

7-14-2014

## This is Sparta! Mediated Mythology as Pedagogy in 300

Adam W. Tyma

University of Nebraska at Omaha, [atyma@unomaha.edu](mailto:atyma@unomaha.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Tyma, Adam W., "This is Sparta! Mediated Mythology as Pedagogy in 300" (2014). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 95.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub/95>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

# This is Sparta! Mediated Mythology as Pedagogy in 300

Adam W. Tyma

## Abstract

Popular films continue to replace history courses as the source of truth with regard to important events or eras. *300*, in its interpretation of the Battle of Thermopylae, based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller, is an example of this trend. Rather than adhering to the presented historical facts of the event, *300* offers a hyperreal interpretation of the battle and the societies that surrounded it, infusing contemporary hegemonic ideologies regarding sexuality, classism, and race into a mediated discourse that presents the spectacle of the film as reality. This essay examines the narratives that are presented within the film, paying particular attention to how each narrative moves away from historical documentation and toward a hyperreality that glorifies violence, misogyny, and domination. How these narratives can potentially become the historical reality that individuals internalize is of particular concern here.

## Keywords

[critical and cultural studies](#), [hegemonic masculinity](#), [ideology](#), [media and violence](#), [media and sexuality](#)

I remember heading to the movie theater to watch *300* with a friend of mine while in graduate school. It was an afternoon matinee, and I, like the majority of the audience, was swept up into the action, violence, sexuality, and storytelling happening on the screen. What I did not anticipate, though, was the reaction of some of the male adolescents in the parking lot after the movie was over. All around me, male and female adolescents (but mostly male adolescents) were engaged in reenacting the dialog and violence that had just been portrayed on the screen. This is not uncommon (anyone who has watched professional wrestling can attest to this type of response to hyperviolence performed in front of them). The more troubling reality was that I overheard some of these individuals discuss the events on the screen *as though they had actually happened that way*. It was this response that forced me to ask the question: "Is historical evidence being trumped as 'truth' by commercially motivated mediated texts?" It is that overarching question that I am exploring here.

*300*, as a major motion picture, did relatively well at the box office, bringing in \$456,068,181 worldwide (\$210,614,393 domestic; \$245,254,242 foreign; [Nunnari & Snyder, 2007](#)) over its 18-week theatrical run.<sup>1</sup> This theatrical interpretation of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300*, loosely based on the historical events surrounding the Battle of Thermopylae and the Persian-Greco war, offered audiences a visual spectacle that highlighted American popular culture's ever-present, sometimes-conscious obsession with the idealized self via the oiled and hyperrealized physiques of the characters. From the *Übermensch*-like ([Nietzsche, 2003](#)) displays of strength and power, to the muscle-

encased heroes enhanced through computer graphic *doctoring*, to the imaginations of Frank Miller (graphic novel) and Zach Snyder (movie) signifying the enemies of the Spartans through fantastic images of giants, demons, and executioners, *300* offers the viewer a visual spectacle that, at the same time, rewrites accepted history and replaces it with postmodern mythologies that may be accepted by various audiences as truth. The film can be seen in two ways: as a cinematic achievement and progression in the evolution of filmmaking (cinematography, technology, computer graphic imaging, etc.) or a cheapening and watering down of history, placing undue focus on the violence and sexuality of the story, losing the political and historical intricacies of the events leading to the battle. On either side of the discussion, one thing becomes clear: Audiences will read, interpret, and learn from this movie.

*300* is an example of a recent surge in American popular culture, articulating *history-as-spectacle* in commercial movie and television projects (e.g., *Alexander*, *Gladiator*, *Braveheart*, *Rome*, *Spartacus*, *The Tudors*, *The Borgias*, and [300: Rise of an Empire slotted for a 2014](#) release). Each of these media texts (among many others) presents 21st century mythologies interwoven with historical events and actors. When these texts are presented, audiences are placed in the position of *learner* in addition to *consumer*. The movie becomes a pedagogical vehicle ([Silverblatt, Ferry, & Finan, 2009](#)), not only entertaining the audience but also, because of the credence provided vis-à-vis the co-opted historical event, establishing new mythologies via the themes that are offered as *truths*. Through the construction of ideological narratives, guised as spectacle and fantasy, the *truths* offered to the audience include the *preferred* roles and value of men and women within society (both on the screen and today), how violence should be encouraged and even celebrated in lieu of rational thought, classism, and antihomosexual behavior.

