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**Practicing Critical Research:
Applying a Feminist Textual Analysis to the Film 300**

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Abstract

This single-class activity was developed to give students hands-on experience with critical research. The purpose of this activity is to assist students in developing critical, textual analysis skills by applying a feminist lens to the hyper-masculine film 300, specifically analyzing symbolic representations of power.

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Courses

Film Studies; Research Methods; Visual Rhetoric

Objectives

- Give students hands-on practice approaching data within the critical paradigm
- Engage in multiple perspectives interpreting the same piece of data

Introduction and Rationale

A number of universities place equal emphasis on scientific, interpretivistic, and critical research [for an explanation of these three types of research, see Fink and Gantz (1996)] in one introductory research methods course. This focus poses a problem for methods instructors: How do we provide students with practice conducting research within each paradigm in the course of one semester, especially if data collection is involved? Students learn best through doing (Kolb, 2007). Therefore, students will best understand each of the research paradigms if they have experience within each research approach designing the instruments, collecting data, and analyzing the data themselves rather than just reading about the process.

Although students can quickly appreciate the tangibility of a questionnaire or interview guide for collecting data, the authors of the current manuscript struggled with an equally substantial method of data collection through which to introduce students to critical research. To alleviate the abstraction of critical research methods, the challenge for the authors was to give students a concrete example (Newby & Stepich, 1987) of the entire research process. The following paper explains the product of much consideration and practice to introduce critical research through a feminist critique via textual analysis of the film *300* (Miller & Synder, 2007). When covering critical film and rhetorical theories, this activity can be integrated into other classes.

Any documented social interaction is a potential sample for textual analysis which includes an investigation of the symbolism within the discourse (Fairclough, 2003). *300* is well suited for textual analysis through a critical feminist lens which considers the symbolism of power struggles through artifacts such as color, view point, and exposure (Jhally, 2006; Kilbourne, 2000; Nead, 1992). If students look past the superficial aspects of the story, considering the role of the lone female lead, they will discover a secondary storyline woven throughout the plot. Critical analysis will reveal underlying societal worldviews of men and women that are violated or enhanced through the portrayal in the movie.

In the Spartan world portrayed in the film, masculinity is shown in its most extreme forms. Men are bred to serve the state and die, if needed, a *beautiful death* on the battlefield. Throughout the film, audiences follow the male protagonist from his birth, to his rise as King, and eventually to his death. Because of the extreme masculine portrayal, *300* appears polarized visually and ideologically against women. Indeed most women appear only as secondary to men: as caregivers, child bearers, sexualized objects, or in similar second-class roles that are contrary to the efforts of feminist movements for equality. Yet, despite the overwhelming depictions of hyper-masculinity that made the movie famous, careful analysis shows that the lone female lead is the character that holds

much of the power. It is because of these counterintuitive findings that this film is an excellent candidate for textual analysis through a critical feminist lens.

The Activity

Preparation

The purpose of this single class activity is to apply research skills through a critical feminist lens (see suggested readings). Therefore, the activity should be utilized only after teaching critical methods. While learning critical methods, the students will need to understand the characteristics of men and women in visual media and study visual indicators of power and feminist theory for the analysis to be possible. This activity specifically assumes that students have been given foundations in the goals, procedures, and philosophies behind conducting a textual analysis. At a minimum, students must have knowledge about how power is portrayed through:

- Typical roles and characteristics of men and women in the visual media (Men appear in greater numbers and variety of roles than women. Typical characteristics ascribed to men—e.g., independent, objective, active, logical, determined, successful, willing to take risks, and confidence—and women—e.g., gentle, calm, clean, orderly, sensual, religious, emotional, expressive and/or as sexual objects.)
- Amount of clothing (where the amount of clothing one wears is positively related to power)
- Colors (darker colors represent evil and lighter colors represent purity; color amongst black and white images represent importance)
- Angle of portrayal (taking a picture from below, above, or in alignment with the person represents power such that the higher the person appears, the more power he/she has)

Before showing the film, instructors are encouraged to have students read reviews of the movie to prepare for the visual imagery. With the theme of the film, the director strove to portray death as beautiful, yet students should be forewarned that it does depict violent battle and sexual content.

