MILLER'S TALE:
Comics as Electracy

by Jason Helms

My Story

I remember when I first ran across Frank Miller's *300*. It was my junior year of high school (1998) and I was an avid comic collector. Miller's work had been fairly influential for me during those formative years. I met Batman for the first time in *Dark Knight Returns*—not the batman of my childhood, accompanied by *biffs* and *pows*, but a Batman that could once again inspire fear and challenge the moral certitude that so often characterizes superhero comics. Then I began hoarding copies of *Sin City* (under my bed in case my mother found them and ripped up my priceless pornography). *Sin City* challenged something more central to life than morality and ethics: narrative. Art suddenly meant something new in the wake of Miller's hard-boiled yarns. Like Prometheus, my aesthetics became unbound and ready to recreate anew—to realize that there are arts far beyond fire that humanity needs.

Then there was *300*. I had been too young to receive *Dark Knight* at its release, and I likewise had to get *Sin City* in collected volumes called "trade paperbacks" (worthless as fetishistic collectibles and therefore freed to be a kind of pure art in my adolescent mind). I stared at the "new comics" rack at my local den of iniquity, seeing for the first time an actual Frank Miller comic in all its overdetermined glory. As my eyes caressed the simplicity of the title, I first consciously recognized what I would later come to call the gaze: it stared back. There was no doubt that this book had chosen me long before it had ever graced the shelves. I rushed home with it and flew through it in fifteen minutes. Then, I immediately started over and read it again. This time it took me over an hour. All in all, I learned more about close readings from Frank Miller than from any of the new critics. I learned that this book was not *just* telling a story. The narrative could in no way be separated from the text. Any attempt at paraphrase would move beyond heresy into outright lunacy. Instead, and unlike anything I had ever read, the text and images told their own stories, weaving together into a pedagogic tapestry.

I stopped reading comics shortly after that. I left for college and "grew up", only returning to my roots sporadically and with much guilt. I learned things about art and literature and rhetoric. Gradually I began to read more than just books. I read films and commercials, cereal boxes and bottlecaps. Everything seemed worthy of critique and capable of upsetting the precarious status quo of modernist art. This spring, watch-

ing Zack Snyder's film adaptation of Miller's novel, my misspent youth rushed back at me. Comics once again demanded my attention—loudly and emphatically. I picked up The Sandman and The Watchmen but most importantly I called my mother and had her search through boxes in the closet for my copies of 300. She sent them out and I realized these books hold more than I had previously realized, perhaps keys to understanding the rhetorical theories I've been wrestling with. This paper is an attempt to put some of that wrestling into words.

The first section deals almost exclusively with theory: ideas of orality and our culture's recent return to it via electracy. The second section deals with Miller's original comic. The third section investigates notions of orality in conjunction with Snyder's film. Finally, I tie these disparate ends together into a question: Are comics a form of secondary orality that have previously gone unmentioned in theories of electracy? Hopefully this paper will provide some of the groundwork for an immanently necessary integration of comics into electracy.

Before we were cool

In recent years, various scholars have begun to apply Marshall McLuhan's media theory to new media (digital art, videogames, even movies) with varying results. One of the more interesting links in this chain goes from McLuhan to the work of Walter Ong and Eric Havelock, becoming secondary orality—a link between ancient fireside storytellers and our contemporary bards. Greg Ulmer and others have more recently redescribed this orality as electracy: a post-critical approach to new media that employs conductive logic rather than more accepted analysis. A tracing of this history may provide a better context for the discussion that follows and the ramifications of placing a new medium alongside the other new media. But the road of a thousand miles begins with one step, and so we must first step backwards.

In the beginning was the word. And the word was oral: spoken, living, dynamic and inherently rhetorical. The earliest rhetoricians, the sophists, were working in an oral context and saw that rhetoric depends most heavily upon appropriateness, *to prepon*, and timeliness, *kairos* (Schiappa). We can grasp appropriateness, but *kairos* signifies a timeliness wholly foreign from most modern notions of time. While chronos denoted a quantity of time, *kronos* employed a quality of time. To be in

kairos is to be in a dynamic, interactive relationship with one's surroundings, including language.

