300 (2007) is a film adaptation of Frank Miller’s popular graphic novel of the same title. The film recounts the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC), in which a massive Persian army led by Emperor Xerxes I (Rodrigo Santoro) fought the forces of allied Greek city states under the command of the Spartan King Leonidas I (Gerard Butler). Overpowered by the size of the Persian army, Greek forces positioned themselves between the narrow cliffs of Thermopylae, also known as the ‘Hot Gates’. There, they stopped the march of the Persian army for three days, giving the Greek armies sufficient...
time to mobilize and face the enemy. Although the war in Thermopylae resulted in
the death of all Spartan forces including King Leonidas, their resistance was crucial
to the eventual Greek victory over the Persians. The heavy casualties Persians suffered
at the hands of Spartans became a symbol of the importance of discipline, strategy
and superior technology over sheer numbers in warfare. The battle of Thermopylae has
achieved iconic status as one of the most famous ‘last stands’ of military history.

One of the blockbuster movies of 2007, 300 earned 456 million USD at the box
office, of which 210.6 million USD came from domestic theaters and 245.4 million USD
from international markets.¹ The success of the movie in attracting various audiences
notwithstanding, 300 has stimulated contradictory responses among film critics
and audiences. The movie inspired numerous spoofs including a parody film titled
Meet the Spartans that also proved successful at the box office.¹ When I asked several
undergraduate students during a lecture what they thought of 300 and its depiction of
the Spartans, they cried “Awesome!” These students, however, grudgingly conceded to
the ‘dirtiness’ of the fun they had watching the film only when I reminded them how
easily they cheered for a militaristic society that found it acceptable to throw infants
off cliffs when seen unfit to become soldiers. At times I have been chastised by friends
for being too concerned with what, in the end, is merely entertainment. They tell me it
is possible to enjoy the spectacle that 300 is, independently from its content. Has 300 so
successfully appealed to audiences globally because of, or despite, its extremely violent,
racist, homophobic, and sexist subtext?

Of course a movie is never ‘just a movie.’ As Shohat and Stam (1994, 356) remind
us, media products can “inflect desire, memory, fantasy. By controlling popular memory,
 they contain and stimulate popular dynamism.” Film is not only an important medium
providing frames of reference to reflect on and interpret the unfolding of ‘real’ life events,
but films also help construct particular representations of the world. Crampton and
Power (2005a, 196) note that films can be studied to explore the “cinemato-graphing
of political space at a variety of spatial scales.” The relationalities between filmic
geographies and geopolitical discourses, or the interactions between “the reel world of
cinema and the real world of global political space” they argue, is crucial in understanding
popular geopolitical imaginations (ibid, 197). In return, these imaginations help “sustain
particular national visions of states and territories” (Dodds 2006, 127).

This paper approaches 300 as a media product produced and consumed in spatially
specific ways. I present a geographical reading of 300’s text, in the sense of deconstructing
the spatial and geopolitical imagination that define the earth the movie graphs (Sparke
2005). I argue that 300 is premised on (re)constructing a battle between two ancient
armies over territorial conflict as a war of civilizations and conflictive styles of life. In
doing so, the film retrospectively reproduces the contemporary hegemonic American
geopolitical imagination of a Manichean vision of the world in which democracy and its
enemies are locked in constant struggle. This vision is articulated by the translation of
spatial distance into incommensurable temporal and cultural/civilizational differences.
I use Hall’s (1993) encoding and decoding model of media circulation in order to investigate the construction and consumption of 300’s messages. In the first half of the paper I analyze the encoding of the film’s message by looking at the underlying discursive framework and ideological context that define the conditions of possibility for the film’s messages. 300 is premised on a retrospective rearticulation of a historical conflict in terms of spatiotemporal racialization and Otherization of Persians. As a result, the film reifies the isomorphism between race and place in line with the contemporary Westcentric and civilizationist exclusivism of reenergized American imperialism. The film renders the Orient/al as the dehistoricized and displaced Other of the Occident/al, while homogenizing and reifying both categories as civilization(al adversaries in the post-September 11 context of the War on Terror. In the second part of the paper, I focus on the decoding of the film’s message in an attempt to account for the film’s success in appealing to multiple audiences. I explain 300’s global appeal by analyzing, alongside the film’s dominant message, how different spectators hold various emotional investments and ideological positions in line with their situated relationship to the messages the film conveys. This section points to the multiple ways in which the messages of 300 are interpreted by differently situated spectators in the United States and in Turkey, a secular Muslim country. I argue that the ambiguities and empty signifiers that characterize the film’s messages create possibilities for negotiated spectatorship. The result is the opening up of alternative routes of identification with Spartans by those who are located outside the film’s Westcentric radar of signification.

**The Story**

300 opens with a Spartan elder holding up newborn Leonidas on the edge of a cliff, inspecting him for any ‘defects’. At the bottom of the cliff we see a pile of bones and skulls, belonging to the infants who have failed the test. The narrator, a Spartan soldier called Dilios (David Wenham) informs us that “if he had been small, or puny, or sickly, or misshapen, he would have been discarded.” This eugenistic tendency, which Saris describes as the “Nazi militaristic ethos as a subtext” maintains its hold throughout the movie.¹²

In a set of flashbacks, Dilios tells the story of Leonidas’ upbringing as we are introduced to the militaristic ethos of the Spartan society, Agoge (see Figure 1). The disciplinary regime of Agoge was

[... manufactured by 300 years of Spartan warrior society to create the finest warriors the world has ever known...[it] forces the boys to fight, starves them, forces them to steal and if necessary to kill. By rod and lash the boy was punished, taught to show no pain, no mercy, constantly tested, tossed into the wild, left to pit his wits and will against nature’s fury. It was his initiation, his time in the wild, for he would return to his people a Spartan or not at all.
Leonidas’ final rite of passage consists of killing a giant “beast,” a digitally mastered wolf, before he returns to Sparta as its rightful king. Thirty years later, by the time of the Persian invasion, Dilios tells us that King Leonidas is now to face another, metaphorical “beast” that is threatening his country: “A beast approaches... this beast is made of men and horses, swords and spears, an army of slaves vast beyond imagining, ready to devour tiny Greece, ready to snub out the world's last hope for reason and justice.” Head of this bestial army, “God-King Xerxes” sends his messenger (Peter Mensah) to Sparta, demanding submission to his rule. Leonidas refuses and kills the messenger (see Figure 2). Seeking support for his decision to fight the Persian army, Leonidas visits the Ephors, a band of corrupt, leprous priests, to earn their consent. Accusing Leonidas of blasphemy for his refusal to honor the ban on fighting during Sparta’s sacred festival of Carneia, the Ephors grudgingly agree to consult the Oracle – a scantily dressed young woman who appears to be constantly abused by them. The Oracle prophesizes that Sparta must not go to war. When Leonidas leaves the temple, a spy of Xerxes appears and presents gold to the Ephors for their covert support. Unable to mobilize the entire Spartan army for expedition, Leonidas takes his personal bodyguard of 300 soldiers and heads to Thermopylae’s narrow cliffs, also known as the Hot Gates, in order to block the Persian army’s advance into Greece. On their way to the battlefield several Arcadians led by Daxos (Andrew Pleavin) join the Spartans. Once the Greek army arrives at the Hot Gates, Leonidas meets Ephialtes (Andrew Tiernan), a disfigured, hunchback Spartan who avoided certain infanticide when his parents fled Sparta to save his life. Ephialtes begs Leonidas to join the Spartan army, but is denied permission due to his ‘weak’ body.

