

Calvin University

Calvin Digital Commons

University Faculty Publications

University Faculty Scholarship

6-1-2019

Fascist affect in 300

Carl Plantinga
Calvin University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin_facultypubs

Recommended Citation

Plantinga, Carl, "Fascist affect in 300" (2019). *University Faculty Publications*. 158.
https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin_facultypubs/158

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Faculty Scholarship at Calvin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Calvin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dbm9@calvin.edu.



Fascist Affect in *300*

Carl Plantinga

Abstract: The stories we tell each other, or present via mass media, are important components of the cultural ecology of a place and time. This article argues that *300* (2007), directed by Zach Snyder and based on a comic book series both written and illustrated by Frank Miller, evinces what can legitimately be called a “fascist aesthetic” that depends in large part on the moods and emotions the screen story both represents and elicits. While many other commentators have charged this film with incipient fascism, this article both deepens and expands on the claim by showing how the film’s elicitation of affect contributes to this aesthetic. The article argues that the affects represented and elicited in *300*, when taken in conjunction with and in relation to the ideology they support, constitute what can be called “fascist affect.”

Keywords: *300*, affect, emotion, eugenics, fascism, mood, Spartans, spectatorship

The word “fascist” appears all too frequently in today’s political climate. It is often used loosely, so one had better take care when using the term. And yet in relation to the epic action film *300* (2007), the word fits well. Adapted from the 1998 comic series created by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, *300* tells the story of 300 courageous Spartan soldiers who, led by their ferocious King Leonidas (Gerard Butler), valiantly battle the threatening Persian army of 300,000 men until, after being betrayed by a hunchbacked Spartan outcast, they all are slaughtered. Their defeat, however, alerts the rest of the Greeks to the significance of the Persian threat, and promises future victory as the entire Greek nation rises up to battle the Persians. The story is loosely based on the Battle of Thermopylae during the Persian Wars of the fifth century BCE. Considerations of the film as history, however, are ultimately less interesting than analyses of the film’s political function in its contemporary context. *300* can certainly be seen as a political allegory that embodies tensions resulting from the Iraq War and conceptions of Iran as a node of the “axis of evil.” This article will instead discuss the film’s incipient fascism, a broad threat that resonates more powerfully today, given the events of the past few years.

300 is a highly stylized fantasy film shot almost entirely on blue-screen soundstages with digital backgrounds added in postproduction. *300* is notable for its striking visual style, for its idealization of the courageous Greeks (all handsome men who sport muscular physiques and wear only tight leather



Figure 1. King Leonidas and his buff Spartans stand proudly before a hill of dead Persians (300, Warner Bros., 2007).

“short shorts” and capes), and for its vulgarization of the invading Persians (represented as monstrous and/or effeminate).

Many scenes feature the preparation and training for combat, fierce chanting (“A-whoop, A-whoop!”), and forcefully intoned epithets (“We are Spartans!” and “No prisoners! No mercy!”). Female characters get in on the slogans as well, for example, when Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey) sends her husband-king off to battle by telling him to come back “with his shield or on it.” The film’s centerpiece, however, is the fighting itself, which is represented graphically, often in slow motion, with fountains of spurting blood, decapitations, impalements, deep base choir intonations to suggest the powerful maleness of it all, and rhythmic drumming as underscoring. After the Greeks are slaughtered, the last scenes serve as a eulogy for the fallen heroes, with music and *mise-en-scène* suggesting the mythic significance of their mission and sacrifice. We see the dead Leonidas on his back, his body pierced by arrows, his arms splayed to the sides in an obvious reference to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. The film did very well at the box office, with a lifetime gross revenue of over \$450 million, which led to a sequel, *Rise of an Empire* (Noam Murro, 2014).

Director Zack Snyder’s wife and production partner, Deborah Snyder, described *300* as a “ballet of death” (Daly 2007). Perhaps it is this, in conjunction with the film’s implicit fascist ideology, that caused audiences at the Berlin Film Festival to walk out and to boo the film. *300* also provoked intense criticism in the Middle East for its portrayal of the Persians as monsters and deviants, with the Iranian Academy of the Arts lodging an official complaint against the film with UNESCO, calling it an attack on the historical identity of Iran. *300* has been called homophobic, racist, antisability, tribalist, and militaristic. It is the film’s incipient fascism, however, that unites these tendencies within a unified ideology. *300* has been called “the ur-text of the alt-right,” “*Hamilton* for neo-fascists,” and “our *Birth of a Nation*” (Breihan 2017). *New York Post* critic Kyle Smith (2007) writes that the film would have pleased “Adolph’s boys,” while *Slate*’s Dana Stevens (2008) compares the film to the Nazi racist screed, *The Eternal Jew* (Fritz Hippler, 1940).

300 has been called homophobic, racist, antisability, tribalist, and militaristic. It is the film’s incipient fascism, however, that unites these tendencies within a unified ideology.