But soon after this golden age of rhetoric, the new invention of writing changed everything. Plato, standing at the cusp of this technological revolution wrote in his *Phaedrus* of the loss of orality:

> This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, for they will not practise their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented not an elixir of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise. (275a-b)

While many disagree as to how literally we should take a warning of this kind from someone who is known mostly through his writings, it nonetheless exemplifies both the luddite fears of his time and the real losses inherent in writing. With writing, we lost much more than memory (for memory certainly became externalized to a certain degree); we lost touch with the dynamic nature of language, trading story for history, and fiction for fact.

Writing has undergone two fundamental changes since that time. The first, print does not concern us here, but the second, the digital revolution, brought with it a return to this dynamism of language. Marshall McLuhan, writing at the leading edge of this moment, began connecting the electronic media around him with oral cultures. One of the major distinctions for him was between hot and cold media. The primary distinction between the two becomes the level of participation the medium demands:

> Speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. (*Understanding Media*, 39)

Hot media include film and print media. Cool media include television, phone, and comic books. That McLuhan stresses comics as a cool medium has gone unnoticed for the most part (with Scott McCloud being the notable exception—more on whom later).

The ramifications of these media quickly become sociological: "our own time is crowded with examples of the principle that the hot form excludes, and the cool one includes" (40). Because of this inclusionary aspect, cool media become largely the realm of pop-culture and were for a long time excluded from academia primarily for their very inclusivity.

As culture became electroncized, McLuhan began to look to the past for clues as to what would come, peered back to the future: "Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion by primordial intuition, by terror" (*The Medium is the Massage* 48). With the advent of writing, we began to *see* rather than *hear*: "We employ visual and spatial metaphors for a great many everyday expressions" (117). McLuhan sees that electricity itself begins to re-invoke the oral state of human beings: "Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. 'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a *global* village . . . a simultaneous happening" (63, ellipsis in original). While the internet was still in its infancy, McLuhan predicted a return to orality: "Where a visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships" (111). These simultaneous relationships took on new relevance with electronic writing.

Contemporaneously with McLuhan and then proceeding onward into the eighties, Walter Ong outlined a theory of "secondary orality" as and interpretation of modern media. Ong began by outlining the differences between literate and non-literate cultures:

> To personalities shaped by literacy, oral folk often appear curiously unprogrammed, not set off against their physical environment, given simply to soaking up existence, unresponsive to abstract demands such as a "job" that entails commitment to routines organized in accordance with abstract clock time (as against human, or lived, "felt," duration). (*Interfaces of the Word* 18)

Hitting on the kairotic nature of television, Ong watches these differences begin to unravel in the latter half of the twentieth century:

> Not all television presentations are simultaneous with reality, but, in a way, all television presentations seem to be; the fact that the instrument is capable of such presentations defines its impact. (316)

Perhaps his most damning statements against linear literacy concerned the dynamic attributes of orality:

> . . . the spoken word is an action, an ongoing part of ongoing existence.
>
> Oral utterance thus encourages a sense of continuity with life, a sense of participation, because it is itself participatory. Writing and print, despite their intrinsic value, have obscured the nature of the word and of thought itself, for they have sequestered the essentially participatory word—fruitfully enough, beyond a doubt—from its natural habitat, sound and assimilated it to a mark on a surface, where a real word cannot exist at all. (21)

I shall return to the issue of "a mark on a surface" as it relates to comics in the final section of this paper, but first let's look more closely at Ong's statement. He thinks linear writing as a betrayal of the word, as obscuring thought itself. How, then, may we think without the line?

