
March 18, 2007**OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR****It's All Geek to Me****By NEAL STEPHENSON**

Seattle

A WEEK ago Friday, moments before an opening-day showing of the movie “300” at Seattle’s Cinerama, a 20-something moviegoer rushed to the front of the theater, dropped his shoulders, curled his arms into a mock-Schwarzenegger pose and bellowed out a timeless remark of King Leonidas of Sparta that has in the last week become the catchphrase of the year: “Spartans! Tonight we dine in hell!”

Groans, roars, macho hooting noises and sardonic applause rained down on him. The audience had been standing in line for an hour. Only a few of them were dressed as Greek hoplites. They were much better balanced between men and women than I’d expected and, racially, looked like a fair cross section of Seattle’s populace. Over the next couple of hours, they enjoyed “300” with roughly the same level of energy and audience participation as one would expect in an N.C.A.A. Final Four game.

The film contains a lot of over-the-top material, reflecting its origin in a graphic novel. As often as not, when I found myself rolling my eyes at something particularly mortifying (the tactical corpse-pile avalanche, the Persian executioner with serrated fins for arms), the crowd reacted much as I did, some even hurling catcalls from the balcony or blurting their own lines of dialogue. It was all pretty festive for a movie about ancient history in which almost all of the characters end up dead.

This, apparently, was no anomaly. Though it opened on a relatively small number of screens, “300” made money far beyond the most optimistic projections of its producers, racking up the third-best opening weekend ever for an R-rated movie.

The critics, however, were mostly hostile, and frequently venomous. Many reviews made the same points:

- “300” is not sufficiently ironic. It takes its themes (duty, loyalty, sacrifice, the preservation of Western civilization against enormous odds) too seriously to, well, be taken seriously.
- “300” is campy — meaning that many things about it can be read as sexual double entendres — yet the filmmakers don’t show sufficient awareness of this.
- All of the good guys are white people and many of the bad guys are brown. (How this could have been avoided in a film about Spartans versus Persians is never explained; the distinctly non-Greek viewers at my showing seemed to have no trouble placing themselves in the sandals of ancient Spartans.)

But such criticisms aren’t really worth arguing with, because they are not serious in the first place — and that is their whole point. Many critics dislike “300” so intensely that they refused to do it the honor of criticizing it as if it

were a real movie. Critics at a festival in Berlin walked out, and accused its director of being on the Bush payroll.

Thermopylae is a wedge issue!

Lefties can't abide lionizing a bunch of militaristic slave-owners (even if they did happen to be long-haired supporters of women's rights). So you might think that righties would love the film. But they're nervous that Emperor Xerxes of Persia, not the freedom-loving Leonidas, might be George Bush.

Our so-called conservatives, who have cut all ties to their own intellectual moorings, now espouse policies and personalities that would get them laughed out of Periclean Athens. The few conservatives still able to hold up one end of a Socratic dialogue are those in the ostracized libertarian wing — interestingly enough, a group with a disproportionately high representation among fans of speculative fiction.

The less politicized majority, who perhaps would like to draw inspiration from this story without glossing over the crazy and defective aspects of Spartan society, have turned, in droves, to a film from the alternative cultural universe of fantasy and science fiction. Styled and informed by pulp novels, comic books, video games and Asian martial arts flicks, science fiction eats this kind of material up, and expresses it in ways that look impossibly weird to people who aren't used to it.

Lack of critical respect means nothing to sci-fi's creators and fans. They made peace with their own dorkiness long ago. Oh, there was momentary discomfort around the time of William Shatner's 1987 "Saturday Night Live" sketch, in which he exhorted Trekkies to "get a life." But this had been fully resolved by 2000, when sci-fi fans voted to give the Hugo Award for best movie to "Galaxy Quest," a film that revolves around making fun of sci-fi fans.

The growing popularity of science fiction, the rise of graphic novels, anime and video games, and the fact that geeks can make lots of money now, have given creators and fans of this kind of art a confidence, even a swagger, that — hard as it is for some of us to believe — is kind of cool now.

Video games have turned everyone under the age of 20 into experts on military history and tactics; 12-year-olds on school buses argue about the right way to deploy onagers and cataphracts while outflanking a Roman triplex acies formation. The near exhaustion of Asian martial arts themes has led a small but growing number to begin reconstructing, or imagining, the forgotten martial arts of the West. And science fiction, by its nature, has had to equip itself with a full toolkit for dealing with alien cultures, mindsets and landscapes.

Which is exactly how the creators of "300" approach the Spartans and the Persians. The only people in the film who don't seem as if they came from another planet are the Arcadians (non-Spartan Greeks), who turn tail once the battle becomes hopeless.

Classics-based sci-fi is nothing new. To name the most recent of many examples, the novelist Dan Simmons published "Ilium" and "Olympos," science-fictional takes on Homer. When science fiction tackles classical themes, the results may look a bit odd to some, but the audience — which is increasingly the mainstream audience — is sufficiently hungry for this kind of material (and, perhaps, suspicious of anything that's overly polished) that it is willing to overlook the occasional mistake, or make up for it by shouting hilarious things from the balcony. These people don't need irony or campiness self-consciously pointed out to them, any more than

they need a laugh track to enjoy “The Simpsons.”

The Spartan phalanx presents itself to foes as a wall of shields, bristling with spears, its members squatting behind their defenses, anonymous and unknowable, until they break formation and stand out alone, practically naked, soft, exposed and recognizable as individuals.

The audience members watching them play the same game: media-weary, hunkered down behind thick irony, flinging verbal jabs at the screen — until they see something that moves them. Then they’ll come out and feel. But at the first hint of politics, they’ll jump back behind their shield-wall, just like the Spartans when millions of Persian arrows blot out the sun, and wait until the noise stops.

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