Are these charges of fascism fair? And should we take the sociopolitical and ethical experience offered by such an action/adventure fantasy seriously? This article will argue in the affirmative for both questions. Yet these charges of fascism are easily made, and this article goes beyond that to attempt to understand some of what makes fascist ideology, in a story format, attractive to many audiences. To do this, I will first discuss fascist art generally, then I will examine the moods and emotions that *300* attempts to elicit through the viewing of the film and in support of the fascist ideology that it exhibits. I call this “fascist affect.”

Fascist Art

Fascism is a political ideology with a constellation of associated social and ethical commitments (Hayes 1973; Payne 1980). This constellation of commitments has existed since the rise of fascism in Italy in 1922, and is a consistent threat to reemerge now and in the future. Fascism is historically associated with the political formations in Germany, Italy, and Japan before and during World War II, and to some extent in Spain until the fall of Francoism in 1975. As a political ideology, fascism is above all nationalist, elitist, and antiliberal. It is a form of extreme nationalism that attempts to unite a favored people (the “folk”), sometimes with an appeal to a mythic and glorious past, under a strong leader figure who is acceded complete control. Walter Laquer writes that fascist movements were “headed by a leader who had virtually unlimited power, was adulated by his followers, and was the focus of a quasi-religious cult” (1996: 14). Japan had Emperor Hirohito, Germany had Adolf Hitler, and Italy had Benito Mussolini. Italian fascism looked to the Roman era for its inspiration for the rebirth of a muscular Italy for the present.

Fascism evinces an ethos of ethnic and national purity, favoring the strong, healthy, and pure over what is thought to be weak, diseased, and impure or inauthentic. Fascism believes not in political democracy and cultural liberalism, but in the “natural” social hierarchy and the rule of the elites. Fascism is, as Yuval Noah Harari argues, a form of “evolutionary humanism” (as opposed to liberal or socialist humanism) that considers humans to be a mutable species that might evolve into superhumans or devolve into a degenerate species. Thus, all social policy must be designed to protect humankind from this degeneration and to promote evolution into superhumans (Harari 2011, 258–263). This ethos led to the Holocaust during World War II, during which the Nazis murdered millions of Jews, homosexuals, political dissidents, and anyone thought not to contribute to the development of a strong and pure Aryan people under the leadership of Adolf Hitler.

Fascism is also imperialistic in that it promotes the right of the “naturally superior” to colonize, exploit, and even kill the inferior and “defective.” Fascism celebrates militarism and physical power, and often sentimentalizes “glorious

death” for the good of the people. One sees this in the chilling images of regimented military might highlighted in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), and in the employment of suicide attacks by Japanese fighter planes on American forces during World War II. It foregrounds a sense of discontent, crisis, and/or impending danger, thus making nationalism and militarism seemingly necessary (Laquer 1996). In sum, fascism is about total stability, control, and homogeneity under the headship of an idealized leader. It appeals to a mythic and idealized nation and points to a glorious rebirth. As Benito Mussolini put it: “We have created our myth. Our myth is a faith, it is a passion, in our myth is the nation, and to this myth, to this grandeur we subordinate all the rest” (quoted in Laquer 1996, 25).

Our idea of fascist art has been influenced most by documentarian, photographer, and Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl by way of Susan Sontag’s famous essay, “Fascinating Fascism.” Of course, Riefenstahl was already famous for her documentaries made during the Nazi era, including *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). The former film celebrates both militarism and uniformity with scenes featuring massive formations of military personnel marching in lockstep. It also features the emotional adulation of Adolph Hitler, as he first descends from the skies in his plane, like some kind of god sent to save Germany, and later addresses the 1934 Nazi Party rally to thunderous applause. Of fascist dramaturgy, Sontag writes that it “centers on orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets, uniformly shown in ever-swelling numbers. Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and congealed, static, ‘virile’ posing” (1981: 91).

Olympia is less political, but it puts the Olympic Games into a kind of mythic context by emphasizing their roots in the ancient world and a devotion to the beauty of the athletic human body. The Sontag essay was a meditation on Riefenstahl’s 1973 book, *The Last of the Nuba*, a book of photographs of the men of Nuba, an African tribe. As Sontag writes, fascist art “displays a utopian aesthetics—that of physical perfection.” “Painters and sculptors under the Nazis,” she goes on, “often depicted the nude, but they were forbidden to show any bodily imperfections. Their nudes look like pictures in physique magazines: pinups which are both sanctimoniously asexual and (in a technical sense) pornographic, for they have the perfection of a fantasy” (1981, 92). Fascist art celebrates “the ideal of life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect, the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders)” (1981, 96).

When one looks at 300, one sees clear examples of these and other aspects of what various scholars have called “fascist aesthetics.” Fascism attempts to build on the supposed cultural achievements of former cultures thought to evince the heroic qualities toward which contemporary society ought to return and to provide models for regeneration. Thus Mussolini and Italian fas-

cism looked to and idealized ancient Rome, to an era when Rome dominated the world. The Nazi architect, Albert Speer, developed a “theory of ruin value” for buildings of the Third Reich, as Mark Antliff writes, “to ensure that they would resemble Greek and Roman models after centuries or even thousands of years had passed (1998, 28). Zach Snyder’s *300*, of course, looks back to ancient Greece, to the Spartans who ostensibly modeled heroic masculinity, courage, and sacrifice in significant quantities.