In the eighties and nineties, as the internet and hypertext writing entered the scene, scholars like Richard Lanham, Robert Coover, and Stuart Malthroup, to name a few, began to look to electronic writing as a way to escape the "tyranny of the line" (Coover's phrase) that print had imposed. Lanham saw hypertext's philosophical implications: "For the changes brought by electronic text, including the very redefinition of what a 'text' is, touch upon practically every central question on the current humanist agenda" (x). Again these central questions present a step back to the future, through the sophists:

> The quarrel between the philosophers and the rhetoricians constitutes *the* quarrel in Western culture. McLuhan's argument for electronic media reintroduced the rhetorician's conception of language,

and of human self and society, after the three hundred years dominated by the philosophers, with their strongly opposed conceptions of language and social reality. The fuss about McLuhan was, behind its glitzy façade, about something very deep, something bound to set off landmines at every step. (202)

What exactly was so shocking about McLuhan? Lanham continues, "As McLuhan well knew, rhetoric was an *oral* phenomenon, returning to an increasingly oral world" (202-3). Electronic media brought about a return to orality through timeliness, appropriateness, and participation, but they also brought with them a non-linearity that had gone unrecognized for centuries.

Simultaneous with these observations, Greg Ulmer introduced a new concept to the discussion of secondary orality: electracy. Electracy can be viewed as a touchstone of Ulmer's theories, or rather as a seed crystal from which all theories begin to spread (thought, certainly not a beginning—these theories are rhizomatic and therefore all middle!). Electracy becomes a literacy for the digital age:

> What literacy is to the analytical mind, electracy is to the affective body: a prosthesis that enhances and augments a natural or organic human potential. Alphabetic writing is an artificial memory that supports long complex chains of reasoning impossible to sustain within the organic mind. Digital imaging similarly supports extensive complexes of mood atmospheres beyond organic capacity. Electrate logic proposes to design these atmospheres into affective group intelligence. Literacy and electracy in collaboration produce a civilizational left-brain right-brain integration. If literacy focused on universally valid methodologies of knowledge (sciences), electracy focuses on the individual state of mind within which knowing takes place (arts). ("Electracy and Pedagogy")

Connected/ing with this, Ulmer invokes a *con*ductive logic that supplants both in- and de-ductive logics. This conduction allows for connections across disparate objects, pulled together to light a (post)critical work. One such use of electracy and conductive logic is the mystory. Ulmer writes mystories by combining the personal (my), the popular (story), and the professional (history/mystery). These works are free flowing and rhizomatic not only allowing for participation, but demanding it. Reading them is like trying to predict the punchlines to bad jokes: a

task far more entertaining than the original joke itself. In fact, puncepts (concepts based upon superficial homonymic links between words) form a large segment of many of Ulmer's mystories. This paper may itself be looked at as a mystory, the introduction providing the personal, the form being largely professional, and the subject matter encompassing the popular scope. However, I did not intend to write a mystory and feel that this work fails to become one for one major reason: its formulaic nature. Each section is clearly divided. While mystories should be fragmentary, they should not be organized in such static forms.

As far as I know, comic books have been left out of Ulmer's electracy. While they wouldn't at face value seem to fit, McLuhan's inclusion of them in the cool media realm that includes TV (which Ulmer utilizes through video) and the internet begs us to give them a closer look.

Get your mind into the gutters

Scott McCloud, in his influential *Understaning Comics*, invokes McLuhan at the end of his second chapter (though the title of the work could certainly be viewed as a reference to McLuhan):

> As it happens, only two popular media were identified by McLuhan as "cool" media—that is media which command audience involvement through iconic forms. One of them, television, has reached into the lives of every human being on earth—and for better or worse altered the course of human affairs from here 'til doomsday. The fate of the other one, comics—is anyone's guess. (59)

I have already done McCloud a disservice by translating his comic format into mere words. The effects of those dashes above have a completely different effect when they are interrupted by the gutters that separate panels. The dashes come to supply the very participatory act which exemplifies comics.

