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Xerxes in Drag: Post-9/11 Marginalization and (Mis)Identification in *300*

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M. MELISSA ELSTON

XERXES IN DRAG:

Post-9/11 Marginalization and (Mis)Identification in *300*

"You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror," President Bush intoned in the fall of 2001.¹ Since then, American ideology has reshaped itself along increasingly nationalistic – and simplified – lines, something that can be seen in film as well as other facets of pop culture. The film *300* has developed an almost-immediate cult following since its March 2007 release. Yet the movie's success hinges upon the conflation of conservative nationalism with epic heroism, serving as an example of both distorted history and displaced mass identification. The anachronistic use of American pro-war rhetoric by Spartan figures is telling. What is equally striking, however, is physical representation within the film, which depicts the (heavily fictionalized) last days of Greece's self-sacrificing Spartan defenders, the "300" who temporarily staved off Persian invaders led by Xerxes I at the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC) but ultimately lost their lives in the process. Among the cinematic *300* and their Grecian allies, beautiful "Bowflex" bodies, are, of course, aligned with universal good and "independence." Disabled, sexually ambiguous, and monstrous bodies, on the other hand, are used to represent the Persian enemy – and by extension, to marginalize and dehumanize the Other, whether within the film (Persians) or in a broader sense (current military "enemies"). This could, of course, also point toward a renewed sense of "internal security threats" posed by women and gays, a tendency Robert J. Corber has observed in Cold War film.² It is intriguing to note that *300* is not the only post-9/11 film release which characterizes the enemy as monstrous and/or deformed; the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy also serves as a vivid visual example of this

¹ George W. Bush, remarks to President Jacques Chirac, "President Welcomes President Chirac to White House," at White House official web site (Washington, D.C., 2001 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-4.html>>.

² Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993).

tendency.³ Nevertheless, *300* is unique in that it interweaves history and fantasy with twenty-first century pop culture, offering a convincing (and convicting!) window into America's contemporary self-image, as well its ongoing ability to collectively justify and endorse (mis)representations of marginalized peoples and nations. By re-examining Sparta's hypermasculine King Leonidas and his band of idealized hoplites, and then contrasting their visual presence with the unsettling representations of gender, race, and physical disability among Xerxes and his forces, viewers can better tease out the film's subtle reinforcement of America's hegemonic wartime culture from decades past – with all its inequity, authoritarianism, and underlying mistrust of the "Other."

From the film's outset, the protagonists are depicted as an elite race – not by natural genetic endowment, but by harshly selective eugenic practice. Even the future king is not immune: "When the boy was born," a voiceover explains, "like all Spartans, he was inspected. If he had been small, or puny, or sickly, or misshapen, he would have been discarded." Tellingly, this scene is initially framed by a pile of infant skulls at the base of the cliff, emphasizing the fate that awaits those who fail to meet community standards at birth: the "throwaways." After this stark beginning, the king's upbringing is detailed in a series of brief, narrated clips which bear closer resemblance to a United States Marine Corps recruiting ad than a catalogue of childhood memories. "He is taught never to retreat, never to surrender," the narrating voice continues, as the child matures from a military buzz-cut boy to a wiry, expressionless teen with a spear. In the end, he is coronated – not as a civilian political figure, but as a warrior. At this point, the narrator reveals himself: he is a general who is recounting the king's tale to motivate his troops. In return, they offer a spirited, guttural cry: "Owooh! Owooh! Owooh!" They might as well *be* United States Marines ("Oo-rah!") or Army personnel ("Hooah!"). The conflation of military training with eugenics continues as the film unfolds. During one slow-motion battle scene, the voiceover returns to narrate the slaughter: "We do what we were trained to do, what we were bred to do, what we were

³ While outside the scope of this essay, James Obertino offers a nuanced reading of the imperialist critique/political commentary present in J.R.R. Tolkien's original text: James Obertino, "Barbarians and Imperialism in Tacitus and *The Lord of the Rings*," *Tolkien Studies* 3 (2006): 117-131.