This essay presents how a particular text (in this case, a commercial film) can be understood as a pedagogical tool that, in this case, may teach various cultural mythologies that are internalized by audience members as *reality*. This fabricated reality then serves to influence the audience member, configuring her or his own social realities and how s/he exists within them. In other words, the mediated myth becomes truth. The troubling moment is identified when we ask, “Are these the stories we want our society to be taught?” It is this action that I intend to identify here. This essay will, first, identify key theoretical concepts to help construct the particular lens for this critique. Once that is accomplished, a four-part analysis of *300* will identify the mythologies presented within the film and how they may be learned from, not only being entertained by the spectacle on the screen but also being taught how to perform certain ideologies. Finally, potential implications and extensions of this critique are offered.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings—The Spectacle, Mythology, and Ideology**

### **Mythology/Narrative**

The use of cultural mythologies to teach sociopolitical systems and norms to members of a group, clan, tribe, or nation is neither revolutionary nor uncommon. As stories are

told from generation to generation, the acceptable norming behaviors become more and more entrenched within the group. As the stories are passed on, however, the distancing between the discourse and the original source becomes greater and greater, developing layer upon layer of simulation-as-sediment until only the simulacra ([Baudrillard, 1983](#)) is accepted as original, subsuming the original discourse—the origin of the mythology—within itself.

Recognizing that understanding the culture creating the text is essential to the analysis and understanding of that text, [Jameson \(1981\)](#) explains that the political interpretations of texts must become priority. By political, Jameson clarifies that “there is nothing that is not social and historical” (p. 20); therefore, everything is political. The political understanding of the film’s audience by the mythmakers—the realities that influence the readers and interpreters of texts—is central to grasping not only the abstract theoretical conclusions but also those conclusions that become internalized by the receivers of messages and practically acted upon and from. This discourse includes the histories and realities of those audience members who engage and experience text—from the discourse comes interpretation and ultimately agency, though the action allowed by agency is limited by the hegemonic systems that allow action. Such analysis helps to understand the influence that mythologies, as well as other discursive formations ([Foucault, 1972](#)), have on the reality of those who receive them. The film, in this case, becomes simulacra of reality.

The Battle of Thermopylae (the historical focus of *300*) is presented as a mythic narrative, rather than how current historically *accurate* texts would suggest, allowing for subjective stories to be told to and learned by the audience both through the spoken word as well as the visual spectacle. As museums are specific systems of representation, allowing only for a partial glimpse of historical *truth* to be experienced ([Hall, 1997](#)), *300* presents partial narratives ([Fisher, 1984](#)) and arguments as history and truth as *right*.

The film’s narrative is presented through the voice of Dilios (played by David Wenham), one of the soldiers who served at Thermopylae and was sent back to Sparta by King Leonidas (played by Gerard Butler) to act as sage and storyteller. Dilios is the *Spartan-at-war* personified. He is battle-hardened, injured, hoarse with rage and power, regrets leaving his king Leonidas and comrades behind before his chance at a *glorious death*, yet delivers the narrative he has woven to his audience(s) as truth, to be accepted without hesitation or question. Similar to *The Song of Roland* ([Sayers, 1957](#)), the tale of the 300 Spartan warriors is meant to inspire the rest of Spartan society to take arms against the armies of Persia. It is through this narrative paradigm that the mythology of slaves, immortals, monsters, and beasts is woven in order to create the melodrama within the film. The narrative becomes the dominant argument, without opposition.

Through the telling and retelling of the tale, the mythology takes hold. It is first presented at the opening of the film, where Dilios is speaking to a gathering of soldiers, on a littered battlefield, but exactly where the telling is taking place the movie’s audience is not sure. It is night. The actors are lit by roaring firelight as Dilios holds sway over

both audiences (within the film and without) with his every word, creating for them (and us) one unified reality. Relying on recognizable motifs, this opening presents the power of the narrative as the story is woven. This narration, like in *Roland*, is created through description, narration, and exaggeration, giving function to the hyperreality through the employment of spectacle.

## The Spectacle

*Spectacle* (extending on [Bakhtin, 1984](#)) is defined here as the use of image, sound, and message within the confines of the media (in this case, *300*) that hyperstimulates the audience member into a position of passive message absorption rather than active critical engagement. Rather than the controlled reception of individual message elements by the audience members as they are presented (plot, image, characters), all discourses are experienced simultaneously. This is experienced as the merging of all aspects of the presented reality within the film (fiction) with the subjectivities and discourses brought to the moment by the audience (reality). This resultant hyperreality ([Baudrillard, 1983](#)), the articulation of these myriad discourses in one moment, becomes the only reality the audience gives weight or credibility to during the viewing of the film. As discussed earlier, the spectacle (the film/myth) becomes the accepted *real*.

