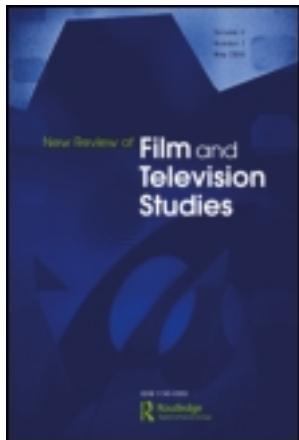


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### Digital afx: digital dressing and affective shifts in Sin City and 300

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Digital *afx*: digital dressing and affective shifts in *Sin City* and *300*

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In *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) extensive post-production work has created stylised colour palettes, manipulated areas of the image, and added or subtracted elements. Framing a discussion around the terms ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’, this paper argues that the digital technologies used in *Sin City* and *300* modify conventional interactions between representational and aesthetic dimensions. Brian Massumi suggests affective imagery can operate through two modes of engagement. One mode is embedded in a meaning system, linked to a specific emotion. The second is understood as an intensification whereby a viewer reacts but that reaction is not yet gathered into an alignment with meaning. The term ‘digital *afx*’ is used to describe manipulations that produce imagery allowing these two modes of engagement to coexist. Digital *afx* are present when two competing aesthetic strategies remain equally visible within sequences of images. As a consequence the *afx* mingle with and shift the content of representations.

**Keywords:** *Sin City*; *300*; emotion; affect; Brian Massumi; digital images; colour

#### Digital *afx*: digital dressing and affective shifts

Both *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) are visually striking films, extensive post-production work having altered colour palettes, manipulated the high and low lit areas of the image, and added or subtracted elements. Given the impact of digital technologies on the imagery of these films, this paper considers how such technologies provide a further means of influencing our experiences and interpretations. Its focus is on how digital manipulations alter conventional interactions between representation and aesthetics in popular cinema and reflects on the affective potential of these manipulations.

Characters are the principal markers whereby aspects of the world, in particular those inflected by political, cultural and social concerns, come into narrativised and also aestheticised space. Aestheticised space exists in any representational work of art, where aesthetics is broadly understood to mean the

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stylistisation of imagery. If the stylisation goes beyond simply depicting an object or character, there is the potential for a gap to begin to open between the image and its referent. As a consequence an image contains within it the capacity for a double impact on a viewer. This impact resides in how resemblance is recognised, which coexists with another complex reaction involving a balance between interpretation and a more direct or affective response. Affective imagery in all eras of the cinema allow both a figure and *mise-en-scène* to be configured to elicit an emotional response in a viewer. Such a strategy is apparent in the contemporary use of digital processes, and is especially exaggerated in the post-production work of *Sin City* and *300*. However, as these films further show, digital materiality also makes it possible to generate a dual aesthetic within a single set of images, extending the affective techniques available to filmmakers. When two competing aesthetic strategies remain equally visible within a sequence of images 'digital *afx*' emerge.

The contraction '*afx*' in the term digital *afx* signals a particular kind of affective response, one that relies on the *fx* used in the production of a film's imagery. Affect and affective response are both familiar ideas in discussions of film, though their development as terms of critical insight within cinema studies is relatively recent. Broadly speaking affect has been used to indicate the emotional response of a viewer to film (Plantinga 2009). Sound is also important, whether as music or soundscape. Underpinned by distinct paradigms, psycho-analytic, cognitive and phenomenological approaches share the view that characters and their actions have the capacity to provoke a felt response in viewers (Pajaczkowska and Ward 2008; Grodal 1997; Sobchack 2004). Editing, visual and aural stylisations are also key means through which a response may potentially be elicited. The figure and location, both stylised, whether through *mise-en-scène*, editing or framing, combine to create a range of responses in a viewer. Two studies of the horror genre have used the terms 'objectless anxiety' and 'horror-dread' to describe anxiety provoked specifically by film style. These studies offer the view that elements other than character have the capacity to elicit an affective response from viewers (Hills 2003; Freeland 2004). These latter approaches are also suggestive of an opening gap between the image and referent. The objects and figures on the screen are recognisable, but there is another dimension in play. This dimension may not be directly representative, but is instead evocative of something that provokes unease.

