbol of the successful fight for freedom and a subject for representation in art and more recently in film and television.

In 2007, Zack Snyder's Hollywood motion picture *300*, which is based on the eponymous graphic novel by Frank Miller,[3] conquered cinemas around the world. The film recreates the historical events of the Second Persian War, glorifying Spartan masculinity, martial prowess and their pursuit of *kalòs thánatos* – a ›beautiful death‹ – in battle.[4] The message of Snyder's film is uncompromising: the Spartan way of life was war. Their ideal of the perfect warrior society, immaculate in body and mind, provided the foundation for every decision, every law, and every action.

The reactions to *300* were divided: many viewers loved it for the sheer force of its elaborate battle scenes and spectacular cinematography; others were shocked by its brutality or interpreted it as a propaganda movie promoting the clash between East and West and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, part of the wider War on Terror. A substantial number of voices also expressed strong reservations about a potentially fascist aesthetic underlying its visual language and message of ›only the strongest survive‹. Interestingly however, yet another kind of response can be found in the plethora of parodies and caricatures that sprang up almost overnight.

The first major parody was an episode of the iconic animated sitcom *South Park* by Tray Parker. »D-Yikes!«, which first aired on 11 April 2007, negotiates sexual identity against the backdrop of Snyder's motion picture. After having outed herself[5] as gay in front of the class, transsexual teacher Ms. Garrison leads the regulars of the lesbian bar »Les Bos« in a stand against the Persian club-owner Xerxes, who was attempting to take over the bar and turn it into a »Club Persh Dance Club«. An epic battle ensues, at the end of which Xerxes admits to being a woman and engages in a passionate affair with Ms. Garrison. The episode culminates in the couple engaging in

3 Frank Miller not only provided the template, but was also directly involved in the filming of *300* as consultant and executive producer.

4 The beautiful death is a concept featuring strongly in the writings of Spartan poets like Tyrtaeus. In his words, it was »a fine thing for a brave man to die when he has fallen among the front ranks, while fighting for the homeland« (Tyrt. fr. 10.1-2).

5 I chose to use female pronouns for Ms. Garrison and Xerxes, as the subsequent scenes are played out in a lesbian bar and the characters are presenting themselves as female.

an act of steamy lesbian sex with Ms. Garrison moaning »Oh yeah! Scissor me Xerxes!« and Xerxes deciding to forego her desire for conquest and to keep »Les Bos« a lesbian haven. »D-Yikes!« also parodies what was rapidly becoming the trademark quote from *300*: when Persian emissaries show up at the bar they are taken aback by lesbian culture, proclaiming it »crazy«. Mirroring Leonidas' (Gerard Butler) cry of »Madness? This is Sparta!« before kicking the Persian envoy into a pit, Ms. Garrison screams »No, this isn't crazy. This is ›Les Bos‹!« before kicking the head-envoy hard between the legs.

Shortly after Comedy Central had aired »D-Yikes!«, another parody, *Meet the Spartans*, appeared in cinemas, poking fun at the warlike imagery and heroic postures of Snyder's film. Even though it received horrendous reviews, it grossed over $ 84 million and became an international success. Although the humour featured in this »epic comedy« is both crude and shallow, *Meet the Spartans* boils its critique of *300* down to the bare bones: the Spartans are characterized as effeminate braggarts, hardly able to hide their homosexual preferences but also slightly ill-at-ease with them.

In addition to these two widely-known examples, there is also an abundance of web pages dedicated to poking fun at *300* and its depiction of the heroic battle, many of them based on Leonidas' iconic »This is Sparta!«. This paper approaches *300* against the backdrop of these comic representations which have turned it into the object of ridicule. I will argue that the negotiation of monolithic gender norms and rigid hetero-normativity and the theme of the abandonment of the individual self in favour of the collective good are being mocked in particular. In conclusion I will then explain how in the case of *300*, humour and laughter act as catharsis to a range of conflicting emotions between fascination and repulsion as well as to contemporary ideas of existential anxiety.

THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF *300*

The moviemaking technique of *300* blends stylized graphics and live-action elements to achieve the maximum impact of overwhelming speed and immediacy (cf. Thompson 2007: 6-7). The Spartan disposition towards violence keeps the audience on edge. The frequent slow-motions and close-ups do not allow the viewer to be distracted from the shocking details of blood and gore; the almost naked bodies of the Spartan warriors demonstrate the constant exposure of the human body to injury and death. The artfully cap-

tured play of muscles and the billowing of the Spartans' red war cloaks play a vital part in the visual choreography, as they transfer the fighters' tension and exertion to the bodies and minds of the audience. In *300*, the Spartan ideal of a ›beautiful death‹ is omnipresent and dominates the screen.

It is an archaic, highly emotional and irrational ideal that openly contradicts our contemporary Western discourse with its tenor of an enlightened rationality and fluid concepts of gender, identity and individuality. Late 20th and 21st century cinema tends to draw on either disillusionment or irony to deal with the irrational and contradictory, particularly if it comes in the guise of experiences of war, brutality and militant masculinity. For example, in the films of Quentin Tarantino, who is regarded as a figurehead of ultraviolent cinema, audacity and searing irony are pivotal elements of the cinematography. Gory sequences of ruthless violence pass over into quick-witted, over-the-top dialogues between characters who are often slightly weird and preposterous but also highly individualistic. A similar effect is apparent in films like the *Die Hard* series, where John McLane's (Bruce Willis) catchphrase of »Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker« and deadpan remarks have become just as iconic as exploding cars and action-packed gunfights.

In *300*, however, the rhetoric of war and abandonment of the individual self comes across as both existential and free of irony and thus completely incompatible with contemporary discourse on violence and postmodern concepts of identity. While their Persian foes, in particular the elite force of the Immortals, are depicted as a faceless mass,[6] the Spartans themselves are also endowed with only minimal individual traits. With no indicators of social rank or age, they are garbed in nothing but a blood red war cloak, speedo-style leather shorts, war belts and helmets hiding their features in battle scenes, while their waxed and chiseled bodies give them the appearance of cloned athletes. Battling beasts and animalistic Immortals, the Spartans' humanity and vulnerable mortality is communicated via their exposed bodies, which during these days of incredible exertion are sustained by the defiance of death and their indomitable will. On the battlefield, the Spartan existence climaxes in the abandonment of the individual self and its absorption into the immaculate perfection of the warrior collective. It is Leonidas himself who gets to the heart of this when he explains to the hunch-backed

6 The dehumanization of the Persian other is another motif running through film, recurring most strongly in the characterization of the Persian army which includes the allegedly soulless Immortals, whose disfigured faces are hidden by distorted silver masks, and numerous man-monstrosity-hybrids.

outcast and eventual traitor Ephialtes (Andrew Tiernan) how the Spartan phalanx works: »We fight as a single, impenetrable unit. That is the source of our strength«. Although the Spartans' laconic witticisms – many of which can be traced back to Herodotus – seemingly bear a close resemblance to those of *Die Hard*'s John McLane, they do not provide irony or comic relief but only serve to heighten the spectator's awe in the face of Spartan fearlessness and defiance of death.

Throughout the film, the violent mood remains an experience of otherness and foreignness which most strongly appeals to the emotional and subconscious levels.[7] Intellectual discourse does little to support the audience of a film like *300* in accessing this. To the postmodern perspective, the historic events at Thermopylae act as a foil onto which instances of contemporary discourse can be projected in order to negotiate them in an apparently neutral setting. However, *300* does not invite introspection or an exterior viewpoint, as it completely foregoes irony or disillusionment. By sticking to the illustrative conventions of a graphic novel and enhancing these through cinematic techniques like slow-motions and close-ups, the film actively avoids any narrative structure that goes beyond rudimentary cinematic necessity.

