(MIS)REPRESENTATION OF DISABILITY IN THE FILM *300*

by

B.J. CHAPLIN

(Under the Direction of Leara Rhodes)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines themes of disability representation and ableism in the film *300*. Though *300* has been criticized for alleged racism, sexism, and homophobia, and as a commentary on U.S. foreign policy, almost no one has examined the film's representation of disability. Using a social construct theory framework, a content analysis of the treatment of disability and able-bodiedness in the film has been conducted. The resulting analysis has found that although the movie was set in the past, conscious decisions made by contemporary filmmakers provided an unmistakable ableist agenda for today.

INDEX WORDS: 300, Ableism, Disability, Social Construct Theory, Frank Miller, Spartans, Zack Snyder, Stereotypes, Media Representation of Disability, Disability in Film, Disability in Media

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B.J. Chaplin

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B.J. CHAPLIN

Major Professor: Leara Rhodes

Committee: Louise Benjamin
Barry Hollander

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose of Study

Despite the questionable *quality* of images, sights, and sounds, most would likely agree that diversity of racial minorities, sexual minorities, and women have generally increased in TV, film, music, and other media outlets. Perhaps slower to attain such gains in diversity as a group are people with disabilities. Furthermore, mainstream media, while failing to portray people *with* disabilities, have also failed to look critically at people *without* disabilities. People with disabilities are ignored literally; people without disabilities are ignored figuratively. Given that most research tends to examine *only* the "problem" group (whether that group be a non-white racial group, women, etc.), a more constructive endeavor would involve both a macroscopic analysis of the disability representation *as well as* an analysis of the hegemonic, "normal," able-bodied infrastructure that marginalizes people with disabilities. By conducting a content analysis of the recently released film *300*'s portrayal of both disability *and* able-bodiedness, this thesis illustrates not only the ways in which people with disabilities are portrayed, but how images of able-bodied persons affect, contrast, and reinforce these images.

Studies of macro-level groups include studies of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality. Critically examining each of these sources of privilege is not only helpful; it is necessary. In regards to race, Richard Dyer explains, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (Dyer, pg. 1). Dyer continues,

"There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that—they can only speak for their race" (Dyer, pg. 2).

As long as society continues to imagine able-bodied people as the taken-for-granted norm, people with disabilities will continue to be symbolically annihilated and ignored, considered afterthoughts or aberrations. People with disabilities will continue to fail to have equal footing with their able-bodied peers, much like the inequalities in sexuality: "*Heterosexual* and *homosexual*," for example, "refer to a historically specific system of domination—of socially unequal sexes and eroticisms…Contrary to today's bio-belief, the heterosexual/homosexual binary is not in nature, but is socially constructed, therefore deconstructable" (Katz, pg. 189).

Some people with disabilities have begun deconstructing their own sense of selves (or the sense of selves forced upon them). In her analysis of freak shows, Rachel Adams found that "the new generation of freaks are knowing readers of cultural studies, sell volumes of poststructuralist philosophy at bookstands during performances, and have been known to incorporate critical theory into their acts…in the words of Joshua Gamson[1]—freaks are, indeed, talking back" (Adams, pg. 2). Furthermore, Adams and others suggest a re-conceptualizing of what it means to be a "freak":

> Freak shows are guided by the assumption that *freak* is an essence, the basis for a comforting fiction that there is a permanent, qualitative difference between deviance and normality, projected spatially in the distance between the spectator and the body onstage. To characterize *freak* as a performance restores agency to the actors in the sideshow, who participate, albeit not always voluntarily, in a dramatic fantasy that the division between freak and normal is obvious, visible, and quantifiable (Adams, pg. 6).

The reclamation of the word "freak" is indicative of new ways of conceptualizing oneself—ways that do not privilege the "normal" over the "freak" (and may even privilege the "freak" over the

[1] Joshua Gamson is the author of *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity.*

"normal" person). Turning these historically unequal categories on their heads is the point of studying able-bodiedness, and, this thesis argues, is one of the most effective ways of subverting the ableist power structure and leveling the playing field.

## Defining Disability

First and foremost, the terms "disability" and "ableism" must defined. Simply put, disability is "physical or mental impairment that limits a person's ability to perform an activity in the manner considered normal" (Asch et al., 2001; Korl & Craig, 2001, as cited in Matlin, pg. 367). Admittedly, this definition is somewhat broad, but justifiably so, as disability has a multitude of manifestations: "The variation within the disability category is tremendous…In reality, life experiences may be very different for a woman who is blind, a woman who is missing an arm, and a woman who is recovering from a stroke" (Asch & Fine, 1992; Asch et al., 2001, as cited in Matlin, pg. 367). And, since anyone "could become disabled in a matter of seconds through an accident, a stroke, or a disease," Lisa Bowleg's perspective—that "people who are not disabled should adopt the label 'temporarily abled' "—is perhaps one that everyone should adopt (Matlin, pg. 367).

Additionally, *persons with disabilities* is preferred (and will be used throughout this thesis unless otherwise quoted by an author) to *disabled person*, as the former "emphasizes someone's individuality first and the disability second" (Wendell, 1997, as cited in Matlin, pg. 367). Likewise, the term handicap—which is also considered negative—will not be used (Wendell, 1997, as cited in Matlin, pg. 367).

Giving agency back to the person with the disability by emphasizing the *person* is important because, like everyone else, disability (or lack thereof) is simply *one* facet of one's identity—not *the* facet. Gender, sex, race, class, sexuality, and other traits are just as present in

the person with a disability as the person without. In a society that devalues people outside the able-bodied norm, being disabled is just one more added layer of oppression for those who may fall into social and biological categories that are already less-valued. Women with disabilities, for example, may find them selves doubly oppressed, as they often have difficulties in many social and occupational spheres: "Theorists often note that women typically live on the margins of a world in which men occupy the central territory. In many ways, women with disabilities *live on the margins of those margins*" (Matlin, pg. 367) (emphasis added). One example of such inequality is evidenced in employment rates. Although employment rates for men with disabilities (32%) and women with disabilities (28%) are similar (Asch et al., as cited in Matlin, pg. 368), "women with disabilities have average incomes that are only half of the average income of men with disabilities" (Holcomb & Giesen, 1995, as cited in Matlin, pg. 368). Importantly, although these figures are still likely showcasing a true sex disparity, a more fair measurement of income would perhaps be *median* rather than average, as average is sensitive to outliers (extremely high and extremely low incomes).

And as stressed before, the scope of disability is diverse—some people have disabilities that are invisible to the naked eye:

> Women with invisible disabilities face a similar dilemma…For instance, a woman with multiple sclerosis may not look disabled, but she may tire easily or experience numbness or memory problems. Should she tell her boss and risk patronizing comments or job discrimination? Or should she try to hide her disability, risking exhaustion and criticism for being lazy? (Matlin, pg. 369).

Alison Kafer, "a queer feminist with disabilities," echoes this same sentiment:

> For those whose disabilities allow them to pass as nondisabled, the compulsory nature of able-bodiedness throws suspicion on their desire to identify as disabled—under a system of compulsory able-bodiedness, why would you identify as disabled if you can pass as an able-bodied person? Compulsory able-bodiedness renders such an identification problematic, suggesting that a disability identity is to be avoided at all costs (Kafer, pg. 80).

This "compulsory able-bodiedness" is reinforced regularly in virtually all aspects of society, from large institutions such as government agencies and schools that take relatively little interest in people with disabilities to the media, which, arguably, have enormous influence to help reflect, reinforce, alter, and/or define perspectives of those with disabilities. Because of the potential power of the media regarding disability, the fact that scant attention was paid to disability in *300* is especially troublesome given the film's *immense* success. The Internet Movie Database estimates that the film brought in an impressive $210,592,590, ranking it as the 70th all-time highest-grossing film in the United States ("All-Time USA Box Office"). With an estimated 40-50 million people with disabilities living in the United States (Germeroth and Shultz, pg. 230) a discussion of ableism and disability in *300* is very much in order. Unlike the war waging between the Spartans and the Persians, the war against ableism is not a war against the *able-bodied*; it is a war against ignorance. This analysis serves as a first step to winning that war, using one of the most potent weapons available: awareness.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Historical Disability Media Representation

As David Hevey explains, disability has historically been viewed as a manifestation of a kind of *moral* disability within the person with the *physical* disability. This viewpoint of disability has its origins in Greek theater:

> The aesthetic construction of a part or parts of the body as the site of all that is socially unacceptable, a *site* of social flaw, began life within classical Greek theatre and has continued today. The villain of the piece may begin a hero and even contain some hope (Lenny, from *Of Mice & Men* by John Steinbeck) and then a flaw becomes apparent, and they then disembowel or impair themselves (or have it done to them) as an act of retribution. This, for example, is the Oedipus story (whose name means 'swollen feet'). The price of his transgressions, the utmost flaw, in this story (and in most tragic theatre), is positioned on and within the impairment. Oedipus blinds himself to make physical that which was fate…He paid for his transgression (in this case, love of the mother, or matriarchy) by becoming disabled…The Oedipus fable in particular sets up the basic rule of the tragedy principle *within representation*, which is that fate must be made physical *on the body*…The testimony, the words and the actions, of this doomed character will then reveal to the audience the 'natural' and inevitable decline of the disabled character. By their social destruction, the message is conveyed that the impairment represents the greatest fall for a person this side of death. The purpose for this device in art is that the audience may cathart their projected anxieties surrounding disablement and 'able-bodiedness' (Hevey, pgs. 424-425).

To the audience, his blindness is thus justified, sending the message that blind people outside of the stage (and others with disabilities) are, essentially, being externally punished for an internal character flaw. Some would argue that this claim is reductive, as the analysis above is somewhat selective in its examples—and they would be right, if the messages did not occur so frequently in the media. Indeed, "[p]eople with physical and mental disabilities have been displayed for

entertainment and profit as human oddities or freaks for hundreds of years, and the exhibition has been a lucrative business" (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 698).

