

## Prepare for Glory: The Multiplication of the Digitally Hyperreal Hero in Frank Miller's/ Zack Snyder's *300*

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The filmic adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* by Zack Snyder stands right between recorded history and postmodern entertainment, with its storyline crammed between an actual event and its virtual filmic shell. The muscular homogeneity of the Spartan army, made possible with digital technology, is viewed as a kaleidoscopic reflection of the relation between one story and its many narrated versions, visually exemplified by the army of 300 Spartans, in which specificity is effaced and the individual conflates with the dehumanized mass. Drawing on the libidinal dynamics of male muscularity, the film fuses history, the superhero tradition and current social anxieties to present an abstract ideal, death in the noble service of freedom, through a specific, contemporary viewpoint. Digital post-processing ensures that the aesthetics of the film is the same as that of the graphic novel, minimalist but hardly life-like; thus the film celebrates the ability of digital imaging to transform a single abstract idea/ ideal into a pop culture spectacle, faithful, as such, to the time and era that it addresses.

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### **Introduction**

**T**his paper will attempt to approach the representational impact of the filmic adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* by Zack Snyder, focusing on the way digital technology transforms one individual historical event, the Battle at Thermopylae, into a contemporary mass cultural product. The film represents the battle between the massive Persian army and a Spartan battalion defending the Thermopylae Passage in Boeotia, Greece in 480 BC; yet, unlike similar cinematic attempts in the past, such as Rudolph Maté's *300 Spartans* in 1962, Snyder's *300*, closely following the aesthetics of the graphic novel, presents the Spartan army as a group of almost identical

hypermuscular ancient supermen with exaggerated military skills and moral ideals. The digital manipulation of the characters that produces their visual homogeneity becomes the locus of ideological representation and, on a meta-narrative level, manifests a negotiation between a single event and its many narrations. In other words, not only is an individual story once again re-told in another one of a mass of versions, but this time, by drawing attention to its own artificiality, the film becomes a self-conscious *simulacrum* of the historical event, a version of reality that negotiates its position against reality itself, using a stylized army of physically exaggerated soldiers whose bodies bear their own political and ideological burden.

Snyder's *300* utilizes the practically unlimited representational capacities of digital technology to sketch the historical and semantic status of the Spartan army rather than pretending to represent the army itself, as the film oscillates between history and digital spectacle with an evident preference for the latter. As well as a limited set of stylistic elements that schematically depict ancient Sparta for the sake of a historical façade holding together the narrative, *300* uses the Spartans as a completely conscious visual declaration of the redundancy of historically accurate details for the sake of preserving abstract ideas with a social or political significance. These abstract ideas involve the diachronic and often oversimplified narrative of a noble defense against the invading "others." The bodies of the muscular Spartan warriors are utilized as representations of these abstractions; their exaggerated eroticization establishes connotations of physical and moral health, self-reliance, and idealized nobility, thus placing them in the superhero tradition. In the depiction of the Spartans, and the film as a whole, digital technology seems to impose its own rules regarding realistic representation, as heroism and sacrifice practically form an individual identity that is shared by the uniform mass. This expanded version of individuality, combined with the connotations of their physicality, consumes the Spartans into one entity, an incarnation of ideals that underlines at the same time the necessary death of the original for the sake of the diachronic. By consciously putting aside realistic representation, the film presents simultaneously the story on an actual and a virtual level, i.e. as close to the real event as necessary to make sense, and at the same time as far from it, as needs be, in order to magnify its significance through spectacle.

### **Forces that Forge Masses: Reproducing the Superhero Body**

*Mise-en-scène* and character design in *300* are dictated by the way in which the narrative handles the association of each individual Spartan with

the entire group. In other words, the film presents a unibody military unit and the soldiers that comprise it as equally important, since the unbendable Spartan discipline, as portrayed, unites the soldiers into a coherent mass that is comprised of monads with no individuality. Especially during battle scenes, the group and each soldier in it only make visual sense through one another, as the actors as well as the characters that they embody are generally stripped of any distinguishing characteristics. The title of the film is very appropriate in this respect, as it underlines the facelessness of the characters. The number 300 instead of the *300 Spartans* in Maté's film denotes *mass* but not *plurality*; it shows the film's indifference towards the historical figures of the Spartans themselves, but at the same time draws specific attention to the muscular bodies of the soldiers as they line up in battle formation. Thus the film creates a clear analogy between the muscular bodies of the soldiers and the strength of the unit that they form together in order to draw attention to the representational implications of orderliness and strength that are emitted by both their physical form and their military formation in contrast to the chaos of a mob. The film, therefore, situates itself carefully between the "one" and the "many" and establishes its meaning in the interplay between the two.