The following three days, the Spartans successfully fight, with minimal aid from the Arcadians, against various Persian adversaries that include Xerxes’ elite troops,
the Immortals, as well as an 'Uberimmortal' giant, “magician” women using primitive grenades, armored rhinoceroses, and giant battle elephants. Back in Sparta, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey) struggles to rally the Spartan Council to send reinforcements. However, her attempts are constantly blocked by the influential councilman Theron (Dominic West), who conspires with the Persians. Meanwhile, bitter with rejection and seeking revenge, Ephialtes betrays the Spartans by showing the Persians the location of a goat path that allows them to take the rear flank of the Greeks. This ends the Greeks’ strategic superiority, and seeing inevitable death, the Arcadians leave the battlefield. The Spartans, however, stay behind and die an “honorable death” in keeping with their soldier ethos of “Never retreat, never surrender!” As Leonidas and his soldiers fight against impossible odds, Gorgo exposes Theron’s treason, and Dilios, the only survivor of the expedition, returns to narrate the brave sacrifice of King Leonidas and the 300 Spartans. All Greeks eventually unite under Spartan leadership to fight the Persians. The film closes with the Greek army led by Spartans facing the Persians, one year after the battle at the Hot Gates.

**Film and Geopolitics**

There are numerous references to contemporary geopolitics in 300. These partly have to do with the shifting self-image of the United States after the Cold War. The Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was sometimes explained by an analogy to the Peloponnesian Wars: the United States identified itself with Athens; a wealthy, democratic country with a strong navy, whereas the Soviet Union was Sparta; a militaristic police state with formidable land power (Westad 2007). Continuing this theme in a different global context and writing on the eve of the September 11 attacks, Walker (2001) warned against a move towards the Spartan
model in the United States with the rise to power of George W. Bush’s neoconservative administration. He observed the “fortress mentality and uncompromising attitudes of a modern Sparta” in the increasingly aggressive unilateralism of an American foreign policy that was bent on maintaining American supremacy at all costs (ibid, 1). The production and reception of 300 is informed by such emergent parallels between Sparta and the United States with the advent of aggressive American interventionism abroad and militarization of everyday life at home.

Following World War II, the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union quickly evolved into propaganda wars. During the Cold War, the United States presented itself as the defender of freedom and democracy while aggressively denouncing the Soviet Union as a source of oppression and tyranny (Brands 1993). Hollywood was actively involved in articulating American exceptionalism into the promotion of hegemonic modes of American ways of life during the Cold War. Hollywood studios not only produced anti-communist movies, but also made films that would celebrate ‘American values’ such as family, patriotism and individualism (Dodds 2006). War movies during the early decades of the Cold War painted a virtuous and heroic picture of American military involvement overseas. The complicity of Hollywood in the promotion of American militarism declined after the loss of the Vietnam War, with the rise of the radical left, the Black Civil Rights Movement, and feminism during the 1960s. By the 1980s, though, American militarism found redemption in Hollywood through films like Rambo, Star Wars and Top Gun, paralleling the Reagan administration’s zeal to bring down the evil empire of the Soviet Union (Ryan and Kellner 1988). During the 1990s, the role of the American army in the first Gulf War and in Bosnia and Kosovo further restored confidence in righteous use of American military power, celebrated in movies such as Behind Enemy Lines (Tuathail 2005).

300 has a place in a long list of Hollywood war movies that have proven to be very profitable since the late 1990s. Crampton and Power (2005a) note that recent success in war movies such as Black Hawk Down, Saving Private Ryan and Behind the Enemy Lines points to a resurgent Hollywood interest in narrating American military adventures. Boggs and Pollard (2007) link the popularity of recent war films to a shift towards hawkish neoconservatism in American politics. They argue that these films rely on the discourses of the global War on Terror and its central tenets of “endless global struggle of good against evil, democracy against tyranny, civilization against barbarism” (ibid, 223). The success of war films at the box office points to the popular appeal of a remilitarized American presence in global geopolitics. Situated in a conjuncture of shifting geopolitical alliances and declining global American hegemony, these films also address “a hunger for explanatory narratives in this period of cultural and political anxiety, uneasiness and uncertainty” (Crampton and Power 2005a, 193-194).

A thriving sub-genre of the war film genre has been that of historical war movies. Starting from the 1990s there has been a renewed interest in these kinds of movies.
Anxieties and uncertainties of the post-Cold War conjuncture as well as the postcolonial/multicultural tensions within the Western countries have been partially responsible for the appeal of going back to the ‘beginnings of the Western civilization’ through historical movies such as *Gladiator*, *Alexander*, and *Troy*. Similar to the above-mentioned war movies, these films respond to “nostalgic instincts and longings for a simpler bygone era of unambiguous glory and represent a desire to revisit and refight previous battles” (Crampton and Power 2005b, 255). They often revolve around the spectacular military prowess of Greek and Roman heroes and the victories of the ‘Western’ armies against their (Oriental) enemies. *300* is representative of this sub-genre that fictionalizes historically grounded events and heroes from the time of ancient Greece and Rome; the privileged, self-attributed cultural ancestors of Western civilization.

**Democracy and Vigilante Individualism**

The conviction in a seamless civilizational progress that begins with ancient Greece and culminates in Euromodernity underlies the narrative strategies *300* deploys in order to distinguish the Spartans from the Persians. The master narrative of the film rests on a sharp divide and ideological conflict between ‘Greek reason and freedom’ in opposition to ‘Persian oppression and slavery’. The film achieves this effect by pitting certain signifiers that purportedly define the West—democracy, freedom, and reason—as exclusively Spartan values against those that define the Oriental Other of the Persian—tyranny, mysticism, and magic. Throughout *300* encounters between Spartans and Persians constantly give reference to the antagonism between Sparta’s freedom-loving democracy and Persia’s oppressive rule over slaves. Greek reason is positioned against Persian magic/mysticism in a binary fashion. Gorgo’s plea to the Spartan Councilmen to send reinforcements for Leonidas summarizes the Western values under siege: “We are at war, gentlemen. We must send the entire Spartan army to aid our King in the preservation of not just ourselves, but of our children. Send the army for the preservation of liberty. Send it for justice. Send it for order. Send it for reason.” Dilios reiterates the same rhetoric when the unified Greek army meets the Persians at the end of the film, one year after the battle of Thermopylae: “This day we rescue a world from mysticism and tyranny and usher in a future brighter than anything we can imagine.” This obvious reference to the Greek future/American present, this rhetoric of warring civilizations, teleologically establishes the Spartans as harbingers and champions of (the exclusively Western) values of freedom, reason and progress in a supposedly tyrannical, irrational and backward world.