Other groups have been historically represented in the media as "exotic," as well, but perhaps not in the same way. Fiona Whittington-Walsh provides an interesting example:

> [S]howcasing characters with disabilities is…[characterized by] not only these inaccurate stereotypical portrayals, but actors who are not disabled portray the characters with disabilities. A film would never be made today casting Anthony Hopkins, garnished in make up, portraying Nelson Mandela—it would be a moral outrage, and yet this is continuing to happen to the most marganlised [sic] and oppressed group (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 696).

Whittington-Walsh's implied "one-upmanship" for comparing oppressed groups—essentially making hierarchical distinctions between them—may not be very constructive, but she nonetheless does make a salient point, providing examples of films in which able-bodied people played people with disabilities such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), *Charly* (1966), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1969), *Rain Man* (1988), *My Left Foot* (1989), *Forrest Gump (1994)*, and *Sling Blade* (1996) (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 696). A few more recent titles that come to mind include *The Other Sister* (1999), *I Am Sam* (2001), *Little Man* (2006), *Radio* (2003), and the *X-Men* films (2000, 2003, & 2006).

Whittington-Walsh identifies several common threads that run through the examples she provides. One such theme is the inclusion of the "idiot savant," a term that "has been synonymously linked with disability and success" (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 699). The character of "Quasimodo" in *Hunchback* and the title character in *Forrest Gump* possess "remarkable 'talents', which reinforce their difference against the 'normalness' of the other characters" (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 699). Additionally, another common theme "found within mainstream films and one that is linked with the image of the savant is what Norden (1994) described as the self-sacrificial mode of presentation where the characters with disabilities sacrifice themselves in

order to save their non-disabled counterparts" (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 701). Examples of this occur when "Quasimodo saves not only Esmeralda from the gallows, but he also liberates Paris from illiteracy" and when in "both *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *Sling Blade*, the characters with disabilities save children's lives" (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 701). Isolation (disability's tendency to make one inevitably live outside of society), pathology (disability as an illness), violence (seemingly a destined part of the life of a person with a disability, whether enacted by him/her or acted *upon* him/her), and dependence (reliance on others due to disability) are also identified as common themes in disability-related movies (Whittington-Walsh, pgs. 700-705). Whittington-Walsh also discusses sexuality, noting that while many of the men with disabilities are asexual, the women are not:

> I argue that women that have a mental illness or are deaf or blind are seen as sexual objects by society, therefore making those female characters desirable. Very few filmmakers have wanted to achieve the de-eroticizing of female body, which perpetuates the image of women's subordination as sexual. The male gaze (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975) positions women as objects of a male eye or 'the eye of some voyeuristic cameraman' (Hirshorn, 1998, pg. 17, as cited in Whittington-Walsh, pg. 702).

Kafer has another, although not entirely differing, perspective on media portrayal of women with disabilities:

> According to [Adrienne] Rich, under the logic of compulsory heterosexuality, lesbianism is not recognized as a valid choice for women; rather, it is seen as a sign of arrested development or deviance. For women with disabilities, this lack of recognition often takes other forms: because of their disabilities, they are perceived as being incapable of finding male partners and thus must have turned to lesbianism as a last resort; their same-sex desires are cast as signs of disability-related confusion; or their same-sex relationships are constructed as platonic due to their perceived asexuality. Indeed, many disabled women, queer and straight alike, have critiqued the pervasive assumption that people with disabilities are either asexual (for those with physical disabilities) or hypersexual (typically those with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities and illnesses). The sexuality of people with disabilities is understood as already deviant; when queer desires and practices are recognized as such, they merely magnify or exacerbate the deviance (Kafer, pg. 82).

Whether hypersexual, asexual, or involuntarily lesbian, the sexual desires of people with disabilities are perceived as non-normative. The desires of people with disabilities are only *now* beginning to be represented in media, as questions about desirability are finally starting to be asked. These questions, as Kafer explains, include:

- How has the absence of sensation in some body parts enhanced or altered sensation in others?
- What new possibilities are opened up through the loss of certain movements or abilities?
- What is the relationship between queer identity and disability identity?
- Does the characterization of one's body as always already deviant decrease one's inhibitions about expressing queer desires? (Kafer, pg. 85)

Part of the reason these questions are being asked is because more people with disabilities are telling *their own stories*. As Hevey explains, "In the history of disability representation or 'arts and disability', we find a history of representation that *was not done by us but done to us*" (Hevey, pg. 423) (emphasis added). Hevey states:

> We are excluded from most history but particularly and perversely, from the history of 'disability representation.' Disabled people have been the *subject* of various constructions and representations throughout history but disabled people have not controlled the *object*—that is, the means of producing or positioning our own constructions or representations (Hevey, pg. 423).

Having been historically usually the *subject* as opposed to the *author* of their own stories, people with disabilities were consistently construed as the perpetual "Other." Perhaps then, one should not be surprised that much of the discourse surrounding research on media depictions of horror is (unfortunately) applicable to the study of media disability representation.

Horror often focuses on deviancy, providing audiences a voyeuristic view of the "Other"; Indeed, "by inviting readers to gaze on the murder and say, I am normal/moral, you are

abnormal/evil, the cult of horror contributed to a more general hardening of social lines between 'normality' and 'abnormality' " (Halttunen, pg. 94). For a reader or watcher of horror media, his/her perspective is essentially "pornographic in its implicit acknowledgement that it is willfully exploring forbidden matters" (Halttunen, pg. 95). Discussing early printed accounts of horror, Halttunen explains the "dreadful pleasure" readers enjoyed:

> [Horror allows] readers imaginatively to entertain images of the culturally forbidden within the safe confines of the printed page, and then to put them away again at the end of the work—thus offering both the pleasure of vicariously performing forbidden acts and the pleasure of once again repudiating them through a reenactment of repression which reasserts the power of 'normal' identity over that which is culturally forbidden (Halttunen, pgs. 94-95).

Experimenting with what is "culturally forbidden," horror films have used horror as a backdrop to comment on much less supernatural forms of Otherness. The 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead*, for example—although initially a financial disappointment—was later praised for "introducing a particularly sophisticated form of bleak social commentary into the low-budget horror film" (Heffernan, pg. 67). Black protagonist "Ben" survives the vast majority of the movie—including attacks by "hordes of recently dead, radiation-infested cannibal zombies"—but then is discovered the next morning by a "redneck posse" and is "mistaken for a ghoul and shot in the head" (Heffernan, pgs. 65-66).

The recurring theme of the tragic Other used in the *Night of the Living Dead* is similar to the recurring theme of using a person with a disability to further (or often carry) a narrative. James Valentine has noted that deafness, for example, has been used in Japanese film regularly on the small screen:

> [P]opular media representations of deafness feature further possibilities of communication, which are exploited dramatically for the entertainment of a hearing audience. Deafness is thus employed in popular television dramas and films as a dramatic device, not only emphasizing particular qualities of character, but also raising certain novel possibilities of action and narrative. This dramatic potential comes at the

> price of erecting a symbolic boundary that defines the other, reinforcing the division between 'us', the mainstream target audience, and 'them', the curiosities portrayed (Valentine, pg. 708).

The use of disability as a narrative device is not unique to deafness only, as G. Thomas Couser observes:

> As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have observed, narrative demands difference, and disability is frequently called upon to accommodate narrative's dependence on anomaly. In everyday life, for example, the unmarked case—the 'normal' body—can pass without narration; the marked case—the limp, the scar, the wheelchair, the missing limb—calls for a story. Thus, people with anomalous bodies are often required to account for themselves. This might be an opportunity rather than an obligation, but despite the request for impromptu narration, the answer to the question 'What happened to you?' is expected to relieve the auditors' discomfort in the presence of difference (Couser, pg. 19).

Intentional or not, the "obligatory" disability back story perpetuates and reinforces the difference between able-bodiedness and disability, making the latter all-the-more deviant. As long as people with disabilities are forced to "explain" themselves and their non-normative bodies (or minds), true parity cannot be attained.

A similar use of disability as narrative occurred with black characters in the 1940s and 1960s. John Nickel found that many of the films tackling racism during this time period were actually regressive:

> With respect to the portrayal of African Americans on screen, the films released in 1949 moved one step forward only to take a step back. An uncanny feature of many race message movies, including *Home of the Brave*, is that African[-]American men are either presented as disabled or equated with disabled white Americans (Nickel, pg. 26).

Film was not the only place this occurred, however:

> Slave narratives and sentimental reform fiction such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* promoted abolitionism by presenting images of the violated bodies of slaves. The disfigured black body, such as a slave's scarred back, functioned as a sign or 'poster' of the evils of slavery. Similarly, in many race message films, disabled African[-]American characters serve as evidence of racial injustices in mid-twentieth-century America (Nickel, pg. 29).

Nickel explains, "The tribulations and deaths of black characters were meant to appeal first to the hearts and then to the minds of white spectators. Making the black character disabled helped ensure that viewers would respond with sympathy" (Nickel, pg. 30). In keeping with the idea that "disability" is something changeable according to circumstance, Nickel argues that "Blackness, as *Home of the Brave* shows, was considered a disability in the postwar years, something that had to be coped with, and if possible, overcome" (Nickel, pg. 36). In much the same way black characters were figuratively framed as needing to "overcome" an involuntary identity, the deaf protagonists on Japanese television were framed as inevitably striving to "overcome" their disabilities:

> Deaf heroes and heroines act as role models of perseverance, a virtue common to deaf and disabled documentaries too. Yet such heroic images may place an extra burden on deaf and disabled people, who are exhorted to an endurance and independence convenient to the mainstream, who can rest assured that no assistance or social transformation is necessary (Valentine, pg. 723).

However, Valentine asserts, "considering the fashionable use of deaf characters as heroes and heroines in film and television drama, it is important to note that these portrayals are constructed for a mass audience: they are mainstream representations of marginality" (Valentine, pg. 707). Valentine explains that these representations are ephemeral:

> Media representations of otherness are subject to fashion. Characters constructed as 'other' than normal may prove successful in attracting sizeable audiences, and may then be copied by subsequent productions that envisage a formula for further successes, until the formula no longer works. The periodic rise and fall can be seen as a cycle of boom and bust, and indeed in Japan a fashion for certain types of character is designated by the loan-word 'boom' (*būmu*). Thus, in the early 1990s there was a 'gay boom' in Japan, in which film, television and popular magazines showed considerable interest in the supposed lives of gay men…By the mid-1990s this boom had faded, to be replaced by a fashion for representing certain kinds of disability, particularly learning disabilities and deafness. (Valentine, pg. 707).

