

# "Immortality! Take it! It's yours!"

## *American Identity in the Epic Film Narratives of Post- 9/11 Cinema*



*King Hyperion with Epirus Bow, Immortals(2011)*

MA Thesis

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**Picture:** *King Hyperion with Epirus Bow, Immortals(2011)*

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## Introduction

After the September 2001 attack on the World Trade center, the world would never be the same again. Terrorism, Islamism, and the "war on terror" would be among the most commonly used words in our public vocabulary. In an attempt to prevent terrorist attacks, America invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and later Iraq in March 2003. The events triggered by 9/11 shaped a New World order and changed the way the West, especially America, viewed itself in relation to the rest of the world. This became especially apparent in cultural representations of the Hollywood film industry. Melani McAlister argues in "A Cultural History of War Without End":

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, many Hollywood executives suggested that there could be no more violent action movies after such a national trauma. The planned releases of several action films were delayed, as producers predicted a return to musicals and family drama.<sup>1</sup> (325)

A return to musicals and family drama was not the cinematic aftermath of the terrorist attack: If anything, scholars agree that the horrifying images of 9/11 popularized action, war, horror, crime and apocalyptic genre films more than any other event in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*, Kirsten Moana Thompson argues that 9/11 served as an informal closure to the "long-standing apocalyptic anxieties about the overdetermined year 2000 [that] became evident in American

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1. McAlister, Melani. "A Cultural History of War Without End." *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*. Ed J. David J., Slocum. Routledge. 2006. Print.

popular culture, public policy, and journalism" (2007 1). Indeed, many scholars agree that American cinema fantasized the events of 9/11 with a series of apocalyptic disaster films.<sup>2</sup>

The role of Hollywood films in shaping American identity and asserting cultural and political authority is nothing new.<sup>3</sup> As John Markert insightfully points out in the introduction of *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*, the role of film since it is personally selected by the viewers, is to socialize them "in the ways of the world--or [to inform them] of how to interpret post-9/11 incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq."<sup>4</sup> His monograph provides a useful analysis of the elements of action films and documentaries in contemporary post-9/11 society, the depiction of Islam and Islamism, and the war on terror.

Similarly, J. David Slocum, the editor of *Hollywood and War: the Film Reader*, is concerned with the ways in which American films depict wars and how they shape the memory of these wars focusing on World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. His volume discusses the representation of heroes, sacrifice, national identity, memory, and history. He focuses on Hollywood's transparency in representing violence and political or ideological discourse to promote military action. In the same manner, Hollywood, as Michael Selig explains, made use of melodramatic narratives in Vietnam War films of the sixties in order to "confront history, or more specifically, to confront historical change in a fashion that appears as "a legitimate vision of the world," that is, as "authentic and authoritative"(1999). These melodramatic narratives not only recreate historical events, they also function as a reassurance of America's morality.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Markert, John. *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*, Scarecrow Press, Inc. US. 2011. Print and Slocum, J. David. "9/11 Film and Media Scholarship." *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1, by University of Texas Press, Fall 2011, pp. 181-193

3 May, Lary. *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

4 Markert, John. *Post-9/11 cinema : through a lens darkly*. Lanham [etc.] : Scarecrow Press. 2011. Print.

5 Michael Selig quotes Robert Lang arguing that "The melodrama... is first a drama of identity," through Vietnam war films, America is coming into terms with contemplating desire versus history.

In their discussion of post-9/11 cinema, Markert, McAlister, and Thompson focus on action, war, horror, and apocalyptic films. They also focus on documentaries dealing with the events of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and criticism of film directors and producers aimed at the Bush administration. These scholars connect post-9/11 cinematic responses to a long tradition of World War II and Vietnam War cinematography with films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)<sup>6</sup> and *Apocalypse Now* (1979)<sup>7</sup>, as well as post-apocalyptic films such as *Independence Day* (1996)<sup>8</sup> and *Armageddon* (1998)<sup>9</sup>. However, Markert, McAlister, and Thompson seem to overlook how traumatic historical events influence cultural products in subtle and unexpected ways. As Slocum points out, "The place of films *other than* action and horror films, as cinematic responses to 9/11 and the war on terror, should likely be revisited in the future and their significance reconsidered relative to other kinds of productions" (9/11 Film and Media Scholarship 183). Among films that need to be reconsidered are those that belong in the historical epic genre.

Being set in ancient times, the epic film provides a distance but insightful glimpse of present attitudes. Commenting on the interpretation of historical events by modern scholars, Wilhelm Dilthey argues, "We grasp the significance of a moment in the past. It is meaningful insofar as in it a connection with the future was made, through an act or an actual event."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, these films although referring to a distant past--in many cases not even America's

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Selig, Michael. History and Subjectivity, Part I: What We Won't Learn from the Hollywood-Style Vietnam War Film. *The Sixties Project*. Thursday, January 28, 1999. Web. 14 May.2013.

6 *Saving Private Ryan*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Prod. Steven Spielberg. By Robert Rodat. Perf. Tom Hanks, Edward Burns, and Tom Sizemore. DreamWorks Pictures, 1998

7 *Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen, Robert Duvall, Frederic Forrest. Paramount Pictures, 1979. DVD.

8 *Independence Day*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Perf. Will Smith, Bill Pullman, Jeff Goldblum, Mary McDonnell. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996. DVD.

9 *Armageddon*. Prod. Michael Bay. Dir. Michael Bay. Perf. Bruce Willis, Billy Bob Thornton, Ben Affleck, Liv Tyler. Touchstone Pictures., 1998. DVD.

10 Afrasiabi, L. Kaveh. "Persians and Greeks: Hollywood and the Clash of Civilizations." GLOBAL DIALOGUE 9:1-2. Winter/Spring 2007. 14 May 2013.

past--provide a metaphor that is at the same time remote and relevant. In the case of historical epic films, the connection with 9/11 is subtle but not as coincidental as it might appear. Here cultural critics may find reconstructions of historical events which, as Michael Selig and other scholars explain, are depictions of present-day American identity and justifications for the "war on terror."

The epic film has the potential to appeal to large audiences because its elements include images of heroes, heroic sacrifice, war, and empire. Also, its emphasis on freedom can be experienced by viewers universally. Subsequently, it is no mere coincidence that historical depictions have regained popularity in the twenty-first century. As Constantine Santas points out in *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster*, "The epic enjoys a considerable resurgence in its recent transformations, mostly aided by digital technology, which gives it the ability to adjust to modern sensibilities and to quiet fears generated by new concerns, like the war on terrorism, for instance."<sup>11</sup>

In order to trace transformations of the epic film, I offer a presentation of this genre's characteristics. An epic film recreates or reinterprets historical events or myths in a spectacular, grandiose way. Film critic Tim Dirks defines the epic genre as "films [that] often take a historical or imagined event, mythic, legendary, or heroic figure, and add an extravagant setting and lavish costumes, accompanied by grandeur and spectacle and a sweeping musical score."<sup>12</sup> Dirks demonstrates how epic films often use other genres' elements by borrowing from historical, action, western, war, science fiction, and fantasy films. This is crucial to our understanding of the epic film. As a genre that is not monolithic using only historical knowledge, epics, instead, rewrite history by blurring historical and political struggles or by changing the chronological order of the events depicted altogether.

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<sup>11</sup> An interesting comparison would be 1930s musicals and comedies that were as Lary May argues "escapist," keeping the audience's focus away from America's economic situation, providing some moral boost.

<sup>12</sup> For more details on the epic genre, the most famous films, actors and directors see. Dirks, Tim. "Epics - Historical Films." Epics - Historical Films. Web. 10 May 2013.

Any attempt to recreate history is first and foremost artistic, without excluding the political or social elements it might entail: "insofar as historical events and processes become understandable, as conservatives maintain, or explainable, as radicals believe them to be, they can never serve as a basis for a visionary politics more concerned to endow social life with meaning than with beauty" (White, 128).

The epic in American cinema is one of the oldest film genres. Starting with silent epics like D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914), the very first American epic films during the 1930s and later in the 1950s dominated international markets.<sup>13</sup> Especially after the 1950s, the era of blockbusters, epic films were criticized for their "stylistic and moral conservatism."<sup>14</sup> As Penelope Houston and John Gillett argued in *The Theory and Practice and Practice of Blockbusting*, the historical blockbuster was

"a well-trying formula. For producers seeking inspiration in a time of crisis, the familiar Hollywood dictum could mean only one thing. The religious spectacle, whether inspired directly by the Bible or by the highly exploitable conflicts of Romans and Christians, is as old as the cinema itself" (Houston and Gillett, 69).

While Houston and Gillett focus mainly on the commercial side of the historical epic and not its appeal on the public and cultural significance, Tim Edensor links epic films to a representation of national identity. He analyses how the media, specifically citing the example of *Braveheart*<sup>15</sup>, uses myths to reinterpret national identity. In this way, national identity is constructed by the media through a common history. Therefore, the role of the film is to

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13 D.W.Griffith, Dir. *Judith of Bethulia*.1914

14 Wyke, Maria. *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*. New York [etc.]: Routledge. 1997.Print.

15 *Braveheart*. Dir. Mel Gibson. Prod. Mel Gibson. By Randall Wallace. Perf. Mel Gibson, Sophie Marceau, and Patrick McGoohan. Paramount Pictures, 1995.

create or promote stereotypes of "otherness." In the case of *Braveheart*, Scottish-ness is read as "other" and used to construct a sense of "our" American identity. Maria Wyke, too, sees the mechanism of identity construction in epic films by pointing out that when it comes to generic conventions "they [United States and Italy] created a whole array of 'invented traditions'.. [which]... attempted to establish for a modern community a continuity with a suitable historical past" (Wyke 14).

These scholars focus on the representation of otherness in the historical epic, but it is equally important to explore the meaning of the historical epic in relation to American identity particularly after 9/11. As mentioned above, the role of cinema is to socialize the viewers "in the ways of the world." Melani McAlister, in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, And U.S. Interests in The Middle East Since 1945*, illustrates how this was achieved in 1950s Hollywood cinema. By relying heavily on stereotypes, portrayals of the East were in open dialogue with political issues raised during the Cold War. Similarly, mechanisms used by historical epics of the 1950s are still being employed by historical epics of the 2000s.

Interest in epic films slowly faded after the 1960s, although the epic, in the sense of the majestic, was still popular through science fiction films. Interestingly enough, there has been a resurgence of historical epic films especially after September 11, 2001 which is still in vogue. This is also a result of ongoing debates surrounding collective American identity which has been traditionally shaped and projected by privileged White Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class males. As Elizabeth Genovese argued in 1990, the previous two decades ceased to be seen as monolithic because increasing numbers of minority populations began to be represented in American culture.<sup>16</sup> This tendency was accentuated after the terrorist attacks in New York City which, as Mathilde Roza discusses in "America under

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16 Campbell and Kean.



Attack': Unity and Division after 9/11,"<sup>17</sup> challenged notions of a national bond. 9/11 and the cultural responses that followed provided new insights into history, memory, otherness, race, class, and gender.

The umbrella term that is called "American identity" is explored in several cultural texts. Although they are not directly linked to the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars, they can nevertheless be seen as attempts to unite Americans under a common imagined past. Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), Zack Snyder's *300* (2006), based on Frank Miller's graphic novel, Louis Leterrier's remake *Clash of the Titans* (2010), Chris Columbus's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010) and Tarsem Singh's *Immortals* (2011) are but a few examples of cultural identity consolidation. What makes these films intriguing is their use of historical events as narratives that draw from ancient Greek history and mythology, thereby expressing modern political notions and post-9/11 American values.

*Troy* (2004) is the cinematic adaptation of Homer's Iliad about war between the Greeks the Trojans. After a prince from Troy sails to Sparta and falls in love with Helen, he convinces her to sail back with him to Troy. Her husband Menelaus feels offended by this act and implores the help of fellow Greeks to attack Troy. Two years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and one after Iraq, the telling of *Troy* serves as a timely war epic about the clash of nations and eminent war. Heroes, destiny, the army, and American exceptionalism are among the prominent themes explored in the film. *Alexander* (2004), released in the same year, depicts Alexander the Great's colonization of the East. Colonialism, multiculturalism and democracy are notable elements in this film. In one of his interviews, Oliver Stone connected the film to American expansionism. He declared the practice to be dangerous since

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17 Roza, Mathilde, "America under Attack': Unity and Division after 9/11." *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*. Ed Derek Rubin, Jaap Verheul. 2nd ed. [Amsterdam]: Amsterdam UP, 2009. Print.

there is little tolerance for the other, as was the case in Alexander's kingdom.<sup>18</sup> In *300* (2006), the Spartans are under attack by the Persians. King Leonidas prepares to go to war. With 300 soldiers he confronts the Persians in Thermopylae (Hotgates) in an Alamo-style battle that ends their defeat. This film's discourse also focuses on heroism, the fight for freedom, and the clash of two different nations and their opposing ideologies. The danger of a big, all-powerful government is apparent as well in *300*, which marks a shift in the discourse of these historical epic films.

In more recent epic films, there is the underlying threat of a large government that threatens citizens' liberties. In *Clash of the Titans* (2010), the hero, Perseus, fights against the powers of the underworld who want to conquer Earth. The "us versus them" worldview is central to this film's narrative, with the gods being out of control and a hero needed to bring justice. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010) is set in modern day America. Percy Jackson is an ordinary teenager with problems in school (he is dyslexic) who also happens to be a descendant of Poseidon, god of the sea. Zeus, father of the gods, accuses Percy of stealing his lightning bolt and gives him 14 days to return it or Zeus will start a war between the gods. Again, the gods have gotten out of control, threatening the future of Earth and its youth. A hero is needed to restore order. Finally, Tarsem Singh's *Immortals* (2010) highlights anxiety over the government's unlimited power, as King Hyperion declares war against humanity and threatens to use a secret weapon that can unleash the Titans on Earth. The gods can do nothing to intervene, leaving Theseus, the demigod son of Zeus, as humanity's only hope.

