

January 2015

## Heart of the Beholder: The Pathos, Truths and Narratives of Thermopylae in \_300\_

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Heart of the Beholder:  
The Pathos, Truths and Narratives of Thermopylae in *300*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts & Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
July 6, 2015

Keywords: subjectivity, history, mythologizing, emotional investment

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is the culmination of a sixteen-year odyssey that would never have begun without the encouragement of my mother and father, Lyn and Jim Holcom. The journey would not have continued without the support of Paul and Roz Potenza. The destination would never have been worth reaching if not for the love of my wife, Jaime Giangrande. Thank you all for helping me meet and weather the challenges, large and small.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that critical understanding of historical narratives needn't be limited to cold, clinical applications of logic and reason. By doing a close textual reading of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's graphic novel, *300* and Zack Snyder's 2007 film adaptation, I posit that critical analysis of popular narratives is better served when pathos takes a central role. Traditional rhetorical criticism tends to favor empirical evidence and fact over emotional, narrative truth. Yet, the writing, recounting and interpretation of history are more akin to arts than sciences. Historical narratives are subject to the same influences and techniques that make poetry, sculpture and music evocative and memorable. Therefore, the closest method by which to recreate the experience of historical events is through pathos. Pathos can serve to focus the attention of an audience and cultivates an intuitive understanding of historical, social, and cultural events.

## **CHAPTER ONE: THE BEGINNING**

For much of my life, movies and comic books have served as escapes: departure points for flights of imagination. They have often been the little rewards to celebrate personal achievement or served as a balm to sooth anger, sadness or disappointment. When I think about it, I suppose nothing really excites me like a good story. If the characters and the plot are compelling, like most people, I'm interested. This is not to say that my relationships with stories are without complications.

As an educator and a practicing actor and stage-director I can recognize and appreciate the aims and goals of art criticism. This does not change the fact that as an artist I am often shocked, mortified and infuriated when I open the paper and read a critic's review of one of my productions. It's not always easy to take such criticism, but just like art, criticism is a subjective form of expression therefore, I can understand and support its overall function. I defer to Oscar Wilde who said that the artist must educate the critic. I am, however, troubled by the notion that works of art can be criticized and/or dismissed solely on the basis of accuracy or historical authenticity. As audience members in a media-rich age, we cannot help but compare an adapted work of art to its source material.

When confronted by someone opining, “that’s not how it really happened,” I feel obligated to educate them on the finer points of *creative license* and *willing suspension of disbelief*.

When adapting a work of art from one medium to another all sorts of factors come into play that necessitate a judicious re-evaluation of the source material. When dealing with narratives, the artist must first determine the scope of the story: is there enough here? Is there too much to try and tell? Time can be the greatest determining factor. Film and television are media that are wholly dependent on time when it comes to telling a story. This dependency on time is inextricably linked to commercial interests. Running time must be considered to allow for multiple showings at the cinema megaplex. Time must be allotted for the advertisers and their commercial breaks. Time equals money, but beyond the temporal and commercial constraints, every other factor that the artist seemingly controls, must be tailored in service of the story the artist wants to tell. A location must be transposed because it is too remote or too dangerous or will not co-operate with the necessities of the production. An actor must be replaced because although he or she may physically resemble the character, that actor is incapable of projecting the pathos or gravitas the character requires for the story. An entire sub-plot may be excised because it does nothing to support and in some ways might even detract from the overall story-arc. It is instances like these where the artist has exercised *creative license* to insure the integrity of the story he is trying to tell. It is *creative license* that people are usually bitching about when they proclaim the book was better.

*Suspension of Disbelief* is a much more complicated trope. It has been said that when telling a story, an audience will believe the impossible, but will not accept the improbable. The poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the term “willing suspension of disbelief” in his *Biographica Literaria* in 1817.

“...it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human intellect and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith”

(Coleridge, 1817).

I think Coleridge’s use of the word “faith” is appropriate. Coleridge was talking specifically about the writing of poetry that utilized mystical and supernatural elements and themes. Bridging the period between the Enlightenment and the Industrial Age, it is understandable how a writer like Coleridge would be concerned. As the age of Enlightenment directly challenged tradition and superstition, it would be reasonable to assume that readers might not readily accept and perhaps even scoff at any supernatural imagery that might appear in the poetry of the time. It takes an act of faith on the part of the reader to accept the fantastical. This may be done with the high-minded hope of learning some profound truth about the human condition or for as simple a reason as passing the time. Our willingness to accept the seemingly impossible might be in direct proportion to a perceived pay-off but it also hinges on the skill of the storyteller and his attention to detail. This is of particular interest to me as a



large proportion of fantasy or *genre* fiction- of which comic books and graphic novels, science fiction, horror fiction or the overreaching title, *speculative fiction*, - encompass. The storyteller's attention to detail (or lack therefore of) is perhaps what gets her into trouble with audiences faster than anything. We are instead left questioning not only the degree to which an audience is willing to suspend its disbelief, but what might be considered a *reasonable* suspension of disbelief? This is succinctly, albeit humorously described by British comedian Richard Ayoade's fictional character, Dean Learner, "An eagle-eyed viewer might be able to see the wires. A pedant might be able to see the wires. But I think if you're looking at the wires you're ignoring the story. If you go to a puppet show you can see the wires. But it's about the puppets; it's not about the string. If you go to a Punch and Judy show and you're only watching the wires, you're a freak" (Ayoade & Holness, 2004). How willing are we to suspend our disbelief? How much are we willing to swallow before we gag? There might be more than a few critics out there, both amateur and professional, for whom the smallest inconsistency serves to shatter the illusion that the storyteller has constructed. Such critics might be more forgiving if the world the storyteller creates is something they have never imagined before. The more foreign a frame of reference, the more the critic might entertain its plausibility. Extraterrestrials come to mind, as do disembodied phantoms, trolls, orcs and goblins.

The game begins to change when we enter the realm of recorded human history. A new set of conditions apply to the critical evaluation of stories that tell (and re-tell) historical events, original stories that take place in the context of historical events or revisionist stories that speculate on what the world might be like if historical events had happened differently. Historians, anthropologists and archaeologists are interested in

accounts, artifacts and empirical evidence that can be verified, categorized and catalogued. Just like the famed fictional archaeologist Henry “Indiana” Jones proclaims at the beginning of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, “Archaeology is the search for fact, not truth. If it’s truth you’re interested in, Dr. Tyree’s philosophy class is right down the hall” (Spielberg, 1989). It is understandable why some audiences and some scholars might be more critical of historical films and storytelling when held up to the breadth of scholarly writing and empirical evidence. The devil is always in the details and it is the attention paid to those details that invites the trust or derision of your audience. I suppose the larger question I am drawn to address is whether or not loose adherence to the historical facts minimizes the *truth* that may exist in a story.

The first time I seriously gave any thought to this problem was a few years ago when I was teaching World Literature to high school freshmen. We began the school year by studying *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and analyzed the structure of this 5,000-year-old Sumerian story using a simplified version of Joseph Campbell’s concept of the mono-myth, more popularly known as the *hero’s journey*. My students were very interested in how this formulaic could apply to so many stories with which they were familiar. I provided the example of *Star Wars* and explained how George Lucas diligently studied the works of Joseph Campbell in order to produce a myth for contemporary audiences. Soon after, my students took it upon themselves to apply Campbell’s mono-myth to the most readily available story they could find, namely the Harry Potter film series. I was especially pleased when my students were able to identify that the mono-mythic structure not only existed within each Harry Potter film adventure, but also applied to the eponymous character’s arc throughout all eight films.

As fascinated as my students were with the mono-myth, what fascinated them the most about *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was the story of Utnapishtim. After the death of his beloved companion, Enkidu the wild man, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, was inconsolable. Now fearing death, Gilgamesh wandered the earth on a quest for immortality. At a nexus of the mighty rivers and near death, the wife of Utnapishtim found him unconscious. She brought the sickly king to her dwelling and there nursed him back to health. When Gilgamesh awakened, he was met by Utnapishtim, an immortal, who recounted the story of how he achieved his immortality. As it so happened, Utnapishtim was warned by the gods of an impending flood that would cleanse evil from the face of the Earth. Utnapishtim was tasked by the gods to construct a giant barque or ship which he would fill with his wife and family as well as assorted beasts of the earth and air and the grain of the fields. Soon the rains began, the floodwaters rose and Utnapishtim & Company rode above the deluge in safety. After many days adrift, the barque came to rest upon a mountaintop and Utnapishtim released three different birds from the mighty ship to determine if the floodwaters had receded. Once convinced, Utnapishtim opens the doors of the barque releasing his precious cargo onto the newly sanctified Earth, and sacrifices a beast in honor of the gods. The gods appear and as a reward for keeping faith, they make Utnapishtim, and his wife, immortal.

While there are noted differences, the tale of Utnapishtim is remarkably similar to the biblical tale of Noah and his Ark. This was not lost on my students. They were also fond of pointing out the similarity between the words “barque” and “ark”. We had lively

discussions as to the nature of the similarities and differences between the two accounts. Much like the biblical and secular scholars who had pondered over these stories before us, we could not come to a satisfactory explanation, but the idea of so strikingly similar a narrative coming from two seemingly different sources caused my students to reexamine their notions of truth in regards to history and myth in storytelling.

The following semester we had another lesson that was no less profound. After studying Greek tragedy and the Oedipus plays of Sophocles in particular, our class moved on to Roman literature. We read excerpts from *The Annals* of Publius Cornelius Tacitus. These excerpts focused on the execution of Christ by Pontius Pilate and the Great Fire that burned much of the eternal city of Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero in the 1st-century. It was a common belief in Rome at the time that Nero was responsible for the conflagration. Tacitus suggests that the Emperor used Christians as scapegoats to draw attention away from himself and his plans to clear portions of the city in order to build a massive pleasure palace.

Reading *The Annals* of Tacitus in that 9th grade World Literature class did two things:

One- Much like the flood story of Utnapishtim, it provided another account of a story my students had been familiar with outside of a biblical context.

Two- it prompted one of my students to ask me why we were reading all of this stuff in a literature class rather than a history class.

It is this very question that serves as the crux for this project. I have been pondering this question posed by my student for the past three years. At the time, considering my audience, I tried to answer the question as best I could. History and literature, I

explained, complement one another. History, at least the empirical side of history, is concerned with the facts and the figures of the past. It seeks to make a reckoning. How many houses were burned? How many Christians were crucified as a result? Whereas literature, or the literate side of history, focuses on the stories people tell and assess them for their aesthetic and emotional impact. History provides us with the who, what, when, where, why and how of a historical event, but literature gives us the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the time. An understanding of historical events is made so much richer when we also have an inkling of what it might have felt like as well. What might the witnesses to history be thinking and feeling as history happens? I still stand by what I told my students three years ago, but I now possess a new set of critical tools, and I am curious as to how these ideas may apply to other stories and artifacts.

In addition to my love of film and comic books, I have always had a strong interest in military history. I suppose this stems from the fact that the maternal side of my family produced four military officers whose collective careers spanned from World War II to the first Gulf War. As a child I was weaned on a steady diet of war films and like most American boys of my generation, I played with plastic war toys that ran the gamut from medieval knight to G.I. Joe. It was my family who instilled the values of duty, honor and country and while they had a deep love for “The Service”, there was no sugar coating of the realities of their trade. Making war for real was a nasty business. Stories of peacetime military service were plentiful, but my grandfather was reticent to share stories of what he did in times of war.

My uncles were equally tight lipped, but for different reasons. Due to the nature of the missions they performed, any inquiries into the details of where they would go and what they would do there were met with a sardonic reply of, “I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you.”

I have a craving for war stories. As a child I was curious about what it meant to be a sailor, soldier or airman and for the most part, that curiosity has continued into adulthood. My life path didn't lead me down the same road as many of the men in my family and perhaps this is why I still seek out stories of combat. The human creature is not merely defined by his or her actions. It is also through the process of relaying stories of our actions that helps us to construct a sense of self and our place in the world. By vicariously living through other's tales of adventure and strife, we appropriate the values and characteristics not only of who we think we are, but those that reflect who we want to be (Mead & Moore, 1936).

In 1998, Dark Horse Comics released Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's *300* as a five-issue, limited series. I came across the collected and bound edition in the early 2000's. *300* is a fictionalized retelling of the Spartan-led defense of the Thermopylae pass in northern Greece against the invading forces of the Persian Empire in the year 480 B.C. Artist and writer Frank Miller was inspired tell this story ever since he had seen the 1962 film, *The 300 Spartans* (directed by Rudolph Maté) as a boy. *300* was met with much industry fanfare and won three Eisner awards in 1999. The Eisner Awards are the comic book industry equivalent of an Oscar and is named for writer/artist Will Eisner who created the 1940's comic book character, The Spirit. In 2007, director Zach Snyder brought *300* to life as a motion picture. Both comic and film

were lauded as being technically and artistically groundbreaking but were also summarily criticized for being historically inaccurate, jingoistic, hyper-violent, racist, homoerotic and even homo-phobic. Regardless, the film was a hit with audiences, earning over \$210,000,000 domestically and worldwide sales approaching half-a-billion dollars. As a tie-in to the movie, collected editions of the *300* comics were reprinted as well as a slew of Thermopylae-related fiction and non-fiction books. Television's History Channel didn't miss out on the opportunity and in 2007 produced a 90 minute documentary entitled *Last Stand of the 300*, a collection of scholars and military historians recounting the battle while interposed with historical dramatizations that were stylistically reminiscent of Snyder's film.