This latter point can be aligned with an alternative way of thinking about affect (Massumi 2002). For Massumi, affect leads to an embodied response, but it has a more autonomous quality, felt in the body without being codified or oriented towards a meaning system. A perceiver's direct response to a stimulus is as yet unaligned to quantifiable reactions, such as movement or an emotional response. In reacting to a stimulus such as a set of moving images, this affective response coexists with an interpretive one, establishing different modes of connectivity to an image. These different modes have an ability to modify each other, heightening or dampening a viewer's engagement. The modes of connectivity are grounded in intensity, an embodied response to an image, and

qualification, which equates to signified meaning. Massumi suggests that there is no direct relationship between the qualities or meaning of the imagery and the intensity, strength or duration of response. Instead: 'the relationship between levels of intensity and qualification is not one of conformity or correspondence but rather of resonance or interference, amplification or dampening' (Massumi 2002, 25). These insights from Massumi can be used to explore the digital manipulations of *Sin City* and *300* to see how they modify the relationship between intensity and qualification, and whether the dual aesthetic of digital a/fx alter our interpretations of the contents of representations.

### Digital dressing: reconfiguring figures and their environments

Working with digital intermediates (DIs) gives filmmakers the capacity to render *all* live-action malleable (Prince 2004). Once the image has become wholly accessible to the filmmaker, the gap between the image and referent has the potential to be widened, loaded with other kinds of resonances (Manovich 2001). These resonances have the potential to heighten or dampen the impact of an image. One of the most obvious impacts of the DI has been on the colour palettes of feature films. Much digital colour grading has pursued the same end as longer-standing film processing practices: to alter the colour tones of a sequence within a film, frequently in ways that allow the colour to resonate with the emotional tone of the film (Belton 2008; Higgins 2003).

In *Sin City* and *300* the widening gap between the image and its referent is visible through the remediation of the original design of the comic books and the extended presence of digital manipulations. Nevertheless, some of these manipulations follow, albeit it in a more exaggerated way, longer-standing uses of colour. For instance, one of the most striking aspects of *300* is the crush, the manipulation of high and low lights in the image, as well as the colour wash. Picking up on Lynn Varley's colour work in the comic book version of *300*, the colours are not only desaturated but also limited to a narrow range. Through using a DI a single dominant colour scheme places both the human figures and their location into the same aesthetic environment. A fight between a man and boy is coded with a cool greenish-blue tone in which white flesh tones of the characters appear greyish. When the man and boy speak about the glories of battle this colour gives way to a more golden hued sequence in which their flesh takes on a similar glow. In the sequence that tells the story of Leonidas' boyhood when, starving and exposed to the snow, he traps and kills the wolf and successfully returns to claim his crown, a cold blue dominates both the figure and location. In these particular examples each colour palette is a stylistic strategy that primarily underscores the action of the sequence: the stomach churning brutal training fight between adult and child, the golden grandiosity of Spartan philosophy and training, and the coldness of the environment and clinical tactics of the youthful Leonidas. The limited colour palettes resonate with and enhance the intensity of the emotive strategies of the narrative told via the figures and their actions.

As described above, the colour palette of these scenes underscore the action, generating dramatic control through colour. Such a use of colour palettes is not an innovation of the digital era, indeed dramatic control through colour is evident in earlier examples of cinema, from the experimental use of Technicolor in *Becky Sharp* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1935), the heightened colour of *Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) to the stylisation of *Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) and the limited sepia-toned palette achieved in *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971). What is distinctive about colour control in the digital era is the extensiveness and degree of manipulation available to a filmmaker. As a consequence, working within a digital environment gives filmmakers the option of ‘digitally dressing’ both the character and their location, with the added potential of controlling and separating out different elements of the image. It is true to say that the colour palettes of the imagery might be controlled via film stock choices and tinting during processing, or bleach by-pass, or on-set using lighting effects and filters; however, each of these manipulations alters the image globally rather than targeting a single element. Within a digital environment any element has the potential to be altered in post-production to the extent that skin tones in *300* can be manipulated to take on the predominant hue of the imagery, de-emphasising naturalistic colour conventions in favour of more expressive ones that match across both figure and location. Through such digital dressing the relationship between the figure and location undergoes a shift; consequently, location ceases to be only the background for actions and instead becomes a more active visual or aural presence. The elements generating an emotional response in the viewer therefore shift away from only being character-based.