Instead, *300* is composed of an array of battle scenes and duels within the battle, where the Spartans are caught in a Moebius strip of violence, without hope of relief. In this way, *300* tries to evade the grasp of interpretation by pretending that there is no real narrative threat, that only the moment matters, a moment in which body and mind are limited to the ultimate experience of near-death and existential struggle. Slow-motion sequences elongate brief moments such as a spear being aimed at an enemy, hitting his chest, penetrating his body, before being ripped out again trailed by a fountain of blood. Or the scene of Leonidas delivering a crippling blow with his shield, sending a Persian flying, of the Spartan king slowly regaining his focus before taking a few purposeful strides, raising his arm and, in a final cathartic fall to one knee, delivering the death blow. Parodies of *300* happily ridicule this narrative deficit by arbitrarily rewinding scenes or repeating them again and again to varying outcomes. The absurdity of both the faceless

7 For the film director and screenwriter Sam Peckinpah, an early icon of violent cinema, the experience of immediate transcendence and raw energy could only take place in a space removed from prosaic commonplace routine. It was only in confrontation with »the madness of ecstatic violence«, that a moment of utter »self-liberation that culminates in the forgetfulness of self« could be experienced (Murray 2004: 24).

masses of the Persian army and the clone-like quality of the Spartan warriors are mocked when they are shown as products of a blue-screen trick in *Meet the Spartans*, for example. In »D-Yikes!«, the producers of South Park employed random slow motion distorting both actions and sound effects to imitate Snyder's trademark cinematography. The aestheticized violence of *300* is reduced to absurdity when the battle sequence described above is recreated in slow-motion in *Meet the Spartans*, initially copying each of Leonidas' moves, only to have him stabbing a Persian through the legs of another Spartan, barely missing his crotch. Leonidas then does a dive roll, pulls a wet towel from a random kettle and uses it to knock out an Immortal, before moving on to twist another Persian's nipples and to give a ›wedgie‹ to a third one.

AESTHETICIZATION OF VIOLENCE

With many viewers, *300* strikes a chord that has nothing to do with analyzing its meta-narrative or discussing the justification of war and violence. What the film makes the audience experience, instead, is existential angst and the aesthetics of violence. Graphic representations of violence and death in battle are staged as the central aesthetic theme, corresponding to the hermeneutic logic established in the pit scene.[8] As a result, it is the cinematography itself which renders distance impossible and creates a space in which the audience is confronted with and exposed to their emotions, while simultaneously denying the mind space for rational analysis. The highly aestheticized and abstract portrayal of violence provides a distance to the horrors of the battlefield, to death, injury and pain. It focuses on the art of war as a sublime entity and depicts warriors as artists and exalted beings, associating them with the sphere of godlike heroes and setting them apart from the reality of common men. In numerous aspects, *300* also brings to mind the works of the German nationalist philosopher and writer Ernst Jünger[9], who created a veritable poetics of violence. His celebration of the beauty of war, of self-sacrifice and heroic death overrules all laws of logic, reason and humanity

8 The pit scene is discussed in detail below.

9 Both in *Fire and Blood* (*Feuer und Blut*, 1925) and *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*, 1920), graphic accounts of his experiences on the Western Front during World War I, Jünger glorifies war and violence in battle as an intense and mystical experience elevating the individual above their everyday existence.

(cf. Wertheimer 1986: 320-322). Both in Jünger's writings and Snyder's film, the experience of war and violence takes place on an emotional, irrational and existential level which combines fear with excitement and attempts to exclude critical analysis. Even though the notion of violence as an aesthetic concept is a subject of controversy in contemporary discourse, it still holds an obscure fascination as it appeals to the unconscious, where Freud located both the origin of humour and of our hidden desires. This may be why ›beautiful violence‹ is still tolerated – and even appreciated – in the realm of art, where rational analysis may be abandoned. As Adorno and Horkheimer established in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (cf. Adorno/Horkheimer 1947), the mind resorts to myth as a foundation for comprehension, since modern discourse has failed to incorporate the foreign and irrational (cf. Emig 2001: 190). In this sense, the recourse to the historic battle at Thermopylae as the topic of a movie paves the way for the recourse to pre-enlightened explanatory strategies. In the domain of art, hyperviolence is usually awarded a space where the human body may be turned into the object of abuse on a symbolic level, where it invites critical debate or illustrates social wrongs and injustices. Yet when it is employed merely for the sake of its allure or on behalf of an aesthetic maxim which foregoes all sympathy with the victims of abuse and all analysis of those who perform it, hyper-violence is shifted from a representational level to a merely presentational one. Such examples of »pitiless art«, which render »the dead of concern only when either violating some existing prohibition or offering themselves up as images of torture«, show no recognition of their transgressions and do not accept what ethical concerns are at risk (cf. Virilio 2003: 5, 7-9). In *300*, violence is not negotiated but elevated to the level of a superior aesthetic concept and philosophy represented in the Spartans' martial prowess, their readiness and ability to take lives – both those of their enemies and their own.