Despite the fervent criticism that attempts to dismiss *300* as an adolescent's testosterone-fueled fantasy or as technical and homoerotic eye-candy, people really love this story. There's something to be examined in the mythologizing of a 2,493 year old battle that wound up a tactical *disaster* and resulted in the wholesale slaughter of 1,100 Thespians & Thebans and the 300 Spartans who led them. For what reasons would generation after generation recount a story where the heroes lost? How is the tale reshaped for its audiences and to what purpose? Perhaps the most important question to be answered is whether or not the assertions of historical inaccuracy make a narrative any less true.

This thesis argues that critical understanding of historical narratives needn't be limited to cold, clinical applications of logic and reason. By doing a close textual reading of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's graphic novel, *300* and Zack Snyder's 2007 film adaptation, I posit that critical analysis of popular narratives is better served when

pathos takes a central role. Traditional rhetorical criticism tends to favor empirical evidence and fact over emotional, narrative truth. Yet, the writing, recounting and interpretation of history are more akin to arts than sciences. Historical narratives are subject to the same influences and techniques that make poetry, sculpture and music evocative and memorable. Therefore, the closest method by which to recreate the experience of historical events is through pathos. Pathos can serve to focus the attention of an audience and cultivates an intuitive understanding of historical, social, and cultural events.

To date, there is no shortage of opportunities to ask these questions of other popular culture artifacts. Cinematically, the Japanese historical tale, *Chushingura*, has been re-imagined with a samurai Keanu Reeves as *The 47 Ronin*. Audiences will be able to return to the Greco-Persian wars and the events that followed the slaughter of the Spartans when *300: Rise of an Empire* hits the big screen. This is a growing area of inquiry, especially in light of the explosion of historically inspired film, television and literature in late 2013, early 2014.



## **CHAPTER TWO: THE INSPIRATION**

For three days in August of 480 B.C.E., approximately 1,100 Greeks, led by 300 Spartan hoplites, held off an incursion by the Persian Empire at the narrow Thermopylae pass in northern Greece. According to Herodotus, a goatherd betrayed the Greeks by revealing to the Persians a hidden goat path. This information allowed the invaders to flank and surround the Greek defenders. The band of 300 Spartan warriors, led by their king Leonidas, were all killed, but not before inflicting heavy losses on their enemies. Despite losing the battle, the Spartans are revered for their combat prowess and Thermopylae is regarded as a textbook example of a rearguard action and tactical retreat.

When we talk about battle, whether it is old soldiers reminiscing about distant campaigns or young children recounting the details of schoolyard squabbles, it is a common desire to know who started the fight. Who are the belligerents and what are the motivations behind the conflict? It was these very questions that prompted Herodotus to explore and examine the stories and circumstances of the conflict between Persia and Greece, thus producing his seminal work, *The Histories*.

As with the current conflict in the Middle East, seeds for what the Greeks call “The Median Events” and what we call the Persian Wars, were arguably sown many

decades in the past (Fields & Noon, 2007). In this section I will provide background, or perhaps I should say I will provide some *history* (using the original Greek definition of the word, meaning “inquiry”) on the man, Herodotus, and his methods; the object of his inquiry: Greece’s resistance to Persian aggression and incursion; and the narrative describing the battle of Thermopylae. It is from some of the methods used by Herodotus when compiling the source material that I will make my comparative analysis of both Frank Miller and Lynne Varley’s graphic novel *300* and Zack Snyder’s subsequent film adaptation.

Very little is known about Herodotus’ early life. It is believed he was born around 484 B.C.E. in the Greek city of Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, now the site of Bodrum in modern-day Turkey. At the time of his birth, Halicarnassus fell within the borders of the Persian Empire and was overseen by Artemesia I of Caria. Roughly four years later, Artemesia would distinguish herself as commander of the Persian Fleet at the battle of Salamis. Halicarnassus of this time was one of many cities that stood at the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures. There was a mixture of Greek and indigenous cultures and it is thought by some readers of The Histories, like Polish travel journalist, Ryszard Kapuscinski, that this contributed to Herodotus’ broad view of people and culture (Roberts, 2011).

While there is uncertainty in regards to Herodotus’ parentage, there is mention of his being related to a poet by the name of Panyassis. It is unclear as to whether Panyassis was uncle or cousin to Herodotus, but it places the future “father of history” in literary tall cotton as some readers praised Panyassis as being second only to Homer. It

is rumored that the execution of Panyassis by the Achaemenid Satrapy (i.e. Artemesia's family) is what drove Herodotus to leave Halicarnassus and wander the Greek and Persian cities that surround the Mediterranean (Evans, 1982).

Poetry was the predominant medium of the fifth century B.C.E. It was through lines and lyrics of poetry that issues of love and politics were conveyed to the populace (Roberts, 2011):

*Poetry formed the core of Greek education. The education of Greek boys - and the occasional girl - was remarkable both for what it taught and what it didn't. A bit of maths was offered but no social studies, no science. The essence of Greek education was mousike, poetry set to the music of the lyre. Mousike took its name from the goddesses who inspired it, the Muses....*

(Roberts, 2011)

Herodotus was greatly influenced by poetry, particularly that of Homer, whose timeless epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* provide both the narrative templates for the war story and the travelogue (Roberts, 2011).

One of the defining characteristics of Herodotus' The Histories is that the text departs from the common medium of poetry and is instead written as prose. The predominance of poetry stems from the orality of Greek culture in the early Classical Age. The manner in which stories, like those of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were shared through oral recitation. The lyricism of poetry helped facilitate not only the oral

performance of the tales, but more importantly, the memorization and retention of detail for works that consist of over 12,000 lines in the case of *The Iliad* and over 15,000 lines for *The Odyssey* (Ong, 2012). It was during the fifth century B.C.E. that prose came into its own as a communicative medium. Prior to this, prose had been used in the codification of laws as early as the late seventh century B.C.E. (Roberts, 2011).

This new mode of writing was ripe to be paired with the Sophist traditions of dialogic inquiry, debate and the art of persuasion (Roberts, 2011). Herodotus seems to exist not only at the political, cultural and social nexus of Greek Halicarnassus, but at its intellectual and literary crossroads as well. Poetry was the language of the divine and for centuries it had regaled the exploits of the gods as well as the heroic deeds of men. These stories were passed down orally through the generations and as matters of liturgy and faith, were never questioned in regards to accuracy and authenticity (Roberts, 2011). The inquiries of Herodotus take an entirely new approach to accounting the deeds of men. By recording his observations in prose and, "...realizing that he cannot be believed implicitly like a poet, Herodotus will have to persuade us - by argument, by analogy, by the citation of eyewitness evidence or the words of oral informants - that he knows what he is talking about as he writes in the protean genre we call history" (Roberts, 2011).

If anything, Herodotus laid the framework of research for what was to become the social sciences. While there has been criticism and skepticism surrounding the "research" and accounts provided by Herodotus in terms of its objectivity and veracity, we must remember that inquiries into historical events, with an eye towards causality, had never before been attempted in such a fashion. Modern critics often point to

Herodotus' younger contemporary Thucydides as being less frivolous and perhaps more appealing to present academic standards, but there is something to be said for having the capability to tell a good story. Accounts of an event must be compelling to remain culturally pertinent. Recitation and repetition is the work by which culture is created and reinforced.

Salima Ikram, professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo, said, "Okay, so Thucydides is a finer historian, but he's so dull, so tedious, oh my god I'm going to shoot myself!" (Qtd. in Roberts, 2011) The argument can be made, that perhaps the stringent accuracy of a historical account is of secondary importance to the event itself being memorable. There must be something about the story that is compelling. Like a virus reproducing, the tale of the event must be told and retold in order to ensure its survival. Infecting the mind with a vital question about historical events is essential. The nitpicking over finer details can come later.

*Both in his storytelling mode and in his ethnographic mode, then, Herodotus manifests a strong belief that to understand history, one must understand origins. He is aware that national pride leads people to offer sanitized versions of their origins that downplay racial mixtures and cultural borrowing. Throughout The Histories, he engages with the origins of origins, noting that the traditions about traditions are suspect, and that we must always consider the source. Those who censure Herodotus for some of the taller tales in his text should remember his role in the foundation of source criticism.*

(Roberts 2011)

To better understand the objectivity and rhetorical devices & techniques utilized by Frank Miller and Lynne Varley in 300 and by Zack Snyder in his film adaptation, there must be a cursory understanding of the methods and objectives employed by Herodotus while composing *The Histories*. In his forward to the 2004 Barnes & Noble Classics edition of *The Histories*, scholar Donald Lateiner identifies four research questions that Herodotus attempts to answer in his text. The first asks how the diverse peoples inhabiting the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea organize and develop into civilizations. The second questions asks how the Persians were able to fashion an empire which ruled the eastern Mediterranean and parts of the Greek world in a period of about 60 years. The third question asks how the Greeks, divided into city-states as well as being numerically and economically inferior, were able to defeat the Persian Empire. Lastly Herodotus tries to answer the question of whether or not we can know the past when it is always already fleeting (Lateiner & Macauley, 2004). These are questions that are perhaps best left without definitive answers and Lateiner praises Herodotus for having the foresight to understand there are limitations to investigating the past.

As a means of providing a balanced, albeit brief, assessment of Herodotus in his forward, Lateiner also makes a list of the man's "merits" and "deficits". Lateiner very clearly states that Herodotus should be praised for his *originality*. Never before had anyone attempted writing "a rational account of the past based on evidence before...(Lateiner & Macauley, 2004)." Credit is also due for the sheer scope of Herodotus' undertaking. Next Lateiner addresses the *veracity* of Herodotus' work. According to Lateiner, Herodotus observed the monuments and the landscapes, "asking

probing questions and... recording what he heard from survivors and descendants (xxvi).” While undoubtedly faced with conflicting and contradictory accounts, Herodotus was able to establish a compelling narrative. This one merit however is the most contested aspect of Herodotus’ The Histories. The father of history has his detractors and his apologists and the battle between them rages on. Lastly, Lateiner praises Herodotus for his *impartiality*. While Herodotus was ethnically and culturally Greek, and was clearly a fan of the Hellenic victory in the Greco-Persian wars, he was clearly not above criticizing the Greeks for their political and strategic shortcomings as well as praising the Persians for their logistical and social pragmatism (Lateiner & Macauley, 2004).

Lateiner tempers his laudatory description of Herodotus by indicating the writer’s shortcomings as well, which he lists under the word “defects”. As far as we know, Herodotus never held public office or served in the military in any capacity. Therefore his perspective regarding political or martial matters is limited. There is evidence of this in the simplified accounts he gives in the battles of Marathon and Salamis (Lateiner & Macauley, 2004). Herodotus did not possess fluency in any language other than Greek as far as we know, meaning he was dependent upon interpreters and translators. “This linguistic ignorance rendered him liable to interpreter’s errors, exaggerations and desires to please (xxviii).” Ultimately, Herodotus had limited access to information and no means by which to check his facts or corroborate the accounts as provided him by informants and interviewees. The library of Alexandria was still about 150 years away from existence, this being the closest equivalent to what we take for granted in terms of resources used for fact checking and shoring up academic arguments.

The most impressive aspect of Herodotus' work in *The Histories* and one that is of the utmost interest to the field of Communication is not his role as the father of history, but that of prototypical ethnographer (Parker, 2008). Herodotus' desire for understanding the causes of the Greco-Persian conflict, as well as isolating the reasons for Greek victory, prompted him to create a comprehensive study of the ethnic, social, political and spiritual practices of all the players in the game (Parker, 2008). While all ethnographers struggle with the notion that different cultures can only be examined through the lens of the ethnographer's cultural bias, Herodotus was able to use this challenge to his advantage by turning his gaze towards the achievements and shortcomings of Greek society (Lateiner, 1989). Herodotus was able to hold up Greek cultural practices next to those of other civilizations around the Mediterranean, and with parity was able to discriminate those that were the most successful. He was fascinated by the strange and unusual, and by logging the unique qualities possessed by different cultures, Herodotus was in turn able to better identify and isolate those cultural practices that were unique to Greek culture (Lateiner, 1989). It is through this process that Herodotus is able to define "Greekness" in relationship to the practices of their neighbors and foes: "until she can theorize... herself, she cannot theorize others (Parker, 2008).

Herodotus' writing of history, which Donald Lateiner categorizes as a "New Genre" utilizing a "New Rhetoric", is not limited to the traditional oral rhetoric and accounts of speeches by historical figures. Instead it forged new ground by providing information to the reader in the form of nonverbal behavior. Herodotus invokes both the literary practices of ethnography and the dramatic epic (Lateiner, 1989). He makes it a



point to write about the clothes, habits, foods and appearances of his characters. He describes the laughter, screams, gestures and expressions of his characters. Herodotus paints for us not just a mental picture of what historical events might have looked and sounded like, but also provides his readers with a psychological context so that we might know what historical events might have *felt* like. According to Lateiner, Herodotus' description of gesture fills in the gaps left by the inadequacy of speech. Contingent upon the reader (or viewer), gesture can provide near instantaneous recognition of status amongst characters or their emotional state. Gesture provides a mode of persuasion that is non-argumentative. It places a myriad of information wholly in the hands of the audience. "The *Histories* thus report gesture in their most objective, reportorial mode (ethnography) and in their most subjective, dramatic and interpretive mode (folkloric, historical, and paradigmatic stories)" (Lateiner, 1989).