When one goes beyond the rhetorical level, however, the Spartan society we see in the film is often at odds with the very modern Western values it is purported to embody. To begin with, despite the valorization of democracy and freedom as exclusive Spartan values, there are contradictions and ambiguities in their articulation throughout the film. *300*’s most obvious paradox is the simultaneously ‘freedom-loving’ and militaristically
hierarchical, violently disciplined Spartan society itself. How do we reconcile the
democratic notion of equality with the militaristic eugenics of Sparta? Although 300
presents democratic rule as the most important distinction between Spartans and the
Persians, the failures and inefficiencies of the Spartan democratic apparatus subvert
the valorization of democracy in the film. More specifically, the democratic aspects of
Sparta are undermined by the actions of the king and by the fallacies of democratic
institutions in Sparta. The Spartan Council is comprised of old men who signify and
show impotency in the face of imminent threat. Their inclination to ‘reason’—implying
use of diplomacy and negotiation—is rejected out of hand by Leonidas. Their inability
to perceive the seriousness of the external threat is matched and further emphasized by
their blindness to the internal danger posed by the traitor Theron (see Figure 3). Why
should we care about Spartan democracy when we see the individual decisions of the
king, in defiance of the majority opinion represented by the Spartan Council, proving
wiser and more patriotic in the end?

300’s positing of “the moral individual as the guardian of the future at the
expense of democratic society” (Crampton and Power 2005b, 254) and the notion of
the benevolent ruler salvaging democratic society—from itself—is at odds with the
very idea of a democracy. The power monopoly of Leonidas undermines the Spartan
democracy, which is protected from its inherent weaknesses by a superior individual
who knows what is best for everyone else. At the same time, the corrupt and inefficient
democratic institutions respectively signified by Theron and the Spartan Council
justify the individual initiative of Leonidas. The eventual justification of Leonidas’
actions undermines the very notion of democracy by rendering democratic procedures
responsible for engendering the conditions that empower traitors like Theron.
Furthermore, the democratic mechanism of consensual decision-making results in

![Figure 3. The traitor Theron (in the middle) surrounded by worried ‘old anxious men’
trying to stop Leonidas from going to war.](image-url)
failure to provide support for, and leads to the eventual demise of, Leonidas and his soldiers. It is possible to draw parallels between Leonidas’ dealing with the Spartan Council here and the Bush administration’s impatience with the American Senate during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Very much like Leonidas, George W. Bush bypassed the constitutional necessities of proclaiming war against Iraq in the name of defending the homeland with swift action. Leonidas’ consultation with the Ephors can similarly be read as the United Nations’ failed attempt to oppose American adventurism in Iraq.

Interestingly, Gorgo’s above-mentioned address to the Spartan Council is not from Miller’s graphic novel. Miller himself approaches Spartans more cautiously, almost as a necessary evil to protect democracy, which he rather associates with Athens. Miller appears to be aware of the contradiction between Spartan militarism and democracy in the graphic novel. In one of the rare sections of Miller’s work that are not reproduced in the movie, Leonidas announces his decision to die ‘gloriously’ rather than surrendering. A soldier shouts: “We are with you sir. To the death.” Leonidas replies coldly: “I did not ask. Leave the democracy to the Athenians, boy” (Miller 1999, 68). This incident indicates the king’s absolute authority over his subordinates in matters of life and death. In the movie, however, the scene is shot right before the Spartans leave for battle. Analogous to a Marine Corps soldier,’ Stelios (Michael Fassbender) shouts: “We are with you sir! For Sparta! For freedom! To the death!” Leonidas smiles and nods approvingly. This scene not only reiterates the rhetoric of freedom but also implies that Spartan soldiers voluntarily joined the fight.

Other putatively civilizational differences between the Spartans and Persians, too, do not hold when we pay attention to the details. In the reason/mysticism binary, for instance, Leonidas’ meeting with the ‘mystic’ figures of the Ephors and the binding authority of the Oracle’s prophecy over the king’s hapless pleas to the Ephors (“Use your reason!”) problematizes claims to secular reason on the side of Spartans. Moreover, the Spartan military ethos manifests itself as a desire to meet a beautiful, glorious death on the battlefield. The Spartans’ obsession with finding ‘glory’ in death confounds the message of patriotic sacrifice and undermines Spartan claims to deploy ‘reason’. The Spartans choose dying in the battlefield over survival in their quest to meet a ‘beautiful death’. Their determination to fight the Persians to the bitter end, despite several offers from the Persians to surrender, eventually becomes more self-suicidal than self-sacrificial. Accordingly, the rhetoric of fighting to defend ‘freedom’ becomes difficult to sustain.

Understanding the emphasis on heroic, yet undemocratic individualism in 300 requires a brief look at the career of the graphic novel’s author, Frank Miller. Miller rose to fame in the 1980s by reviving the Batman and Daredevil series. His work to date points to a fascination with film noir landscapes, conservative patriotism, misogyny and the use of excessive, aestheticized violence. Since the inception of his career, vigilante heroes have been at the center of Miller’s increasingly popular works. Dubose (2007, 918) describes vigilantes as “characters who take the law into their own hands yet
are politically aligned with the politically ruling group.” There is an ambiguity to this vigilante hero: s/he has to embody virtue and greater public good while transgressing the very social conventions that sustain and regulate a society. Batman in Miller’s *Dark Night Returns* (1986) is the perfect example of the vigilante hero. In this work, Batman is perceived to be a hero by “those who would typically fit the stereotype of conservative/Republican,” whereas the characters who see Batman as a vigilante are liberals (ibid, 921). One such character in the graphic novel describes Batman as “a symbolic resurgence of the common man’s will to resist…a rebirth of the American fighting spirit” (Miller 1986, 41, cited in Dubose 2007, 921). Dubose points out that the cultural frame of reference for *Dark Night Returns* was closely related to the conservative shift in American society under the Reagan administration. The conservative regime emphasized the initiative of the individual entrepreneur as the solution to America’s problems while attacking the gains of the civil rights struggles and the welfare state. In light of Miller’s ideological commitments, Leonidas’ individualism and vigilante behavior appear in keeping with a neoconservative anti-statistm combined with eugenistic superhero individualism. The growing popularity of Miller’s works following the September 11 attacks, too, I would argue, stems from the parallels between his work and the neoconservative geopolitical imaginary of the Bush administration that constructs a world with clear-cut lines between ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’. Miller’s rather simplified moral universe, similarly, revolves around a clear distinction between ‘villains’ and ‘heroes’, mirroring neoconservative geopolitics. To put it another way, caricaturized and reduced complexity of the ‘real’ world by neoconservatives resonates with the simplistic, clear-cut moral universe of Miller’s comics.

**Representing Persians, Racing the Oriental**

*300*’s narrative unfolds through dominant frames of reference that can be easily recognized by its audiences as the film deploys Orientalist and racist discourses of imperial civilizationalism. Several genres and modes of representation are combined in the construction of the Persian image in *300*. First of all, Persians are at once very familiar yet exotic because of the ubiquitous archive of the Oriental Other in various media. Edward Said (1994, 2) defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’.” According to Said, Orientalism builds its own ‘imaginative geography” through which it defines, from a Western perspective “what is far away, what is familiar, and what is exotic” without an empirical basis for judgment (Jackson 1989, 150). Although *300* draws from a number of stereotypical images of the Others of ‘the West’ in constructing the image of the Persians, such as war elephants, ‘primitive’ tribes and African slaves in Xerxes’ army, due to the ‘Middle Eastern’ roots of the enemy, the stereotypical image of the Bedouin Arab is most ubiquitously deployed (see Figures 4 and 5). The scene of Xerxes’ harem, where belly dancing, decadent hedonism and
sexual promiscuity are displayed at length clearly draws from Orientalist imagery, as well (see Figure 6).