The excessive muscularity of the figures of the Spartans in *300* is in line with this sense of solidness, and follows the wider physical tradition of post-modern supermen, perhaps with the sole exception of spandex tights. Miller's graphic novel self-consciously belongs to comic books, and the aesthetic standards of that genre are equally prominent in the film. Snyder's film closely follows Miller's artwork in the graphic novel as regards the way the bodies draw attention to themselves; consequently, the film's representational matrix follows comic books that are "obsessively centered upon the body" (Bukatman 49). In *300*, as is the case in all superhero comic narratives, the impression is underlined not so much by what the hero does or is, but by his looks; the individual bodies of the Spartans exemplify the same flawless muscularity of other superheroes, which, "despite their plasticity, are armored . . . , rigid against the chaos of surrounding disorder" (Bukatman 56). Any military force would be expected to display a large degree of uniformity, but in *300* this uniformity of muscular bodies is so conspicuous that it eclipses almost everything else in the film and becomes the locus of significations, as the superhero body "can only be compared to those of other superheroes and not to the common world of flesh, blood, muscle and sinew" (Bukatman 59). The Spartans are a homogeneous group from which nobody stands out, with the possible exception of King Leonidas. In superhero texts the superbody is not simply favored over the narrative, but in fact, as Alan Klein notes, becomes the narrative itself

through its ability to “communicate without an act” (qtd. in Bukatman 55). As the mere presence of the superhero is equated to the text itself, eventually becoming *autoreferential* (Bukatman 59), the mass of bodies of the Spartans is by analogy also equated to the text, communicating, through its physicality, strength, health, dignity and eroticism.

This eroticism that surrounds the superhero’s “autoreferential” muscular body establishes an interesting link with the bond that held together the actual Spartan army during the Classical era. Ancient Sparta was indeed a caste society, which promoted and in fact relied upon a strict system of social separation. The group that fought in Thermopylae and, consequently, inspired *300*, was the *Spartiates*, the class of Spartans with full citizen rights, and ergo the right to become warriors and be raised according to the famous (or infamous, to some) Spartan military way of life. According to Plato, this way of life was in fact responsible for creating strong affective bonds between the *Spartiates*,<sup>1</sup> and was associated with physical and moral health, as displayed by a well-built body. While erotic muscularity is a common physical trait among superheroes, which are traditionally marginal and solitary characters, in ancient Sparta it was the result of a highly social way of life, which also seems to be reflected in the Spartans as a mass in the film. The film thus manages to eliminate the representational incompatibility between the lonesome superhero figure and the socially conscious Spartiate; it takes everything that the superhero character stands for, i.e. righteousness, bravery against an overwhelming threat, etc, and transfers them to an entire group of people, simply by using the same image for all of them, relying on the relative representational straightforwardness of erotic muscular bodies on screen.

The film also exploits the eroticism that the superhero’s muscular body emits in order to relocate its signification as a forging force between members of artificial groups like armies, which, according to Freud, rely on underlying “libidinal bonds” that hold them together. According to Freud, the unification of a military group rests in the illusory assumption that all soldiers are equal under the guiding paternal love of a commander-in-chief that loves all of them in the same way, an “intense emotional tie” with him that, in turn, also creates

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1. The *Spartiates* were obliged to participate in closed dining groups as *homoioi*, i.e. similar in behavior and equal in social rank, which was an attempt by their highly controlling state to force them into homogenization by eliminating their individual differences (Powell 226). According to Plato, those dining groups also aimed to divert the attention of the *homoioi* from their families to their comradeship, a condition which, combined with their nudity during the *gymnasia* (combat training), created homoerotic relationships among them (228).

strong bonds between the soldiers themselves (123-25). The well-built, half-naked bodies of the Spartans make explicit the underlying eroticism that united the ancient Spartiates and functioned as a powerful force that held them together against the surrounding disorder of the battle. The film constantly underlines the Spartans as a completely unified group, both in terms of their attitude regarding fighting and dying for Sparta, as well as the way the battle scenes are filmed; from their red capes, splintered shields and swords, to their height, biceps and combat line-up, all Spartans are fused together into a single fighting force.