Drawing upon the epic tradition hearkens back to the writings of Homer where Greek identity was reflected in the mythological. It is the trappings of mythology that give historical events as described by Herodotus their substance, scope and longevity. Events of the past are rendered more accessible when within the realm of human experience. "The narrative of the past is now more interesting because it is more human, and more significant because the roots of men's actions are exposed" (Lateiner, 1989). This dramatic lilt to the writing of Herodotus is particularly useful when trying to bridge the two-and-a-half millennia gap between his account of Thermopylae and the retellings presented by Frank Miller and Zack Snyder. *300*, both as a graphic novel and a film are best described as epic. The scope with which these stories are told visually and thematically can also be construed as mythic in proportion. Myth is nothing foreign

to the media of comics and film. From 1939, the very beginning of the comic book and the superhero genre, characters were born of mythic stuff. Umberto Eco stated that a comic book character, "...must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature which renders him easily recognizable (this is what happens to Superman)" (Eco & Chilton, 1972). In his 2011 essay "Heroes UnLimited: The Theory of the Hero's Journey and the Limitation of the Superhero Myth", Brett M. Rogers posits that due to the publishing demands of monthly comic books, comic book authors, looking for a template to help streamline their process, appropriated Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth. Rogers also argues that Campbell's theories have become so pervasive in the production of comics and film that contemporary artist's and audience's understanding of storytelling is conditioned by the Hero's Journey (Rogers, 2011). Therefore, several generations of comic writers and artists, screenwriters and directors, instinctively take a theory that was devised to deconstruct mythic characters and use it to re-mythologize their narratives. Characters clad in cowl, costume and cape who were once passé are transformed to de rigueur, and historical characters who traded in blood and sweat, can walk amongst the gods.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE PAGE

300, written and drawn by Frank Miller and colored by Lynne Varley, was originally released by Dark Horse Comics over the course of five issues from May to September of 1998. The work was first collected as a hardcover volume in 1999 with subsequent releases of editions to capitalize on the release of the 2007 film adaptation directed by Zack Snyder. The edition I own and will analyze is the 2006 hardcover edition that was released the year before the film.

The most immediate feature of this publication is its dimensions. Unlike most graphic novels and trade paperbacks, which mimic the standard dimensions of monthly or weekly comic printings (6.75" X 10.25"), the 2006 edition of 300 is printed to the dimensions of 13 inches wide by 10 inches high. The 13x10 are very nearly the 4:3 (or 1.33:1) aspect ratio that was standardized during the silent film era by usage of the 35mm motion picture lens. This aspect ratio was then chosen by the television industry in the late 1940's and early 1950's as the standard for television broadcast because of the ease with which cinematic features could be broadcast on television. Due to dwindling attendance, the film industry later changed to widescreen formats like Panavision and Cinemascope in the 1950's and 1960's to better compete with television. The TV industry continued using the 4:3 ratio up until the early 2000's with

the mass commercial acceptance of High Definition Television (HDTV) when HDTV's were internationally standardized at a wider screen format of 16:9 (Anamorphic Now, 2013). This is very interesting as the 1962 film, The 300 Spartans, which Frank Miller has publicly acknowledged as being his introduction to the battle of Thermopylae and the inspiration for his own version of the tale, was originally presented in a 2.35:1 widescreen format, but perhaps reached its broadest audience when replayed on television in a chopped and visually limited 4:3 format.

Miller's choice to draw 300 in essentially the 4:3 aspect ratio accomplishes two things:

1. It presents the story in a visual format familiar to at least two generations that were weaned on visual storytelling (first through cinema and then through television).

2. It deviates from the manner in which most comic book narratives are formatted, allowing for a more "epic" presentation of the story.

From a strictly practical point of view it affords more real estate with which Miller can expand his visual storytelling in terms of scope, scale and depth. For all intents and purposes it best mimics the widescreen cinematic experience that is usually accomplished in comics by use of what is known in the industry as a "splash page", or single image that takes up the entirety of one or two continuous pages (Markstein, 2010).

This is visual storytelling at its best. Miller and Varley capitalize on Herodotus' *new rhetoric* by rendering in ink and pigment what the Father of History had to do with detailed literary description. *Action, appearances and gestures can be seen* as opposed to being invoked through clever word choices. I could also argue that their occupation as artists makes Miller and Varley's interpretation of Herodotus more memorable in that they are in the business of producing iconic images. As most comics in the West adhere to traditional western reading practices (i.e. story progresses left-to-right), this provides Miller with the capability of better relaying these actions and gestures in an otherwise static medium. As our eyes are drawn across the first page, emblazoned across the top with the words, "Chapter One: Honor", we can begin to decode events *in media res*. On the left side of the page in the lower left hand corner we see the silhouettes of what look like Hoplite warriors, heads crowned with Corinthian helmets, the points of their *doru* spears raised high, in stark contrast to the dust that hangs in the air. As we move right across the page each progressive rank is larger and rendered in more detail creating the illusion of movement as the disciplined formation charges into battle. The image hums with a kinetic energy almost to the point of where you can hear the footfalls of the phalanx. It is a testament to Miller's skill as a visual storyteller that the smallest details sing the loudest and make the illusion of motion most potent. The ranks toward the bottom right of the page (the closest) hold their *dori* spears with the points thrust forward, several breaking frame. As a counterpoint, we see these warriors protected by their large *hoplon* shields, riddled with enemy arrows. We also see the long locks of hair streaming out behind the warriors. This little bit of contrast in movement: arrows and hair moving right to left, while hoplites and spears move left to right,

provides just enough resistance, allowing the imagination of the reader to gauge the power and direction and arguably the intent of the subjects in the image as they “move” across the page. The effect would be nowhere near as convincing if drawn on the standard 6.75”x10.25” comic book page as Miller would not be afforded any room for his Spartans to maneuver.

The first five pages in Miller’s 300 are all full-page affairs. There are no smaller frames that break up the action. While the chapter page foreshadows events yet to come, the next four pages provide more expository information and put our story on a path that presumably builds up to the event depicted in the first frame. As the story begins in earnest we see Spartans marching. Miller and Varley have made these images high contrast. Faces, helmets, shields and armor are all a stark interplay of highlight and shadow. Each page is washed in earth tones. Action moves from left to right and yet each subsequent page becomes brighter and more rendered. Not only do we maintain the sensation of an army marching across the landscape, but the reader is cued to the changes in the landscape as well: topographically and temporally. Highlights become so great that we recognize the experience as a sunrise. By the fourth page, the Spartan army has emerged from the darkness, cresting a rocky hill, bathed in the warm glow of morning. Miller labels the page with “480 B.C.” and Varley makes it the color of dried blood. The reader has been introduced to a landscape, to a people and to a time. From some of these early pages we can see the faces of individuals. We hope, as readers, that we will come to know some of these faces better, but through image and through text, Miller establishes that these men should first be seen as a collective unit. They move together. They will fight together and ultimately they will die together.

The remaining pages in the first chapter continue providing exposition by relating two past events through visual representations of action and renderings of appearances and gestures. The first sees us introduced to the character of Dilios. Dilios is not only a skilled warrior, but also a talented raconteur. Page seven has him seated by a campfire surrounded by other warriors, some relaxing, some grooming, some maintaining their tools of war. The character of Dilios is very expressive and when regaling his fellow Spartans with their favorite story about a boy becoming a Spartan warrior, his body gesticulates to better punctuate his tale. The panels on the next three pages move back and forth between images of Dilios, illuminated by the campfire, and the Spartan boy of his story, armed only with a sharpened stick, while being stalked by the shadowy form of a wolf with glowing blood-red eyes. Dilios' story accentuates the admirable Spartan qualities the boy displays: courage, poise and discipline. The story culminates with the boy luring the beast into a narrow passage of rock where the wolf becomes pinned. As Dilios says, "The boy raised his stick. His hands were steady. His form was perfect." The boy returns home to Sparta wearing the wolf's pelt. He is not only a warrior: he is a king. And with that we have a panel that focuses on Dilios' face and a dialog bubble crying out, "Our King! Leonidas!" This progresses to another panel of the bearded man looking up pensively then calling his Spartan warriors childish and telling them to go to sleep.

We now know this man, this King Leonidas, to be the paragon of Spartan warriors. I would be remiss if I did not mention an interesting observation about the nature of Dilios' story. Leonidas' duel with the wolf is obviously a rite of passage. It lends credibility to Leonidas' role as king, warrior and Spartan, but this particular

account must be called into question. There is little doubt amongst scholars that King Leonidas of Sparta participated in a rite of passage into manhood, but it is believed that he was required to perform a task that was expected of any Spartan boy. At the age of seven, every Spartan boy was taken from his family and placed in the *agoge*. *Agoge* is the Greek word for “raising” (Nelson & Allard-Nelson, 2004; Cartledge, 2006). It is essentially a 10-13 year boot camp where young Spartan males are toughened up through a brutal regimen of hazing, beatings, physical drills and limited food and clothing. The final test prior to joining the army requires the Spartan youth, under cover of darkness, to find a *helot* (a member of Sparta’s slave class) and kill him barehanded. The young Spartan must do this undetected and evade capture in order to succeed. Ironically, Spartan heirs to royalty were exempted from the *agoge* and this brutal rite of passage, but as Leonidas was not heir-apparent until the death of his half-brother Cleomenes, he had already been through the *agoge* and this particular test (Kennell, 1995). Why then does Miller have young Leonidas kill a wolf instead? It is difficult for contemporary audiences to view historical events from any perspective other than through the lens of 20th and 21st century ethics and morality (Nelson & Allard-Nelson, 2004). The stark and simple fact that Spartan military culture was founded on the backs of slave labor, and that an intended sympathetic character most-likely killed a slave in cold-blood as part of a coming-of-age ritual are difficult truths to ask a modern audience to rectify. Therefore, Miller changes (sanitizes?) the story. He looks again to history to solve his problem and doesn’t have to look much further than behind enemy lines.

While Herodotus may have stated that the extent of a Persian king’s education was limited to three things: riding a horse; shooting a bow & telling the truth, there is



evidence to suggest that great emphasis was placed on the cultural, political and philosophical (Cartledge, 2006). This by no means diminishes the need for a king of the Achaemenid dynasty to be a warrior as well as an administrator. To illustrate this, there is a story that has been attributed to Darius, Xerxes and even Darius III, which may serve as evidence of a Persian martial rite of passage. The story states that the Achaemenid heir was locked in a confined space armed only with a spear and a hungry lion was turned loose upon him. This creates an ultimate do or die situation and tells much about the character, courage and training of the Persian nobility. This is precisely the sort of revelatory information Miller needs in order to make Leonidas appealing to readers. It would however, be ironic to have Leonidas, the “son of the lion”, slaughtering a beast that symbolically represents strength, courage and royalty. Therefore Miller plays on deep-seated fears of predation that have been reinforced in the minds of modern audiences through countless iterations of Grimm’s Faery Tales. He makes the threat Leonidas faces into a shadowy, fire-eyed wolf. While taking such liberties, Miller is still able to invoke the necessary impression of Leonidas’ character and allows the audience to identify with him. Miller continues to reinforce the image of Leonidas as sympathetic character. There is a panel on the tenth page that shows Spartan warriors sleeping, clustered around small campfires with the solitary figure of Leonidas standing vigil. On this page, Miller further contextualizes the story of the wolf. He analogizes the Persians as a new beast, which like the wolf of so many years before, can only be overcome through Spartan poise and discipline.

The last expository scene from the first chapter illuminates the nature of the conflict for this story. While Herodotus’ account of the Persian Wars is concerned with

finding a root cause and looks back several decades in search of one, Miller's focus culminates with the battle of Thermopylae. He is not concerned with the Ionian Revolt, or Marathon or Artemesion (although he later produced Xerxes, which tells the tale of the naval battle between Artemesia of Caria and the Greek general Themistokles, which occurred simultaneously with Thermopylae). The story of *300* ends on the fields of Platea, prior to the 479 B.C.E. battle. As most of the characters will never leave Thermopylae, Miller distills the reasons for the battle into three very efficient pages. He begins by introducing the "other" belligerents in the conflict. Our first glimpse of the Persian messenger is one full of action. He rides astride a horse coming at us at full gallop, four hooves in the air. The messenger's cloak billows out behind him like wings while his face is set with a stern expression. His cloths are ornate and finely rendered in purple and gold, perhaps symbolizing his role as an imperial messenger. His wrists and fingers are all adorned with gold jewelry. The features of the messenger give him the appearance of an African man (perhaps symbolizing the breadth of the Persian Empire, or perhaps to add an element of racial tension to the conflict). The most striking features of the messenger however are the multiple piercings in his right nostril and left eyebrow. The combined effect of his appearance is one of decadence and excess. This is in stark contrast to the citizens of Sparta, who casually inhabit the streets of their city in loincloths or less. The Lakedemonians seem unimpressed by the Persians, at most viewing them as an ostentatious curiosity.

