

300: Cultural Stereotypes and War against Barbarism

Masoud Kowsari¹

Abstract: During the era of Bush administration and post-September 11th anti-terrorism discourse, the movie *300* was one of the best exemplar of a close relationship between Hollywood pop culture products and the neo-conservatives' political discourse of nationalism. From my point of view, *300* is not an example of outstanding artistic films, but a film that more than any other film contains an Iranophobic discourse, produced by Hollywood. The film is another example for '*warfare-ization*' of public sphere and envisioning war as part of the people's everyday life using pop culture products in U.S. after 9/11. Connecting war with collective memory, *300* brings war to the heart of everyday life. The Western or American youths should think that just like the brave and devoted Spartan soldiers in *300*, they also fight for democracy, freedom, and glory. This film is full of cultural stereotypes on the Eastern and Iranian culture, in particular, their identity. For example, women are depicted as erotic objects. In contrast to the Spartan women who are free, brave, kind mothers and faithful wives, the Iranian women are represented as slavish, lustful, indecent, and homosexual. They look like the sexy dancers in nightclubs and discothèques. Using van Leeuwen's approach in critical discourse analysis (2008), this paper is aimed at analyzing this film as a media text.

Keywords: CDA, cultural stereotypes, Iranophobia, Islamophobia, women, *300*.

1. Assistant Professor, Social Communications Department, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, Email: mkousari@ut.ac.ir

Introduction

300, which according to critics, is not an outstanding work in the history of sword and sandal films, was released in North America on March 9, 2007, in both conventional and IMAX theaters. It grossed \$28,106,731 on its opening day and ended its North American opening weekend with \$70,885,301, breaking the record held by *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (Saldanha, 2006) for the biggest opening weekend in the month of March. *300*'s opening weekend gross is the 24th highest in box office history, coming slightly below *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 2007) but higher than *Transformers* (Bay, 2007). It was the third biggest opening for an R-rated film ever, behind *The Matrix Reloaded* (\$91.8 million) and *The Passion of the Christ* (\$83.8 million). The film also set a record for IMAX cinemas with a \$3.6 million opening weekend¹.

Several reasons have contributed to its success, which also resulted in several tumults. This film not only caused great criticism among in-home Iranians, but also among the Iranian Diaspora. Quite contrary to films such as *Not Without My Daughter* (Gilbert, 1991), which have a more clear and severe critical orientation, this film look like a popular film made only for entertainment. The majority of ordinary Iranians, even the ones that had not seen the film *300*, felt insulted and angry. *One Night with the King* (Sajbel, 2006), another film from Hollywood, caused much less sensitivity and more interestingly, received no reaction from the part of Iranian authorities, despite the fact that it had the capacity to flame a tumult because of its one-sided reading of Iranian history and suggesting that the Jews were under pressure in ancient Iran. Hence, though these two films (*Not Without My Daughter* and *One Night with the King*) were produced during Bush presidency, the circumstances under which Iran was under pressure of US and his allies due to seeking a military nuclear program (Jafarzadeh, 2007; Delpech, 2007; Howard, 2004; Ram, 2009) and interfering in Iraq, both had the capacity to flame Iranian authorities and people's anger. These films both contain forms of Islamophobic, Iranophobic, and fundamentalist discourses, which have been intensified after September 11th. Sardar and Davies (2003, pp. ix- x) refer to parallels between many Hollywood films, for example *Independence Day*, and American daily politics:

1. Wikipedia, *300*. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/300_film.

The carefully prepared scene for the declaration of the end of hostilities in Iraq made this link with national ethos as expounded in popular culture both clear and facilely banal. President George W. Bush invoked the imagery of Hollywood to emphasise what victory – ‘we have prevailed’ – should mean to America. In homage to a scene from the blockbuster movie *Independence Day*, President Bush helped to pilot the plane that landed on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*. He climbed from the plane clad in the flight gear of a combat pilot to embrace similarly clad aircrew on the deck of the carrier. The imagery was instantly recognizable, and commented upon in the media both in America and abroad.

These discourses consider the confrontation between East and West to be a historical rather than a temporal one. King (2000, p.2) calls it a “frontier mythology”, an underlying narrative structure that we can see in many Hollywood productions from Westerns to present day actions and Sci-Fi’s. According to King (2000, p.5):

Contemporary frontier narratives establish oppositions between the moment of the frontier – sharp, clear-cut, ‘authentic’ – and a dull, decadent or corrupting version of ‘civilization’.

However, *One Night with the King* was released without attracting any attention. The question is: why? Iranians’ reaction toward *300* seem to be flamed not only because the film is fundamentalist but also because the film cumulates Iranian ancient civilization and portrays Iranians as barbarians. In fact, Iranians have a glorious image of the history and empire of ancient Iran, an image which is the opposite of the story *300* narrates. The picture depicted by *300* is by no means in accordance with historical and collective memory that the previous regime intended to create using different means (schools, outstanding historians, mass media, and above all glorious 2500 years celebrations of the Persian Empire). Snyder, the director of *300*, had emphasized that his aim had not been to produce an anti-Iran film and his film had had nothing to do with American daily politics. He just has chosen Miller’s comic (Miller and Varley, 1998) under the same name, for producing his own film, because he has been interested in comics from his childhood

up to now. He absolutely denied any significant relation between his film and anti-Iranian currents. According to his wife (the producer), Deborah Snyder, the only alteration done to Miller's graphic novel by Zack, is allocating a more important role to Leonidas' wife, Gorgo. She is Gorgo who encourages Leonidas to fight for 'freedom' and 'glory'.

But at the era of Bush administration and post-September 11th anti-terrorism discourse, no one accepted Snyder's statements. Opponents considered his denial to be nonsense, while proponents were happy because the film was supporting US in crushing its enemies, the enemies of 'freedom' and 'democracy'. No matter what has been the intention of Zack and what his opponents and proponents say, the question is: what does the movie itself, as a media text, manage to say and which discourse is supported by the film, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Using van Leeuwen's approach in critical discourse analysis (2008), this paper is aimed at analyzing this film as a media text. From our standpoint, *300* is not an example of outstanding artistic films, but a film that more than any other film contains an Iranophobic discourse, produced by Hollywood.

300: a Real Comic Strip

The importance of comic strip in the pop culture of US and other Western countries is obvious and widely accepted. Comic strip is one of the most important types of culture industry that has a lot of advocates among children and even adults. There are several examples of world-famous comic strips such as *Astérix* and *Obélix* and *The Adventures of Tintin*. Furthermore, comic strips that have made their way into cinema and have had a great sale are by no means rare- *Superman*, *Spiderman*, and *Batman* to name a few. In American culture, comics have a special place and are considered to be among important products of the culture industry; they enjoy a considerable sale rate. Moreover, comic strips in US, contrary to societies like Iran, are not exclusive to children. Comic strips have their special adherents, and a great number of them are adults. They have been raised with these books which have a significant role in their culture.

One of the causes contributed to the success of *300* is that this film has been reproduced from the graphic version. If *300*, with its very poor content

and cast, had been produced in the genre of sword and sandal, it would never turn out to be a bestseller. All of the attraction of *300* to American audience lies in its construction as a live and real comic strip. Snyder is intelligent, not only because with a low cost and a group of not that much famous artists, he produces a bestseller, but also because of reproducing the same atmosphere we can see in Miller's book. In order to create a more dramatic effect and to approach the graphical action states of Miller's work, Snyder even decelerates the movements of artists in many scenes. In fact, most of the movie scenes are the very slides of the comic strip with some added movement. In other words, there is not much difference between the film and Miller's comic when it comes to *mise-en-scène*, painting, and action terms. Two parts of image 1 show no difference; both suggest the same feeling to their audience. This is the exact key of Snyder's success. With the aid of blue screen and computerized special effects, he succeeds in creating the same graphical scenes without which *300* would not be successful.

The main process here is a kind of *comic strip-ization* of war, the long-lasting war between Iran and the West. What we mean by *comic strip-ization* of war is the fact that through a comic registration of war, war is consumed as a recreational commodity, and such a commodification of war has great implications for Bush's administration (Bush's agenda of 'attack on terrorism'). Moreover, a comic book brings its audience out of his passivity and wants him to fill in empty spaces between picture frames (or panels) using his imagination. Carrier (2000, p.7) points out that the meaning of a comic is determined not only by the artist, but also by the audience. Because, in order to interpret a comic, we need to identify the ways in which it reflects the fantasies to its viewers. The very same idea has been offered by Joost (2006) and Schulte (2008) for reading warfare game-documentaries. According to Joost (2006), the production of such works is equal to the '*warfare-ization*' of public sphere and envisioning war as part of the people's everyday life. Connecting war with collective memory, *300* brings war to the heart of everyday life. The Western or American youths should think that, just like the brave and devoted Spartan soldiers in *300*, they fight for democracy, freedom, and glory too. As Elston (2009, p.58) says:

Nevertheless, *300* is unique in that it interweaves history and fantasy with twenty-first century pop culture, offering a convincing

(and convicting!) window into America's contemporary self-image, as well its ongoing ability to collectively justify and endorse (mis) representations of marginalized peoples and nations.



