



2007.05.04

300: History, Graphic Novel, Movie

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History: Late Summer 480 BC

The Battle at Thermopylae, chronicled in Herodotus's *Histories*, was an early chapter in King Xerxes' carefully planned campaign to fold Greece into the Persian Empire. The progress of his impossibly large army ground to a halt in central Greece as it was funneled through a narrow pass between cliffs and sea on the Malian Gulf between Locris and Thesaly and into the spear tips of the most highly trained soldiers the ancient world ever produced.

Days earlier the Spartan king Leonidas had led some 7000 troops to Thermopylae in an effort to prevent, or at the very least delay, the Persian invaders from spilling into the Greek heartland. There he positioned his men in what the locals referred to as the "hot gates," a corridor roughly two meters wide at its narrowest that would negate the Persian advantage of numbers. For several days, Xerxes' soldiers were fed into impenetrable Spartan phalanxes. Their losses were considerable. The Persian king himself noted "he had in his army many men, indeed, but few soldiers."¹

On the third day, Xerxes caught a break when the Greeks were betrayed by Ephialtes, a local who revealed to the Persians a path that would allow them to outflank Leonidas and his men. Hearing of the treachery, Leonidas sent the bulk of the Greek army home to mobilize a stronger resistance. Those selected to remain behind included the famous 300² Spartan heavy infantry, plus 1100 Boeotians³ and at least 900 helots (Spartan state-owned slaves). Surrounded and facing certain death, the 300 fought ferociously to the last. When spears shattered they switched to swords. When swords broke they fought with bare hands and teeth. Xerxes' forces, fearing to close with even unarmed Spartans, stood off and delivered them to the afterlife on a tidal wave of arrow heads.

Not long after Thermopylae, Xerxes met defeat against the Hellenic League, suffering a debilitating blow at the naval Battle of Salamis. The following year, Spartan-led Greek forces defeated the Persian army definitively at the Battle of Plataea. Leonidas' suicidal standoff gave inspiration to the remaining Greek allies and remains a magnificent example of how a small, highly disciplined, and well-led body of men can resist a vastly larger enemy force. Thermopylae marked the origin of the "Spartan Mirage"—the

¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, rev. ed., trans. A. de Sélincourt, ed. J.M. Marincola (NY: Penguin, 1996) 7.210. See, for a recent, very readable account of the campaign, Paul Cartledge, *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World* (Woodstock & New York, NY: Overlook Pr, 2006), with Donald Lateiner's review at *MWSR* 2007.01.01 <www.miwsr.com/2007/20070101.asp>.

² Foreshadowing the dangers of the mission, Leonidas had selected only men with living sons to carry on their family line (Herodotus 7.205).

³ Of these, 700 were Thespians who stayed (and died) voluntarily, 400 were disloyal Thebans, who defected to the enemy as soon as the outcome was clear (Herodotus 7.222).

myth of the invincible Spartan warrior whose choice in combat was a brutal one: win or die.⁴

Graphic Novel: May 1998

The graphic novel adaptation of the Battle of Thermopylae was published by Dark Horse Comics as a five-issue series of comic books: *Honor* (May 1998), *Duty* (June 1998), *Glory* (July 1998), *Combat* (August 1998), *Victory* (May 1999), and was quickly collected into a single hardcover volume (August 1999). The series enjoyed instant critical and commercial success, due largely to the reputation and talent of iconoclastic writer/artist Frank Miller. Miller's career began essentially in 1979 in the pages of Marvel Comics' *Daredevil*, which writer Stan Lee⁵ and artist Bill Everett had launched in 1964. Miller started as penciler on the series⁶ but quickly established himself as an adept writer and was soon pulling double duty on the monthly book. He breathed new life into a tired character that had been on the brink of cancellation with stories that transcended the typical "superhero foils supervillain" formula. Daredevil evolved into an introspective, morally complex character. A highlight of Miller's thirty-three month run on the series was the introduction (and eventual death) of *femme fatale*, Elektra Natchious, a Greek assassin named after Agamemnon's vengeful daughter.