The Persian messenger and his entourage of archers, who are clothed in patterned gold and purple livery, are escorted man for man by Spartan warriors clad only in light brown cloaks. Once again the contrast is glaringly apparent. On the page,

the Spartans almost blend in to the cityscape as if they were a part of it. The Persians on the other hand look as if they don't belong. And they don't. The dialogue in these three pages is full of veiled insults while paying lip service to the revered concept *xenia*, or hospitality. Traditionally, the Greeks viewed hospitality as a divine right. This stemmed from the Greek belief that the gods would roam disguised amongst mortals. The Greeks feared retribution from the masked god who was not given proper hospitality (Louden, 2011). On page 11 we see two Lakedaimonians lackadaisically offering a bath to the Persian messenger. While this is a traditional gesture of hospitality, it is implied that the Persian has an offensive smell not because of his long ride through the Greek heat, but because of a proclivity for perfume, which the Spartans deem feminizing. Miller further hyper-masculinizes the Spartans by drawing them adorned in simple cloaks that reveals their physique and leaves their penises shamelessly exposed. When the Persian messenger asks for "...a modest offering— of earth and water— a simple token of Sparta's submission to the will of Xerxes..." (Miller & Varley, 1999), Leonidas says that this is a problem. The problem he refers to is one of image and reputation. Leonidas labels the Athenians, who have already declined the Persian request as "boy-lovers". He implies that the practice of pederasty makes the Athenians less masculine than the Spartans, and by not refusing the Persian request of submission as well would be damaging to the Spartan reputation. There is a certain irony to what Miller presents to his readers as pederasty was practiced throughout ancient Greece and while falling into decline toward the end of the fifth century BCE, continued in Sparta in particular through the classical period (Nelson & Allard-Nelson, 2004). Understanding of the sexual behaviors of the ancient Greeks is by no means

comprehensive, but it is known while they practiced pederasty, homosexuality amongst adult males was not acceptable (Nelson & Allard-Nelson, 2004). While there was a sexual component to pederasty, it generally was a mentorship between an adolescent and a twenty-something. The relationship was in place to help guide the younger male into maturity and most often ended when he reached adulthood. Either by choice or because of ignorance, Miller equates pederasty to homosexuality as an affront to Greek masculinity. In actuality, while accepting of pederasty, the ancient Greeks did consider sexual relations between adult males a challenge to masculinity on the grounds that males are to be active and penetrating in sexual encounters rather than passive and penetrated. For a warrior culture like the Spartans, whose very profession relied upon their ability to aggressively penetrate their opponents with a dory spear it is easier to understand the desire to protect a reputation where masculinity, sexuality and military prowess are inextricably linked. In order to reaffirm the masculinity of his subjects, Miller creates a display that is inspired by Herodotus and presented as only a comic book artist would envision. The final page of chapter one is divided in half. The left half of the page is taken up by the open and yawning maw of a large brick well. Leonidas and the Persian messenger stand at the precipice while the other Spartans hold the Persian entourage at sword point. The second half of the page is divided into seven panels. The first three are devoted to reactionary frames of the Persian messenger, his face drawn in high contrast that emphasizes the expression of the eyes and mouth. Both register panic and disbelief. The character's hands are held up, fingers spread as in a gesture of surrender. The dialogue bubbles support this by hearkening to a violation of *xenia*. "This is blasphemy!", "This is madness!" he cries, to which Leonidas replies with the phrase

made famous by the film adaptation, "This is Sparta." A penetrating kick from the Spartan king sends his adversary into the black abyss of the well. The last panel shows Leonidas sheathing his sword and casually walking away as the other Spartans pierce the Persian archers with their swords and send them hurtling into the well's depths. Two last bits of text are juxtaposed to illustrate the mentality of Spartan culture and their manner of diplomacy - "The children frolic." and "A war begins." This last bit of text can be understood two ways. The first is that war is a way of life in Sparta. Spartan children will play the same in times of peace as in times of war. The other way this text can be understood, and made more overt by the action-taking place in the panel, is that of the trained Spartan warriors being unleashed to bring forth the fury for which they have been bred.

Another example of Miller's representations of appearance and gesture can be found in Chapter Two: Duty. This chapter depicts Leonidas addressing the Ephors of Sparta. Miller paints the Ephors as priests shrouded in cloaks and hoods. They reside in a temple atop a high and treacherous rock promontory and even Spartan kings are only granted access by way of monetary bribe. On the sixth page of chapter two, as if a bird perched high in the cupola of the temple, looking down, we see Leonidas on his hands and knees, spreading out a map of the Hot Gates and spelling out the Spartan battle plan. The king's head is bowed and he is surrounded by the shrouded figures of the Ephors and the columns supporting the temple. The image shows a discrepancy in status between the king and Ephors in a couple of different ways. Leonidas' body position mimics one of supplication. He is almost prostrate, while the Ephors loom over

him. The Spartan king is also clearly outnumbered by the Ephors and must look up and all around him to address them. The manner in which Miller dresses his characters is also interesting. Aside from his cloak and bound loins, Leonidas is naked before the Ephors. He is exposed and revealing which metaphorically says something about his sense of conduct and honor. He is honest and direct. In contrast, the Ephors are mostly hidden beneath their robes. Their appearances are as mysterious as their motives. The only thing identifying the Ephors as possibly being human are eight pairs of pox-ridden feet with long, unkempt toenails. Miller draws them about the temple, staggered, positioning Ephor, column, Ephor, column. It invokes the idea that Sparta's ministers of religious tradition are integral in supporting the structures that maintain the status quo. They are rigid and inflexible and according to Leonidas a vestige "...from the age of darkness." It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Ephors are Miller's criticism of organized religion. Historically, the Ephors (overseers) were a council of no more than 5 men, each at least the age of 30 who were elected annually and with Sparta's two kings, represented the executive power within the Spartan state. With the dual monarchy, the Ephors created a system of checks and balances that could, if needed, provide a foil for overly charismatic kings. Miller expresses no love for the Ephors and in addition to rendering them physically unattractive, his word choices reinforce this. He continually describes them as "swine", "worthless", "diseased" and "rotten". Miller punctuates his portrayal of the Ephors by blatantly showing them not only as corrupt, but also as traitors to the Spartan state. After Leonidas hears the prophecy of a Pythian-like oracle who reinforces the position of the Ephors, he leaves and from the shadows, bearing gold, emerges a figure resembling the Persian messenger Leonidas

kicked to the bottom of the well. This man's features are African as well and his nose is pierced. As this new character thanks the Ephors on behalf of Xerxes, he details the compensation for their betrayal, "When Sparta burns - you will bathe in gold. Fresh oracles will be delivered to you - daily - from every corner of the empire." This new Persian messenger delivers this with an expression of pleasure that resembles more of a sneer than a smile. There is no evidence in the historical record to substantiate that the Ephors denied Leonidas' request for an army because of Persian bribery. Instead, by using a common political tactic, Miller attempts to lionize (pun intended) Leonidas by demonizing the Ephors. He makes no mention of Sparta's other king, thus leaving Leonidas as the sole moral, honorable and righteous political figure in Lakedemonia. By simultaneously raising the stakes and limiting the choice of sympathetic characters, Miller has almost forced the reader into admiring Leonidas, thus creating a proxy for his own demagoguery.

At the end of the Archaic Period, which happens to coincide with the battle of Thermopylae, "...Greek art begins to depict what we now describe as the classical proportions of man" (Sullivan, 2001). In contrast, depictions of deformity in Greek art carried with them the connotation of mental anguish rather than physical suffering. In chapter three of *300* (entitled 'Glory'), the reader is introduced to a hulking, hunchbacked, misshapen figure wearing an ill-fitting Corinthian helmet, a red cloak and bearing a hoplon shield. A good two-thirds of the frame is taken up by his (its?) lumpy shoulder and back. From Miller's drawing it looks as if the character's disfigurement is a combination of musculature, boil and lesion. His head, surrounded by the scarlet cloak and adorned with the too small Corinthian helm, cocked at a jaunty angle is leprous and

simply ugly. The brow is heavy, the nose broad and flat, and the chin slight and covered with hairy growths. The lips are thin and pulled showing a hint of toothy sneer. His left eye is heavy lidded and weepy while the right is large and bulbous with a cold, blue iris that stares out from the page with intensity. Miller has drawn this figure in a way that no matter what angle it is looked at, the single blue eye looks squarely at the reader. The overall effect of this creature is pitiful and unnerving. After so many pages of establishing the Spartans and Leonidas in particular as physical specimens, it is a mockery to clothe such a monstrosity in Spartan livery, but it is clever on Miller's part to do so as it foreshadows events to come and piques the curiosity of the reader thus building anticipation.

On the second page of chapter three, most of the page is taken up by an image of warriors doing calisthenics (specifically push-ups) Spartan style. Five men are prone, doing one-handed push-ups while another warrior in full Miller battle dress of helm, spear, shield and cloak stands casually on the backs of each one. The scene is drawn if lit by firelight, illustrating that Spartan Hoplites will train, fight or march no matter the time of day or conditions. The exercises themselves are extreme and continue to add to Miller's portrayal of the Spartans as exemplary physical specimens whose will power and discipline override pain or discomfort. A five panel vertical strip on the left of the page provides brief exposition that explains the Spartan practice of examining newborns for physical defects and exposing those that did not fit physical standards. The first panel shows a pair of hands roughly manipulating a crying newborn. A text bubble reads, "if we are small or puny or sickly or misshapen, we are discarded." The corresponding panel is a silhouette depicting a cloaked figure atop a rocky outcrop,



dropping what appears to be a baby into space. The next panel shows a bald and apparently naked youth in profile with his left hand clenched into a fist and drawn back as if ready to punch. The next panel is another silhouette of what appears to be bare trees, their final leaves stripped off by blowing wind. This frames the hunched and thin figure of what is assumed to be the figure from the previous panel. In the final panel of this strip we again see the head and torso of the bald youth. His hands are bound by rope, his arms held at a right angle. It appears as if he is being struck from behind with a rod. These depictions of infanticide and brutality towards children, while they may be shocking and distasteful to contemporary sensibilities, adequately represent practices that were fundamental to the maintenance and survival of the Spartan city-state (Nelson & Allard-Nelson, 2004).

So much attention has been paid to expressing the moral and physical superiority of these Greek warriors that Miller must show that they are not wholly callous. When Leonidas asks his captains of any risks that may allow the Persians to flank the Greek positions, the shadowy and misshapen figure first revealed at the beginning of the chapter appears and points out such a route. Leonidas' captains react as if threatened by the monstrous form who identifies himself by the name of Ephialtes. Leonidas dismisses their posturing as poor manners. Clearly the Spartan king is not intimidated. Ephialtes briefly explains he is Spartan-born, but upon witnessing his deformity, his parents fled Sparta fearing their child would be subject to infanticide. The deformed Spartan speaks of learning the ways of a warrior from his father and requests to serve Leonidas in combat. The Spartan king asks Ephialtes to walk with him. The panels are drawn almost completely in silhouette where Ephialtes demonstrates his

combat drills and spear thrust. Leonidas compliments the man's offensive capability but then points out his deficient defensive ability. In one dialog bubble, the words "phalanx", "unit" and "strength" are written in bold typeface. Leonidas explains that the phalanx battle formation is strong and successful because its soldiers within the formation function as an integrated unit. Due to his deformity, Ephialtes is unable to raise his shield high enough to adequately protect men in a phalanx. Briefly in one frame, half of Leonidas' face becomes visible. In the next frame we see half of Ephialtes' face as he is told that Leonidas cannot use him in battle. The king apologizes and abruptly leaves. The next frame is an extreme close-up of Ephialtes' face and its bulging blue eye. The expression is one of despair as the dialogue bubble reads, "Mother. Father. You were wrong." The next two panels are silhouetted depictions of Ephialtes throwing himself from a cliff. The image evokes that of seven pages earlier, where the, "...small or puny or sickly or misshapen... are discarded." For Leonidas, the question had a pragmatic answer. It can be argued that Leonidas had no desire to publicly humiliate the man and this is why he led him away to talk privately. This is about all the tenderness one can expect from a Spartan warrior. Miller even wants his readers to view Ephialtes not as a figure to be reviled, but instead as one to be pitied. This he does with two small bits of narration, 'poor soul' and 'may he rest in peace'. One can't help but think that in the world of 480 B.C. as Miller paints it, Ephialtes has made the right, proper, *Spartan* choice. The plight of this poor, deformed Spartan, who should never have been, is a perfect example of the Classical concept of *pathos*.

In spite of the political intrigue and the carefully rendered depictions of cultural contrast, *300* is a war narrative. An audience that wishes to read about the battle of

Thermopylae has a reasonable expectation to see some actual battle. Chapter Four is entitled "Combat". The art on the page depicts first contact between the Spartan and Persian forces. It is painted in earth tones of browns and reds, gold and black. The mass of clashing bodies takes up three quarters of the page. Just below the chapter title's block letters is the visually arresting image of a Persian soldier aloft, spear and wicker shield in hand, with a Spartan dori completely penetrating a spray of blood where his head should be. As the eye moves down the page we can see the chaotic nature of ancient melee warfare. It is a mass of humanity with no visible gaps. Every space is occupied by soldier, shield or spear. It is cramped, claustrophobic and utterly brutal. The more the reader looks at the image the more detail becomes apparent. At least six Persian soldiers have been visibly impaled upon Spartan spears while there are no obvious Spartan casualties. This image foreshadows the carnage yet to come while belaying the true cost the Spartans will have to pay. The next page shows an excellent depiction of the Greek phalanx. The image takes up the entire page and Miller draws it in perspective so it appears as if the formation is marching towards the reader. Four, almost five ranks can be seen, spears bristling at the ready. The uniformity of spear, shield, helmet and cloak as well as the regimented positioning of rank and file give the impression of phalanx as machine. It is mobile, mechanized death. It is only the sandaled feet and muscular arms grasping spears that remind you these are men. Yet what makes these men effective at what they do, and what precipitates their being the subject of discussion is the ability to shed individuality when necessary to function as a unit. This is the cornerstone of any successful army. What is most noticeable is that when Miller paints his Spartan Hoplites, their Corinthian helmets obscure their eyes. We

the reader have no connection to the warriors in these panels. They are methodical, mechanical and without mercy. This is echoed later on in the narrative when the Spartans encounter the Immortals, the personal bodyguards to King Xerxes and the warrior elite of the Persian Empire. They march wearing breastplates that create an eerie image of hollow, chest-less, *heartless*, *soulless*, men. Their faces are covered by gray, simian-like masks with dark, hollow eyes and dark grimacing mouths. These Immortals cross the page as cyphers: a warrior machine every bit as cold and impersonal as the Spartans themselves.