born to do," he intones with intense gravity. "No prisoners, no mercy."⁴

The film's heroes are thusly depicted as idealized humans, epitomes of genetic selection and accomplishment. ("Only the hard and strong may call themselves Spartans," the narrator enthuses. "Only the hard. Only the strong.") The Spartans' enemies, by contrast, are constantly depicted as hyper-real perversions of this prototype. They are monsters; they are misshapen; they are fantastically – and thus dehumanizingly – uncanny in their physical form. Even the wolf which King Leonidas kills during his early training is a clearly animatronic representation: "Claws of black steel, fur as dark night, eyes glowing red, jewels from the pit of hell itself," the narrator intones as the Epcot Center-quality "animal" stalks and lunges at its human adversary. Likewise, Xerxes' army is referred to repeatedly as "a beast" and "a monster" by Spartan characters, something reflected in its actual composition: Xerxes utilizes animal and fantasy-genre superhuman combatants as well as human ones.⁵ The cumulative effect of such visuals is more than a merely aesthetic one. Because of the uncanny visual representation of these forces – which combines human elements with decidedly inhuman ones – viewers automatically have less of a positive, empathetic response, a perceptual phenomenon robotics engineer Masahiro Mori first noted in 1982, with his theory of the Uncanny Valley.⁶ This closes the door to contemporary dialogues which might posit military conflicts as *avoidable* friction due to hostilities (and misunderstandings) between cultures. After all, if the enemy is a "monster," it does not have a legitimate human history or cultural/moral standing. The only "human" viewpoint is that of the protagonists, whose strong, unquestioning sense of nationality can easily be transferred to 21st century notions of American patriotism. Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric echoed this idea, emphasizing the lack of human "feeling" America's geopolitical opponents possess, and framing them as aberrant: "We differ from our enemy because we love. ... We love life, itself. In America, everybody matters, everybody counts, every human life is a

⁴ *300*, directed by Zach Snyder, performed by Gerard Butler, Lena Headey, Dominic West, David Wenham, 2007.

⁵ Butler, et al, 2007.

⁶ Masahiro Mori, *The Buddha in the Robot: A Robot Engineer's Thoughts on Science and Religion* (North Clarendon, Vt.: Tuttle Publishing, 1982).

life of dignity. And that's not the way our enemy thinks."⁷ Later on, he was even more succinct: "Now we have a chance to lock up monsters, terrorist monsters," he told an audience in Hershey, Pennsylvania, in 2004.⁸

Despite their prominent role in separating protagonists from antagonists in the movie *300*, the implied link between physical refiguration/injury and monstrosity has served a different purpose in some past war films, including one which is arguably far more reflective. In Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), Sgt. Barnes has a prominent facial scar, ostensibly from combat-related injuries. Moreover, Barnes is the closest thing the film – hailed in some quarters at its time for graphic, unflinching realism – has to a genuine monster: He kills without regard to conventions of warfare or standard moral code. As a result, Barnes' troops seem to view him as equal parts demon and immortal. During an argument in which Chris suggests the men enact vigilante justice on Barnes and "frag his ass" after Elias' murder, Rhah rises to meet him face to face. "Dig this, you assholes, and dig it good," he announces, emphatically. "Barnes been shot seven times, and he ain't dead. Does that mean anything to you, huh? Barnes ain't meant to die. The only thing that can kill Barnes is Barnes." While Chris eventually proves this statement wrong – at least on its face – the viewer is left with unsettling questions about America's wartime conduct as embodied by the amoral sergeant. In the film's climactic battle scene, Barnes' face transforms and seems to take on an even more demonic appearance as he looms over Chris with a shovel, face spattered with blood, eyes glowing red against reflected explosions, muscles tensed and ready to kill yet another of his own men. As *Platoon* concludes, Chris hovers over the pockmarked, body-strewn battlefield in a helicopter, pondering how to make meaning from the war when he returns home, even as he bears his own recently acquired facial scar to match Barnes'.⁹ Does the wound signify that he has internalized Barnes' cruelty in some small way, thus becoming permanently "disfigured" by the war, or is he – and America, by extension – simply

⁷ G.W. Bush, speech, "President Bush Calls on Congress to Act on Nation's Priorities," at White House official web site (Trenton, N.J., 2002 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020923-2.html>.

⁸ Bush, remarks, "President Bush Calls for Renewing the USA PATRIOT Act," at White House official web site (Hershey, Penn., 2004 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040419-4.html>.