Daredevil #158

Daredevil #182

Daredevil #189

Daredevil #191

Years later, without Miller's participation, Marvel Comics gave Elektra her own monthly comic book series. In 2005, 20th Century Fox produced the film *Elektra* (2005), a critical disaster that Miller cannot even bring himself to watch: "She's my daughter so I'll always love her, but she's been sleeping around all over town. I don't talk to her anymore."⁷

⁴ An axiom so ingrained in the culture, a Spartan mother handing a shield to her son departing for battle once said: "son, either with this or on this"—Plutarch, *Moralia* 241, in Richard J.A. Talbert, ed. & tr., *Plutarch on Sparta* (NY: Penguin, 1988) 161.

⁵ Lee created many other famous heroes, including Spiderman, the X-Men, Fantastic Four, Hulk, Iron Man, et al.

⁶ Klaus Janson handled the inking; the two men collaborated productively for years to come. The assembly of a comic book typically requires the efforts of a writer, an editor, a penciler, an inker, a colorist, and a letterer. As Miller's career progressed, he would assume nearly all these roles.

⁷ Frank Miller, in Daniel Robert Epstein, "Frank Miller, 300 Interview," *UnderGroundOnline* (n.d.) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0701.htm>.

In 1986, after a long, successful run on *Daredevil*, Miller composed a work for DC Comics that completely revitalized the comic book industry, establishing comics as an artistically powerful and socially significant medium. Originally released as four individual books and later collected into a best-selling volume, *The Dark Knight Returns* ignited a renaissance in the superhero genre.

Written and drawn by Miller, inked by Janson, and colored by Lynn Varley (who broke from conventional coloring techniques by actually painting the comic book's panels), *The Dark Knight Returns* supplanted the campy Adam West-style Batman with a completely retooled hero who spoke to a sophisticated, modern audience. A fifty-five-year-old Batman emerges from a ten-year, self-imposed retirement to put a crumbling and chaotic Gotham City back on the rails. The sixty-year foundation DC Comics had given the character was an important subtext of the narrative, though the key to the title's breakout success was Miller's filtering of that history through a dark lens. The book "deconstructed and criticized nearly fifty years of comics history, and stretched the boundaries of the genre ... bringing new meaning to its stock formula."⁸ Miller's Batman was an "anti-hero," rejecting heroism in the classic sense. Several times during the narrative, the postmodern Dark Knight Detective denies himself the reward of martyrdom, choosing instead to instruct a younger generation and perpetuate his ideals.



#1 - *The Dark Knight Returns*

#2 - *Hunt the Dark Knight*

#3 - *The Dark Knight Triumphant*

#4 - *The Dark Knight Falls*

Comic books were never the same again. Frank Miller had brought grown-up, complex themes and controversial storylines to what had previously been breezy entertainments for kids (and adults who lived in their mother's basement). *The Dark Knight Returns* garnered massive media attention, which expanded its audience well beyond the subculture of comic book collectors. It has been a perennial bestseller and has never gone out of print.⁹ This retailored Batman so enthralled fans that the entire industry entered what came to be known as the "grim and gritty" period. Reinterpretations of many classic heroes swept across the pages of comic books with varying degrees of success.

Miller followed up *The Dark Knight* with a series of solid works and began focusing on creator-owned properties that allowed him full creative and legal control over his own characters and stories. His greatest success in this arena is the hard-boiled black-and-white

⁸ Anne Magnussen & Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds., *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2000).

⁹ "Over 1 million copies in print"—*Business Wire* (5 Dec 2001) 1.

Sin City (1991–). This brutally violent crime noir anthology features recurring characters that double-cross, bully, murder, and scheme their way through intertwining stories. Miller stocks these stories with short-lived heroes who rarely ride off into the sunset. The tough-talking protagonists often sacrifice themselves (usually for a “dame”) at the expense of their reputations, their honorable intentions known only to themselves and the reader.