However, "in a culture where deafness has been rendered largely invisible, even flawed representations may be considered preferable to broad disregard." And perhaps, as Valentine

posits, “Under such circumstances, stereotyped hearing accounts may be viewed more positively as an opportunity to develop a wider and less misleading recognition of deafness” (Valentine, pg. 708)

One must also remember that media characterizations of disability can “be taken up and used by diverse groups with variant interpretations” (Valentine, pg. 709). One such alternative reading occurred with Whittington-Walsh’s interpretation of the controversial 1932 film *Freaks*, which he defended:

> *Freaks* is a film about the institutional, xenophobic oppression experienced in the daily lives of people with disabilities. It is one of the few films that does not blame the individual’s disability for the cause of their disempowerment, used actors with physical and mental disabilities, and allowed the characters with disabilities emancipation. The film should be viewed from the frame of reference of revolution and social change (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 706).

*Freaks* stands as “the most controversial disability[-]related film,” notable for being one of the first to use actual people with disabilities instead of able-bodied actors with prosthetics (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 697). While panned by many critics, Whittington-Walsh celebrates the film, as its creator, Tod Browning, “allowed his actors to experience this revolutionary action by showcasing their diversity without shame and, therefore, giving them the opportunity to return the gaze” (Whittington-Walsh, pg. 706). Providing people with disabilities the power to control and “return” the gaze is perhaps one of the best ways to attain better disability representation.

David Hevey explains, “The beginning of a strategy for the future of disability arts and culture, then, is to start to examine some key cultural norms within the history of (mis)representation which still surround us today and which have to be challenged and destroyed” (Hevey, pg. 423). These misrepresentations are exacerbated when one has little or no experience to counter the misrepresentation: “If your only images of certain people come from the media (if you have no direct interaction with them) and these representations tell consistent

stories, then you are likely to have your view of these groups framed by media accounts" (Valentine, pg. 722). This phenomena—people possessing a single (albeit inaccurate) view of a group of people due to a single (albeit inaccurate) perspective promoted and reinforced through mainstream media—is defined, essentially, as social construct theory. Given the less-than-stellar history of disability media representation, this theory is quite appropriate.

## Why *300*?

Although the film *300* has been touted for its highly stylized computer-generated image (CGI) special effects, explained as a commentary on contemporary U.S. foreign policy, and dismissed as a mindless, bloody action film, very little ink has been spilled about ableism in this 2007 film. A review of the film's critiques in the top ten newspapers in the United States is evidence of this absence. The top ten newspapers in the country (by circulation, from highest to lowest) are: *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Denver Post/Rocky Mountain News*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* ("Top 200 Newspapers"). Of these newspapers, none use the words "ableism" or "disability" (or a variation of the two) in their reviews of *300* (Hunter; Kennedy; Mathews; Morgenstern; Phillips; Puig; Rea; Scott; Smith; Turan). The dearth of discourse on this subject suggests at least two things: 1). The film has no ableist agenda, or 2). The ableist agenda is present but not deemed important. The latter, this thesis argues, is what is at play here.

Although neither "disability" nor "ableism" grace any of the pages of the reviews, tangential references to disability and ableism exist in many of the reviews. The *Denver Post/Rocky Mountain News* describes the disfigured and ephors as "grotesques" and explains that "a deformed hunchback betrays his handsome Spartan countrymen," leading the reviewer to

surmise as the film's message: "War's not ugly. Ugly is ugly" (Kennedy). *Philadelphia Inquirer* writer Steven Rea notes that some of the Persians (the bad guys in the film) are "freakishly mutated" while others are "transsexual." The ephors mentioned above are described by Rea as a "group of deformed pervs" (Rea). Kyle Smith of the *New York Post*, noting the Spartan society's intolerance for physical impurity, explains that this "is a culture that puts babies to the sword for looking like weaklings" (Smith). Another New York newspaper, the *New York Daily News*, mentions that *300* includes "mystics and monsters and scar-faced hordes that would seem at home in Tolkien's Middle-earth" (Mathews), while the *Los Angeles Times* describes the ephors as "creepy...pestilent elders" (Turan). A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* also took note of the ephors, describing them as a "gaggle of sickly, corrupt priests" (Scott).

Perhaps indicative of an ableist society, all reviews in one way or another note the bodily perfection of the 300 Spartans. This is notable because only six of the reviews mention a character's disability. Most of the commentary on the appearance of the 300 Spartans could be described as light-hearted: "And one of the amusing things about '300' is how good-looking [Spartan king] Leonidas' crew is. There is nary a fella among them who couldn't own the cover of *Men's Health,*" muses Lisa Kennedy of the *Denver Post/Rocky Mountain News* (Kennedy). Rea describes the Spartans as "a sculpted troop wearing codpieces, capes and nothing else," even arguing that "the performances have more to do with bodybuilding than character" (Rea). The *New York Daily News* describes the Spartans as "hard-bodied, highly disciplined" (Mathews) while the *New York Times* claims that "[d]evotees of the pectoral, deltoid and other fine muscle groups will find much to savor" (Scott). The *Los Angeles Times* borders on homophobia in its analysis:

> With costumes designed by Michael Wilkinson, '300' pays a lot of attention to what its characters wear. The Spartan look—tight metal helmets, giant shields, long red capes

> and what look like black leather Speedos—is quite effective, though at times it makes 'the fiercest soldiers the world has ever known' look like an especially fit group of Santa Monica lifeguards taking part in the Doo-Dah Parade (Turan).

The *Wall Street Journal* claims that "[b]eing a Spartan, the movie tells us, was about pride, pecs and abs" (Morgenstern) and *Chicago Tribune* writer Michael Phillips quips, "It's the few against the many, and the few are mighty fit. The movie should've been called 'Ode to a Grecian Ab' " (Phillips). *USA Today* describes the Spartans as "an enemy of interchangeable, well-muscled soldiers" (Puig) and the *Washington Post* exclaims, "[W]e get a Spartan culture that seems notable primarily for one thing: the invention of the ab machine. You never saw so many six-packs in one place outside of a Budweiser warehouse!" (Hunter). *New York Post* writer Kyle Smith's take on bodily perfection comes closest to flirting with ableism, as he evokes Nazi comparisons: "But keeping in mind *Slate*'s Mickey Kaus' Hitler Rule—never to compare anything to Hitler—it isn't a stretch to imagine Adolf's boys at a screening, heil-fiving each other throughout and then lining up to see it again" (Smith). Admittedly, Smith could be drawing comparisons more so between the desire by Persian king Xerxes to rule the world, but a eugenics interpretation is more than applicable here as well, especially given the fact that the colors the Spartans don in the movie—black and red—are reminiscent of Nazi attire. Furthermore, as Scott explains, "It may be worth pointing out that unlike their mostly black and brown foes, the Spartans and their fellow Greeks are white" (Scott).

Although many of the newspapers' film critics discussed the celebration of physical perfection in *300* and a few mentioned (although briefly, if at all) characters with disabilities, none seriously take to task at great length the conspicuous contrast between the able-bodied (to the $n^{th}$ degree) Spartans and the characters with disabilities—virtually all of whom are portrayed as evil in one way or another. While reviewers went to great length to detail the battle between

the Persians and the Spartans, a more immediate battle was being waged on screen between the able-bodied characters and those with disabilities. Most, but not all, were unaware of this battle.

At least two astute bloggers commented on ableism in *300*. A blogger who goes by the username "Grace" (and from whom the inspiration for this thesis came) was "shocked, horrified, and awed at the film's flirtation with an exploration of ableism" (Grace). Grace explains how, early on, the film is quite clear about its focus on physical perfection:

> The film's beginning scene shows the infant Leonides [sic] being examined for weakness or deformity, and states that had he been sick, small, or imperfect, he would have been discarded at that point (with the sickening visual of babies' skulls in a pile below the cliff they were presumably thrown off). The premise is established right from the beginning that if you aren't a perfect physical specimen, you are not a Spartan (Grace).

Grace also details a crucial plot point in the film involving the most significant character with a disability that appears in the film:

> It's a shock, then, when later in the film Leonides [sic] is beseeched by Ephialtes (played by Andrew Tiernan) to allow him to fight. Ephialtes is a grotesque looking hunchback saved from death as an infant because his parents fled Sparta, and Leonides [sic] is kind to him, but says he cannot fight because he can't lift his shield high enough to be of any use protecting [the]...man next to him in the phalanx. Angry and humiliated, Ephialtes turns coat and leads Xerxes' forces to...[a trail] that can cut off the Spartan back side and ultimately leads to their defeat. This is the age-old and always irritating twisted body=twisted soul thing, made all the more irritating by the fact that there is no evidence for the historical traitor Ephialtes having been in any way disabled—[creator of the graphic novel on which the film is based Frank] Miller invented that part (Grace).

As Grace suggests, decisions such as portraying a character with a disability as a traitor are *conscious* decisions made by *contemporary* filmmakers; this choice was not a simple re-telling of a historical event that can be justified by claiming it is merely an attempt to depict historical events accurately. This decision (such as the decision to display only female nudity and female sounds of female sexual arousal during the sex scene between Leonidas and his wife, Queen

Gorgo[2]) are contemporary ones made for *contemporary audiences*. *Salon.com* writer Stephanie Zacharek explains, " '300' is a movie set in the past—about 2,500 years in the past, to be exact—but it feels like a purely modern creation" (Zacharek). As such, this thesis does not debate the historical accuracy of *300*. What it questions is *how* and *why* certain decisions surrounding depictions of disability and able-bodiedness were made.

A *Leftist Looney Lunchbox* blog penned by "AradhanaD" also took note of *300*'s use of ableism (among other –isms as well). AradhanaD notes that the Persian army is "substantially disfigured/ugly" and she/he recounts how the harem of evil Persian king Xerxes seduces Ephialtes:

> [W]e are introduced to a whole harem of hot, ornated, tattooed, coloured sexy chicks...[it's] like we've been thrown into a visual orgy of totally debaucherous sexuality...We see these women of every single colour, other than white, defiantly throwing themselves at the disfigured/disabled/gollum-like character who is a traitor to Leonidas...They tempt and snare him into being an asshole and betraying his leader while luring him to the 'dark side' (AradhanaD).