⁹ *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone, performed by Tom Berenger, Willem Dafoe, Keith David, Charlie Sheen, 1986.

temporarily traumatized? His final narration does not clarify this point. The question hovers, like the helicopter ... like the historical specter that is the Vietnam War itself.

If Stone alludes to the link between physical disfigurement and American cultural disfigurement in *Platoon*, he makes it much more explicit in his 1989 post-war drama, *Born on the Fourth of July*. When character Ron Kovic returns from Vietnam, he bears more than a facial scar; he is a wheelchair. Yet Kovic's physical appearance isn't the only thing that haunts him. In his mind, his body's traumatic reconfiguration and his resulting sense of diminishment are a reflection of the Vietnam War's metaphysical trauma, as well as karmic retribution for his role in it. This is evidenced clearly by the film's dialogue:

Ron Kovic: When I was in the hospital, I thought, 'Yeah, yeah, this makes sense.'

Timmy Burns: What makes sense?

Ron Kovic: Because I failed, Timmy.

Timmy Burns: What are you talking about?

Ron Kovic: Because I, I killed some people. I made some terrible mistakes.

Timmy Burns: Oh, for Christ's sake, Ronnie, we all made mistakes. I mean, you, you had no choice. That's something that those goddamn pansy demonstrators ain't never gonna understand! Now, you don't even have to talk about it, Ronnie. I mean, it was insane over there! It was crazy!

Ron Kovic: Sometimes I wish, I wish I'd ... The first time I got hit, I was shot in the foot. I could have laid down, I mean, who gives a fuck now if I was a hero or not? I was paralyzed, castrated that day; why? It was all so ... stupid! I'd have my dick and my balls now, and some days, Timmy, some days I think I'd give everything I believe in, everything I got, all my values, just to have my body back again, just to be whole again. But I'm not whole; I never will be, and that's ... that's the way it is, isn't it?¹⁰

Kovic's wish to be "whole" again extends beyond physical regeneration. Despite the fact that he devolves into mourning for his loss of mobility (and other functions), note that he *begins* his statements with a confession of remorse for his wartime behavior – behavior he presently views as "terrible mistakes." Through Kovic as well as his earlier, facially scarred character, Chris Taylor, Stone

¹⁰ *Born on the Fourth of July*, directed by Oliver Stone, performed by Seth Allen, Tom Cruise, Amanda Davis, 1989.

seems to be using disfigurement as a metaphor for psychological warping brought on by the trauma of war. In its extremes, the films collectively suggest that such trauma produces monsters like Barnes. Yet in lower concentrations, it simply cripples and scars, leaving countless ex-soldiers – and an entire country – with a slew of haunting moral questions in its wake.

This degree of anguish and self-examination, however, is far beyond the characters in *300's* Sparta. For Leonidas and his warriors, killing enemies isn't a morally troubling act; it's the Spartan code. Moreover, it is also a source of amusement. In one telling scene, Leonidas nonchalantly munches an apple while his men patrol the battlefield for wounded opponents, impaling them with swords and spears as they cry out in agony. Upon hearing that Xerxes has come ashore to negotiate, Leonidas declares he will go down to meet with him. "There's no reason we can't be civil," he says, to great ironic effect, considering the barbarism going on around him. "Is there?" His captain pauses, then roughly runs his spear through another dying man. "None, sire!" As the film's body count climbs higher and higher, the Spartans seem to take great pleasure in their ability to inflict pain in inventive ways. They jeer at opponents. They build walls with corpses and then topple them onto the next wave of oncoming troops. Notably, their enemies' monstrosity serves to justify this treatment. As the Persian Immortals advance, the film's narrator introduces them with fantastic details that would make many historians cringe: "They've observed the will of Persian kings for 500 years. Eyes as dark as night. Teeth filed to fangs. Soulless," he intones, just as a masked swarm of figures in black march forward, leading what appears to be a giant fantasy-novel orc, in chains, to the front lines. At one point during the ensuing battle, a Spartan rips off an Immortal's mask – only to behold a grotesquely shriveled, zombie-esque visage behind it. The disgust on the Spartan warrior's face reflects the viewers' anticipated disgust. It is clear that these opponents are anything *but* human; nevertheless, they are still capable of bleeding – and likely should be made to, with faces like *that*. "Immortals," the narrative voice sneers, amidst images of Spartan-inflicted slaughter. "We put their name to the test."¹¹

