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Greek History

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Analysis of Character Depictions in Zach Snyder's 300.

A character's appearance can show a lot about their inner drive and overall goals in a story. Movies and TV shows use makeup, costumes, and even prosthetics to manipulate actor's appearances to give subtle insights about the character they portray. The film 300, directed by Zach Snyder, uses these tactics in a very obvious way. From the idealized depiction of Leonidas to the crippled depiction of Ephialtes, the characters visually reflect how the viewer is supposed to feel about a character and their overall values. Although the visual depictions of characters in Zach Snyder's 300 are used to outwardly portray their values, those values do not reflect the historical values of the time.

The film 300 was released in March of 2006 by Warner Brothers Studio. It was based on a graphic novel of the same name, written by Frank Miller and published by Dark Horse Comics in 1998. 300 tells the story of the Spartan general Leonidas during the Persian invasion of Greece and the Battle of Thermopylae in 480BC. "Many people get what they consider to be accurate pictures of history from such popular cultural sources such as movies..." (Weinstein pg. 3). However, 300 loses much of its historical accuracy in favor of fantastical drama and fanservice.

The characters who lie, cheat, or are otherwise villainous are depicted as inhuman fantastical creatures such as orcs, ogres and fay. Main characters, who the viewer is supposed root for and support because are depicted as perfect, beautiful humans. This creates a contrast between the evils pretending to be human and human heroes who can do no wrong.

A good example of this is the difference between the depiction of the main character Leonidas, played by Gerard Butler and Ephialtes. Leonidas is depicted as a fearsome warrior who wears nothing but a loincloth and a helmet. His body is on display as an example of what an ideal man should look like, and his actions reflect what a hero should act like. In the film, he can do no wrong. Every kill is justifiable and upholds the honor a Spartan soldier should have. He goes off to war and comes back to his equally perfect gorgeous girl. The film removes details, such as armor and that Leonidas was not the sole leader of Sparta, to increase his honorability.

In contrast, Ephialtes is depicted as a withered spineless man which reflects his eventual betrayal of the Spartans to Xerxes. His hunched back suggests that he is a spineless man for betraying his people and helping the Persians. Historical evidence supports that Ephialtes did betray the Spartans “but in fact it was Ephialtes who showed the Persians the way around the mountain along the path, and I hereby record his guilt” (Herodotus pg. 480) however there is no evidence that he had any deformities. In fact, there is evidence that Spartan children born with deformities were abandoned on a mountain after they were born. So had he been born with deformities, he likely would not have made it to adulthood and, at the very least, would not have been a Spartiate.

The depiction of Ephialtes in 300 is a very interesting because his appearance is a feedback loop. He is a bad person because he betrays the Spartans. He is depicted as less than human because he is a bad person. He betrays the Spartans because the Spartans treat him as less than human. Ephialtes's appearance becomes a reason for his betrayal in the film. Historical evidence suggests that he betrayed Sparta for the wealth and power of Persia, so the movie gives him an arguably more morally acceptable reason to betray the Spartans.

The way Xerxes is portrayed is somewhere between the perfect portrayal of Leonidas and the monstrous portrayal of Ephialtes. His appearance is reminiscent of fay from traditional fairy tales. His actions also reflect the trickery of fay. He bribes the Ephors and manipulates Ephialtes into betraying the Spartans. However, this contradicts the values of Persian kings expressed by Darius. Persian kings follow the will of Ahuramazda, the Zoroastrian creator god, and did their best to uphold and spread Ahuramazda's values. "because I was not wicked, nor was I a liar, nor was I a despot, neither I nor any of my family. I have ruled according to righteousness." (L.W. King pg. 9). These values do not align with the values that Xerxes's presents in the film.

The movie also portrays Xerxes as very feminine, which is meant to show that he is weak in comparison to the strong manly Spartans, especially in comparison to Leonidas. The slimmer frame of Rodrigo Santoro, who plays Xerxes, more evident makeup, and delicate gold chains all serve to portray Xerxes as more feminine. In the film, femininity equates to weakness because women are not fighters. The idea that Xerxes is not a fighter is further emphasized by his clean flawless skin, which shows that he has not seen the

mess of battle. When he is shown in his harem, he could almost blend in with the other women if not for his throne.

Persian men often had harems, “Every Persian man has a number of wives, but far more concubines.” (Herodotus pg. 62). However, there is no evidence to support the type of people depicted in the Xerxes’s harem. The women, and men, who make up the harem act as accessories to further dehumanize and demoralize Xerxes. The darkness of the harem obscures the members and makes it difficult to determine if the members are male or female. The film portrays it as a bad thing the Persian culture included “the practice of having sex with boys, which they learnt from the Greeks.” (Herodotus pg. 62.)

Many of the members of Xerxes’s harem also have visible disfigurement. This helps portray Xerxes as weak since he associates himself with people who are not skill in battle. It also which contrasts Xerxes’s clean figure. The people he associates with a portrayed as less than human so by association is he. The visual disfigurement of Xerxes’s harem also helps Ephialtes fit in among the members, representing that in that scene, he is just another one of Xerxes subjects.

The Persian soldiers are portrayed as the opposite of Xerxes. They are larger than typical humans, and more brutish, like ogres. They roar as they fight and are brought down by the mighty heroes, Spartiate warriors. Some soldiers who are not ogres are instead completely covered in armor. Even their faces are shrouded in masks, which further dehumanizes them and creates a juxtaposition with the almost naked Spartiate.

The Spartan Ephors are portrayed as withered old men, reflecting their weakness in taking bribes from Persia. Their rotten teeth, scar-covered skin, and arthritic knobby fingers help to show that they are greedy, like goblins. The Ephors in the film 300 seem weak when they were revered and honored warriors. The actions of the ephors follow the historic values of Persian however the motive behind them strays away from historic accuracy. Spartaties had a lot of respect for the way of the gods and the oracle. The film takes light of this by having the ephors manipulate the oracle for their own gain.

The film 300 uses the visual depiction of characters to dehumanize villainous characters. It also strays from historical accuracy in favor of storytelling and dramatization. From the golden hero Leonidas, to the weak willed Ephialtes, and the cunning Xerxes, the way each character is portrayed represents their values in the film and how the viewer is supposed to feel about them.

Works Cited

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