Several important questions arise out of both the academic discussion and the quick overview of filmic themes and discourses above. How is American identity consolidated

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18 Oliver Stone's talk in Institute for Advanced Study on (Ancient) History on Screen.

(Ancient) History on Screen. A Talk by Oliver Stone. Perf. Oliver Stone. Youtube. Youtube, 01 Feb. 2013. Web. 10 May 2013.

through the epic film narrative in post-9/11 cinematography? How do the themes present in epic films connect to the rest of post-9/11 cinematography? Last but not least, is this genre tied to American identity and American core values? Is the historical epic employed as America's cultural diplomacy and as an explanation of the post-9/11 society? In the following sections I attempt to answer these questions by exploring several themes as they are represented in the above-mentioned films. I will make connections between these films and scholarship in film studies and American studies in order to determine the ways in which these films can be viewed as cultural representations of an American identity after 9/11.

The first section explores the theme of heroism and heroic sacrifice. Elizabeth Abele argues that the hero in American movies “epitomizes the qualities of the 'successful male'--a man with his eye firmly set on his goal, his 'duty,' committed to toughing out whatever gets in his way.”<sup>19</sup> The Western epic hero has predominantly been a white male, and after 9/11 such WASP narratives are accentuated. Who is the post-9/11 epic hero? How is he portrayed in relation to ethnic minorities and women? How is homosexuality depicted in the historical epic?

The second section investigates the ways in which war, battles scenes, and the army are reproduced in epic films. These films usually revolve around one or more battle scenes. As I mentioned earlier, the historical epic film has in many instances been linked to World War II and Vietnam. This connection can be proven useful in an attempt to map the ways in which these films depict war and battle scenes. Slocum argues, for instance, that the armies or the troops depicted in Vietnam war films, are a metaphor for the American nation (10). Thus, in this section I will explore the ways in which the “war on terror” is represented. News coverage and war imagery have influenced the cinematic representations after 9/11. Pictures of armed American soldiers in the desert as well as images of torture from Abu Ghraib or

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<sup>19</sup> Abele, E. "Assuming A True Identity: Re-/De-Constructing Hollywood Heroes." *Journal Of American & Comparative Cultures* 25.3/4 (2002): 447-454. *Academic Search Elite*. Web. 19 May 2013.

Guantanamo have been recycled by films and, in the case of the historical epic, new visual techniques have been employed in order to depict ancient deserted wastelands and gruesome violence.

In the third section, the theme of empire will be addressed. In the years after 9/11, empires have been portrayed in both positive and negative lights. In *Alexander* (2004), director Oliver Stone admitted that he purposely portrayed a truly multicultural empire,<sup>20</sup> while films in the second half of the 2000s such as *300* and *Immortals* portrayed the empire as something evil (usually by making it the enemy). In all cases, however, post-9/11 historical epics use the Puritan “City upon a Hill” narrative to stress America's relationship to itself and to the world.

The last section will explore themes of freedom and democracy in order to show how their meaning has changed over the last 10 years. I focus on the antithesis between the portrayal of free nations and evil empires, or a nation that has different worldviews of what freedom and democracy are. The major change apparent in the historical epic within the last few years appears to be the shift from Huntington's “Clash of Civilizations”--in which he argued the world is divided in the East and the West, Christianity and Islam, rich and poor--to a threat by Gods or creatures of the underworld, external superpowers and lunatic leaders who possess secret and powerful weapons. Thus, with the remake of *Clash of the Titans*, a closure to more archetypal good versus evil narratives seems to be appearing in twenty-first century American cinema marking, therefore, an end of the “war on terror.”

Together, these historical epic films provide a unifying discourse that helped promote whiteness, conservatism, and right-wing domestic and foreign policies that the privileged WASP elite supported. Instead of providing a platform where several trajectories and perspectives could be introduced and tested, the historical epic genre in particular, attempted

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20 Oliver Stone's speech in Institute for Advanced Study on (Ancient) History on Screen.

to promote the discourse of this certain elite, providing a justification of American policies  
and an attempt to create a unified American identity.

# 1. Heroism and Heroic Sacrifice

*“All men's souls are immortal, but the souls of the righteous are immortal and divine.”<sup>21</sup>*

## Introduction

Given the subject matter and the structure of the historical epic film, little has changed since the first epics when it comes to the plot, the characters, and the screening of historical events. The epic genre has preserved its basic structure, which revolves around a protagonist--predominantly a young, white male with exceptional strength and endurance--selected by the gods to fight for freedom. Slocum argues in *Hollywood and War* that in war films the squad, the platoon, or even combined military services stand for the American nation, and any group appearing in those films expresses the way Americans view themselves in relation to the world and history (10). Historical epic films function in a similar way the 21st century: they express the way a certain group of Americans--the Bush administration in power and the WASP majority who voted for them--view themselves as threatened by foreign forces and domestic rivals. In addition, the question of who is a hero became problematic after the war in Iraq. Alexander and Leonidas, for example, are both heroes yet it is debatable whether their actions are heroic. The epic film, then, is a projection of the anxiety of the white man. Furthermore, the PATRIOT Act, the war in Iraq, the 2008 economic recession, and hurricane Katrina created new debates on how much power Americans thought their government wielded. Did this change the identity of the epic hero as well? This section will analyze the whiteness of the historical epic and the traits that every epic hero must have, and then link them both to post-9/11 era anxieties. Last but not least, this section would be incomplete if there was no discussion on the portrayal of other members of society, such as people of color,

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<sup>21</sup> Voiceover (John Hurt) in *Immortals* (2011)

*Immortals*. Dir. Tarsem Singh. Perf. Henry Cavill, Mickey Rourke, Stephen Dorff. 20 Century Fox, 2011.

homosexuals, and women, in the historical epic. All these minorities have traditionally either been omitted or emphatically downplayed in the historical epic.

Some scholars focus on the multicultural debate 9/11 resurfaced<sup>22</sup>: U.S. media idealized the firefighters that helped the injured or even lost their lives when the World Trade Center collapsed. Yet, as Michan Andrew Connor demonstrates, in a controversy over the memorial statue raised at Ground Zero picturing white, African American and Hispanic firefighters in order to promote multiculturalism, certain issues emerged. Liberals pointed out that there are not many colored firefighters whereas the Right wanted to underline the role of the white male firefighter in this debate.<sup>23</sup> The historical epic, as it has already been argued, is a genre that is predominantly white and male. Thus it is not mere coincidence that it was revitalized in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In most of these epic films, when the colored other is shown on screen it is either the Eastern barbarian forces that threaten the West as in *300*, a people to be colonized and plundered as in *Alexander* or, as in the case of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians the Lightning Thief*, the hero's gullible and goofy companion. Women, on the other hand, provide the backbone to the story, the reason why a hero will leave on his quest and his reason to come back home. Furthermore, homosexuality is also portrayed as weakness (*Alexander*) or as proof of a sinister character (*300*). Apart from these films already mentioned, filmmakers have usually worked hard to downplay homosexuality, remaining faithful to the elements of the epic genre. In these instances, however, by over-projecting masculinity they manage the exact opposite: they idealize the male body and give the camera a homoerotic focus: males gazing upon males. To what extent does this create an interesting irony to the genre's predominantly white focus?

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22 Connor, Michan Andrew. "Real American Heroes: Attacking Multiculturalism through the Discourse of Heroic Sacrifice" *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*. Ed Derek Rubin, Jaap Verheul. 2nd ed. [Amsterdam]: Amsterdam UP, 2009. Print.

23 Ibid. 94

## 1.1 The epic hero.

In the United States there is even a pathos of inverted emphasis: the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young; not to mature away from Mother, but to cleave to her. And so, while husbands are worshipping at their boyhood shrines, being the lawyers, merchants, or masterminds their parents wanted them to be, their wives, even after fourteen years of marriage and two fine children produced and raised, are still on the search for love—which can come to them only from the centaurs, sileni, satyrs, and other concupiscent incubi of the rout of Pan, either as in the second of the above-recited dreams, or as in our popular, vanilla-frosted temples of the venereal goddess, under the make-up of the latest heroes of the screen (Campbell 38).

In the introduction of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell explores Jungian concepts of cultural archetypes, symbols and ideas passed on from generation to generation which are part of the "collective unconscious" of humanity. This "collective unconscious" is employed in storytelling and mythmaking, which is why myths have an international--or a transnational--appeal. The historical epic genre makes use of myths from around the globe, which the American audience can identify with or even adopt by relating them to American myths and symbols.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, *Troy*, *Alexander*, *300*, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: the Lightning Thief*, *Clash of the Titans* and *Immortals*, are all adaptations of ancient Greek storytelling and mythmaking, that has been re-imagined and re-adapted to a more American context.

The hero is the most important element and the driving force of every myth. The hero in the historical epic film has certain distinguishing characteristics that are similar to the action hero that Elizabeth Abele has analyzed. In her article "Assuming a True Identity," she

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<sup>24</sup> Not only Americans can relate themselves with the myths explored in these movies: these movies are made for transnational audiences and they are meant to be exported as a cultural product. For the sake of this analysis, however, the impact of these movies to Americans is primarily studied.



focuses on the hero in American cinema, claiming him to be a vivid example of how American masculinity is invented and projected on screen. She argues that the screen hero "...epitomizes the qualities of the 'successful' American male--a man with his eye firmly on his goal, his 'duty,' committed to toughing out whatever gets in his way" (447), though in today's society such manifestations of masculinity are considered unreal. The epic hero is a man whose only concern seems to be the well-being of his community and his never-ending adventures. In a way he resembles the "cowboy hero" described by William W. Savage as a "spokesman for the people, a real sense First Citizen of the Republic, a guardian, a writer of wrongs, or, at the very least, a perceptive and philosophical observer of the human condition" (20). The epic hero might not be as directly linked to American identity as the cowboy, but he possesses the same patriarchal power and the same authority.

Toughness, violence, and self-discipline are stereotypically identified with masculinity, and the heroes in the films discussed here are personifications of masculinity. Toughness and self-discipline are attributed to the epic hero as an extension of his whiteness (there will be a more extensive discussion on the depiction of violence in the following chapter). In his book *White Bound*, Matthiew W. Hughey reported on extensive research on how whiteness is viewed and lived by two white organizations--one that is a white nationalist group and one that is a white antiracist group--which can highlight how whiteness is portrayed on screen as well. His conclusion is that both groups, although being politically antithetical, are making meaning of whiteness in a similar way, reproducing both stereotypes and "white supremacy." He then describes five understandings of whiteness: "non white dysfunctions," "white racial victimhood," white saviors," "white appropriation," and "whites as all-knowing actors." Of these five, four are crucial to our understanding of how the epic and the historical epic genres are connected to whiteness: "victimhood," "saviors," "dysfunction of non-whites," and "white appropriation."

Hughey argues that whites in the post-civil rights era refer to themselves as victims of political correctness and, in the case of the white nationalists, perceive themselves as martyrs in a battle against discrimination. All heroes in these movies are also seen as victims: Alexander for instance is not a tyrant but a misunderstood idealist. In the case of Leonidas the imagery employed is far more obvious: in his last scene, the camera zooms out only to show him dead, pierced by the enemy's arrows, in a Christ-like or St. Sebastian imagery... as an allegory about the necessity of conflict between the modern West and Islamic expansionism"(Prince 291). At the same time, the heroes are not only seen as martyrs, but also as saviors defending the weak and defenseless. This is what Zeus, disguised as an old man, advises Theseus to do in *Immortals*. Hughey argues that only when the "patriarchal white self is idealized as normal and proper...it becomes the standard against which whites are judged as more or less worthy people"(Hughey 147). These epic heroes are embodiments of this patriarchal self and they emphasize it with their urge to "make the right thing" and defend the weak. Thus, although the people of Argos doubt Perseus in *Clash of Titans* he is nevertheless willing to risk his own life to save the city from the wrath of the gods.

Other important points discussed by Hughey are the "appropriation of the white self" and "the dysfunction of the nonwhites." On one hand, non whites are linked to immoral and un-American traits: "rhetoric of 'bad values' and 'pathological behavior' reigns as a powerful tool for whites."<sup>25</sup> This makes the distinction between people of color and white epic heroes all the more obvious. I will touch upon the depiction of non-whites in the last subsection concerning otherness. On the other hand, Hughey argues that both white nationalists and anti-racists equate non-whites, especially blacks and Latinos with hypersexuality.<sup>26</sup> This is also obvious in the historical epic: the East is portrayed as being alluring and exotic. Alexander decides to stay in the East, unlike other Greeks before him, and there he becomes so

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<sup>25</sup> Hughey 62

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 160

influenced by the beliefs and practices of the people of Babylon that his army almost revolts.

In one of the most controversial scenes of the film, he is kissing a eunuch after the latter performed an erotic dance in front of him, which causes a dispute within his soldiers who keep reminding him that he has been changed by the customs of the East. In *Immortals*, Phaedra the prophet-priestess appears in front of Theseus in clothing that looks more like a burqa<sup>27</sup> than ancient Greek clothing. The use of such attire makes Phaedra appear distant and exotic, while her status as a priestess with supernatural powers makes her alluring but threatening.