A Dame to Kill For #1

The Big Fat Kill #4

That Yellow Bastard #1

That Yellow Bastard
Collected

Miller’s next undertaking represents the first time Herodotus’s account of Leonidas at Thermopylae was put in comic book form. His interest in the Spartan culture began with Rudolph Maté’s 1962 film *The 300 Spartans*. “I was about perhaps six years old when it came out, and my parents took me and my brother to see it, and I was utterly astonished by the power of the story, the pure heroism involved. And that led to a lifelong fascination with ancient Greek history....”¹⁰ This was a formative experience for him, defining the theme of heroic sacrifice that motivates nearly all his protagonists, including Elektra, Ronin, Batman, Marv, Hartigan, Carl Seltz, among others. “It was an epiphany to realize that the hero wasn’t necessarily the guy who won.”¹¹

Before undertaking the Thermopylae project percolating in the back of his mind since *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller spent several weeks in Greece studying the terrain and steeping himself in the history. “I couldn’t have understood it properly had I not seen the cliffs and that angry sea and actually sailed on it.”¹²

300 is an idiosyncratic interpretation of Herodotus’s account. Miller hones the already spare original narrative down to its barest essentials. He eliminates much of the historical back-story, offering little character development and no subplots or extraneous elements that might distract from the singular theme of heroic sacrifice. The Spartans in *300* are amplified versions of their historical selves—pared down to capes, shields, and hair, evoking the “heroic nude” style of Greek vase painters and sculptors. “It was very important to streamline the appearance of characters to make them more dynamic and to lose the sense of this being an old story. It’s not an old story; it’s an eternal story.”¹³

¹⁰ Frank Miller, in Shawna Ervin-Gore, “Interview: Frank Miller,” *DarkHorse.com* (n.d.) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0702.htm>.

¹¹ *NY Times* (26 Nov 2006) 2.9.

¹² See note 7, above.

¹³ Frank Miller in “300 Part One,” *ixguide* (25 Feb 2007) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0703.htm>.

Miller's execution of his vision breaches standard comic book formatting. Rather than confining the artwork within fixed panels on each page, Miller depicts individual scenes in full-page spreads. The dialogue is minimal, the story driven by the actions of simple figures drawn in bold, deliberate lines. Greatly enhancing the work is the expert painting of long-time collaborator (and wife) Lynn Varley, whose dramatic red and gold palette and water-color washes give the artwork a rich texture and gritty atmosphere that intensify Miller's characteristic engrossing compositions and camera angles. "I didn't know how I could do it without her. I knew it had to be a color story. It wouldn't work without the atmosphere, and without those red capes. And I also couldn't imagine anyone else working on it, so I did the logical thing—I begged."¹⁴ Printed on glossy, heavy-stock paper, the whole project takes on a coffee-table art book aesthetic.



300 - Honor

300 - Duty

300 - Glory

300 - Combat

300 - Victory

The series was a massive success. Individual issues sold out quickly and the over-sized hardcover, which beautifully presents each two-page spread in the comic as a single undivided page, has been a bestseller, running through multiple printings. *300* won three Eisner Awards and two Harveys in 1999.¹⁵

Movie: March 2007

Although Frank Miller had had a positive experience translating *Sin City* into a successful movie, he bristled at the prospect of working within the Hollywood system to film what he considered the "crown jewel" of his career: "'300' means an awful lot to me, so to see it homogenized into something like 'Troy,' which manages to turn the *Iliad* inside out, would betray it."¹⁶ Despite hesitations, he was eventually won over by producer Gianni Nunnari and director Zack Snyder's enthusiasm for the project and dedication to preserving the visual integrity of the book.

The movie was shot in sixty days inside a Montreal Studio on bare-bones sets in front of blue screens. After the live actors had been filmed, Computer Graphic (CG) artists spent months in post-production adding sweeping backdrops, dramatic weather effects, legions of soldiers, and oceans of spraying blood. This "digital backlot" technique makes for a

¹⁴ See note 10, above.

¹⁵ Eisners for "Best Coloring," "Best Writer/Artist," "Best Limited Series"; Harveys for "Best Limited Series," "Best Colorist." These awards are the comic book equivalents of Oscars.