It is important to note that within the film's epistemological universe, misshapen bodies also indicate misshapen ideologies, a linkage which reinforces the historic notion that external difference,

¹¹ Butler, et al, 2007.

or "deformity," indicates *internal* moral defectiveness.¹² Like the Immortals, the Ephors (or "diseased old mystics" as Leonidas views them) are also hideous, "inbred" beings underneath their priestly robes – mouths rimmed with sores and decay. By extension, the pacifism they advocate in the face of Xerxes' imminent invasion is equally grotesque – and signals corruption. "Pompous inbred swine," the narrator intones. "Worthless, diseased, rotten." To further emphasize the physical/ideological contrast between Ephors and true Spartans, one fiendishly runs his tongue along the porcelain-skinned body of a drugged young girl – the oracle – before twisting her "prophetic" words in order to prevent Leonidas from marching to battle.¹³ The viewer soon learns that they have been paid by Xerxes to discourage any Spartan military response to his aggression. The scene raises two interesting points: Firstly, if the young girl can be read as a personification of America's national sense of vulnerability, then the gendering of her protectors as hypermasculine warriors suggests an endorsement of the contemporary masculinist security state, as described by Iris Marion Young.¹⁴ (There is some precedent for this phenomenon in American cinema; trauma theorist Adam Lowenstein has identified similar "allegorical moments" in horror films that displace corporate trauma and feelings of national vulnerability onto corporeal figures – particularly those of young females.¹⁵) Secondly, this highly sexualized, religious spectacle casts contemporary ideological reservations – particularly faith-based ones – about war as some sort of societal molestation. Those who would encourage their leadership *not* to militarily respond to an enemy's threat are depicted as predatory, even perverse, and threaten the "purity" of collectively held values and nationhood – embodied by the violated teenager. As Young notes, "It is not merely that dissent is dangerous; worse yet, it is ungrateful."¹⁶

If the film uses visuals to vilify moral objections to war, it likewise wields dialogue and rhetoric against political objections.

¹² Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 52-53.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Iris Marion Young, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State," *W Stands for Women*, eds. Michael L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Young, 124.

When Leonidas is approached by senate members (who are understandably alarmed at unauthorized troop movement), he playfully thumbs his nose at their concerns: "I'm just taking a stroll, stretching my legs.... They are my bodyguards," he wryly answers. When asked where they are going, he is equally saucy: "I haven't really thought about it, but now that you ask, I suppose I'll head north" to the intended site of military conflict.¹⁷ Rather than characterizing Leonidas' actions as dictatorial – and, in reality, they *do* amount to the authoritarian bypassing of his society's system of political checks and balances – the film casts them as heroic. By deflecting the senators' concerns with humor, Leonidas marginalizes their legitimacy: They are not even worth taking seriously enough to merit a straight answer. This is reminiscent of President Bush's repeated use of humor to deflect concerns about increased government surveillance powers. In remarks delivered in April 2004 at Kleinshans Music Hall in Buffalo, N.Y., Bush used laughter to gloss over critics' questions about the constitutionality of increased government surveillance under the USA Patriot Act:

Part of the problem we face was that there was laws and bureaucratic mind-sets that prevented the sharing of information. ...See, I'm not a lawyer, so it's kind of hard for me to kind of get bogged down in the law. (Applause.) I'm not going to play like one, either. (Laughter.) The way I viewed it, if I can just put it in simple terms, is that one part of the FBI couldn't tell the other part of the FBI vital information because of law. And the CIA and the FBI couldn't talk. ...We're charged with the security of the country ... and if we can't share information between vital agencies, we're not going to be able to do our job.¹⁸

Instead of addressing the problems raised by centralization of domestic intelligence-gathering, the President's remarks instead frame it in terms of improved communication, dismissing reflections over its constitutionality as hyperbureaucratic handwringing, or getting "bogged down in the law," much to his audience's amusement. His stance seems bemused, much like Leonidas', yet he follows the joke about lawyers with a more troubling assertion: Legal

¹⁷ Butler, et al, 2007.