What is more, these myths are usually coming-of-age stories, so the hero must also be a young man who matures through his journey or his adventures. In American culture, youth is valued as it represents the nation (Campbell and Kean 246). Youth and promises of birth and renewal are central to American discourse. As James Oliver Robertson argues in *American Myth, American Reality*, youth has always had central role in America: "all people, everywhere, value youth ... but America is the fountain of 'youth'" (348). This idea of youth and renewal is ingrained in the New World-Old World conflict that has been present in America's rhetoric since colonial times. America is the New World that rebelled against the authority and corruptive nature of the Old World that as a "parent culture" alienated certain groups.<sup>28</sup> The tension between old and new contained some ambiguities: although America valued youth as a sign of a strong nation, at the same time, certain mechanisms had to be employed in order to restrain the rebelliousness of that youth. One of these mechanisms was culture.<sup>29</sup> Leslie Fiedler called America the "good bad boy" meaning that America is like a rebellious child who is at times "crude and unruly" but who eventually conforms to the norms of society.

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27 The garment that is worn by Muslim women, mostly in Afghanistan, that covers all the body except the eyes.

28 Campbell and Kean(246, 247) and Lawrence(10)

29 Campbell and Kean

A good example of the tension between the new and the old is *Alexander*. Alexander feels alienated from his father Philip especially after the latter gets married to or when he, as a king, criticizes heavily and tries to control him. His mother Olympias also estranges him as she claims him to be the son of Zeus and tries to make him a king by assassinating his father. Alexander is torn between his parents. He longs for his father's attention: when he comes back from his injury in the of Hydaspes and he announces to his soldiers that they are going to go back to Babylon, he imagines that he sees in the crowd his father smiling at him. At the same time, he is afraid that he is becoming violent like his father. This is why in two scenes in the film, while he is outraged and yells at his soldiers, his face changes with scenes from Philip shouting at his mother, as he had seen him do in the past. Although Alexander is raised by his mother, who becomes his most powerful ally in Macedonia, he is intimidated by her strong presence in his life, resulting in his decision to exclude her from politics after he becomes a king. Alexander leaves Macedonia to get away from the Old World and the authority of his parents. However, the tension between old and new becomes a recurring theme in the movie, as it is again introduced by some of his soldiers who were friends with his father and did not support Alexander's authority. The power of youth, however, is captured in the quote by Old Ptolemy: "How can I tell you what it was like to be young; to dream big dreams? And to believe when Alexander looked you in the eye you could do anything. In his presence, by the light of Apollo, we were better than ourselves." What Ptolemy "teaches" the audience is that when a nation is young--implying America--it has great potential to change the world.

*Troy* was released earlier in 2004 and also has as a central motif the clash between the New World and the Old. The conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles is apparent from the beginning of the movie and the battle against the king of Thessaly until Troy is conquered by Agamemnon's army. Furthermore, Achilles is the best example of the "good bad boy": he is selfish and arrogant in the beginning of the film, but also authentic. Throughout the movie, however, Achilles goes through a transformation. From the crude warrior he is, he becomes

more sensitive after he falls in love with Briseis. For a short time he even faces the dilemma of whether to be the hero or the husband, conforming to the norms of society. After Patroklos (Garrett Hedlund), his cousin, is killed in battle and Briseis leaves, he becomes a war machine again, avenging his cousin's death, although when Troy is conquered he runs to save Briseis from death or enslavement. So, Achilles--and the American nation--is arrogant at first and self-absorbed but he ultimately does the right thing, proving that America also fought the wrong wars, but there is still hope that they will also do the right thing in the end.

In both *Troy* and *Alexander*, Achilles and Alexander are epic heroes who have an inclination to what is right but they sometimes make mistakes. Later, when they choose not to conform to the ways of their societies, they are both killed. In older epic films, it is not uncommon for the epic hero to die, usually killed by his enemies in battle. In these two movies however, the death of the hero is seen as part of the life he chose for himself, a logical consequence. Although both are killed in ways that are below them, not the honored death in battle fighting for their ideals but killed by a coward prince or poisoned, they are both given a memorial by the narrators of their stories that makes their death meaningful. In the next subsection that focuses more heroism after 9/11, I will discuss more thoroughly this important detail.

In *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, *Clash of the Titans*, and *Immortals*, the film narratives focus on this duality between the Old and the New World, the Old being the gods and the New the heroes. The difference in these three films, is that although Percy, Perseus, and Theseus are the “good bad boys,” they are also not heroes in the traditional sense. All three of them start as innocent, non-heroic young men who have to fight for their family or for innocent people who are in trouble; they have to learn how to be a hero. Thus, their journey is not like Achilles' and Alexander's whose destinies was laid in front of them. The former three heroes, although selected by Poseidon and Zeus, are forced to fight when they have no idea about fighting and are thus victims of the circumstance. Still, they become the heroes

everyone is expecting them to become, but first they have to go through maturity. This theme of the hero's predestination links the historical epic film to a more Christian discourse. The heroes and their armies are selected by God who chose them to fight against evil, giving their adventures religious undertones. Although this narrative of God's elect is central to American discourse since colonial times, in the 2000s the religious political right was the majority that helped George W. Bush achieve victory in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections (McKay 34). Although these historical epics do not directly incorporate Christian narratives, they nevertheless include Christian symbolism and discourse.

The third characteristic of an epic hero is his exceptionalism and "manifest destiny" ethos.<sup>30</sup> The epic hero needs to have some power that makes him larger-than-life, or at least an exceptional character that makes him admirable. Oftentimes, special power is bestowed to the character from a God, usually Zeus (Father of the Gods) or Poseidon. Being the son of God gives him Christ-like qualities. The epic hero is there to reassure the spectator that God is indeed watching over them, although sometimes it seems that he has forgotten his children. Such is the case in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. It is apparent that not only film narratives carry this special meaning, but also the visual elements of historical epic films dial into a more Christian sensation--such as Leonida's crucifixion-like death pose. Again, this is part of historical epics use of Christian symbolism in an era where religious right-wing and neo-conservative politics influenced American foreign policy.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, these heroes although remote from our present moment in time, they still inspire filmmakers and audiences alike. The less historical knowledge we have of a hero, the

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30. Journalist John L. O'Sullivan, who was the first person to use this term in 1845, imagined the United States as a republic that, in the future, would influence the whole world and would spread its ideals of liberty and self-governance. This discourse was associated to American exceptionalism and was, in turn, employed by the Bush administration in the 2000s. Pratt, Julius W. " The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny.'" *The American Historical Review* , Vol. 32, No. 4, (Jul., 1927), pp. 795-798

31 .More on neo-conservatism, in the section about the Empire.

more room there is for imagination and myth creation. As Savage argues about his cowboy hero, "The significance of his myth ... is that it suggests to Americans what they might have been and what they might yet become" (38). In the case of epic films based on ancient Greek history and mythology, the significance of their heroes is simple: To provide a historical context and a myth of heroes who stood against hostile civilizations fighting for their ideals while facing similar dilemmas comparable to contemporary Americans. Comparing contemporary problems to past events immortalizes the struggles of contemporary Americans by reinforcing their desires to lead mission-oriented, purposeful lives. This will be discussed in the following sections.

## **1.2 The hero in Post-9/11 cinema.**

In *Troy* and *Alexander* the epic heroes were selfish and impulsive, but their rebelliousness was attributed to youth. Eventually, in both cases they ended up doing what is right which allows them to be remembered as great warriors. These narratives demonstrate that up until 2004 Americans were not sure if the war in Iraq was the right thing, but they hoped that it would lead them in the right direction to fight the "war on terror."

In 2006 the public was not openly supportive of the war in Iraq. By then, many war crimes such as Abu Ghraib were common knowledge. The war in Afghanistan had not yet ended, and there were no signs that it would end any time soon. The public's attention was constantly being drawn to what had gone wrong. *300*, which was released in 2006, addressed a similar moral dilemma of how someone can be considered heroic if he has to act in an amoral way. If a hero has to defeat an all-powerful, monstrous enemy, should he not become as ruthless as his opponent is? In *300*, the heroes are not going East any more, the Eastern armies are attacking them on their own soil. This justifies any violence they use and any extremes they reach. Thus, the answer to the question posed above is that any man, under threat of dying or being forced into slavery will fight back, even if it means that he will become more like the enemy himself. In post-9/11 films, the use of violence is very common.

The next section will touch upon this. It is worth mentioning nevertheless, that at the same time war films and documentaries of 2006 were detailing the horrific consequences of war, especially in Iraq, the films clearly opposed decisions made by the Bush administration. According to Stephen Prince, only TV series and TV films were sympathetic to these policies. *300* stands in high contrast to such narratives. By transferring the war at home and suggesting its proximity to American soil, the war had been transformed into a battle against darkness and death. This made it seem like the right war to fight. Therefore, just as TV was used by supporters of the Bush administration, historical epics were also used for a similar function.

A second important element as mentioned above was the theme of meaningful death. After 9/11 there was noticeable reluctance from filmmakers to make films that would depict the events of 9/11. Although films were influenced by those events and even mentioned, a direct screening of 9/11 was almost a taboo in Hollywood. This changed in 2006 with *United 93*. *United 93* focuses on the final moments of passengers aboard the airplane that was high jacked by terrorists and intended to crash somewhere in New York. In this film the last hours of passengers on board of the plain are shown. The passengers are portrayed as brave "heroes" who fight back and actually manage to kill the hijackers before the plane inevitably crashes although missing its intended target. The concept of a meaningful death becomes central in narratives after 9/11 as an attempt to immortalize these common people and elevate them to the status of hero. At the same time, this film offers a sense of closure for the horrific events of September 11, 2001 and the promise that those who were lost did not die in vain.

Similarly, *300* revolves around the same theme. While they were hopelessly facing the vast Persian army, the soldiers nevertheless stood up and provided a necessary amount of time for the rest of the Greek armies to unite and fight back. Thus their deaths were not in vain, but the ultimate sacrifice for a greater cause. Theseus in *Immortals* also dies fighting against King Hyperion. He becomes a demigod hero who is seen fighting in the heavens just before the



film ends. His death, too, is not meaningless. In fact it is almost necessary so that humans can have hope that some omnipotent power is watching over them even after death.

After 9/11 the themes of heroic sacrifice, meaningful death, and the transfer of the war at home are most prominent in the historical epic film. These themes help to justify not only the terrorist attacks but also the foreign policy America was delegating in the war against terrorism. In the next subsection otherness will be explored, since this is another theme that was almost absent from the historical epic, but has become more prevalent during the last decade.

### **1.3 Non Whites, Women, and Depictions of Homosexuality.**

In the post-9/11 era there has been a discussion of multiculturalism and how non-whites are depicted. As Connor argues in "Real American Heroes," a characteristic of this era has been the elevation of national heroes and the attack on multiculturalism (93).<sup>32</sup> Connor points out that not only does this discourse justify the war on terror, as was mentioned above, but also that "the privileged cultural, political, and economic standing of white men" through the over-emphasis of white heroism, such as the firefighters who served at the World Trade Center, has silenced other minorities. He later argues that "although film images alone do not create white dominance, they are useful for protecting it and inherently less useful for challenging it" (Connor 96).

As has already been argued, the historical epic functions in such a way by promoting whiteness and securing white American identity, which is the very reason it reappeared in the 2000s. In the historical epics that this thesis examines, non-whites are almost absent from the narratives, being reduced to insignificant or villainous roles.<sup>33</sup> Grover in *Percy Jackson and*

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<sup>32</sup> Rubin and Verheul.

<sup>33</sup> Not only is the hero predominantly white as it has been discussed, it is a role that is acted by white actors: in the historical epics discussed here, Brad Pitt(Achilles) is an American from Oklahoma, Colin Farrell(Alexander) is Irish, Gerard Butler(Leonidas) is from Scotland, Logan Leman(Percy) an American Jew from California, Henry Cavill(Perseus) and Sam Worthington(Theseus) both are British.

*the Olympians* is the friend and later companion of Percy Jackson during his quest to find the lightning thief. Grover is a satyr (supernatural half-goat, half-man creature) in charge of helping Percy. Satyrs were followers of Dionysus in Greek mythology who were believed to seduce young women and rape them in the forests where they lived. It was mentioned above that according to Hughey, Latinos and blacks are associated with hypersexuality. An example of this exists where Grover, in "real life," is an African American attending school with Percy. In *300*, the only non-whites are the Persians and their leader, Xerxes who is the god-king attacking the Spartans. The Persians are depicted as a slave army with no will of their own. They are fighting for Xerxes because they are either afraid of him or they enjoy the money and women they receive as gifts. They are seen by their king as expendable soldiers with no personality of their own. Computer generated armies help to aid with this feeling since the Persian army consists of a few actors who are multiplied through the use of special effects. In sharp contrast the Spartans are very few, and the audience can actually distinguish who is who, thus better relating to each one. Xerxes is depicted to be a hybrid giant who is man, but also has a feminized appearance. Xerxes' homosexuality is exoticized and demonized in order to provide contrast to the Spartan's heroism. His outfit consists mainly of chains, which according to Prince, symbolizes the undemocratic nature of his empire that threatens to enslave the people.

In *Alexander*, homosexuality is condemned but at the same time seen as a historical truth. Nikoloutsos in "The Alexander Bromance: Male Desire and Gender Fluidity" provides a thorough analysis of the theme of homosexuality in Oliver Stone's *Alexander*. The term "bromance" is a descriptive term referring to the relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion, his comrade and "brother-in-arms" (15). Oliver Stone has been criticized for depicting Alexander as a bisexual leader, partly because the filmmakers have to obey certain norms when creating epic films since the audience expects to see certain elements. A homosexual hero is not one of the conventional elements since the hero must predominantly

express American ideals. Homosexuality is incompatible with established heroic traits. The audience was not so critical when Xerxes' perceived homosexuality was accentuated because he served as an antipode for Leonidas.