Aspects of such message construction have been investigated in the past. Though not taken as a whole, part of [Bakhtin's \(1984\)](#) position on *the spectacle* illuminates this project. In his discussion of the "comic image," [Bakhtin \(1984\)](#) defines and explicates the "grotesque image," the third and most fantastical version of the "comic." (pp. 304–306) The grotesque image ([Bakhtin, 1984](#)) exaggerates reality for the audience; it utilizes hyperbole to resituate reality, reconstructing the established discourses in different ways, making the mundane tantalizing—or the repulsive acceptable—for the audience. Scene and setting become caricatures of their former selves, changing the realities that are experienced outside the film into the reality the narrative wishes the audience to exist within.

Violence and sex in cinema are prime examples of filmic spectacle here. As [Gallagher \(1999\)](#) discusses when looking at action films from American studios in the 1980s and 1990s, "the mainstream action film reconfigures violence as visual spectacle and as vivid cinematic images designed to generate pleasurable sensations in audiences" (p. 200). Through this conversion of violence into a pleasurable experience, the audience is trained to accept such actions not only as preferred but also as culturally right.

Leonides, Delios, Xerxes (played by Rodrigo Santoro), and the other characters of *300*, like the scene and setting themselves, are also rewritten in the new light of the grotesque. The characters become "impossible" or "improbable" ([Bakhtin, 1984](#), p. 305) reconstructions of what they were, scribed as extreme or fantastic simulacra of what was once considered "real," through these new expressions of accepted narratives, histories, and mythologies. Again, hyperbole and exaggeration become just as important in the construction of the real as the socio/historico/cultural discourses that are incorporated into the uncovered discursive formations of the film. Such discourse

allows for the audience to rationally accept what is being presented while externally experiencing a type of sensory deprivation via the hyperreal spectacle presented to them.

Where [Bakhtin \(1984\)](#) focuses on specific parts of the human anatomy (the nose and mouth) that “play the most important part in the grotesque image” (p. 306), the grotesque image and, by extension, “spectacle” for our uses take the same approach to the rearticulation of images within the movie. Human physique, imagery, cityscapes, color palette choices—all of these are subject to the same exaggeration and hyperbolic transformation, like the *harlequin* character of 16th century *commedia dell’arte*, where the nose and mouth are extended and exploded in size and detail to demonstrate the moral and sexualized aspects of the individual character. However, Bakhtin’s analysis leads to specific individualistic and psychoanalytic imagery, processes, and conclusions. For this critique, a more holistic extension and decentering of *the grotesque* allows for a larger, more culturally situated utility and fantastical interpretation. The specific hypersexualization of the human physique will be discussed in detail further on in this critique.

## Ideologies

Ideologies are neither impenetrable nor without flexibility. Ideologies shift in meaning or focus as discursive formations—those processes and structures that direct the dominant cultural norms—that are controlled by whatever hegemonic systems are articulated, in order to control social and individual behaviors. It is this dialectical relationship, a relationship that relies on the heteroglossia of social groups as well as individuals, that allows for specific ruptures within the dominant discourse to form exposing *flaws* in the *armor of the soldiers*, as it were. It is this perspective on discourse and, by extension, on ideology (that ideology is not only not fixed but also not a predictor even if properly employed), rather than a more structured and rigid formation (a la Marx) that is utilized here ([Tucker, 1978](#)).

[Hall \(1986\)](#) concurs with this train of thought. By extending on Althusser’s (1971, in [Hall, 1985](#)) analysis that not only are ideologies complex social constructions but also situationally bound, the aspects that define a given ideology are not locked into position. Instead, ideologies, regardless of their constructed signifier (for example, *freedom*) may, in fact, not signify the same construct to the same individual. Ideologies are malleable and susceptible to manipulation by hegemonic structures, further demonstrating why the narrative (in this case, the movie *300*) needs to be understood, not as a simple entertainment vehicle dismissed as being unimportant, but as a viable and true argument ([Fisher, 1984](#)).

