Zack Snyder’s 2006 film *300*, which is based on Frank Miller’s 1998 graphic novel,1 tells the heroic story of the Spartan king Leonidas and his three hundred men. Because Leonidas is forbidden by the oracle and her priests from leading the Spartan army against the mighty Persian god-king Xerxes, he decides to head north himself with a “personal bodyguard” of three hundred of his finest men. This relatively small number of soldiers, joined by an auxiliary Arcadian force, holds the countless number of Persian soldiers back for no fewer than three days. Meanwhile in Sparta, Queen Gorgo works to have the Spartans send additional men to Thermopylae to rescue her husband and his Three Hundred, but her efforts are thwarted by the treason of the politician Theron.2

Ever since the movie’s release, critical and popular opinions have advanced many different perspectives. A rather large number of people have found diverse reasons for considering *300* offensive. One aspect of this critique revolves around its so-called homophobia,3 for example, in the scene in which Leonidas arrogantly calls the Athenians “those philosophers and boy-lovers.” Others vituperate the movie for its supposed fascist ideals, pointing out uncanny parallels between the Spartan society and the “Third Reich”: the extreme nationalism, the mutual equality of the Spartiates and their superiority to the helots, the (primitive) genetic selection, and considering women as breeding machines for an ideal fighting

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1 The movie quite strictly follows the design and the perspective of the graphic novel. Snyder even stated publicly that the film *300* is “probably about ninety percent the book” (“Interview with Zack Snyder,” accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.latinoreview.com/news/interview-zack-snyder-on-300-1558). However, since the present book is about antiquity in film, we focus almost exclusively on the movie.

2 Gorgo’s name is never explicitly mentioned in the movie, but, following the ancient sources, IMDb lists Lena Headey’s character as “Queen Gorgo.”

elite. Yet another accusation is 300’s so-called facile embrace of racism towards modern Iran, the geographical, ethnic, and cultural descendant of ancient Persia. Some of the Persians in 300 are depicted as deformed or monstrous, sometimes even barely recognizable as human beings, and others are depicted as stereotypical and banal representatives of Western orientalism – effeminate, decadent, exotic.

In response to these ready-made and superficial criticisms, we aim to take the discussion to a deeper level, identifying and tracing the different forms of social discourse (both ancient and modern) which run throughout the movie. We will try to uncover the naturalizing processes in gender definition, in which the norms of the ancient narrator are manifestly reconstituted in the conventions of the genre of the modern action movie. By deconstructing this self-evident link between two historical forms of discourse, and by showing the historical discrepancy between both worlds in which they are performed, we aim to demonstrate how 300 can avail us of the opportunity to question the “natural” dominance of masculine discourse in our contemporary society. In doing so, we hope to achieve a refined historical assessment of gender as it is described, for example, by Judith Butler:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts... This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality.

To do so we will provide more insight into the communicative value of the storytelling, and this equally for the characters in the movie as well as for the director of the film and his audience. Subsequently, we will address the depiction of gender and the Orient, neither of which can be thought apart from the other. Finally, we will turn our attention to the way in which 300 offers a remarkable example of the reception of classi-

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