We have seen that fascist aesthetics values representations of the ideal male body rooted in works of Greek sculpture. We see this, of course, in the representations of the Spartans in *300*, who are all represented with traits that the film takes to be bodily perfection: muscular physiques, shining blue eyes, and full manes of hair. It is interesting that although actual Spartans would have worn full armor when engaging in battle, these cinematic Spartans are nearly nude aside from their helmets, capes, and tight shorts. Thus *300* partakes of the aestheticized body characteristic of fascist art, and has clear affinities with Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba* and *Olympia*. As the boy Leonidas kills a wolf, the voiceover narrator intones that his hands are steady and “his form perfect” as he kills the outmatched animal.

The romantic inspiration drawn from an idealized past and an interest in the perfection of human form are both important elements of the fascist aesthetic. My primary interest in this article, however, is what I call “fascist affect” in *300*. What do I mean by this? By affect here, I am primarily interested in mood and emotion, both examples of affect that I will examine in more detail below. No types of moods or emotions are fascist in themselves. Anger in itself is not fascist, any more than a mood of earnest seriousness is. It is only affects in relation to their rhetorical uses that can properly be so called. But moods and emotions can be marshaled in the context of a narrative to assist in highlighting the appeal of the fascist imagined order. Fascist moods and emotions are affects that are used to sell the fascist program. Certain moods and emotions, though not fascist in themselves, tend to recur in fascist art and storytelling. When they occur in combination, and when they occur in support of fascist ideas, then we can call them “fascist affects.”

What the remainder of this article does is identify a constellation of moods and emotions at work in *300* and describes the use of mood and emotion in providing an experience of fascist ideology as it is played out on the screen.

Mood in *300*

Moods and emotions are both examples of human affects, but emotion is thought to have a stronger cognitive component (Plantinga 2009), as I will briefly explain in the next section. Moods, as human affects, are a bit trickier. My sad mood in real life may not stem from any particular incident. I may simply be sad for some unknown reason. But a sad mood in a screen story is

different. When a person has a mood, it is a mental state. When a screen story has a mood, it must be something else, quite obviously. Whatever that something else is, it is likely to have a fittingness or affinity with human moods; but unlike a human mood, it cannot itself be a mental state.

Moods in screen stories, as I have argued elsewhere, have two essential components. Such a mood is (1) the affective character or tone of a scene or entire screen story (2) that serves as an expression of the perspective of a character or group within the story and/or the expression of the perspective of the narration as a whole on the story (Plantinga 2018; Sinnerbrink 2012). Mood depends in part on the sort of events that are depicted. Obviously, the mood of an auto accident scene will tend to differ from that of a birthday party, as the affective character of a funeral scene will differ from that of a wedding scene. Filmmakers are not typically satisfied to let the represented event signal mood by itself. The mood of a screen story is also developed through the manifold registers of style and technique in the rich medium of moving images: cinematography and videography, special effects, music and other sound, editing, production design, editing, acting, and much else. These elements are orchestrated and/or designed to effect a mood that serves certain ends. A sad mood or tone, for example, is typically designed to suggest that the events depicted are sad or that a certain character is sad. Thus moods embody and/or help develop the cognitive orientation of the narration toward the events depicted (Plantinga 2018).

How does this play out in *300*? The film presents some extreme perspectives and behaviors undertaken by the Spartans, for whom viewers are meant to have allegiance. Yet the eugenics practiced by the Spartans, for example, would be considered to be reprehensible to most viewers. Spartan baby boys are examined at birth, and if found to be small, puny, sickly, or “misshapen,” are discarded and killed. When engaged in battle, the Spartans chant “No mercy! No prisoners!” We see the Spartans, after a successful fight against the Persian hordes, piercing wounded enemy soldiers with swords, casually killing them as they engage in lighthearted post-battle banter. The 300 Spartans who eventually face a massive Persian force in the film’s climactic action expect only to be able to slow the Persians down and to demonstrate the ferocity with which the Greek nation will face them if they pursue their invasion further. But the 300 all expect to die, to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their nation.

The mood established by the film is designed to justify all of this, to make it seem appropriate and fitting. Filmic moods are often difficult to describe in language; their qualitative feel is often beyond linguistic expression. To be best understood, they must be experienced. Yet moods have a strong effect on the rhetoric of a film and may encourage cognitive biasing (Carroll 2003). Thus, moods have implications for an ethics of spectatorship. The mood of *300* can be described, however imprecisely, as a kind of fierce, melancholic foreboding

The mood of 300 can be described, however imprecisely, as a kind of fierce, melancholic foreboding in the face of urgent crisis and threat.

in the face of urgent crisis and threat. The extreme militarism, aggression, cruelty, and violence of the Spartans are played against a background established and justified by mood.