Fig. 1. Near Parallel between the film *300* and its comic version¹

Iranophobia Discourse

After September 11th, the discourse of Islamophobia (McDonald, 2003) became one of the dominant discourses in the West. One could say that racism and Islamophobia are the dominant and related discourses of the West in relation to its "others". Part of the discourse of Islamophobia consists of Iranophobia. According to Ram (2009, p. 17) Iranophobia (anti-Iran phobia or Iran psychosis) is a kind of *moral panic*. The term has been used in sociological analyses to refer to periods when 'specific groups are negatively framed and labeled as the enemies of society's cosmological order of things and as a threat to its interests. The phobia is a result of dialectical processes

1. Wikipedia, 300. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/300_film.

between 'us' and 'them'. Hence, Iranophobia is a moral panic that "is bounded by history but at the same time transgresses the boundaries between spaces, between self and other, between "here" and "there." (Ibid, p.18) Therefore, as Ram says, "Iran became a screen onto which we ...projected our own *fears of difference*" (Ibid, p.18). Media, popular culture, academicians and politicians are, according to Ram, the main agents for producing moral panics and phobias like Iranophobia.

Though we could trace the formation of this discourse back to post- Iranian Revolution years, but it has been intensified after September 11th. There have always been turning points (such as hostage-taking, Iran-Iraq war, imprisoning of political activists, violation of freedom of press, and recently, post-election events) for spreading of this discourse in the West, especially in US; however, it was during Bush presidency that through announcing a nuclear Iran as a threat first to Middle East and Israel, and then to the rest of the world, this discourse reached an unprecedented climate. They strongly believe that, as Delpech (2007, p. x) says:

If Iran's neighbors and other international players, including Israel and the United States, perceive that it has acquired a nuclear weapons capability, dangerous instability will follow.

Here, we do not want to discuss the political intentions of Snyder and Miller, and presume that they have no political preference. But at the end of the day, Snyder's work has been screened during the climate of the Iranophobia discourse. Whatever causes and intentions they offer for production of their works, they have promoted the discourse of Iranophobia. Furthermore, on January 24, 2007, in an interview with American radio network National Public Radio, Miller talked about his political views. On the issue of 9/11, the second Iraq war and the War on Terrorism, he frankly said:

Nobody questions why we, after Pearl Harbor, attacked Nazi Germany. It was because we were taking on a form of global fascism, we're doing the same thing now ... It seems to me quite obvious that our country and the entire Western World is up against an existential foe that knows exactly what it wants.... For some reason, nobody seems to be talking about who we're up against, and the sixth-century *barbarism* that they actually represent. These

people saw people's heads off. They enslave women, they genitally mutilate their daughters, they do not behave by any cultural norms that are sensible to us. I'm speaking into a microphone that never could have been a product of their culture, and I'm living in a city where 3000 of my neighbors were killed by thieves of airplanes they never could have built (*Italic added*).¹

In analyzing *300*, we will see how many of the words Miller used in this interview, have been visualized. As it can be seen in these statements, Miller frankly refers to one of the sub-discourses of Iranophobia: the discourse of 'barbarism'; however, deliberately or inadvertently, Miller commits a historical mistake, he talks about "the sixth-century barbarism" and equals one of the first and biggest empires of the ancient world as "barbarism"! Miller simply ignores the long and distinctive history of a civilization like Iran, and this is exactly what flames the Iranian people's anger of the movie *300*.

Iranophobia has several sub-discourses, such as authoritarianism, militarism, and Islamism, but concentrating on each of these is beyond the scope of this article. These sub-discourses produce a unified discourse via interaction: the discourse of Iranophobia. The discourse of Iranophobia itself is also not a discourse distinct from other discourses such as the discourse of war on terrorism (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007). Throughout three decades after the Revolution of Iran, each of these sub-discourses of Iranophobia has been spread via different products, media texts in particular. Several political events in Iran (like The *Iran hostage crisis*) could be point to as contributing to the articulation of the discourse of Iranophobia. Thus, articulation of discourses cannot be understood without considering the interaction of actors (either persons or countries). Articulation of discourses is by no means meant to be the product of pure imagination, having nothing to do with reality. From a constructivist approach, discourses are kinds of representation of reality and all representations are constructing rather than mirroring the reality. According to Hall (2003, p.25).

We must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists

1. NPR, January, 24, 2007 and NPR, March, 10, 2007, in Wikipedia, 300. Available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Miller_\(comics\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Miller_(comics)).

do not deny the existence of the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concept. It is social actors and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others (*Italics in the main text*).

On the other hand, as van Dijk (2008a; 2008b) points out, there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and society. Discourses not only are shaped by society, but also shape it. According to van Dijk (2005; 2007), practice and discourse have a dialectical relationship; practices result in formation of discourses and reciprocally reinforce practices. But we should bear in mind that in this dialectical relationship, the alteration of discourses is possible.

Discourse of 300: Civilization vs. Barbarism

In this paper van Leeuwen's approach (2008) to critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been employed for the analysis of 300. According to van Leeuwen, in CDA we are confronting with at least two questions: first, what are main elements of discourse? Second, how a discourse manages to justify its legitimacy? In answering the first question, van Leeuwen names elements such as *action, actors (participants), eligibility conditions, representation styles, times, locations, resources*.

First we will explore the actors (participants) and the way they are represented in 300. Then we analyze their actions, and finally, concentrate upon the ways of legitimizing the text.

Actors (Participants)

According to van Leeuwen, each discourse is a 'speech act', and the main doers of this act are the actors (participants) represented in the discourse. Thus, the first step in each discourse analysis, he says, is to identify the actors. In 300, we are confronted with two groups of actors: the Persians and the Spartans. On the Persian (Iranian) side, the actors are: King Xerxes, the Emissary, commanders, soldiers, animals, monsters, and women. On the Spartan side, we have: King Leonidas, his wife Gorgo, his son, the councilmen, the Ephors, the Oracle, commanders, soldiers (300 Spartans, Arcadians).

After identifying the actors, according to van Leeuwen, we face at least two questions: how are the actors represented? And what relation does this representation establish with the viewer (audience)? First, we will deal with the question number one: representation of actors in relation to viewers (Fig. 1). Van Leeuwen says it takes place in at least three ways: *distance*, *relation*, and *interaction*. All these three ways explicate this point that whether the actors are part of us ("we") or alien ("they").

Distance

What we mean by *distance* is that at what distance from the viewers, the actors have been represented. The less the distance, the more we feel friendly with the actors and vice versa. To explore the distance between actors and viewers, we could concentrate on using of close-up (nearness) and long-shot (distance). Examination of sequences of *300* from tip to toe reveals that in comparison to King Xerxes, much more close-ups have been used to depict King Leonidas. Even in the scene Xerxes and Leonidas are talking face to face, close-ups have been used fairly better for Leonidas, in such a way that his face is centered and his rather ridiculous state of looks and smiles is completely obvious. Even in some sequences, extreme close-ups have been utilized for depiction of Leonidas, while this shot has never been used for Xerxes. This is also true about the depiction of Spartans and Iranian commanders and soldiers; for the depiction of Spartan commanders and soldiers, much more close-ups and medium shots have been used, while Iranian soldiers have been exiled to long-shots. Apart from scenes of hand-to-hand combat with Greeks, Iranian soldiers are never captured in close-ups and medium shots. The same is true about the Spartan women and Leonidas' wife, Gorgo. Gorgo has been mostly shown in close-ups, while the Iranian women in middle-shots. In addition, some actors on the Spartan side have been shown in middle- shots (the Ephors, the councilmen, the Spartan peoples, the Oracle, Ephialtes the hunchback). As we will see, all of these groups, but the Spartan people, have doubtful and equivocal position: semi- patriot/ semi- traitorous. They do not like Leonidas and his men to go to war and fight against Xerxes' war machine.