As the battle rages on, we see Spartans engaging and running through Persian soldiers, but what is most interesting is that while we cannot see the facial features of the helmeted Spartans, we can clearly see the eyes of the Persian infantry. There is a panel showing a Spartan thrusting his spear into the groin of a Persian who stares down at the shaft piercing his body with a look of disbelief. In a panel below this we see a mass of Spartans driving a group of Persians from left to right. Spears pass through Persian bodies with Miller's requisite spray of blood. The bottom image is especially chilling in that two of the victims of the faceless Spartan defenders break the fourth wall by staring directly at the reader. Their eyes are wide with what can be interpreted as fear, disbelief or surprise. Their pupils are mere pinpricks. There is a feeling that these soldiers are pleading with us, the reader, in their final dying moments.

*Persians **gasp** and **groan** and **gurgle** and **scream** and **stumble** and **tumble** and **fall**, brains splattering across briny stone, lungs sucking deep of the deadly, salty sea.... We Spartans laugh like fools — And keep pushing.... No Prisoners.... No Mercy.... We're off to one hell of a good start.*

(Miller & Varley, 1999)

This is the text that accompanies one of the most iconic images of Frank Miller's *300*. It is important to point out that Miller has the following words written in bold print: *gasp*, *groan*, *gurgle*, *scream*, *stumble*, *tumble*, *fall*. Beside the simple alliterative and a few rhymes, these words are a combination of onomatopoeia, adjectives and verbs. Each word is vivid in its descriptive power, evoking a very real and succinct response from the reader. They are distinct and emotionally charged. Pairing this with the simple image of Spartan hoplites driving Persian soldiers off a cliff whilst silhouetted by the rising/setting sun makes for a memorable scene (memorable enough to be utilized visually verbatim by director Zach Snyder in the film adaptation) written in canary yellow to match the color of the sun, the phrase "The First Day". This text is situated in the bottom right corner of the page. The effect of this page is exciting, not unlike a favored team taking an early lead in the game. As any good storyteller does, Miller is building the drama. At this point in the narrative, Miller has already established the necessary exposition and therefore is free to drive the story along with violent action.

The fifth and final chapter of *300* is entitled "Victory" and here we see what sort of action it is that drives the Persians. There is a panel where in the foreground we can see the crook of a man's arm as he draws back with a whip in hand. In the mid ground

we can see another man lashing a group of three assumed Persian soldiers holding the visible outlines of spears and shields as they run to the right of the page. The action in the top panel moves across the page in a left to right pattern. The bottom panel is drawn in opposition. On the right side of the page, in the foreground, are the highlights of hoplon and Corinthian helm, the long black shaft of a dori held horizontally drawing the eye across the page right to left. We see the silhouettes of shields and spears with billowing crimson cloaks, driving three Persian silhouettes back towards the left of the page. The effect of the two panels in concert is almost comical. Persian soldiers are whipped into running towards the Spartan lines, only to encounter the Lakedemonians and be driven back in a similar fashion. Fear is what motivates the Persian army and these images confirm the Spartan's assertion that they are fighting for freedom. It is not national pride or the desire to protect their homeland that motivates the Persian soldiers. It is the lash, a blatant symbol of slavery and oppression, that drives them to fight.

After learning that the Persians have outflanked the Greek defenders and addressing his troops, Leonidas asks Dilios to walk with him. He privately orders his troubadour-warrior to leave the battlefield and spread the tale of the Spartan's stand at Thermopylae to all corners of Greece. Yet Leonidas informs Dilios that it will not be a tale of defeat, but one of victory. For a split-second, Dilios seems to question his king's assertion, but the storyteller's remaining eye takes on the same calm and focused look found in the eyes of Leonidas and the other Spartans. This is the look of men who understand that they serve a purpose far greater than any individual and serves as another example of *pathos*. It is the look of discipline and duty. As he departs, Dilios

closes his eye. He is a Spartan warrior and longs to stand alongside his fellow warriors, but accepts the role his “spare eye” must play. Dilios will bear witness. Combined with his talents as raconteur and communicator, he will insure that all free Greeks know that victory can be found in sacrifice.

The climax of Miller and Varley’s *300* begins with a page featuring a member of the Immortals and the hulking figure of Ephialtes in silhouette. Ephialtes looks a bit different. Varley’s highlights reveal he has shed his crimson cloak and Corinthian helm in favor of gold studs and Persian cap. A long-nailed finger points to a mountain pass below him. The bulging blue eye eliminates any doubt to his identity. As stated by Herodotus, Ephialtes is guiding the Persians to the mountain pass that will allow them to outflank and surround the Spartans and other Greek defenders. A full page is devoted to an image of the Spartans awaiting their Persian adversaries. Leonidas is most prominent, standing in the foreground, his red cloak in tatters, shield and spear breaking frame of the page. His eyes are clearly visible through his helmet as he stares into the distance, presumably at Xerxes. Behind him, clustered closely together with hoplons and dori held in tight ranks are his Spartan comrades. There is no dialogue. Instead Miller provides omniscient narration cueing the reader in to Leonidas’ inner thoughts. There is an image of a youth with sharpened stick, squaring off with a shadowy wolf with glowing, blood red eyes. This harkens back to the trials of the Greek king’s youth. The next image is a close-up profile of Leonidas’ helmet. Miller’s narration speaks to the king’s lack of fear and growing restlessness. The breeze, the cries of the seagulls and the steady beats of his Spartans’ hearts reveal the heightened nature of his senses. The boundless loyalty of his men occupies his thoughts. In the next panel, Miller shifts the

perspective to a position above the Spartans where the reader can see how completely surrounded the Greeks are by the Persians. This sequence builds tension with its interplay between Leonidas surrendering his weapons and the expressions, most notably, of Ephialtes and his bulging blue eye. It ends with the Greek king dropping to his knees and hanging his head.

There is a cognitive cry within the mind of the reader as the man who has been continually built up as a paragon of reason and resistance makes this gesture of obeisance. In the last panel of the page, Leonidas' head gazes into the dirt as a word escapes his lips. However, it is not a word, it is a name: Stelios. As the reader turns the page, the visual narrative explodes with action. Leonidas' submission was a ruse to lure in the Spartan's enemies and precipitate a final opportunity for attack. In a display of aerial ability, Stelios flies forward with his dori and impales the Persian emissary, while Leonidas reclaims his discarded weapon. Two insert panels provide close-ups of Xerxes displaying the most emotion he's shown in the entire story as he screams to his troops, "SLAUGHTER THEM"! A flurry of arrows surrounds and pierces Leonidas as he rears back, preparing to throw his spear. In a large dialogue bubble, with the largest font used in the entire comic, Leonidas cries, "XERXES- - - DIE!" as the spear leaves his open and outstretched hand in the middle of a rain of arrows. The remainder of the page is taken up with a drawing of the Greek king drawing his sword, teeth bared, riddled with Persian arrows and according to the narrative bubble, laughing in the face of death. Behind him we can see a helmeted Spartan warrior meeting death, his eyes wide, their pupils pinpricks.



The next page is divided into three horizontal panels. In the top one we see a dori, with nicked spear point, suspended in the air. In the next panel we see the same spear approaching the head of Xerxes as he stares at it defiantly from atop his palanquin. In the third panel, the dori, which we can safely assume belonged to Leonidas, has flown past Xerxes and buried itself in the emperor's conveyance. Xerxes' left cheek is awash in a spray of crimson and some of what look like Xerxes' facial piercings hang in the air behind the spear's butt spike. The living god can bleed. Xerxes' lips are slightly parted, his eye's half-lidded and there is no sign of fear, pain or shock in his face. This is confirmed in a later panel that shows the Persian king holding a hand to his wounded cheek as he casually watches his archers dispatch Leonidas and the remaining Spartans. The last image we have of the 300 Spartans is that of their arrow-ridden bodies strewn across the battlefield in various states of repose. In the center, lay their king, supine across a rock, arms outstretched. This final image of the Spartans contrasts greatly to the action in the pages that precede it. There is a stillness and quiet to the image that Miller enhances by including the epitaph by Simonides of Ceos: "Go tell the Spartans, passerby: That here, by Spartan Law, we lie."

The final two pages take place a year after the events of Thermopylae. It is the eve of the battle of Platea. An eye-patched Dilios, who now carries the rank of Captain, holds a group of Spartan hoplites enthralled by firelight, as he spins the tale of the battle of the Hot Gates. As Leonidas foresaw, the veteran troubadour-warrior inspires his troops and prepares them for battle with his storytelling. Through his tales, the values, traditions and deeds of the 300 Spartans live forever. The one irony that is never touched upon, however, is how Dilios can speak to the event of the last stand of the 300

Spartans when he himself leaves the battlefield before the final battle commences? I suppose the political and cultural stakes that compelled Leonidas and his men to die in defense of reason, liberty and self-determination were well established before their final act of sacrifice. At this point in the game, the reader is hopefully so invested in Miller's carefully constructed pathos that the momentum of the images and the visual narrative allow the casual reader to disregard any story-telling paradoxes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE SCREEN

Zack Snyder's 2007 film adaptation of Frank Miller & Lynn Varley's *300* might very well be the most faithful translation of comic book to film that has ever been attempted. Stylistically, from color palette and art direction to dialogue and character design, there is little in Snyder's film that cannot be found in the pages of Miller and Varley's graphic novel. Yet due to the demands of the film medium, primarily those regarding pacing and time, important and noticeable differences can be found. It is not hard to believe that director Snyder kept a copy of Miller's *300* close by during all steps of the filmmaking process. I made it a point to watch the film with my copy of the graphic novel sitting in my lap so that I could readily discern what was culled directly from Miller's version and where the story was embellished or in some cases, wholly fabricated for the film. For the most part, Snyder recreates for the screen, what is seen on the page. The narration and dialogue in the film are almost verbatim Miller's words. Many of the most iconic images of the film are direct recreations of Miller's drawings. I doubt if there was much need for Snyder to storyboard scenes in the film as Miller had already done most of the work for him. This is the reason why in this chapter I will instead focus on the details of the film that differ from those found in Miller's pages. These are the aforementioned demands of film adaptation, that allow for departures from

the source text. Some are expository, while others serve the need to pad a feature-length film's running time and/or target a specified viewer demographic.

Following the opening title, which uses the same blood-spattered font seen in the graphic novel, the viewer is treated to a history lesson. Snyder's first major departure has less to do with changing the events to be presented as much as changing the order in which the events are presented. Faced with less than two hours to tell his story, Snyder makes the choice to drop the viewer into the world Spartan warriors are born. He does this quite literally by taking Miller's exposition that explains the inspection of Spartan infants for defects and composing a shot whose foreground is framed with a mound of little skulls. The empty, soulless eye sockets are evoked, yet contrasted by the dark, shining eyes of a Spartan elder as he turns and rolls an infant in his hands, looking for the slightest deformity or imperfection that would require casting the child onto the pile of miniature bones. This child will pass the muster, and with him, the viewer will learn the unique cultural practices that make a Spartan warrior. At age seven, we will go with him as he is stripped from his mother and sent to the *agoge*. It is here that I first noticed a non-verbal behavior that is quite rare in Miller's text, but permeates Snyder's adaptation: the backwards-looking glance. As the child's mother is being restrained, he is led away by the arm, but not before looking back over his shoulder towards her. We see the violent and brutal training practices of the *agoge* where the boy is compelled to use his fists and the aftermath is displayed as he looks into the camera with bloodied lips and an eye swollen shut. Finally, as in Miller's source, we see the boy alone in the snowy wilderness, armed only with a sharpened stick. He encounters the wolf with glowing red eyes. Youth and beast circle one another until the

boy calmly looks over his shoulder to see a crevice in the rocks behind him. He casually turns and walks toward the fissure, only to again look over his shoulder to see if the wolf will follow him. Visually, the remainder of this scene plays out just as it does in Miller's version, albeit much earlier in the film's narrative. Upon vanquishing the wolf, we learn that the youth we have been watching is none other than Leonidas. All these images serve as a visualization of the story as told by one-eyed Dilios, who tells his tale in the Spartan camps above the field of Platea. Thus, the viewer is introduced to two very important players in this story, Dilios, the narrator who will serve as guide, navigator and commentator and Leonidas, the protagonist. The next scene, while for the most part adhering to the template Miller created, introduces us to two more characters that will serve a subplot wholly unique to the film. Just as in the graphic novel a Persian messenger and entourage arrive in Sparta requesting a symbolic gesture of submission. Snyder felt the need to elevate the stakes in this scene by having the Persian messenger possess a collection skulls and crowns that presumably belong to kings that defied the will of Xerxes. This symbolic threat serves to demonize the Persians. The Persian messenger is brought before King Leonidas and the now present Queen Gorgo, by a character created for the film, Councilman Theron. Queen Gorgo immediately establishes her relationship with Theron by greeting him with, "Councilman Theron, you found yourself needed for once." This is the opening volley of a rivalry that will fuel a subplot of political intrigue that touches on the nature of women's agency in the Spartan warrior culture throughout the film. Queen Gorgo has no qualms about inserting herself into state affairs by warning the Persian messenger about his coyness. The Persian messenger is clearly shocked by a woman being allowed to participate in what he sees

to be “man talk” and tries to lead Leonidas away as he delivers his message. Gorgo and Theron follow and we see the messenger look back over his shoulder to see the Spartan queen staring back at him disdainfully. Snyder again chooses to elevate the stakes in Leonidas’ decision to resist Persian encroachment. Close-ups of Leonidas’ eyes looking at what is at risk, namely Sparta and her people, are intercut with shots of those very same people looking back at him in anticipation of the great king’s decision. Finally, Leonidas looks back over his shoulder to his wife, their eyes fix and it is apparent that the decision has been made. This is Sparta. This is not and never will be a satrapy of the Persian Empire. As the Spartans dispatch their Persian guests into the bottomless well that has become such an icon for the film, Snyder allows the camera to follow one of the Persians as he falls. The frame zooms in on the man’s exasperated eyes as he is swallowed in blackness. These Spartans are to be feared.