¹⁸ Bush, forum address, "President Bush: Information Sharing, Patriot Act Vital to Homeland Security," White House official web site (Buffalo, N.Y., 2004 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040420-2.html>>.

restrictions keep America's protectors from doing "our job." Bush's earnest tone seems like that of Leonidas sitting up in bed the night before his march, bemoaning the fact that Spartan law prevents him from formally engaging in war against the Persians even though that's what he feels his position (or, in Bush's more folksy *parlance*, his "job") calls for, in order to defend Sparta. "What must a king do to save his world when the very laws he is sworn to protect force him to do nothing?" he asks, with all the gravity of a late-2001 Bush administration press briefing. Queen Gorgo's ensuing advice seems to parallel (and endorse) contemporary American presidents' authoritarian tactics during wartime – paradoxically, by recasting a leader's seizure of war powers as an expression of freedom: "It is not a question of what a Spartan citizen should do, nor a husband, nor a king," she advises the king. "Instead, ask yourself, my love, what should a free man do?"¹⁹ In other words, disregard of parliamentary procedure (read: Congress, the Constitution) isn't reckless; it is instead noble, the ultimate expression of leadership in a "free" society like Sparta's (read: the United States').

Certainly, in Leonidas' view, legal procedure can be mocked. But if there is *not* something to laugh about, it is the scene he quickly discovers upon leaving Sparta: the smoldering remains of an unnamed Greek village, against which Spartan troops' silhouettes look eerily similar to Ground Zero rescue workers in early news photos after September 11. The resemblance to *historical events doesn't end* there. The Persians responsible (note, a *small* party, like the 9/11 attackers) have nailed a token sampling of Greeks to a tree, in a gesture that is equal parts crucifixion and terrorism. For the most part, the assembled troops fall speechless at this sight, echoing America's initial response to the 2001 horror of falling bodies and collapsing towers. "Unparalleled attacks shock, paralyze nation," a headline on the cover of the September 12, 2001, San Jose Mercury-News read.²⁰ Other newspaper staffs described the event in similar, stark terms. Some chose to almost abandon words altogether, composing front pages full of photos without long stories – perhaps in recognition that such an apocalyptic event "annihilates language,"

¹⁹ Butler, et al, 2007.

²⁰ San Jose Mercury-News, front page, in Newseum [electronic visual archive] (San Jose, Calif., 2001 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from < http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/hr_archive.asp?fpVname=CA_SJMN&ref_pge=gal&b_pge=1>.

in James Berger's words, "replacing it with what previously we were both unable and forbidden to conceptualize."²¹

It is interesting that as the Spartans gaze up at the mangled, sacrificed bodies in front of them, *this* example of barbarism is considered reprehensible – and further evidence of the invaders' inhuman qualities – yet the Spartans' construction of a wall with Persians' bodies at the Hot Gates is viewed as completely justifiable (despite the fact that a Persian emissary points out that this mass defilement of corpses, too, constitutes a barbaric act). Once again, contemporary ideology takes center stage; Leonidas and his men would certainly endorse Bush administration efforts to distinguish American acts of violence as morally justifiable, and hence different than those of terrorists and other foes who are ostensibly characterized by an Islamic fundamentalist "culture of death." As Andrew Feffer explains in a recent essay:

It is on [the] ability to maintain a clear distinction between the violence of the suicide bomber and other forms of violence (such as Israeli missile attack or American death sentences) that Bush hangs his rhetorical device, the "culture of death." The distinctiveness serves the rhetorical reduction of suicide bombers to "monsters" and at the same time allows the normalization of *similar behaviors* (i.e., similar expressions of violence and rage) in non-marginal or "democratic" spaces – for instance, in the American army of occupation in Iraq.²²

This thinking, which Feffer suggests is an "absurd inconsistency," appears to propel Spartan attitudes toward war in *300*, as well. There are times that the film's Spartan-inflicted slaughter takes on almost orgiastic tones, as well-built, scantily clad men revel *en masse*, with thrusts, grunts, and frequent spurts (of blood). As noted earlier, the movie celebrates the deaths of enemy forces as if they were simply fairy-tale monsters. Yet Xerxes' forces contain human elements, too and, given the film's immediate historical context, those portrayals are perhaps even *more* troubling, due to their direct visual associations with minority populations and the Arab world.

²¹ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 15.

²² Andrew Feffer, "W's Masculine Pseudo-Democracy: Brothers-in-Arms, Suicide Bombers, and the Culture of Life," *W Stands for Women*, eds. Michael L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 93.