Relation

Relation with the viewer occurs in two ways: *involvement* and *power*. Depiction of involvement and power occurs with the aid of camera angles. Involvement and non-involvement (separation) of actors with viewers happens through two kinds of camera angles, frontal angle and oblique angle. Frontal angle fosters the involvement of viewer in representation, while oblique angle distances the viewers from represented actors. It should be noted here that for Leonidas, Spartan soldiers and Gorgo, frontal angle are used; while on the other hand, for the Iranian commanders, soldiers, women, and even for the councilmen, the Ephors, and the Oracle, oblique angles are used. Consequently, the viewer feels more involved with Leonidas and Spartan soldiers, rather than Iranians and the traitorous Spartan persons and groups. The situation is somehow different for Xerxes. The viewer sees Xerxes mostly from a frontal angle, but he/she feels no involvement and experiences and no sympathy with him.

Power is depicted using three angles¹: high angle (actors look upward) provides viewer with power over representation, low angle (actors look downward) exercises power over viewer, and the third one is the eye level (actors look straight). In the majority of sequences, eye level (angle) is used for the depiction of Leonidas, his wife, and the Spartans soldiers. Thus, the viewer sympathizes with them. While the viewer see the Iranian soldiers from a low angle as tiny creatures: thus they seem to be powerless and humiliated. Only in some scenes Xerxes (while sitting on his royal throne over the shoulders of his slaves, or when talking to Leonidas) look downward at Leonidas and the viewers. Despite the fact that Xerxes has been attributed some power in these scenes, the ridiculous upward gaze of Leonidas (on behalf of the viewer and himself) destroys this power.

Interaction

Interaction occurs in two ways: *direct addressing* and *indirect addressing*. The question here is that whether the represented actor looks directly at the

1. The meaning intended by van Leeuwen is somehow different from the terminology which is in common use in the field of semiotics. The difference is that we either look at viewer from perspective of actor, or look at the actor from perspective of viewer (of camera). Anyway, these are opposite approaches and both are correct. In terminology of semiotics, the high and low angles of camera are most of the time identified from the perspective of the viewer (of camera).

camera (viewer) or not? Examination of the sequences of 300 reveals that Leonidas has full eye contact with the viewer, while Xerxes never looks at the viewer; when he looks, he is at a distant point. Lack of eye contact from Xerxes' part implies that he attaches no importance to the viewer; to him, the viewer is equal to one of his countless slaves.

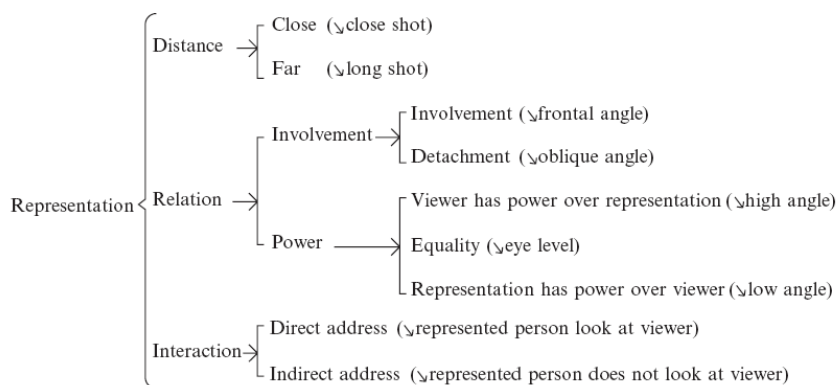


Fig. 2. Representation and Viewer Network (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 141)

Now we can turn to other questions, namely, how actors are represented? According to van Leeuwen, representing an actor is equal to categorizing him in the 'our' or the 'others' group. In order to identify the language and answer the above question, van Leeuwen concentrates on social practices of social groups. Social groups are either "open" or "closed" to others; they either 'include' or 'exclude' others. Thus, linguistic practices could in this way be categorized in two groups: practices of inclusion and exclusion. Hence, according to van Leeuwen, two main discursive components are inclusion and exclusion. In this way, we either make room for other people in the category of insider (inclusion) or put them in the category of alien or outsider (exclusion). The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are means by which we could determine whether the represented actor is represented as a member of "we" or "them". Inclusion and exclusion are opposites; so it is sufficient to explore just one of them. Figure 2 depicts the categorizations of these mechanisms.

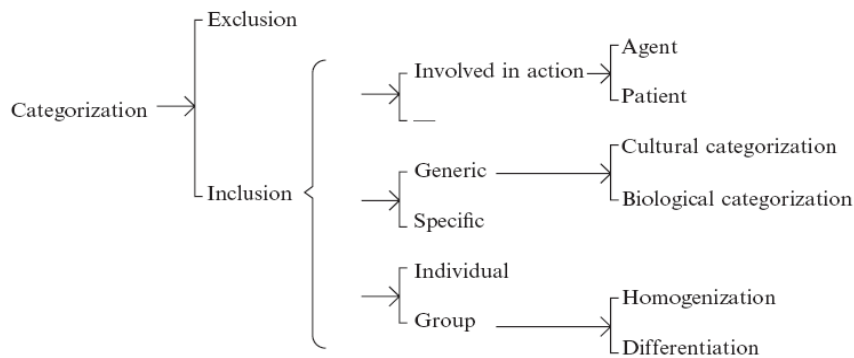


Fig. 3. Visual Social Actor Network (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 147)

Before exploring inclusion/exclusion mechanisms, we should specify the list of actors. The main Iranian actors in *300* are: Xerxes, the Emissary, commanders, the Immortals (the Javidan Army), soldiers from different nations, magicians, and countless slaves who carry Xerxes over their shoulders. Moreover, giants and animals such as huge elephants and rhinos serve in Xerxes' army. Women just appear in a scene of debauchery as objects of sensual pleasure. They are depicted extremely sexy and even appear to be homosexual. They are only for sexual pleasure and have no other identity.

On the Spartan side we have the following actors: First, we have to mention Leonidas, his wife, and his son. Second, Leonidas' 300 soldiers, ready to sacrifice their lives to preserve Sparta and to stop Xerxes' army. Behind the front line are women, children, and in sum, the people of Sparta who are worried about the war. Additionally, we should name the Councilmen of Sparta comprised of proponents and opponents of Leonidas, and even those who betray him. We should also name a group of Ephors who supervise the King's performance. Every month, the Ephors swear to serve the king; the king also swears to obey the law. They hear the call of invisible messengers, with the aid of the prettiest girl of Sparta (the Oracle Pythia), who lives in a temple and conveys the call to the King and councilmen. They (who? Councilmen or Ephors) oppose going to war. Small numbers of Arcadians join Leonidas in the middle of the way. Finally, we should refer to a hunchbacked Spartan

(Ephialtes of Trachis) who is on the side of Spartans, but after being humiliated by them, betrays them and joins Xerxes.

Exclusion

First let's see which actors have been excluded? 300 says nothing about Iranian women, children, families, and society. It is not clear why Iranians bring up their children to become soldiers and whether they have any reason for sending their children to a war against Greeks or not. Women on the Greek side are symbols of love and devotion to their husbands. Moreover, they are symbols of the Greek families' advocacy of their King. The Spartan King fights for the families, while it is not obvious for whom the Iranian King is fighting. As Elston (2009, p.60) points out:

Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric echoed this idea, emphasizing the lack of human "feeling" America's geopolitical opponents possess, and framing them as aberrant: He says "We differ from our enemy because we love. ... We love life, itself. In America, everybody matters, everybody counts, every human life is a life of dignity. And that's not the way our enemy thinks.

Thus, the Iranian people are absent here. With the exclusion of people, we also have no democracy. Thus, people are hardly considered to be more than slaves and have no right to self-determination. They are treated as worthless objects. Their value just relies in being scarified before and for the King. Furthermore, the film says nothing about the Iranian's religious and political structures and their interpretation of war against Greece. Instead, everything is reduced to the role of Xerxes, he who calls himself 'god of gods' and 'king of kings'. Hence, by highlighting the role of Xerxes, the film excludes all other Iranian actors.

Inclusion

In this section we explore the inclusion strategies. The first strategy employed in the film suggests that the involved actors are either *agents* or *patients*. The Spartans are all agents: Leonidas, the councilmen, his wife, the Ephors, 300 Spartan, and even the hunchback who betrays. They all are fighting and combating (and even betraying) over the scene or behind the scene; while on

the Iranian's side, the main actor is Xerxes, a man who imposes his will on his countless soldiers and slaves, thus, most of the Iranian participants are patients rather than agents. The giants and huge animals that accompany his army are also patients. They come to stage to be annihilated by brave and warlike fighters of Sparta. Iranian women have the same position: nothing more than sexy objects to satisfy King's whim and seduce the Spartan hunchback.

One of the main strategies in the inclusion of actors is whether they are identified as a group with *general* characteristics or a group with *specific* attributes. We tend to introduce the beloved ones more specifically and the hated ones more generally using general phrases and statements.

