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Persians and Greeks: Hollywood and the Clash of Civilisations

KAVEH L. AFRASIABI

The movie industry has not been immune to the dramatic possibilities inherent in the controversial thesis of the "clash of civilisations" and its antinomy, the harmony or dialogue of civilisations. On the contrary, Hollywood in particular has accommodated itself to both perspectives, as evidenced by such films as Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and this year's huge box office success, *300*, directed by Zack Snyder. In turn, the various cinematic counterparts to the contemporary paradigmatic debates—on the nature of contemporary world order and the future of relations between East and West—have added an artistic dimension to these discussions, raising new questions about the connections between cinema, history, culture, and politics.

Screening History

Gadamer once observed that "an education by art becomes an education to art". As a form of mass media, films shape and reshape the popular culture, particularly when they venture, as do the two movies cited above, into the treacherous terrain of history. The relationship between history and films has its own history, rife with complexities that defy simple generalisations. In the case of Hollywood, it is tempting to draw a less than favourable conclusion about how it has handled history. Plenty of voices question even the possibility of an accurate cinematic representation of history, or whether there can be a uniform standard by which to judge and evaluate such representations, particularly of ancient history.

After all, movies are conceived, first and foremost, but by no means exclusively, as the end products of an "entertainment industry" guided by the inner logic of capitalism, namely, the pursuit of profit. Historians, on the other hand, are obliged to follow the logic of a disciplined accumulation of facts, past and present, which are filtered through various methodological and epistemological screens. Consequently, the enmeshing of cinema and the historical record is an inherently problematic enterprise, converging the aesthetic and the (purportedly) factual in a pictorial representation that is ultimately answerable to the evaluative standards of different species of action. Compared to documentaries, feature films dealing with history often blend truth and fiction beyond the pale of narrative (or oral) history and its strictures about "getting the facts right". Yet, no matter how problematic the filmic representations of history and historical events, they always contribute one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, to so-called "popular history".

According to one school of thought, movies in today's mass societies form an important aspect of popular cultures, which

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"tend to endorse prevailing power structures by helping to reproduce the beliefs and allegiances necessary for their uncontested functioning".[1] There is, of course, a major difference between "mainstream" and "counter-culture" movies, as can be clearly seen in Hollywood's varied portrayals of the Vietnam War. The line between "manufacturing consent" and "manufacturing dissent" is not always clear-cut in cinema and, in fact, may ultimately depend on the private experience of the audience, nowadays shaped in part by reviews, promotional previews and, in the case of controversial movies, the public debates over the film in question.

A Cinematic Plea for Peace

In *Kingdom of Heaven*, a non-binary, complex set of Christian and Muslim characters, including the great Muslim leader Saladin, portrayed rather sympathetically, parade before our eyes. There is a Jungian criticism of moral crusaders, embracing the notion of dialogue and empathy between hostile others. The film's most obvious exclusion is that of ethnic or religious antipathy, hatred, or superiority. There are heroes and villains on both sides of the cultural fault lines, and the movie's pedagogic element is a humanist, cosmopolitan ideal embodied in the thesis of dialogue among civilisations, centred on the themes of reciprocity, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence between and among the various civilisational groups or clusters. Indeed, in the "interview" segment of the DVD version of the movie, both the director, Ridley Scott, and the lead actors and actresses explicitly voice the hope that the film will "spur dialogue" between Muslims, Christians, and others. The intersubjectivity of the world of interaction of *Kingdom of Heaven*'s Christian and Muslim characters makes the film ultimately a pacifist work that provides what Max Weber called "value interpretation"—of a violent historical past. This is achieved by a "controlled distancing" from the protagonists on both sides of the long warfare that was the crusades, and there is no attempt to create audience identification with one side or the other.