The film's mood is in part established by the narrative events the film depicts and by what the viewers *are shown*. The characters, settings, and events as represented have an affective character. Among the most striking images that we see are geysers of blood, decapitations, impalements, deformities, monsters, and grotesque creatures. It is a dangerous and unsettling world indeed, quite a far cry from *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965). After the opening title, the first image shown is that of a pile of skulls. This is a film in which the specter of death is ever-present. Sparta and all of Greece are threatened by the gigantic Persian army, consisting not merely of hundreds of thousands of very ugly soldiers, but by elephants, rhinoceri, a giant with bad teeth who resembles *Jaws* (Richard Kiel) in *Moonraker* (Lewis Gilbert, 1979), and an assortment of hideous monsters. Early in the film, we are introduced to the training of Spartan boys, and we see Leonidas, as a child, forced to fend for himself in the wilderness, where he is attacked by and then kills a vicious wolf. We later see a Greek village that has been destroyed by the Persian forces, in which the dead villagers have been impaled on tree limbs. We see a defensive wall constructed by the Spartans for which they used their enemies' dead bodies as "mortar." We see that all of the enemies of the Greeks are hideously deformed or else effeminate (as is Xerxes). We see constant fighting, yelling, and bodily injury. Even back in Sparta, the world is an excessively dangerous place. Queen Gorgo must deal with the duplicitous Theron (Dominic West), a corrupt Spartan politician who lures Gorgo into having sex with him by promising in return his fealty to her husband, but then betrays her (for which she plunges a blade into his body).

Figure 2. Spartan newborn boys are either kept or killed after a close inspection. (*300*, Warner Bros., 2007).



It is important to remember that the eugenics practiced by the Spartans is represented as a cultural convention not tied to any particular war or invasion. Sparta is represented as in a constant state of threat. As the specter of the advancing Persian army is introduced, the voiceover narrator links this to the wolf-killing scene: “Now, as then, a beast approaches.” Eugenics is related to the military training that all Spartan boys must undergo, as all boys must become killing machines “baptized in the fire of combat.” As the voiceover narrator intones, in Sparta there is “no place for weakness. Only the hard and strong may call themselves Spartans.” As if to drive home the point, the narrative repeats slowly: “Only the hard, the strong.” Killing imperfect babies and Persian messengers is justified by the frightening nature of the world, by a worldview. This is just the way the Spartans do it, because the Spartans experience the world as one of never-ending threat. It is as though Sparta is permanently under siege, and that threat and crisis must be always emphasized to justify such outrageous practices.

All of the elements of film style are marshaled to contribute to this mood of melancholic foreboding and determination in the face of threat. Filmed with a chroma-key technique, the visual design of the film replicates the look of the Frank Miller comic series on which the film is based. Much of the film is muted in blues and greys, and other scenes in nostalgic sepia tones, with few bright or saturated colors save for the deep reds of the blood that freely splatters and flows throughout. Many of the exterior scenes are played out against a backdrop of austere natural beauty as a mythical backdrop. Day scenes invariably occur under clouds, often with shafts of light beaming through the cloud cover to suggest the fierce beauty of the deadly Spartan mission. In one scene, Leonidas stands at the window of his bedchamber, the moon unnaturally large in the sky to lend a cosmic significance to his impending sacrifice. This all suggests the eternal, destiny, and large concepts. (In this, it also relates to the godlike physiques of the Greek soldiers). Night scenes are often decidedly low key, often lit with flames that suggest the dramatic weight of the present and the conflagrations to come at daybreak. And the blood—my goodness. The blood spurts and splashes almost as freely as the severed limbs and heads of the combatants, becoming an integral design element of the *mise-en-scène*. So much blood, such a bloody world, such a dangerous world.

The soundtrack is also important in creating the film’s mood. The voiceovers and dialogue never fail to remind the viewer of the majesty of Spartan power and the weight of responsibility. Delios, the voiceover narrator, provides the Spartan perspective and an account of the battles in hushed tones and with an ardent sense of mission: “Spartans never retreat; Spartans never surrender.” Queen Gorgo is also granted lines that espouse the essential seriousness of life and the Spartan mission, in this case echoing contemporary bumper stickers: “Freedom isn’t free at all,” she says, “it comes at a high cost, at

the cost of blood.” The dialogue helps to effect a mood of urgent crisis, and so do the music and sound effects. The mood of a film’s first scenes tell us much about the narrative perspective; over the shots of dozens of infant skulls in the film’s first images, we hear foreboding music and the rumble of thunder. The score for the film, composed by Tyler Bates, contains much percussive battle music, low-base windy sounds, male voices chanting and harumpfing, heroic choral music, and heavy rock themes with electric guitar riffs for some of the energetic battle scenes. Bates describes the score as “beautiful themes” tempered with “extreme heaviness,” adding that the score has a lot of “weight and intensity in the low end of the percussion,” which Snyder found fitting for the film (Epstein 2005).