- **Specific Description**

In the movie *300*, only a couple of characters are introduced specifically: Leonidas, Gorgo, two councilmen, one of Leonidas' commander, the hunchback (Ephialtes), Xerxes, Xerxes' emissary and commander.

- **Leonidas**

He is portrayed as a real soldier, a good commander and leader, a respectable King, a lovely husband and father, a kind comrade for his soldiers. He is fit and muscular, strong, clever, saucy, and brave. Leonidas' personal attributes and relations, especially with his wife and son, have been presented completely in the film. Leonidas is depicted as a man of the house, and just like a modern man, he instructs his son in the art of war and teaches him the lesson of life in the yard of his house. He is a kind and loving husband and respects his wife's demands (e.g. he kills Xerxes' messenger with her admission, even though the messenger reminds him that killing a messenger is not customary). Each of Leonidas' commanders and soldiers are introduced very well and every one of them has a distinct personality. Leonidas interacts with his commanders and soldiers, laughs and jokes with them, and respects them. Every member of his army is in a good mood and a special relationship with Leonidas; but Xerxes has no interaction with his soldiers nor with his commanders, For example, he has no verbal communication with his highest commanders. Just when he is embarrassed with their defeat, they are beheaded before him; even here, not a single world is exchanged.

- **Gorgo**

She is represented as a lovely queen, a politician, a brave and wise Spartan woman, a kind mother, and a faithful wife. She is even willing to offer herself to Theron (a traitorous councilman) for her husband's victory.

- **Councilman 1 (the Loyal Councilman)**

He is loyal to Leonidas and helps Gorgo in persuading the council to send the army north.

- **Councilman 2 (Theron)**

He is one of the traitorous councilmen and Leonidas' serious political opponent. He has a sexual gaze towards Gorgo; she finally kills him for his betrayal.

- **The Hunchback (Ephialtes)**

He is basically a faithful Spartan, but when Leonidas rejects him, he joins Xerxes' army and betrays the Spartans. Ephialtes is ugly, has sexual passions, and has a strong desire to become rich.

- **Xerxes**

Contrary to Leonidas, who is introduced with his sword and shield as an instance of a proper commander and soldier, Xerxes is introduced with jewelry and ornaments. It is not clear how can he fight with these jewelries? Moreover, Xerxes and his commander are covered with piercing, which is nowadays common in the West, while ancient Iranians did not have such a tradition. In sum, what has been attached to Leonidas gives him the virtue of a good soldier, while what Xerxes holds gives him an effeminate profile. He looks like advocates of hip-hop culture and uses tattooing and piercing. In one scene, Xerxes says to Leonidas: "Imagine what a horrible fate awaits my enemies... when I would gladly kill any of my own men for victory"¹, and he replies "And I would die for any one of mine. You have many slaves, Xerxes... but few warriors"². Xerxes is introduced as an egoistic person, with big ambitions. He is a god-king that likes everyone to kneel before him, just like slaves. In

1. Time of presenting the dialogue in the film is: (00:58:18,000 --> 00:58:23,300).
2. (00:58:23,500 --> 00:58:52,400).

a dialogue, Xerxes says to Leonidas: "I am a generous god. I can make you rich beyond all measure. I will make you warlord of all Greece. You will carry my battle standard to the heart of Europa. Your Athenian rivals... will kneel at your feet... if you will but kneel at mine"¹ and Leonidas replies ridiculously: "Well, it's left a nasty cramp in my leg... so kneeling will be hard for me"². In another scene Xerxes says to Ephialtes: "You will find...I am kind. Unlike the cruel Leonidas, who demanded that you stand...I require only... that you kneel"³.

- **Xerxes' Emissary**

He is introduced as violent, discourteous, impolite, and ugly with a dark face. At the beginning of the film, he throws a chain of skulls of conquered Spartan commanders towards Leonidas.

- **Xerxes' Commander**

He also has a dark face, and is ugly and violent. In one scene, he is sitting on a throne heaved onto the shoulders of obedient slaves, and asks Leonidas to surrender and kneel before Xerxes.

- **Generic Description**

On the Spartan side, the Ephors, the councilmen, the Oracle, the 300 Spartan soldiers and the Spartan people are introduced generically. On the Iranian part, Xerxes' army, and lustful women are introduced generically.

- **The Ephors**

According to Leonidas, religion should not be an obstacle for war; and it should also encourage the war against barbarism. Because, for Leonidas, this is the reason and one should trust his/her reason. When the Ephors ask Leonidas to "trust the gods" and "honor the Carneia", he replies with a ridicules tone: "I'd prefer you trusted your reason"⁴. Hence, Leonidas makes a contradiction between 'God' (unreason) and 'reason'. When religion and religious leaders (i.e. Ephors) are

1. (00:59:55,500 --> 00:59:59,300).

2. (01:18:12,300 --> 01:18:27,900).

3. (00:16:28,500 --> 00:18:59,000).

4. (00:14:24,900 --> 00:18:23,000).

corrupt, we have to rely on reason and men instead of the gods. Leonidas cries angrily: "The Ephors, priests to the old gods. Inbred swine. More creature than man. Diseased old mystics. Worthless remnants of a time before Sparta's ascent from darkness. Remnants of a senseless tradition...for the old wretches have the needs of men... and souls as black as hell"¹. He rejects them as "pompous, inbred swine. Worthless, diseased, rotten... ..corrupt" and accuses them as the betrayals: "Truly, you're in the god-king's favor now"².

- **The Oracle**

The Oracle Pythia is a "beauty girl that her beauty is her curse"³; "a drunken adolescent girl...though a slave and captive of lecherous old men..."⁴.

- **The Councilmen**

For Leonidas, even law and councilmen are real obstacles to the war against the enemy. According to Leonidas, most of the councilmen and Ephors in Sparta are traitorous. Leonidas says to the councilmen: "Then what must a king do to save his world...when the very laws he is sworn to protect force him to do nothing?"⁵. Not only does Leonidas say to the Ephors that they will be rich after conquering Greece by Xerxes' army, but also in a scene his wife Gorgo finds gold coins near Theron.

- **The Athenians**

Leonidas not only criticize the Ephors and councilmen, but also criticizes the Athenian as the "philosophers" and "boy-lovers" who are coward and weak⁶.

- **The Spartan Soldiers**

The Spartan soldiers in *300* are depicted as 'finest soldiers'; they are fit, strong, muscular and brave. As narrator (Delias) says about Leonidas, "he was baptized in the fire of combat, taught never to retreat, never to surrender. Taught that death on the battlefield in service to Sparta... was the greatest

1. (00:19:04, 600 --> 00:19:20,100).
2. (00:18:10,700 --> 00:18:13,900).
3. (00:20:24,700 --> 00:20:46,400).
4. (00:21:07,700 --> 00:21:14,700).
5. (00:10:40,300 --> 00:10:49,000).
6. (00:02:42,500 --> 00:05:14,700).

glory he could achieve in his life". Sparta strives "to create the finest soldiers, the world has ever known." He (Leonidas) "taught to show no pain, no mercy... constantly tested, tossed into the wild... left to pit his wits and will against nature's fury... his form perfect"¹. They are ready for what the Spartans call 'a beautiful death'. They are 'as a single, impenetrable unit'. That's 'the source of [their] strength'. They "do what [they] were trained to do... what [they] were bred to do... what [they] were born to do, and for an honored dead"². They are selected soldiers not only based on a 'genetic' selection, but also based on a 'eugenic' selection. At the beginning of the film, we hear the narrator's mythical voice: "When the boy was born... like all Spartans, he was inspected. If he'd been small or puny or sickly or misshapen... he would have been discarded"³.

They are real family guys. One of Leonidas' commanders says, after losing his son in the battle, with a sad tone: "I have lived my entire life without regret until now. It's not that my son gave up his life for his country. It's just that I never told him that I loved him the most. That he stood by me with honor. That he was all that was best in me"⁴.

In the last night before the war, Gorgo says to Leonidas: "It is not a question of what a Spartan citizen should do... nor a husband, nor a king. Instead ask yourself, my dearest love... what should a free man do?"⁵. In another scene, when Leonidas and his soldiers are going to leave Sparta, he says to his soldiers: "For Sparta. For freedom. To the death. We march... for our lands, for our families, for our freedoms"⁶. In the last battle, Leonidas cries: "Spartans, citizen-soldiers, freed slaves. Brave Greeks, all. Brothers, fathers, sons...we march. For honor's sake, for duty's sake, for glory's sake, we march. Freedom isn't free at all. That it comes with the highest of costs, the cost of blood. Spartans! Prepare for glory!"⁷.