The next scene, which features Leonidas consulting with the Ephors, who in turn consult with the Oracle, is just as it is in the graphic novel. The only departure in this sequence comes at the very end, after Leonidas has been rebuffed and ordered to honor the Carneia. Once he leaves, another Persian messenger arrives with gold and promises the lecherous Ephors a bevy of nubile oracles. Yet, the Ephors are not the only corrupt Spartans. Councilman Theron has accompanied the Persian messenger. This bit of character development justifies his treatment at the hands of the Spartan king and queen, eliminating any doubt in the mind of the viewer of his role as villain. In contrast to Leonidas and the evolving picture of what it means to be a Spartan, Theron is the antithesis. He does not serve in the army as the honorable king does. Instead, he is a duplicitous politician who speaks circuitously and his presence amongst the Ephors

and Persian messenger points to his direct involvement in the refusal to send the Spartan army north to defend Greece. Inklings of an old soldier's complaint come to mind: *We could win if the politicians let us*. There is another small characteristic of this scene that is visually interesting and slightly different from the source material. The scene ends with the bearded and gilded face of the messenger taking up most of the foreground of the frame. He looks directly into the lens, beaming and suddenly his face is masked in shadow. This dimming effect doesn't change the illumination of the background. What is so striking is that the messenger's eyes blaze in the darkness. This is the second time in a row where a scene ends in a fade to black and the focus is on a character's eyes that seem to break the fourth wall.

The next scene does not appear in Miller & Varley's *300*, but is unique to the film adaptation. As Snyder has chosen to expand the role of Gorgo in his telling of the story and to make her more than the cypher she is in the graphic novel, a scene is needed to better define the relationship between Leonidas and his queen. How these two characters interact privately provides insight for the viewer in terms of Gorgo's personality and will lend credibility to her conflict with Theron in the film's subplot. The scene begins with Leonidas standing naked in the moonlight, looking beyond the terrace of his bedchamber. The camera changes position and we can see the troubled face of Leonidas with the out-of-focus figure of who we assume to be Gorgo asleep behind him. She stirs in the bed and we see him turn and look over his shoulder at her. The queen is perceptive and knows something is bothering her husband. Through intimate conversation we see more of the king's conflict between his obligation to obey Sparta's laws and his duty to defend Sparta from all threats, foreign or domestic. In the

confines of this bedchamber it is revealed to the viewer that this relationship is a partnership. Leonidas loves and honors Gorgo, but he also respects her enough to solicit her advice. Which she gives without quarter. Where Leonidas may be harboring doubt, Gorgo has none. She is every bit as much a creature of duty as her husband. She recognizes that if the king allows the rule of law to prevent him from defending his homeland, such laws would be moot because Sparta will cease to be. Gorgo takes the dominant role in this dialogue and aids in the restoration of Leonidas' confidence. This is important because it illustrates Gorgo as a woman of reason and power on equal footing with her husband. It is also important for Leonidas because it humanizes him and garners sympathy from the audience. The transposition of status also ignites the couple's passion and the requisite sex scene that follows. The sex scene is also interesting in that through the physical act of love we see a reversal of status that leads the Spartan king back to a position of dominance. Their lovemaking begins with Gorgo on top, in the dominant position. This transitions to missionary position with Leonidas on top, but special emphasis is placed upon Gorgo's hands as she digs her fingers into his back as if trying to possess him and refusing to let go. The scene ends with Leonidas standing and taking Gorgo from behind, placing him in the dominant position. The king has reasserted himself, as a monarch and as a man, but the moment is punctuated by Leonidas reaching across his wife's back to tenderly caress her face with his hand.

The next morning we see Leonidas and his Captain inspecting 300 Spartan warriors when a group of men, presumably members of the council, approach. They beg Leonidas not to defy the Ephors or Spartan law. Theron is among them and his presence brings a more adversarial tone than found in the graphic novel. Ironically, in



the graphic novel, this scene is the only one in which the Queen of Sparta appears. It is she who advises that the king take his bodyguard of 300 men on his long walk. In the film, as in the book, Gorgo is there to say goodbye to her husband in the traditional Spartan fashion: *come home with your shield, or on it*. Very few words pass between husband and wife. Maintaining the laconic nature of the Spartans, Zack Snyder still chooses to build the emotional resonance of the scene with a non-verbal exchange between Leonidas and Gorgo. Both characters seem to know that this will be the final time they ever set eyes on one another. The Spartan queen takes from her own neck, a necklace she has been wearing since the beginning of the film and places it around Leonidas' neck. It is a simple leather cord, from which hangs a fang or claw. Perhaps this tooth or claw came from the wolf Leonidas killed so many years before, but regardless of what this totem actually is, it is apparent from the look on the Greek king's face that it holds significant meaning. Leonidas turns away and marches north, not looking back. It is Gorgo instead who looks back, towards her son, toward Sparta and as she does so, a low rumble of thunder can be heard and a shadow descends across her face.

Up to this point in the film, the viewer has seen very little of the Persians. What we can infer from the two Persian messengers in their colorful livery and proclivity for facial piercings is that the Persians are decadent, ostentatious and possess immense wealth. The Spartans appear downright ascetic in comparison and from what the audience has seen of Spartan military discipline, the Persians might not appear as much of a threat. At this point in the film, it is important for Snyder to quash any such notions and give the audience a taste of the true menace Greece faces. As they march

north, the 300 Spartans and a band of Arcadian soldiers encounter a blood red sky and pillar of smoke. This leads them to a devastated village completely devoid of inhabitants. Buildings are aflame. Livestock have been slaughtered. All the soldiers are hyper-alert as they look for the village's people, knowing full well that they most likely encountered the forces of King Xerxes. Out of the smoke emerges a lone little boy, battered and filthy. He walks directly up to King Leonidas, looks him in the eye and collapses into the Greek king's arms. "It's quiet now," he says. "They came with beasts from the blackness with fangs and claws and took everyone but me...." (Snyder, 2007) It is there that the little boy either dies, or passes out from the shock of it all. Suddenly, a Spartan calls out that he has found the villagers. All the Spartans and Arcadians stare in disbelief at what the Persians have done. It is a tree of the dead. Either lashed or pinned in place with arrows, are the bodies of the villagers, covering the tree in its entirety from roots to trunk to branches. The Persians are masters of psychological warfare and the tree serves as a warning to the audience every bit as much as it does to the Greeks. Snyder continues to demonize the Persians and their methods. There are no redeeming qualities to be found in these Persians. These are not Persians as Herodotus would have described them. These Persians are the other. They are monsters and they will grant no quarter.

It is not long before the Spartans engage the Persians at Thermopylae. Due to the inspired choice to use the terrain of Greece as a force multiplier in the face of overwhelming Persian numbers as well as their superior discipline on the battlefield, the Spartans inflict heavy casualties on the invaders. However this is not the only battle

being fought by Spartans. On the home front, the battle is not fought with spears and shields, but with intrigue and political maneuvering.

Obeying the mandate set forth by the Ephors and supported by Theron, the Spartan Council has prohibited their army from marching to battle during the time of Carneia. Queen Gorgo however, is compelled to provide aid to her husband and his men by any means necessary. While the queen is honored and respected customarily in public, she holds very little political power. And despite the reverence for mother's who produce warriors that defend the city-state, Sparta remains a patriarchal society. Thus, Gorgo plans a hawkish and unorthodox approach. She wishes to go before the all-male council and make the case for war. It is a bold move, but one that cannot hope to succeed due to her limited access. She therefore must rely upon the assistance of a gatekeeper, a member of the council who can grant her the audience she seeks. Such behavior is highly irregular within the socially rigid Spartan society and would not be permitted of the average Spartan woman, let alone Sparta's queen. But the Councilman, whose help she has sought is a man of principal. He believes in the decision made by his king and will bend the rules in support of what he believes to be a greater good. Only someone of his position and stature could make this possible. So despite her intelligence and cunning, Gorgo is still subject to Spartan hegemony and the success or failure of her plan will rely upon a man.

The plan is not without risk. Theron, should he get wind of her machinations could easily, in a supreme act of dramatic irony, make trouble for the queen with allegations of conspiracy and anarchy. Therefore all meetings of the queen and Councilman must be conducted under a veil of secrecy. Snyder symbolically reinforces

the obfuscatory nature of this scene by intercutting shots of Gorgo and the Councilman's shadows conversing. The next time we see Gorgo, she is wandering the Spartan agora with her son. As he plays amongst the merchants, she ducks down an alleyway to meet again with the Councilman. He informs her that she will go before the Council in two days time. He also warns her of Theron's intent to discredit her. The Councilman advises her that the success of her plan may hinge on her ability to make an ally out of an enemy and promptly leaves. As distasteful as it may be, the queen ponders this and when turning to leave is surprised to find Theron standing behind her with her son. The politician suggests she take better care looking after the future king. Recognizing the veiled threat for what it is, Gorgo takes her son and quickly leaves.

After combatting several waves of Persian soldiers and batting them aside with little effort, Leonidas learns that Xerxes himself approaches wishing to meet with the Greek king. In the film, the character design for the Persian emperor is much the same as it is in the graphic novel. Xerxes is gargantuan and towers over Leonidas, who is no small man himself. The self-proclaimed god-king has an enviable physique that is decked out in golden, gossamer robes. He is gilded, bejeweled and pierced. While stylistically, Xerxes' appearance is almost the same, the effect on film is different than it is for the page. It creates an uncanny, feminized masculinity, simultaneously alluring and repulsive. In the graphic novel, the reader sees Xerxes in singular panels, very often in extreme close-ups of his features. It makes him look dispassionate, possibly even bored at times. At 24 frames per second, Xerxes, as portrayed by Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro, has a much more expressive face. This Xerxes shows his anger and displeasure.

In the graphic novel, it is difficult to read what emotion Xerxes is expressing. His face is almost always a dispassionate mask. The dialogue bubbles provide the only indication the reader has about how Xerxes is feeling. There is a disconnect between how the character looks and what it is he is saying. I think this works to the character's benefit in the graphic novel. It creates an air of mystery surrounding Xerxes. He appears cold and calculating, creating for the reader a character willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of troops in order to achieve his aims. The expressive Xerxes as seen in the film, particularly when he is angry, comes off as petulant and childish. Make no mistake - this is every bit as viable a way to play the character of Xerxes as is the sociopath. The issue is how do the motives and actions of the other characters change when they act in concert with Xerxes? Are the Spartans patriots defending their homeland against encroaching tyranny? Or are they at best serving as disciplinarians and at worst antagonists for a spoiled and enabled brat? From a dramaturgical perspective there really is no right or wrong answer. The preference for one characterization over another is wholly subjective. In the context of what director Zack Snyder has created, perhaps a histrionic Xerxes is just that much more visually interesting on film than the dispassionate and cold Xerxes of the static graphic novel.

The meeting between Xerxes and Leonidas doesn't only provide character insight for the viewer's of Snyder's film. Taking a page from Miller and Varley's book, Snyder utilizes the summit of the two kings in Leonidas' favor. The Greeks have made a very important cultural observation about the Persian monarch: he fancies himself a living god. And while this revelation might do little to raise an eyebrow on the continent of Asia, through Greek eyes, any man willing to place himself on equal footing with the

gods, especially if he is a king, is guilty of the crime of hubris. Pride can blind a man to the simple realities that exist around him and always comes before the fall. Leonidas and the Spartans recognize this. They use Xerxes' pride to their tactical advantage and are more than happy to oblige.

Leonidas knows that in the mind of Xerxes, a failure to acknowledge and respect his 'divine power' must be met with a punitive example of said power. The Greek king surmises that Xerxes will order a surprise attack utilizing his most elite warriors and has laid a trap for them. The Spartans have reinforced the Phocian wall with more 'mortar' of Persian providence and silently await the god-king's worst. In turn, Xerxes offer's his best: The Immortals. At first glance, the Immortals appear just as they do in Miller's artwork. They wear the same haunting, simian-like masks. They have the same triangle-shaped breastplates, but the Immortals of Snyder's film don't come alone. Bound in chains, they bring with them a pale, scarred and hulking giant. This creature's teeth are like fangs, his features disproportionate, and he pulls at his bonds, eager for combat. The only way he can seemingly communicate is with animalistic cries.