At the same time, *Kingdom of Heaven* originates from the standpoint of Christianity. It is able to go beyond that standpoint by journeying through the tumults experienced by the film's main protagonist, Balian, a Christian blacksmith turned defender of Jerusalem, played by Orlando Bloom. It is no small matter that this Hollywood movie pays partial homage to a historical Muslim figure, Saladin, just as an earlier (fantasy) movie, John McTiernan's *The 13th Warrior* (1999), also offers a sympathetic portrayal of a Muslim prince, played by Antonio Banderas. The opposing camps during the crusades may have viewed each other as an existential threat, but the novelty of *Kingdom of Heaven* is precisely its ability to deconstruct this perception as a myth, boldly supplanting oppositional self-awarenesses with deep reverence for the "hostile other". The movie's lead character epitomises the spirit of interreligious dialogue. On hearing the sound of Muslim worship, the Christian Balian remarks that it "sounds like our prayer". In another scene, Balian yearns for a "kingdom of conscience", reflecting a spiritual, rather than institutional–religious, moral identity.

The chief merit of *Kingdom of Heaven* is its candid consideration of the "barbaric

1. Andreas Behnke and Benjamin de Carvalho, "Shooting War: International Relations and the Cinematic Representation of Warfare", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006), p. 936.

within", its unblinking gaze at the violent, warmongering Christians who engage in the rape and pillage of Muslims, blessed by the papacy. "To kill an infidel is not murder. It is a path to heaven," shouts a monk in one scene. The lead character's witnessing of such events constitutes an instance of what we may call "intersubjectification".[2]

Any account of the past is essentially incomplete, be it oral, narrative, pictorial, or all combined. Yet, as the philosopher Arthur Danto and others have observed, incompleteness of description is not a deficiency as long as the representation is not determined by a prejudicial frame of reference. Movies about history are more profound when the filmmakers pay attention to both sides, interweaving all the elements, instead of giving only one side of the story. This more comprehensive style is that followed in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), and in Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans* (1962), an earlier and fairly impartial and balanced Hollywood treatment of the famous battle between Persians and Greeks at Thermopylae in 480 BCE.

In *Kingdom of Heaven*, the Western gaze at the Muslim other is empathetic within limits, and the conflict is presented as arising more from greed and a struggle for territory than from purely theological differences. The film thus constitutes a welcome cinematic rebuff to proponents of the "clash of civilisations" theory, which envisages a long chain of immutable, irresolvable, and antagonistic cultural divides, particularly between East and West, and Islam and Christianity. The makers of *Kingdom of Heaven* are clearly aware that the past informs the present and the future. They provide a criticism of the narcissistic West that is reflected in the ultimate disenchantment of the lead hero; the specificity of his experience is simultaneously instructional, vexing, and open-ended, and is inextricably linked to a strong distaste for stereotyping or mythologisation. In fact, a point missed by reviewers of *Kingdom of Heaven* is precisely its anti-mythologisation.[3]

Also discernible in the highly acclaimed (multiculturalist) movies, *Crash* (2004) and *Babel* (2006), such a distaste in the post-9/11 international context actually enlists cinema in the service of reconciliation, in those two films by solidarity in suffering and in *Kingdom of Heaven* by the reinvention of a past that still haunts the present, i.e., the ghost of the crusades, illuminating the hubris of world conquerors, the interplay of faith and power, the weight of the irrational, the fear of the other, etc. In all three movies, their "reality effect", to quote Roland Barthes, is to open up the space for understanding and compromise that has been blocked by the obverse epistemology of the clash of civilisations.

In Huntington's Footsteps

It has been observed that the clash of civilisations "is not a hypothesis to be empirically tested, it is an agenda, a worldview to be globally implemented by the U.S. against its invented enemies, all in the name of global domination".[4]

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2. For more on intersubjectification, see Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. W. Rehg (Cambridge: MIT, 1996).

3. "Antimythologization requires a resolute effort not to represent social actors in a manner that essentializes or fetishizes their attitudes," Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 254.

4. Nanda Shrestha and Kenneth Gray, "Clash of Civilizations or Cartography of U.S. Global Domination?", *International Journal on World Peace* 23, no. 3 (September 2006), p. 30.