Delias, Leonidas' messenger to Sparta, says with solicitation to the councilmen: "send the army for the preservation of liberty. Send it for justice. Send it for law and order. Send it for reason. But most importantly, send

1. (00:37:30,200 --> 01:08:50,800).

2. (00:01:09,600 --> 00:01:24,000).

3. (01:25:41,500 --> 01:26:11,000).

4. (00:21:17,700 --> 00:21:31,000).

5. (00:22:57,400 --> 00:27:23,500).

6. (00:33:30,400 --> 01:23:34,900).

7. (00:29:08,800 --> 01:31:53,100).

our army for hope, honor, duty, glory"¹. They are the main supporters and guardians of values such as freedom, justice, order, honor, duty and love in the world. They are very similar to the selected soldiers in the movie titled *Universal Soldier: The Return* (Rodgers, 1999). In fact, American soldiers have a global duty for establishing democracy and freedom throughout the world; this is their 'call of duty'. In other words, they have a universal mission; we also hear this mission from Leonidas' message to Sparta: "The world will know that free men stood against a tyrant. That few stood against many. My queen! My wife! My love! Remember us! Remember why we died! This day, we rescue a world from mysticism and tyranny... and usher in a future brighter than anything we can imagine"².

Gorgo says to Leonidas: "Come back with your shield... or on it. There's no room for softness... not in Sparta. No place for weakness. Only the hard and strong may call themselves Spartans"³ Leonidas asks his soldiers: "Spartans! What is your profession? And his soldiers cry: "Owooh! Owooh! Owooh!" (war, war, war!)⁴.

● **The Spartan Peoples (mothers, wives, daughters)**

The Spartan people are depicted as calm and peaceful people who are worried about the war. They are faithful wives, good mothers who give birth to the best soldiers for Sparta. When one of the councilman says to Gorgo about sending her son to agoge (the rigorous education and training regimen mandated for all male Spartan citizens) next year: "Your son starts the agoge next year. That is always a difficult time for a Spartan mother"⁵. She, with a glorious sense of a historical duty, replies: "Yes, it will be hard, but also necessary"⁶; because Spartan women, just like Leonidas, will fight for 'land' and 'love' in the future⁷. In a very emotional scene, Gorgo before the Council says: "I stand before you not only as your queen. I come to you as a mother. I come to you as a wife. I come to you as a Spartan woman. I am not here to represent

1. (01:00:30,500 --> 01:48:35,700).

2. (00:26:05,000 --> 00:26:41,700).

3. (00:28:23,500 --> 00:28:26,800).

4. (00:54:02,900 --> 00:54:09,600).

5. (00:54:10,700 --> 00:54:15,300).

6. (01:21:28,200 --> 01:21:31,900).

7. (01:29:43,300 --> 01:30:21,000).

Leonidas. His actions speak louder than my words ever could. I am here for all those voices which cannot be heard. Mothers, daughters, fathers, sons"¹. When Xerxes' emissary says to Leonidas that: "What makes this woman think she can speak among men?" he replies: "Because only Spartan women give birth to real men"².

• Xerxes' Army

In *300*, the Iranian army is described generally as slaves and as a "barbarians huddle"³. Leonidas says: "An army of slaves, vast beyond imagining, ready to devour tiny Greece. Ready to snuff out the world's one hope for reason and justice. We lose few... but each felled is a friend, or dearest blood"⁴. In addition, in many situations, they are called 'beasts': "They came with beasts from the blackness, with their claws and fangs"⁵. They are brutal, barbaric and wild. They are 'coward'⁶, and have no respect and honor. Leonidas teaches a lesson to his son: "a Spartan's true strength is the warrior next to him. So give respect and honor to him, and it will be returned to you. First... you fight with your head. Then you fight with your heart. Do not forget today's lesson. Respect and honor. Respect and honor"⁷.

• Immortals

The *Immortals* are famous as the brave and professional *ancient Persian* royal guard. They were called *immortal*, because the number of the soldiers was always the same. But, the Spartans describe them as brutal and cruel slaves, as the narrator says: "They are the hunters of men's souls. They cannot be killed or defeated. Not this darkness. Not these Immortals"⁸. Leonidas says with a ridicules tone in the battlefield: "Immortals? We'll put their name to the test. They have served the dark will of Persian kings for 500 years. Eyes as dark as night. Teeth filed to fangs. Soulless"⁹. As we will see, the metaphor

1. (00:09:40,800 --> 00:09:46,300).
2. (01:47:39,100 --> 01:47:49,100).
3. (00:06:19,900 --> 01:14:55,300).
4. (00:31:37,100 --> 00:31:41,200).
5. (00:50:33,700 --> 00:50:35,300).
6. (00:08:18,000 --> 00:08:47,000).
7. (00:32:39,700 --> 00:32:50,800).
8. (00:32:53,000 --> 01:02:16,100).
9. (01:23:47,700 --> 01:23:53,200).

of wolf (claws of black steel, fur as dark night, and eyes glowing red) has been used in this film for the depiction of Xerxes, the Iranian army, and the Immortals at the same time. But, the Spartans believe that the real Immortals are themselves; Leonidas says: "Spartans never retreat. Spartans never surrender. No retreat, no surrender. That is Spartan law. And by Spartan law, we will stand and fight... and die"¹.

- **Magicians**

The magicians are introduced as one part of Xerxes army: "When muscle failed...They turned to their magic"². From an Orientalist point of view the East is the territory of magic, mysticism and exotic things.

- **Monsters**

Xerxes army is full of monsters and giant animals: "Xerxes dispatches his monsters from half the world away. They're clumsy beasts..."³.

- **The Iranian Women**

In contrast to the Spartan women who are depicted as free human beings, brave women, kind mothers and faithful wives, the Iranian women are represented as slavish, lustful, indecent, and homosexual. They look like the sexy dancers in nightclubs and *discothèques*. This construction of woman is in contrast to the American rightist image of woman and family. In accordance with the American rightist/conservative ideology, the film attempts to produce a sacred image of woman and family. American soldiers who fight outside their borders should know that their women will remain faithful to them and there is need to be worried. American families are the greatest advocates of soldiers, and soldiers are in their hearts. Thus, *300* tries to connect war with family and dissociates it from a military adventure that gets the youth killed.

Categorization

For representing someone in general, two strategies of *cultural categorization* and *biological categorization* are utilized.

1. (01:10:42,600 --> 01:10:47,300).
2. (01:12:20,300 --> 01:12:37,700).
3. (01:24:59,300 --> 01:25:07,700).

- **Cultural Categorization**

300 represent Iranians and Spartans using different strategies. Iranians are identified generally, while Spartans are introduced more specifically. Throughout the film, Iranians are represented as having common attributes and personalities. They are soldiers easily killed by Spartans. The only character being identified specifically is Xerxes. In representation of Iranians, cultural categorization has been used. All Iranians not only wear head-covers, but their faces are also veiled. Even in the war, the director seldom shows an Iranian soldier's face. The producers of *300* have not even bothered to look at the pictures of e-encyclopedias to see that Iranians never veiled their faces; the Immortals, as evident on the historical tiles of the city of Susa (Shush), had beards and their faces by no means had been masked. In the movie *300*, the Iranian soldiers are wearing masks similar to the Japanese Ninjas, their identity is unknown and their appearance and height is much more similar to Japanese rather than Iranians!

Moreover, no distinction has been made between Iranians and Arabs. The significant point here is that covering of face against the burning sun has been common in the deserts among Arabs and no book about the history of ancient Iran has mentioned such a custom among Iranians, especially soldiers. Thus, a kind of cultural categorization has been utilized here and Iranians and Arabs have been put in a chain of equivalence, something that has displeased many Iranians. The film signifies a dark skin Middle-Eastern man residing in the desert. Xerxes' emissary and commanders are all in dark skins. Hence, all of the Iranians who are depicted in the *300* have common attributes and have no major differences. Wilderness and Barbarism are the only cultural characteristic with which they have been identified. Besides, no commander and soldiers' distinctive features have been portrayed. Soldiers from other nations, who have joined the Xerxes' army, are all silent and put in the same cultural category, and have no particular identity. In this way, they are introduced as Iranians (wild or barbarian), wearing Iranian clothing, who are nothing but part of Xerxes' war machine. Even Iranian commanders have not been introduced in a particular way; they are all brutal and savage and do nothing but obey Xerxes. Iranian women are all lustful and even homosexual.

On the other hand, most of the time, a particular strategy has been

employed for the depiction of Spartan soldiers. Spartan soldiers have been described as brave, loyal, emotional, and lovers. In addition, a cultural categorization strategy has been used for depicting the Ephors, the Oracle, the councilmen and even the Athenians. All of them are corrupt, coward, and traitorous.