The blogger explains that Ephialtes then "is a traitor because Leonidas refuses him entry into his army due to his physical disability...The disabled character would have 'created a gap in their strategic battle formation.' So he is emasculated by Leonidas and seeks revenge by betraying his 'people' " (AradhanaD).

In addition to the two bloggers, parental media watchdog group *Common Sense Media* also mentions ableism in the film. The group warns that there is "[s]ome stereotyping based on Asian culture, as well as one character's physical disability" (Chen). Though this warning is

[2] For the sake of full disclosure, the bare buttocks of Leonidas (played by Gerard Butler) is shown for a few seconds before the sex scene, but, quite frankly—this male "nudity" is *not* equivalent to the female nudity portrayed. In the sex scene, Queen Gorgo (played by Lena Headey) is shown in several positions, her breasts bouncing as the viewer essentially plays the part of Leonidas; through strategically placed camera angles, he is almost absent from the scene. The resulting perspective is conceivably what sex would look like if the viewer was actually there as Leonidas. Additionally, there are at least two other instances of nudity which involve females only.

rather shallow and incomplete, the group must at least be commended for its awareness of the film's poor treatment of disability.

Like *Common Sense*'s brief analysis, this review has only scratched the surface of disability and ableism in *300*. The film has several characters with disabilities apart from Ephialtes and the ephors and many interactions with gender, class, and sexuality that uniquely affect their portrayals. By conducting an in-depth analysis of the film's treatment of disability, this thesis will shed light on an aspect of this film that received very little attention.

# CHAPTER 3

# PROCEDURES

## Theoretical Framework: Social Construct Theory

To study the proliferation and pervasiveness of able-bodiedness and disability representation in the film *300*, this thesis operate under a social construct theory perspective. Put simply, "The Social Model of Disability holds that persons are impaired for a number of reasons, but that it is only by society that they are disabled" (Bolt, pg. 539). The main models of media representations of disability lead to using this newest and perhaps most promising model. Couser identifies three main paradigms in media representation of disability: The symbolic/metaphorical paradigm "under which a particular impairment serves as a trope for a moral or spiritual condition," the medical/individual paradigm, "under which a particular impairment is seen solely as a dysfunction of a particular body, which biomedicine may cure, fix or rehabilitate," and the social/cultural paradigm (an alternative name for social construct theory), in "which disability is located at the interface of particular bodies with particular societies" (Couser, pg. 22).

Additionally, Clogston categorizes two basic groups of media representation of disability, " 'traditional' attitudes of disability (including the 'medical' and 'social pathology' model) and 'progressive' attitudes (such as the 'minority/civil rights' and cultural pluralism model[])]," while Haller adds "the business model (people with disabilities as costly to society, especially economically); the legal model (people with disability as vested with legal rights);" and "consumer (people with disability as an untapped market)" (Goggin & Newell, pg. 48).

Germeroth and Shultz, meanwhile, trace historical disability discourse through four perspectives that, at times, overlap with the ones mentioned above:

> Historically, disability was constructed from a *medical* orientation focusing on disability as a functional impairment and the ways in which medicine and technology might fix or cure this impairment. Eventually, disability came to be viewed for its *economic* constraints. The economic model attempted to ameliorate the deficits of disability by providing enhancements to alleviate the burden of costs faced by persons with disabilities. Out of this developed a third perspective, a *sociopolitical* one, that seeks to ensure that persons of equal productivity are provided equal wages and equal opportunities for employment…Most recently, a fourth perspective is emerging as disability activists are demanding that they be accepted as different rather than rejected as defective (Germeroth and Shultz, pg. 231).

Although all models have their own merit, Couser's paradigms are most easily applicable to media representations of disability, so his paradigms will be used in this analysis. These three categories are the most inclusive, encompassing the main historical (and present) perspectives of disability. A more extensive look at his categories, therefore, is in order.

Perhaps the oldest paradigm, the symbolic/metaphorical paradigm viewed disability as a representation of moral deficiency:

> The origins of the symbolic paradigm are indistinct. A version of it is detectable in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, in which people (men) with various physical defects—'he that hath a blemish,…a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose,…or a man that is broken-footed, or broken-handed, or crookbacked, or a dwarf, or that have a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken'—are excluded from ceremonial functions (and presumably the priesthood). It is more clearly present in the Gospels, in which people who would today be regarded as sick or disabled are viewed instead as possessed by evil spirits and in need of spiritual cleansing or salvation (Couser, pg. 22).

The medical/individual paradigm, explains Couser, saw disability as a pathology that needed a cure:

> The medical paradigm bids to demystify, de-moralize, and naturalize somatic aberrancy, stripping away any supernatural or moral significance and insisting that human variation is a matter of defect or irregularity in the individual body that medicine may cure, fix, rehabilitate, or prevent. This paradigm offers much benefit for people with anomalous conditions. People who once might have been persecuted, even executed (as witches),

> because of conditions like Tourette's syndrome, epilepsy, and schizophrenia could be regarded as candidates for medical treatment. The result for some would be cure, for others institutionalization. Either way, those with disabilities would, in theory, be absolved of responsibility for their conditions…Although it does not necessarily essentialize conditions, it may represent conditions in ways that are inimical to the best interests of those who have them insofar as it suggests that the problem resides entirely in a defective body. It this puts the burden on people with disabilities to adapt themselves to their environment; they can function in society only to the extent that their impairments can be normalized (Couser, pgs. 24-25).

The social/cultural paradigm—the newest paradigm—distinguishes impairment from disability:

> The third paradigm originated with disability scholars and activists in the United States and the United Kingdom in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It exists in more than one variant, but essential to all of them is the notion that, like race and gender, disability is a social construct that varies but synchronically, from culture to culture, and diachronically, over time…A fundamental and crucial distinction is made between *impairment*, which is found in the body, and *disability*, which is located in the social response to, or cultural construction of, impairment. This distinction allows us to recognize, understand, and alleviate the discrimination and oppression that seem to be, but are not, inherent in particular impairments (Couser, pgs. 25-26).

Couser acknowledges that these models are not perfect:

> I do not mean to suggest that reference to…[this schema of three paradigms] resolves all questions about the impact on vulnerable subjects of their representation…And granted, the first two paradigms are not necessarily harmful in cultural representation. Further, the social paradigm is not without its own costs, at least in its extreme ('strict' or radical constructivist) form. Although its intent is to empower people with disabilities, defining their conditions as oppression risks characterizing them as victims, rather than agents. And, as already suggested, claiming that disability is 'a construct' risks effacing the body's materiality and denying the pain and suffering caused by impairment. (Couser, pg. 28).

Christine Overall explains similar objections to social construct theory:

> However, many theorists are willing to take the social constructionist thesis only so far. Usually they insist that there is a biological "foundation" or "substratum" on which the social identity rests. In the case of disability, the biological substratum is said to be impairment, an organic injury to, defect in, or absence of a limb, organ, or physiological system. So, while being a disabled person is an identity that is socially acquired, people are thought to be born with, or at some point become the victim of, mutilating or injurious diseases and accidents whose results—impairments—are part of our biological condition (Overall, pg. 126).

As Claire Tregaskis also notes, "It is worth remembering that one of the 'fathers' of the social model, Michael Oliver, never claimed that it was designed to give a neat holistic explanation for all aspects of disabled people's exclusion, but was instead intended as a starting point for discussion of the issues" (Tregaskis, pg. 458). However, as Couser explains, the ends justify the means:

> But in 'real life' the medical and the social paradigms are not mutually exclusive. Disabled persons can embrace them both simultaneously, seeking both to minimize their impairment and to maximize their access and accommodation. Deployed sensitively and sensibly, the social paradigm enables all of us to distinguish between the suffering inherent in impairment (which medicine may be able to ameliorate) and that caused by social arrangements (which needs to be addressed through rhetorical, political, legal, and other means) (Couser, pg. 28).

The impetus of the social/cultural paradigm—encouraging a critical look at able-bodied hegemony and its effects—is obviously in tandem with the desire to "level the playing field" by treating disability as a normative state of being (just as able-bodiedness is assumed to be).

Despite his acknowledgments of the limitations of social construct theory, Couser, again, perhaps views this model as having the highest potential to achieve the goal of "normalizing" disability:

> I would suggest that, in textual representation, only the third paradigm can be *presumed* to advance the collective interests of people with disabilities—to do them good and not to do them harm…Representation that deploys the social paradigm tends to be beneficial because it acknowledges that disability is everybody's business and that disability may be better addressed (more effectively and universally) by accommodation rather than by rehabilitation. Such representations are also valuable insofar as they tend to challenge the very norms that marginalize and stigmatize disabled people—the norms that make them vulnerable subjects in the first place (Couser, pg. 29).

Similarly, Hevey sees great potential in social construct theory:

> A particular, and in representational terms crucial, development of this new activism (and which links it to other movements based on class, women, colour, etc.) is the *de-biologisation* of disability. That is to say, the issue of disability, like other issues pertaining to women and blacks and gays and lesbians and so on, is shifting its focus *away from the body and onto society* (Hevey, pg. 427) (Hevey's emphasis).

And, as Hevey explains, "The strategies for change lay in an analysis of what has gone before *and* a cultural intervention in what is socially happening to disabled people. This dialectic is our terrain. Within this dynamic, we can affect and create cultural forms and agenda which bring the non-disabled world to us, not we to it" (Hevey, pg. 429). Social construct theory, essentially, seeks to do just what Hevey suggests—it seeks to help discover what forces contribute to forming a perspective of a particular group (in this case, people with disabilities). This theory will be used as a backdrop (and with the Couser-identified models as points of reference for evaluation) to analyze how the film *300* handles disability and able-bodiedness. This analysis will help determine *what* is now "socially happening to disabled people" within this film, and, by extension, in larger society.