The historic setting creates distance and allows the staging of topics and perspectives not deemed otherwise appropriate. It is much easier to come to terms with the mentally disturbing effects of a film if we are able to attribute them to a distant and somewhat obscure past. That way, we are able to approve of ruthlessness and brutality while continuing to claim intellectual superiority. The setting in classical Sparta renders the experience of violence remote and places it in an age of myth and legend. Here, people live by rules which do not have to adhere to either formal jurisdiction or the principles of reason and enlightenment. However, the underlying message of *300* is that reason can be rightfully abandoned in times of war or when a society finds

itself at a crossroads. Here, Snyder's film goes a long way to make it as easy as possible for the audience to identify with Leonidas and his men, piling one instance of Persian savagery and decadence on top of another. Xerxes' barbarity justifies all of the Spartans' violence and brutality, even when that means that they are shown erecting a wall cemented with the bodies of slaughtered Persians. However, the audience does not only connect with the Spartans because they fall victim to Persian cruelty and greed for power, but also because recent history has seen events which openly invite comparison. In the era of War on Terror, the motif of a clash between East and West, of a fight for freedom and heroic imagery and rhetoric very similar to that of Snyder's film have become a daily reality. In his rally at the dawn of battle, Leonidas declares that: »A new age has come, an age of freedom. And all will know that 300 Spartans gave their last breath to defend it […]«. Not only does this contradict historical events, it also brings to mind the American obsession with the rhetoric of freedom in the aftermath of 9/11, and, in particular, George Bush's addresses to the American people with their excessive use of the terms ›freedom‹ and ›liberty‹.[10] The U.S. opposition to tyranny in countries like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, for example, is described as one of the »the greatest achievements in the history of freedom«, secured by »the dangerous and necessary work of fighting our enemies«. Bush goes on to declare that some Americans »have shown their devotion to our country in deaths that honored their whole lives – and we will always honor their names and their sacrifice«.[11]

The similarity between Bush's and Leonidas' choice of words is clear and needs no further comment. Whether or not these similarities were intended is less important than the extent to which they were perceived as such by the public. The box-office appeal of *300* proves that the film did strike a chord with many people and the nature of the parodies and witticisms di-

10 In his second inaugural address on January 20th 2005, for instance, Bush managed to use the word ›freedom‹ 27 times and the word ›liberty‹ 15 times within 21 minutes. Cf. »The Rhetoric of Freedom«, editorial in the Washington Post on 21 January 21 2005, Page A16 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A 25249-2005Jan20 html>). Accessed 12 February 2013.

11 A complete transcript can be found in the *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001-2008*, published in the White House archives (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George _W_Bush.pdf>). Accessed 12 February 2013.

rected its way shows how narratives of violence and self-sacrifice on the battlefield create significant unease and discomfort when they are too obvious a reminder of the events of daily life. This can best be illustrated by the spoofs of two major battle scenes in *Meet the Spartans*. Here, the first clash between the armies is parodied as a dance battle between the Spartan host and the Immortals. Leonidas, who is pictured wearing a beanie-style hat, finishes his performance with a spectacular move and taunts the Persians in slang: »You got served!«. The Spartans then proceed to dance the Persian forces off the cliffs in a grotesque imitation of Zack Snyder's Spartans driving men and beasts out to sea, their broken bodies silhouetted against the golden horizon. And while in *300* the decisive encounter between Spartans and Persians culminates in the death of Leonidas and all his men under a shower of arrows, *Meet the Spartans* exploits the scene to make a mockery of the superior Persian military force. When Xerxes fails to beat Leonidas in a Grand Theft Auto video game challenge, he gets into a sports car which transforms itself into a giant robot, finally forcing Leonidas to admit that »He is a god-king« before Xerxes accidentally cuts off the power when he trips over his extension cord and crushes all surviving Spartans underneath him.