This shift in relationship between figures and their location has been articulated in various ways, usually in the context of art cinema in which the relationship between character and action is often more deferred. As a consequence, a character’s place within the location, as opposed to their actions, becomes of interest as it begins to take on meaning and associations for a viewer. Barbara Klinger develops a contrast between arresting and indelible images to tease out the affective and interpretive dimensions of images in which action is deferred. Though she is writing about *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) her comments provide a way into thinking about the imagery of *Sin City* and *300*. Of an arresting image Klinger states:

It occurs when a film stops to contemplate an exquisitely composed, significantly evocative and/or uncanny image. The forward motion of the narrative slows down or temporarily halts, allowing this spectacle to capture fully our attention ... The exact meaning of the arresting image is unclear; it is at once visually stirring and interpretively opaque. The mystifying qualities of the arresting image are, in turn, deeply related to its affective dimension ... We can consider the arresting image, then, as the ‘money shot’ of the art film insofar as it delivers a payoff for one of the genre’s chief pleasures: contact with highly aestheticized, ambiguous and affecting imagery. (2006, 24)

Underlying the distinction that Klinger makes between an arresting image and ones that pass us by in the flow of events is the familiar split between time and

space, or narrative and spectacle. The arrested image is the one that slows or engages the senses through a different pacing. The time-less quality of an arresting image ensures that the aestheticised and ambiguous imagery is more available to be seen. It is the configuration of timelessness and ambiguity that distinguishes the arresting image from what Klinger calls an indelible image. While an indelible image still contains striking visuals, its configuration is such that it lacks ambiguity. Unlike arresting imagery it does not remain open, but is instead enlisted to a trajectory established by the narrative:

[Referring to *Titanic*] As in many Hollywood films, the indelible image does not wish to remain truly mysterious; rather, it represents the culmination of the film's narrative trajectory and emotional structure. Thus, one distinction between arresting images in blockbusters and in art films lies in the former's repudiation of ambiguity. (Klinger 2006, 28)

The films discussed in this paper fall short of the arresting imagery to which Klinger refers, but the notion of affective imagery not straightforwardly tied to the narrative trajectory of a film is relevant to a discussion of both *300* and *Sin City*.

To consider further the idea of affective imagery untied from narrative trajectory, Brian Massumi's work is helpful. In his view, an affect, or intensity, is understood as the body being momentarily held by a sensation, often a sound and/or image:

Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static – temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It's like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. It is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance. And it is not activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims (if only on screen). (Massumi 2002, 26)

Massumi's analysis is distinctive in arguing that while intensity is embodied, it does not equate to affect understood as a synonym for emotion (2002, 27). For Massumi an emotion is a qualified intensity, by which he means that the emotion is registered as belonging to a meaning system or having a particular function. By contrast an affect is a perceiver's direct response to a stimulus that is as yet unaligned to quantifiable reactions, such as movement or a felt emotion. It is the lack of alignment of an affect that causes a viewer to be suspended, uncertain of where to direct their interpretation. In the following, I suggest that digital dressing and digital afx generate both kinds of affect, an intensity that is qualified as recognisable emotion, and an intensity that remains unaligned. The image holds two modes of connection for a viewer, an interpretive one that is grounded in narrative and an affective one that troubles the stability of interpretation.

### Affective shifts: stepping out from representations

Having followed Massumi's lead in arguing that affect and emotion are not the same, there is a problem with the kind of language that can be used in describing

the affective and emotive impact of imagery. Though somewhat clumsy, the following will use the word emotive to mean qualified intensity. The impact of imagery in *300* and *Sin City* not only resides in the actions of the characters, but in the emotive shift generated by digital dressing, and also in the affective shift of digital afx. To make clearer the distinctive aesthetic possibilities offered by using a DI it is worth first considering *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), a film made using analogue techniques that also relies on an extensive stylistic dressing of its characters and locations. *Alien* will be used to describe an emotive shift, as it is then easier to demonstrate the affective shifts of both *300* and *Sin City*.