Social construct theory has been used by several disability scholars in their analyses of media representation in film (Couser; Darke; Whittington-Walsh). Many of the analyses have been illuminating. Couser's examination of *Million Dollar Baby* is a prime example of how operating from a social model theory can potentially provide complex and previously ignored understandings of disability representation:

> Significantly, no film review that I read noticed a crucial anachronism: although the film is set in the present, no one informs Maggie that she can request to have her life support discontinued. (Ironically, soon after the Oscars, the Terry Schiavo case educated the general public of the rights in this regard.) The film utterly ignores the possibility that Maggie's despair is in effect depression, and, more to the point here, the degree to which her decision may be conditioned by internalized prejudice against people with disabilities (which is all the more likely in someone like Maggie, who achieved upward mobility through sports). That is, the film fails to reckon with the extent to which her condition is not (only) a brute *fact* of *her* life (an impairment) but also to some extent a *social artifact* (a disability). There is no denying that her injury is 'tragic'—in the vernacular and perhaps even in the literary sense—but the extent to which such injuries are devastating to people's life chances is partly a function of the societies in which they live. And had the film represented her situation with more verisimilitude—acknowledging her right to refuse treatment—it also might have allowed that in order to make a truly autonomous and informed decision she needed time to adjust to her body's new condition and to

> consult with others who share it. Thanks to disability-rights advocacy, injuries like Maggie's are less 'tragic'—that is, unfortunate—today than they once were…And it is misleading to suggest, as the film does, that her decision is 'for the best' and a truly free choice. While presumably no actual paraplegics were harmed in the production of the film, it may be fair to say that all paraplegics were harmed *by* it (Couser, pg. 27) (Couser's emphasis).

There exist countless other examples of misuse of disability in film (Couser; Darke; Davidson; Samuels; Stastny; Valentine; Whittington-Walsh), some of which are arguably more intentional:

> Almost a century ago, on a cold but sunny day at Craig Colony for Epileptics in rural New York State, Dr. Walter Chase, a pioneer in medical kinematography, positioned 125 blanket-covered patients in front of his camera and waited until one of them started to seize, at which time the blanket was removed, and they were filmed. Thus begins the history of documentary films that feature persons with psychiatric disabilities. It is a history of exploitation, objectification, and even annihilation (Stastny, pg. 68).

Combating this extensive history of "exploitation, objectification, and even annihilation" is no easy task. Doing so requires looking at past ways media have constructed disability as well as the ways in which it is constructed today. As Tregaskis explains, "Since its original conception over 20 years ago, the social model of disability has been an emancipatory force in the lives of many disabled people" (Tregaskis, pg. 457). Via this analysis, the social model will continue to be an "emancipatory force."

## Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to prompt a more detailed discussion of ableism and disability, starting with the film *300*. This long-overdue discussion will start by attempting to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How does the film *300* portray disability and able-bodiedness?

RQ2: What social implications might the representation and/or misrepresentation of disability in the film *300* produce for people with disabilities? For the able-bodied?

## Methodology

The two-disc "Special Edition" *300* DVD will be used for this analysis, as the Special Edition version features more bonus content than the original DVD. The bonus features of the original *300* DVD listed on the DVD's box are "Audio Commentary" and "Languages & Subtitles." The Special Edition DVD features are "Additional Scenes," "Frank Miller's Vision Realized on Film," "300 Spartans—Fact or Fiction?: The Shocking Life of a Spartan Revealed," "Who Were the Spartans?: How the Actors Built Their Characters Based on Spartan Customs," "Webisodes: Go on Set with the Cast and Crew," "Audio Commentary," and "Languages & Subtitles." The analysis will be two-fold. First, the film will be viewed as it was shown in theaters. Second, *300* will be viewed with the audio commentary turned "on" as this approach may provide the *modus operandi* behind certain aspects of the film, particularly those related to disability and able-bodiedness. The focus of this analysis will be limited to physical signs of disability, although this thesis is in no way attempting to rank the importance of one media representation of disability over another. Physical signs of disability are simply more easily recognizable, and, as such, will take precedence in this analysis.

Additionally, as this thesis proposes, one way to provide fairer, more diverse, abundant, and complex portrayals of people with disabilities in film (and other forms of media), is to deconstruct ableist ideology. According to Michael White, deconstruction

> …has to do with procedures that subvert taken for granted realities and practices: those so-called truths that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production; those embodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices; and those familiar practices of self and relationship that are subjugating of persons' lives. Many of the methods of deconstruction render strange these familiar and everyday taken-for-granted realities and practices by objectifying them (White, pg. 34).

Since the aim of social construct theory is to challenge hegemony, it serves as an appropriate tool for deconstructing the "taken for granted realities and practices" that are the foundations of ableism and, thusly, will be used in this thesis.

Furthermore, since the movie—like most of the mediated (and real) world—is able-bodied-centric, ableism will be analyzed in contrast to disability as it is portrayed within the film. What this means is that the analysis will involve looking at the characters with disabilities first and then looking at how the able-bodied characters interact with and contrast them. This process is necessary because a simple quantitative analysis of able-bodied characters versus characters with disabilities would likely provide too much focus on the former. By beginning with a focus on characters with disabilities, a more equivalent number of scenes and characters for comparison and a more comprehensive analysis will result.

# CHAPTER 4

# CONTENT ANALYSIS

## Background

Before analyzing *300* for its content regarding disability and able-bodiedness, a background of the film's origins, story, and main characters is in order. The following briefly chronicles how *300* came to fruition.

The film *300* is based on the 1998 graphic novel of the same name penned by Frank Miller. The film, directed by Zack Snyder, had actors performing "against blank screens on which backgrounds are drawn [digitally] to represent the panels Miller [originally] created for Dark Horse Comics" (Travers). The process gave the filmmakers much leeway:

> Every frame was manipulated and color-shifted to create an intense, thunderstorm palette. Creatures and landscapes and entire armies were created from scratch. With the kind of computing power directors have at their disposal, editing becomes more like painting than moviemaking. Time speeds up for dramatic effect, then slows down to capture a balletic spear thrust. Computer-generated elephants rear up and plummet off computer-generated cliffs. The Persian King Xerxes becomes 9 ft. tall…The result is a gorgeous, dreamlike movie that's almost too perfect (Grossman).

Shooting the film took "a brisk 60 days" and "post-production took a full year and 10 special-effects companies" (Grossman). The resulting visual feat impressed even some of *300*'s staunchest critics, such as *The New York Time*'s A.O. Scott, who, while decrying *300* as "about as violent as 'Apocalypto' and twice as stupid," admitted that a "few combat sequences…achieve a grim, brutal grandeur" and that some of Snyder's "filmmaking acumen is evident" in the film (Scott).

Given all the modern touches the film received, one should not be surprised that although *300* "is set in the past…it feels like a purely modern creation" (Zacharek). And although this thesis focuses primarily on the contemporary aspects of this film (the actors and modern directorial decisions, etc.), a brief discussion of the past—namely, the events that inspired Miller's graphic novel—is nonetheless necessary.

While ignoring the story altogether would certainly be a mistake—as *300* is based, if loosely, on *real* events including *real* people—the focus on this thesis is on the *contemporary*, *fictitious*, and *interpretive* portrayals of those *real* people. *300*'s portrayal of people with disabilities (or of able-bodied people, for that matter) cannot be excused as merely "a sign of the times" in which the film is set. Using that logic, the racist portrayal of black people in D.W. Griffith's 1915 Civil War epic *Birth of a Nation* could be similarly excused. The only "sign of the times" character portrayal in the film *300* will reflect is the "time" in which the film was *made*.

The legendary events that inspired the film occurred some 2,500 years in the past (Zacharek). In epic and CGIassisted fashion, *300* chronicles "the celebrated 480 BC battle at Thermopylae between those few plucky Spartans under Leonidas and an enormous horde of invading Persians led by the legendary Xerxes" (Turan). Thermopylae—which means "the hot gates"—is a narrow pass on Greece's northern coast (Grossman). The battle involves "300 brave Spartans" who "square off against thousands of Persians knowing they are fighting a losing battle" (Puig). The number of doomed Spartans—300—is obviously where the movie gets its name.

But this number is most likely more myth than fact, as University of Toronto assistant professor of Hellenistic history Ephraim Lytle explains:

> According to Herodotus, Leonidas led an army of perhaps 7,000 Greeks. These Greeks took turns rotating to the front of the phalanx stationed at Thermopylae where, fighting in disciplined hoplite fashion, they held the narrow pass for two days. All told, some 4,000 Greeks perished there. In *300* the fighting is not in the hoplite fashion, and the Spartans do all of it, except for a brief interlude in which Leonidas allows a handful of untrained Greeks to taste the action, and they make a hash of it. When it becomes apparent they are surrounded, this contingent flees. In Herodotus' time there were various accounts of what transpired, but we know 700 hoplites from Thespiae remained, fighting beside the Spartans, they, too, dying to the last man (Lytle).

Despite the inaccuracy of the specific number of Spartans versus Persians, historians know the Spartans were vastly outnumbered and the bravery of the soldiers compelled Greece to act. For the scope of this thesis, that is really all that is important. Of greater interest for this analysis are the characters and how they are portrayed.

## The Main Players

Though some critics, such as *USA Today*'s Claudia Puig have claimed that *300*'s "performances are glaringly secondary" to its "dazzling" visual style, the performances of the actors in the film reflect more about contemporary filmmaking than about the film's distinctive visual flair (Puig). The directorial choices, script decisions, and the actors' performances are much more telling of what messages the film sends; the film's highly stylized visceral appearance, on the other hand, is more so a testament of the technology available at the time. While CGI can be used to create true art, *300*'s unique look, for most critics, arguably overshadowed the (admittedly oftentimes wooden) performances of the actors and, more importantly, the very conscious decisions made by the filmmakers regarding disability and able-bodiedness.

Below are brief descriptions of those too-often overlooked characters in *300* who either have disabilities or who are used in this thesis as contrasts to those with disabilities. As explained earlier, this process gives a more balanced analysis that does not favor the able-bodied,

who far outnumber characters with disabilities. More detailed descriptions are included in the actual analysis. The characters are as follows:

King Leonidas. Played by Gerard Butler. He is the able-bodied fearless king that leads the Spartans to "glory" (as he would call it) and inevitable "doom" (as his enemies would call it).