The epic genre, as it has been already discussed on this chapter, is a genre that immortalizes men and masculinity and cannot go along with homosexuality. Yet, at the same time aesthetic elements such as the camera's sharp focus on muscles and armor projects a subtle eroticism. Since the target audience is presumably male, these films project a certain homoeroticism between the hero or heroes of the film and the male audience. This homoeroticism has not gone unnoticed by film critics. Richard Corliss, in "7 Reasons Why *300* Is a Huge Hit," lists that men were presented as "the tough guys, the bully boys, the warrior class." Their remarks on each other's physiques project a certain level of homoeroticism.

I know nothing of the sexual orientation of Snyder or Miller. I am not criticizing, but merely describing *300*'s iconography. I am surprised by the movie's broad appeal to the demographic of young American males, many of whom still use "gay" as the second-worst slur, and view homosexuality as something to laugh at or fear (Corliss, 2011).

Furthermore, women are also underrepresented in historical epics. Laura Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," argues that Hollywood's success is grounded in the fact that it encourages viewers to identify with a male protagonist who is active and fiercely male, as opposed to women who are passive receivers of action. Although Mulvey's essay was written in 1973 and might sound out-dated mostly because it referred to classical Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, as it has already been argued, the historical epic is a film genre that has retained its most basic structures throughout history. Thus, women in the

historical epic genre since classic Hollywood films have remained passive as far as action and development is concerned. This depiction of women is prominent in many film genres such as film noir, western, war (where women are usually absent altogether), horror, and many more. In those film genres, women are either portrayed as reassuring and soothing, as in the feminine or domestic sphere (Slocum 9), or as threatening to strip male characters of their masculinity. In *Troy*, Achilles mother warns him about the life of the hero:

"If you stay in Larisa you will find peace. You will find a wonderful woman. You will have sons and daughters, and they will have children. And they will love you. When you are gone, they will remember you. But when your children are dead and their children after them your name will be lost. If you go to Troy, glory will be yours. They will write stories about your victories for thousands of years. The world will remember your name. But if you go to Troy you will never come home. For you, glory walks hand in hand with your doom."

As Achilles goes to Troy, a second chance to find a wife appears. He meets Briseis who criticizes his way of living on the grounds that it is destructive toward other people and offers nothing but death and pain. This threatens his status as a hero. Achilles falls in love with her and he even considers leaving the battle to go back to Greece with her. He asks, "would you leave this all behind? Would you leave Troy?" Briseis does not answer and later chooses family over love. The last time she interacts with Achilles, Troy is being burnt to the ground and she is praying in a temple for mercy from the Gods. Achilles, instead of leaving Troy as he intended, decides to follow his heart and search for her. This decision as it is predicted by his mother, is his doom. Similarly, Paris is depicted as a cowardly impulsive child. He is in love with Helen, causing him to act without thinking about consequences. He puts his family and townspeople in danger. Throughout the film his cowardly, immature

choices are accentuated which makes him an antipode to his brave brother as well as an example to the viewers of what to avoid. Only toward the end is Paris able to show some courage, but only after he and Helen part. In the last part of the film Paris sets out to defend his country and do his "duty," which results in him killing Achilles.

Alexander's mother is a strong, authoritative woman. She wants to be part of Alexander's policy making, but again, Alexander has to leave her and her influence in order to become the leader of his destiny. Gorgo, in *300* and Annabeth, in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* are the only female protagonists who are strong and active characters among recent historical epics. Gorgo is wife of Leonidas and queen of Sparta, an example of how women are seen as part of the domestic sphere. Rather than being a passive wife submitting to her husband's wishes or to the laws of the patriarchal society she is part of, she nods in support of Leonidas kicking the messenger in the pit. She urges Leonidas to fight the Persians although it has been forbidden by the priests, and she confronts the rest of the men who are arguing whether to or not to send troops with Leonidas into war. Her inner strength and unwillingness to conform to the rules of society or to the traditional roles of her gender are apparent when she kills Theron who is a traitor accusing her of adultery. Gorgo's independent character is underlined by Snyder with this subplot. This lends to a stereotypical impression of a woman who keeps everything under control at home and is not threatening to the hero's masculinity, but rather a source of his strength. Still, Gorgo in *300* is a sensual woman, appearing lightly dressed as is the epic film's tradition, never losing her femininity.

The role of woman is uplifting and comparable to the hero in the epic film. This is obvious in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* with the role of Annabeth. Annabeth is the daughter of Athena and a demigod like Percy who is training in a boot camp for demigods. Her first appearance onscreen depicts a very powerful female warrior who defeats every other man attacking her without even losing her breath. Percy is immediately charmed by her looks but also intimidated by her combat style. After a capture-the-flag game

the demigods play in order to improve their fighting skills, Percy manages to defeat her. This plot point seems rather implausible, but is necessary in order to secure Percy's masculine authority.

## **Conclusion**

Historical epics from 2001 to 2011 served as a means of establishing whiteness and white male authority abroad and at home. Through the use of these narratives American foreign policy was justified and at the same time, the discourse of Republicans and the religious right was defended by the historical epic genre. In the following section, there will be a more detailed discussion of how this discourse was used to promote American ideals and justify foreign policy.

## 2. War

*Peace is for the women, and the weak. Empires are forged by war.*<sup>34</sup>

### Introduction

Historical epic films have as a central plot a conflict which inevitably leads to one or more battles. In the next subsection, different aspects of how war is dramatized in the historical epic genre and how this dramatization has changed within these 10 years will be explored. The historical epic is related to war films about World War II and the Vietnam War. As such, they function in a similar way. The hero or his army are seen as a personification of the American nation, so wars fought onscreen are comparable to the real life wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The audience can readily identify with this aspect. As a result, the historical epics from 2004 through 2011 analyzed here form an open dialogue between their narratives and other post-9/11 era films. This subsection will be kept short because it serves as a step to the discussion of the next subsection regarding the war in Iraq.

Post-9/11 films raise another important question about motives behind the war in Iraq. Being political, economic, or moral, war is experienced differently in every historical epic of this era. Eventually, they all provide a justification for America's foreign policy. A sub theme that cannot go unnoticed is the depiction of violence and torture, which is prominent in films after 9/11. In the beginning of the last decade historical epics had remained faithful to the aesthetics of the genre, being similar to the epics of the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. By 2006, however, Zack Snyder's *300* changed the visual imagery of the historical epic to more gloomy artificial scenery with violent bloody battles. With the exception of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* which is a children's film so it cannot follow these new advancements in the

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<sup>34</sup> Agamemnon to Menelaus: *Troy*. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. Perf. Brad Pitt, Eric Bana, Orlando Bloom, Peter O'Toole, and Diane Kruger. Warner Bros., 2004.

historical epic genre, *Clash of Titans* and *Immortals* share the same aesthetics as *300*. This is linked to action and horror films that were released in the post-9/11 era.

## 2.1 History and War

As argued in the introduction, the historical epic genre shares ties with war films and westerns. According to Slocum and other scholars, western and war films of the twentieth century "have molded national identity that articulates an image of a nation that ... has been 'beaten into national shape by the hammer of incessant wars'" (Smith, qtd. by Slocum 10).<sup>35</sup> The historical epic has a similar function: The heroes and armies appearing both in war films and in historical epic films are defending a common set of beliefs and ideas that define American identity. This identity is also constructed, as it will be discussed on the last section, by the epic film tradition and political discourse produced at that time.

Slocum argues that by the late 1970s and 1980s the screening of World War Two and Vietnam War films as well as the "institutionalization of film studies" opened the way for the study of historical and cultural particularities of the war film (8). Michael Selig discusses how Vietnam War films use history very subjectively, portraying historical and political events in a moral way. That way it distances the audience from the actors, creating a pseudo-democratic national identity. At the same time, he points out that, "the conflation of the subject's moral position with national identity precludes the representation of aspects of the war that would make problematic the (re)creation of that identity as fundamentally democratic, moral, and just" (1994).

The historical epic film is also re-inventing this invented national identity. Because of its references to a distant past and the space it offers for interpretation, the historical epic was used in the post-9/11 era to sustain American identity. Therefore, the narratives employed were filled with didacticism justifying the war in Iraq and creating a system of

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<sup>35</sup> Slocum cites Burgoyne(1997), Anderson(1991) and Smith(1981).



(pseudo)philosophical ideas that reinforced America's involvement in the Middle East. The following section will offer a discussion of what the U.S.'s foreign policy was and how historical epics promoted it through "cultural diplomacy." It is worth mentioning here, however, that war films and the historical epic are linked because they construct an imaginary common past. It is true that the historical epics discussed here are using Greek historical events and mythology. The cultural and historical memories they create are as illusionary as the ones created by war films about World War II and the Vietnam War. In a similar way, they construct American identity by generating "cultural amnesia"<sup>36</sup> about the cultural or historical motives of these screened wars, thus creating a sense of shared past.

## **2.2 Why is this war fought?**

Insofar as the Vietnam War was highly controversial to be onscreen, the war in Iraq was even more so. When America sent troops to Afghanistan it was considered a step toward winning the war on terror. The war in Iraq proved to be far more controversial since it was based both on realist, mostly economic, but also on ideological reasons.

As David McKay explains in *American Politics and Society*, American foreign policy is not one-sided. It can be divided into three types of foreign policy and defense: The "strategic policy," which is the general standpoint of America; "crisis management," which refers to the emergency American reactions to a certain crisis; and "logistical or structural defense," which includes all funds and American personnel around the world (417). These policies are not functioning separately. In fact they are influencing one another. They are either realist (supporting or defending national interests), or idealist (having a moral stance).

McKay argues that during the Cold War, the major influence in these policies was the realist view: Wars were fought for territorial or economic reasons (420). When Communism was no longer a threat to America it became difficult to determine America's national

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Rogin qtd. by David Slocum.

interests, but foreign policy did not abandon its realist stand. Nevertheless, foreign policy became more idealist by defending abroad, not only national interests but having a humanitarian approach as in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo (Mc Kay 420). After 9/11, however, this idealism was damaged by the terrorist attacks while Americans were asking: "Why do they hate us?" (Bush 2001). In the post-9/11 era, both a realist and an idealist foreign policy has been employed by America. In order to achieve its goals an emphasis on "cultural diplomacy" is given, exploiting Hollywood's and American cinema's dominance in order to promote American ideals (Kennedy qtd by Campbell and Kean 311).

The historical epic genre, as part of Hollywood's cultural diplomacy is promoting a specific representation of war, which was among the largest debates in America in the post-9/11 era. Almost five years after the invasion of Iraq in a poll released by New York Times and CBS News, sixty-one percent of Americans believed that "taking military action against Iraq" was a bad decision. War films and documentaries of the era depict this view. Stephen Prince argues in *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism*, that the war in Iraq is similar to the war in Vietnam in that its motives behind it were not clear-cut, making it difficult to explain it:

Why did the U.S. attack Iraq after 9/11? This is a question that it is not easy to answer, and the answers to come that will be sufficient will almost certainly be complicated ones. It is a question that will haunt American political culture for years, in the way that a similar question posed about Vietnam during the Cold War has done" (232).

Prince points out that although documentaries made about the Iraq War are characterized by pessimism: they are portraying on one hand Americans in a deserted land, and understanding too little of the country's language and culture. On the other hand, they stand as a striking contrast to the reassuring claims made by the Bush administration that the

war was going well (9). Most of the documentaries analyzed by Prince, which were made from 2004 till 2008, de-romanticize war by emphasizing violence that was caused by the U.S. and challenging its legitimacy.

In a similar way, although historical epics are usually functioning in a different manner, romanticizing war and celebrating man power, as already been argued, some of the historical epics studied here are also questioning the motives behind the war in Iraq. In an interview with Deutsche Presse-Agentur, *Troy's* director Wolfgang Petersen connected his film with the debate over the legitimacy of the war in Iraq:

"I thought, it's as if nothing has changed in 3,000 years. People are still using deceit to engage in wars of vengeance ... Just as King Agamemnon waged what was essentially a war of conquest on the ruse of trying to rescue the beautiful Helen from the hands of the Trojans, President George W. Bush concealed his true motives for the invasion of Iraq." (2004)<sup>37</sup>

In the previous chapter the role of the hero was discussed along with the traits that made him a hero and gave him the authority he had. Campbell and Kean argue that President George Bush's image portrayed by the media was manipulated by his administration and employed for mass consumption. The Bush administration promoted the image of President Bush as an inspiration, projecting images of him dressed in military outfits and ready for action (294). Historical epics of the 2000s and 2010s are quite ambiguous. Petersen linked Bush to King Agamemnon, portraying him as a greedy and deceitful leader. Oliver Stone imagined a charismatic general who could unite all nations, while by 2006 in Zack Snyder's *300*, although it appears to be pro-Iraq War, right-wing voters were "nervous that Emperor

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<sup>37</sup> Derakhshani, Tirdad. "Director Likens Plot of 'Troy' to Iraq War." *Philly.com*. N.p., 11 May 2004. Web. 11 May 2013.

Xerxes of Persia, not the freedom-loving Leonidas, might be George Bush"<sup>38</sup> (Stephenson 2007).

This double-edged representation of war and the motives behind it changed after President Barack Obama's election in 2008. For Obama, rebirth and renewal were recurring themes in his inaugural address in 2009. This renewal was also witnessed in historical epic films which became even more simplistic in their narratives. Percy Jackson is a typical coming of age teenage story whose main characters, although based on a book, are quite flat and one-dimensional. The same can be said for *Clash of Titans* and *Immortals*: the narratives are one-dimensional celebrations of heroism trying to immortalize it as a recurring theme in history. What is more, Campbell and Kean argue that Obama's election brought about a new optimism that would translate into a different foreign policy. This is also seen in the historical epics of 2010 and 2011. Percy Jackson, *Clash of Titans*, and *Immortals* follow a central structure which was absent in earlier years: They involve the world of humans and that of gods. The gods appear absent from the lives of humans, in most cases indifferent, even dangerous, alluding to a previous conservative administration which held almost fundamentalist Christian notions. In newer historical epics this conservatism is denounced as apathetic to people's needs and the hero. Likewise, self-reliance is always endorsed.