*Alien* is a horror/SF hybrid, and so it is not surprising that it would have a rich visual style. Even so the aesthetics of the film are more distinctive than is usual for these genres. In *Alien* light and shadow are fully exploited to heighten suspense in such a way that the pervasive uncertainty surrounding the creature is as much to do with the resonances embedded in the aesthetics of the location as the characters and their actions. Like *Sin City* and *300*, the lighting and colour design fully encompass both the figures and their location. Many of the iconic moments of *Alien* take place within the confines of the *Nostromo* where the imagery plays on establishing visual connections between the exo-skeletal structure of the alien and the internal structure of the craft. The lines of panelling along the corridors on the *Nostromo* are often aligned as close vertical parallels, with horizontal connections running between the two. At times there is a curl of wire or a clinking chain dripping oil or water, with ducts and wider vents running along the roof opening into the dimly lit space above a character's head. All of this is low lit and heavily shadowed, but with lights carefully placed so that some edges stand out. Once the creature has been introduced via brief and often fear-laden glimpses, the editing and framing reverberates across both the lines of the creature and those of the craft, generating tension and toying with our uncertainty as to whether any high lit edge is ducting or a limb of the deadly creature. In making the *Nostromo* and the creature visually equivalent the sets of associations available for a viewer begin to intensify. Instead of focusing only on the threat of the creature, we begin to ask which is the greatest threat to the crew: the creature or the vessel.

Through matching the aesthetic of the *Nostromo* with that of the creature, a shift occurs. The *Nostromo* ceases to simply be a representation of a place where action occurs, and becomes a presence out of which emerges a wider expression of threat and entrapment. There is an intensification of feeling around the location, one that begins to modify the interpretation of the imagery. This does not mean that the imagery is ambiguous in the same way as an arresting image, but its representational dimension provides the material for one interpretation that can be shifted by its emotive dimension. This modification amplifies the threat generated around the creature. *Alien*, then, generates an intensity that is qualified as a recognisable emotion. It also demonstrates that emotive shifts are not a facet of digital manipulations per se. The distinction between an emotive shift and the affective shift of digital afx in *300* and *Sin City* is that the latter are

generated via the visible combination of two distinct visual conventions within a single set of images.

Where *Alien* was made in an era of analogue technology, the manipulations of *300* and *Sin City* rely on the different materiality of digital media technologies. It is this different materiality that makes it possible to create imagery with the dual aesthetic of digital fx. One outcome of working within a digital environment is that the relationships between elements within the image have the potential to be altered. To expand, once footage exists within a digital environment, either through a conversion to a DI or because it was captured in a digital format, all the information is available to interventions using digital technologies. This differs from analogue techniques in which the relationships between the elements are set in camera, or when the footage is shot. For instance, in *Alien*, all the textured combinations of light and shadow, industrial piping, exo-skeleton and dripping matter were captured in camera as the actors performed on the carefully designed and lit set. The cinematographic choices led to the camera movements and framing, which again were achieved through the relationship between camera and performer. While the editing, sound design and score add additional dimensions to the audio-visual imagery, the relationships between the visual elements within any given frame are established at the moment of filming. The extent of the contrast between light and dark may be altered by post-production processing of the film stock but the line of light and shadow is set by the in camera shot. The aesthetic possibilities available to a filmmaker follow from the ways in which they exploit moving image technologies to influence the look of a film.

In a digital environment it has become possible to manipulate many more parts of the image in post-production than had usually been feasible using analogue techniques. This is not to say that digital technologies are in some way better, only that they offer an additional array of choices to the filmmaker. This array of choices can be understood through two different conventions, those of *layers* and *groups*. Compositing techniques, in both analogue and digital environments, are a means of working across layers. At its simplest this involves combining background and foreground elements, which further draws attention to the ways in which potentially separable elements of the image can be considered in terms of the conventions through which they are grouped together. In mainstream cinema the aim is usually to ensure the illusion of integrated live-action and fx elements, a convention that can be described as continuity grouped. *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1983) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), the former produced using non-digital and the latter digital compositing technologies, both used compositing to embed their respective central actor within footage of historical events, an example of grouped compositing. Ungrouped elements are only rarely encountered in popular cinema, unless fully motivated by the narrative, such as the use of colour and black and white imagery in *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998). Working in layers also pre-exists digital environments, but the latter has increased the pervasiveness of this kind of manipulation during post-production.

The potential pervasiveness of digital manipulation is perhaps most obvious in *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (Kerry Conran, 2004), *Sin City* and *300* in which blue or green-screen filming techniques were extensively used. But extensive digital manipulation does not in itself generate digital afx. These are only present if the imagery has a degree of affect, or unqualified intensity. Though *Sky Captain* is extensively manipulated any intensity in the imagery is fully embedded in a meaning system. The digital dressing of the film relies on intertextual stylisations. The digitally constructed sets resemble Max Fleischer's *Superman* (1941) cartoon series, though the soft blue and red tones of the futuristic art-deco New York of the original have given way to the more sepia-toned look of *Sky Captain*. As the storyline follows 'a hero saves the day' trajectory typical of series films from the later 1930s (for instance, *Flash Gordon* (1936) and *Buck Rogers* (1939)) as well as the *Superman* franchise, the softness of the imagery and the glowing faces of the figures give an overall impression of a nostalgic evocation of futuristic heroes gone by. *Sky Captain* shares with *Sin City* and *300* a stylisation based on bringing together a mix of aesthetic antecedents. Nevertheless, in *Sky Captain* the different strategies are merged seamlessly, an example of immediacy that precludes the emergence of digital afx (Bolter and Grusin 1999).