The chief propounder of the thesis, Samuel Huntington, has exhorted the West to "maintain the economic and military power necessary to protect its interests in relation to [non-Western] civilizations".[5] This thesis or discourse has been elevated to the level of a theoretical paradigm, a dubious promotion in light of its egregious shortcomings, such as its *a priori* discounting of the contrary notions of converging, shared, or parallel interests between and among civilisations, not to mention its inadequate descriptions of the number and types of world civilisations.[6]

What is alarming about this thesis is its brushfire infection of the Western intellectual milieu with its perverse logic and eurocentric orientalism, engulfing not only a segment of academia but also the media and the entertainment industry. A case in point is Frank Miller, a scriptwriter for *300*, on whose "comic fantasy" book the film is purportedly based. Miller, a US citizen, has expressed a robust identification with the extreme binary polarisation that sees the Muslim East as the hostile other: "It seems to me quite obvious that our country and the entire Western World is up against an existential foe that knows exactly what it wants . . . and we're behaving like a collapsing empire."[7]

It would be one thing if Miller's Westernist bias had remained his private predilection, not dominating his intellectual output, but that the exact opposite is the case can be seen in his overtly racist, vicious stereotyping of Persians and "Asian hordes" in his cartoon novel, as well as in the film that adapted his narrative. Fantasy is an insidious mechanism of exclusion, and the appellation "comic" for Miller's peculiar depiction of the ancient battles between his Greek favourites and their Persian enemies is, in fact, a misnomer; it serves as an authorial self-defence, camouflaging the intense, self-righteous ideology that exalts a golden age in which Western heroes stood up to the Eastern forces of barbarism. Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, denounced *300* for depicting the ancient Persians as "savages". In response, Warner Brothers' studio, which produced the movie, issued a statement insisting that it had "developed this film purely as a fictional work with the sole purpose of entertaining audiences; it is not meant to disparage an ethnicity or culture or make any sort of political statement".[8]

Thermopylae and Karbala

Ironically, the book and the film both have an unintended consequence that does not quite meet the requirements of the ideology of the clash of civilisations: by creating a new reverence for the Spartans' self-sacrifice and martyrdom, the two works plunge the reader/viewer into the midst of a cult of martyrdom that is familiar territory in Islam, particularly Shi'ite Islam, which centres on the martyrdom of its saints led by Imam Ali and his son, Hussain, who fought an asymmetrical war of seventy-two versus thousands in the famous battle of Karbala, south-west of Baghdad, in 680 CE.

5. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (summer 1993), p. 49.

6. See Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "The Contestation of Civilizations and Interreligious Dialogue", *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 12, no. 3 (autumn 1999), pp. 338–62.

7. See Touraj Daryaee and Warren Soward, "Microphones, Planes, and Stereotypes: Those behind the Making of *300*", *Payvand Iran News*, 5 April 2007 [www.payvand.com/news/07/apr/1058.html].

8. "*300* Irks Iranian President", *New York Times*, 23 March 2007.

In both battles, Karbala and Thermopylae, courage appears as the central theme. Plutarch reports the Spartan king, Leonidas, as downplaying the small size of his forces at Thermopylae thus: "If I am to rely on courage, then even this number is quite adequate." He is also depicted as a true, self-sacrificing patriot: when the Persian emperor, Xerxes, offers to make him king of Greece in return for abandoning resistance, Leonidas replies, "For me, it is better to die for Greece than to be monarch of the people of my race."