The film also exhibits the fact that this Freudian "libidinal bond" between soldiers also requires a process of identification in which the commander-in-chief plays the role of the ego-ideal. The apparent incompatibility of having Leonidas as the indisputable leader of a group in which uniformity is a definitive trait, especially as presented in battle scenes, is explained by Freud's note that "a soldier takes his superior, that is, in fact, the leader of the army, as his ideal, while he identifies himself with his equals," without actually ever identifying with the commander himself (167). Therefore, the character of Leonidas has a double function as an "ideal"; on a literal level, he embodies the social ideal of freedom and obedience to a higher cause, which motivates and is reflected in the rest of the army as well, and on a psychoanalytic level he serves as a visual manifestation of the ego-ideal, which in turn personifies the libidinal bond that holds together the army on screen, as it did with the real Spartan army in the past. Whatever the Spartans are, he is more of it, and at the same time equal to them, as they are his own kaleidoscopic reflections. This is why his fighting scenes are more elaborate than the rest; for example, in several sequences in which he breaks away from the formation and advances forward alone, normal flow is interrupted by voyeuristic slow motion and consecutive zoom-ins and zoom-outs that allow objectification of his muscular body that dominates the austere *mise-en-scène*, while his balletic fighting maneuvers contrast with those of the clumsy and clownish Persian attackers. Laura Mulvey in *Death 24x a Second* comments on the control that digital technology offers to the "fetishistic spectator" as regards voyeuristic scopophilia; as the spectator is able to slow down or even freeze a frame, s/he eventually becomes "more fascinated by image than plot" (165). Filming and playback technology facilitate this "delayed cinema," as Mulvey calls it, in which the fragmented linearity of the film enhances the image of the star as icon and the spectator acquires a "heightened relation to the human body" (161). In the case of *300* the way that Leonidas' physicality is underlined by the way the temporality of the sequence is manipulated serves to establish his

individual body as a point of reference for the ego-ideal of the entire Spartan army, the erotic force that mobilizes them as an incorruptible mechanism animated from the inside by *eros*, and at the same time to pose all of them together as objects of the scopophilic gaze.

Although this objectification of the male body does not agree with Mulvey's earlier dichotomy between activity/ passivity in relation to the male seer and the female seen in cinema,<sup>2</sup> Steve Neale's model seems to allow room for this erotic objectification of the male body as well while aligning with Mulvey as regards male pleasure during film viewing. Neale supports his viewpoint by focusing on combat scenes between male characters, in which the physical destruction of the male body diffuses the anxiety of homoerotic desire on behalf of the spectator (284). This way, the male body on screen remains erotic while the male gaze manages to retain its heterosexually voyeuristic status: "Battles, fights and duels of all kinds are concerned with struggles of 'will and strength,' 'victory and defeat,' between individual men and/ or groups of men. All of which implies that male figures on the screen are subject to voyeuristic looking, both on the part of the spectator and on the part of other male characters" (284).<sup>3</sup> The scene in which Astinos, one of the youngest Spartans, is decapitated by a Persian anticipates the Spartans' eventual physical degradation. For an elaborate twenty-second slow-motion sequence, a relatively long filmic time in a blockbuster action movie, Astinos' body falls headless to the ground. His explicit mutilation agrees with Neale's model by allowing the disavowal of the male body as sexual object by the spectator; indeed, after their initial triumph, the bodies of the dead Spartans are presented close to the end of the film scarred and ravaged by hundreds of Persian arrows. As the autoreferentiality of the superbody hides "both the mortal and erotic truths of its being" (Bukatman 55), which nevertheless become apparent towards the end, the figures of the Spartans call attention only to the signification of their homogenized appearance. The mortality under-

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2. See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure."