Implicated in the Orientalist and colonialist perspectives of the film, gendered differences between the Spartans and Persians play an important role in distinguishing the two groups. It is necessary to pay attention to the representation of women and homosexuality in 300 when explicating the film’s gender regime, which draws civilizational boundaries between the West and non-West while affirming a patriarchal social order for both. Let us first look at the representation of women. Compared to their Persian counterparts—whose shots are limited to the veiled ‘magicians’ throwing exploding bottles at Spartans and the dancers and concubines in Xerxes’ harem—Spartan women are given an exalted status, exemplified by the persona of Gorgo. When the Persian messenger visits Leonidas, Gorgo joins the conversation between him and Leonidas. Startled, the Persian messenger objects: “Why does this woman think she can speak

Figure 4. Two of the countless “towelheads” sent to the afterlife by Spartan supersoldiers.
amongst men?” Rather than waiting for Leonidas to defend her, Gorgo steps forward and replies: “Because only Spartan women give birth to real men.” This particular notion of womanhood is inserted into the movie to make a point about the advanced status of women in Spartan society compared to the treatment of Persian women. Yet this women-as-the-mothers-of-the-nation rhetoric echoes the construction of “women as important, but properly subservient icons of national identity” (McAlister 2001, 272) in the constitution of Spartan masculinity.

Sharp (1998, 159) notes that after the Cold War, partly in response to the post-Cold War ambiguities of the role of the United States in world politics, Hollywood movies served to remasculinize America by engaging “with the re-establishment of a hegemonic masculinist sense of patriotism.” Among other things, this was achieved through the exclusion of women from the types of struggles that create patriotic bonds

*Figure 5. War rhinoceros is a fresh idea, whereas the elephants have an obvious The Lord of the Rings feeling.*

...
among men. By the same token, 300’s gender codes operate through the exteriority and passivity of women with regard to the relations between men. We see Spartan women’s vulnerability as mothers, in shots where they embrace their children in fear, unable to do anything other than wait to be saved by their men. More importantly, both Spartan and Persian women gain relevance to the film’s storyline mainly as sexual assets in the relations and transactions between men. When the Persian spy bribes the Ephors, he promises: “fresh oracles will be daily delivered to you from the every corner of the empire.” Xerxes convinces Ephialtes to betray Spartans by promising him the sexual pleasures of his harem (see Figure 6). When Gorgo seeks Theron’s support for rallying the Spartan Council to support Leonidas, all she can offer him in exchange are sexual favors. The effort to stress the difference between the Spartan and Persian treatment of their women is, then, in effect about subservience to men of the former and silencing of the latter.

Relationships between men in 300 are also far from simple. Although it is well documented that homosexuality played a central role in the civic life of the free citizens of ancient Greece including Sparta (Foucault 1990), 300 confines homosexuality to Athens. Leonidas mockingly refers to Athenians, as: “those philosophers and boy lovers.” The specter of homosexuality continuously haunts the movie, however. Homoerotic readings abound, despite attempts to suppress them, even if only by virtue of the 300 half naked gym-hardened men fighting, eating and sleeping shoulder to shoulder. The filmmakers attempted to resolve this problem by stressing the heterosexual love affair between Gorgo and Leonidas, to the extent of shooting a lengthy scene of heterosexual intercourse. In the case of the ambivalent relationship between Spartan soldiers Astinos (Tom Wisdom) and Stelios as ‘partners,’ the filmmakers chose to portray them as big brother watching over the young one.

Figure 6. Not as strong willed as Leonidas, Ephialtes is seduced by the promises of pleasure in Xerxes’ harem.
As Spartans are rid of their homosexuality, Persian sexualities are problematized, especially through the depiction of Xerxes. Greek homosexuality is displaced onto Xerxes as he is feminized as an extravagant drag queen, complete with facial makeup. The ambiguity of his sexual identity is emphasized by his specific costume, mannerisms and attitude (see Figure 9). Yet Xerxes is simultaneously masculinized as he is a larger than life character of digitally enhanced height and voice. Ambivalence arising from the combined feminization and masculinization of Xerxes renders him the embodiment of the Orient: his apparent prowess based on physical size is intended to invoke fear and danger; yet he is simultaneously weak because of his femininity.

The Orientalist discourses are conducive to the standardizing, cultural stereotyping, and finally dehumanizing of the Oriental Other. However, Orientalism does not provide the totality of the cultural semiotics for the Other in 300. The racializing discourses on aesthetic beauty are central to the construction of the Persian image, as well. The film fetishizes the bodies of both Spartans and Persians in different ways. On the one hand, the ‘classical’ beauty of the Spartan bodies, constantly displayed through minimal dress—except for the crimson cloaks and leather speedos—gives reference to and reinforces Western norms of beauty based on the ideals of Greek aesthetics (West 1997). The likening of Spartan bodies to Greek statues is taken to its fullness when Astinos is beheaded by a Persian cavalryman during the battle. His slow-motion fall to death reminds one of the countless Greek statues on display in museums, missing a limb or head.

On the other hand, 300 puts Persian bodies into stark contrast with those of the Spartans. While the Spartan bodies stand for aestheticized bodily beauty and masculine strength, racialized Persian bodies are in turn mutilated and/or disfigured. In 300 covered Persian bodies and faces often hide a defect. The distorted faces and clawed hands of the Immortals, as well as the transmuted bodies of Xerxes’ executioner and
Figure 8. Xerxes is trying to convince Leonidas to surrender by offering him wealth and power.

Figure 9. Unaccustomed to being rejected, Xerxes gets hysterical.
the Uberimmortal exemplify how the bodies of the Persians are simultaneously violated and transgressed into the realm of sub- or non-human (see Figures 10 and 11). The heavy piercings and tattoos of Persians not only imply violation of the sanctity of the flesh but bear an association with the ‘extremism’ of contemporary subcultures. Just like their Spartan counterparts, transmuted and often dismembered Persian bodies are put on constant display to invoke visceral fear and disgust. One can further suggest that the constant exhibition of disfigured Persian faces speaks of the nineteenth century racist notion that assumed racialized subjects’ inner character and morality were reflected in their outside appearance. In keeping with this notion, Ephialtes, the ‘abomination,’ is reunited with his true brethren, by switching to the Persian side.

By covering up or distorting the bodily image of the Persians, 300 distances them from the realm of the norm-al and acceptable, rendering them abject. That is, Persians
operate as the constitutive outside of the civilized humanity embodied by Spartans. Accordingly, the encounters between Spartans and Persians in the film are presented in such a way as to maximize the audience’s fear of Persians as creatures that transgress the boundaries of the normal human body. To this end, Persian bodies were transformed with make-up and special effects to mobilize the affective powers of revulsion and horror among audiences. 300’s DVD special features include a joint commentary by the director (Zack Snyder), one of the script writers (Kurt Johnstad) and director of photography (Miroslaw Baszak) of the film. Snyder and Johnstad discuss the appearance of the Spartan messenger as follows: “Peter Mensah looking scary with his contacts and with his…calling card, crowns of the conquered kings.” We also learn that when the studio required “a symbol of the Persian advance into Greece” Johnstad found a “real story from Balkan Wars… and put it in the movie, because it is such a horrific idea.” This ‘horrific
idea’ was put into use in the scene where the Greeks, while on their way to the Hot Gates, find a village ambushed by the Immortals. The Immortals have killed everyone and tied the dead bodies of their victims to the branches of a “tree of the dead.” When the Spartans see that the footprints of the Immortals are unlike human footprints Snyder remarks, “see, they have claws, they are evil.” These examples show the extent to which the filmmakers deliberately improvised on the image of the Persians, taking Miller’s already ‘horrifying’ figure of the Other to new extremes.