The parables of Karbala and Thermopylae mirror each other to a large extent: instead of submitting, both Imam Hussain and King Leonidas fought to the death against rivals they considered tyrants, and their "great refusals" provide morally textured, culturally specific lessons about a glorious past, i.e., a timeless struggle for freedom and justice. There is, of course, the dissimilarity of Hussain's faith-based revolt, compared to the nationalistic zeal of the pre-Christian Greek hero, but this matters less than the fact that in both cases there is a strong reservoir of hero-worship and negation of death, serving as a foundational grounding for identity formation. The functional similarities of these two ideal types bridge the unbridgeable in the East–West cultural clash by illuminating the shared passion for valour, heroism, steadfastness, courage and defiance of death as an essentially valuable universal attribute. In both stories, real historical events are intermixed with symbolism, metaphors, allegories, and parables of justice and freedom. Both are tragic histories that inspire awe and admiration, as much as they teach us about terror and violence. The kernel of all chronicles of the battles of Karbala and Thermopylae is the same thing: the justness of resistance to oppression and domination. "Go tell a tale, tell a victory," Leonidas commands a fellow Spartan in the film *300*, just as he is about to fight his final and losing battle.

But herein lies a major difference between the two stories: whereas Karbala is a staple of Shi'ite faith and identity, Thermopylae lacks such religious significance. Moreover, unlike the "Karbala paradigm", Thermopylae owes its contemporary relevance less to textual tradition than to the cinematic device or medium.

The Uses of Nostalgia

Like *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), a movie about the Vietnam War, *300* has done much to popularise a buried history, triggering interest in a past event and reviving nostalgia for a vanished gallantry. According to Jameson, "In nostalgia films, the image—the surface sheen of a period fashion reality—is consumed, having been transformed into a visual commodity."[9] Many of the famous historical aphorisms arising from Thermopylae are inserted into the dialogue of *300*, such as a Spartan's response to the Persians' threat that their arrows will darken the sky: "Then we'll fight in the shade."

The Spartans' bravery has long been a synonym for patriotic courage. During the Second World War, "a reassuring analogy was aptly drawn between the few loyalist Greeks of 480 B.C. . . . and the 'Few' who were resisting the myth of Nazi Germany."[10] Similarly, today, what *300* may have single-handedly achieved, in light of its huge success at the box office, is to elevate the story of the Spartans to the upper reaches of cultural or political significance in a West that is mired in a seemingly borderless and interminable "war

9. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 197.

10. Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), p. 119.

on terror". The Greek archetype Leonidas and his brave warriors are represented as model citizen-soldiers worthy of imitation by their contemporary (Western) offspring, who are allegedly menaced by "evil" threats from without, i.e., by the darkly exotic, murderous, barbarian forces from the East. The film achieves this aestheticisation of the enemy image by explicitly endorsing the notion of a clash of cultures or civilisations.

"I have seen what your culture can do," says Leonidas in terse dismissal of the "god-king" Xerxes' observation, "Our cultures have much in common." The film's producers might as well have inserted images of collapsing twin towers right there and then. However, the contemporary resonance of scenes of a burning Athens in the hands of Persian "immortal guards" is probably too obvious to the average Western or American viewer to have required that. The power of putting history on screen emanates from the unique ability of the medium to communicate not just realistically or fictionally but also metaphorically, through a filmic reconstruction of a tragic event that fits the ideological construct of the "West versus the rest", to quote Huntington, who means by the "rest" Muslims and Orientals first and foremost.

Making (up) History

According to Dilthey, "We grasp the significance of a moment in the past. It is meaningful insofar as in it a connection with the future was made, through an act or an actual event."[11] Following Dilthey's notion of experience (*Erlebnis*), the hermeneutic understanding of a film's meaning is achieved by reconstructing what experience of the world is expressed in the work of art.[12] Often this involves a shifting connection of past, present, and future. The subtitle of *300* is "Prepare for Glory". The promotional advertisement, "watch the movie that is making history", reflects the film's active myth-making, as it leans a long way towards depicting the famous ancient battle as merely one chapter in a long struggle between freedom and tyranny, reflected in Leonidas's line that "the world will know that freedom stood against a tyrant".

Hayden White has observed that "historical facts are politically domesticated".[13] This raises important questions regarding "objectivity" and "neutrality" in the discipline of history, as well as in the much less disciplined genre of historical films. *300* practises "ethno history" by exalting the "good" Greeks over the "evil" Persians, who embody excess, arrogance and indolence, horror and monstrosity, the nefarious and the destructive. Its juxtaposition of extremes runs contrary to the historian Paul Cartledge's insight that "the tradition of Western civilisation has been decisively shaped or enriched by Eastern civilisation".[14] It also recalls what Theodor Adorno wrote

11. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 134.