3. The phrases that Neale uses in quotation marks ("will and strength," "victory and defeat") were the ones that Mulvey originally used in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to refer to narratives that involve voyeuristic activity towards female protagonists. According to Mulvey, narratives that include those traits by definition concern a "change" of a character by another one, and ergo also include underlying sadism, which she then links with the guilt that accompanies voyeurism and is necessary in order for male pleasure to be established (29). Neale uses the same argument to show that male characters are very often the object of this sadistic "change" by other male characters, and therefore may also constitute objects of the voyeuristic gaze as well.

neath the Spartans is nothingness, the historical and corporeal void that is swept and concealed by the overwhelming representations of their surface image, on which the entire visual focus of the film is shifted.

### Embodying Geographies

The visual explicitness of this eroticization of the Spartans is also symptomatic of the wider sociopolitical framework of the film. The contrast that the film draws between Spartans and Persians utilizes existent and recognizable representational patterns that situate the narrative of *300* within a broader tradition of contrasts between spirit and flesh, morality and corruption, and, ultimately, East and West. This differentiation is established on an individual level, where each Spartan's half-naked body with his limited gear epitomizes a classical Greek simplicity that contrasts with the military extravagance of the average Persian. Initially, Leonidas' perfect, healthy shape comes in sharp contrast to the deformed figure of Ephialtes, the Spartan who eventually betrayed him and led to his defeat and death by the Persians. As opposed to Ephialtes, the muscular body of Leonidas is desirable because it signifies trust and reliance, whereas Ephialtes' treason and allegiance to King Xerxes in exchange for the lustful pleasures of an oriental harem eventually comes to prove the immorality that his physicality connotes. The confrontation between Leonidas and Xerxes also underlines their differentiation; each king in this scene is a reflection of his entire army, a clear embodiment of the mass by the individual; the real contrast here is between the way an idealized and caring officer controls and transforms the libidinal relationship between his men into a bonding force, and the way the extravagant passions of a tyrant contribute to the chaotic appearance of his troops. In scenes where the two armies meet, the healthy, fit and orderly bodies of the Spartans massacre and prevail over the uncoordinated and almost pathetic mob of Persians. Leonidas' ideally sculpted body expresses a harnessed erotic force that forges the solid "body" of the Spartan troops, whereas the slender bisexuality of King Xerxes whose tall stature and golden ornaments are not enough to hide his sybaritic and effeminate body, signifies corruption deriving from raw and uncontrolled passions of the flesh.<sup>4</sup>

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4. This follows Richard Dyer's analysis of the difference between the white and the non-white body as the traditional dichotomy between spirit and flesh (qtd. in Rehling 92). The body of Xerxes is presented as much taller and darker than that of Leonidas, in fact inhuman, but the threat that such a stature would normally pose is disavowed by the sense of abnormality that this size presents, in addition to its homosexual connotations,

This visual exaggeration of the historical core of the battle at Thermopylae in *300* may also serve the wider ideological attitude of certain films that promote Western ideals of honor and democracy in contrast to a corrupted Orient. Much like the contempt that the ancient Greeks showed towards the Persians, whom they considered as uncivilized, the film reduces the contrast between King Leonidas and King Xerxes as individuals, their armies as a mass, and, consequently, their entire cultures to little more than a matter of ethnic appearance. With its stylization of characters and simple narrative of a brave defense against an invasion by a tyrant, the film may be seen as representative of the kind of campaign that is launched after great disasters, most obviously 9/11. Superhero figures have always been recruited in patriotic narratives to uplift the common sentiment, because of their ability to keep the patriotic message as simple and direct as possible in periods with immediate need for heroes. At the same time, the excessively muscular Spartan bodies in *300* seem to be impenetrable, a sign of physical health which, according to Yvonne Tasker, is equated in Western cultures with moral health (81).<sup>5</sup> This autoreferential moral cleanliness and purity functions as a visual example-to-follow of nobility and self-sacrifice, turning the Spartans into sort of “moral ancestors” of the entire Western world through the film’s clear-cut and almost naive differentiation between West and East as the “good guys” and the “bad guys” respectively. Digital technology makes the mass of Spartans look identical in order to represent the fact that all nations in the Western world are equal against danger or terrorism, and each individual Spartan, under this kind of political reading, embodies and represents collectively the indefinite number of people and societies, diachronically and geographically, that share the same Western values of “freedom,” a word so prominently articulated and defended in *300*. This straightforward message is enriched by the visual multiplication of the Spartans; their physical similarity underlines the visual dynamics of the way each soldier contributes to the battalion as a war machine, a visual translation of the way the individual contributes to the power of the mass.