One of the Immortals holds up a gray, gnarled, inhuman looking hand to halt their advice beneath the wall of corpses. Already there is something very different about this encounter. While the order of events basically unfold in the manner Miller has prescribed in his text, the inclusion of a hulking monster and the grotesque enhancements to the Immortals change the tone of the scene. The Spartans engage the enemy and don't discriminate, but the nature of the conflict has moved beyond a literal clash of cultures. Miller provides us with the best warriors the east has to offer battling the best warriors the west has to offer. Snyder, on the other hand chooses to

supplant the historical with the mythical. The Spartan's fancy themselves as descended from Herakles and Snyder populates the scene with inhuman creatures that rival the beasts the great hero fought during his 12 labors.

Dilios, in single combat manages to knock the mask off of an Immortal and the visage found underneath is every bit as dark and horrifying. This is no longer a conflict of men with competing ideologies; instead it has become a battle of man versus the supernatural. I cannot say that this surprises me or that it even detracts from the story. While very different from Miller's rendition and wholly different from the account as presented by Herodotus, Snyder has in fact utilized a technique very often used by the Father of History himself.

When faced with a gap in his narrative, Herodotus would rely on dramatic devices to bridge the spaces between more verifiable events. He sought to create the appropriate emotional tone that builds on what came before and reasonably leads to what happens after. Snyder does the very same thing, only in an exaggerated fashion. It is quite conceivable that when first encountering the Persians, the Spartans were shocked by the strange uniforms and tactics utilized by the Immortals. It is also reasonable to assume that the Spartans had heard rumors and stories surrounding these warriors, designed to frighten their enemies and enhance their battle prowess. The first weapon brought to bear by any successful army is always psychological and in conjunction with the fog of war, it can make for some fantastical accounts of the battlefield.

From a simple storytelling standpoint, the techniques used by Snyder make the deeds and accomplishments of his protagonists more impressive. The stranger and more frightening the adversary, the more the viewer identifies with the Spartans and the more heroic they become.

As the Spartans continue to engage the Immortals and move through their second day of combat, the viewer begins to see the first Spartan casualties. And while the Spartans welcome what they call, “a beautiful death”, the viewer must be reminded what terrible cost such a death exacts. Much like the film *Titanic*, there should be little doubt about how the story of Thermopylae will end. Instead, it is the manner in which the characters approach their deaths and the emotional investment of all parties involved, actors AND audience, that provides a satisfying catharsis for the viewer. Snyder achieves this by building a series of emotional plateaus in preparation for the film’s dramatic climax. He begins by sacrificing a likable character. Astinos is the young son of the Spartan Captain. Through his interactions with Stelios and his sense of humor amid the grimness of combat, Astinos becomes a very likable character. He and Stelios have been killing Persians far beyond the front lines when Leonidas orders his soldiers to regroup during a lull in battle. The Captain hails his son, their eyes meet, when out of the smoke behind young Astinos, a Persian rider gallops bearing a large battle-axe. With a look of horror, the Captain watches as his son is beheaded. There are very few words in this sequence; the anguish is instead conveyed through graphic violence, facial expressions and primal vocalization.



What the viewer experiences is much more visceral and emotional. In the comic, this sequence takes up a mere two panels with a bit of brief narration and doesn't have anywhere near the same emotional impact.

In the graphic novel, Xerxes' camp is peopled by decadent and sensual characters that tempt the pitiful Ephialtes. In Snyder's film, the camp is occupied by the weird and the monstrous. A goat-human hybrid serves as musician playing a hauntingly carnal dirge while pierced and gold-bedecked, quadruple-amputees flaunt their sexuality. There are conjoined beauties that beckon in profile and turn their faces to reveal disfiguring scars. Ephialtes meanders through Classical Greece's version of a 10-in-1-carnival freak show. In fact, carnival is probably the best way to describe this scene. It is an exhibition of flesh and carnality in a variety of forms. There is the sexual element playing seductively with the mortification (in both senses of the word) and mutilation of the human body. Yet, for Ephialtes, sexual gratification is but the lesser of two temptations that Xerxes offers. In the menagerie that Snyder has created for this scene, Ephialtes' grotesque appearance is not out of place. As a subject of Xerxes, perhaps Ephialtes might not be the strangest looker in the room. One gets the impression that all the other occupants of this camp might very well be exiles from their respective homelands that have been embraced/subjugated by the Persian god-king. Making the decision to bend to the will of Xerxes looks as if it is painful for Ephialtes. He will have to betray Leonidas by leading the Immortals by goat-path to a flanking position. While Ephialtes was never raised in Sparta, the Lakedemonian ways of his father are deeply ingrained in his being. But the desire for inclusion far outweighs any claims he held to a Greek identity and thus a bargain is struck. It is exile and difference

that has brought Ephialtes and these Persians together so it is ironic yet fitting that his most forceful request is to have a uniform.

Night has descended over Sparta. Heeding the advice of the Councilman, Gorgo has invited Theron to her home to solicit his help in prompting the Council to reinforce Leonidas. It will be another hard bargain. The meeting between the two is a clash of various competing binaries, politician versus warrior, idealism versus realism. Gorgo is married to a warrior and conducts herself as such. Spartan warriors do not retreat and do not surrender but she has entered the world of politics that operates with its own code of conduct. She is in need of a favor. This puts her at a disadvantage and Theron readily exploits this fact. Status has shifted and he is quick to remind Gorgo that the Council is a man's domain, a place where even her position as queen holds no sway. Theron mocks Leonidas' idealism, stating that all men are not created equal and every man has his price. This indicates the councilman's moral flexibility and may also illustrate how a man of conscription age is in Council rather than in uniform. Knowing her devotion to her husband and the principles of Sparta, Theron rhetorically asks what the Queen will give in return for his support and she begrudgingly offers herself to him. With an unctuous smile, Theron forcibly takes her while taunting, "This will not be over quickly. You will not enjoy this. I am not your king." Theron is very astute in his assessment. In terms of how they express themselves sexually, Leonidas, the warrior, is tender and respectful and his actions come from a place of love. Theron, the politician, on the other hand, is a selfish opportunist who will fuck you any chance he gets.

Battle has been brutal. The Spartans patch their wounds and prepare to meet their fate. Word has been received of Ephialtes' treachery. Many of the other Greeks prepare to retreat, but per Spartan law, Leonidas and his 300 prepare to make a final stand. They intend to make Xerxes and his troops pay handsomely for every inch of Greek soil won. As in the graphic novel, Leonidas calls on the wounded Dilios to leave the battle and return home in order to spread the tale of what the Spartan's have accomplished at Thermopylae. When the one-eyed warrior asks if there is any message for the queen, Leonidas takes the fang/claw necklace from his neck, hands it to Dilios and says, "None that need be spoken." Prior to dawn of the third day, before the Persians can surround their position, assorted Greeks begin their organized retreat to the south. Miller as well as Snyder emphasize that none of the retreating Greeks look back save one. I made note earlier of the backward looking glance and throughout the film it has become one of the most repeated and distinctive non-verbal behaviors. In nearly every instance, the character looking back takes their time, waiting for a response from those he or she looks back towards. They seek permission, approval or reassurance from friends, companions or betters. Similarly, as Dilios departs and looks back, he seeks confirmation. As a Spartan it is clear that he desires to stand firm with his comrades and meet Glory head-on. The regret at having to leave is clear on his face. But his duty to his king and his oratorical skills require him to take on an even greater conflict. The battle he faces is an internal one. Dying at Thermopylae with Leonidas and the rest of the 300 would be easy. The greater challenge lies with Dilios living *for* his 299 comrades. It is his duty to serve as Spartan memory and recount time and time again the lives and deaths of his closest friends. Within the context of the story

he is the lone survivor. While there are numerous accounts of this kind throughout history and literature, the whaling ship Essex/Moby Dick and Operation Red Wing/Lone Survivor are but two popular examples, we can only speculate at the burden of living such a life. As he leaves Thermopylae, Dilios looks back to his comrades one last time and for the rest of his days he will have to look back again and again and again.

At great personal sacrifice, Gorgo believes she has achieved her goal of garnering support to send the Spartan army north to engage Persian forces and relieve her husband. She arrives to address the Council and the camera follows her into the amphitheater-like council chamber. Snyder shoots this from a low angle with a wide-angle lens. This gives the impression of a massive institution dwarfing the Spartan queen. A series of panning shots across the chamber show many of the council members sniggering and balking. The viewer can assume these men are not receptive to the idea of a woman addressing a patriarchal assembly. There is a change in point of view and we see a singular shaft of sunlight penetrating the council chamber and illuminating the Spartan queen. This is rather overt symbolism. An enlightened queen has broken traditional political and social barriers. However it will not be that easy to persuade the hearts and minds of these men. Gorgo gives a very moving speech about the voices of mothers and the security of future generations and Snyder provides some reaction shots showing many of the Council members moved by her words. They smile and Theron shifts uncomfortably in his seat. When the queen has finished he is the first on his feet, clapping mockingly. He labels her a trickster and obviously reneging on his earlier promise of support, calls her an adulteress. She has ventured into his house and having already gotten what he desired, he will use the opportunity to school her in

political duplicity. Theron goes on to slander his political rival, the Councilman, labeling him an adulterer as well. Gorgo lunges for Theron but is restrained by chamber guards. She spits in his face and Theron orders the “little whore queen” be forcibly removed. Having learned Theron’s lesson, she decides to reciprocate with the warrior’s version. She seizes her guard’s short sword and penetrates Theron in full view of the entire council. Theron’s face is filled with disbelief as the queen coolly whispers in his ear, “This will not be over quickly. You will not enjoy this. I am not your queen.” As Gorgo withdraws her blade, she cuts loose Theron’s purse. It falls to the chamber floor spilling gold coins stamped with the face of Xerxes. The councilman stoops to examine one of the coins and holds it up for the remaining council members to see. The chamber is filled with cries of “Traitor!” There is no need to debate the issue. The evidence is clear and it vindicates Queen Gorgo. In one brutally simple act, she has revealed Theron for a traitor. And while we do not see the council vote on sending the Spartan army north, we know that by virtue of discrediting Theron, Gorgo has discredited any political stance he held, namely keeping the Spartan army in Sparta. She has won her battle and now it is time for her husband to win his.

Leonidas peers out from his helmet to survey his situation. He looks ahead. He looks to his left. He looks to his right. The Spartan king and his brave band are surrounded on all sides by the Immortal warrior elite and scores of Persian archers. Xerxes watches from a distance. The images Snyder provides the viewer need no narration or dialogue. The hopelessness of the situation is clear and yet the Spartans stand proud and defiant. Yet another Persian emissary approaches along with Ephialtes. The emissary is flattering and complementary as the Persian try diplomacy

one final time. Ephialtes gives a heartfelt plea for Leonidas to listen to reason. The Persians dress up the conditions of surrender and present it as victory. The Persians will lay wealth, power and a respectful degree of autonomy at Leonidas' feet if only he lay his shield and spear at theirs. Leonidas removes his helmet which precipitates a backwards look from the emissary to Xerxes. A suspicious smile begins to spread across the god-king's face. The Greek king throws down his shield and the anticipation within both the Persians and the audience builds. Leonidas drops his spear and the camera zooms in to a close-up of the king's knees hitting the dusty soil. Snyder wants to emphasize this action. The director also plays with the flow of time in the moments following Leonidas' supposed submission. The camera zooms in on the profile of Leonidas drawing the viewer into the king's private thoughts. The graphic novel doesn't go into such detail. Once again Snyder wants to raise the emotional stakes of the scene and by getting a glimpse of Leonidas' inner thoughts, we see why he has made the choice he has. There is still a bit of uncertainty in how Snyder presents the images. In a shot that is reminiscent of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, the viewer sees Queen Gorgo lying in a field of golden wheat as a man's hand comes into frame to caress her face. Does Leonidas lay down his arms so that he may return to his beloved? With a cry of, "Stelios!" we are brought back into the present moment as Stelios bursts forth, leaping off of the back of Leonidas to stab the Persian emissary with his spear. It occurs to me that this action symbolically foreshadows the Greek conflict with Persia. The 300 Spartans, by falling at Thermopylae, have given the rest of Greece an opportunity to rush forward from behind and leap off their backs to stab at the heart of Persia in much the same way Stelios leaped from Leonidas'. This final, valiant attack also gives

Leonidas the satisfaction of smiting Xerxes and revealing the Persian god-king as nothing more than a mortal man. Just as in the graphic novel, Leonidas hurls his spear and wounds Xerxes, by grazing his cheek, but rather than coldly acknowledging he's been hit, the film version of Xerxes is shocked and vainly tries to hide his wound. This confirms Xerxes to be a highly theatrical and constructed personality. Meanwhile, with a final goodbye to Gorgo on his lips, Leonidas and his remaining Spartans are cut down by a volley of Persian arrows that blot out the sun.

A haunting flute melody is the only sound we hear as the scene fades up on Queen Gorgo standing in the same field where she said goodbye to her husband when he departed for the Hot Gates. A lone Spartan has returned. The expressions that pass over the faces of the two characters tell a tale of loss and acceptance confirming Leonidas' assertion that there is no message that need be spoken. Dilios places the fang/claw necklace in the Queen's hand and somberly continues his march into Sparta. Leonidas' son runs to his mother and she places the necklace around his neck. We next see Dilios as he addresses the Council and imparts Leonidas' final message to his people. It is a rallying cry that will be all the more effective in light of the efforts and preparation laid forth by Sparta's queen. Dilios asserts that the only request the king and his men ask of the Spartan people is that they be remembered as loyal and faithful. And so the tale returns to where it began on the fields of Platea. Dilios uses the power of his speech to inspire his troops in a battle that pits "reason" against "mysticism and tyranny".