12. This is a point that escapes Joseph Nye in his discussions of Hollywood as a source of "soft power". Nye maintains that the United States enjoys an advantage over, say, China in that the latter does not have cultural industries like Hollywood. But if a film proves a negative as opposed to an attractive experience for its viewers, as *300* did for many Iranians, then the result is not "soft power" but rather "negative power". Nye's rather limited theoretical framework, based on axiomatic generalisations about hard and soft power, ignores this important distinction.

13. Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation", *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1982), p. 128.

14. Paul Cartledge, *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World* (New York: Overlook Press, 2006), p. 198.

about "the violence of history", its "withering fury", which "prohibits aesthetic compromise just as political compromise is no longer an alternative".[15] With its self-indulgence in the demonisation of Persians fighting the gallant Greeks, *300* may be visually innovative and even avant-garde in form, as claimed by some reviewers, yet its content is fairly traditional, albeit excessively complimentary about the Greek heritage. For example, it portrays Greek women as enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy, thus setting the Greeks apart from the patriarchal Persians, who are subtly accused of deforming their women (all the women in Xerxes' tent are shown with signs of physical abuse) and of being "boy-lovers".

D. W. Griffith once said that a "film can impose upon a people as much of the truth of history in an evening as many months' worth of study will accomplish".[16] Gilles Deleuze, on the other hand, has alerted us to cinema's more negative contribution, i.e., "a powerlessness in fact, a dispossession of thought in relation to the image".[17] *300* restages history on screen by standing historical facts on their head. Thus, according to Herodotus, it was the Spartans who had their slaves—the Helots—fighting alongside them at Thermopylae, whereas in *300* the only slave-whippers we see are the Persians. The Athenian philosopher and political leader Critias said of Sparta's class society that the free were most free and the slaves most slavish.[18] The movie's silence on the subject of Spartan slavery, while emphasising vile images of Persian slavery, is simply one of numerous pieces of evidence of the prejudice of the minds who made the film. Nearly all the "vices" attributed exclusively to the Persians—homosexuality, the subordination of women, and pederasty—were rather prevalent in Sparta at the time. Foucault, in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, shows that the segregation and subordination of women was linked to the birth of the ancient Greek polis. The currency of bisexuality in ancient Greece, and of institutionalised pederasty, is a well-attested historical fact.[19]

The film's dialogue is rife with actual Spartan statements found in Herodotus's account of Thermopylae, yet the demonic masks and black and white outfits *300* represents Xerxes' "immortal guards" as wearing bear no resemblance to Herodotus's detailed description of the Persian army's attire:

> the dress of these troops consisted of the tiara, or soft felt cap, embroidered tunic with sleeves, a coat of mail looking like the scales of a fish, and trousers; for arms they

15. See F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation: Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 167.

16. See Jeremy Black, *Using History* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), p. 34.

17. See David N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 190.

18. See Peter Hunt, *Slaves, Warfare, and Ideology in the Greek Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 16. Hunt himself remarks: "That greater number of Helots, whom the Spartans called their 'slaves', also died defending Greece puts the noble struggle for freedom in a different light" (p. 32).

19. See, for example, Eva Canterella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), and Paul Cartledge, "The Politics of Spartan Pederasty", in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 27 (1981), pp. 17–36. According to Plutarch, when boys in Sparta reached the age of twelve, they were entrusted to lovers chosen from among the best adult males, and from those they learned to be true Spartans.

> carried large wicker shields, quivers slung below them, short spears, powerful bows with cane arrows, and daggers swinging from belts beside the right thigh.[20]

In addition to the inaccurate demonic attire for the Persian army, in several battle scenes the Persians are shown carrying no shields. The cinematic magic of making their shields disappear is, of course, meant to make it easier to show their ruthless slaughter by the gallant Spartans.[21] Herodotus also writes about Sparta's tyranny, which led most Greek cities actually to seek an alliance with Sparta's most powerful rival—Persia. The film's deliberate, overt fabrications may be passed off as cinematic licence, but in that case we may ask why nearly all the fabrications are one-sidedly against the Persians.

