“EVERYBODY LOVES A MUSCLE BOI”:
HOMOS, HEROES, AND FOES IN POST-9/11 SPOofs
OF THE 300 SPARTANS

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In 2007–2008, a significant accumulation of cinematic and other visual media focused upon the celebrated episode of Greek antiquity recounting in different genres and styles the stand of the three hundred Spartans against the Persians at Thermopylae. Among them are David Padrusch’s documentary *The Last Stand of the 300* (2007), Zack Snyder’s feature film *300* (2006), Collision Studios’ video game *300: March to Glory* (2007), Andy Signore’s short film *United 300* (2007), and the Jason Friedberg/Aaron Seltzer comedy *Meet the Spartans* (2008).

Why did the legend of the three hundred Spartans seem so attractive for contemporary American visual media at that time? An anecdotal, yet telling account stems from the economic sector of society. Emerging at the dawn of the worldwide financial crisis, the fight of the three hundred Spartans served as point of reference for the serious loss of confidence in the banking system and also in national politics in general. William Streeter of the *ABA Banking Journal* specifically wondered about what was keeping bankers up at night:¹

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.”

This assessment draws an image of bankers as the 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” – 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, the author wished no such fate for these bankers.

Though this financial scenario is not necessarily typical for the broad reception of the story of the three hundred 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. For the remainder of this essay I will concentrate on the latter of these by focusing 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 the 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 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.”

Accordingly, I wish to view these films as parodies not only in their formal style as aesthetic interpretations 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 prob-

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