Unlike film, where very little information has to be filled in between frames—and indeed the unconscious supplies this continuity imperceptibly or else the illusion would be ruined—comic frames are separated by infinite possibilities of completion. Figure 1 shows McCloud's example of an axe-wielding maniac raising his weapon followed immediately in the next panel by a scream. The mind has to, very consciously, fill in these

Figure 1: McCloud 66 Used with permission.

spaces, these gutters of meaning. These spaces represent the compossibilities of language. Rather than representing nothing, they comprise a nothing out of which all representation may spring. Between these two panels the victim dies a thousand deaths, all supplied by the increasingly complicit reader. Gutters not only implicate the reader in the text, but they also offer her a power few other mediums are willing to give: "If comic strips 'slow down' the flurry of impressions that constitute the experience of modernity, then their attractiveness for the disoriented consumer would lie in the restitution of his/her command over an elapsed temporal-

ity" (Alemán para. 7). Readers participate as co-creators between the panels. Gutters then epitomize the comic book's participatory nature.

However, there is one other factor in play that determines participation in comic books. For the most part, comic lean away from realism towards more abstract shapes and iconic representations (McCloud, Ch. 2). These minimalist creations demand a reader willing to supply her own nuances to a text. Yet rather than a loss of meaning, something is gained—involvement. McCloud calls this "amplification through simplification" (30). The less information the artist supplies, the more the reader supplies, and therefore the more participatory the medium. This may clarify the issues some readers had with McLuhan's definitions of hot and cold media. Many wonder why high-definition products (hot media) would demand *less* participation, but when viewed through the lens of comics it all starts to coalesce. Simplistic cartoons and company logos come to take on increased emotional weight due to our constant involvement in mentally completing them.

Reading comics for McLuhan, mirrors Barthes' writerly texts: "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). Thus each reading becomes a new writing. It is perhaps relevant to note here the danger of trying to speak definitively about any medium. While Barthes is speaking specifically of print (which McLuhan described as hot), he is imbuing it with cool values—participation, non-linearity. But we must remember, that he is differentiating between two *types* of texts: the readerly and the writerly. We must then ask, Are there cool types of hot media and vice-versa? I think so. Trying to talk about media involves unhealthy generalizations. But let us not throw the baby out with the diaper. Media do have certain characteristics, and we may often learn more about the rules through their exceptions. First then, the rules.

As we have already seen, McLuhan classed comics as cool media because of both their interactive nature: "The comic book and TV as cool media involve the user, as maker and participant, a great deal" (219), and their simplistic charm: "Comics, . . . being low in definition, are a highly participational form of expression" (226). We must also remember that these are two sides to the same coin; low-definition demands par-

ticipation. He foresaw (and probably inspired) McCloud's extrapolation of gutters and closure in comic art:

> It is relevant to consider that the old prints and woodcuts, like the modern comic strip and comic book, provide very little data about and particular moment in time, or aspect in space, of an object. The viewer, or reader, is compelled to participate in completing and interpreting the few hints provided by the bounding lines. (218)

These bounding lines are where the story actually takes place more often than not—especially when we are given an artist who views the creation of text and images as separate but complementary procedures rather than as mirror representations of the same object.

Frank Miller is such an artist. Most of his best work has featured him as both artist and writer, a very tenuous position in the comics world. Comics in particular depend, like film, upon collaboration rather than individual vision. One might think that Miller, with his artistic renown in both spheres, would want to distinguish himself by that individuality as much as possible. However, in *300* he chose to employ Lynn Varley as colorist (really as painter, colorist sounds so blasé). Miller did not view her as mere adornment to his work, but as an integral part of creating a unique whole: "It's a much more integrated way to approach it, because what happens is with Lynn working directly on my black line, what we produce ultimately is an original piece rather than two originals that are put together artificially" (Interview with Ervin-Gore). Varley's work not only complements Miller's but actually creates something completely new. To appreciate this difference, let's take two examples of this same tale: one done solely by Miller, one done collaboratively.