GENDER AND HETERO-NORMATIVITY

In the context of an all-encompassing experience of war, Leonidas and his Spartans symbolize a male norm that celebrates values like courage, aggression, and loyalty. The warrior's self-sacrifice on the battlefield is transformed into the ultimate expression of the pursuit of freedom and the concept of an archaic hegemonic masculinity. The characterization and depiction of Xerxes is in stark contrast to the image of the Spartan hetero-normativity. In *300* he is portrayed as an androgynous, heavily pierced giant, clad only in a few pieces of golden cloth and jewelry, his superhuman height and deep voice at odds with his painted face. The Persian king's decadent and ambiguous sexuality is intentionally installed as a polar opposite to the austere masculinity of Leonidas and his men. While Xerxes' sexual identity carries strong hints of transgenderism, references to homoeroticism among the Spartans are either avoided or contrasted with explicit heterosexual experiences, for instance between Leonidas and his wife (cf. Es 2011: 19-21). When, during his conversation with the Persian emissaries, Leonidas condescendingly describes the Athenians as »boy-lovers«, he challenges both their

readiness for battle and their masculinity. Ironically, the scene also constitutes one of the crudest deviations from what is known about the society of classical Sparta, which incorporated a ritualized cultural form of *paiderastia* into their educational system (cf. Cartledge 2007: 25). Even though *300* celebrates the aesthetic value of the male body, this takes place on an asexual and highly symbolic level. The Spartans' identical chiseled nudity is a symbol of their righteousness and readiness to sacrifice their lives for the common good, whereas the obscene gold-clad nudity of Xerxes and the monstrous bodies of his minions symbolize their effeminate and degenerate weakness, foreshadowing their eventual demise.

Interestingly, it is not the strictly hetero-normative and militant masculinity of the Spartans, but the hedonistic Persian environment with its hints at queer culture and transgenderism which more closely resembles contemporary standards. However, as *300* depicts it, traditional norms and rigid categories are crucial in times of danger and turmoil to provide security and ensure that all effort can go into the fight for survival instead of into the negotiation of individual identity. Thus the homogeneous collective of the Spartan *kósmos* is given preference over the multicultural decadence of the Persians.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that mockery of the Spartan hetero-normative masculinity remains a recurring motive in many jokes and parodies. In the South Park episode »D-Yikes!«, the epic struggle for freedom and against tyranny is turned into a gender-bender pun, emphasizing the benefits of queer culture. In *Meet the Spartans*, Leonidas (Sean Maguire) and his men are accustomed to greeting a woman with a high-five and a man with a deep French kiss. Xerxes (Ken Davitian), whose androgynous sexual identity is a major theme in *300*, is depicted either as a woman in drag or as the negative stereotype of an oriental male: small and fat, with extensive body hair, a beard and heavy eyebrows, sporting a heavily gilded cell phone. His efforts to make Leonidas bow before him take the form of bazar haggling: »I bow for no man!« – »Take a knee?« – »No!« – »Curtsey?« – »Enough!«, and when the Spartan king refuses to compromise, Xerxes eventually tricks him into bowing by pointing out that Leonidas' sandal is untied and needs fixing.

RE-NEGOTIATION OF REASON

One of the film's pivotal scenes unfolds when a Persian envoy (Peter Mensah) and his retinue arrive in Sparta to negotiate an agreement with Xerxes. The alternative to such a surrender is alluded to and symbolized by the skulls and crowns of defeated kings carried by the Persians. Seemingly unfazed, however, King Leonidas explains to the Persian emissaries how the Spartans were perfectly willing to embrace death and destruction rather than bow to the Persian god-king. Once again, Herodotus provides the source for the incident which acted as the model for the subsequent scene: when the Persians sent envoys to the Spartans demanding a gift of earth and water, the traditional symbol of surrender, the Spartans threw them into a deep well, suggesting »Dig it out for yourselves!« (Herodotus, Histories, 7.133.1).