Showing 300

300 is 117 minutes long. Therefore, it is recommended that students be instructed to view the movie outside of class without distractions. To be most effective, instructors should inform students that they are expected to view the film through a critical feminist lens and take notes of scenes that defy gender expectations in this masculine world. These notes will create the parameters (a guiding instrument) for their textual analysis. Students should note specific scenes in detail that will help with both class discussion and the written assessment. Given the students' level of preparation, instructors may consider giving students a hint before showing the film that they should pay particular attention to the portrayal of the queen.

Debriefing

Once the film has been viewed, the instructor should lead students in a discussion of their initial analysis, encouraging them to describe and cite specific examples. It is essential to discuss in depth, each of the scenes that portray the queen. The following scenes are typically those first brought up by students:

- *The Persian Messenger Arrives in Sparta:* In this early scene, the Persian messenger arrives to tell Sparta that they are to submit to foreign rule. The queen is the only female character portrayed in the meeting, and the messenger makes it clear that he is offended that a woman should be allowed to speak in their midst. Before anyone can respond to his proclamation, the queen defends her own position at the meeting. More crucially, although the king ultimately declares war, he looks to the queen in making his decision, allowing her nonverbal cue to be the catalyst that initiates the war.
- *The Army Leaves:* When the Spartans go to war, the queen sees the army off. There are two notable displays of power by this character within the scene. First, it is her nonverbal communication that dismisses the army. Second, she is the only character who is fully clothed. Being naked or scantily clothed is perceived as submissive, powerless (Nead, 1992), or sexually objectifying (Jhally, 2006; Kilbourne, 2000). Hence, the queen is portrayed in this scene with adequate clothing as an assertive power and active ruler rather than a sexual object. Both her dismissal of the troops and her clothing indicate that she is the character holding the most power.
- *The Queen's Speech:* Ending the film, the queen appears before the counsel to argue in favor of sending more soldiers to support her husband. Her speech is quite powerful and able to move many councilmen. Notably, she wears a red dress – the first colored ensemble shown in Sparta. Aside from her attire and powerful words, her actions also exude power in this scene. When a councilman attempts to discredit the queen, the queen exposes the councilman's corruption and slays him. So, it is by the actions and words of the lone female lead that the Spartan army is rallied to defend Greece.

Each of these scenes provides clear examples of how the only woman given a name in the entire film is actually the most powerful character – the only character more powerful than the king.

The queen appears in two additional scenes in which she displays her power—this time, through her sexuality. As a note regarding these scenes, nothing is shown that students would not see in an art history course. The scenes are filmed to be part of the story rather than pornographic.

- In the first scene, the queen is with her husband and tastefully filmed to show her in control of her own sexuality, equal to her husband.
- The second of these scenes typically generates the most debate among students: the scene in which she uses her sexuality (or allows herself to be used sexually) to win the favor of one of the councilmen. The discussion polarizes because some students see this as an exercise in her power, though others see it as a loss of power because she was coerced.

Once these five scenes are discussed, the instructor must pose a critical question to the students: Was *300* a masculine or feminine movie? The initial reaction before textual examination of the symbolism surrounding the queen would be to call it definitively masculine. Students typically debate from this point whether it was truly a feminist movie, given that only one female character had power, or whether both sexes were portrayed as equally powerful. Each semester, students reach a different verdict on the matter, but they must do so through analysis of the data, making the unique perspectives valuable (i.e. symbolism noted in the film). Being able to debate this question with the support of data allows for an involved example of critical research which assists in removing the abstraction.

Appraisal

This activity is limited by the film's length. This single class activity works best in a three-hour class period where showing the film ensures that all students have the same exposure. The activity fortunately also works if students are required to watch the film as homework before the class discussion and debriefing.

Students respond positively to this activity for two reasons. First, this is typically the most enjoyable research experience of the semester. Rather than administering questionnaires or conducting interviews, they watch an award-winning movie, providing an appreciated break within such an intense course. Second, students report that this activity actually poses one of the semester's greatest challenges to their critical thinking skills. Because the movie is so blatantly masculine on the surface, considering the portrayal of femininity is an effortful process. Students who are familiar with the film before viewing it in class usually laugh at the seemingly ridiculous notion of finding what they initially believe are non-existent feminine aspects. Yet, they learn that by paying attention to symbolic representations of power and taking on a new perspective, they develop a new understanding of the film and an appreciation for the critical research process.

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Suggested Readings:

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