With these theoretical constructs in mind, the next section identifies four narratives within *300* that serve as a teaching element for the audiences. The movie itself, acting as a pedagogical structure, offers these ideologies as potential ways of living for audience members. Once the narratives have been identified and interrogated, possible implications for this type of work are presented.



## Four Narratives

### Male Dominance Over Women

*300* presents women in several roles. In each case, the historically documented reality taught in history books is inserted into the hyperreality of *300*, transforming the presented real into the grotesque. The historical reality of women during this time was not easy. Women were considered property, typically not in positions of power, and seldom if ever considered equal. Even with these facts and near-2500 years of progress for women in mind, *300* entices the audience to embrace such old ideologies not just through suspension of disbelief but as the *right way* of thinking. Spartan women are portrayed as either utilitarian connections with the spiritual realm, as both oracles of the divine and bringers of life, both considered mythic in their own construction and controlled by the overt patriarchal society within the grand narrative of the film; Persian women, in contrast, are presented as harem girls, commodity, or temptresses. In both cases, except for rare exceptions, women are considered property.

The status of women within the culture appears to be very straightforward: Even when a woman holds a position of power and esteem, such status is bestowed upon a woman only by the will of a dominant patriarch. Though the actions of the Spartan queen (Gorgo, played by Lena Headey) might seem to represent the contrary to the earlier argument throughout the film, women are subservient to men within the world of *300*. Several times, Gorgo is presented in positions of power and class over those she interacts with (e.g., the conversations with the Persian emissary; members of the Spartan senate; her husband and king). She is also presented as a source of logic and reason. Both her visual presentation as well as the spoken text offer Gorgo as an independent, strong, beautiful, and powerful woman within this warrior society, which is counter to what the history of Sparta would have us believe. Paradoxically, an alternative reading of Gorgo's dialog within the film presents several ruptures that counter this initial interpretation. The first instance occurs when Gorgo reminds the Persian emissary (played by Peter Mensah) that only men born from Spartan women may be called *men*. This narrative ([Fisher, 1984](#)), along King Leonidas' statement before he goes on his *walk* (bringing the 300 to Thermopylae)—*Sparta will need sons*—confirms that women are meant to create men for Sparta, further establishing the reality of the text. Gorgo also becomes a representation of the male perception of women as commodity. True to the hypersexuality and ideological narratives of the film, the queen, though presented in scenes as a wielder of public power and agency, becomes sexually subservient to Theron (a member of the Spartan Senate, played by Dominic West), even depicted in the film as being complicit to her own rape in order to ensure the support of her husband, the king, by key members of the senate.

The same ideological tropes hold true for the oracle, the connection to the divine in *300*. Following the initial scene between the king and the Messenger, Leonidas approaches the Ephos, men who are considered the prophets and interpreters of the gods' wills, to ask whether his battle plan to stop the Persians is favored by the gods. As a further example of the exploitation of women in this culture, it is only through the drugging,

prostration, and abuse of a woman declared the oracle of the gods, given freely by the Spartans to the gods (and the Ephos, of course) as tribute, that the words of the gods can be heard and then interpreted. Not surprisingly, the incoherent statements made by the oracle are simply for spectacle and titillation. It is later revealed that the oracle is corrupt, delivering not the words of their gods but rather the words of their enemies (the Persians) as divine truth and revelation to Leonidas. The drugging and abuse of the oracle is simply to ensure the compliance of the Ephos to Sparta. The use of the oracle presents a tension between women being considered mediums to the supernatural and women being viewed as utility and pleasure products for men.

Similar to the representations of the Spartan women, the harem women of the Persian god-king Xerxes are also presented as commodity and object, not agent and subject. While Xerxes works to persuade the disfigured Ephialtes (played by Andrew Tiernan) to join the Persians, in order to receive information that will lead to the final destruction of the 300, women, in various degrees of disrobe and sexual gyrations, are presented as the rewards for Ephialtes' loyalty and obedience to Xerxes. The correlation between sex, power, and material desire is exemplified when Ephialtes also states that, in addition to women and power, he wants a uniform, a symbol of potency to Spartan men and something he was denied.<sup>2</sup> This plot sequence commodifies women with no more value than clothing or material goods, to be traded or sold like so much jewelry or a new car. In an age of music videos and television shows, where women are deconstructed as objects on display for visual and physical pleasure, *300* historically situates and justifies such behaviors for audience as *right* and normalized.