The nature of American foreign policy is crucial to understanding the reasons why America would go to war in Afghanistan, but most importantly in Iraq, as David McKay discusses. According to his analysis, foreign policy first was pragmatic, then more idealistic, and finally both—which did not go unnoticed by filmmakers. Thus the war is seen as evil or a mission-oriented toward the East in the first years. In late years it is influenced by Obama's election and the shift from neo-conservatism.

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38 Stephenson.

### 2.3 Screening Violence and Torture

In the previous section was mentioned that according to Prince, documentaries released in the years 2004 to 2008 portrayed Americans in the Middle East looking incongruous with their surroundings. They were soldiers using the latest technology in a deserted land among Middle Eastern civilians, lacking any linguistic and cultural knowledge of the Iraq.

Again, the historical epic has been influenced by such imagery. Some distant barren land is always the place where big wars are fought in the historical epic of post-9/11 cinema. This has probably been assumed from countless images used by the media from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These images in turn were employed by the media since the Gulf Wars. Through repetition they have become historical memory for viewers. For this reason, the desert as a battlefield has been used in historical epics to the extreme that in the computer generated epics of recent years such as *300*, *Clash of Titans*, and *Immortals*, the scenery gives the impression that Earth is a complete wasteland. As Tom Charity argued "the movie's landscape is a disappointingly barren digital domain, the same gray cliffs, deserts and seas familiar from "300" and so many game-worlds."<sup>39</sup> The audience cannot help but wonder why war is fought in a dry, artificial land where nothing can grow and to which it is impossible to relate. This is a device of historical epics that help promote the ideological aspects of war: If it is not for the land or the riches, then it is for the ideals the heroes are fighting for.

Moreover, as much as documentaries of the era de-romanticized and showed the violent and irrational nature of war, the historical epic glorifies it. In part, this is due to the structure of historical epics and their traditional approach to battles and war. Film genres have certain norms of storytelling and "narrative formulas," with which the audience is acquainted and expects to see in a specific genre film (Prince 14). Historical epics for example usually involve a hero or an army which are the "good guys" and a despotic villain with a ruthless army who wants to conquer the world. Similar to action films, the hero's army consists of free

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<sup>39</sup> Tom Charity review on *Immortals* for CNN.

people who fight for their ideals and to protect the innocent people among their community.

The enemies are slaves to their leader and serve him because they are ordered to. This simplistic dualistic structure is accepted by the audience as "real" and it is "extremely important ... very persistent and relatively unchanging over time (Ibid. 14). Filmmakers are reluctant when it comes to changing the narrative lines of a genre movie simply because in the film industry a movie is released if the producers estimate that it will be financially successful. If a film then is far from its usual form, it is considered to be too risky, and it is less likely to be financed to begin with. (Prince, 14)

The historical epic, although it is bound to certain narrative forms, has also been influenced by changes in American cinema of the post-9/11 era. Although the narratives discussed here depict war as something inevitable in most cases, they all project self sacrifice of one's beliefs and ideals. This is to some extent influenced by Muslim Fundamentalists who were responsible for the terrorist attacks on the World trade Center. Their actions appeared absurd and extremely violent. They were thus presented as such in various films on 9/11. Slavoj Žižek argues that the West doubted the religiousness of these extremists precisely because they made use of violence: "Are the terrorist fundamentalists, be they Christian or Muslim, really fundamentalists in the authentic sense of the term? Do they really believe" (85)? Furthermore, according to Žižek, discourses employed by the media and governments in order to justify their acts have a sense of continuity: We have to act in a certain way in order to bring a closure to the work by those who sacrificed their lives and thus make sure that they did not die in vain.<sup>40</sup> In *Alexander*, Aristotle teaches geography to the young Alexander and Hephaestion makes remarks that bring to mind those made by proponents of eugenics: "Although an inferior race, the Persians control at least four fifths of the known world."

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<sup>40</sup> See Slavoj Žižek (qtd by Wegner in Rubin and Verheul) who connected it to 9/11 and the war on terror : "This transformation makes the American deaths on 9/11 not endings, but rather the crucial inaugural act, the moment when things change, in the new infinite sequence of the War on Terror. Again, this momentous change would have been confirmed in the original ending title card [of United 93], 'America's war on terror had begun.'"

Aristotle's remarks are not distant from post-9/11 society. As it is argued by Connor, in the post-9/11 era whiteness was promoted at the expense of multiculturalism.

Prince argues that this need for closure is provided by post-9/11 cinema which makes use of vengeance narratives and violence on screen. On one hand, "The revenged format, and the extravagant melodrama that was inherent in it, could form an organic bond with the unhealed wounds of 9/11," (Prince 286) appearing as late as 2007, six years after the attacks. In the historical epic revenge narratives appeared in 2010 with *Clash of Titans* where Perseus' family is killed by Hades the god of the underworld in a display of his power to the people of Argos. Perseus wanting avenge his family, does everything he can to stand up to the gods and limit their authoritative power. In 2011, this theme reappears in *Immortals* with Theseus retaliating for the murder of his mother by king Hyperion. The structure of the vengeance family is simple: An innocent life, usually one of the hero's family members, is killed by the enemy. The hero grieves and doubts himself and his belief that there is justice in the world before he decides to fight for retribution.

On the other hand, another important shift in post-9/11 cinema is the presence of extremely violent scenes. While *Troy* and *Alexander* are closer to traditional depictions of scene battles as seen in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s epics, after *300* the historical epic is closer to a visual design that imitates video games. *300* is based on Frank Miller's graphic novel which explains its aesthetics. The historical epics appearing after it, however, continue using a similar technique. This visual design is characterized by the deserted lands it portrays, as it was argued above. Also blood, decapitations, and severed limbs are common. This is not totally attributed to its visual design. Like Prince, several scholars have already pointed out that post-9/11 horror films have used torture as their subject matter (Ibid. 283). Prince and Benedict Jung link "torture porn" to pictures from Abu Ghraib in April 2004 and the

Guantanamo detention camp.<sup>41</sup> The wall made of Persian dead bodies behind which Spartans are taking shelter in *300* is an imitation of the pile of bodies of Abu Ghraib. Similarly, King Hyperion's army of masked anonymous soldiers bring to mind both the faceless terror from the East but also images from Guantanamo inmates, blurring the lines between who is the victim and who is the victimizer.

Lastly, both in *300* and in *Immortals* Xerxes and King Hyperion respectively use money and bribery, but also psychological and physical torture is used to keep their army "loyal" to their will. Prince is asking: Is information from tortured prisoners valid? In his and other scholars' view, the information extracted from tortured individuals is not trustworthy since they are in pain or scared for their lives, which would make them admit or confess anything. In the historical epic, a similar question arises: Are tortured people loyal to their values and their country's ideals? Slaves or people who are under threat to serve their nation tend to fight less heroically in the historical epic because they are not fighting for the right or just cause.

All in all, media images of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq helped to shape a cultural memory that is evoked by historical epic films. Violence, being an important element of the historical epic film in post-9/11 cinema, is heavily accentuated partly because of the computer generated productions that imitate videogames and partly because, again, images of torture by American military officials had leaked to the media.

## **Conclusion**

War in the historical epic is open for numerous interpretations. However, its primary function in the post-9/11 era was to reinforce a collective American identity by creating a sense of belonging for the audience. It also serves as an explanation of the post-9/11 era events as a

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<sup>41</sup> to quote David Edelstein who used this term for films like *Saw*(2004) and *Hostel*(2005) but also Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*(2004), which is closer, thematically, to the historical epics discussed here.

See <http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/>



justification for the war in Iraq which divided the public more than anything else during those years. One of the biggest changes to the historical epic film has been the depiction of violence in computer-dependent worlds. Both new features mark the beginning of an era for the historical epic genre. Although they are not innovations since they are "borrowed" from other film genres, they are, however, influenced by the same political and social events. In the next section, another important theme will be discussed in relation to American identity formation, the theme of empire.

### 3. Empire

"It was an empire not of land and gold but of the mind." <sup>42</sup>

#### Introduction

In the previous section I argue that during the years 2001 to 2011, historical epic films depicted war as either pervasive, like *Alexander* and *Troy*, or defensive like *300*, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, *Clash of the Titans* and *Immortals*. The depictions of empire in historical epics are also dubious, and predominantly negative, especially after the war in Iraq. In the following section I will discuss this clash between the making of the empire and the vilification of the empire. More specifically, I will provide a broader discussion of the academic debate over the term "empire" and its use or its dismissal by several scholars. This academic discussion was still polemical during the last decade, especially after the war in Iraq, and it was, of course, projected in contemporary cinematography. In 2004 for example, although both *Troy* and *Alexander* are about empires in the making, they deal with the concept of empire in a whole different manner. Petersen's *Troy* sees any war of conquest as unjust. In *Troy*, the Greeks are portrayed as alcoholic brutes, blinded by their greed, and the Trojans as impulsive and inconsiderate. *Troy* is more of an antiwar film than a epic tale of heroes and war glorification. Oliver Stone, on the other hand, imagines a more benevolent empire that has considerable tolerance for the other. In *Alexander*, the empire is not seen as something calamitous, but as a new state of mind, an empire that is being created before the spectators' eyes which, if it is ruled by an effective leader, can be an example for the rest of the world.

From 2006 to 2011, however, the imagery of the empire is abandoned significantly. In *300*, *Clash of the Titans* and *Immortals*, any depiction of colonial forces is projected to the

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<sup>42</sup> Ptolemy about Alexander's empire

*Alexander*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Colin Farrell, Angelina Jolie, Anthony Hopkins. Warner Bros. 2004.

enemy legions that are attacking Sparta, the city of Argos and Theseus' village respectively.

The enemy, either coming from the East, a greedy king, or a supernatural being, threatens the entire known world with tyranny, destruction, and slavery. In the second half of the decade, the structure of the narratives is dualistic: one side is good and the other is evil. As a plot twist, there is usually one member or a group of citizens who, either for money or for power, betray their compatriots. This plot pattern is nothing new of course, as it imitates the 'enemies-abroad-traitors-at-home' narrative structure of Cold War era films.<sup>43</sup> In the 2000s, such a narrative twist serves as a reminder that America has to fight foreign forces but also keep an eye for traitors or spies that work from within to cause its destruction. More importantly, this twist appeals to the audience that, at the time, was highly critical of America being viewed as an empire.

Last but not least, there is a cinematic "discussion" between those films about the corruptive nature of any form of governmental power. This is obvious in villains such as Xerxes or King Hyperion but in the case of *Alexander*, it is quite surprising as it will be explored. This marks a new shift in the historical epic: instead of depicting an Old nation fighting against a New one, as it was with the historical epics of the 1930s and 1950s<sup>44</sup>, now there is a powerful--at times ideal--republic that is under attack.

### **3.1 Is America an Empire?**

As argued in the previous sections, war is glorified in the historical epic genre both by making use of the hero or the heroes and by creating and preserving an imagined historical memory. In the section about the hero, I pinpointed an important debate: is the epic hero a defender of the values and ideas of his community, or a victimizer, imposing his community's ideals to other nations? In this section, I will refer to another debate: are these imagined wars seen on

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<sup>43</sup> Especially 1970s films as it is argued by Ross Douthat (2008)

<sup>44</sup> Historical epics in the 1950s, like *Ben-Hur* (1959) for example there used to be Romans versus Christians, where Romans were an old corrupted society and Christians a new reformed version of society.

screen unavoidable, or are they used as a pretext for a nation to start a war with the intention to gain more land or more riches? This debate is related to another larger debate as to whether America is an empire or not, and if it is, then what type of empire. This question has tantalized scholars since America took up its role as one of the world's superpowers after the second World War, but it was also highly controversial during the war in Iraq and severely divided American society.

The empire has always had a controversial meaning for many Americans, since it conjures up colonialism and its negative aspects. Still, although some would not call America an empire, they accept America's international role as a superpower. Geir Lundestad provides a broad discussion of the use of the term empire and the different interpretation historians have given it (92). First, he notes that he uses the term in the broader sense meaning that an empire is a power whose "system of relationships" organized in a hierarchy is considerably more influential than any other. Its influence is witnessed not only within its territory but also outside of it. For Lundestad, America is an empire not only because of its numerous army bases around the globe and its economic influence, but also owing to its "soft power."<sup>45</sup> According to Richard Pells, "American corporate and advertising executives, as well as the heads of Hollywood studios, were selling not only their products but also America's culture and values, the secrets of its success, to the rest of the world." (31, 32)

This last quote is very important for the discussion of the cultural hegemony America exercises in the rest of the world through Hollywood. David Rothkop, commenting on the international role of America in the economic, military, and political spectrum, argues that:

It is a general interest of the United States to encourage the development of a world in which the fault lines separating nations are bridged by shared interests. And it is in the economic and political interests of the United States to ensure that if the world is

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<sup>45</sup> More on the term "soft power" in Joseph Nye

moving toward a common telecommunications, safety and quality standards, they be American; that if the world is becoming linked by television, radio and music, the programming be American; that if common values are being developed, they be values with which the Americans are comfortable. (5)

In a similar way, in post-9/11 cinema the empire is projected the way America wishes it to be shown. The use of the "empire in distress" imagery, promotes those values that Americans are "comfortable" with.