When the film's first Persian messenger initially arrives in Sparta, he is visibly different than the European-looking cast of Spartans, a "foreigner." He is dark-skinned, and wrapped in easily identifiable Middle Eastern garb. His companions are, likewise, non-white. He is carrying a rope strung with the skulls of conquered kings, echoing the baby-skull imagery in the film's opening. (In other words, leaders who acquiesce to Middle Eastern political interests are, like the discarded babies, somehow "unacceptable" or ideologically deformed – and therefore complicit in their own "deaths," to boot.) Later, when Leonidas (righteously!) kicks the messenger and his accompanying party down a well, the last image we see is an olive-skinned man clad in Middle Eastern robe and headgear, plunging to his (deserved!) doom. The movie's references to the Arab world subsequently become even more pointed – one battle scene is scored with a rhythmic blend of Levantine instrumentation and electronic drumbeats, giving it a distinctly Arabic feel as turbaned combatants repeatedly fall to the hard, dry earth.²³ Further, when Xerxes' troops are not being referred to as "monsters," they are instead portrayed as "an army of slaves," echoing Bush speechwriters' constant depictions of twenty-first century Afghans and Iraqis as oppressed people in urgent "need" of liberation from dictatorial regimes (and, it is insinuated at times, their own "backward" fundamentalist thinking). "Whips crack," *300*'s narrator dramatically intones during one scene. "Barbarians howl. Those behind cry, 'Forward!' Those in front cry, 'Back!'" Two successive monsters (the giant and the rhino) are seen crushing their own troops. Xerxes' barbarism to his inner circle is even fiercer: He employs a chained, heavysset man with jagged, horny blades for limbs to decapitate failed generals, or "discipline" them, as the narrator euphemistically tells us. These forces – tortured, trampled, terrorized – are obviously propelled by fear, instead of a just or noble cause. Spartans, by contrast, represent a society built on freedom, "the world's one hope for reason and justice," as Dilios reminds his troops.²⁴ Despite the problematic historicity of this assertion, the characters within the film seem to believe it.²⁵ And, the film insinuates, so should audience members.

²³ Butler, et al, 2007.

²⁴ Butler, et al, 2007.

²⁵ In spite of the film's "freedom" versus "army of slaves" rhetoric, during the historic battle of Thermopylae, Leonidas also utilized some troops despite their vehement objections. Herodotus writes: "Only the Thespians and the Thebans remained with the

Perhaps the greatest challenge to believability, however, is Xerxes himself. Unconventional in appearance, he towers over Leonidas in their first meeting, yet his sexually ambiguous, exoticized features stand out in stark contrast to the Spartan leader's exaggerated Anglo masculinity. His entreaty to substitute diplomacy for armed conflict takes on a seductive tone, as the jeweled, plucked, and painted Xerxes caresses Leonidas' brawny shoulders with well-manicured fingertips. "Come, Leonidas, let us reason together," he suggests. It is as if the filmmakers took every "other" they could lay *their* hands upon – racial, cultural, sexual – and attempted to distill them all into one character (who, incidentally, does not reflect the historical Xerxes' appearance in the slightest).²⁶ If Leonidas is the heroic personification of the conservative masculinist security regime, then Xerxes is likewise posited as its ostensible opposite: liberal, ungendered, and most of all, dangerous. The Middle East isn't the only threat to American security, the movie seems to be saying; anything that challenges the conservative cultural and ideological norm is suspect. This poo-hooing of multiculturalism (and a host of other -isms, to boot) further crystallizes with the next few lines of dialogue: "It would be a regrettable waste," Xerxes tells Leonidas, in articulate, statesmanlike tones, "it would be nothing short of madness for you, brave king, and your valiant troops to perish – all because of a simple misunderstanding. There is much our cultures could learn from one another." As he speaks, Leonidas eyes him with bemused mistrust, as if to signal that he won't be duped by such "progressive" talk. "Haven't you noticed?" he wryly responds. "We've been sharing our culture with you [by fighting and winning] all morning."²⁷

While his troops embody conservative anxieties about the external "threat" posed by Islamic nations, Xerxes seems to embody anxieties about the internal security "threat" posed by gays and other minorities – perhaps signaling a twenty-first century trend back toward the cinematic sensibilities of the Cold War, an era marked by "hysteria over the possibility the federal government had been infiltrated by Communists, homosexuals, and lesbians."²⁸ Xerxes'

Spartans; and of these the Thebans were kept back by Leonidas *as hostages, very much against their will.*" Herodotus, *History of the Greek and Persian War*, trans. George Rawlinson, ed. W.G. Forrest (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), 293.