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in direct contrast to the “ordinary” heterosexual Spartans that Leonidas’ masculine and normal proportions represent. Through this opposition, the film agrees with similar filmic narratives that use men of color to “ridicule the objectified male body in part through designating it homosexual” (Rehling 95).

5. Tasker uses the figure of Arnold Schwarzenegger as an example of this. Positing Schwarzenegger as a personification of the American dream, she quotes Alan Richman who sees the Austrian-born film star as a man who “transformed the image of bodybuilding from one of excessiveness and narcissism into one of heroism and health” (81).

### The Core and its Many Surfaces

This Spartan tradition of orderliness which was passed down in history by Herodotus is the same that still influences productions like *300*. The story of the ancient Spartans, woven like a “moral tale” with a traitor and a noble king that perishes in the struggle of his country against a tyrant, has a meaning and purpose that is politically applicable in any given society (Hooker 230). The propaganda of Sparta that is found in ancient writers, mainly Athenians, was successful; eventually the latter were led “to throw their weight behind the legend” and use Sparta in their writings as an example of order that counterbalanced the “riotous excesses of the Athenian democrats” (Hooker 231). After all, the ideal state presented in *300* is an oversimplified version of the truth. The Spartan character on screen has very little to do with the heterogeneous defenders of Thermopylae in 480 BC.<sup>6</sup> With this propaganda having proved far more successful than its original intentions, Sparta was perpetuated in the course of the centuries as the paradigm of order and dignity for the Western world. It dresses a historical core in a surface form which, despite its several historical inaccuracies, still preserves the absolutely necessary, i.e. the aura that the event carries as a powerful tale of values. This way the individual moral core of the story remains intact although it may be told in an in-

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6. There are a number of confusing issues with names here; for example, the city is referred to in the ancient scripts both as *Λακεδαιμόν* and *Σπάρτη*, but *Λακεδαιμόν* is also the name of the entire state (Hooker 14; MacDowell 26). Its inhabitants are also referred to as both *Λακεδαιμόνιοι* and *Σπαρτιάται*. In this paper the term “Spartan” has been used only to match the names in the film, since history scholars make a distinction between *Spartiates* and *Spartans*. According to scholars, *Spartiates* is used to refer to the free citizens with full political rights that inhabited the city of Sparta, and which were in fact the *par excellence* military caste that had the right to follow the *agoge* and become members of the Spartan ironclad troops (Hooker 14); the term *Spartans*, on the other hand, includes the *Spartiates* as well as the *helots*, the *perioikoi*, the *slaves*, the *freedmen* and the *mothakes* (MacDowell 23-51). For Hooker, this problem also becomes numerical when we read in Herodotus that the troops that defended Thermopylae consisted of 300 Spartiates, 2800 hoplites from other parts of the Peloponnese, 700 from Thespiae, 400 from Thebes, 1000 Phocians and an unspecified number of Locrians, the sum of which (3100) contradicts the number mentioned in the epitaph, which raises the force to 4000 (164). The “missing” 900 soldiers, possibly *Spartans* in the broader geographical and social meaning of the word, make the story of the sacrifice of 300 men even more prestigious and effective for the politically military profile of Sparta. Some additional inconsistencies in the work of Herodotus, then, not only raise a certain degree of historical skepticism but also prove that he had simply recorded and thus perpetuated an event that, by his time, had already acquired the legendary proportions that served the *Spartiate* propaganda (Hooker 165-66).

finite number of ways. Just as in *300* there was a set of characteristics epitomized by Leonidas and shared by his warriors as individuals and a group alike, on a meta-narrative level there is also a set of values epitomized by Herodotus' story, which are then multiplied in its many different versions, of which *300* is but one. Therefore, the film's liberalities as far as history is concerned should be approached as intentional variations on an underlying theme, which are selected according to the needs of the audience for which the surface product is intended. This way, the single moral core may be retold each time in many different ways, in order to fit the needs of any society temporally and spatially.