Following Frank Miller's lead, Snyder turned Herodotus' anecdote into a major turning point determining the fate both of Leonidas' 300 men and the whole of Greece. After the Persian emissaries have arrived at Sparta, their leader is shown in deep conversation with Leonidas while striding through the city streets, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey) and several Persian and Spartan warriors in tow. The Persian paints a lucid picture of Xerxes' superior military forces and godlike power, pointing out how it would be suicide to refuse submission and attempt to stand against him instead:

»If you value your lives over your complete annihilation, listen carefully, Leonidas. Xerxes conquers and controls everything he rests his eyes upon. […] All the God-King Xerxes requires is this: a simple offering of earth and water, a token of Sparta's submission to the will of Xerxes.«

Leonidas' reaction is delivered in a both provocative and mock-ironic tone, ignoring the interjection of his counselor Theron (Dominic West) to remain conciliatory:

»Submission? Now, that's a bit of a problem. See, rumour has it the Athenians have already turned you down. And if those philosophers and boy-lovers have found that kind of nerve – […] And, of course, Spartans have their reputation to consider.«

Not deigning to acknowledge the challenge, the Persian emissary merely repeats his ultimatum and reminds Leonidas to choose his next words carefully, as »they may be your last as king«.

Now a soft wind sets in, Leonidas' face is caught in close up, his eyes lingering on the beauty of the Spartan landscape, on a Spartan woman and her daughter and a group of young Spartan boys, all waiting with baited breath for their king to decide their fate. Finally, Leonidas' eyes turn towards Queen Gorgo's proud and assertive features, before turning back to the head emissary standing on the verge of a giant, brick-built pit. In a final moment of stillness, the king's voice whispers the words »earth and water« before audibly drawing his sword, aiming it at the Persian's throat. Eyes wide in disbelief, the emissary can find only one explanation for Leonidas' reaction: »Madman. You're a madman!«. Leonidas' answer is as laconic as Herodotus' account: indicating the pit, he quips: »Earth and water. You'll find plenty of both down there«. Shocked, the Persian appeals to reason: »No man, Persian or Greek, no man threatens a messenger!«. When, in cold fury, Leonidas counters that the Persians insulted his queen and threatened his people, all that is left for the emissary is a final, desperate cry: »This is blasphemy! This is madness!«. With the background music foreshadowing the lull before the storm, the king turns his gaze towards the queen once more; her face caught in a close-up, the ultimate decision is left to Gorgo. Only when she sets her features and nods assent, is Leonidas ready to burn all bridges: »Madness? This is Sparta!«. With a single mighty kick, he hurls the Persian emissary into the pit, re-sheathes his sword and, while the rest of the Persians are sent to their doom, strides back to his queen.

Leonidas' iconic »This is Sparta!« has not only turned into an internationally known catchphrase, but has also become the movie's most frequently parodied quote. In *Meet the Spartans*, Leonidas not only drenches the Persian emissary in spittle when he gives the iconic shout, he also sends another Persian after him with a flying dropkick, while the corrupt councilman Traitoro (Diedrich Bader) urges him to »Stop kicking people into the Pit of Death, really!«. After all the Persians have been dealt with, Leonidas proceeds to kick an over-the-top Britney Spears, Kevin Federline, and finally the entire jury of *American Idol* into the pit. The internet was brimming over with spoofs and caricatures of people yelling »This is Sparta!« in the most unlikely contexts or of Leonidas' cut-out screaming face transplanted onto different bodies, for example in a photomontage of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*.

Figure 1 & 2: Internet spoofs of the »Pit of Death« scene and the »This is Sparta!« catch phrase[12]

In my opinion, the pit scene provides a key to understanding why spoofs of *300* have become so crucial, as Snyder's vision of Sparta renegotiates the dimensions of rationality and irrationality. Today, as in ancient Greece diplomatic immunity is a fundamental principle and absolutely sacrosanct. In fact, in Herodotus' version of the events preceding the battle at Thermopylae, the Spartans acknowledge their sacrilege and send two volunteers of noble birth to die at the hands of Xerxes in requital for the slaying of his

12 Both images recur on numerous websites, thus tracing the original poster or the owner of any rights which may subsist in them proved impossible. I apologize for the infringement of any legal rights.

heralds (cf. Herodotus, Histories 7.134.2).[13] In *300*, however, Leonidas' exclamation »This is Sparta!« overrides all rules and traditions grounded in political and humanitarian reason. It claims the Spartan *kósmos* as a sphere unto itself, with its own interior logic and hermeneutic rationality. Killing the emissaries severs all ties with the common Greek world and henceforth, all Spartan actions follow this particular interior logic which culminates in the warriors' self-sacrifice on the battlefield.