Figure 2: Miller, 1996, 133
Reprint denied, etc.

Figure 3: Miller, 1998, 2.2-3.

In Miller's 1995 *Sin City* yarn, *The Big Fat Kill*, the Spartans make an interesting noire appearance (Figure 2). Placed in the middle of his hard-boiled crime thriller, Leonidas becomes a grim fatalist pressing on toward certain death. The black and white format presents a much colder Leonidas than we find in *300* (Figure 3). It is not just the words which are more meditative. The scene itself, with its subtle lighting effects, the play of red and gold, the stark realism transfixed against the impressionistic background, creates a softer, more graceful object. Whereas the characters of *Sin City* have no time for shades of grey, the Spartans of *300* are capable of reflection upon a more nuanced moment in history. Yes, for them it was black-and-white, but for us the various shades take on more significance as we view our destiny emblazoned in those shields. How might the world be different if they'd lost? What significance does this tale have for twentieth century Americans, the supposed inheritors of these warriors' ideals? And perhaps most importantly of all, when retold, which side are we meant to identify with? If *300* has a moral, it is certainly a sticky one.

As mentioned in the introduction, my first experience with *300* was one of inability. I sped through it, reading the words and glancing at the pictures briefly to gain plot information. My second reading taught me that images in comics evoke as much if not more than the words they accompany. Any reading of *300* must also be a rewriting.

Comic critics have long recognized the need for an integration of image and text. In the special Graphic Novel themes issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven write, "In comics, the images are not illustrative of the text, but comprise a separate narrative thread that moves forward in time in a different way than the prose text" (769). Not only is comic art not derivative of words, but it is not imitative of nature: "graphic narratives usefully challenge the transparency of realism in integrating prose and drawing, rendering the question of verisimilitude productively unstable" (770).

The relationship between Miller's text and the collaborative images is often one of mirroring. In an inspired pun, Kurt Johnstad (the film's co-writer) remarks, "Frank's work is very Spartanesque in its aesthetic and visually the book is stunning and strong" (Video Diary 7). Though I would merely call it "Spartan," Miller certainly understands the process

of amplification through simplification. While traditional comics follow an equality of division in panels per page (nine, for example, in three rows and three columns), Miller uses *300* to break completely out of this mold. Many, perhaps most, of his pages contain no panels whatsoever and those that do offer irregular sizing and placement. Yet, rather than this serving to fragment the text (as he does very purposefully in the media-focused *Dark Knight*), it makes it more fluid. They eye is drawn first in a direct line across the page from upper left to lower right, encountering the text bobbing along somewhere in between, and then back in small circles and sweeping arcs across the page, sucking up ambiance and beauty everywhere. The first eight pages contain no panels whatsoever, but are two page spreads (Figure 4). Yet Miller designed all these various reading methods to result in a singular response: cool.

The pages serve as unique panels, but rather than offering the typical action-to-action relationship of the average superhero comic, the relationship between panels is scene-to-scene, making it feel much more like montage than comic. Then, when we are finally given panels, almost all of them have an action-to-action or aspect-to-aspect relationship (Figure 5). The perspective spins from character to character and the entire scene feels almost filmic. We are introduced to a tale that will be at once violent (Miller is hear to say in the
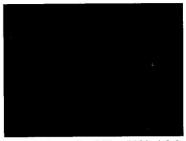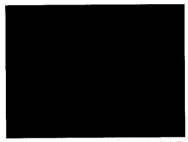

Figure 4 a: Miller, 1998, 1.2-3.
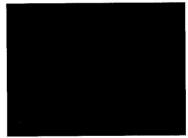

Figure 4 b: Miller, 1998, 1.4-5.

Figure 4 c: Miller, 1998, 1.6-7.

Figure 4 d: Miller, 1998, 1.8-9.

video diary, "There's a long worthy history of stylized violence, and there was no way to tell the story of 300 without it being amazingly brutal.") and soft. There is a beauty in this Spartan tale, but it's the tragic beauty of a diamond: multifaceted, hard, sharp, cold, filled with love and rooted in violence.