### Colour as digital afx in *Sin City*

By contrast to *Sky Captain*, in *Sin City* and *300* the manipulation of the imagery creates a dual aesthetic. The emotive potential is visible in the digital dressing of the film, while digital afx generate an intensity whose meaning is less easy to align. The story-world of *Sin City* is graphic in its depictions of violence and draws on exploitative traditions for the costuming of the women characters. Like *Sky Captain*, it too plays on *noir* conventions, but its digital dressing tends more toward exposing the brutality underlying the genre than the illusion of individual clean-cut heroes who so often save the day. Where the soft tones of *Sky Captain* aesthetically capture the ultimate safety of its story-world, the uncompromising greyscale of *Sin City* presents an emotive palette offering little escapism from the violence of the action. Marked by the contrast of heavy shadow and bright light, the reality of the world of Basin City is equally stark: kill or be killed.

The greyscale of *Sin City* is, however, only one of the stylistic strategies in play, as another significant aspect of the imagery is the use of colour. The relationship between the colour and greyscale elements of the image can be defined by the ways in which these elements are grouped and ungrouped. The affective dimensions associated with these stylisations depend on the extent of the gap between intensity and qualification. The greyscale imagery is a digital dressing creating the potential for an emotive shift described earlier in relation to *Alien*. But as the greyscale seeps into the gap between the image and its referent, the shift is further underscored through the second aesthetic dimension created by the splashes of colour in the imagery of *Sin City*. The particular facet of a digital environment exploited in *Sin*

*City* is to run these two strategies concurrently, and it is from this practice that the digital afx emerge. Taken on their own, each of the strategies operates within the confines of either colour conventions or those of film *noir*, and so alone they are not afx. For instance, the use of colour is at times motivated in the sense that it conveys some aspect of characterisation within the story-world. In the sequence when Dwight drives Jackie-Boy to the Tar Pits, his distress is expressed through the use of flashing colours. Similarly, the greyscale imagery draws on both film *noir* and hard-boiled detective conventions, both in terms of the exaggerated chiaroscuro lighting, as well as the characters and their milieu. The distinctiveness of *Sin City* lies in the ways these two separate strategies are combined into a single set of images. When in combination, the meaning of the colour and greyscale cease to be only motivated by the characters or textual conventions.

The simple presence of a colour differential need not necessarily lead to digital afx, however. For instance, the coexistence of greyscale and colour in *Sin City* is quite different to that seen in *Pleasantville*. In the latter any gap between image and referent is tethered by its explanation within the narrative ensuring that the colour differentials come to have meanings within the terrain of the story-world of *Pleasantville*. In *Sin City* no such explanation is provided and so any associations that accumulate need not only be governed by the story-world or generic convention, though a number clearly are. For instance, a consequence of placing Goldie's colour palette within a different aesthetic strategy to Marv's is that we can re-read the aesthetics of Goldie's presence. Instead of thinking only about how she is represented as a woman, we can also think about what the presence of colour per se stands for within *Sin City*. While Goldie is a cliché, a prostitute wrapped in red satin sheet, the use of colour is not necessarily saying anything about her status as a sex worker. Rather the colour sets in play an alternative set of resonances that sit in relation to the emotive environment already established by the greyscale aesthetic.