It should be noted that the battle scenes are sometimes infused with a mood of good cheer, as though fighting and killing are the Spartan *telos*, the glorious expression of their very being. It is only during the many fighting scenes that the melancholy of approaching death takes a momentary hiatus: it is replaced by good-natured male camaraderie and energetic guitar rock. Tellingly, this is when the filmmakers employ slow motion, which is here designed to slow down the action so that it can be emphasized, so that the viewer can better see the swinging and thrusting of the blade, the piercing of the flesh, and, most importantly, the splattering of blood. It is also a way to slow down the images in the name of comic book graphics. Slowed down like this, they better resemble the frames and pages of the comics, with their stylized virile posing and capacity to capture the high moments of the action. It also highlights and emphasizes the fighting, further amplifying its supposed magnificence and its relationship to glorious death (a concept that I will examine in the next section).

Moods, as Greg M. Smith (2003) writes, pervade a film at the global level and provide a kind of affective framework from which films elicit more local emotions. This is certainly true in the case of *300*, where a mood of melancholic foreboding, punctuated by scenes of furious and energetic hand-to-hand combat, provides a context for the emotions that I describe in the following section. The mood suggests that life is a constant struggle undertaken under permanent threat. It seems fitting here to consider this excerpt from a chapter entitled “The Laws of Nature and Mankind” in a 1942 German biology textbook: “The battle for existence is hard and unforgiving, but it is the only way to maintain life. This struggle eliminates everything that is unfit for life, and selects everything that is able to survive. . . . The meaning of life is struggle. Woe to him who sins against these laws” (quoted in Harari 2011, 262).

Fascist Emotion in *300*

As concern-based construals, emotions have an “aboutness” to them; emotions have objects. Emotions are concern-based construals. For example, when

I become angry at characters in a film, my anger is directed toward the characters and/or their actions (the object), and it expresses a perspective about those actions (a construal) in relation to my concerns. If the antagonist hurts a beloved protagonist, my construal is that the antagonist behaved badly; my concern is for the well-being of the protagonist. My anger is not just a feeling. Even if it is elicited largely unconsciously and immediately as a kind of intuition, it is also an expression of an attitude or perspective on the events. Thus, it has a strong cognitive component. Presumably, the makers of screen stories elicit emotions intentionally, and those intended emotions are also expressions of a point of view—a perspective on a character, event, or theme. If one denies the cognitive component of emotion, one must also deny the aboutness of emotion—the idea that an emotion expresses a perspective on the world (Plantinga 2009).

In this regard, the remainder of this article will focus on five ideas that *300* embodies, and the emotions (and moods) that the film elicits to support them: (1) an extreme tribalism; (2) disdain for the “other” and the outsider; (3) militarism; (4) suppression of “soft” emotions traditionally thought to be feminine; and (5) a fascination with glorious and honorable death. Together with the mood described above, these emotions comprise the fascist affect and aesthetic of *300*.

Tribalism

Fascism is widely thought to be intensely tribal, emphasizing the goodness, idealness, and superiority of its tribe (whether racial or ethnic) under the absolute rule and authority of a leader who is granted complete authority. This devotion to tribe and tribal leader takes on a quasi-religious aspect, becoming a powerful force of inspiration and direction. In *300*, the attractiveness of tribal emotions is typically promoted through developed allegiances with sympathetic characters that supposedly represent the authentic qualities of the tribe, and by the idealized representation of a leader character (King Leonidas). The emotions celebrated here are tribal pride, patriotism, loyalty, reverence, and vainglory, which are combined with admiration for and submission to a great tribal leader.

Emotions like reverence, loyalty, and devotion to both Sparta and its king run rampant through the sympathetic Spartan characters in *300*. The film’s dialogue and voice-over narration are peppered with phrases proudly declaring what it means to be a Spartan and declaring that Spartan values are worth dying for. I have quoted many of these lines above. The figurehead of the tribe is blue-eyed King Leonidas, who is treated as a great man and a sacrificial hero. It is Leoni-

Fascism is widely thought to be intensely tribal, emphasizing the goodness, idealness, and superiority of its tribe (whether racial or ethnic) under the absolute rule and authority of a leader who is granted complete authority.

das who, as a boy, is shown undergoing rigorous Spartan training and killing a savage wolf. And the king is singled out several times for special veneration. When the Spartans watch a failed landing of Persian ships, in which many are dashed onto the rocky coast, the narrator intones: "Only one among us keeps his reserve; only he; only our king." It is Leonidas who refuses to kneel before the "holy" Persian King Xerxes and whose sacrificial death at the film's end is treated as a Christ-like sacrifice. As the Spartans die, the narrator speaks: "The old ones say we Spartans are descended from Hercules himself. Bold Leonidas gives testament to our bloodline. His roar is long and loud."

It is important to recognize that character and viewer emotions may differ significantly. Although the characters evince devotion and patriotism to the point of death, the viewer is intended to have different emotions. The viewer may not feel any patriotism for Sparta or any loyalty to Leonidas. What the viewer may feel is admiration for the Spartans and their king, or even elevation. Elevation refers to a positive emotion resulting from witnessing what is taken to be another's act of moral goodness. In this case, the sacrificial deaths of the Spartan heroes may elicit elevation.