- **Biological Categorization**

Another strategy employed in the film is biological categorization. Spartan soldiers are biologically white, fit, healthy, and muscular. Iranians are all of the same stature, dark face and ugly. Their commanders have dark skin, ugly teeth, big noses, and wings that tremble when they become angry. Furthermore, even Xerxes' army never succeeds unless an ugly Spartan hunchback helps them. The other groups and persons under such a biological categorization are the Ephors and the hunchback. They are misshapen, sick, and disfigured who have plague. As Elston (2009. p.66) argues, 'disfigurement' has been long stigmatized in Western culture as 'an absolute state of otherness' ".

Individual or Group

In this section, we discuss the last strategy used for the representation of actors. Are the actors represented individually or collectively? In other words, what kind of processes are utilized: "homogenizing" or differentiating"? Throughout the film *300*, Spartans are portrayed individually and Iranians collectively. Spartan soldiers all have a distinct personality and are differentiated very well from each other, while Iranian soldiers are depicted collectively and their attributes are homogenized. Out of more than 956 sentences that comprise the dialogues of the film, Xerxes, his emissary and commanders, have very limited dialogues, and are not described as individuals. The only exception is Xerxes. In other words, the Iranians soldiers have no personal identity.

Legitimation

According to van Leeuwen, when it comes to text and context in the field of discourse analysis, the question is not how social practices are crystallized in the text, because text itself is based on the very social practices. In fact, the question is how the text gives legitimacy to those social practices. The

concept of 'Legitimation' is similar to Barthes' concept of 'naturalization'. For Barthes, myths serve the ideological function of *naturalization*. Their function is to naturalize the cultural - in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural', 'normal', self-evident, timeless, obvious 'common-sense' - and thus objective and 'true' reflections of 'the way things are' (Chandler). Legitimation takes place in several ways: *authority legitimation*, *moral legitimation*, *rationalization legitimation*, and *Mythopoesis*.

• Authority Legitimation

Authority legitimation occurs in three ways: customs and traditions, individuals or institutions, and experts and/or specialists. In *300*, almost all of these three types of authority legitimation have been used. For example, Spartans are told to be brave warriors, because they have benefited from an old social and educational set of traditions. They are trained according to a spirited tradition. Their tradition is based on freedom (negation of slavery), participation (even for women), law (even against king's wish) and living for justice and honor. They are the fundamental values of Greece and Sparta.

Leonidas does not behave like a king towards his soldiers; rather, he behaves in a way as if he is the representative of all those Spartan traditions. These are the traditions that the West claims since the ancient Greece up to now. Therefore, if we consider *300* to be the war of 'democracy' against 'tyranny', we've not gone so wrong.

Another legitimation that *300* is based upon is the Herodotus history, the most famous historian of ancient Greece. This legitimation is preserved to some extent by the narrator's voice. This voice tries to induce the audience to believe that the film is not based on a fable, but rather on historians scripts like Herodotus, and a main eye-witness' experience, who himself has been present there alongside Leonidas. Through the narrator's voice, we hear Herodotus, but we do not see him, and of course, there is no need to see him. However, there are several differences between Snyder' narrative and Herodotus' history (Wallensten, 2007, p.79). Snyder even forgets the historical political culture of the Ancient world:

Moreover, the prevailing political culture tended to encourage war rather than peace. With few exceptions, the voices we hear from antiquity are those of the powerful elites and rulers. They were concerned primarily with legitimizing, securing, and extending their status and power. According to Herodotus, who was familiar with Persian royal ideology, King Xerxes' decision in the late 480s BCE to conquer Greece was motivated by the desire to avenge previous defeat and especially to emulate his ancestors (Pomeroy, 2002, p.14).

Finally, *300* has used a kind of 'role model legitimation'. Although both roles (Leonidas and Xerxes) are played by famous actors, Xerxes' weak and thin figure, semi-giant height, dark skin and other features - similar to African aboriginals - makes him an unattractive character. He appears on his throne similar to the head of a cannibal tribe. In contrast, the actor playing the role of Leonidas is physically very strong (like athletes), has an attractive beard and nice white teeth. Furthermore, Lena Harvey who plays Gorgo, complements Leonidas' role very well and adds to the attractiveness of Spartans. She is their queen, their symbol of love and family loyalty and also their manifestation of patriotisms. Finally, it is she that tries to convince the councilmen to support Leonidas.

● **Moral Legitimation**

Another legitimation strategy that can be seen in the media texts is *moral legitimation*, meaning how actions of actors are morally legitimized? There are three strategies for moral legitimation: *evaluation*, *abstraction*, and *comparison*. Of these three strategies, comparison has been used more than the other two. In its common form, we see positive characteristics (such as freedom of spirits, bravery, love and affection, family, beauty, humanistic relationship, altruism, kindness, good-humouredness, collective life, and philanthropy) attributed to one side, and negative attributes (slavery, phobia, hate, barbarism, sex, egoism, ugliness, bestiality, anger, brutality, wilderness) attributed to the other side. In our case, the first set of characteristics has been attributed to Spartans, and the second set to Iranians.

• Rationalization Legitimation

Another type of legitimation is *rationalization legitimation*. What is meant by this legitimation is how actors' behaviors are rationalized for the audience.

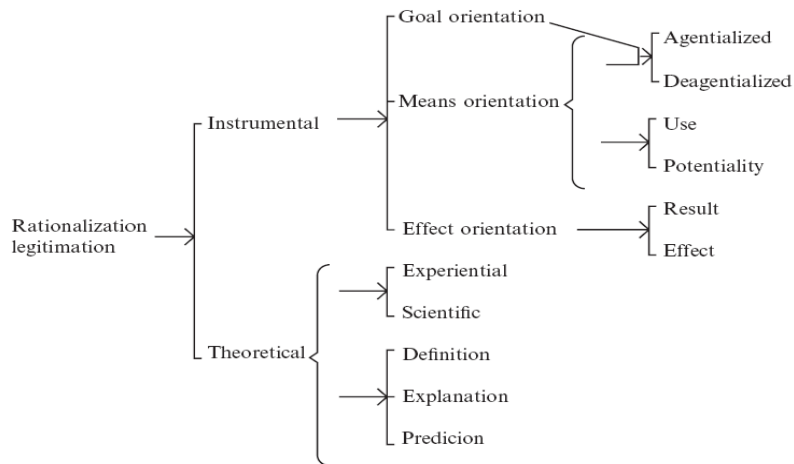


TABLE 6.3. Rationalization Legitimation

Fig. 4. Rationalization of Legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.117)

Rationalization occurs in either *instrumental* or *theoretical* form. Theoretical rationalization is the justification of behavior with knowledge, experience and so on. In *300*, instrumental rationalization has been used more than the other form. Instrumental rationalization has been employed in the following ways: *goal orientation*, *means orientation*, and *effect orientation*. *300* uses all of the above three methods to rationalize Spartans' behaviors and de-rationalize Iranians behaviors. Spartans' goal is 'freedom', 'justice', and 'democracy'; it is a goal everybody (be infant, youth, adult, and old) seeks. Thus, a kind of de-age-ization has been undertaken here. On the other hand, the Iranians' objective is 'earth and water', as Xerxes' emissary says to Leonidas, which equals to war and conquest. In terms of manipulating the means, the Spartans are completely rational. They use the best methods available (friendship, cooperation, honesty, bravery, and altruism) to accomplish their aims. On the contrary, the Iranians use the worst methods to achieve their goals: war, violence, and brutality. In one of the scenes, a village is shown which

is burned by Iranians, and all of the villagers are sewn to trees with several arrows. Only a young boy survives this massacre, and he also dies in the arms of Leonidas after retelling the brutality of the Iranians. Now let's discuss how effect orientation is employed in 300: even though the 300 Spartans are eventually defeated by the Iranians, they succeed in mobilizing all of Sparta and Greece against the Iranians, and finally defeat and expel them.

• Mythopoesis Legitimation

Another type of legitimation occurs by using *Mythopoesis*. In this type, the actors' behaviors are legitimized through producing fables and myths. This type of legitimation occurs either through stories (moral and cautionary tales) or by means of *single determination* or *over determination*.