In the pit scene, the audience is also confronted with a process of othering: the Persian envoys are turned into a scapegoated other bent on exterminating the Spartan *kósmos* through abominable acts of violence. They are objectified as ruthless minions to a barbaric king who may rightfully and reasonably be denied the basic rights of all emissaries. Yet in doing so, the Spartans also install themselves as an alterity, spurning rational considerations and social traditions. Therefore, the pit scene is the point of no return, both for the plot and the audience's frame of mind. Setting the tone of the discourse for all actions and decisions from that point on, it establishes the resort to violence and self-sacrifice as a diktat of reason.

CONCLUSION

I would argue that the need to ridicule the message conveyed in *300* is based on more than a lingering sense of unease about an unreasonable, emotional and subconscious reaction: it springs from the fact that *300* fails to provide a solid, resilient reference system for the hetero-normative and hyperviolent standards it conveys. The experience of war is no longer an integral element of wide parts of contemporary Western civilization. When ancient writers related anecdotes about the Spartans' laconic wit, they were raising their hat to kindred souls deserving praise and admiration for their repartee in humiliating barbarian enemies through *para prosdokian* rhetoric. In the mock parodies of *300*, however, it becomes clear that even though Spartan valor and defiance of death have the potential to capture the audience and send shivers down their spines, the reality of war and its consequences remain an alien experience. On screen, violence and death can be valued for their fear factor

13 Herodotus also relates Xerxes' reaction to the Spartan attempt at atonement: even though the Spartans had made havoc of all laws and traditions, the Persian king refuses to copy their action or to free them from their guilt by killing the Spartan volunteers (cf. Herodotus, Histories, 7.136.2).

and their aesthetic merit, allowing a brief holiday from reason. Yet when the cinematic world intersects too closely with everyday reality, the artistic threat of pain and self-sacrifice becomes real and starts to imply consequences for the audience's personal lives, e.g. losing their right to autonomy and individuality. Therefore the mocking and parodying of *300* as an example of existential struggle also addresses the very substantial angst which arises from its references to today's great chimera, the War on Terror. *300* celebrates monolithic gender norms and clings to the ideal of an archaic masculinity, the abandonment of the individual self in favor of the common good, defiance in the face of death and the acceptance of war as an end in itself. These are ideals which are now widely associated with a past we have abandoned, a past with strong connotations of totalitarian regimes and their regimentation and control of the minds and behavior of their populations. Therefore, even in the age of War on Terror, when the motive of a fight for freedom and heroic imagery and rhetoric very similar to that of *300* have become a daily reality, we are not ready to welcome their return.

Ridiculing the depiction of the Spartan stand in *300* is also a cathartic reaction to a situation of intense unease caused by a conflict between reason and intellect and a rather primal set of emotions and instincts. In the parodies of *300*, humour acts as a stress-reliever, counteracting the inner conflict and existential angst the film evokes. While our minds are firmly rooted in modern or postmodern discourse, we still seem to crave an emotionally charged experience of raw immediacy, which may easily be projected into the premodern period and provides us with a rush of adrenaline which then leaves us feeling tainted. It is this guilt about longing for something reason tells us is wrong that has us calling for comic relief, ridiculing what we are afraid to deal with. Puns, parodies and laughter have the ability to right what is wrong, allowing us to come to terms with our conflicting emotions from fascination to repulsion. Both the spontaneous mocking of catchphrases like »This is Sparta!« and the large-scale but crude parodies such as *Meet the Spartans* or »D-Yikes« deliberately create scenarios where aestheticized violence, existential fear and liminal experiences are reduced to absurdity. The crudeness of these parodies is due to the need for an incongruence experience, which Kant and Freud both established to be one of the underlying categories of humour (cf. Freud 1905/1982: 9-22, 176-177). The parodies defy the value of aestheticized violence, heroism and artfully staged fights to the death, targeting in particular the ideal of a belligerent archaic masculinity and hetero-normativity and the abandonment of individuality. Thus, incongruity is explicitly made manifest and facilitates an emotional release (cf.

Kant 1951 [1790]: 172). Parodies of *300* and the Spartans' ultimate struggle for freedom dissipate the fear of war as an all-encompassing entity that eats up all the certainties of reason, the social beliefs formed over many decades and finally the essence of the individual and its right to preserve the integrity of body and mind.

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