¹⁶ See note 11, above.

challenging acting environment, but gives maximum control to the art director. This is the same technology weathermen have been using on television for decades, now realized with a technical polish that makes it impossible to discriminate a virtual wheat field from the real thing.

Despite the incredible scope of the film, the lack of elaborate sets, expensive shooting locales, and pricey A-list actors kept costs to a reasonable \$65 million (for comparison, less than a third the production costs for Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 sword and sandals epic *Troy*). The movie earned back that investment in its first three days of release, with the entire theatrical run grossing nearly half a *billion* dollars world-wide.

300 was not the first major studio release shot entirely on blue screen. Paramount Pictures' *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) originated on a Macintosh IICI in director Kerry Conrad's living room.¹⁷ *Sky Captain* captured the tone of low-budget sci-fi serials of the 30s and 40s, Hollywood's "Golden Age." The stylized visuals lent themselves well to the blue-screen technique, allowing the filmmakers to hide limitations in the technology. Starring Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Angelina Jolie, *Sky Captain* was filmed almost exclusively in a warehouse in Van Nuys. Promotion of the movie (mis)led audiences to expect a more traditional action-adventure film. Consequently, though it was a critical success, the film's theatrical run recouped barely half its production costs.

Frank Miller's screen adaptation of *Sin City* (2005) was spearheaded by maverick director Robert Rodriguez, who persuaded Miller to oversee production¹⁸ and share a co-directing credit. Filmed at Rodriguez's ranch in Austin, Texas, *Sin City* was a slavishly faithful adaptation of the comic. Stark black-and-white visuals alleviated the technical difficulties of "digital backlot" film-making. Dialogue, locations, and even camera angles were pulled directly off the pages of the books. The result was an enormously successful film with a unique art-house style.¹⁹



Kerry Conrad (right) & CJH



Robert Rodriguez (left) & CJH



Frank Miller, San Diego 2004

¹⁷ *Star Wars* director George Lucas prophesied that with the advancements in special effects technology, it would not be long before the next Hollywood blockbuster was filmed by a couple kids in a garage.

¹⁸ Miller had been soured on film-making in general after a bad experience developing the scripts for the second and third *Robocop* films.

¹⁹ Even though it was a comic book property lacking high profile characters such as Spiderman or Superman, thanks to the film's considerable box-office receipts, *Sin City* became the greatest creator-owned success in the comic book industry.

300 represents a marked improvement in the blue-screen film-making technique. The Greek countrysides are an idealized version of reality posing technical challenges beyond the stylized environs of *Sin City* and *Sky Captain*. Over a dozen special effects companies scrupulously refined the cinematography to create a vivid, sometimes dream-like reality. Each scene is beautifully framed for maximum balance and visual appeal. Lynn Varley's (prominently credited) artistry underlies the film's rich color palettes and moment-by-moment visual texture. Jeffery Silver, *300*'s producer, said "Zack [Snyder, the film's director] developed a recipe where you'd crush the black content of the image and enhance the color saturation to change the contrast ratio of the film Every image in this film went through a post-image processing. The crush is what gives this film its distinct look and feel."²⁰



<http://300themovie.warnerbros.com>

This nuanced, carefully calculated cinematography is in sharp juxtaposition with the brutal violence of the combat sequences. The rigorously choreographed fight scenes unravel in a variety of film speeds like an ethereal, blood-soaked ballet. There are moments when the action slows dramatically, allowing viewers just enough time to drink in the chaos before returning to normal speed. The combat strikes a high note of historical realism with the depiction of the Spartan phalanx. This hallmark of Hellenic heavy-infantry warfare involved locking shields in an impenetrable wall. The close-quarter ground-level perspective thrusts the audience right into the thick of the battle.



<http://300themovie.warnerbros.com>

²⁰ See note 13, above.