### **Violence-as-Reason Versus Reason-as-Violence**

Greece is "The world's one last chance for reason" according to King Leonidas, who tells this to Xerxes when offered all of Greece as his domain to rule over as warlord if he were to kneel before the Persian conqueror. Through the teachings of Socrates, Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle developed within the Greek empire itself, the link between Leonidas' argument for reason and what is presented by *300* as expressions of reason and logic becomes difficult to locate. The level of violence presented within the film exemplifies the spectacle—violence existing at a level where it would seem outrageous if not choreographed and performed in order to be considered art and a possible representation of the ideal form, yet through the performance is acceptable as right. In his work *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess coined such displays as *ultraviolence*, violence not to be critically engaged but, rather, performed for the enjoyment of self and others. [Cohen \(n.d.\)](#) helps to see how this concept moves from the book to the film depiction. He also points out how violence becomes aesthetic. Once this occurs, and the aesthetic is turned into spectacle, the spectacle then becomes acceptable reality. The performance of violence becomes the performance of what is considered real.

Each scene of warfare within the film aids in further solidifying this particular discourse as not only deemed proper but preferred both within the culture constructed inside the world of *300* but also outside of it—in the world that is engaged and discursively constructed by the audiences who see the film. Audiences are attracted to the



postmodern spectacle presented within the discourse. Violence is celebrated as truth, where reason and logic are considered elusive and providing multiple alternate agendas.

Aspects of the film present the idealized violence-as-right. For example, after the first waves of Persian soldiers (the enemy; the other) are conquered by the protectors of Sparta and greater Greece (the true; the right), Xerxes and Leonidas have their conversation. Xerxes asks for reason and logic as he asks the Spartans to stand down in their combat. Yet, while this call for rational thought is brought forward, there are Persian archers drawn on Leonidas. The juxtaposition between the two—violence and logic—creates a postmodern discursive formation that re-/creates the accepted histories normally presented as true.

### **Class Separation**

Two implicit and politically situated classes exist within the Sparta of 300. The first, the warrior class, becomes the representation of all things masculine and *good*—strength, valor, virility, and power—the perfect Western male specimen is presented as the exemplar. Each element is presented through the visual spectacle, whether it is bodies of soldiers bathed in the light of the sun or in the blood of their enemies. The elements are equally presented as statuesque representations of the ideal man and, therefore, the ideal culture. Even in the clothing worn by Spartan soldiers and Sparta's king—the crimson cape—presents the warrior class as hero, worthy of worship and praise. The dialog of the warrior is inscribed with bravado—a discursive representation of what is right.

Contradicting the machismo of the warrior is the stoic representation of the Senator class. Draped in *his* white toga (for a woman would never be allowed as member of either class, except for show or humor), the senator does not make war with weapons but with words—with logic. However, these wars are always fought in secret, in shadows. For example, conversations between the Queen and one of her loyal subjects, a senior member of the senate, are held either at the royal home after hours or in dimly lit corners of the city, where few may hear. The power struggle between the two opposing classes becomes apparent when the law makers, those who would develop systems of behavior, grounded in their logic, in order to ensure order, come into contradiction with the systems of behavior that have been created by the soldier in order to ensure peace. The intersection of these two competing power discourses ([Foucault, 1995](#)) creates a formation that cannot or will not resolve.

A subtle *othering* presence also exists within the discourses of 300, further establishing class separation, but now between *Western* and *non-Western* entities. In this post-9/11 media environment, where narratives detailing terrorism and the ever-present *axis of evil* are juxtaposed with narratives that express how America is helping those it recently attacked, audiences are asked to accept each of these opposing ideologies without question. Similar to those conflicting constructs discussed previously in this project, the representations of these discursive formations within 300 must be interrogated. The

Spartans are presented in minimal clothing, with minimal fashion accretions and no use of metallic colors or representations, demonstrating a lack of fear and self-assurance in their own right. The Persian entourage, comparatively, is in lavish clothing and jewelry, with eye makeup or, alternately, no flesh but the eyes showing from behind a veil or mask. The use of the mask as a metaphor for *The East*, *Demon*, or *Other* starts here.

This particular dialectic is all too familiar with the film's audience. Politics are understood and recognized at a subconscious level ([Jameson, 1981](#)), but they are acted out on behalf of in the acceptance of them in the film without question. Recognizing the ideologies in the film allows the audience member to recognize it in her-/himself, particularly when it comes to class issues within contemporary American culture, and move toward critically engaging those ideologies.