Under this scope the film could never constitute a historically accurate reproduction of the *Spartiates*, but rather promotes only their semantic significance in the form of artificial entities. As superhero figures, digitally constructed in such a way that they are capable of functioning as icons of the moral core of the story, the Spartans are a simulated version of the historical event, an image of the battle that is able to have its own effect because it was realized according to the aesthetic standards of contemporary times. Digital technology makes possible an image in which the historical details of human fragility have been removed, and the only thing that is preserved is the feat, the grandeur of a chimerical army of 300 superheroes, of breathing machines put in the service of a higher order. With the film brimming over with Computer Generated Imagery (CGI), the Spartans' eventual mortality is the only thing that reminds the viewers of its deeper, although weak, connection with historical facts. In this sense, the film remains historical, yet selective on the portion of reality it presents in a *qualitative* rather than a quantitative way. It is a simulation of reality, on a technological as well as on a cultural/ historical level; i.e., on the one hand, technological simulation is related to a kind of artificial standalone reality produced with the help of digital technology, and on the other, cultural simulation, in Baudrillard's sense of the simulacrum, involves images that function independently from the thing that they represent. The mode of representation in *300* passes through the simulacrum, in the sense that it becomes the copy of a pre-existing copy, i.e. of the graphic novel, which has already appropriated the reality of the event that it represents, and digital technology actually facilitates this subsequent simulation. Since "synthetic computer generated imagery is not an inferior representation of our reality but a realistic representation of a different reality" (Manovich, *The Language of New Media* 202), and taking into consideration the differentiation between a single core and different surface realizations, as discussed earlier, the film will be further approached as a spectacular affirmation of the power

of the digital hyperreal to quantify, transform and multiply the historical event of the battle.

### Technocultural Simulation

As a digital construct, *300* carries with it not only the negotiation between a single reality and its various transformations as spectacle but also the ontology of the binary code that has the ability to endlessly and flawlessly reproduce that negotiation. In the case of *300*, by reality we understand a narrative core that is roughly speaking based on history, i.e. a social construct accepted as real. This reality is the inspirational effect of the battle, still strong through the diachronically successful Spartan propaganda; and by spectacle we mean the actual personification of this effect by the multiplied Spartans in the film, made possible with the help of digital graphics. In this respect then, the relation between the individual and the mass in *300* becomes one between technological and historical/ cultural simulation,<sup>7</sup> due to the catalytic effect of digital technology. When historical and technological simulation are combined, CGI in *300* enables the simulation of a single actual event, and at the same time uses artistic imagination to reproduce this historical core again and again in a mass of different virtual “realities,” owing to its technologically unlimited representational potentials. When digital technology is utilized in cases like *300*, in which messages extracted from history need to be put in the service of current social needs, historical and technological simulations come together as *technocultural simulation* that transforms an unaltered diachronic core into yet another surface and era-specific form.

The way *300* presents this multiplication of the superhero body in relation to the historical event is a clear example of technocultural simulation, accommodating this visual negotiation between reality and (photo)realism. As such, the film needs to present things in a credible way, but not necessarily in terms of our own understanding of the real world, but in terms of the standards that it actually creates for itself. In other words, the need for digital graphics to look “realistic” or “believable” does not have to do with the environment that the viewers objectively understand as reality, but with the representational

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7. Historical simulation could be defined as the attempt to revive the abstract core of heroism, commitment, etc. found in the narrative of the battle, which remains identical diachronically; on the other hand, technological simulation is the way in which digital technology translates this historical core into contemporary aesthetic language, which of course implies an infinite number of possible visual translations of the same event, depending on the aesthetic and cultural standards of each era.