300 unfolds with the broad, exaggerated strokes of a Wagnerian opera. Those hoping for a straight recital of Herodotus's Thermopylae account will be disappointed. *300* is, like *Sin City*, an exceptionally faithful adaptation of a Frank Miller graphic novel and can fairly be judged only as such. The spirit of Leonidas's accomplishment is intact, but art wins out over historical accuracy.

Where history is concerned, the movie provides more than a striking rendition of phalanx warfare. The basic elements are preserved: messengers kicked down a well,²¹ King Leonidas²² marching 300 red-caped Spartans to fend off vast numbers of Persian invaders, Xerxes' "Immortals" and countless archers, the treacherous Ephialtes—but these are just an armature on which to hang a gory operatic *retelling*. The many departures from Herodotus's narrative do not keep the film from delivering the underlying meaning of the event. *300*, like *The Histories*, demonstrates how Leonidas' heroic sacrifice achieved an inspirational moral victory. In Miller's words, "Heroic sacrifice is the essence of civilization."²³



<http://300themovie.warnerbros.com>

Still, inaccuracies and outright absurdities in the film are as commonplace as decapitations. The elevation of the Spartans into the rarified air of comic book superheroism pales beside the outrageously superfluous parade of Persian sideshow freaks. It doesn't take a classical scholar to surmise there were probably no ten-foot mutants with axe-hands in the ancient world. Ephialtes has been transformed from greedy miscreant into deformed abomination anxious to don a Spartan uniform but too disfigured to fight effectively. The physical stature of the man now matches his unseemly betrayal. And was that actually a lute-playing *goat-man* in Xerxes' tent of malformed debauchery? As repellent as these details are to the historian, they neatly forestall any assumption of historical veracity by viewers unacquainted with the ancient sources.

The film departs from the graphic novel's appealing, straightforward approach to the story by, in particular, completely fabricating the side story of Queen Gorgo (wonderfully played by the foxy Lena Headey), which unfortunately hinders the momentum of the action. Gorgo, looking for a troop surge to save her king, schemes with the diabolically over-

²¹ Conflated from the run-up to the battle of Marathon ten years earlier: see Herodotus 7.133.

²² It is worth noting the exceptional performance delivered by Gerard Butler, who inhabits a note-perfect Leonidas. He's a magnetic presence on the screen, exuding leadership and inspiration.

²³ In Will Lawrence, "The High Priest of Heroism," *Telegraph* (9 Mar 2007) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0704.htm>.

the-top politician Theron (Dominic West). It's all a minor distraction from the heart of the epic tale, valuable only for its rare portrayal of a strong feminine role model.

The action of the film is recounted by one Dilios,²⁴ which somewhat mitigates the fantastic embellishments and gross inaccuracies. As Miller himself put it, "I always wanted this to be like a story told by a soldier over a campfire."²⁵

* * *

Response to *300* has been sharply divided along generational lines. The film was savaged in the establishment media,²⁶ but Leonidas and his unwaveringly noble ideals found acclaim in publications, both print and online, catering to a younger crowd, including military personnel.²⁷ However mixed the critical reaction, the film has enjoyed spectacular financial success. *300* shattered box office records for the month of March; its opening weekend take was the third highest for an R-rated movie, after *Matrix: Reloaded* and *The Passion of the Christ*. It clearly resonates among those who choose not to be encumbered by the baggage of history.

It's a short jump to postulate how the timing of the release contributed to its exceptional success. *300*'s clear, concise military operation is a refreshing change of pace from the exhausting stream of disheartening reports emerging from the quagmire in Iraq. Watching a highly trained force engage in a straightforward military operation has an almost restorative effect. The thematic stakes are high. Leonidas and his men fight with unflinching heroic resolve, with the burden of defending freedom and democracy upon their well-muscled shoulders as they strike terror in the hearts of a culturally distinct enemy. The movie delivers an uncomplicated truth—a comforting escape in the midst of the gleeful wanton violence. The overt moral dichotomy between the Spartans and the Persians is as simple as good and evil, right and wrong.