Figure 5: Miller, 1998, 1.10-11.

One of the narrative devices Miller uses is that of framing. The narrative is framed both internally and externally by a bard character, Dilios, who recounts the glory of past Greeks to the Spartans as they go to war and eventually recounts the glory of the Spartans to the rest of Greece to spur them on at the Battle of Plataea. Miller at least implies that Dilios may be the voice behind all the narration given throughout the tale. Orality takes on added significance in this tale due to its extraordinary nature.

The Tale is taken from Herodotus, who, to borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, told the truth, mostly. As Tim Blackmore's extensive research with regard to Frank Miller speaks with a grace I could not hope to muster, allow me to quote him at length:

> While Herodotus wasn't at the battle of Thermopylae, he recorded oral and written accounts of it. We have also learned that in his *Histories*, Herodotus lied. He claimed to have traveled to places he probably never did; it is possible that he wrote part of the *Histories* in Sparta, making his lionization of the Spartans suspect (Mandell and Freedman, 1993: 37); his calculations of the Persian hordes were off by more than a factor of ten (contemporary estimates place Xerxes's army strength between 100,000 and 360,000, not 5 million, soldiers); it is unlikely that experienced mountain soldiers in the Persian army fought in the pass for two whole days before looking for another route (Burn, 1962:407); there was no betrayal by Ephialtes because the alternate route was known to the Persians "The great secret about Thermopylae and the 'selling of the pass' is that there was no secret" [Bradford, 1980:117, see also Burn 1962:413]); in many instances Herodotus's sources don't corroborate his claims (Fehling, 1989:9).

> The time it took to write the *Histories* suggests that Herodotus told his stories orally to many different audiences (as was the fashion) and altered the stories until they pleased the listeners (Herodotus, trans. Waterfield, 1998:xxvii). (325-6)

So if the original text participates this heavily in orality, we should expect nothing less from Miller's adaptation. Miller in fact recounts that he had much more interest in Herodotus's story than in any historical validity: "but then this isn't a historical text; this is an adventure yarn" (Ervin-Gore). Thus, when we meet the god-king Xerxes, he is a full head taller than the enormous Leonidas. The battle scenes are hyper-real, as are the stakes. Victor Davis Hanson writes in his introduction to *300: The Art of the Film* (speaking specifically of the film, but equally applicable to the comic at this point),

> But more importantly, *300* preserves the spirit of the Thermopylae story. The Spartans, quoting lines known from Herodotus and themes from the lyric poets, profess unswerving loyalty to a free Greece. They will never kow-tow to the Persians, preferring to die on their feet than live on their knees.

> If critics think that *300* reduces and simplifies the meaning of Thermopylae into freedom versus tyranny, they should reread carefully ancient accounts and then blame Herodotus, Plutarch, and Diodorus—who long ago boasted that Greek freedom was on trial against Persian autocracy, free men in superior fashion dying for their liberty, their enslaved enemies being whipped to enslave others.

It is interesting that the medium most conducive to telling this violent, ancient, oral tale would be comics. Both media (comics and primary orality) interact with the masses, but mainly with those segments of the masses who have a concern with aesthetics and storytelling. A mere academic history could not hope to adapt Herodotus's surreal history.

While many readers might protest that this is a singular instance of orality in comics and does not signify any larger traits of the medium itself. However, not only are all cool media linked inextricably with orality, but others before me have noted the oral nature of comics without recourse to McLuhan:

The aesthetic development of comics can then be seen as *arrested* (by means of critical authority) in a pre-literary stage. "Pre-literary" is a polyvalent term here, it is paraliterary as well as oral. The predominance of the graphic content of comic books, its visual space, in this context becomes the primary signifier of a preliterate symbolic universe. (Alemán para. 26)

Comics return us to a preliterate (or possibly post-literate) stage by demanding participation and aiming for the lower forms of art and culture: violence and idealism. It is no surprise that they are then devoured by the culturally dispossessed fanboys (and girls) so disdained by literate academic culture. These fanboys can make or break cultural juggernauts like the Hollywood studio system (witness the downfall of the recent *Fantastic Four* movie). How then does one attempt to film a comic? How does one transfer content from a cool medium to a hot one? According to Zack Snyder, you make one cool movie.