aspirations of the filmmaker. With the suspension of disbelief and the function of cognitive structures inside the human mind, these alternatives realities establish themselves as “real,” at least for the duration of the viewing. In this sense, *300* is based on a filmic universe that balances between historical realism and non-realistic representation; the fusion of live actors and digital graphics creates a new kind of image, which “combines ‘the best’ qualities of two types of imagery that we normally understand as being ontologically the opposites: live action recording and 3D computer animation” (Manovich, “Image Future”).<sup>8</sup> Digital technology ensures that the stylized aesthetics of Miller’s printed *300* are accurately transferred on screen, aiming at a resemblance between the two rather than creating a historically accurate visual panorama of 480 BC Thermopylae. In this respect, the film functions as an alternative visual realization of the past event. This processing was used to enhance the physicality of the Spartan soldiers, rendering on screen the patina of epic heroism that Miller’s earthy colors convey in the graphic novel. It also causes a significant ontological detachment of the actual bodies of the actors, no matter how fit they are, from the digital excess of testosterone and muscles that spectators eventually see on screen. In this spirit, the final visual result admits a liberal modification of the historical event for reasons of effective spectacle appropriate only for the audience for which it is intended, but without sacrificing the social ideals that it represents.

### The Real Within

Technocultural simulation could initially make sense as a Baudrillardian dichotomy between reality and simulation, always in favor of the latter. A Baudrillardian reading of *300*, as an example of the image eventually extinguishing reality and becoming reality itself, would perhaps dismiss the real core of abstractions underneath the artificial digital surface as a deceptive illusion, and would conclude that the actual battle at Thermopylae is eventually reduced and consumed by its mass of images, thus becoming its “own pure simulacrum” (170). In other words, the superhero surface narrative would perhaps be seen as a postmodern suit that not only dresses and transforms the narrative, but also makes it completely contemporary, thus eventually severing all its bonds with the event itself. The problem that consequently arises entraps the spectator of *300* between the assumption of the reality of an individual

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8. The film uses the method of “digital backlot,” in which real actors perform in front of blue or green screens; digital landscapes and color management added in post-processing ensure that the final visual product is almost identical to that of the graphic novel.

historical event, and a mass of images, with the difference between the two not always possible to determine. The former is still prominent in the narrative of the film but its actual form remains elusive and lost in time, whereas the latter is alluring and spectacular. As a Baudrillardian simulacrum, the cinematic image of the sacrifice of King Leonidas' troops would have no relation to the actual troops; it would mean that the shadow that Leonidas and his men cast upon history outlived and eventually superseded them, usurping their place and, in fact, establishing itself as history in the place of history itself.

Under this scope, the debate about the individual and the mass in examples of technocultural simulation tends to be conflated with the debate between the assumption of one familiar truth and its many new surface transformations. Yet, any one of the many surface forms that function as alternative digital "realities" to an individual abstract core would be difficult or impossible to comprehend without assigning a certain amount or quality of actual truth to that core. The Baudrillardian model of simulation, which makes a "rigid distinction" between actual and virtual (Colebrook 98),<sup>9</sup> could be replaced by a Deleuzian one, which constructs a notion of the simulacrum that incorporates simultaneously the actual level of the individual abstract real and the virtual level of the mass of its specific manifestations. In "The Actual and the Virtual" Deleuze refuses the existence of purely actual or virtual objects, arguing instead that "every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images," which constitute its potential realizations (148). The essence of every object always retains concurrently what it is (actuality) and what it may potentially become (virtuality), which means that all actual things are also already the realized images of themselves (Colebrook 98). This way Deleuze harnesses the virtual before it murders the actual. In this respect, *300* is not a copy of the actual battle at Thermopylae, not only because it could never resemble it accurately, but also because it does not want to. Since contemporary cinematic aesthetics of epic films usually tend towards exaggeration, digital technology enables this conversation between actual and virtual in such a way that each of the two layers only makes sense through each other. With the existence of some truth in it, Snyder's film is neither a pretentious imitation of the battle at Thermopylae, nor does it replace the actual event itself, but instead expresses merely a visual version of it, which, faithful to Deleuze's

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9. Brian Massumi notices that Baudrillard practically "sidesteps the question of whether simulation replaces a real that did indeed exist, or if simulation is all there has ever been." This lack of specific reference to the status that reality itself finally occupies in his schema eventually makes Baudrillard's model of simulation problematic.

approach, denotes the *hyperreality* that surpasses the warriors' mortal flesh but manages to retain their virtual image. Therefore, although digital technology is the definitive means of simulated realities, and, as such, could be seen as the primary generator of a mass of realities that eventually render the original one meaningless, it seems that the way *300* manipulates the relation between the one and the many as technocultural simulation calls for a model that does not exclude reality, either in a qualitative or in a quantitative way.

