

History cut off at the pass: Zach Snyder's 300

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300, directed by Zach Snyder, screenplay by Snyder, Kurt Johnstad and Michael Gordon, based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley

Zach Snyder's *300* is abominable, and the comic book by Frank Miller (with Lynn Varley) that it is taken from only a little better. It's deplorable, but not astonishing. In a culture where torture, militarism, and porno-sadism all too often fill up film, television, and computer screens, *300* is hardly shocking or even the worst example of an ignorant and needlessly violent film.

In Snyder's work, the Spartans live in a city where boys are inured to pain from a young age and grow up to be fearless, obedient soldiers. Leonidas (Gerard Butler) is their king. As a boy, armed only with a spear, he killed a wolf-monster. The women are brave and strong, too, as evidenced by his wife, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey).

A group of outlandish-looking ambassadors from Persia come to demand Sparta's submission; Leonidas has them thrown to their deaths in a pit. When he learns that Persia's King Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) has invaded Greece with a massive army, he decides to confront the foe. But the magistrates of the town are reluctant, and one of them, Theron (Dominic West), is secretly a Persian collaborator.

Despite the wishes of the elders, Leonidas takes a group of 300 warriors to head off the Persians at a mountain pass called Hot Gates. The story is narrated by one of his soldiers, Dilios (David Wenham).

The Spartans, phenomenal fighters, defeat hordes of Persians, some of whom are clearly not human. The Persians, including their seven-foot king, Xerxes, are ornamentally pierced and lavishly dressed. The Spartans are splendidly muscled and reveal it by a lack of clothing. They are super-, or really non-human themselves.

The film is elegantly shot. More than one critic has praised the colors and the landscapes. There is subtle melding of film with graphic art. Generally, the images express an exoticism that combines beauty and pain. Various characters wriggle in ecstasy or are hideously deformed. Walls are mortared with corpses. Body parts are lopped off, and blood that resembles ink flies everywhere.

If this were all the film did, it might be ignored. The problem is that it trivializes an important moment in history. Snyder especially approaches the Persian-Spartan battle with a lazy and

smirking attitude. *300* is, as Snyder has put it, "opera"; shot for shot it has been adapted from Miller's comic book.

Neither the film nor the comic books tells us much about what actually occurred at the mountain pass of Thermopylae (Hot Gates) in northern Greece in 480 BC, or why it was important. It is an ugly business to see something genuinely significant falsified. One is tempted to say, "Hands off!" But it is better to look at the problems.

To begin with, there is something worrisome in making a film from a comic book. Comic books, as a rule, have not been known for representing historical events accurately or thoughtfully.

Visual images can depict history with great emotional force and even move the viewer to action. Think of Jacques-Louis David's Oath of the Horatii or The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons. To show the French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century the tragic necessity of sacrifice for a great social cause, David painted the Romans engaged in struggles to found their republic in a series of semi-mythical wars against the oppression of the Etruscan kings in the sixth century BC.

To be most effective and affecting, however, historical images depend on some knowledge by the viewer of the events that they portray. David's viewers were often educated men and women who had read the stories about the struggle to establish the Roman Republic in Livy's histories, often in the original Latin. The paintings brought to life events they were already familiar with and revealed what was essential in those events for modern times.

It is true that without much knowledge one can see and experience grief, strength, bravery and hope. But the greatest impact of historical works occurs when the viewer can fill these emotions with more developed content.

Without this knowledge, the image tends to fall back to its most vague and general level: to violence, for example, as opposed to the character of violence in a specific war of liberation or in a specific war of enslavement.

Unfortunately, this is the state of American culture at the moment, when artists and audiences alike have by and large been cut off from historical knowledge.

It is telling that comic books, especially in the form of graphic novels, have become a significant cultural phenomenon. Comic books, whether fictional or historical or a

mixture of both, usually attempt to supplement images with some sort of narrative.

They generally only make sense with some dialogue or a bit of “filler” that explains the background of the story. That is, they are a form in which effective images must depend on a scaffolding of prose. But only a scaffolding. If there is too much narrative, it conflicts with the image and detracts from it.

This makes them problematic for rendering historical events. Nothing is impossible, but comic books seem to be an art form the least suited to depict historical events in a meaningful way. This is even more the case when the events occurred many years ago and concern fundamentally different forms of society.

An artist must judge what is possible and appropriate in the form that he or she is working in, and that has been notoriously difficult for artists in the last 30 years. Novels and films seem under-utilized, and comic books and cartoons seem overblown.

Why, after all, treat the Greeks who in 480 BC died to prevent an invasion by the Persians? Simply because it was a good fight? Or because men were courageous on the battlefield? Neither Miller nor Snyder seems to have a penetrating view of who the Spartans were and why the battle of Thermopylae was significant.

They certainly search for reasons. In the film, the dark, monstrous Persians represent an inhuman, Asiatic tyranny. (Is it entirely coincidental that modern-day “Persia”—i.e., Iran—is presently in the sights of the American media and political establishment?) The Greeks are fighting for “Reason” and “Freedom.” In Miller’s book, one reads, “Howling barbarians. The armies of all Asia—pledged to crush the impertinent republics of Greece to make slaves of the only free men the world has ever known.”

At best, these are just phrases. It is doubtful whether Snyder or Miller cares very much about what the historical significance of the Battle of Thermopylae might have been. A tradition exists that tells us that the Spartans fought for freedom, but it doesn’t mean much now.

In the absence of historical understanding, events can become surrounded by the most banal and clichéd notions. Chapters in Miller’s book have titles like “Honor,” “Duty,” “Glory” and “Victory.” These ideas are hackneyed and empty and quickly become filled with militarist sentiment.

Historical reality is richer, more complex and ultimately a far more fertile ground for a film or a graphic novel.

The Spartan soldiers came from a unique society, even among the ancient Greeks. The Spartan was a member of a ruling military class. He underwent relentless training and exposure to the elements because his social class was in a constant state of war with a much larger group of oppressed helots, Greek-speaking serfs, whose labor the Spartans exploited.

Every year, the Spartan elite, whose society had democratic and even communistic features, officially declared war on the helots. When boys were forced to live on their own for a period, they were encouraged to steal from the helots, although

they could be punished if they were caught.

The other Greeks exhibited different political and economic forms—in particular, democracies or semi-democracies based on slave labor. Unlike the Spartans, their armies depended on citizen-militias made up not only of landowners, as was the case with the Spartans, but of working farmers, small tradesmen.

These soldiers were wealthy enough to supply themselves with heavy shields and body armor. Fighting in a compact group, they were a potent force. This sort of society, in particular the Athenian, was to make decisive contributions to the development of science, art and philosophy in the decades after the Persian-Greek Wars.

The 300 Spartans at Thermopylae consciously sacrificed themselves for freedom from foreign rule, but to discover the objective content of this, the society has to be studied, no matter what the artist ultimately chooses to do with it.

Next to nothing of this comes across in Snyder’s *300* or Miller’s comic book. We live in a world torn by war and oppression, and we need films and art (including perhaps graphic novels of a more interesting and artistic variety) to help us make sense of it so that we can change it. There is a need, for example, to understand what heroism and sacrifice actually mean, to divest the notions of the stereotypes that run through the popular media. The Battle of Thermopylae offers an artist a chance to weigh some of this. But not in the hands of Snyder and Miller: this historical route to understanding our own world has been cut off, for the moment.

Links to paintings by Jacques-Louis David:

http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neocl_dav_oath.html

http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/neocl_dav_b rutus.html



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