Disdain

The danger of tribalism is the vilification of the enemy, or even of anyone who does not happen to belong to the tribe. In this case, "vilification" becomes literally the making vile or loathsome of the enemy. It is expected that the Persians would be represented in stark terms as morally evil. *300* goes beyond this to represent them as biologically disgusting as well. As in many other conflict scenarios, the outward physical attributes of the enemy are signs of their inner corruption, thus promoting the harmful association of physical ugliness or deformity with evil, while physical beauty and perfection signify the morally

Figure 3. A hideous Persian giant roars like a beast before attacking the Spartans (300, Warner Bros., 2007)



good. Thus the devotion to purity, beauty, and the threat of pollution are not only elements of the fascist aesthetic, but also serve to mark tribal differences between the good Spartans and the bad Persians.

Both race and sexuality work into this stark differentiation as well, as purity is designated to the white heterosexual male. The Persians are dark-skinned while the Spartans are light-skinned, and the Persians are marked as homosexual and Persian men are shown as either effeminate or monstrously ugly, while the Spartans are full-blooded, well-formed Caucasian heterosexuals with bulging arms and six-pack abs. Thus Xerxes, the Persian god-king, though a man with a beautiful face, also apparently wears lipstick and eyeliner, his face covered with jewelry and piercings, all of which suggests effeminacy. One of the most effective ways of vilifying others in moving image media is by eliciting disgust toward them (Plantinga 2009). The rank and file Persians, as the pustule-faced Ephors (mystics), are often depicted as visually revolting, some of them monsters of huge stature, often with scars, deformities, putrid and decaying flesh, horrifying teeth, and vocalizations usually heard only by carnivorous beasts in cartoons. One particularly loathsome monster has large blades in place of his arms, and it is not clear whether these are biological or mechanical appendages grafted onto his body. His role is to execute those who displease Xerxes by chopping off their heads.

The threat of pollution from the disgusting “other” is nowhere more apparent than in the figure of Ephialtes, the hunchbacked and variously deformed Spartan-in-exile. His mother had taken him away from Sparta as a baby to escape the infanticide meted out to deformed children, and he approaches Leonidas to ask to join forces with the Spartans. Leonidas rejects his help as a soldier because Ephialtes cannot lift his shield high enough to fit into the Spartan defensive formations. The enraged man visits the Persian

Figure 4. Ephialtes the hunchback, who was born a Spartan, had years ago escaped the Spartan eugenics practice, but betrays the Spartans and thus justifies the practice (300, Warner Bros., 2007)



king in whose tent we see writhing female bodies apparently engaged in an orgy. The camera lingers on two women kissing each other, again to associate the Persians and lesbianism with a threat to purity and authentic heterosexual Spartanism. Xerxes offers unlimited pleasures in return for Ephialtes's help, and as Ephialtes accepts this devil's bargain, the women move toward Ephialtes, suggesting the impure and disgusting thought of young female bodies consorting with this hideous creature. (Such "impure" relationships had earlier been suggested during the scene in which the "diseased, rotten, corrupt" Ephors consult the oracle, a young and beautiful Greek female with whom, it is implied, they also have sex). Thus in tried-and-true fashion, the physically disgusting and repulsive are mapped onto moral offensiveness; they are threats to Spartan purity, beauty, and authenticity. This was also accomplished during the Nazi decades in Germany, when Jews were associated with rats as a means of dehumanizing them and rendering them disgusting to the German populace.

The promotion of the strong over the weak is everywhere apparent in the film, as the virtues of manhood are associated strictly with excellence in battle. Thus, even the Athenians, who are Spartan allies, are implied to be weak and soft in comparison with the buff Spartans. Their help in battle is accepted though not highly regarded, and the only identifiable Athenian among them continually expresses fear and doubt, where the authentic Spartans express only fierce resolve. The "poets," "potters," and "blacksmiths" of the Athenian army, it is implied, are not genuine warriors because they have not devoted their lives solely to the arts of battle. They have not sufficiently realized that all of nature, and all of life, is a deadly struggle.

The Spartans are strong, beautiful, heterosexual, and white, while the Persians are dark-skinned, homosexual or effeminate, ugly, putrid, and/or de-

Figure 5. The effeminate Xerxes (notice his eyeliner and painted fingernails) puts his hands on King Leonidas, eliciting homophobic disgust (300, Warner Bros., 2007)



formed. This simplistic and exaggerated portrait of the “other,” which is designed to elicit disgust, is an obvious feature of the promotion of tribalism at the heart of the fascist aesthetic.

The Spartans are strong, beautiful, heterosexual, and white, while the Persians are dark-skinned, homosexual or effeminate, ugly, putrid, and/or deformed.