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **THE LESSON**

Initially there were a few questions I was trying to answer in regards to the historicity and historiography of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's 300 and Zack Snyder's film adaptation of the story. I was hoping to find how much of Herodotus remains in each of these iterations of the story of Thermopylae. I was hoping to defend the artists who choose the genre of history within which to tell their stories. I was also hoping to, in my own small way, contribute to the argument that stories such as these have a valid place in the examination of historical events. The importance of the Miller/Varley and Snyder texts is not just in the messages each example conveys, but the manner in which those messages are conveyed. Miller and Snyder made active choices in how their characters express themselves and drive the narrative. As both comic and film are primarily visual media, they lend themselves well to the laconic nature of the Spartans. The Spartans are men of few words. Not because they are violent Neanderthals incapable of speech, but because they are highly empathic warriors who don't need to speak excessively. Spartans spend their formative years learning to function as a cohesive unit and this develops and promotes not only kinesthetic awareness but effective non-verbal communication as well. After examining the graphic novel and the film in depth, numerous, specific examples of non-verbal communication present



themselves by the Spartans as well as the Persians. Therefore, not only have Miller and Varley and Snyder given the audience a taste of Spartan breviloquence, but have utilized it as a technique in their own storytelling. This creates a distinctive atmosphere and tone that actively transports the reader or viewer into the story. It is a meta-communicative conceit that should make Marshall McLuhan proud.

While there are plenty of examples of non-verbal communication found throughout Miller & Varley's 300, I find the instances where characters effectively break the fourth wall and peer into the eyes of the reader to be the most interesting. Both Spartan and Persian characters are found gazing into the eyes of the reader, but there is one specific image that I find particularly haunting. In chapter four, *COMBAT*, on page 44, there is a drawing of battle where the Spartans are engaging the Persians.

In this image there are two Persian soldiers who have been mortally wounded by Spartan dori. The eyes of the Persians are wide, their pupils contracted to pinpoints. As I described in chapter three, the Persians look to the reader with expressions of fear, disbelief and surprise, while the Spartans and whatever expression they may be wearing are obscured by their helmets. Whether or not the reader identifies with the Persian soldiers, there is a clear display of emotion that is in stark contrast to the Spartans.

By taking away the reader's ability to see their eyes, Miller has painted the Spartans as soulless war machines whereas the only real examples of humanity to be seen on the page exist in the silent suffering of the Persian soldiers. Therefore, what if the most human depictions in Miller & Varley's 300, are those of the Persians? In the preceding chapters, Miller has built up his Spartan warriors as physically and morally

superior to their Persian adversaries. We see Spartan tactical superiority as they move about the battlefield with preternatural precision and grace, effortlessly dispatching their enemies. They are impersonal, almost god-like in their actions and this is the most remarkable thing about Miller's portrayal of the Spartans. He wants you to cheer for the good guys and jeer the bad guys. There is nothing unusual about lionizing the protagonists while demonizing the antagonists, but Miller does so through dehumanizing his heroes. Or perhaps I should say, through apotheosizing them. Until the very end of the graphic novel, there is no visual depiction of a Spartan falling in battle. The only wounded Spartan we see is Dilios, and ultimately, he does not die at Thermopylae. It is the villainous Persians who provide us with the most readily identifiable examples of humanity, however base they are. They are vain. They are mutilated. They are carnal and they are *frightened*. We can learn all this visually and non-verbally through Miller's drawings. And even though the character of Xerxes likes to portray himself as a god, in the purely visual sequence where Leonidas hurls his spear and wounds the Persian king, we are reminded in spite of all his theatricality, he is but a mere mortal. Instead it is Leonidas and his 300 Spartans that Miller wants us to see as the true gods. Even though the Greek warriors are felled by Persian arrows, it is the choice to sacrifice themselves, the god-like power of determining the time and place of death, that grants them immortality. Miller paints an idealistic picture of Spartans that should be mimicked, revered and perhaps, even worshiped. To use a religious metaphor, history, as written by Herodotus, has *transubstantiated* Leonidas and his 300 Spartans. Only in this case, their bodies and blood have been changed from the physical into the symbolic. These Greek heroes persist in memory, not so much as

individuals, but instead as representations of the values and ideals that prompted their sacrifice. Every time the story is reiterated, whether by the images on the comic page or the images flickering across a silver screen, the immortal heroes are invoked into communion with their audience and with each retelling of the story, the facts become less consequential compared to the moral, social and cultural truths being presented.

While remarkably faithful and remarkably similar to its source material, Zack Snyder's 300 presents a wholly different example of non-verbal communication. Just like Miller & Varley, there are specific instances of characters looking directly into the camera and breaking the fourth wall, but more interestingly, Snyder's characters exhibit a tendency to look back over their shoulders towards their compatriots. In chapter 4 of this project, I referred to this as the *backward looking glance*. This particular gesture is performed by Spartans and Persians alike. Most often the characters perform this action when requiring some form of confirmation, affirmation or permission from the other characters: young Leonidas looks back at the wolf to confirm it is following him into the crevasse; King Leonidas looks back at Gorgo and the citizens of Sparta before kicking the Persian messenger into the well; Dilios looks back at his Spartan comrades as he leaves Thermopylae. In all instances of a character looking back, said character is experiencing a moment of doubt or uncertainty. He cannot proceed on the path ahead until a clear accounting is made of what lies behind. Young Leonidas cannot kill the wolf unless he knows that it has followed him into the trap. King Leonidas cannot declare war on the Persians until he looks into the eyes of those for which he will fight. Dilios' backward looking glance is particularly difficult. He desires to remain and fight to the death with his comrades, but as he looks back on his king and friends, he is reminded of

his duty to tell the tale of the 300 Spartans, and so with a heavy heart, he marches home. As with Miller, the Spartans in Snyder's 300 are presented as possessing superior skills and moral fiber to their Persian adversaries but this element of uncertainty as manifested in the backward looking glance humanizes them in a way that the graphic novel does not. It removes Leonidas and the Spartans from the realm of gods and paints them as very human. The fact that an aristocratic warrior like Leonidas can face his doubt and still make the difficult choice is what makes the character admirable. In light of Spartan humanity, Snyder creates a bold contrast by dehumanizing the Persians. While the slaughter and desecration of an entire village and depictions of brutality against slaves does much to demonize the Spartan's enemy, it is Snyder's choice to mythologize the Immortals that proves the most interesting. It is not enough to depict the Persians as the strange and mysterious "other". Instead the director quite literally makes them into inhuman monsters. They are giants and beasts and combat the mortal Spartans with dark magic. Alas, where Miller & Varley show the morbid mortality of the Persian forces in a way that apotheosizes the Spartans, Snyder does almost the exact opposite. He makes supernatural grotesqueries out of the Persians, which put a more human face on Leonidas and his men.

In the *Histories*, Herodotus created a new genre in which to revive and reconnect with the events of the past. In the 25 centuries since its inception, history has been primarily a verbal medium whose narratives consist of, "...significant actions, reports of speeches and plans that changed history," that rely little on descriptions of gestures and non-verbal behaviors (Lateiner, 1989). Yet Herodotus was keen on making note of gesture and non-verbal behavior for the simple reason that, "...a gesture provides some

unmediated expression of emotion for the victim and a powerful signal to the reader” (Lateiner, 1989). It was Herodotus’ belief in the significance of gesture that prompted me to use its examination as a means of accessing and analyzing the texts of Miller/Varley and Snyder. But the simple question remains: How much of Herodotus has survived in a comic book and a big budget Hollywood film? Most often the criticism of 300 stems from the exaggerated nature of the images presented or the factual inaccuracies and anachronisms (Alleva, 2007; Wallensten, 2008), but I do not believe that the ancient Spartans or Herodotus himself would be too surprised by elements found on the page or screen. Miller and Snyder spent considerable time illustrating the differences between the Persians and Spartans. This is completely in line with the aims of Herodotus, whom despite being convinced of Greek superiority, was fascinated by the concept of the “other” and reveled in, “high-lighting polarities between cultures” (Lateiner, 1989). Herodotus also had a great respect for the Persian Empire, but this did not preclude him from including within his narrative unflattering and untrue tales about them. Donald Lateiner claims that Herodotus could rationalize this because, “The anecdote’s ideological significance outweighs the historical falsehood” (Lateiner, 1989). This shaping of the narrative implies that those who write history are judicious in their presentation of the facts. When compounding data of varying veracity, some sort of structure must be imposed in order to make it intelligible to others. The author will make choices about what can be included based upon limitations like time, available space and consistency amongst the data (Lateiner, 1989). This process can be viewed as *poiesis*. *Poiesis*, in the most basic understanding of the word, is the process of making or bringing into being. Philosopher Martin Heidegger speaks of how things have

“comportment toward being” and that it is the artist or artisan who sees this potential and guides it into existence (Whitehead, 2003). By extension I argue that the process by which *The Histories* were brought into existence is the same process used by Miller/Varley and Snyder to create the 300 graphic novel and film. Despite the derivative nature of the 300 story, Miller/Varley and Snyder were presented with a narrative about which they had to make specific editorial choices based upon the necessities and limitations of the medium in which they were working. Thus all three iterations of the story of Thermopylae, from Herodotus to Frank Miller to Zack Snyder are phenomenologically unique.

When I was teaching literature to high school freshmen and juniors, our headmaster frowned upon the use of film and video as a teaching tool. He felt it was lazy teaching and being a history teacher himself, he often questioned the “authenticity” of the stories being presented. I agree with film scholar Robert Sklar who argues that the usage of the word “authenticity” can be used to shield a historian’s bias. Sklar also asserts in his 2013 paper entitled *Historical Films: Scofflaws and the Historian-Cop* that, “the history film and ‘traditional scholarship’ in history are two entirely different domains, with their own rules and discourses,”. Written history, in the absence of complete accounts, has the luxury to make educated guesses about the past. Whereas filmmakers are tasked with presenting a, “...complete and convincing interpretation on the screen or risk losing audience attention” (Metzger, 2010; Toplin, 2004). The task itself of presenting history on film is a daunting one. The overarching need to create a compelling narrative brings about many dramatic necessities when constructing a film. Multiple characters are often combined into one. Events and places are often

transposed in time and space. Exposition is created to explain the roles of people and situations. Quite simply, historical film can be called upon to provide structure and stimulate interest in a historical narrative through concise if not comprehensive packaging (Rosenstone, 2004). And contrary to the opinion of historian, author and teacher Michael Morrogh, historical accuracy does not have to be wholly “sacrificed, for reasons of drama, simplicity and narrative drive (Morrogh, 2008). Rather, history can be enhanced by film, provided one respects the limitations of cinema and engages it properly. A historical film should never be used as a solitary source when attempting to construct a picture of the past. Film is but one method by which we can attempt to make meaning out of historical events. There are some things at which film excels, displays of emotion being one and visual recreations of the past that, “give the audience a feeling for life in a distant time and place (Toplin, 2002)”, being another. Yet any usage of film as a teaching resource should always include an element of criticism. Students should actively interrogate the film as they would any text. As Scott Alan Metzger suggests, teachers and students should weigh historical films for, “what historical knowledge is included, what knowledge is left out, and what knowledge is compressed or altered (Metzger, 2010).” The film can serve as a jumping off point for discussion. It has no business serving as an end-all-be-all treatise of the events described. In a story presented as fantastically as 300, there is the opportunity for archeologists and historians to attract new attention to their areas of expertise (Wallensten, 2008). For any student of history, this would be like taking a trip to the zoo to see African elephants. While not exactly like visiting the African Continent, it can still stimulate interest in

elephants, their habitat and their behaviors and thereby prompt a more refined understanding of the animals and where they come from.

*To be literate, students can learn to analyze historical narratives by reading a film for explicit meanings and subjects, corroborating or challenging a filmic account of the past across other sources (such as textbooks), and recognizing alternative accounts to the one presented by the film.*

(Metzger, 2007)

As a teacher, I would often explain to my students that part of my job was to tell them what to think, but it was also my personal responsibility to teach them *how* to think. The pervasiveness of unsubstantiated data in books, film, television and across the internet requires a more discriminant mind. It is therefore important to have a well-stocked bag of tricks so that we might peel away the obscuring layers and see what lies underneath. A post-industrial, service-based society can become enamored with the “next big thing”, often discarding what came before for the latest model. Some people might call this “disposable culture”.

For decades, comic books and popcorn flicks were trivialities relegated to children. Yet when a film like “Titanic” that embeds its story in historical events, or films like “The Avengers” and its sequel that found their genesis in the pages of Marvel Comics, or the Chris Kyle memoir *American Sniper*, films that gross over 5.4 *billion dollars* (Box Office Mojo) critical scholarship should sit up and take notice. These are artistically and textually complex narratives that deserve to be dissected.



Our entertainment tastes don't seem to have deviated far from the ancient Greeks. We still tell tales of heroes and great tragedies. With no less than 13 films based on "true stories" premiering in 2015, I cannot help but think that were Herodotus to find himself in Hollywood, he would be spreading his "New Rhetoric" to the silver screen.

We choose the history we want to believe. Some audiences prefer their history stripped down and objectified. Yet, I believe this approach to be limiting. Emotional investment in a historical narrative makes the passive observer an active participant in the construction of stories we find socially and culturally significant. Rhetorical criticism asserts the primacy of logos and ethos. It allows the critical scholar to discern the facts about any given event or narrative, but it reveals little truth. The emotions must be engaged in order to truly get a taste of what history may have been like. Returning pathos to the center of rhetorical criticism creates a more holistic understanding of human experience.

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