Robert Rodriguez, the director of *Sin City*, has stated that he thought of colour as a weapon through which he could heighten the impact of the imagery of the film, with red blood used to underscore a character's pain, bringing it to the foreground like a 'colour-close-up'. Similarly, some gruesome images could be toned down to make their violence more palatable (Rowe 2005). An implication of Rodriguez's comments is that colour has the potential to act as distraction, catching a viewer's attention at key moments to heighten or diffuse a reaction. But if colour is dissociated from narrative events, it can also be seen as an affective shift whose impact on a viewer is not easily contained within a meaning system. The colour imagery of *Sin City*, then, lends itself to both interpretive and affective connections. In relation to representation and characterisation, Goldie and Rourke Jr.'s colourisation can be interpreted as saying something about them. A simple association would be red for sex and yellow for corrosive poison. In addition, their colourisation expresses what they stand for in Marv and Hartigan's worlds – literal distractions from their lives in Basin City. For viewers of *Sin City* the patches of colour are also a distraction, whose potential for creating an affective

shift varies in the different moments and contexts in which they are encountered within the film. They appear in the flash of an eye, on the flesh of a limb in a club or on the street, an inconsistent presence often without any stable status. The affect of colour, appearing and disappearing as it does, insistently leaves meaning aside. In this sense colour is an example of digital *afx*, a distraction that has no meaning in itself. These digital *afx* betray the viewer with a promise of something but delivering only a fleeting presence. The splashes of colour gather attention but leave the viewer with just the greyscale world and its contagion of violence and exploitation. It is almost as if colour only intensifies through its loss.

### The push and pull of digital *afx* in *300*

The aesthetic of *300* also relies on work carried out within a digital environment, and it too combines aesthetic strategies within a single sequence of images at various moments within the film, generating a push–pull of digital *afx*. By contrast with *Sin City*, in *300* colour often groups figures within their location, an approach similar to that of *Sky Captain*. The crush digitally dresses the imagery of *300* creating the primary aesthetic and emotive tone of the film. The crushed colour palette, the digitally constructed set and the extraordinary figures entering the story-world all gesture towards its status as a story, which though based on a historical event, nevertheless revels in its lack of authenticity. As the fx supervisor of *300*, Grant Freckleton, stated: ‘Screw history, let’s make it look cool’ (Armstrong 2007).

Though the digital dressing of the crush dominates *300*, when they are present the digital *afx* add a further dimension to the visual strategies of the film. Through the crush one strategy of *300* is an overt attempt to affect the viewer, though the intensity of the imagery remains qualified. Explicit within the imagery and narrative of *300* is a glorification of violence and death, a celebration of a fanatical desire to protect one’s nation against any odds, with a perception that anyone who stands against this protective militarism is weak, corrupt and somehow degenerate. Add into this mixture the honed body of elite fighters from which deformed individuals are excluded by culling, a contrast with the Persian army that exploits mutated bodies as cannon fodder. In a film that relies on a crush that makes the shadows so visually impenetrable, it is perhaps not surprising that shades of subtlety in *300*’s characterisations of its heroes and villains are also lacking in visibility. While it is easy to feel quite exercised over the politics of these representations, the fx throughout *300* play up the film’s artifice. While not going so far as to claim this a self-reflective act by the filmmaker, the high degree of artifice exposes the ways in which *300* deploys mythmaking strategies so overt that they reveal themselves.

The digital dressing of the crush encompasses all elements of the image making the narrative arcs of heroes and villains as inauthentic and as manipulated as each other. The imagery has an otherworldly quality that resides outside the conventions of live-action cinema. The overall impact is to configure the earth,

sky and bodies as one, recalling glowering nineteenth-century lithographs on faintly yellowing paper, making them tales from history, from a medium associated with 'long ago'. The long ago quality of the imagery sits alongside a more explicit process of mythmaking that defines the parameters of the storytelling. *300* is not only a fictional account of what occurred at Thermopylae, it also shows the process of the mythologisation of that battle for the purpose of motivating others to make an equivalent sacrifice. When the narrator of this story is revealed towards the end of *300*, we realise that it is Dilios the injured Spartan sent by Leonidas to tell the story of Thermopylae, which he does as propaganda to promote the cause. From the moment the voice-over begins to speak of the mighty Spartan customs, telling of Leonidas' origin story, the aesthetic of the presentation takes on a grandiosity befitting the claims of the narrator. From the first tale of the near naked teenage boy shivering in the snow as he slays a monstrous glowing eyed wolf, it is necessary that the enemies of the extraordinary heroes be themselves larger than life, for how else can the worth of the Spartans be proven? If the heroes are clever, powerful and strategic men, then their enemies must also be powerful, strategic and clever, though ultimately flawed. Taken in terms of representation all these connections become problematic, easy to align with a fascistic view of the world dominated by perfect white bodies, whose injuries are conjured as breathing life into a future premised on sacrifice. In terms of mythmaking the logic, though not defensible, has a sense to it. The emotive quality of the colour palette that blends the brutality of the action with glorification amplifies the process of mythologisation. As the artifice slips more fully into the foreground, the exaggeration carries an intensity, one that tumbles over into our experience and our interpretations of what the imagery represents, heightening equally what viewers might like or dislike about *300*.