²⁶ John E. Curtis and Nigel Tallis, eds., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2005), 36, 76-77.

²⁷ Butler, et al, 2007.

²⁸ Corber, *In the Name of National Security*, 3.

sensual, sexually ambiguous persona, when coupled with Leonidas' brawn and bravado, also echoes earlier gendered constructions of foreign effeminacy versus American exceptionalism. William V. Spanos describes a binary ethos originating with the Puritans which distinguishes "the *manly* inhabitant of the New World from the *feminized* citizen of the Old World ... [who represents] the decadence, the enervation, the sterility, the conformity, the effeminate passivity and the sensuous cruelty that is the consequence of overcivilization."²⁹ Yet effeminacy (and the accompanying sense of demasculinized "otherness") does not necessarily signal benignity in American cultural shorthand. Leo Bersani has argued that the gay male's perceived affinity with the feminine (i.e., the linkage between the anus and the vagina within the symbolic order), is the exact reason he is considered threatening, despite the superficial abdication of power such an affinity purportedly signals.³⁰

Xerxes' later recruitment of traitorous Ephialtes (who reveals a pass around the mountains, thus betraying his Spartan compatriots) further resurrects Cold War fears, and then brings them to their ultimate cinematic culmination. After all, filmmakers have chosen to visually depict Ephialtes, like Xerxes, as "othered" on multiple fronts: He is disabled, "hunchbacked," and perceived as somewhat genderless to boot, physical details which are certainly missing from Herodotus' original account of the Battle of Thermopylae.³¹ "We're being followed," a Spartan soldier reports, upon spotting Ephialtes on a hillside. "It has followed us since Sparta," Leonidas replies. By referring to Ephialtes as "it," the film again displays gender anxieties. The reference also dehumanizes him; his congenitally non-normative physique (and hence status as an "undesirable" to the body-conscious Spartans) is looked upon as animalistic, less than human – "disfigurement" having been long stigmatized in Western culture as "an absolute state of otherness."³² When Ephialtes joins the Persian

²⁹ William V. Spanos, "A Rumor of War: 9/11 and the Forgetting of the Vietnam War," *boundary 2* 30.3 (2003): 36.

³⁰ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 212. Readers interested in de Beauvoir's original application of the concept of "the Other" to gender/sexuality should consult Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf., 1953).

³¹ Herodotus, 289-292.

³² Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, eds, *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 2.

"monsters," therefore, viewers conditioned by this stigma are not truly surprised. The implication is that America's internal "undesirables" (i.e., gays, war protesters, and other "deformed" left-wingers) will ultimately team up with its enemies ... even though they enthusiastically *purport* to be patriotic at first. Indeed, this conflation of anti-war Americans and "America's enemies" has shown up repeatedly in contemporary political discourse. In responding to criticism in 2005, the President suggested that Democrats and other detractors were somehow aiding Al-Qaida ideologically, if not materially: "These baseless attacks send the wrong signal to our troops and to an enemy that is questioning America's will."³³

Over the course of film history, many Hollywood war movies have prepped American audiences to respond to real-life wars as if they were melodramas, and "enemy" peoples as if they were mere caricatures, with little complexity or history of their own. This tendency is then easily seized upon by political figures, Feffer's essay suggests: "The receptivity of Bush's audience to a large degree is a matter of recognizing generic character types."³⁴ Yet sniffing out these moments of conditioning is anything but simple. Upon its release, some film critics chose to bypass *300*'s political implications altogether, focusing instead on the film's eye-popping visuals and faithfulness to Frank Miller's original graphic novel.³⁵ Others, such as *Slate Magazine*'s Dana Stevens, seized upon the movie's ideological undertones almost immediately:

To cast *300* as a purely apolitical romp of an action film smacks of either disingenuousness or complete obliviousness. One of the few war movies I've seen in the past two decades that doesn't include at least some nod in the direction of antiwar sentiment, *300* is a mythic ode to righteous bellicosity.³⁶

Beyond its endorsement of belligerent military responses, however, *300* also lends support to the continued political marginalization of

³³ "Bush Takes on Critics of Iraq War," at CNN.com [online news site] (Tobyhanna, Penn. 2004 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from <<http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/11/11/bush.intel/index.html>>.