In contrast to the dehumanization of Persians, Spartans are humanized, especially through the persona of Leonidas. The humanized depiction of the king and his close circle plays an important role in the distribution of identificatory routes throughout the film. Leonidas’ character appears as a brave leader struggling to unite and protect his people in the face of grave danger, while his commitment to be a good father, husband and lover is constantly tested (see Figure 12 and Figure 13). Leonidas’ romantic relationship with his wife Gorgo and her devotion to him are continually emphasized. His Captain’s (Vincent Regan) pride and affection for his son Astinos and Astinos’ friendship with fellow soldier Stelios also help humanize the Spartans.

Leonidas is also a moral agent who makes difficult choices throughout the film. We see him hesitate three times before making a difficult decision. Leonidas first hesitates when he considers submitting to Xerxes before killing the Persian messenger. The second time he is offered wealth and the “warlordship of all Greece” by Xerxes. The third time he is tempted to choose survival by surrendering when Persians surround Spartans from all sides. However, each time he resists the temptation to surrender to wealth, love and finally his desire to live on, in the name of ‘freedom.’ In an analogy to the self-sacrifice of Jesus to save humanity, Leonidas and his 300 warriors become sacrificial lambs for the free, democratic West, which, the film’s narrative suggests, was only possible because of the Spartans’ death. Indeed, the last we see of Leonidas is when he is lying dead with his comrades around him. His position is reminiscent of the crucified Jesus, his arms stretched to both sides, his body pierced by arrows.

**Spatial Symbolism**

Film is a powerful medium that produces certain geopolitical imaginations through filmic cartographies and landscapes (Crampton and Power 2005a). The spatial symbolism articulated through the use of light, music and colors plays an important role in terms of films’ emotional impact on audiences. 300 was shot by the computerized bluescreen technique that gave the director a wide array of possibilities for producing and manipulating the visual background. Zach Snyder made an extraordinary effort to reproduce the visual feel of the graphic novel in cinema. The result is the recreation of what I would call a spectacular ‘comicscape’ in 300.

300’s cinematography rests on a peculiar use of light and color. The dark skies and dulled colors of the battlefield landscape are a stark contrast to the scenes where we
see the Spartan wheat fields or the Senate Hall glowing in the light (see Figure 14 and Figure 15). As spectators, we constantly travel back and forth between the light daytime reality of Sparta, and the almost surreal, dark nighttime landscape of the Hot Gates. It is in the Hot Gates, in this nightmarish comatscape that the boundaries between human and non-human become porous. It is here that the Spartan army battles “Xerxes’ monsters from the darkest corners of Persia,” as Dilios puts it. The battle scenes are generally shot under a dark sky and there is often fog in the background. Shot under the narrow cliffs and the imposing combat landscape of the Hot Gates, these scenes produce feelings of claustrophobia and imprisonment for the viewer.

The darkness where Persians reside and come from is both figurative and literal. Tuathail (2005, 371) notes that in the aftermath of September 11, the Bush administration
drew a distinction between “those inside the folk nation and those beyond it who dwell in the realm of darkness, hatred and distorted morality.” On their way to the Hot Gates, Greeks stop at a village ambushed by the Immortals, the elite troops of the Persian army. The only survivor of the incident, a young girl whispers, “They came from the darkness,” before dying in the arms of Leonidas. This shot suggests that the Persians are creatures of darkness—not only metaphorically, as Bush suggests for America’s enemies—but literally, as well.

Boggs and Pollard (2007, 230) point to the importance of “imbuing combat scenes with elements of aesthetic beauty and playful excitement” in recent war films. 300 is no exception. Visceral details of warfare are aestheticized for the audience’s voyeuristic gaze.

Figure 14. Wheat harvest signifies peace and prosperity. The reference to Gladiator is obvious.

Figure 15. The beam of light and tranquil atmosphere in the council’s chambers points to the use of light as an affective technique throughout the movie.
The killing and mutilation of Persians either quickly passes from the screen with a splash of blood, or the minute details of their dismemberment are shown. The slow motion shots from three angles during fight scenes enable the viewer to observe every minute detail of the carefully choreographed combat and the masculine beauty of the Spartan soldiers. Heavy metal music accompanies the fight scenes as the Persian soldiers can only growl or scream before being efficiently butchered by the Spartans.

In contrast, when we return to Sparta, we see children playing, hear the running of water and gaze upon the fertile wheat fields awaiting harvest. There is no place for internal tensions and problems in this idealized Sparta. All we see is a paradise where welfare, order, and peace reign supreme. Rather annoying aspects of Spartan society such as its reliance on slave labor and the imperial militarism that provided its wealth are erased in the process. Snyder and Johnstad’s remarks in the commentary section of the film reveal that the filmmakers sincerely believed in their own fable of Sparta: “How great everyone looks in Sparta. That is what free society is…Yeah everyone looking great, working, having fun. Rich and the poor intermingle.” Overall, the spatial symbolism of the film almost subconsciously suggests fear and disgust of the Persians by associating them with darkness, while producing the image of a peaceful, innocent folk that is about to be attacked by evil doers. The brutal violence inflicted on the Persians is hence justified by their exclusion from the normative temporospatial realm of the daytime open spaces and by containing them in the uncanny sphere of nighttime claustrophobia and fear.

**Politics of Space and Time**

300 teleologically stretches the theme of virtuous American military power back to antiquity by likening Spartan soldiers to United States Marines and by presenting
the war between the Greeks and the Persians as one concerned with the preservation of freedom and democracy. This move renders the agendas of Sparta and the United States as one and the same. The suggested continuity between the two countries in return blesses the United States as the rightful heir to the democratic legacy of Greece, the mythical foundational stone of Western civilization. As a result, the Manichean struggle between the proponents of freedom and the harbingers of oppression is ostensibly historicized while actually becoming timeless. The assumption is that the ‘enemies’ that were ‘out there’ are still ‘out here’. For this reason we need to pay special attention to the temporospatial dimensions of the geopolitical imagination that inform representations of Sparta and Persia in the film.

300 advocates the position that there has been a continuous clash between supposedly exclusive Western values and their antipodal adversaries. The film’s narrative logic rests on a rewriting of the history “in the name of eternal ‘West’ unique since its moment of conception” (Shohat and Stam 1993, 57). In 300, a teleological reading of universal historical progress as a movement towards ‘democracy, freedom and reason’ presents Spartans as the saviors and champions of special, unique values that could only have emerged in the West. These values that underlie modernity—individualism, democracy, equality, and freedom—are imagined to be intrinsic to Western civilization. In what Scott (1999, 146) calls the “How-The-West-Was-Won vision of the metaphorical wagon train of history,” the Persians have no other role to play than being yet another anachronism that stands in the way of progress.

Fabian’s (2002) critique of the anthropological discourses on non-Westerners can be applied to the representation of Persians in 300. Fabian attacks these discourses for promoting an understanding of the present according to “a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream” (ibid, 17). When progress is defined as movement in the homogenous empty time of the West, resultant discourses of modernity deny the present to contemporaneous others of the Euro-moderns (Chakrabarty 2000). In these evolutionary conceptions of time “the Other is constructed as a system of coordinates (emanating of course also from a center—the Western metropolis) in which given societies of all times and places may be plotted in terms of relative distance from the present” (Fabian 2002, 26).