The digital fx are embedded within the context of this emotive mythmaking when the imagery of the predominant aesthetic is combined with an additional dynamic that pushes and pulls at a viewer. This dynamic operates within a different aesthetic strategy to that of digital dressing created using the crush. The strategy of digital dressing groups all the elements together, whereas the affective dynamic works to extravagantly ungroup elements of the image provoking an affective shift. This is most obviously true of the close fighting action of the battle sequences, as it in these scenes that the fx create imagery with an in-between dimensionality. During the battle sequences, there are sections in which a 2-D blood spatter associated with the carefully choreographed movements of the fight is overlaid on seamlessly edited shots of 3-D action taken at different speeds from three separate cameras. To achieve this the makers of *300* exploited invisible CG 'morph' zooms in such a way that the action was apparently captured in a continuity of tracking and zooms (Williams 2007). The combination of the two aesthetic strategies, the crushed colour palette and the dynamic of the 2-D/3-D 'spatter and zoom', creates the affective impact of the battle sequence. No longer simply watching a flow of aesthetically heightened pomp and circumstance, the viewer is further pushed and pulled into and out of the graphic action. The digital

environment is again important in enabling the generation of this affect. The blood is one of the few elements of the imagery of *300* that could be described as ungrouped, since it is visualised as a 2-D digital construction. These two sets of images, the zoom morphs and the 2-D splatter, form part of what is often referred to as the arresting imagery of *300*, by which we can understand that it is almost literally striking. In the context of a discussion of *Reservoir Dogs*, Paul Gormley has commented that: ‘An “affective” reading might stress the strong mimetic connection between the body of the viewer and the actions and images of the torture scene’ (2005, 11). In the affective dynamics of the morph zoom and blood spatter such a bodily connection does indeed seem to be echoed. Locked into an almost literal affective shift through the framing established by this push–pull, there is a sense in which a viewer feels the blow-by-blow account of a battle told from a perspective seeking to glorify. But this feeling is a strange sensation, an estranging one that generates a degree of uncertainty in where to ‘put’ oneself. A viewer is caught in a dynamic of being pulled in for a closer look at graphically stylised violent action even as spatter is arcing outwards from the wound. Whatever the particular associations that may finally emerge, perhaps a mixture of admiration for the fx and degrees of revulsion at the content of the imagery, the digital afx create a moment of intensification generated from a state of being in between reaction and meaning, caught on the verge of something.

Neither *Sin City* nor *300* make use of an arresting image as described by Barbara Klinger. The affective shift of their doubled aesthetic also sets them apart from the indelible imagery of fx films such as *Titanic* which ‘repudiate ambiguity’. The doubled aesthetic instead conjures other dimensions that sit alongside the action-led trajectory of the narratives. The argument of this paper is not offered as a means of recuperating *300* or for that matter *Sin City*, rather it presents a way of thinking about the impact of their affective dimensions on the aesthetic and representational strategies of both films. In every set of images there are always diverse tendencies and levels of organisation that gesture to particular interpretations and also provoke a range of experiences. In *The Future of the Image* Jacques Rancière argues that images are operations that couple and uncouple in ways that create and frustrate expectations (Rancière 2007, 1–31). Though Rancière does not directly discuss digital manipulation, it can be deployed in ways that are central to these operations. The particular materiality of working in a digital environment offers practitioners the ability to work across layers of the image to group or ungroup elements of the image. As a consequence, they have the potential to develop aesthetic strategies that combine more conventional representations with digital afx. In discussing affect Brian Massumi states: ‘Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox’ (2002, 27). In the digitally rendered provocations of *Sin City* and *300* digital afx trouble the stability of a representation, even if they cannot undo the representational matrix within which a figure operates. Digital afx can emerge when two competing aesthetic strategies remain equally visible within a sequence of images. In the moment when the gap

between the image and referent is exposed by digital afx, the security of a structured distinction is withheld, and as a consequence the afx mingle with and shift the content of representations. Where these shifts lead is more difficult to say as the answer belongs in the more individual responses of each viewer, but nevertheless the shifts are evident and have the potential to give pause. In that pause it becomes possible to begin asking how this imagery works: what it represents and what is the purpose of its affective dimensions.

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