Queen Gorgo. Played by Lena Headey. She is Leonidas' "equally fierce" (Turan), "strong and fiery" (Puig), "take-no-prisoners Spartan spitfire wife" (Zacharek). She is able-bodied.

Ephialtes. Played by Andrew Tiernan. He is the Spartan disfigured hunchback who betrays the Spartans after he is denied a place on the battlefield to fight alongside them.

Xerxes. Played by Rodrigo Santoro. He is the film's main villain, portrayed here as an effeminate Persian king. Depending on one's perspective, one could perceive Xerxes as having a disability or as being able-bodied: He is of giant stature (clocking in at "9 ft. tall"), which could be beneficial, especially when one literally wants to take over the world (Grossman). His tall stature, however, could also be troublesome, as his non-normative self/body lives in a world built for people of normal stature. His tall stature could also signify a growth disorder (more on that later).

Theron. Played by Dominic West. He is the able-bodied, deceitful Spartan traitor who attempts to negotiate with (*read* submit to) Xerxes rather than stand up against the Persian army.

Dilios. Played by David Wenham. He is Leonidas' "right-hand man" and narrates the film. He is able-bodied for most of the movie, but then becomes a "one-eyed warrior" after losing an eye during a battle with the Persians (Zacharek).

Uběr Immortal (Giant). Played by Robert Maillet. He is a one-eyed, disfigured "giant with awful teeth" who fights alongside the Persians (Turan). He is restrained by chains before he

is let loose to fight the Spartans, indicating that his services are not necessarily voluntary. His size likely surpasses that of Xerxes'.

The Oracle. Played by Kelly Craig. She is the able-bodied oracle who half-nakedly predicts the future for the ephors.

Ephors. Played by many actors. These are "a gaggle of sickly, corrupt priests" who are the elders that give advice to the Greeks (Scott). They are disfigured and use the oracle for their sexual pleasure.

Xerxes' Harem. Played by many actors. These are the members Xerxes' exotic, erotic, androgynous posse. Some are missing limbs, some are disfigured, and many are apparently "heavy into body-piercing and decadent orgies" (Rea).

The Immortals. Played by many actors. These Persians are dressed in black and wear silver masks and connote a distinctive Asian flair—in fact, they look like ninjas. Their hands are disfigured and twisted with long claws, and their hidden faces suggest their visages may be disfigured as well.

While other characters—with disabilities and without—are not mentioned here, these are the main ones. This brief overview of the main characters—as well as the film's origins and the story of the Battle at Thermopylae—is integral understanding the film and its historical, as well as modern, context.

## Feature Presentation

The film *300* opens with a jarring image of a large pile of infant skulls at the base of a cliff. A child—who is revealed shortly thereafter to be the future Spartan king (and lead protagonist/hero of the film) named Leonidas—is being inspected for birth defects. "If he had been small or puny or sickly or misshapen," Dilios, Leonidas' "right-hand man" and narrator of

the film, explains, "He would have been discarded." Yet, as Lytle notes, "infanticide could as easily have been precipitated by an ill-omened birthmark" (Lytle). Luckily for Leonidas, he is judged as healthy. Thus, from the film's very first images, the theme of able-bodied perfection is advanced. The scene following this one of a young Leonidas he taking part in the Spartan male initiation rite called the "agoge" continues this trend.

By most contemporary standards, the agoge would be classified as child abuse. As portrayed in the film, male children—at a young age—are taken from their parents, thrown into the wild with little or no food and drink, and expected to fend for themselves against nature, animals, and whatever human enemies they may encounter. The agoge is not fiction—it did exist. In the Special Features section of the *300* DVD, author and historian Dr. Victor Davis Hanson explains, "[T]he idea was that this was to be a hyper-militaristic male initiation of a small coterie of exceptional warriors" (*300*). But the agoge was more than what was portrayed in the film, notes *300* Director Zack Snyder (also in the Special Features): "In the movie, I've edited it into its most brutal aspects, but there were parts of the agoge that I think are also interesting—that, to be the ultimate warrior, you had to learn music and dance and mathematics and philosophy. That combination created an ultimate warrior" (*300*). In the Special Features section author and historian Bettany Hughes states that when the young Spartans-to-be were in the agoge, "they were taught to think, to be very witty and sharp" (*300*). These revelations of the true, *complete* nature of the agoge are important because in the film—and in the graphic novel on which the film is based—these aspects are not discussed, suggesting that the "ultimate warrior" need only develop his *body*. By focusing solely on developing the body, attention is diverted away from developing the *mind*. Had "defective" Spartans not been discarded, Spartans with disabilities who may have been at a disadvantage on the battlefield would certainly have been

evenly matched to their able-bodied brethren in the cultural and mental aspects of the agoge. In this depiction, these aspects of the agoge, however, are deemed unimportant. Discussion of the mental potential of the Spartans may require acknowledgement that a Spartan with a disability could be as equally contributing member of society as one without a disability. Granted, "defective" children usually did not survive their initial inspection, but, as social construct theory shows, however, *society* is largely responsible for what constitutes "disability." Even when athletic prowess and physical perfection are not essential to the task at hand, for Spartans—and the filmmakers & author of *300*—someone may still be labeled as "disabled." This observation is more a criticism of the actual Spartan society than of the film—because the cultural and mental aspects of the agoge were also not captured in the graphic novel. By his own admission, Snyder was well-aware of the *other* aspects of the agoge and still decided not to include them in the film. This omission is interesting, but, as Dilios narrates, "There is no room for softness—not in Sparta" (*300*).

There is no room for Persians, either. When Persian King Xerxes sends his (notably turbaned and dark-skinned) messenger to convince Leonidas to pledge his allegiance to the Persian Empire, Leonidas—after insulting the Persians as "philosophers and boy lovers" (*read* thinkers and gay pedophiles)—kills the messenger and his faceless, also turbaned, companions. Issues of ethnicity and sexuality come into play with the "boy lover" barb and the fact that the messenger is dark-skinned and, like his companions, turbaned. Like disability, throughout *300*, race, sexuality, and gender appear to pose threats to able-bodied hegemony, and they act as their own devalued states of being when they are outside of the norm.

The arrival of the Persian messengers prompts Leonidas to seek consul from the Supreme Court-like ephors who are described in narration by Dilios as "more creatures than men,"

"diseased old mystics," and "worthless old remnants." The hooded men are disfigured with boils covering their faces and hands, which are the only exposed parts of their bodies. They demand generous monetary compensation for their services. Hughes sees this physical portrayal as a personification of how Spartans would have perceived the ephors:

> I think it's interesting what Frank Miller has done with them in his comic book because he's kind of got their essence. Everybody was always trying to work out what ephors wanted the Spartans to do—they're always trying to second guess them. So the fact that in the comic book you've got these ephors as these kind of gnarled old guys who hold the future of the city-state in their twisted hand, is a very good evocation of them (*300*).

Lytle's take on the ephors' depiction is perhaps more to-the-point: "[I]n the interests of portentous contrasts between good and evil, *300*'s ephors are not only lecherous and corrupt, but also geriatric lepers" (Lytle).

Not only are the ephors greedy and—as revealed shortly after the meeting with Leonidas—corrupt, they are also sexual predators. The oracle—portrayed as a half-naked young woman who predicts the future magically while writhing erotically, suspended in the air—is the property of the ephors. In addition to predicting the future, she exists also for the ephors' sexual pleasure, as "the old wretches have the needs of men" (*300*). But, as Hughes explains, although "the oracle was a real person," in reality, "she was a very old woman" (*300*). This kind of directorial choice (using a young woman instead of an elderly one to portray the oracle), is consistent with the graphic novel, as the oracle also appeared to be a young woman in the book, albeit a much more fully clothed one. Of perhaps more interest is the narration that accompanies the oracle's introduction. Speaking of the oracles, Dilios says, "Their beauty is their curse" (*300*). The oracle exists as one of the few characters in the movie whose able-bodied beauty is viewed in a negative light. The meaning of his words can also apply to the actor—Kelly Craig—who plays the oracle. As she writhes in mid-air (a computer trick executed by filming her body

moving underwater), her breasts are exposed, and one cannot help but notice that Craig's able-bodied beauty was the "curse" that landed her a role in which she is sexually victimized by both the ephors *and* the voyeuristic audience. Additionally, had the oracle's visions not been accompanied by the computer-assisted spectacle of floating in mid-air, Spartans and people watching *300* may have believed she was merely a woman with a mental disability rather than someone with clairvoyance. Again, as social construct theory dictates, disability is in the eyes of the beholder.

Shortly after his visit with the oracle, Leonidas meets Ephialtes, who is the most significant character in *300* with a disability. Ephialtes, according to the film, is a hunchback born in Sparta who was hidden away in the mountains as a baby so he would not be murdered because of his non-normative body. Of the real Ephialtes, little is known. "We don't actually know that much about Ephialtes in real historical terms," explains Hughes (*300*). "We know that he was a local. And we know that he was somebody who went over to the Persians. But he quickly became demonized by history so it is no surprise, in a way, that he ends up in the film as this kind of embittered hunchback" (*300*). Herodotus, who wrote down much of the Spartans' glorious tale, did not suggest that Ephialtes was a hunchback, according to Hanson. "That's something that the screenwriters and writers have tried to draw out of Herodotus," explains Hanson (*300*). "In Herodotus, we don't get that degree of information. We're just told that Ephialtes was a traitor and was given financial rewards by the Persians for showing them the route around the back of the pass" (*300*). Lytle notes Ephialtes has been "changed from a local Malian of sound body into a Spartan outcast, a grotesquely disfigured troll" (Lytle). By his own admission, *300* creator Frank Miller was very aware of his decision to make Ephialtes as a character whose moral insides were meant to match his physical outsides:

> Ephialtes was generally known just to be a shepherd. I turned him into a hunchback because I wanted to stress just how rough the Spartans were and how he shouldn't have survived…I wanted him to be a pathetic figure, and, often in cartooning, you make someone's physicality a metaphor for their very inferior reality" (*300*).

