

## Graphic? Yes. Novel? No.: "300," "Amazing Grace," and "Black Snake Moan"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 14 March 2007 02:23

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### **300**

Whatever its problems, and they are myriad, you can't say that Zack Snyder's *300* doesn't give you plenty to look at. Adapted from Frank Miller's and Lynn Varley's graphic novel, the film - which follows the ancient Spartan army in a wildly violent, self-sacrificing battle against Persian forces - is filled with memorably *outré*

images: an enormous tree and a 20-foot-high wall, both composed entirely of corpses; a triad of elephants, backed over a cliff, that plunge to their deaths; the sky blackening with what appear to be locusts, instead proving to be the incoming trajectory of thousands of steel-tipped arrows.

In *300*, Snyder shows a remarkable gift for graphic-novel composition, and continually keeps your eye engaged. Too bad the same can't be said of your brain.

It's fair to assume that this won't much bother the film's core audience; no one goes to an unsubtle bloodbath such as *300* for the *wit*. Yet I found the relentless carnage - with its excruciating dependence on slow motion - and digitally enhanced amber color schemes more exhausting than exhilarating, and after about an hour of CGI mayhem, I found my eyelids getting heavy; there's nothing to pay attention to *but* the visuals. During the months leading up to its release, nearly everyone I know had asked if I'd seen the film's trailer, which is a two-minute masterwork of brutally suggestive imagery.

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Watching

*300*

is just like watching the

*300*

trailer ... 60 times in a row.

Occasionally, the movie's narrative did allow me to snap back into consciousness, but only because I was expending energy trying not to laugh. I failed once, when I audibly giggled upon hearing the Spartan queen Gorgo (Lena Headey) make the priceless declaration, "Freedom is not free." (That's the opening chorus to my favorite song in *Team America: World Police*.) But I came close with the frequent shots of the amassed Spartan army, whose perfectly sculpted chests and leather loincloths suggest an open-casting call at Chippendale's; and with the hysterically bombastic voice-over narration, which is somehow more explicit than the film's violence; and with the arrival of the evil Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), whose electronically altered *basso profundo*

voice seems looped in from another auditorium entirely, and who glares at the camera like Yul Brynner as a ticked-off drag queen. When it isn't wowing you with visual trickery,

*300*

is the most embarrassing kind of blockbuster: high camp that thinks it's high art.

God bless Gerard Butler for lending the film a modicum of style. Almost ridiculously forgettable in Joel Schumacher's *Phantom of the Opera* adaptation, Butler seems a perfect fit for this sort of iconic action-warrior role - his bellowing is legitimately impassioned - and he's not without a streak of ironic humor; he acts (and looks) like George Clooney's ass-kicking older brother, and forces you to take *300* more seriously than you

may be inclined to. The movie also desperately

*needs*

him, as the other performers - including the usually sharp Dominic West - are lethargic to the point of somnolence. Prior to

*300*

, Zack Snyder crafted 2004's zippy remake of

*Dawn of the Dead*

. At least those zombies knew how to

*move*

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