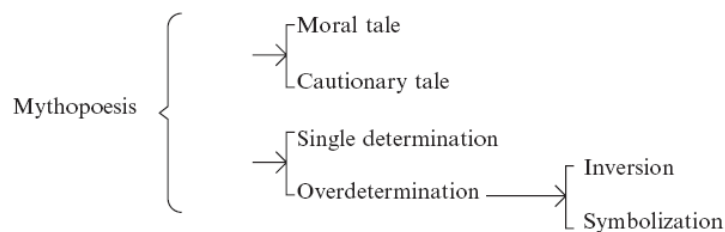


Fig. 5. Mythopoesis Legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 119)

• Interpreting 300

In order to analyze *300*, we need to distinguish between three different levels: level 1 (the metaphoric world), level 2 (the Diegetic world), level 3 (the real world) - sequenced from bottom to top as shown in Figure 6. We can also name them as deep level (the metaphoric world), middle level (the Diegetic word) and outer level (the real world). These levels (see diagram in Fig. 6) in a work such as *300* are intertwined, but we need to distinguish them analytically. At first, we begin with the Diegetic level, because it is our real departure point, and without understanding and interpreting it, we cannot provide an exact analysis of the other two levels.

Level 1: the Diegetic World

300 recounts for us a story about a historical even (Thermopylae war) and invites us to accept it. This story, like any other story, has a diegetic world with its own rules. It invites us to live in this world and experience it sympathetically. Several critics (academicians or journalists) have tried to criticize the film based on 'historicity', while as Wallensten (2007, p.80) points out rightly that "in comments on films treating historical themes, questions of what is 'true' or 'false' often come to the fore. In discussing *300*, I believe that questions of realism or history miss the mark and are irrelevant. The film is clearly not intended to be a history lesson, but an action movie purposely fictive on several levels". She continues "firstly, the script for *300* was not primarily based on historical sources such as the ancient Greek author Herodotus, but on a graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley... secondly, the narrative grip of the film allows for further fictionalizing." Hence, Snyder was completely free for "any exaggerations of the deeds of the Spartans and the monstrosity of the enemy". Finally, she adds: "fundamentally, *300* is more pop culture than illustrated history". According to Sardar and Davies (2003, p.x), "The political discourse of America has been alive with references and recourse to national myth and historic narrative in the years since 9-11". They add that "American popular culture creates stereotypes and exports them around the world" (Ibid, p. xi). In fact, *300* is a pop culture product for persuading the present audience mostly in America. The film says to them why America has to fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, why they should send their sons to war, and why they should support their government operations against other nations. In this diegetic world, Xerxes tries to conquer Greece with his war machine (an army from one hundred nations), and a small group of Spartan soldiers defend their country and fight to death. In the film, Xerxes' army is coward, slavish, brutal, and violent, while the Spartan army is humanist, emotional, free, strong and so on. We dealt with the diegetic world in detail throughout the paper.

Level 2: The Real World

The real world level has its roots in the diegetic world. Phenomenon such as post 9/11 and Bush administration 'attack on terrorism' belong to the real

world. Based on the film, hostility between Iran, as a member of the 'Axis of Evil' and the West is a historical one. Consequently, as Elston (2009, p. 68) argues, we can see many parallels between the diegetic world of the film and the real world after 9/11: "over the course of film history, many Hollywood war movies have prepped American audiences to respond to real-life wars as if they were melodramas, and 'enemy' peoples as if they were mere caricatures, with little complexity or history of their own". According to the Spartans and also according to the Bush administration, it is a war between 'civilization' and 'barbarism', between 'us' and 'them', between 'freedom, justice and democracy' and 'slavery, injustice and tyranny', between 'order' and 'anarchy', between 'reason' and 'mysticism', between 'love, family and loyalty' and 'sex, homosexuality and drugs', between 'fit -healthy body' and 'misshapen-hunchbacked body and plague', between 'darkness' and 'brightness'¹, between 'beauty'² and 'ugliness', and finally, between 'betrayal' and 'loyalty'. These dichotomies describe the necessity of war between 'us' (the Americans, the West) and 'them' (terrorists, Middle-Eastern mystic societies). Hence, as Leonidas (read Bush) says: "A new age has begun. An age of freedom"³. There is a nice parallel between the concept of 'new age' in Leonidas' term and Bush's 'new global order'. Therefore, "if the film uses visuals to vilify moral objections to war, it likewise wields dialogue and rhetoric against political objections" (Elston, 2009, p. 63).

• Who are with us?

In this 'holy war' against terrorism, mysticism and tyranny, America (like Sparta) is alone but vanguard. America, like Sparta, more than anything relies on his 'finest soldiers' and only needs its citizens' loyalty. The American mothers not only should not mourn for losing their sons in war, but just like the Spartan women, they have to give birth to healthy boys both genetically and eugenically. In a 'militaristic society' like America, what is more important than this? Pomeroy (2002, p.62) gives us a similar historical case in American history: "during the American Civil War, inspired by patriotic propaganda,

1. Leonidas' march from a bright and golden farm in Sparta

2. Gorgo's beauty versus the ugliness of Xerxes, his emissary and commanders, and Iranian women

3. (00:03:52,700 --> 00:04:22,500).

some southern women behaved in ways similar to those Plutarch attributes to Spartans. Women would leave bonnets and hoopskirts at the homes of young men who had not enlisted, with a letter commanding them to volunteer or be stigmatized as unmanly. They exhorted the troops to come home only if they wore laurel crowns of victory or were carried on shields of honor”.

In addition to the American soldiers and families, the European countries or NATO members (like the Athenians or the Greeks) are potential allies of 'us'; America needs to persuade them for invading Afghanistan, Iraq and other regions and countries.

- **Who are against us?**

Based on the American nationalism, the Middle Eastern countries, the 'terrorists' and the 'Axis of evil' countries are against 'us'. The enemy is always trying to attack the Western countries in general, and U.S. in particular, because they hate us. And why do they hate 'us'? Because 'they hate our freedom and our democracy. Sardar and Davis (2003, p.137) write as below:

When he addressed a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001, President George W. Bush observed: 'Americans are asking, why do they hate us?' He provided a direct answer: 'They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

They continue:

So when President Bush, for example, says in his 2002 State of the Union address, 'America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere', he takes it for granted that American ideas of liberty and justice are the only ones that there are (Ibid, p.201).

In the American nationalist ideology, not only are those countries the enemy, but also there are several enemies inside the country: the ethnic, racial and cultural groups. Noble (2002) in his *Death of a nation* criticizes U.S. nationalism and military adventurism, which is based on the old 'metaphor of two worlds' or the ideology of 'American exceptionalism'. The metaphor is based on a radical contrast between an innocent and virtuous 'America', and a corrupt and degraded outside world. Lipsitz in his introduction to the book writes:

The exclusionary mentality at the heart of the metaphor of two worlds never allowed for the full inclusion of people of color, women, sexual minorities, and other aggrieved and nonnormative groups into the ranks of national subject (2002, p. xvi).

Level 3: the Metaphorical World

In the two previous levels, we dealt with the diegetic and real levels. The third level is the metaphorical level; in this level we try to identify the metaphors used in the film and understand their meanings. Understanding this metaphorical level helps us to establish a connection between the diegetic and the real world. In other words, it helps us to interpret the film better. We see several interesting metaphors in the film: wolf (a metaphor for both Xerxes and his army), misshapen (the Ephors, the hunchback, the oracle, the Immortals, the monsters). Dilios, the narrator, says: "It's been more than 30 years since the wolf and the winter cold. And now, as then, a beast approaches. Patient and confident, savoring the meal to come. But this beast is made of men and horses... swords and spears"¹.

Elston says:

It is important to note that within the film's epistemological universe; misshapen bodies also indicate misshapen ideologies, a linkage which reinforces the historic notion that external difference, or 'deformity', indicates internal moral defectiveness (Elston, 2009, p.61).

She continues:

If Leonidas is the heroic personification of the conservative masculinist security regime, then Xerxes is likewise posited as its ostensible opposite: liberal, ungendered, and most of all, dangerous. The Middle East isn't the only threat to American security, the movie seems to be saying; anything that challenges the conservative cultural and ideological norm is suspect. Xerxes' sensual, sexually ambiguous persona, when coupled with Leonidas' brawn and bravado, also echoes earlier gendered constructions of foreign effeminacy versus American exceptionalism (Ibid, p.67).

1. (00:05:58,200 --> 00:06:19,700).

Leonidas as Jesus!

In contrary to this brutal evil (Xerxes, Xerxes' army), Leonidas is Jesus! Leonidas sacrifices himself for the salvation of the other (the American families, the West). He gives himself and his soldiers' life as a gift for the salvation of freedom, democracy and justice; however, "His main regret...is that he has so few to sacrifice"¹. In a final scene from the battlefield, we see Leonidas, crucified by the Iranian arrows, and his soldiers surround him like the apostles.