Natter (2002, 255) notes that non-whites often appear in Hollywood movies as not only demonized, but also “as forces of pre- or anti civilization.” 300’s politics of time reifies the incommensurable difference between the anachronistically ‘freedom-loving’ democracy of the Spartans and the anachronistically familiar yet exoticized tyrannical empire of the Persians on the basis of such Westcentrism. The same move that deprives Persians of contemporaneity pushes Spartans forward in time, as they are ahead of their times: the Spartans stand for what is yet to come. In the progressive line of history,
Persians are of the past while Spartans are of the future. They do not and cannot coexist in the present.

During an interview about 300, Frank Miller invoked notions of an uncivilized world, where the promises of the civilization—freedom, democracy and progress—were created by Greece and salvaged by the Spartans:

Well, if you picture a time when the world was ruled by mystics and savages, when the basic components of the world we understand today didn’t even exist – they didn’t understand logic, they didn’t understand democracy, and they didn’t consider any human being to be an individual or free. There were only masters and slaves. It was an endless dark age, and out of this Greece was beginning to emerge as a place where different thought was beginning to happen... What I tried to get across here is that what is being defended is much larger than the fate of one country. It could be argued that without what ended up being only 300 Spartans, we couldn’t even be having this conversation, because all our notions of free speech, of democratic freedom, would have been erased by a tyrant.10

For the same reason, it was possible for Miller in another interview to associate Persians with Muslims despite almost a millennium of chronological distance between the Battle of Thermopylae and the rise of Islam:

Well, okay, then let’s finally talk about the enemy. For some reason, nobody seems to be talking about who we’re up against, and the sixth century barbarism that they actually represent. These people saw people's heads off. They enslave women, they genitally mutilate their daughters, they do not behave by any cultural norms that are sensible to us. I’m speaking into a microphone that never could have been a product of their culture, and I’m living in a city where three thousand of my neighbors were killed by thieves of airplanes they never could have built.11

Miller here turns to Islam in order to suggest an unbroken continuity between Persians and the current Iranian regime. He does so by lumping together a wide array of ‘problems’ he associates with Islam—‘senseless’ cultural traditions such as genital circumcision, female oppression, and the violent methods of the Iraqi insurgency in Iraq—as what makes ‘them’ backward. Compare Miller’s comments to the quote below from an influential article by prominent Orientalist Bernard Lewis (1990), who coined the term ‘clash of civilizations’ before it was popularized by Samuel Huntington.

Just like Miller, Lewis pits the irrational, ‘insensible’ Islamic Other’s rage against the West’s secular present, denying Muslims contemporaneous co-existence with ‘the West’:
We are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.\footnote{12}

Notice that the West is itself reified as what-is-not-Islam-ic by both Miller and Lewis. However, Lewis and Wigen (1997) aptly point to the social, cultural and economic underpinnings of the historically shifting borders of the West and the East as geographical categories. This has especially been the case for the spatial construction of Europe, the historical link between Greek civilization (as Europe’s predecessor) and the United States (as Europe’s successor). Agnew (2002) notes that the hegemonic spatial imaginary on the boundaries of ‘Europe/an’ has been built on an understanding of European history linearly moving from ancient Greece towards modern Europe. He argues that this history is imagined to have materialized through a closed, homogenous linearity where there are no breaks, no interactions or exchanges with people deemed non-European. Such an essentialist construction of Europe suggests that European modernity has developed by relying solely on its own dynamics and has been culturally homogenous and sealed from inside (Shohat and Stam 1993). Imagining the boundaries of Europe as fixed and closed has consequences for 300’s framing of the relationship between the Greeks and Persians. The film implies that the sacred, pure space of a bounded European territory, Greece, is under siege by unwanted outsiders represented by Persians. This has relevance for the contemporary metaphor of fighting the barbarians at the doors of the ‘fortress Europe’, as unwanted asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants try to make Europe their home and as Turkey seeks membership in the European Union. The heroes of 300, then, can be seen as defending Europe’s—and hence the West’s—purity from the polluting influence of the non-Westerners signified by the Persians. Therein, relations with Persians can be only of enmity because they do not belong, or fit in the West: Persians are surely ‘out of place’ (Mitchell 2000) in Greece, as contemporary Muslims, refugees and postcolonial settlers are often seen as out of place in Europe and the United States (see Figure 17).

300’s politics of time, on the other hand, articulates relative spatial distance into modern national/racial conceptions of cultural difference. Massey (2005, 64) argues that “within the history of modernity there was also developed a particular hegemonic understanding of the nature of space itself, and of the relation between space and society...’Cultures’, ‘societies’ and ‘nations’ were all imagined as having an integral relation to bounded spaces, internally coherent and differentiated from each other by separation.” Conceptualizing places and cultures, or for that matter, civilizations as inherently corresponding to one another in turn underlies absolutist conceptions of ethnicity and racial segregationism: the assumed understanding of location-as-culture suggests that contact between human groups from different cultural or civilizational backgrounds
by movement through space will very likely, if not inevitably, result in conflict rather than cultural and/or material exchange and cooperation. The collision of culture into space has to do with a certain logic of race-thinking that is predicated on distributing racialized bodies in space according to their designated locations within a racial hierarchy. Gilroy (2005, 6) argues that race-thinking reflects a “Manichean fantasy in which bodies are only ordered and predictable units that obey the rules of a deep cultural biology.” One could indeed suggest that the cosmology of 300 is premised on such a normative geography of racism where ‘everybody knows their proper place’ (Crampton 2007). Resultant isomorphism between place, race and culture underlies the imagination of geographical difference in 300. The film’s narrative logic rests on the assumption that Persians are from another place-culture and hence are so radically different than, and due to their non-Western location, inferior to Greeks that there are no possibilities for interaction between the two parties beyond antagonism.

**Productive Ambiguities and Negotiated Spectatorship**

Up to this point I have explored the underlying discourses and civilizational politics that construct 300’s master narrative by encoding certain Orientalist, racist, and sexist messages based on civilizational exclusivism. A brief look at the decoding of the messages of 300 by different audiences at different localities points to a spatialized politics of spectatorship. This exercise reveals active ways of audience participation in the production of diverse meanings through engagement with the film’s messages. Similar to the official complaint issued by the North Korean Government to the United States following *Die Another Day* (2002), the Iranian government acknowledged the importance of filmic representation by taking a similar stance regarding 300. Iranians worldwide were outraged by the historical inaccuracy of the events narrated in the film and the representation of Persians as ‘barbaric savages.’ The scheduling of the
film at a time of growing tensions and confrontation between the United States and Iran concerning Iran’s attempts to acquire nuclear technology did not go unnoticed by the Iranian government and its citizens. Iranians’ reactions started another battle of representation, but their attempts to set the historical record straight are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that Iranians decoded the messages of 300 in line with the reading above: they were critical of the film’s celebratory representation of the Spartans, and they also had difficulty identifying with the particular image of the Persians constructed in the movie.