Militarism

We have seen so far that *300* creates a mood of urgent crisis, idealizes the tribe and its leader, and portrays the enemy—and in fact nearly anyone who is not a member of the tribe—as either monstrous or effeminate. In such a dangerous world, and a world in which good and evil are so easily determined, it might be thought perfectly natural that violent combat be romanticized, military training valorized, and the combatants themselves idealized. And of course, bloody combat scenes and the glorification of the Spartan combatants comprise the heart of *300*. Spartan boys are “baptized” in the fire of combat to create the “finest soldiers the world has ever known.” The film’s early stages suggest the austere beauty and necessity of the boys’ military training, suggesting that to be a Spartan is a fine thing indeed—worthy of adulation and admiration.

In the film, the Spartans like to think that they preserve freedom, reason, and justice in the face of mysticism and emotion. The Ephors, for example, are “diseased old mystics” and remnants of a senseless tradition. Leonidas, according to Spartan law, must consult with them to his great distaste. But Spartan “honor culture” is an “imagined order” just as fascism or mysticism is. A lesson in honor and respect is granted the viewer early on, when several dark-skinned Persian emissaries visit Leonidas and the Spartans to bring a message demanding submission to Xerxes. Feeling the winds of Spartan beauty and tradition, Leonidas instead kills the Persian king’s representatives by having them thrown down a bottomless pit. Later in the film, the effeminate Xerxes demands that Leonidas submit by kneeling before him. Instead, Xerxes is nearly impaled by Leonidas’s spear, which grazes and cuts his face. Spartan militarism, it seems, is driven by a fierce sense of honor, such that any submission to the outsider becomes a loathsome, despicable act. Those who bring such a message to the Spartan king are worthy of death itself because, well, reason demands it! Yet Sparta itself was a helot-owning culture, so presumably it was fine to demand the submission of the people of conquered tribes (even the citizens of other Greek city-states). It is only the special favors tribalism grants to its own tribe that make submission to the outsider such a mark of shame.

At this point, one might object that the valorization of militarism in the film is wholly justified in that the Spartans actually did face a significant threat from the invading Persian forces. This really *was* a dangerous time that demanded a strong military response. The reader should ask why *300* needed to be retold at this particular time and in this particular way. The purpose is not

a history lesson; the film is replete with historical errors and besides, historical accuracy is not really the point. The important question to ask is what role the telling of the story plays in our culture today. Of course, the makers intended to entertain and to fascinate. But we can also see the film as a restaging of a paradigm scenario that rehearses certain kinds of desires and responses, that elicits various supporting emotions and moods, and that uses these to support views about violence, masculinity, and tribalism. The popular success of the film implies that incipient fascist perspectives are potentialities that await only the right cultural context to be fully released.

Suppression of Feminine Emotion

Occasionally, the Spartan men gather for group chanting. When building up their resolve, or celebrating their great leader, they sometimes chant “A-whooh, A-whooh!” and sound a bit like fans at a sports match. At other points, we hear exclamations such as this: “No prisoners! No mercy!” From the beginning, we learn that for Spartans mercy and compassion are rejected ideals. Mercy is a sign of weakness and a failure to recognize the cruel and dangerous nature of the world. While a softhearted liberal or a woman might administer mercy and compassion, the Spartan men reject it outright. Post-battle, as we have seen, this allows the Spartans to casually kill wounded Persians while engaging in lighthearted banter about something else altogether. This is the Spartan way. Neither do the Spartans want mercy and compassion for themselves. We learn that Spartans never retreat and never surrender, and that they expect no mercy from their enemy. Just before the apocalyptic final battle, Captain Artemis (Vincent Regan), who has lost his eldest son to the Persian sword, tells the king: “I have filled my heart with hate.” “Good,” Leonidas replies.

For Leonidas (and the other Spartans), controlled hatred and anger are fine, but the “soft” emotions must be avoided at all costs. When his son dies, Captain Artemis experiences uncontrollable grief and anger as he breaks formation to wildly swing his sword at the Persian hordes. We are reminded that keeping one’s reserve in the face of outrageous events is the hallmark of King Leonidas, who had witnessed the destruction of the Persian navy with a stoic demeanor. We must remember that “only the hard and the strong may call themselves Spartans.” Emotional control in all cases must be maintained, and the “soft” or “effeminate” emotions must be quelled altogether.

Mercy and compassion would seem to call into question much that these fictional Spartans stand for: eugenics, rigorous and dangerous combat training, the dehumanization of other tribes, the killing of Persian wounded and even messengers, and, in general, a rejection of human consideration beyond the narrow confines of family and tribe. And like the mood of urgent crisis that seemingly makes the Spartans’ hard violence necessary, the elimination of compassion and mercy make certain Spartan practices more acceptable.

Fascination with Death

This attitude toward mercy and compassion, then, does leave an interesting question. Typically the death of a hero is met with a certain amount of sentiment: sadness, compassion, mourning, grieving. After viewers of *300* are repeatedly taught that mercy and compassion are weak, how are viewers cued to experience the deaths of King Leonidas and his men? The short answer is this: the death of Leonidas and his cohorts is a fulfillment of their destiny and of their very identity as Spartans. It is not a cause for mourning, but for glorification, remembrance, and even celebration.