The narrative of the Persians as *Other* is supported through Bakhtin's grotesque image as part of the overall spectacle, the narrative the film brings to the audience. The purpose of the grotesque image is meant to be comic (to make a point through exaggeration of both physical and dialogical texts). *300* represents anything non-Western (perhaps, even, non-White) often in the dark, sometimes with masks, as *the liar*, without moral or ethical code or compass. These formations allow the audience(s) to identify with the protagonists of the film, further entrenching their own notions or perspectives on the other and their place within the social order of things.

### **Antihomosexuality**

Throughout the movie, an antihomosexual ideology is woven, while the hypersexualized visual is readily present for the audience to internalize. The former is quite different from recorded history, particularly when discussing the Greek military. In Sparta, as in all of Greece, *pederasty*, intimate (and often, though not officially, sexual) relations between an older and younger man, often under the banner of a pedagogical relationship, was not uncommon ([Percy, 1996](#)). This act has been connected to the academy, politics, aristocracy, and the military. It was thought that such relationships between men would not only create stronger bonds and fidelity within the city-state but, in the case of Sparta, that these bonds would cause the soldiers to fight to the death to defend the men they had as their equals in all things (including sexually) readily. Within the narrative Dilios constructs for his audience(s), however, this is not the case. As stated earlier, violence-as-reason becomes the mainstay. The audience is presented with the story of how King Leonidas was taught through a very specific ideological lens—violence is preferable to anything else in order to survive. Unlike the Spartan fraternity that, historically, was supposedly developed through the act of pederasty, only respect through fear and domination (hallmarks of the totalitarian hegemonic state) is considered right or just within *300*—ideologically proper, the central pillar of this fraternal formation. Where pederasty, though considered less-than-acceptable in contemporary culture, fostered goodwill, love, and kinship through intimacy, *300* fosters fear and violence through stripping the soldiers of an understanding of sexual intimacy

except as a visceral physical experience or, in the case of Gorgo and her rape, an expression of power and control.

A second antihomosexual discourse within the presented narrative comes about during the conversation between King Leonidas and the messenger from Persia. During the exchange between the two, Leonidas is asked if he is willing to bow and submit to the rule of Persia. To support his refusal to do so, Leonidas states “we’ve heard rumors, Persian, that the Athenians turned down your offer already, and if those philosophers and boy-lovers turned you down . . . well, we Spartans have a reputation to consider.” This statement rearticulates Spartans as the socially situated representations of what is considered the *Übermensch* by both Spartan and contemporary American culture, the ultimate assemblage of all that is male in contemporary American culture—strong willed, physically powerful, and not homosexual in any way.

However, this *superman*-as-discursive formation does not coincide with the visual exaggerations of the male characters within *300*. Each of them succumbs to the grotesque in their own way, enabling the audience to be fully immersed in the spectacle presented to them. Any Spartan, representing violence-as-reason, is considered virile and indestructible and is presented barely clothed, often only in a single wrap of his toga, bearing his hypersexualized physique for the audience to admire, lust after, and wish to become. By contrast, members of the senate (representing reason-as-violence) are often seen, though still baring their bodies, older, disheveled, or not physically as dominant, perhaps demonstrating that their weapons of choice are not their bodies (whether for combat or sex) but the mind, often using others as their weapons through deceit and subterfuge. Even more ideologically confusing is the visual presentation of the Persians who, excluding only Xerxes, are also completely covered barring their eyes. Though both sides have warriors, it is only Spartan warriors that offer themselves as perfection exemplified. Similar to the all-too-familiar barely clothed advertising models of Abercrombie and Fitch, the Spartans present the ideal mixture of spectacle, virility, and preference.

These representations of the men of *300* match both the ideologies of class within the film (as discussed earlier) and those constructs that would denounce homosexuality as violent or not right yet, at the same time, embrace those images and symbols that could promote a positive discussion surrounding the acceptance of homosexuality in contemporary culture. Rather than recognizing that sexuality is, as [Foucault \(1972\)](#) would encourage, a discursive practice of acceptance and affection, it is placed in the shadows of Western history, only to be used as a demeaning and degrading othering tactic.

## **Implications of the Film and Project**

*300*, as a film, allows us the opportunity to recognize the interchange between audience(s) and text at a holistic ideological level through the narratives presented and how they are constructed, the spectacle. With any critical analysis, two questions often need to be asked. The first is subject-specific: “How does this study aid in our

understanding of the film *300* and, by extension, commercial American films in this first part of the 21st century?" The second is a broader query: "How does this study extend our understanding of critical inquiry?" Each question shall be discussed in turn.