Indeed, there are numerous inaccuracies and distortions of historical fact in *300*, almost all pertaining to the Persians, including the following:

• Persia's Achaemenid kings did not claim the title of "god-king" or "god of gods", as does Xerxes in *300*.

• Xerxes did *not* send any emissaries to Sparta, because those sent previously by his father, Cyrus the Great, were killed by the Greeks. Herodotus adds that later on when two Spartans offered their lives in atonement for the slain Persian messengers, Xerxes "with truly noble generosity" pardoned them and told them that he would not behave like the Spartans.[22]

• The film depicts Xerxes' emissaries as carrying to their meeting with the Greeks the severed crowned heads of conquered kings, for which there is no historical evidence.

• Neither is there any historical warrant for *300*'s claim that Xerxes decapitated his generals in anger at their failure to overrun the small Spartan army (which in any case was annihilated after three days of resistance).

'Evil' Enemies, Past and Present

Judging by the depth and variety of the inaccuracies and outright hateful representations in *300*, the answer to our question above—why nearly all the film's fabrications are one-sidedly against the Persians—is rather simple: Persian-phobia. This is manifest in the stereotyping of the Persians as those with "eyes as dark as night, soulless", who are out to "erase the memory of Sparta", and who are referred to as "beasts".

A voiceover "privatises" the Greeks' experience (we learn only towards the end of the film that it belongs to one of the Greek protagonists). "A wolf approaches, a beast," the voiceover says in reference to the Persian army. This characterisation of the Persians resonates with the opening scene showing young Leonidas's heroic rite-of-passage slaughter of a ferocious wolf. The Persians are thus dehumanised, being depicted as something akin to dangerous brutes. The voiceover continuously frames the Greeks' struggle as one waged on multiple fronts—against a decadent Persian enemy, but also against trai-

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20. Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 395.

21. The barely-clad Xerxes, moreover, resembles Yul Brynner's Pharaoh in the Hollywood biblical epic, *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Could the makers of *300* have intended a parallel between the Jewish struggle for freedom and the West's struggle against the Persian threat (past and present)?

22. Herodotus, *Histories*, p. 414.

tors: in Leonidas's absence, a Spartan politician in league with the Persians forces the Spartan queen to have sex with him. She later kills him in the senate and the Persian coins drop from his pocket.

The film's telling of the story through the brazenly racist voiceover of one of its Greek protagonists is also intended to mythologise white racial superiority, for in another violation of historical accuracy, *300* represents the Persians as being predominantly black. Moreover, its blatant Persian-phobia is explicitly revealing of the current and longstanding political demonisation of Iran in the United States, which has seeped into Hollywood. Among the pernicious consequences of this demonisation is that the rhetoric or image of "evil" Persians/Iranians perpetuates cultural and political misunderstanding and enmity. Worse, it legitimates militaristic modes of communication, wherein the use of brute force supplants discussion and dialogue, especially when the Persian "other" is depicted as irrational and incomprehensible. At a time when influential voices in the United States seriously urge "pre-emptive" military attacks on Iran, ostensibly to prevent its acquisition of nuclear weapons, the exposure of Western cinema audiences to the delight, excitement, and pleasure of righteously annihilating the Persians' ancestors has the effect of "softening up" public opinion to accept and support an assault on present-day Iran.

Nevertheless, as *Kingdom of Heaven* shows, there is no consensus in Hollywood regarding Iran and the Muslim world. The divergence of views and interpretations between that film and *300* actually leaves room for hope that the warmongering mindset reflected in the latter is not the only voice in tinsel town. Time will tell whether the avalanche of public criticisms of *300*'s Persian-phobic racism has resonated with the movie industry's decision-makers. ❑