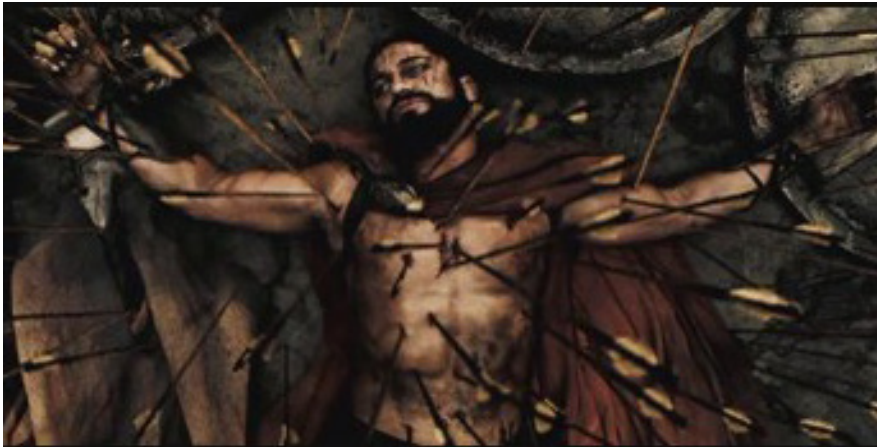


Fig. 6. Leonidas, crucified by the Iranian arrows

Conclusion

In the post-September 11th anti-terrorism atmosphere, the Bush administration needed to persuade the American people that the best way for the punishment of the enemies of U.S. is war. Because, not only they are the enemies of U.S., but they are also the enemies of freedom, democracy, justice, order, and reason. They are 'beasts' and 'monsters', and "if the enemy is a 'monster', it does not have a legitimate human history or cultural/moral standing" (Elston, 2009, p.59). Consequently, *300* is a film over the necessity of fighting against 'barbarism'. In addition, there are many enemies 'inside'

1. (00:29:10,700 --> 00:29:14,500).

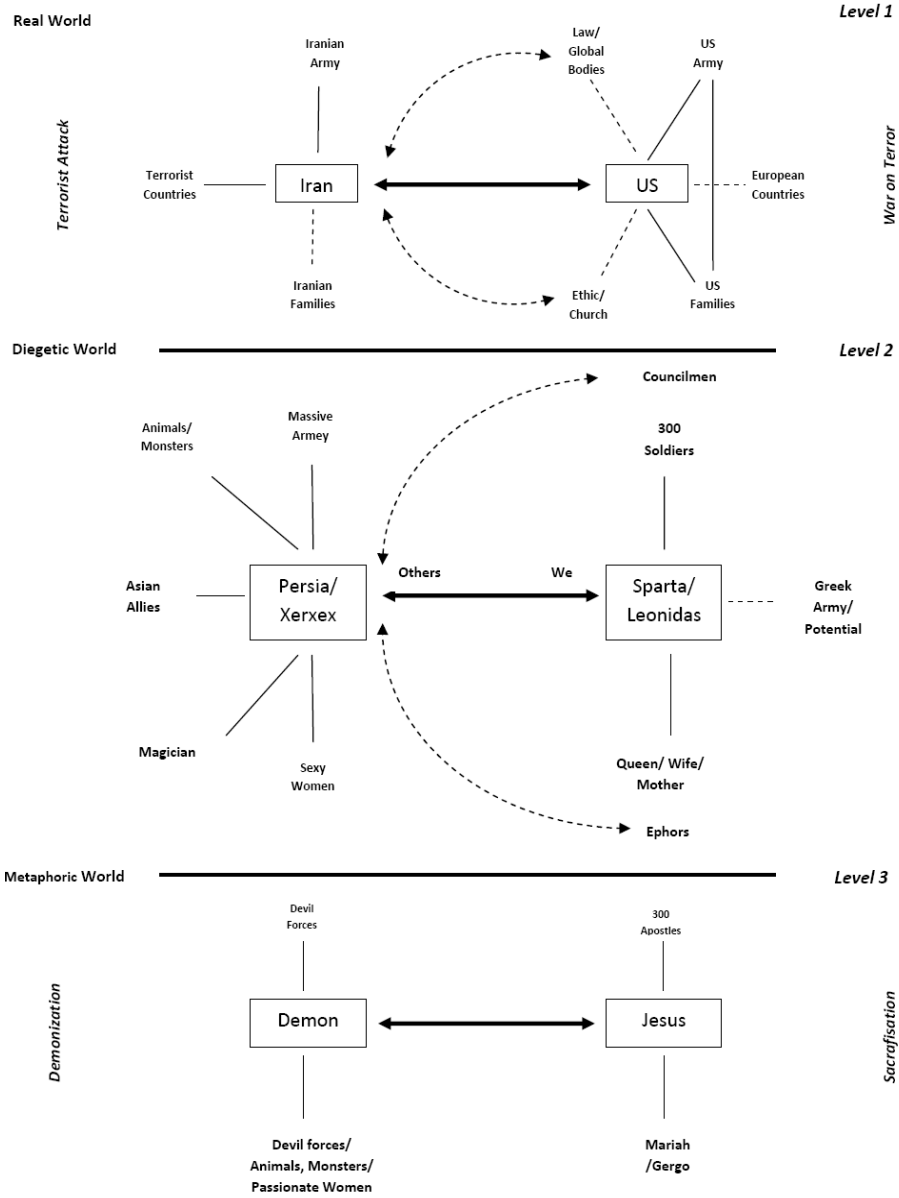


Fig 7. Three levels of significance: level 1 (the metaphoric world), Level 2 (the Diegetic world), level 3 (the real world)

the American society. The liberals, left intellectuals, cultural, racial and sexual minorities (homosexuals, drug abusers) are the insider enemies of America; even the religious and legal procedures and institutions that are not so concomitant with the conservative masculinist security regime are traitors. Based on an American exceptionalism ideology, in this mission/war, America is alone. America is the only country that can guide this war against barbarism, terrorists, and mystical and tyrannical societies such as Middle Eastern societies. The European countries, in the best-case scenario, are the 'potential' allies that can help America to do its job. *300* is full of cultural stereotypes about East and Iran; these stereotypes not only target the rulers and soldiers of these countries, but also extend to their women and families. According to the producers of *300*, all Eastern societies are degenerated societies full of evil.

Reference

- Writers, Artists Describe State of the Union*. (2007). Talk of the Nation (NPR). Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7002481>.
- Barthes, R. (1991). *Mythologies* (Annette Lavers, Trans.). New York: The Noonday Press.
- Carrier, D. (2000). *The Aesthetics of Comics*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Delpech, T. (2007). *Iran and the bomb: the abdication of international responsibility*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fields, N. (2007). *Thermopylae 480 Be: Last stand of the 300*, Oxford: Osprey.
- Gilbert, B. (1991). *Not Without My Daughter*, USA.
- Hall, S. (2003). *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, London: Sage Publications.
- Howard, R. (2004). *Iran in Crisis? Nuclear ambitions and the American response*, London: Zed Books.
- Jafarzadeh, A. (2007). *The Iran threat: President Ahmadinejad and the coming nuclear crisis*, New York: Palgrave.
- Joshua Z. March 10, 2007. NPR Interview with 300's Frank Miller. *The Atlasphere*. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www.theatlasphere.com/metablog/612.php>.
- King, G. (2000). *SPECTACULAR NARRATIVES Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, New York: I.B.Tauris.
- Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Macdonald, M. (2003). *Exploring Media Discourse*, London: Arnold.
- Machin, D. and Leeuwen, T. (2007). *Global Media Discourse: A critical introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Matheson, D. (2005). *Media Discourses: Analysing Media Texts*, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Michaels, C. W. (2005). *No Greater Threat: America after September 11 and the Rise of a National Security State*, New York: Algora.
- Miller, A. (2007). *Reading bande dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip*, Wilmington NC: Intellect Books.
- Miller, F. and Lynn, V. (1998). *300*, Dark Horse Comics.
- Noble, D.W. (2002). *Death of a nation: American culture and the end of exceptionalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Pomeroy, S.B. (2002). *Spartan Women*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Raaflaub, K.A. (ed.) (2007) *War and peace in the ancient world*, London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Raessens, J. (2006). Reality Play: Documentary Computer Games: Beyond Fact and Fiction, *Popular Communication*, Vol. 3,213-224.
- Ram, H. (2009). *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession*, California: Stanford University Press.
- Sajbel, M.O. (2006). *One night with the King*, Gener8Xion Entertainment.
- Sardar, Z. and Davies, M.W. (2003). *Why Do People Hate*, New York:Disinformation.
- Schulte, S.R. (2008). "The *WarGames* Scenario" Regulating Teenagers and Teenaged Technology (1980–1984), *Television & New Media*, 9(6), 487-513.

- Talbot, M. (2007). *Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2008). *Discourse and Context: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2008). *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing Social Semiotics*. New York: Routledge.