Susan Sontag, in her essay on fascist aesthetics, writes that fascist art “glamorizes death” (1981, 91). It promotes mass obeisance to the hero through immortalizing him and the doctrines that he represents. In *300*, it is the deaths of Leonidas and his men that are designed to cement their legacy and to glorify what they stand for. If death in the service of race or ethnicity is the ultimate glory, then there is little to be sentimental about when the hero dies. Early in the film, we learn that Spartan boys are taught that “death on the battlefield in honor of Sparta is the greatest achievement.” As we see Leonidas embarking on his mission to save all of Greece, the voiceover narrator intones that Leonidas’s “only regret is that he has so few to sacrifice.”

As the Spartans view the Persian hordes from above, one Spartan soldier smiles as he considers that among this mass of Persian soldiers there may be one man “capable of granting him a beautiful death.” (An Arcadian who overhears this shakes his head in disdain, but what would an Arcadian know? They are merely blacksmiths, poets, and potters.) As Leonidas prepares his troops for battle, he tells them: “Spartans, prepare for glory!” and “A new age has begun.” After the climactic battle had ended, all of the Spartan 300 are dead, Leonidas’s body splayed with arms to his sides and his body pierced, an obvious Christ reference. The ritual celebration of these sacrificial deaths plays down

Figure 6. Leonidas as Christ, having gloriously sacrificed himself for the Spartan nation (300, Warner Bros., 2007)



sadness and grief, but emphasizes the glorification and the representation of death on the battlefield as the highest achievement available to a Spartan hero. The spectator is meant to feel subdued pathos but full-scale admiration and elevation. Delios says: “Remember us. Remember why we died.”

Conclusion

Fascist art and stories are dangerous art. Fascist art helps disseminate fascist ideas and a fascist “emotional regime” even (and perhaps especially) among those who have no historical framework, who have no idea what fascism is or why it is a threat. As I argue in *Screen Stories* (2018), mass stories on screens have the potential to significantly influence both individuals and cultures. The

The affective character of 300 seems designed to make extreme tribalism, nationalism, militarism, leader-worship, disgust for the “other,” and heroic death seem very attractive if not absolutely necessary in a world of urgent crisis and threat.

affective character of *300* seems designed to make extreme tribalism, nationalism, militarism, leader-worship, disgust for the “other,” and heroic death seem very attractive if not absolutely necessary in a world of urgent crisis and threat.

Madeleine Albright, in her recent book, *Fascism: A Warning* (2018), notes that Donald Trump is the first antidemocratic president in US history. The forces that he threatens to unleash have connections with fascism—authoritarian, xenophobic nationalism and a seeming contempt for liberal democracy. The threat of fascist resurgence is real. To think that the mass narratives that populate Western culture could have no influence in inculcating the sorts of affects and perspectives that contribute to fascism would be naïve.

Carl Plantinga is Professor of Film and Media at Calvin College. The most recent of his three monographs is *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (Oxford University Press, 2018). He also wrote *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience* (2009) and coedited *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (1999). Email: cplantin@calvin.edu

References

- Antliff, Mark. 1998. “Aestheticized Politics.” In *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* Vol. 4, ed. Michael Kelly, 26–29. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Breihan, Tom. 2017. “Zack Snyder’s *300* Presaged the Howling Fascism of the Alt-Right.” *AV/Film*, August 11, 2017. <https://film.avclub.com/zack-snyder-s-300-presaged-the-howling-fascism-of-the-a-1798265082>.
- Carroll, Noël. 2003. “Art and Mood: Preliminary Notes and Conjectures.” *The Monist* 86 (4): 521–555. doi.org/10.5840/monist200386426.
-

- Daly, Steve. 2007. "Double-Edged Sword: How *300* Was Positioned To Be a Box Office Hit." *Entertainment Weekly*, March 11, 2017. <http://ew.com/article/2007/03/11/how-300-was-positioned-be-box-office-hit/>.
- Epstein, Daniel Robert. 2005. "Exclusive Interview with Tyler Bates, Score Composer for *The Devil's Rejects*." *UGO Entertainment*, July 16, 2005. <http://www.gerardbutler.net/news/Print.php?NewsID=1112>.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2011. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Penguin.
- Hayes, Paul M. 1973. *Fascism*. New York: Free Press.
- Laquer, Walter. 1996. *Fascism: Past, Present, Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Payne, Stanley G. 1980. *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Plantinga, Carl. 2009. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Plantinga, Carl. 2018. *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sinnerbrink, Robert. 2012. "Stimmung: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood." *Screen* 53 (2): 148–163. doi:10.1093/screen/hjs007.
- Smith, Greg M. 2003. *Film Structure and the Emotion System*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Kyle. 2007. "Persian Shrug." *New York Post*, March 9, 2007. <https://nypost.com/2007/03/09/persian-shrug/>.
- Sontag, Susan. 1981. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Stevens, Dana. 2008. "A Movie Only a Spartan Could Love." *Slate*, March 8, 2007. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2007/03/a_movie_only_a_spartan_could_love.html.
-