*300*, on its own, presents a utilization of current American ideological positions as foundational discourses in order to present a simulacra of historical discussions as fact. Though it does not once state that the film presents the actual history, no disclaimer to the contrary is ever made. As [Foucault \(1972\)](#) tells us, history is simply the construction of discursive formations by those in dominant positions; however, utilization of those formations to impress ideologies on an audience consumed by the spectacle is cause for alarm. Where those audiences are expecting a film for entertainment, they are presented with antihomosexual, promisogynistic, proviolence simulacra, to be considered not only the truth and what is real but also as foundational justification for such actions, behaviors, and belief systems. One example came to light that, when speaking with a colleague, she revealed that her son left the theater in a state that can only be considered *revved up* or testosterone-saturated.

Several films over the past 10 years have utilized history (particularly violent history), libido, and violence to sell the film and, though perhaps implicitly, sell the ideologies contained within; therefore, *300* is not unique. What does make it unique is the utilization of animation and computer-generated realities to move the narrative one further step away from the original, yet the larger than life Xerxes and his menagerie and the statuesque army of Sparta are accepted by audience(s) as reality. But if the resultant effect after the theater on one male adolescent is any indication, other discursive forces are at work within the formation of the text.

*300* presents several key identified ideological turns that should concern not only critics but also audience members alike. First, the dominance of men over women is presented as not only normalized but also acceptable. Granted, historical texts do present this as *fact* (as far as history can be considered without objection or question), that women were considered second-class citizens in parts of Greece at that historical moment. However, it does not mean that it needs to be glorified as it is. Second, violence is presented as a method of reason, which offers an ideological dialectic that needs to be explored. Though the Spartans wish to keep Greece independent to support all those who are free (except for slaves and women, of course), the first course of action presented by the Spartan king Leonidas in the film is to slaughter the Persian entourage when they present their terms. A logic of *defending our freedom*, a rhetorical strategy that has been part of the American lexicon since late 2001, appears to have entrenched itself here.

Third, a warrior class is presented as the dominant class and preferred class to become part of in Sparta and, by extension, in Western civilization. Contrary to the film, though Sparta was renowned for their military accomplishments, they were also artisans, scholars, and regular citizens. Through the hyperreality of *300*, it would appear that all others fall short of the glory that is a Spartan soldier. Fourth, and in the light of recent events on a local campus, homosexuality becomes the target of ridicule and othering.

Could it be argued that a direct correlation exists between hate crimes against homosexual college community members and the film? That is not known. What is known is that such rhetoric is presented in the film and, unfortunately, is still practiced within American culture. Finally, a demonization of non-Western cultures is rampant throughout. Through oppositions in color, style, imagery, language, and presented culture, the Persian armies represent everything the Spartan army and the Greeks propose to represent. It is these narrative threads—these ideologies—that are found first in Dilios' tale and then extended into the audience of the movie, *educating* the audience along the way.

At a broader level, what can critical and cultural inquiry gain from this project? First, a continual consideration and reconstruction of what discourses are at play within cultural texts needs to occur. As has been argued, discourses are not a fixed structure. Even those who claim to adhere to a strict ideological discourse experience shift in their own understanding of the world around them, resulting in the discourses (and the attached realities) being rearticulated.

Second, how the cultural discourses are taught/infused/internalized to and by those cultures that are meant to internalize them, particularly in a society like the United States that is more and more saturated by media messages, has to be interrogated. Otherwise, all messages become simply the surface, with the underlying currents of hegemonic forces absorbed and accepted without hesitation or critique. The spectacle allows the critic to see underneath the surface of the film to locate, through the mediated sensory experience, representations connected to various discursive formations and articulations. The spectacle becomes more than just a single image, sound, or scene. It is, instead, the combination of all of them, allowing for the total effect of the text on the audience to be considered, rather than the pieces separately. The spectacle is the articulation of the various messages within the film, presenting a communication phenomenon at that moment that allows insight into the social/cultural/historical messages presented.

Third, the utilization of the narrative paradigm, as introduced and developed by [Fisher \(1984\)](#), has not recently been employed within the realm of current film. This paradigm allows for the critic to accept all arguments presented as valid from the perspective of the speaker/orator/author. It is from this perspective that analysis into film can be achieved at multiple levels, whether it is at the characters' levels, the screenwriter, the producer, the audience(s), or a combination thereof. Each of these perspectives gives the critic the opportunity to understand what discourses exist within the film, how they work together, and what ideologies are presented to the audience(s) as a result.

