

Complicit vs. Interrogative Spectatorship: Ideology and Closure in Snyder's *300* and HBO's *Watchmen*

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We examine *300* (2007) and HBO's *Watchmen* (2019) in order to discuss the contrasting strategies through which *300* perpetuates and *Watchmen* challenges Western ideologies. Both are contemporary rewritings of a historical reality and originated as comic books, the rhetorical effectiveness of which relies on "the audience [being] a willing and conscious collaborator" in narrative closure (McCloud 65). Closure, in this context, refers to the way in which audiences both consciously and unconsciously fill the "gutters" between comic panels (66); gaps that "fracture both time and space," concealing the work's intended effect within "a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments that let [readers] connect and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (65-7). Cuts between scenes in a film or within an episode of a television show operate in a manner similar to those empty spaces between the panels of a comic book; film and television require audiences to make quick interpretive leaps about what happens "off screen." In other words, the cognitive process of closure (and, consequently, the collaborative nature of the media-audience relationship) necessarily takes place in the minds of both readers of comics and watchers of movies.

In *300*, successful narrative closure depends on the viewer's rejection of the Eastern Other in favor of their own Western hegemonic norms; on the other hand, *Watchmen*'s sixth episode, "This Extraordinary Being," upends these very norms with the intended effect of leading the viewer to interrogate their hegemonic indoctrination. Specifically, the series engages viewers in an exploration of black agency against a backdrop of the historically white superhero canon. While *300*'s closure is both encouraged and *enabled by* admiration for the Spartan's military prowess, grave appreciation for the nationalistic passions behind warfare, and

distaste for a one-dimensional, non-Western antagonist, we argue that *Watchmen's* intended effect involves an alternative closure: one that undermines and inverts dominant ideologies; namely, the privileged agency of 'whiteness' in superhero space.

300's ethos is reinforced by the power of a dominant discourse to make the viewer complicit with the film's ruling ideology of racial and moral supremacy—the viewer is able to accept the discursive conditions of the film because it validates their past experiences by reinforcing existing ideologies. Conversely, *Watchmen's* origin story for Hooded Justice challenges both the audience's beliefs about American race relations in 1930s America (Tulsa and NY) and the hegemonic whiteness embedded in Western superhero culture. Rather than fostering complicity, *Watchmen* asks its viewers to interrogate the dominant ideologies that guide their consumption. This paper takes for general truth the assumption that the average viewer is not merely historically-literate but is rather indoctrinated—familiar with contemporary Western and American discourse at the cultural level. Once immersed in the viewing process, this orientation-indoctrination leads the average audience member to either empathetically align or consider themselves at odds with the texts' focalized groups at the narrative level.

Although adaptation studies avoid fidelity discourses, remixing materials establishes an ideological challenge on the cultural, canonical level; one in confrontation with the genre's primary audience and their established ideology. This focalization in Snyder's *300* produces a narrative—part historical, part fantasy (the degree to which *300* belongs to either category is debatable)—informed by and infused with ideals of masculinity, heroism, and democracy that were presumed to have been promoted by Grecian thought and perfected by Spartan action. *300* provides an aesthetic space that allows the dominant discourse surrounding the event to exist and prevail. *Watchmen's* "This Extraordinary Being," however, exemplifies the opportunity embedded within adaptation as a mode: to challenge both real and fictional manifestations of ideology. Exploring Hooded Justice's secret identity as a homosexual Black

man orphaned by the 1921 Tulsa race riots can be understood as a challenge to the heteronormative whiteness of the Superhero space. On the whole, HBO's *Watchmen* series picks up Alan Moore's initial spirit of "developing its heroes precisely in order to deconstruct the very idea of the hero" (Thomson), and advances its vision of contemporary sociological, ideological structures in order to scrutinize their heteronormative whiteness.

In both *300* and *Watchmen*, closure relies on the audience's tacit understanding of hegemonic ideologies, which makes these texts and their (opposing) intended effects ideal for comparative analysis. *300* represents a more typical, 'complicit' type of closure that validates the ideological framework of the intended audience; this permits and encourages the audience to remain in that same ideological realm with which they engaged the text initially. In *Watchmen*, on the other hand, the viewer's ideological framework is undermined in an effort to interrogate its very nature—both within the text and within the imagination of the viewer who creates closure. In this way, viewers are led to consider how their ideological perception leads them to favor certain qualities over others. "Our perception of 'reality,'" according to McCloud, "is an act of *faith*, based on mere *fragments*" (62). Closure, through the viewer's creative acts of imagination, imbues these fragments with meaning that is inexorably invaded and shaped by the dominant ideologies from which the text and viewer arise.

Works Cited

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