³⁴ Feffer, 95.

³⁵ Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, *300* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse, 1999).

³⁶ Dana Stevens, "A Movie Only a Spartan Could Love," at *Slate* [online magazine] (8 March 2007 [cited 12 December 2008]). Available from <<http://www.slate.com/id/2161450/fr/rss/>>.

gays, minorities, the physically disabled, and anyone else who does not happen to meet the Anglo heteronormative ideal. Rather than present war as a moral question or an opportunity for national introspection, *300* silences dissenting voices, suggesting that dissent – nay, difference itself – is something to be cast out, discarded at the foot of a hill, much like the undesirable infants who didn't meet Sparta's rigorous physical standards. As Leonidas tells Ephialtes before turning down his help, in a statement that seems as ideologically loaded as strategically descriptive: "We fight as a single impenetrable unit. That is the source of our strength ... A single weak spot and the phalanx shatters."³⁷ Leonidas might as well be parroting, "You're either with us or against us," as per Bush's oft-quoted 2001 speech.³⁸ And sure enough, an enthusiastic viewer of *300* might identify with his need to present a united front. A critically aware viewer, on the other hand, might instead ponder why such a stark set of binaries – with or against, "us" or "them," righteous defender or monstrous threat – should be *any* leader's (or society's) guiding philosophy in the first place.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This essay was originally written during the George W. Bush administration of 2001- 2009. In the months since, executive leadership in the US has changed; nevertheless, hegemonically distorted representations of "the enemy" during wartime are a persistent historic phenomenon in American culture. As such, they deserve our continued attention and re-examination as we – like those who came before us – continue to shape this constantly evolving democracy.

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³⁷ Butler, et al, 2007.

³⁸ George W. Bush, remarks to President Jacques Chirac, "President Welcomes President Chirac to White House," at White House official web site (Washington, D.C., 2001 [cited 17 March 2008]). Available from <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-4.html>>.

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JEFF GRIFFIN

The State of Exception in Film: *Cloverfield* and 24

Giorgio Agamben, Carl Schmitt, and Walter Benjamin have discussed the centrality of the "state of exception"¹ in the political sphere. Despite their disagreements, they all concede in one way or another that sovereign power hinges on the state of exception. In the modern West, the state of exception has become a constitutional paradigm.² The current "War on Terror," which declares open hostilities on a de-localized, disembodied enemy that has yet to be determined,³ turns the state of exception into the *raison d'être*. In his September 20, 2001 Congressional address, President Bush stated, "our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."⁴ The emergency situation becomes

¹ I use "state of emergency," "state of siege," and "state of exception" synonymously.

² Agamben offers a brief history of the state of exception in its constitutional usage, beginning with Article 14 of French Constitution of 22 Frimaire Year 8, which granted the sovereign the power to "make the regulations and ordinances necessary for the execution of the laws and the security of the State (11). This clause has its origin in Napoleon's decree of December 24, 1811 granting the emperor the power to declare whether or not a city was in a state of siege, and take exceptional powers to avert it (4). Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution gave the President of the Reich the power to declare a state of siege and, if necessary suspend the fundamental rights listed in the constitution (14). On August 3, The Swiss Federal Assembly gave the Federal Council full power to ensure the "security, integrity, and neutrality of Switzerland (16)."

Article 1 of the United States Constitution allows the suspension of Habeas Corpus in times of rebellion, invasion or for the sake of public safety. Article 2 gives the president the title of Commander and Chief of the armed forces (20). Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ The Bush Administration's political use of the word terror conflates widely disparate strategies with readily identifiable subjects. But his public rhetorical use of the term is not consistent with its use in official State Department reports and publications, and neither are the definitions in these reports consistent. See Tilly, 2004. The Department of Defense defines terrorism as, "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." U.S. State Department, "Significant Terrorist Incidents, 1961-2003: A Brief Chronology," Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5902.htm> }

⁴ Ibid.