²⁴ Before the final, fatal engagement in the pass, Dilios, who has sustained an eye injury, is given orders to return to Sparta and preserve the memory of Leonidas's accomplishment. This may be a tip of the hat to Herodotus, who recounts (at 7.229-231) the story of Aristodemus, who missed the battle because of a severe eye inflammation, much to his subsequent chagrin.

²⁵ See note 23, above.

²⁶ A.O. Scott, *NY Times* (9 Mar 2007): "the script for '300,' which [Zack Snyder] wrote with Kurt Johnstad and Michael B. Gordon, is weighed down by the lumbering portentousness of the original book, whose arresting images are themselves undermined by the kind of pomposity that frequently mistakes itself for genius.... '300' may find its cultural niche as an object of camp derision At present, though, its muscle-bound, grunting self-seriousness is more tiresome than entertaining" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0705.htm>. Stephen Hunter, *Washington Post* (25 Mar 2007): "There's no sinuous continuity in his film, which is mostly geared toward re-creating images from the comic book, as if that's [*sic*] enough" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0706.htm>. David Denby, *The New Yorker* (2 Apr 2007): "the movie is a porno-military curiosity—a muscle-magazine fantasy crossed with a video game and an Army recruiting film" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0707.htm>.

²⁷ Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone* (7 Mar 2007): "prepare your eyes for popping—hell, they just might fly out of their sockets—in the face of such turbocharged visuals" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0708.htm>. Todd Gilchrist, *IGN Movies* (12 Feb 2007): "Ultimately, this film combines an archetypal conflict, an ancient storytelling tradition reaching back as far as the Greeks themselves, and technique that makes it relevant to modern audiences. In other words, it's not clear whether great movie myths are born or bred, but *300* is unequivocally one of them" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0709.htm>. Chuck Vinch, *Army Times* (n.d.): "[*300*] culminates in an ending that will raise the neck hairs and moisten the eyes of anyone who has ever felt that freedom and liberty are ideals worth defending—with the East vs. West theme sure to resonate strongly against the landscape of our own age. A sensory feast from start to finish, '300' is larger-than-life storytelling that qualifies as the first true CGI-enhanced epic" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0710.htm>.

Both the film and the book idealize the Spartan way of life—the 300 have been purified of the complicated facts of history. Leonidas extols the virtues of freedom, but fails to mention Sparta’s quarter million helots, who were regularly terrorized and murdered by their brutal masters. Spartans could afford to devote themselves from childhood to rigorous military training, since the helots handled their agricultural needs. Spartan warriors are depicted as charismatic Caucasians with chiseled physiques.²⁸ By contrast, storming the shores of Greece are “the Others.” Decadent, tyrannical, and often deformed, the Persians of *300* are easy to identify and play strongly to racial biases. Xerxes himself is sexually ambiguous and his Immortals inhuman creatures.

Such historical distortions aside, the film provides fast-paced entertainment that speaks with a visual language rooted in comic books. The cinematography is simply beautiful. Every shot is thoughtfully composed. The combat is intense and wonderfully choreographed. The goal was to bring *300* the comic book to the screen, and on that front it succeeds wildly. As always with Hollywood, entertainment is the first imperative, historical fidelity a distant second.

It is difficult, however, not to consider the abandoned historical narrative. *300* wouldn’t require much editing to accommodate Herodotus: the excision of approximately ten minutes of flagrantly unhistorical material spread throughout the film, the toning down of Persian deviancies, and the insertion of some helots into Sparta’s golden digital wheat fields. The result would have made Herodotus proud with no loss of appeal to modern audiences. We’ve been given an impressive, artistically exaggerated version of history, but I can’t help wondering, wasn’t history exciting enough?

* * *

“This is the best damn story I’ve ever gotten my hands on.” —Frank Miller²⁹



<http://300themovie.warnerbros.com>

²⁸ “I told everyone, “You guys have got to be in crazy shape, in superhero shape,” ... [director] Snyder said. To inspire the troops, he had T-shirts made that read, ‘I died at Thermopylae’”—see note 11, above.

²⁹ *DarkHorse.com* (n.d.) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0711.htm>.