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Film Review
300 by Zack Snyder

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In his epoch-making book *Orientalism*, Edward Said asserted that the way ancient Greeks perceived and depicted Persians strongly influenced subsequent western perceptions of the East. Said has surely received countless criticisms for his approach, but this particular aspect of his argument has mostly gone unchallenged. In the course of western history, the presentation of the Persians has generated a template for describing the predominant "other" in a given place at a given time in the West. That is, the Persian of the ancient times, as reflected by the Greek historians, has grown into a generic "other" representing an outside hostile force, capable of threatening the endurance of a superior civilization by leaking into it elements of slavery and corruption.

Such usage of ancient Persians has some inevitable instances in American culture. The 1962 film *300 Spartans*, depicting the Battle of Thermopylae, is an excellent example of this perennial and contemporary tendency. The film was grounded in the culture of the Cold War. Thus it portrayed the ancient Persian Empire as an allegory of how Communist states behind the Iron Curtain were enslaved by an anti-democratic master of a hostile civilization, the Soviet Union.

The more recent animated version of the same story, the 2007 film *300*, has utilized the Hellenistic prototypical image of Persia to convey a message about the modern-day government of Iran. Although Warner Brothers, the production company, has assured the audience that the film did not aim to demean any ethnicity or civilization or to score any political points, the timing of its release, which coincided with the growing uranium-enrichment crisis between the United States and Iran, suggests the contrary.

Adopted from the graphic novel of Frank Miller, *300* majestically illustrates the Battle of Thermopylae, which was fought in 480 BC between Spartan King Leonidas, three hundred of his personal guards, and a few hundred other Greeks, and the gigantic army of Persian King Xerxes I, perhaps numbering two hundred thousand. The Spartan band was slowly annihilated, but its resistance inspired the Athenians to later defeat the Persian invaders. In the sweep of civilization,

Thermopylae signifies the thwarting of the largest Asian army to attempt to conquer Europe until that time and hence stands as one of the earliest versions of the "clash of civilizations." Therefore, it provides an essential background against which any story of eastern-western conflict can be told.

In *300*, the Spartans are depicted as "freedom" and "democracy loving" people who honor the maxim "freedom comes with its cost." The portrayal of Sparta as a nation that holds a promise for the perpetuation of a high civilization and unhesitantly undertakes military action to rescue the peoples of that civilization from tyranny and collective slavery reminds us of post-World War II American ideology. The Persian Empire is by contrast presented as the breeder of a despicable culture that enslaves women, encourages concealed luxury and renders superior "the dark will of the kings." Such representation bears undeniable similarities with the current images of Iran noticeable in the American and much of the western press. In the film, for example, ancient Persians wear turbans, veils, and fabric of modern designs, representations that disregard many historical and ethnographic facts as well as encourage the audience to perceive this chapter of ancient history as an analogy to the alien relationship between the orient past and present to the western world.

The resurrection of an ancient civilizational clash during the political crisis between the United States and Iran has thus evoked the ancient stereotypes of the "other" identity and may have strengthened the unfavorable perception of today's Iran by the western public. The director Zack Snyder stipulates that the scenario is quoting directly from the Greek historian Herodotus, thus he denies any deliberate attempt to belittle any contemporary state or its culture. Snyder's rationale ironically suggests the longevity of ancient Greek images of the East. And *300* underpins, or at least reflects, the argument that after the defeat of the slavish ideology, "a new age, age of freedom" may begin.