Miller's use of the words "pathetic" and "inferior" are quite telling. Ephialtes—who yearned, more than anything, to simply be a Spartan—could easily have been perceived to be "sympathetic" or "misunderstood" or even "oppressed." Also notable is the fact that Miller (and, as he concedes, many cartoonists) sought disability as a way of expressing a "pathetic" character. Such continual portrayals reinforce and stigmatize disability, advancing the idea that disability is somehow a deserved outer expression of inner qualities and something to be pitied—that *people* with disabilities are to be pitied. And since Ephialtes ends up betraying the Spartans (although one could argue he was betrayed by *them* first when they denied him access due to his inability to raise a shield above his head), his disability, in the film, is justified.

Ephialtes' extreme disfigurement stands as a stark contrast to the sculpted frames of the able-bodied 300 Spartans. The focus on bodily perfection evokes images of Nazi-era eugenics, which are defined as "the science of racial purification and the elimination of human 'defects' " (Mitchell and Snyder, pg. 844). Perhaps its most infamous application occurred when at "the end of the eighteenth century to the conclusion of World War II, bodies designated as defective became the focal point of violent European and American efforts to engineer a 'healthy' body politic" (Mitchell and Snyder, pg. 844). The Spartans' red-and-black attire only reifies this image, calling to mind Nazi color schemes. This reference was not lost on Lytle, either, who saw Leonidas' reason for barring Ephialtes' inclusion as a Spartan as a "transparent defence [sic] of Spartan eugenics" (Lytle). The Spartans do little to refute this image; the first time Ephialtes is addressed by a Spartan, he is referred to as a "monster." His response: "I know what I look like." After Leonidas explains to him that he is incapable of becoming a Spartan, he offers a

less-than-stellar consolation prize: He says Ephialtes can "clear the battlefield of the dead." Disappointed, embarrassed, and angry, Ephialtes leaves and finds acceptance by Xerxes—for a price.

Xerxes is the arch-villain of the film, portrayed as a ruthless Persian king who seeks to rule the entire world which, naturally, includes Sparta. Xerxes has a commanding presence, as he is literally larger than life, scaled to 7'6", down from the 10-foot portrayal in the graphic novel (*300*). He is not disfigured in the same way many of the Persians are, but, as Lytle explains, there is "no need," as "it is strongly implied that Xerxes is homosexual which, in the moral universe of *300*, qualifies him for special freakhood" (Lytle). Lytle notes that this is another of the film's historical inaccuracies, as this portrayal "is ironic given that pederasty was an obligatory part of a Spartan's education. This was a frequent target of Athenian comedy, wherein the verb 'to Spartanize' meant 'to bugger.' In *300*, Greek pedastry is, naturally, Athenian" (Lytle).

Viewing Xerxes' size through an ableist lens, his tall stature could even be seen as a disability, akin to Gheorghe Muresan's character in the aptly titled 1998 film *My Giant*, which co-stars Billy Crystal. In real life, the 7-foot-7 Muresan has a pituitary condition:

> Muresan's height is not hereditary. His father was 5-9, his mother 5-7. He has a rare form of a non-hereditary disease called acromegaly. His problem developed from a benign tumor in his pituitary gland while he was a teenager. The disorder caused an overproduction of growth hormone before it was removed in 1993. But by then, Muresan was already 22 and had been through abnormal growth spurts (Asher).

Prior to his acting career (perhaps "career" is a bit too generous of a term), Muresan was a Washington Wizards basketball star; in fact, he shares the title of "tallest NBA player in history" with Manute Bol (Kwan). Much like Muresan in *My Giant*, Xerxes displays little (if any) athletic prowess and his unusual stature is used as a plot device to further a narrative.

Xerxes' erotic harem is similarly used to further distinguish him (and the Persians) as non-normative, and, thus, evil. Ephialtes enters Xerxes' harem, seeking to make a deal with him to reveal a hidden path to the Spartan stronghold in exchange for wealth and power. The first "person" shown in the harem has the head of a goat and is playing an instrument. Snyder explains the scene in the film's DVD audio commentary: "The goat-headed minstrel was another drawing that…I thought was cool and thought it would be neat to have in the movie. I just wanted Xerxes' harem…to be a place of exotic wonders" (*300*). Next, an androgynous, heavily jeweled person with missing limbs is shown looking at Ephialtes/the camera seductively. Notably, Ephialtes is missing his shirt and, thusly, his disfigurement is all-the-more pronounced. The next scene shows two women kissing. Apparently to add more shock value, one of the women turns her head to reveal the disfigurement of the previously out-of-view side of her face. A topless woman lying on the floor, luring Ephialtes, is shown next. Important to note is that many of the women shown here are comparatively heavier-set than those in any other part of the movie. The lack of heavier women throughout the rest of the film is perhaps an anachronism given the time period in which the movie was based, as, historically, the female standard of beauty was geared to more voluptuous figures than the bodies of the other characters who appear nude—Gorgo and the oracle.

The harem is also one of the first times a non-white woman is shown. The fact that perhaps *the* most diverse group of individuals in *300*—a mixed bag of sexuality, gender, race, disability, and even *species*—exists in Xerxes' evil harm underscores the extent to which hegemony based on ability is such a central focus of the film. This depiction of the harem is unique to the film, as Ephialtes' meeting with Xerxes is captured in only a few frames in the graphic novel. In the graphic novel version, apart from the Xerxes and Ephialtes, the only other

people shown are two (non-kissing) heavily jeweled (and heavily shadowed) apparently able-bodied women.

To gain access to the goods promised by Xerxes, Ephialtes must submit to him. Xerxes explains, "Unlike the cruel Leonidas who demanded that you stand, I require only that you kneel" (*300*). Ephialtes obliges.

Meanwhile, Leonidas' able-bodied 300 Spartans face off with the "evil" Persians, who seem to come in every shape, size, and color other than white. No sympathetic depiction of any Persians exists in *300*. Lytle notes this biased portrayal of the Persians "touches on *300*'s most noteworthy abuse of history: the Persians are turned into monsters, but the non-Spartan Greeks are simply all too human" (Lytle). One foe of particular interest is a heavily scarred giant that Leonidas faces. Referred to as an "Ubër Immortal" in the credits, Special Effects Makeup Supervisor Shaun Smith describes him as "an abused dog, kind of beaten-up, like an old-time boxer" in the DVD's Special Features (*300*). The dog comparison is no accident, as the Ubër Immortal appears initially in chains before the Immortals let him loose to kill. But after putting up a good fight, the Ubër Immortal is beheaded by Leonidas—the same method of execution Xerxes punishes his generals with for their repeated battlefield failures in the film. Another character with a disability, who—like the Ubër Immortal—was created specifically for the film, also appears briefly. An obese, pinkish giant-of-a-man with stitched-up stumps as legs and metallic blades as arms serves as Xerxes executioner and he is shown beheading one of Xerxes' generals. Neither the Ubër Immortal nor the executioner appears in the graphic novel.

The Immortals, however, resemble closely what is portrayed in the graphic novel. The Ubër Immortal giant was one-of-a-kind, but the Immortals—"the deadliest fighting force of all of Asia," as Dilios explains—are plentiful. To Hughes, the name "Immortals" is appropriate:

> Xerxes surrounded himself with this elite force called the Immortals and they were known as the Immortals in the Greek world because the Greeks couldn't get their heads around the fact that every time one of them died, another one seemed to pop up in its place. They actually didn't know whether there was something supernatural or spiritual going on (*300*).

The Immortals resemble black ninjas and their hands are thickly clawed and disfigured. One of the Immortals masks is removed to reveal that he is disfigured with "teeth filed to fangs" and "eyes as dark as night" (*300*). Because of Dilios' descriptions and because the Immortals are all wearing masks, one can logically conclude that *all* of the Immortals are similar in appearance. Hughes understands the utility of such an appearance: "I think that's why it's brilliant in the film that the Immortals have been represented as these kind of strange, demonic figures because in the heads of the Greeks who were fighting that day, that is how they would have seemed to them" (*300*). This may truly have been the case for the Greeks, but remember, first of all, the Immortals were not depicted this way in the graphic novel. Secondly, since this is a film, the way in which the protagonist Greeks see the Persians (and disability) is the same way the audience sees it.

Off the battlefield, back in Sparta, Queen Gorgo tries to convince her fellow Greeks to go to war to help the Spartans. Her biggest opposition is the corrupt, yet powerful, able-bodied politician Theron. Theron demands sex from her in exchange for his word that he will help convince Greece to go to war, and—fearing for her husband's life and the future of Sparta—she reluctantly submits. Theron spins her body around roughly and whispers in her ear, "This will not be over quickly. You will not enjoy this" (*300*). He later reneges on his promise, claiming, publicly, that she offered herself to him and that he declined, calling her "my little whore queen" (*300*). Angered, she stabs him with a knife, whispering the same words he whispered to her the

night before as she twists the blade in his gut. Persian money falls from his pockets as he dies, and he is revealed to be a traitor and a liar.

Theron is one of the few able-bodied main characters in the film to be portrayed in a negative light. Many of the Persians appear to be able-bodied, but, through non-normative ways (race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), they are deemed inferior "freaks" and "monsters" in their own right. Worth noting as well is that, as Snyder reveals in the film's DVD audio commentary, Theron was created specifically for the movie—he does not exist in the graphic novel. So, while Gorgo displayed a moment of triumph and empowerment when she exacted revenge on her attacker, the attack—the *rape*—was created solely for the film and was completely unnecessary.

In contrast to Theron, Dilios exists as perhaps the only character with a disability presented in a positive light. Dilios, in the course of battle, loses an eye. When Leonidas asks him if the injury will incapacitate him, Dilios, in typical Spartan-like fashion, responds, "It's just an eye. The gods saw fit to grace me with a spare" (*300*). But although Dilios insists he is still fit for battle—and Leonidas claims he believes him—Leonidas nonetheless sends him away to "tell their story" of the soon-to-be-killed/martyred Spartans who stood as "free men" (*300*). One could argue, as Leonidas did, that the timing was coincidental, but, given the Spartan's focus on bodily perfection, Dilios' removal from the battlefield may have been because of his lost eye.