Adaptation

Snyder's recent film foray has been alternatingly lambasted as fascist propaganda devoid of a moral compass and praised as the war film for the Nintendo age. Hopefully those reference points will make it obvious where these critiques are coming from. It seems to receive similar criticism as its original source, those oft misunderstood comic books. Snyder attempts an accurate representation of Miller's work that will evoke the same emotions he first felt when reading 300. The translation of hot to cool provides most of my basis for critique.

Miller worked closely with Snyder throughout the film. He saw Snyder as an individual reader whose acts of closure would fill his gutters with a film: "See, there's a lot of white spaces between the images. He [Snyder] had to fill them all in" (Moro). Yet Snyder wanted to stay as close to the comic as possible. Rather than merely retell the battle of Thermopylae, "he wanted to make a graphic novel version, and Frank Miller's version of this battle. (Video Diary 7 [Johnstad]). Grant Freckelton, one of the artists employed by the film, writes,

> I knew this wasn't another typical sword and sandals movie, or a 7-hour long lesson in historical accuracy. There are dozens of ways to retell the Battle of Thermopylae, but to adapt the story as presented in '300', I knew this was as much about bringing Frank Miller and

Lynn Varley's visual style to life, as it was about the historical event itself.

Mere content was not to be transferred, but that often slippery concept: style. Accuracy thus took on a new meaning:

> Everybody's killing themselves with this thing to make it as accurate as possible, but accurate not in the sense of historical accuracy. They picked up on the stylization I brought from drawing them, so these Spartans are more physical in their appearance than the real Spartans were. (Video Diary 7 [Frank])

More real than real, more human than human, the film began to take on the hyper-real attributes of orality right away. Historicity was never the goal. Instead Snyder attempted to speak with Miller's voice. Concerning historicity and style,

> Snyder writes:
> As much as I am a fan of history, I am also a fan of legend and lore. With 300, I chose to explore one of the world's greatest historical battles from the perspective of a storyteller rather than a historian. With Frank Miller's amazing graphic novel as our bible, I strove to capture the raw emotion and energy of the battle of Thermopylae. Pursuing its underlying themes of freedom and what it is to be a Spartan. (Hanson)

Orality insinuates itself throughout Snyder's completed work. Some is due to his careful reading of Miller, some to his careful imitation of Miller, and some perhaps unintentional.

Bringing the bard to the forefront, Snyder picks up on Miller's portrayal of oral tales. Within the film, there is no ambiguity as to whether or not Dilios is our narrator. He appears early on as narrator and in the end as narrator, as well as narrating some of the tales within the tale. As Blackmore notes, "The story of Thermopylae is a story about stories" (326). Not only does narration itself become central to the film, but he stylistically retains and amplifies Miller's hyper-real approach. Now Xerxes is literally twice as tall as Leonidas. The fearsome wolf from the first episode now looms larger with glowing eyes and razor-sharp fangs. There are elements of the fantastic and the grotesque added through-

out (Ephialtes' bargaining, the crucifixion of an entire town to a single tree, the giant of the immortals). While many audience members were shocked at the over-the-top aesthetic, the target audience seems to enjoy it. If the Nintendo generation really does signify a return to orality, then Snyder has given them their Iliad.

Stylistically, Snyder chose to go with bluescreen CGI to enhance his control over the film: "It was because he wanted to bring the graphic novel to life, and he knew that shooting against bluescreen gave him the maximum flexibility to control the 'look' of the film" (Freckelton). The film actually replicates significant frames from the comic throughout. Yet even given all of this, how does this film escape being hot media?