The narrative in the film animates a graphic novel that is indeed inspired by real events, and this consequently creates an ontological association between the two as the film is meant to revive the event in a dramatized manner that would make it more believable. Digital technology is the main technological protagonist in *300* because it is the definitive means by which simulated realistic spaces are created, i.e. spaces that are intended to be perceived by the viewer's senses as "real." In the digital era, the essential reality of images is established on an on-demand composition of the 0/1 binary code. In other words, the endless reproduction and modification of digital images enable the representation of a reality which is now nonexistent in temporal as well as spatial terms, but still real in terms of its significance. This fact enables CGI to represent visually both the actual and the virtual levels of a certain past event. Therefore, it is this significance or virtual level that is able to be mechanically reproduced, i.e. a certain "reality effect".

Digital media reduces everything to numbers. This basic property of digital media has a profound effect on the nature of visual realism. In a digital representation, all dimensions that affect the reality effect—detail, tone, color, shape, movement—are quantified. As a consequence, the reality effect produced by the representation can itself be related to a set of numbers. (Manovich, "The Aesthetics of Virtual Worlds")

Quantified and reduced to algorithms, the reality that the film presents is an echo of the actual event as it transgresses, negates and ultimately bypasses the antithesis between original and copy. The self-consciousness of the film as a pop product eventually renders it innocent against its historical inaccuracies.

## Conclusion

Technocultural simulation exploits the potentials of the virtual by multiplying the solid body of the Spartan warriors that represent a collectively impenetrable shield against invasion. The actual core, though, does not only concern the implications of the Spartiates' sacrifice, but also hosts the conditions

that made it necessary. This condition is also expected to be virtualized along with the event itself each time the individual core surfaces in any one of the mass of its virtual forms, differently materialized each time the narrative resurfaces. The filmic Spartans are clearly products of their time, and therefore need to be approached through the aesthetic and representational standards of that time. With this in mind, it seems almost impossible to overlook the signification of their physicality in an era that utilizes narratives of muscular superheroes to manifest and thus purge its instincts and impulses, which are often reflected in social structures. The homogenized mass of erotic bodies on screen entangles the viewer in a game of political and social ideology that re-affirms his/her position in the matrix of multileveled experience of social life that s/he comprehends as reality. Through this scope, the lack of individual specificity in each Spartan's form will make sense, as they will stand for the mass that only makes sense through the individual, and therefore they will be expected to be the carriers of the anxieties of both individuals and entire groups.

Technocultural simulation, therefore, stands between the mechanical and the natural, constantly drawing attention to the meaninglessness of separating them. It exploits the potential of animating the multiplied "virtual," making the Spartans physically identical not because they are bound by a blind one-to-one mimesis of a single prototype, but because they share a common reference to one abstract "actual," a historical basis still lies deep underneath CGI. The character in *300* is not a mixture of incongruous elements in an image that maliciously appropriates the place of the idea it represents, but a hybrid comprised of the actual actor, the digital hero and the historical persona of each soldier. Such hybrid new forms of visual narratives, according to Manovich, do not attempt anymore to hide the seams between digital graphics and live action, like previous films; instead, they "explore the space between juxtaposition and complete integration" ("Understanding Hybrid Media"), presenting manipulated *interpretations* of reality rather than accurate or even identical imitations of it. Like all situations and events, the battle at Thermopylae may be assumed to accommodate many levels of reality that include both physical and abstract items; the former have only a single finite, specific and mortal form, like the actual soldiers that perished in 480 BC, whereas the latter are abstract and thus have a mass of malleable and versatile forms, which in this case are related to the way their sacrifice will become meaningful diachronically. None of the two is expected to make sense without the other, the same way that no simulation makes sense without it being counterbalanced by the assumption of reality.

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