The following day, the doomed Spartans meet the glorious death they have always dreamed of having. Ephialtes, wearing a cone-shaped hat (his "uniform"; the sight calls to mind the image of a dunce), pleads with Leonidas to surrender. Leonidas responds, "May you live forever" and Ephialtes hangs his head down in shame, as living as a traitor with a disability—albeit a rich and powerful traitor—is much worse than dying as an able-bodied super soldier (*300*). Leonidas and his 300 Spartans (minus Dilios) are killed, leading Greece to act one year

later, and, led by Dilios, to charge into battle, fighting against the Persians' "mysticism and tyranny" as the film ends. As for Ephialtes, although the last scene of the feature film shows Leonidas telling him, "May you live forever," those who explore the DVD's Special Features see that his humiliation does not stop there.

## Deleted Scenes

Two of the three deleted scenes are about Ephialtes. Neither, unsurprisingly, present him in a positive light. In the first scene, Ephialtes—immediately after his initial meeting with Leonidas in which he was denied entrance into the Spartan ranks—jumps off a cliff, attempting to kill himself. This potentially dangerous message suggests that suicide is preferable to living an unfulfilled (or, as portrayed, *unable* to be fulfilled) life with a disability. The reason this scene was taken out, explains Snyder in the DVD's Special Features, was "because we took the later scene out of the movie and so you couldn't really have him jump off a cliff and…not see what happened to him" (*300*). The scene was taken out for continuity's sake then, not to avoid the death-is-better-than-disability message.

Ephialtes' other scene was deleted because, according to Snyder, "in the end…it just slowed the whole thing down a little bit too much" (*300*). The scene shows Ephialtes alone, sobbing and cursing the Spartans, the gods, and his parents after his failed suicide attempt. Consistent with all of his other scenes in the film, he is portrayed as a "pathetic" character—one who cannot even *commit suicide correctly*. Even more disturbing is that this scene suggests that had Ephialtes successfully killed himself, the Spartans would be better off: With Ephialtes' death, no one would tip off Xerxes to the hidden path. The main character with a disability in *300*, then, is *better off dead*. One could also argue, however, that perhaps *so were the 300 Spartans*, as their deaths spurned Greece to action. Yet, one could also argue that the 300

Spartans—had they not been betrayed by Ephialtes—would have successfully defended themselves against the Persian army and lived.

The last deleted scene involved more creatures and characters with disabilities created specifically for the film. Snyder explains,

> This sequence [is] of the Persian giants with the midget archers on their back—the captain, you know, is cutting his leg and the midget archer is shooting the arrows—and the reason why we took it out of the movie was because it was too much. This scene seemed to go into the stratosphere (*300*).

Important to note in his description is his use of the word "midget," a term which, according to the non-profit organization Little People of America (LPA), is a term that "has fallen into disfavor and is considered offensive by most people of short stature" (FAQ). LPA explains, "Such terms as dwarf, little person, LP, and person of short stature are all acceptable, but most people would rather be referred to by their name than a label" (FAQ). The small-statured archer sits atop the armless giant who wears a metallic mask. Affixed to the giant's stubs are metal caps. The giant only growls, making no audible sounds that indicate he speaks any human language. Like the Ubër Immortal and many of the Persians, he is stripped of humanity. He is an animal.

The deleted scenes, to be sure, were not part of the original film's presentation as it was shown in movie theaters. Including them in this analysis was necessary because they illustrate and reinforce the consistent theme of disability-as-a-metaphor-for-inferiority/immorality that threads itself throughout the film. Importantly, although the scenes were deleted from the original film, they were very consciously *included* on the Special Edition DVD and all three scenes involved, almost exclusively, characters with disabilities. The inclusion of these scenes suggests that they are meant to be watched. As further evidence that they are meant to be seen, the Special Edition version of the *300* DVD uses Ephialtes' betrayal and the non-normative

Persian soldiers as a selling point. Under "Special Features," on the Special Edition version of the *300* DVD, the back of the package reads, "Additional Scenes of the Traitorous Hunchback and Never-Before-Seen Giant Warriors" (*300*). Given how the characters with disabilities that *did* make it into the film were treated, perhaps the fact that these additional scenes were deleted is for the best.

# CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSIONS

Had *300* not been such a phenomenal financial success, had it not been based on real events, and had discussion of ableism and disability in the film not been virtually nonexistent, this thesis would not have been necessary. Even if *300* included no characters with disabilities, however, ableism and disability—like race, class, gender, and sexuality—are *always* present. Exclusion of minority groups is just as significant (if not more so) as mishandled inclusion. Yet, excluding characters with disabilities is not a crime *300* is even remotely guilty of committing. As this analysis has shown, characters with disabilities were often literally created solely for the sake of representing inferiority, weakness, and evil. Ephialtes and the Ephors—although authentic historical figures—were given pronounced physical disabilities to exaggerate their supposed lack of morality. The Immortals were depicted as monsters with gnarled, heavily clawed fingers and disfigured faces. Characters such as the Ubër Immortal and the executioner had no basis in history *or* the graphic novel and were similarly created to emphasize "Otherness" and evil. As stated earlier, the practice of using disability to express immorality is not unique to *300*. Nirmala Erevelles recalls how the use of disability arguably had a similar effect in another film: "Take for example, the famous biographical sketch, novel, and film, *The Elephant Man*…So horrifying are the images of disability in the books and the film that, when marked in the unconscious, they serve to mediate in invisible ways almost all human interactions with the 'disabled' other" (Erevelles, pg. 427). By their own admission in the DVD's Special Features, the filmmakers and the creator of the graphic novel were very aware of this artistic process,

intentionally continuing the disturbing tradition of representing a character's inner flaws with a manifestation of physical ones. In doing so, real-life individuals with physical "flaws" are deemed, unfairly, as having inner flaws.

From a social construct theory standpoint, one can clearly see that an ableist agenda is in place. Apart from the use of characters with disabilities to represent inferiority, weakness, and evil in *300*, virtually no characters with disabilities were shown in a positive or even neutral light and the only perspective presented was an able-bodied one. Furthermore, no discussion or presentation of the inconsistent nature of the definition of "disability" was explored. As Tregaskis explains,

> [T]here may be environments and situations in which individual people with impairments are not even necessarily disabled people, because in those settings and at those particular times all their support needs are being met, and they have the opportunity to participate on an equal level with their peers. However, such inclusive episodes tend to be transitory in nature, and are overshadowed by the more usual experience of exclusion (Tregaskis, pgs. 462-463).

Indeed, in different settings and operating under a social construct theory perspective, the characters with disabilities in *300* would not have been perceived as being "disabled." Singer/songwriter Stevie Wonder, actress Marlee Matlin, and physicist Stephen Hawking serve as examples of famous people with disabilities who—in reference to their career choices—could be perceived as no less "disabled" than a person with no current physical impairments. Because of the nature of the current, non-social construct theory societal perspective, the identity of disability oftentimes largely trumps any consideration of the "socially constructed" nature of this identity in both reality and in film. This is true despite the fact that, as Overall notes, "[a]mong most philosophers and theorists, it is now a truism that identities, or at least some identities, are socially constructed. These identities include gender identity, racial identity, and what we might call ability identity, as a disabled or non-disabled person" (Overall, pg. 126). Overall adds that

"to regard these identities as socially constructed is to say that they are created, reinforced, and sustained, although not necessarily with intention or full consciousness, through normative conventions, relations and practices" (Overall, pg. 126). The film *300* is certainly one movie (but not the *only* movie) that reinforces normative practices of ableism.

Although deconstruction of ableist ideology using a social construct theory perspective has great potential in film and other media, it has perhaps even grater potential in the everyday lives of people with disabilities. Nick Watson found this out after interviewing several people with disabilities, focusing on the subject of self-identification.

Interviewee Moira, for example, recounts her experiences with Multiple Sclerosis (MS): "Well[,] I suppose this sounds ridiculous. I feel I'm lucky, because as my MS slowly gets worse, because it's been so slow, I don't know it's happening. And then by the time I suddenly think, I could do this a year ago I can't do it now, I'm so used to it that it doesn't really bother me" (Watson, pg. 519). Similarly, interviewee Tommy explained, " 'I don't wake up and look and my wheelchair and think 'Shit, I've got to spend another day in that'…I just get up and get on with it' " (Watson, pg. 519). For these individuals, their disabilities are just another aspect of their lives. Watson notes, however, that "variability [of how one perceives one's disabilities] is also contingent and situated" (Watson, pg. 519).

Social construct theory dictates that disability is largely socially defined through ableist perspectives. But not to be forgotten are the very real challenges people with disabilities face. As Overall explains, "Impairment also can be redefined or expanded, by picking out new arrays of features thought to be abnormal or defective. This is not to deny that real suffering—physical and/or psychological—may attach to the possession of features that are also picked out as

defects" (Overall, pg. 127). Keeping this in mind, Overall nonetheless explains that social construct theory is still very much a part of how a person with a disability is treated:

> But within any given social context, features that involve suffering may or may not be recognized as impairments (as opposed, say, to normal variations, sources of spiritual insight and divine inspiration, or stigmata). Moreover, in some cases, it is the identification of a feature as a defect that actually *causes* the suffering—for example, in the case of so-called 'birthmarks' (Overall, pgs. 127-128).

Identification is key to social construct theory, and perhaps society would be better served by identifying all individuals as *people*, rather than by present states of disability. Clearly, the opposite occurred in the film *300*. Here, disability served as the main vehicle through which abnormality was represented. More research and attention needs to be given to the topic of disability and ableism in the media. While able-bodied individuals may not perceive the subject of ableism to be of much importance, ableism affects everyone, as Suzanne Pharr explains:

> It is virtually impossible to view one oppression…in isolation because they are all connected…They are linked by a common origin — economic power and control — and by common methods of limiting, controlling and destroying lives. There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or else success will always be limited and incomplete (Pharr, pg. 53).

Hopefully, future filmmakers will learn from the stereotyped misuse of disability in *300* and provide more diverse and complex depictions of characters with disabilities. In the process, all people—those with disabilities and the "temporarily abled"—will benefit.

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