Hollywood cinema, however, was not just a way for America to export its culture around the world. Films are also made in order to address the American audience and, therefore, they had to speak to the people's anxieties, problems and ambiguities. William Fitzgerald in his article on the "toga movies"<sup>46</sup> argued that although historical epic films have monolithic plots and accentuated emotions, behind this simplistic facade there is an attempt to explain deeper and more complex aspects of the historical period they are made (in 1951-1964 for the toga movies). As he notes "the basic 'us and them' structure, pitting a decadent Old World against a healthy New World on the rise, holds up a mirror to post-war America as it stands poised for global leadership, but this structure also reveals a layered series of complementarities, antagonisms, and ambiguities *within* American culture itself."(24)

Recent historical epic films, on the other hand, explore the 'us versus them' imagery. Within this imagery, an otherness is constructed which serves as a comparison between a strong republic and a weaker one. America is traditionally implied as one part of this duality, assuming either the role of the benign colonizer or the victimized other. The Motion Picture Association of America estimated that "Hollywood's share of the world market had affectively doubled between 1990 and 2000 to around 60 per cent and remained at that level

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46 The "toga movies" are the epic films that had as their subject matter ancient Rome historical events or Biblical tales and were produced during the 1950s to 1960s. Another name for these films was "Sword and Sandal films" referring to the ancient battle scenes they depicted.

for much of the next decade"(MPAA 2010 qtd. by Campbell and Kean 310). Thus, Hollywood's influence after September 11 was quite significant globally and part of its cinematic response was a product of "cultural diplomacy," an attempt to promote American beliefs and ideals in order to ensure America's hegemony (Kennedy 315-326). This "cultural diplomacy" is either directly or indirectly engaged by Hollywood filmmakers--directly when it comes to the filmmakers' choices in post-9/11 cinematic adaptations of 9/11, such as Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006), documentaries such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), or films on the war on terrorism such as *Uncle Saddam* (2002) and *Osama* (2003).

In these films, the directors are explaining the events of 9/11 or the wars through the choices they make; they decide what to include and what to exclude from their narratives. Their decision is affected both by the public demand, but also by the types of narratives America is willing to export at a given moment. In the historical epic, however, this is done indirectly. The connections with "cultural diplomacy," although they are strong, are at the same time either implied or even unconsciously developed. Still, they play an important role in the way America views itself and wishes to be seen, as the next sections suggest.

### **3.2 The Making of an Empire**

In the years after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the world in general, and America in particular, was highly polarized over America's role in international politics. Since the invasion of Iraq was not a pre-emptive action under NATO or the UN and since it was unclear what were America's motives to start a war, America's reputation was severely damaged, as David McKay argues in *American Politics and Society*. McKay attributes this shift in America's international role to the neo-conservative agenda of the Bush administration. Neo-conservatism rose in the late 1990s as an ideology within academic circles by notable scholars such as Irving Kristol, Robert Kagan, and Paul Wolfowitz. Their idealist view of America as a

"benevolent hegemony" intervening in different parts of the world to ensure freedom and democracy affected the Bush administration, especially regarding their foreign policy (421).

In January 2013, ten years after the invasion of Iraq, the influence of neo-conservatism is still noticeable in cinematography. Oliver Stone in a lecture on (Ancient) History on Screen took the opportunity to comment on America's role in world politics. He explained why he chose Alexander as a historical figure to make a film based on his life, and he made several connections between Alexander's empire and America. Stone also commented on how several critics and fans called Alexander's empire a "benign empire" when such wording was still unknown in Alexander's time. In his opinion, Alexander was a tyrant who freed slaves and war hostages, tried to unite the people he conquered and changed the world around him into a better place. He thought that his film is teaching how Americans needed to make room for other nations and see through "Chinese eyes, Russian eyes," other people's eyes and realize how they are part of a larger world community.

Just before *Alexander* was released, America invaded Iraq, making *Alexander* an example of empire building and the negative aspects of such an endeavor. It is very ironic how in the film, there are several instances when Alexander's soldier mutinied, rose against him, asked him to go back to Babylon or Greece, and called him a tyrant. Alexander disbanded every mutiny such as that, reaching the point when, blinded by his dream of conquering the world, he killed 30 people that stood against his colonialist expenditures. In this sense *Alexander* was indeed didactic: it dealt with the controversy over whether the end justifies the means.

Earlier in 2004, Petersen's *Troy* dealt with the same controversy. Ten thousand Greeks attacked Troy in order to bring Menelaus' wife, Helen, back to Sparta. From the beginning of the film however, King Agamemnon who is the leader of the expedition, lets the viewers know that he is taking part in this war in order to gain more riches and political power. As he confesses to Menelaus: "Peace is for the women and the weak. Empires are forged by war."

He is established in the minds of the viewers as a greedy, barbaric leader who is only interested in material wealth and power: "I always thought my brother's wife was a foolish woman. But she's proven to be very useful. Nothing unifies a people like a common enemy." This did not go unnoticed by film critics. In a film review for CNN, Paul Clinton described *Troy* as "an anti-war film by underlining the futility of slaughtering men on battlefields in the name of power, land, or even love."<sup>47</sup>

Thomas Friedman in "A War for Oil?"<sup>48</sup>, an article published on January 2003 in the 'Opinions' section of New York Times, accused the Bush administration for attacking Iraq using the suspicion of possible links with Al Qaeda and the use of chemical weapons as a pretext. In his view, America's war was for the oil reserves in the Iraqi region and not for spreading freedom and democracy for any oppressor: "Let's cut the nonsense. The primary reason the Bush team is more focused on Saddam is because if he were to acquire weapons of mass destruction, it might give him the leverage he has long sought not to attack us, but to extend his influence over the world's largest source of oil, the Persian Gulf" (2003). Petersen's *Troy* is dealing with this question: the Greeks are interested not in bringing Helen the queen of Sparta back in Greece, as they initially claimed. As the film progresses, king Agamemnon is making apparent that he attacked Troy in order to take as much land and riches as he can. His war is not a war fought for honor, but a war driven by his greed. This is very obvious in the film after Helen's husband, Menelaus, dies in battle. King Agamemnon, his brother, smiles, assured that his war is now settled since his brother is killed by Hector while he was in a close combat with Paris.

To sum up, the empire is either depicted as positive, like in Alexander, or as negative, as in Troy. After the war in Iraq, the majority of the public did not approve of America's invasion which was thought of as an attempt by America to control the oil reserves or Iraq or

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48 By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN Published: January 5, 2003



to exercise control on Iraq. This tension is explored by the historical epics of 2004. By 2006, this changed dramatically.

### 3.3 The "City Upon a Hill"

In the historical epics of the twenty-first century there is a tendency to portray an all-powerful humane empire, which, despite the differences and antagonisms that exist among its citizens, is an example for all the known imagined ancient and present-day world to follow. In *Alexander* this is quite apparent: his empire, despite its controversies, was one of tolerance, of gender and race blindness.<sup>49</sup> It united people under a more centralized power while it did not deprive them of their individualism. Despite the misfortunes and the miscalculations that stemmed from Alexander's policy, his colonialism is not to blame; rather it is the unprecedented, experimental, and almost accidental nature of his empire. This functions as a reassurance of America's influence in parts of the world: although it was seen as negative in 2004, it was essentially part of a benevolent "mission" to spread freedom and democracy to the world.

Another theme dramatized in *Alexander* is the multicultural aspect of his empire. Alexander granted everyone their freedom and he gave back to their owners the possessions and the land he conquered. This made him a "benevolent tyrant" as Oliver Stone called him in his lecture on (Ancient) History on Screen for the Institute for Advanced Study. Tony Pipolo voiced some concerns on the orientalist approach to the East that is rather stereotypical for a film whose director claims to have used historical facts without many alterations:

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, however ... consultant to Alexander's costume design ... develops his argument through a fascinating discussion of "Self" and "Other" as they relate to the "two halves" of the historical Alexander, whose actions following his

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<sup>49</sup> because we are talking about a film where an imagined Greek history is shown, not the historical one.

conquest of Persia--adopting court dress and protocol, drafting Persian youths into the Macedonian army, and imposing mass intermarrying--were "just some of his attempts at a greater acceptance of the dialogic nature of the East-West relationship." For Llewellyn-Jones, the film exemplifies a dichotomy whereby both the enlightened nature of its theme and its characterization of Alexander as one who embraced the "Other," are both undermined by the reduction of its sets, costume design, and mise-en-scène to stereotypical visualizations of the East.(63, 63)

Therefore, even though Oliver Stone conducted research before creating *Alexander* and while he wanted *Alexander* to be an example of the positive aspects of an empire, he still represented the East as Americans, and the Western world, imagines it to be and not how it really was.

This stereotypical representation of the East, however, was visibly accentuated in *300*. In 2006 when *300* was released, the empire in the making was abandoned as a theme by historical epics and, in its place, the empire under attack by foreign, hostile forces was adopted. This is could be justified as a response to the fact that by late 2004 a CIA report stated that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction as was put forth by the Bush administration (CNN 2004). On March 17, 2003, President George Bush announced that "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised" (2003). As a result, America took initiative in invading Iraq so that they could ensure that Hussein would not make use of these lethal weapons. One year later, when no lethal weapons were reported, an investigation began in order to determine if the intelligence agency knew about it or if they had made assumptions and estimations. All the people who already opposed the war that America started on its own initiative, and who were suspicious of America's true motives,

now openly criticized the U.S. for its imperialistic policies.<sup>50</sup> This of course affected the historical epic genre in which, from then on, the empire is the enemy and the "good guys" are defending a small nation's ideals of freedom and democracy against all odds. Since the hero and his comrades are seen as a symbolism for the American nation, a narrative where he goes East to colonize other nations--even for the best reasons---seemed out of place. This is why from 2006 onwards the war "comes" at home.

In *300*, the Spartan society is founded on war and military training, a model society that is strong, manly, and effective when it comes to battle but is also just and righteous, unlike the rest of Greece, which has been feminized by philosophy and homo-erotic love. This society and its eminent battle against the Persian army is an ancient version of the puritan "City upon a Hill," perhaps the last fortress of righteousness and freedom. In this sense the Spartan society is an exceptional society in the ancient world just as America is exceptional in the modern world. Seymour Martin Lipset argues that America is different from the rest of the world because it is original and unique (2). Sparta is different from the rest of Greece and from Persia because of its originality and its uniqueness too.

Furthermore, what makes the Spartans exceptional is their king's stress on individuality and his refusal to obey the old-fashioned and ineffective laws of his country. Richard H. Pildes argues in "Why the Center Does Not Hold " that it is "the general American tendency to emphasize the power of individuals in shaping events, rather than deeper historical processes or institutional structures at work." This is acted out by Leonidas in *300*: while the laws of his country oblige him to stay at home--the priests warn him that he should not go on war with the Persians and the rest of the political body of Sparta advise him to conform--he boldly refuses to remain passive. His decision is echoing the Emersonian ideal of self reliance: a man should be the maker of his own destiny.

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<sup>50</sup> see Corn, David.

In a similar way, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* is also about a "city upon a hill": New York. In Rick Riordan's first book upon which this film is based on, it is made known that when America became the center of Western civilization, the Gods and Goddesses followed a "bright flame" which led them to New York. There on top of the Empire State building they created a second Olympus. In this narrative the focus is closer to reality, as this is not a historical epic per se, but one that uses mostly mythology in the real world. The Empire State building is one of the most recognisable landmarks of New York, together with the twin towers. To place the Gods on top of it gives it supernatural qualities and assures America's exceptionalism since it is the Gods' favorite city. The empire state building becomes the closest to God one can get, or, as Mark Kinglwell argues, "it is the nearest thing to heaven."<sup>51</sup>

The imagery of the city upon a hill in *Percy Jackson* is quite clear cut: only Gods and demigods can be in Olympus. This means that only people with some special power or a unique trait can go there, which ensures the exceptionality of its citizens. In addition to that, Olympus is not a utopia: there is crime here as well; Zeus' bolt is stolen for example by one of Percy's friends. This betrayal by a friend at home is a recurring theme in the epic film, as fears about traitors at home or spies are embedded in post-Cold-War American society. After it became known that the terrorists who attacked New York were American born and raised, the same fear reemerged and it is being a recurring theme in the historical epic film.

Finally, in *Clash of the Titans* the city of Argos is not an ideal city like Sparta or New York. There is nothing to be admired in this city: the king and the queen are unjust, greedy, and blasphemous toward the gods and the soldiers are obeying their king's commands without questioning them. The city is not an empire to be admired, it is a city whose citizens and leaders have gone wrong, blinded by their lust for power and control. Not all hope is lost for them however, as long as there are heroes to defend it. Perseus is the future of Argos, a

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51 This is the title of Mark Kinglwell's monograph.

modest hero who defends the city and saves it from the Kraken, a sea monster sent by Zeus to punish the habitants. He is the only hope for Argos's citizens and the only person they can identify with if they want to be righteous too. Once more, the young hero--and America--is the only hope of the world to the fight against foreign threats and authoritative power.

In *Clash of the Titans*, the audience is expected to identify with the hero, Perseus, who is transformed from a bitter child to a self-reliant hero, freed from patriarchal authority. In this sense, small Argos, in spite of its vices, is a place that is not totally corrupted like the world of gods is. In Argos, the spectator can see a nation that is desperately trying to free themselves from the ancient gods' authority, which can be seen as America's struggle to reinvent and distinguish itself from the Old World. This theme is also embedded in American identity: as Woodrow Wilson argues, "America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world" (Campbell and Kean 281). In this context, Perseus' fight is the fight of free people against any form of terrorism--in this case the gods--in order to bring safety and peace to Argos and become an example for the rest of the world to follow.