After watching the film recently with a colleague, I asked him what he thought of it. "It was ok, I guess. A bit like watching a two-hour music video." My colleague's self-proclaimed absence from the Nintendo generation perhaps explains his dislike for the film. It is a two-hour music video. And that is its appeal.

The film has been critiqued for its supposed pro-right wing propagandism. Yet Snyder and Miller add very little to Herodotus that would make it seem so. Snyder replies to such criticism with, "But if you take it in ancient context and look at what Herodotus says. Herodotus is the one that shaped what Thermopylae is for us - democracy versus tyranny kind of conflict" (Moro). Certainly the creators may be voicing their political opinions loudly (if so I cannot hear it). Their alignment with neo-conservative Victor Davis Hanson may belie a not so subtle ideological bent. Yet I feel that the film itself begs to differ with such accusations.

First of all, its tale is a timeless one of underdogs and freedom defeating tyranny and oppression. It is set in the eternal past and is relevant in the eternal present. Every generation since has identified with the three-hundred Spartans who fought at Thermopylae. However, if we were to attempt to assign contemporary roles to these fighters I believe we would be surprised. A small, but idealistic group of men defend their homeland against a wealthy, monotheistic invading army that fights for nothing more than greed. Where indeed would America situate themselves in their present endeavors?

Regardless of political statements that may or may not be intended, the film speaks for itself and with its audience—a trait few films have been characterized by. Snyder's work, for all its faults, transcends its medium to become something else.

300 Plateaus
In wrapping these disparate threads back together, allow me to reinvoke Deleuze. He too believed that mediums did not have to be constricting—linear writing, for instance, did not have to obey the rule of the line, but could offer new, open lines of flight:

> To attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it; no typographical cleverness, no lexical agility, no blending or creation of words, no syntactical boldness can substitute for it. In fact, these are more often than not merely mimetic procedures used to disseminate or disperse a unity that is retained in a different dimension for an image-book. Technonarcissism. (22)

Technonarcissism makes us think that an oral digitality promises an era of openness impossible in the print age. Deleuze insists that if we did not seek openness then, we would not now: "A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence" (8). Technonarcissism falls into the trap linguistics has fallen into: that of thinking epistemically rather than technically. Their tendencies toward transcendence make writing a signification, an entrance into the real. Deleuze counters that "Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (4-5). When thought radic(al)ly—or even rhizomatically—all forms of techné (whether oral, print, or digital) can map or trace. It depends upon their user.

While media effects can be interesting to study, the nature of orality (and electracy) is to slip outside of our carefully constructed categories. While comics deserve a place among the pantheon of electronic monuments, we must recognize that the medium is not the only thing that creates the message. Individual objects can stretch the bounds and even step outside them

Notes

Disclaimer: During a phone conversation with Mr. Miller's lawyer, I was unable to procure the rights to reprint these images. He did, however, engage me in a fascinating conversation about McLuhan's theory of hot and cool media. Regardless, we are unable to show the images here. We have chosen to represent their absence rather than to just avoid their inclusion.

1 I much prefer their term "graphic narratives" to "graphic novels" because it lacks the pretension of the latter but also because it allows serialized books (a category in which most comics find themselves) a place that the term "novel" often reserves for finite, book-length works. However, all in all, I'm most comfortable with the term comic books. It embraces the pop-sensibilities that comics still exhibit. To remove comics from pop-culture is to remove them from themselves—a hasty and unwarranted amputation, to be sure.

2 It seems that graphic novels will always be graphic. Alemán writes, "graphic novels suggest an entryway into a stark, violent reality and in that sense hold fast . . . to the dictates of conventional realism; that they thus fall into a mimetic form of representation is arguable, but it is undeniable that their direct appeal to the artistic plane is deeply mediated by recourse to an aesthetics of violence" (para. 53).

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