Commercial movies, especially American commercial movies, are *green lighted* by production companies to do one thing—make money. In this quest for capital gain, unfortunately, ideologies that may be considered at the same time wrong yet seem to be agreed on implicitly through other mediated entertainment are continually utilized by media oligopolies to sell product, further entrenching the hegemonic ideological structures (women as objects, violence over reason, vilifying the Middle East and other

foreign entities, and continued rejection and violence against alternative sexual or philosophical orientations) that encompass Western society. *300* provides a glimpse at the underlying discourses that permeate popular culture today. Through the interrogation of the media products created for and consumed by popular culture, and through understanding those products not as individual artifacts but as pieces of a much larger cultural construction and network, movement toward alternative messages that move against the dominant discourse may be possible.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1 Interestingly, *300* developed such a strong following that *300: Rise of an Empire* was recently released in the theaters, grossing \$45,038,460 domestically and \$4,636,747 (converted) in the United Kingdom ([IMDB, 2014](#)). This sequel is meant to provide contextuality—a history, as it were—to the events in the first film. In addition to making money for the franchise, this project reversed the order of things for the storytelling: The graphic novel it is perhaps based on, *Xerxes*, has yet to be published.

2 As a child of Sparta who was born with birth defects, Ephialtes was shunned and to be discarded. Spartan children, so *300* tells, are judged at birth and, if not found worthy, are thrown over a cliff to their death. Ephialtes was spared this somehow and hidden.

### **References**

300: Rise of an empire. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1253863/>.  
[Google Scholar](#)

Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world* (H. Iswolsky, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.  
[Google Scholar](#)

Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations*. New York, NY: Semiotext[e] Foreign Agents.  
[Google Scholar](#)



Cohen, A. (n.d.). *Clockwork orange and the aestheticization of violence*. Retrieved from [http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/Cinema\\_Beyond/C\\_B.lectures/ClockworkOrange/Benj\\_CultIndustr\\_Clockwrk.html](http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/Cinema_Beyond/C_B.lectures/ClockworkOrange/Benj_CultIndustr_Clockwrk.html).

[Google Scholar](#)

Fisher, W. R. (1984) Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs* 51(1): 1–22.

[Google Scholar](#) | [Crossref](#) | [ISI](#)

Foucault, M. (1972) *The archaeology of knowledge & the discourse on language*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

[Google Scholar](#)

Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Random House.

[Google Scholar](#)

Gallagher, M. (1999) I married Rambo: Spectacle and melodrama in the Hollywood action film. In: Sharrett, C. (ed) *Mythologies of violence in postmodern media*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, pp. 199–226.

[Google Scholar](#)

Hall, S. (1985) Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2(2): 91–114.

[Google Scholar](#) | [Crossref](#) | [ISI](#)

Hall, S. (1986) The problem of ideology—Marxism without guarantees. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 2: 28–44.

[Google Scholar](#) | [SAGE Journals](#)

Hall, S. (1997) *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, London, England: Sage.

[Google Scholar](#)

Jameson, F. (1981) *The political unconscious*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[Google Scholar](#)

Nietzsche, F. (2003) *Thus spake Zarathustra: A book for all and none*, New York, NY: Algora.

[Google Scholar](#)

Nunnari, G. (Producer), & Snyder, Z. (Director). (2007). *300* [Motion picture]. United States: Legendary Picture (Warner Bros.). Retrieved from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=300.htm>.

[Google Scholar](#)

Percy, W. A. (1996) *Pederasty and pedagogy in archaic Greece*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

[Google Scholar](#)

Sayers, D. L. (Trans.). (1957). *The song of Roland*. London, England: Penguin Books.

[Google Scholar](#)

Silverblatt, A., Ferry, J., Finan, B. (2009) *Approaches to media literacy: A handbook*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

[Google Scholar](#)

Tucker, R. C. (Ed.). (1978). *The Marx-Engel reader* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

[Google Scholar](#)

## **Author Biography**

**Adam W. Tyma**, PhD, is an associate professor (Critical Media Studies) and the Graduate Program Chair in the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the coordinator for the Visual Communication and Culture minor, located within the School. This essay was originally presented at the 2008 Central States Communication Association annual convention. The author would like to thank the multiple reviewers who have given guidance and feedback on this essay and his graduate students for forcing him to clean it up and send it out during seminar.