In *Immortals*, a small village is facing the army of King Hyperion of Heraklion, who possesses a secret weapon that can awake the Titans and destroy the world. Similar to *Clash of the Titans*, Theseus is the hero that is chosen by the Gods to defend his village and--subsequently--the rest of the world. Again, a small city stands against a powerful empire that does not wish to make peace, even with King Cassander an equally powerful leader. King Cassander is killed, which leaves his army without a leader, a role that Theseus takes up. In this narrative, the powers against Theseus are sinister, powerful, and despotic. Theseus' village might be small in size, like the city of Argos in *Clash of the Titans*, but it is still a model for mankind in ancient Greece, as America is in the modern world.

All in all, the city upon a hill is not always defined by its size or power, in recent years filmmakers have chosen films that resemble Alamo-style battles, where a small group of

people has to stand up for their right to be free.<sup>52</sup> Still, the discourse around this concept is focusing on the community's sense of mission and is opting to make an example out of it for the rest of the world-- the ancient imagined one and the real--to follow. It is an interesting detail that since 2004, spatially speaking, the territory where the battles of the "good and righteous" nation fighting its oppressors is shrinking. *Alexander* uses part of Europe and Asia to refer to Alexander's empire, then with *300* by 2006, Peloponnesus in Greece where Sparta was situated is significantly smaller. In 2010 with *Percy Jackson* and *Clash of Titans*, New York is a big city while Argos is a smaller city, and later in *Immortals* it is just a small village. This shows how even geographically the empire is being abandoned by filmmakers as it is no longer something America wants to be associated with.

## Conclusion

The historical epic film has always portrayed empires, from the corrupted Roman empires of the 1950s to the small villages with a noble cause of the 2010s. Empire is a controversial term, one which not all Americans--even scholars--would want to use for America. I argued that in 2004, while *Alexander* was in favor of an empire where there is gender--and color--blindness and freedom for every citizen, *Troy* was suspicious of every form of colonialism. After 2004, when it was confirmed that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction as President George Bush claimed in 2002, the worries that *Troy* expressed about wars happening for economic or territorial purposes were becoming a reality, making the depictions of empire discreet. Instead, historical epics chose to depict cities upon a hill and Alamo-style last battles for a noble cause, rather than benign empires. The empire continued to exist of course, but it was mostly identified with the villains of the narratives, as it will be shown in the next section on freedom and democracy.

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<sup>52</sup> I use the phrase "Alamo-style battles" to describe the narratives of heroes going on war, especially when they know that they are sent to their deaths. In the battle of the Alamo, in 1836, 200 Texans stood against 1500 Mexican soldiers. This event has become shared historical memory, evoked by filmmakers in war films, such as *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) about the Vietnam War. This memory is being evoked again by *300*.

## 4. Freedom and Democracy

*Freedom isn't free at all, that it comes with the highest of costs. The cost of blood.*<sup>53</sup>

### Introduction

In the previous sections several recurring themes of the historical epics were addressed, such as heroism, war, and empire. Every theme was linked to a debate that I analyzed which referred to larger debates of the post-9/11 era. These discussions, in turn, were not completely recent: they all have been connected to the tensions related with American identity formation, but because of the events of 9/11 and the war on terrorism, they readdressed and were reassessed by contemporary historical epic films.

Throughout this analysis one theme has been particularly persistent, interwoven with every discussion: freedom. Freedom is the most central theme of the epic films discussed and of the politics of the era. Every historical epic film should have a hero, or an army of heroes, a main battle scene, an empire that is being created or, better yet, a corrupt empire that is destroyed by a New World order, and some values and ideals that need to be defended. These ideals are the driving force of the epic movie and although immortality, honor, history, or just doing the right thing are among the reasons for a hero to fight, freedom is an umbrella theme for them all. In this manner, Achilles fights for immortality while, in reality, he is fighting against the unlimited authority of Agamemnon. Leonidas fights to defend his city from a Persian invasion. Perseus fights because this is the right thing to do but also because he feels that the Gods have become despotic. Finally, Theseus fights against a mad and vicious king to restore order to the world. Freedom is the ultimate goal of all these heroes and secondarily is

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<sup>53</sup> Queen Gorgo to King Leonidas  
300. Dir. Zack Snyder. By Zack Snyder. Perf. Gerard Butler and Lena Headey. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007.

democracy, which can only be achieved once freedom is ensured. Even Alexander, who is essentially a "tyrant," fights for freedom, equality, and to spread Western ideals to the East.

Freedom is central to the political discussions of the era too. As President George W. Bush stated in his inaugural address in 2001:

The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom. We will defend our allies and our interests. We will show purpose without arrogance. We will meet aggression and bad faith with resolve and strength. And to all nations, we will speak for the values that gave our nation birth.

After 9/11, the "war on terror" was the administration's primary objective. Thus in his 2005 inaugural address Bush stressed the "American ideals"--meaning freedom and democracy--that according to him Americans should defend with their lives. As he stated, "the call of freedom comes to every mind and every soul. We do not accept the existence of permanent tyranny because we do not accept the possibility of permanent slavery. Liberty will come to those who love it." The ideas that he was referring to, for instance freedom, permanent tyranny and slavery, are carefully selected to address the public's emotions and to create a sense of collectiveness and continuity.

As has been argued, the historical epic genre traditionally has dualistic, simplistic narratives evolving around a central clash of civilizations or a clash of creeds. It is a place where masculinity is celebrated. In the epic film, white men are able to fight against hostile forces that imitate those of his present. During the 1950s, for instance, as Bosley Crowther describes, "the drama in "Ben-Hur" has a peculiar relationship and relevance to political and social trends in the modern day," [inverted commas in the original] touching upon race and



Christian values (1959). Other films about the Roman empire in decline assured Americans that they did not live in an empire and that their Christian faith will be once more celebrated.

In the decade after 9/11, although the religious right was gaining political power, especially in the Congress (McKay 33), there has not been a resurgence in Roman or Biblical epics as in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. On one hand, these epics were expensive and lavish productions. On the other hand, since they weren't big box office successes, Hollywood had to turn to productions that could appeal to bigger audiences, even outside America. These new narratives turned to the Greek civilization which is older than the Roman but at the same time not too alien to American and transnational audiences. Freedom and democracy are themes that are hyphenated to Greek myths and history; therefore, in an era when America is being attacked by terrorists and its government stresses its democracy and civil liberties by contrasting them to totalitarian regimes from the East, they fall right into place.

In this section, freedom and democracy in relation to American identity will be discussed focusing on the Presidential speeches by President George W. Bush, in order to compare it with the epic film narrations. Secondly, I will refer to the "clash of civilizations" that Samuel Huntington discussed in 1996, which was adopted both by politics and by cinema alike between the years 2001 and 2011. Lastly, I will link the discussion of Old versus New clash that was introduced in the section on heroism with Americans' fear of a big government as seen through the post-9/11 film narratives. The last two years, films like *Clash of Titans* or *Immortals* have demonized any form of centralized power, stressing on its oppressive and corruptive nature.

#### **4.1 Freedom and National Identity**

Freedom, individualism, and democracy have been values that are closely linked to American identity. Since the colonial times and the American independence, every President in the history of the United States has, in one way or another, stressed America's struggle to retain its democracy and its civil liberties. Freedom is one of the most favorite terms in American

foreign policy discourse, especially after 9/11 (Slevin). A definition of freedom, however, is hardly possible to be given since different definitions of freedom are given by different politicians and policy makers (Smith 35). Glenn W. Smith in *The Politics of Deceit* makes an important distinction between "negative" and "positive" freedom discussing that "Positive freedom, which might better be termed freedom-to-will, entails an expression of personal will that can ignore or even impose restraints on others. An emphasis on negative freedom, which I call freedom-to-experience, focuses on the elimination of such restraints" (19).

According to Smith, apart from this categorization of freedom as either negative or positive, the Presidents of the United States and the political parties in general, use the term without defining it, evoking their public's perception of freedom to fill in the gaps. Journalist Peter Slevin agrees with Smith, arguing that during the Bush administration, President Bush used the word freedom on every occasion, thus, by repeating it, he somehow managed to persuade the public that his administration was devoted to the defense of freedom at home and abroad (2002). Smith and Slevin claim that the term freedom in Bush's speech is intentionally not clarified. Instead, in his Address to the nation on September 20, 2001 President Bush "invokes the word as shorthand for American values as he defines them, and treats the concept as an argument-stopper."<sup>54</sup> That way, President Bush creates a dichotomy between "us" and "them," "enemies of freedom" and Americans.

Furthermore, the terms Presidents use in their Presidential speeches help create a common American identity which, of course, is not real but imagined. According to Campbell and Kean, "the Presidential discourse of America is a tried and tested mythological system that attempts to speak of renewal and invoke new beginnings as an appeal that *'harmonizes with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself.'*" (35) [emphasis in original] The

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Slevin, "The Word at the White House: Bush Formulates His Brand of Foreign Policy," *The Washington Post*-, 23 June 2002, p. B1

Presidential discourse then, re-invokes myths or historical memories that are constructed, but because of being repeated they become a past that we assume to be true. (34) The fixed meanings of democracy, nation, peace, "liberating tradition of America," history, "freedom from tyranny," dignity, liberty etc, are being employed in Bush's discourse as a constant reminder of this constructed American identity which serves as a central unifying narrative.

Similarly, the historical epic films touch on the same myths and discourse that Presidential speeches do. Between the years 2001 and 2011, historical epics stress freedom from any type of oppression--by real or supernatural enemies--invoking the same fixed notions. The epic genre of course has always had as its subject matter meanings of heroism, liberty, renewal, so the use of such ideas is, to some extent, predictable. The fact that it is revisited by Hollywood, however, despite its failure to become a box office success, shows that Hollywood producers and filmmakers alike, consider it important for the formation of an American identity and its projection to the rest of the world.

Moreover, the historical epic functions as cultural memory. Not only does it refer to an imagined--or invented--historical past, there is also a large body of American historical epic films such as Cecile De Mille's biblical epics in the 1930s and *Quo Vadis?* (1951), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963) in the 1950s and 1960s, that function as a cinematic past. Thus, the historical epic film has also had a cinematic sequence, which recycled and revisited many of these notions.

In relation with the function of Bush's discourse and the construction of American identity, the historical epic makes use of its own history as a genre in American cinema, in order to evoke a common cultural memory which serves as a reminder of a shared past. Together with that, the use of Greek historical events and myths, which have already been introduced to the American public by Classic Hollywood films and are now revisited in post-9/11 film narratives, creates a feeling of timelessness. The same feeling is evoked by Bush when he points out in his inaugural address in 2005 that "Americans move forward in every

generation by reaffirming all that is good and true that came before--ideals of justice and conduct that are the same yesterday, today, and forever." The historical epic, in its simplistic narrative, is a manifestation of these ideals and a representation of their timelessness.

What is confusing in the resurgence of the epic film in the 2000s and 2010s in this specific form is that Greek myths and history are not flexible enough to be used in accordance with the Christian beliefs that were promoted by the Bush administration. While the Roman epic had room for discussions on Christianity, the tension between the Old and the New or Christianity and terrorism, it was not revived by filmmakers. On the contrary, the only historical epic set in the Roman empire was *Gladiator* in 2000, a year before 9/11 and the events discussed here, making the Roman epic absent from post- 9/11 cinema. This can be explained, on one hand, as a shift from Roman times because of the use of the theme of the empire. In this narrative, America has no place: it cannot be the powerful Roman empire because this is Old and about to collapse, not to mention that it opposes Christianity. This new context brings forth the relationship of Greece as the mother of democracy and America as the child that preserves this ideal.

On the other hand, as has already been mentioned, Greek history and mythology can be used as a distant past--older than the Roman--focusing on the universality of American ideals. Through this lens, those values that the epic hero fights for are as old as time, proven to be the right reasons to fight a war. For this reason, although there cannot be a stress on Christianity with the use of these narratives, there is a sense of tradition and continuity. As a result, *Troy*, *Alexander* and *300* do not include any gods in their narratives. In *Alexander* and *300*, this is not something that strips the narrative off its significance, however, in *Troy* could not be more conspicuous. Homer's *Iliad*<sup>55</sup> is an epic poem where gods' interference and human actions function simultaneously. The Trojan war, for example, begins because of Paris's decision to present Iris's apple to Aphrodite as an acknowledgment of her beauty. The other

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<sup>55</sup> the epic poem upon which Petersen's *Troy* is loosely based.

two goddesses--Hera and Athena--involved in this "competition" are enraged by this, thus they stand against Troy. Aphrodite offers Helen of Sparta--the world's most beautiful mortal woman---to Paris. From the beginning, the gods' decisions and actions play an important role to the way the story unfolds. Soon enough, all twelve gods are fighting against each other, siding with either Troy or Greece. This is absent from Petersen's *Troy*, a choice which according to film critics:

By jettisoning Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Athena and the rest of the Olympian crew, the film presents the Trojan War as a political tale of free will ... But the tragedy of the Trojan War and the majesty of its heroes lies in the fact that the characters know their actions fit into a masterplan laid out by the gods.( Petrakis 2004)

Historians have also pointed out this omission of gods as a weakness of *Troy*. What is seen as an ellipsis in the field of historiography and classics, can be very useful in a narrative-based analysis, however. In this case, what is omitted is as important as what is included: the absence of gods, enforces the power of man's free will. Free will is connected with individualism. As McKay argues "nothing seems to represent Americanism than a stress on individual than collective action" (11). In a world were gods play an important role, man's free will is violated. This is why after 2010 gods return in the historical epic and control people's fates, which is seen as something negative.

Political discourse during the years between 2001 and 2011 are using vague but universal values which they attribute to American identity, creating a mythology that Americans can identify with. At the same time, the historical epic films are creating a common past, between Americans and Greek history or mythology and they are evoking a shared historical past, a collective memory of America and for America.