A brief look at the debates on the construction of meaning through media can help us to distinguish between moments of production and consumption of 300’s messages. Instead of a reductionist communication circuit model that assumes a linear interaction among senders-messages-receivers, Hall (1993) suggests an approach to the complex process of communication as a circular model of meaning production. He argues that media messages do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in institutional power relations. Curran (1996, 263), on the other hand, draws attention to “the inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps and even internal oppositions within [media] texts” that enable audiences to become active participants in the processes of meaning production. Fiske (1994) argues, in the case of television audiences, that dominant meanings posed by TV texts are contested by disruptive readings of diverse audiences. That is, the hegemonic meaning of a media text is never total, but has to be negotiated. Criticizing Fiske’s model for attributing too much autonomy to the consumers of media texts, however, Morley notes that audiences are not completely autonomous in their relationship to media products as media messages are situated in “signifying mechanisms which promote certain meanings, even one privileged meaning, and suppress others” (1996, 282). The situated identities and geographical contexts of 300’s spectators are significant in the decoding of its messages. For this reason, a brief discussion of the geographically specific modes of media consumption regarding 300 is in order. The focus will be on the ways in which audiences in two different locations, the United States and Turkey, interpreted the film’s messages.

There are several reasons why Turkey provides a good point of comparison for the negotiated spectatorship of 300 outside the United States. First, the movie was extremely successful at the Turkish box office. In its opening weekend 300 was at the top of the box office and earned 1.5 million USD. It stayed at box office charts until the first weekend of June and earned an impressive sum of 4.8 million USD in total. It also was received well by audiences. For instance, at a popular Turkish film website the film received 8 stars out of 10 by 335 viewers. Second, the ambivalence of Turkey’s position regarding whether it is of the East or the West is productive in terms of looking at with whom Turkish audiences chose to identify. The Ottoman Empire (predecessor of the contemporary Republic of Turkey) has played an important role in the constitution of the unified will for a common European identity. The Ottomans not only provided European identity
with its significant other, but the peoples of ‘Turkey’ have been essential partners in the shaping of Europe, especially after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in the fifteenth century, and later, of Eastern Europe (Faroqhi 2004). The debates on whether Turks belong to the East or West have informed the Ottomans’, and later on the Turkish Republic’s, modernization efforts (Zurcher 1998). Currently, Turkey is a candidate for European Union membership and is going through a controversial process of accession negotiations that is by no means uncontested both in Turkey and the member countries (Savage 2004, Baban and Keyman 2008). Third, Iran is Turkey’s neighbor with a long history of mutual influences. However, currently the relationships between these two countries are confounded by the discrepancies and conflicts between Turkey’s authoritarian secularism and Iran’s Islamic regime.

When we look at 300’s reception in the United States, many readings of the film lean towards an understanding of Spartan soldiers as akin to American troops participating in the efforts of exporting democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan. As such, audiences find parallels between the Spartan soldiers and American troops, especially the Marine Corps. One can read the hawkish attitude of unilateral American foreign policy under the Bush administration in the figure of Leonidas. Gorgo’s ‘support our troops’ rhetoric, on the other hand, when she addresses the Spartan Council, is perceived to be the similar to the debates within the American Senate. Comments taken from a forum on the blog of the conservative talk show host Hugh Hewitt strongly support this stance:

The left and our post-moderns have spent decades [sic] destroying the warrior ethos, destroying American Exceptionalism. This movie seeks to unravel their many gains, it has to be snarked and sneered into oblivion… There’s no UN, there’s no ridiculous Condi [Condoleezza Rice] making trips here and there to various dirtballs, none of that works. Only lead works.19

I treated my Marines to see it as well. This film was a motivator, I have to say… you needn’t have read Greek History to recognize the theme of men being willing to die to defend something worth defending against hordes who seek only to destroy. It is funny how 19 year old Marines from small town Illinois and East Los Angeles can instantly grasp the significance of this story, but that message completely escapes our learned movie critics.20

The fact the politicians in that film sound almost like any Democratic presidential nominee is outstanding because i hope everyone else draws the proper conclusions.21

These comments clearly associate the Spartans’ actions with the civilizing mission of the United States while drawing parallels between the actions of Persians and al-Qaeda. Opposing the war at home is to act in the same manner as Theron. Privileging diplomacy over war or questioning the government’s decisions is tantamount to betraying one’s country.
Another viewer opposes American interventionism from a conservative perspective, yet appreciates the patriotic sacrifice of the Spartans in the movie. The theme of heroism in the face of grave danger is invoked by this viewer in an Entertainment Weekly forum. The viewer associates the predicament of Spartan soldiers with American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan:

Please say “tree-hugging” liberals are unable to like this movie. I never supported the war in Iraq but I support the man [sic] and women who joined the armed forces for what they believed in. I loved this movie. I think the Spartans displayed a heroism that is really absent [sic] many people today. They died for a cause, for what they believed in, and that is one of the most important things a person can do.23

Different readings, too, occur within the United States. However, notice that even the subversive reading of a viewer at the Rotten Tomatoes movie website forum below ends up siding with the Spartans, despite the fact that United States is criticized as a corrupt, imperialistic force much like Persia in the movie:

It could easily be completely the opposite...A small band of warriors, the Spartans (read that as Iraqi insurgents) battle by themselves to stop an invasion of a huge, well formed, well supplied army of Persians (Read that as the United States). The Persians (Americans) are rolling through the area (Read that as Afghanistan and Iraq) to depose of the leaders of the area (Read that as the Taliban and Hussein). The Spartans (Read that as Islamics) have a regimented, strict, structured life. The Persians (Read that as the Americans) are hedonistic, seeking only to conquer for gain.23

Now let us look at the negotiation of textual closures of 300’s content thanks to the productive gaps and openings during the decoding of meanings of the film by Turkish audiences. ‘Sinemalar.com’ is a popular Turkish movie website. I read through approximately 120 comments left on the discussion forum for 300 during March 2008, following the film’s opening in Turkey. The majority of these comments were positive. Even a cursory look at the comments illustrated24 that the majority of the spectators did not associate themselves with the Oriental Other of the movie, although some criticized the representation of Persians as ‘primitive monsters’.25 The majority of the comments showed a clear appreciation for the Spartans. For instance, one viewer wrote

In a single word this was a wonderful movie…you watch it without blinking. We should also act like those 300 soldiers and act bravely without being intimidated or manipulated by anyone. Just like our ancestors in Gallipoli. This [was] really the kind of movie that incited nice feelings in me.26

Similar to the American viewers, this Turkish viewer draws from local events and popular historical memory when decoding the movie’s messages. S/he connects the
struggle of the Spartans to the resistance of the Ottoman Empire against the Allied Forces in Gallipoli during World War I. One of the major epic battles of Turkish national-ized history, during the Battle of Gallipoli the Ottoman army fought and won against technologically and numerically superior enemies.

As the two comments below show, general themes of freedom and heroic sacrifice also resonated strongly with the Turkish viewers:

As a freedom lover I can say this is the best freedom-loving movie I have ever seen. Everybody should definitely see this movie, I recommend it. Long live 'freedom' [written in English]!¹⁷

This was one of the best historical movies in the last couple of years. I would also prefer to fight and die free.²⁸

Hence, explanation for the success of the movie has to do with the fact that audiences morally choose not to side with the invading army of a tyrant, notwithstanding the debates about whether the depiction of Persians in the movie was historically accurate or not. Despite the ambiguities regarding Greek militarism and eugenics, the morally superior position of Greeks over Persians was hard to contest. Consequently, the Turkish viewers approached the struggle between two camps as yet another episode of the eternal fight between the oppressor and the oppressed. The above comments suggest that it is possible for ‘Oriental-ized Others’ to identify with the Spartans, not necessarily because Spartans defend supposedly exclusive values of the Western civilization, but because they are outnumbered ‘heroes’ giving up their lives to defend the freedom of their homeland.