## **4.2 Freedom versus Slavery / the West and the Rest**

As Smith points out "Bush's real rhetorical goal is to present himself as the very image of freedom. Oppose Bush and you oppose freedom, albeit a warm and fuzzy definition of freedom" (36). Indeed, this is evident in Bush's speech when he is broadly categorizing American liberties contrasting them to the terrorists:

Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber--a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms--our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. (Bush 2001)

What is more, Bush's discourse creates a polarization of cultures, a "clash of civilizations," a term coined by Samuel Huntington. According to Huntington, that neo-conservatives, the world is divided into the West and the rest of the world, the rich and the poor, Christians and others. These conflicting ideologies will inevitably clash: "in the emerging era, clashes of civilization are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war."

Huntington's article received much criticism from notable scholars, such as Edward Said. Said argues that Huntington provided one-sided definitions of Western or Islamic culture and identity that are not valid because cultures and identities are not measurable entities; they are constructed and every attempt to define them would fail, since they are fluid and constantly changing:

Huntington is an ideologist, someone who wants to make "civilizations" and "identities" into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and

that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that "the clash of civilizations" argues is the reality. (Said 2001)

Noam Chomsky attacked Huntington's article arguing that it offered a pretext for America to continue its empire building: "a justification for any atrocities that they wanted to carry out. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the pretext is gone. The policies remain the same, but you need a new pretext" (2001).<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Kaveh L. Afrasiabi agrees that Huntington's thesis is not just an academic theory, but a political agenda, stating: "What is alarming about this thesis is its brushfire infection of the Western intellectual milieu with its perverse logic and Eurocentric Orientalism, engulfing not only a segment of academia but also the media and the entertainment industry." In his view, *300* provides a good case study that proves his point that Huntington's thesis has been applied in the media.

Although Afrasiabi provides a thorough analysis of *300* and makes sure to point out that Frank Miller<sup>57</sup> has "viciously stereotyped Persians," he adds that "it serves as an authorial self-defense, camouflaging the intense, self-righteous ideology that exalts a golden age in which Western heroes stood up to the Eastern forces of barbarism." Afrasiabi concludes that ironically the narrative in *300* portrays heroism and martyrdom on the part of Spartans that is a "familiar territory in Islam." What he does not recognize is that Christianity and Islam derived from Judaism, so their teachings are sometimes similar. Martyrdom, for instance, is not Islamist or Christian, it is common in both. What is more, Wegner in "The Dead are our Redeemers," quotes Slavoj Žižek arguing that conservative anti-multiculturalists showed their

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<sup>56</sup> Noam Chomsky's lecture on "Militarism, Democracy and People's Right to Information."

<http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/509/509%20noam%20chomsky.htm>

<sup>57</sup> *300* is based on a comic book made by Frank Miller.

resentment toward the beliefs of Muslim fundamentalists that "dare to take their beliefs seriously." (81)<sup>58</sup> In his view, after 9/11 both conservatives and liberals agreed on the same view: they envied the Muslim fundamentalists for their ability to die for their beliefs. Then, this envy was acted out by filmmaking. In *300* for instance, the only "ideology" Xerxes provides is money and women in return for total submission to his large empire. In this manner, Persians--and Muslims--are portrayed as having no beliefs at all but material desires.

On the other hand, the historical epic film makes use of the "guilt" that Muslim fundamentalists could sacrifice themselves for their ideals and Americans did not. These films settle once and for all that the hero or heroes will die for what they believe, providing a sense of closure. The epic heroes' discourse seems, at times, too didactic, with their ideal visions of freedom and democracy and their self-sacrifice for "what is right." King Leonidas, for instance, never stops promoting the ideals Spartans fight for:

"The world will know that free men stood against a tyrant, that few stood against many, and before this battle was over, even a god-king can bleed."

"You have many slaves, Xerxes, but few warriors. It won't be long before they fear my spears more than your whips."

"Children, gather round! No retreat, no surrender; that is Spartan law. And by Spartan law we will stand and fight... and die. A new age has begun. An age of freedom, and all will know, that *300* Spartans gave their last breath to defend it!"

That way, the Spartans are fighting and dying for these ideals that America's cultural diplomacy has been promoting as reasons to fight the "war on terror."

In the simple, dualistic world of *300*, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant male is given the opportunity to confirm himself and to assure his cultural dominance. America's discourse

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<sup>58</sup> See Rubin and Verheul



has been based on America being the "city upon a hill," serving as an example for the rest of the world and spreading freedom and democracy has been its mission. This can be done by foreign policies, such as the war on terror, as the historical epic genre implies. Promoting historical epic films that function as a territory where Christian beliefs and American core values can be fostered, justified American foreign policy decisions.

In the years after 2006, the narrative of the historical epics concerning the clash of civilizations has slightly changed. Still, America is fighting against any type of oppression and wants to ensure that democracy will be secured. This clash however, which in *300* was all too obvious, has shifted from being a clash among civilizations to be a more general clash of two creeds usually taking place within the same society. The clash in *Percy Jackson and Clash of Titans*, for example, is occurring between man and gods. The gods have become uncaring, distant, and authoritative, while humans struggle between atheism and their will to rely more on themselves and free themselves from the gods' influence. In both films as well as in *Immortals*, the narratives seem more of a social commentary than a depiction of the division between America and the Middle East; they are criticisms on class divisions and on the government's role in people's life.

All in all, although epic films are always using a clash, a tension between two opposing forces, it is not always for the same reasons. As I already showed in the section on heroism, these tensions can be between the Old and the New, as seen in *Troy* and *Alexander*. In this section, it is made clear that this tension can also be referring to class division as *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, *Clash of Titans* and *Immortals* reveal. In all cases, freedom from any type of oppression is always on one side of this tension as an umbrella theme.

### **4.3 Big Government**

In the previous subsection, the new shift toward a criticism of social classes was discussed. In this section, this theme will further be explored and it will be related to the role of the government in American politics and American identity. As I already argued, *300* marked a

shift in the way empire is portrayed. In *Clash of Titans* and especially in *Immortals* it is made even more evident how filmmakers have viewed any form of central government as oppressive.

In *Clash of Titans*, Io acting as the narrator, narrates how the gods defeated some ancient supernatural creatures, the Titans, and then divided Earth among them and became immortal, fed by the prayers of people. At some point however, the gods distanced themselves from humanity and: "mankind grew restless. They began to question the gods and, finally, rise up against them. Into this world, a child was born. A boy who would change everything." This boy was Perseus, whose family was killed because of Hades, the god of the underworld. Seeking revenge for his family, he challenges even the gods' authority: "I know we're all afraid. But my father told me: someday, someone was gonna have take a stand. Someday, someone was gonna have to say enough! This could be that day. Trust your senses."

The aforementioned narrative marks a shift of the historical epic toward storylines of a hero interfering with the twelve gods, or the Titans, and questioning their powers over the fates of humans. As I demonstrated in the previous subsection, gods in this narrative are not seen as the benevolent parent of the Christian tradition but as despotic gods who act at the expense of humanity. This shift can be seen as a criticism of the government's unlimited power over the citizens.

As McKay points out, one of the most important divisions of American society is the role of the government in society. Walter M. Brasch's *America's Unpatriotic Acts* argues that the Bush administration approved a series of laws under the umbrella PATRIOT Act acting oppressively, the government that under the pretext of security, taking up measures that violated six Amendments and one section of the Constitution (preface, xiv). Brasch's concern is that the Bush administration with the Congress voted for the PATRIOT Act too soon--72 hours after its introduction (McKay 285)--not giving time to the government officials and the

public to decide whether or not it was wise to take up such extreme measures. The PATRIOT Act turned out to be limiting the public's liberties as Brasch and McKay argue. This tension is seen partly in *Troy* and *Alexander* with Agamemnon and Philip. Both are despotic leaders who, for their own imperialistic purposes, impose their will on Achilles and Alexander respectably.

This tension is not so vividly depicted in the historical epics in 2004. After Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prison's tortures of prisoners was made known to the public, there has been a discussion of the government's--and the military's--power. In 2005, hurricane Katrina--one of the deadliest in American history--hit New Orleans causing the death of many citizens, destruction of private properties and violence because of the lack of police patrolling. Many criticized the government's delay to send help and assist to the victims. Juan Gonzalez in his article published in the *New York Daily News* accused the Bush administration for their neglect on sending help to New Orleans and having troops sent and money spent in Iraq at the expense of American citizens. As he points out:

Except for the floods, the post-hurricane destruction and near-anarchy in New Orleans resembled those heartbreaking scenes of the chaos in Baghdad after "liberation."

Those floods are yet another tragedy that the Bush administration will have to explain.

They are in no small way connected to the curse that Iraq has become for our nation.(2005)

Three years later, in 2008, the U.S. housing bubble marked the beginning of the world recession. The economic recession was inherited by the Obama administration together with the public's expectations that he will address it. As McKay argues, however, Americans often assume that the President has more influence and power over legislation and policy making

than he actually does. This is why they are always polarized by their fear of a centralized power government and the demand that the President will impose his will on the Congress.

All these tensions of the 2000s were acted out in the 2010 and 2011 historical epics. Both *Clash of Titans* and *Immortals*, as it has been argued, are questioning unlimited power. In the case of *Immortals*, the twelve gods know that King Hyperion is about to free the Titans--which would be catastrophic for them and for Earth-- but they can do nothing to stop them because of some unwritten laws they have to obey. This plot device is exploring the limitations of the government and its questioning these extremes of the 2000s: the unlimited power of government in the case of the PATRIOT Act and the government's reluctance to vote for a new policy in times of crisis such as during and after Hurricane Katrina and the economic recession.

## **Conclusion**

As it has been argued in this section, freedom is a central theme in the historical epic film both in older times but also in recent years. This resurgence in the historical epic is not a coincidence; it is related to an emphasis by political discourse and the public's aspirations for America to be a world leader in the mission to spread freedom and democracy. The use of these last two terms is done as loosely as possible, referring to foreign enemies and to the American republic, the federal government or both, so as to let the public make the connections between these themes and personal experience or Americanness.

## Conclusion

Stephen Neal argues in *Genre and Hollywood* that the different genres should not be discussed separately from each other as it has become almost impossible to distinguish them, and that they should be analyzed regarding policy statements. Although he was right about the first part of his thesis, after the terrorist attacks it is almost impossible to discuss films without placing them within a historical and political context.

In 2007 Stephen Prince points out that the top five box office films were all fantasy films such as *Spider Man 3*, *Shrek the Third*, *Transformers*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. According to Prince, these films appeared and were instant hits because of the public's fear and anxiety that pushed the filmmakers to create fantasy and pleasant comedy rather than portraying unpleasant events (3, 4). David J. Slocum argues that after a discussion on post-9/11 responses to terrorism and the war on terror, it is urgent that a discussion on fantasy films and other genres is initiated, for the distance they offer from terrorism and post-9/11 era anxieties.

I focused in my analysis on the historical epic genre in order to show how the narratives of such films dramatize themes and tensions that are central in American cinema but resurfaced during the post-9/11 era. Such themes were the depiction of heroism and heroic sacrifice in relation to otherness. The hero or army of the hero is seen as the American nation--white, male and young--having a mission in the world: to spread freedom and guard democracy. Non whites are seen as inferior, even monstrous and hostile, while homosexuality is mostly identified with anything but heroism. Though not a new element of the historical epic films, I argued that the post-9/11 epic hero faces more moral dilemmas according to the choices he has to fight, but, at the same time, filmmakers transcended these dilemmas by bringing war to the hero's territory, having him defend it. This justified the hero's actions, providing the a type of discourse that was crucial for the post-9/11 public's explanation of the

war in terror. This also explains why whiteness is so accentuated while other minorities are still excluded from post-9/11 historical epic films,

War is another controversial theme: filmmakers have condemned it but also justified it, while the historical epic has glorified war and continues to do so. Following the tradition of war films, the historical epic genre was among few media that romanticized war while they promoted right-wing rhetoric to defend it. In *Troy*, by contrast, although the narrative remained faithful to the historical epic genre, it also criticized the war in Iraq and the motives that America had to start it. Furthermore, I pointed out that among the most important post-9/11 changes in the depiction of the war would be the way death and torture is dramatized. The historical epic genre was influenced by other film genres, such as action and horror films, in which torture is highlighted and blood, severed body parts and death are emphasized with computer generated special effects. Video games but also the documentation of the war in Iraq by the media have also influenced the way violence is screened. However, death in the historical epic film is seen as a closure, everybody who dies did not die in vain, even if his contemporaries cannot understand it. This serves as a reminder that the war on terror is real and the victims of 9/11 or the war victims of Afghanistan and Iraq died to defend their ideals. In this sense the historical epic film functions as both a justification but also as an explanation for the post-9/11 society and policy making.

Empire is traditionally portrayed as something negative. However, after the War in Iraq, any mention of empire has to be linked to the enemy. I analyzed this as an American response to those who criticized America's invasion of Iraq as colonization, something that American cultural diplomacy wanted to differentiate from. Lastly, freedom was the most important theme throughout this analysis. Every motivation, every war, and every dialogue is filled with discourse about freedom while the dualistic, simplistic narrative of the historical epic film employed the discourse of the "Clash of Civilizations" to create a contrast between

the Western free nations and the Eastern enslaved hordes. This, again, promoted the pro-war, right-wing discourse which influenced post-9/11 political discourse.

All in all, an analysis of the historical epic films of the post-9/11 era can add to our understanding of the ideas that create a unifying--though not a sole--American identity and the tensions that this created in the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s. This American identity is created by political discourse, the media, and consolidated by cultural artifacts such as the historical epic films.

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