Another conclusion one can draw from 300’s Turkish box office success and the above audience comments is the following: the ideas of democracy and freedom have a strong resonance in the popular imagination worldwide and they strongly influence popular discourses and practices. People all over the world make conspicuous use of discourses based on the signifiers of freedom, democracy and justice in their everyday struggles. For this reason the exclusive Western civilisationism the film advocates can be displaced when other ‘freedom-loving’ people elsewhere identify with the Spartans. However, this does not mean that the boundaries that separate Spartans and Persians get blurred; they are rather displaced to local contexts and struggles.

Conclusion
Films provide “language and imagery as well as reference points and ways of en-framing popular understandings of the radically changing geopolitical world” (Dodds 2006, 119). The geopolitical discourses through which 300 operates is based on the residual reworking of the Cold War frames of reference: Western freedom and democracy vs. Eastern oppression and tyranny. Yet the coordinates of the opposition has shifted from an opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union, to the West vs. the
Rest. By establishing an association between the United States and Sparta, 300 conveys the following message: for millennia, we (Westerners) have been defending the values of civilization from barbarians (non-Westerners). This rhetoric posits that the fragility of the ‘hope’ that democracy and freedom hold necessitates a constant fight against ‘evil forces’. This conviction in turn engenders a historical vision of civilizational conflict in which the non-West stands for despotism, slavery and tyranny while the West appears to be the bastion of welfare, democracy and freedom.

Boggs and Pollard (2007, 226) note that currently there is an ideological consensus around an American “military entertainment complex” which promotes the themes of “patriotism, a virtuous US military, glorification of battlefield exploits [and] masculine heroism” through war films. This parallels a new wave of Hollywood combat movies that revolve around themes of “individualism, unilateralism, patriotism and duty” since the late 1990s (Crampton and Power 2005b, 254). What Gregory (2004) aptly calls ‘the colonial present’ that informs post-September 11 global geopolitics calls for new studies on the theme of empire and accompanying “moral discourses of civilization and the figure of the professional soldier” (Dalby 2008, 440). For, in the shifting conjuncture of reenergized imperialism abroad and militarism at home, warriors are given the task of “physically securing the West, and simultaneously securing its identity as the repository of virtue against barbaric threats to civilization” (ibid). 300 is situated in a context of War on Terror and in discourses of imperial American Exceptionalism, in which the United States is ‘the shining beacon of democracy and freedom’ in the world, and for this reason is attacked by ‘evil forces’. The film’s performative reproduction of American Exceptionalism has a twist, however. 300 locates the genealogy of American freedom in Sparta, the military democracy, instead of in Athens, the democratic empire. Paradoxically, operations of empire require the self-imagination as a virtuous defender of freedom, equality and goodness. The powerful, omnipresent enemies, meanwhile, are imagined to be oppositional civilizational, or as in the case of the Persians of 300, almost anti-Civilizational adversaries that embody pure evil.

Torres (2003) argues that providing multiple identificatory inroads into characters in TV shows and films is crucial to achieving popular success. In 300, however, identification with Persians has been rendered almost impossible. Apart from the infra-humanized representation of the Persians, we are not given any explanation for the motivation of the Persians to attack Greece. This is in line with, as Said remarks, certain questions that are generally neglected in media representations of ‘Orientals’: “Who are these people, what are their actual desires, where did they come from, why do they behave as they do” (1997, 39)? In 300 Persians do not demonstrate many individual differences as they are projected “not as distinct, complex subjects but simply as a nameless, primitive drive compelled to destroy civilization” (Konzett 2004, 330).

As the above analysis has shown, 300 allows scarce routes for audiences to identify with the Persians. Apart from Iranians and the American Persians who tried to set the
historical record straight, few viewers vocally identified with Persians as they appeared in the film. However, an active decoding of 300 by diverse audiences resulted in multiple inroads into identification with the Spartans and their struggle. I agree with Shohat and Stam that a straightforward rejection of Hollywood as inherently regressive is analytically unproductive. Researchers should instead pay attention to the struggles taking place within Hollywood, while acknowledging Hollywood’s hegemonic configuration as a “massively industrial, ideologically reactionary, and stylistically conservative form of ‘dominant’ cinema” (1993, 7). Moreover, as Prince (1992) notes, Hollywood films contain internal tensions and contradictions not only because of their narrative structure, but because as commercial products they aim to appeal to different segments of a given society.

This paper points to the possibilities for subversive readings of media texts by audiences beyond the attempts at textual closure by filmmakers. In 300, despite the fact that the producers painted the differences between the two parties as black and white and attempted a textual closure based on the Orientalist and racist imaginaries of the temporospatial ordering of the world, supposedly ‘Oriental’ Turkish viewers destabilized the exclusive claims of the Westcentric producers to heroism, freedom and democracy. The Turkish audiences who themselves are relatively marginalized in the contemporary conjuncture identified with the Spartans as underdogs who put up a good fight against their oppressors in the face of uneven odds. As a result the triumphalist Westcentric vision was multiplied and Thermopylae was deterritorialized, just to be reterritorialized through the situated spectatorship practices of the Turkish audiences, their geography and history. As one film critic put it, we still have a “cinematic interpretation for solace, the story is told from the perspective of Dilios who has lost one eye in the battle of Thermopylae, hence it’s bound to be a unilateral vision of the world.” But there are many other eyes that see things from an-other place.

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Endnotes

1 http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=meetthespartans.htm

2 http://www.observer.com/20070326/20070326Andrew_Sarris_culture_sarrismovies.asp

3 As seen through the corruption of Greek religious figures and the persona of God Emperor Xerxes, the heroes of Miller are radically secular. Parallel to the Enlightenment's propensity towards equating modernity and progress with secularism, Persians are implied to be stuck in the backwardness of religion, as they are blessed with the supposed secularism of the Greek hero Leonidas. This should not surprise us, given Miller's representation of the church in Sin City, another one of his popular graphic novels adapted to cinema, where one of Miller's arch-villains is a cardinal.

4 The filmmakers were aware of the similarities between the Spartans and the Marines. In the commentary section of the 300 DVD, Snyder mentions that the script writer Johnstad came up with the war cry of the Spartans “ha-woo” as a “homage to Marine Corps.”

5 Miller's upcoming graphic novel is indeed titled 'Batman: Holy War!', in which Batman fights Al Qaeda in Gotham City (Sardar 2008).

6 Konzett (2004, 327) remarks that Orientalism is a strong factor “underlying cultural semiotics of national imaginings represented in Hollywood combat films.”

7 A South Park spoof of the film revolves around Lesbians' defense of their bar from Persian night club owners. Meet the Spartans hint conspicuously at the homosexuality of Spartans.

8 Xerxes often acts like a spoiled child, getting into fits of hysteria when rejected.

9 http://movies.about.com/od/300/a/300zs030307.htm, retrieved on 05.05.2008.


12 While referring to the audience, I am aware of the differences between viewers in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and class. Limitations on having access to internet further circumscribe the boundaries of such audiences in terms of class differences.


14 All the translations from Turkish are mine.

15 While referring to the audience, I am aware of the differences between viewers in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and class. Limitations on having access to internet further circumscribe the boundaries of such audiences in terms of class differences.
References


Es • Frank Miller’s 300