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That Film's Real Message? It Could Be: 'Buy a Ticket'



Ancient history? Maybe. A scene from "300," directed by Zack Snyder.

Warner Brothers Pictures

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LOS ANGELES, March 4 — Three weeks ago a handful of reporters at an international press junket here for the Warner Brothers movie ["300,"](#) about the battle of Thermopylae some 2,500 years ago, cornered the director [Zack Snyder](#) with an unanticipated question.



Zack Snyder directs "300," standing with Lena Headey, who plays Queen Gorgo. Mr. Snyder insists no political message was intended.

Takashi Seida/Warner Brothers Pictures



Diplomacy in 480 B.C.: Gerard Butler, left, and Rodrigo Santoro play leaders who are negotiating the surrender of Spartan troops in "300."
"Is George Bush Leonidas or Xerxes?" one of them asked.

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Warner Brothers Pictures

The questioner, by Mr. Snyder's recollection, insisted that Mr. Bush was Xerxes, the Persian emperor who led his force against Greek's city states in 480 B.C., unleashing an army on a small country guarded by fanatical guerilla fighters so he could finish a job his father had left undone. More likely, another reporter chimed in, Mr. Bush was Leonidas, the Spartan king who would defend freedom at any cost.

Mr. Snyder, who said he intended neither analogy when he set out to adapt the graphic novel created by Frank Miller with Lynn Varley in 1998, suddenly knew he had the contemporary version of a water-cooler movie on his hands. And it has turned out to be one that could be construed as a thinly veiled polemic against the Bush administration, or be seen by others as slyly supporting it.

In the era of media clutter, film marketers increasingly welcome controversy as a way to get attention for their more provocative fare. The companies behind the Dixie Chicks documentary ["Shut Up & Sing"](#) and ["Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan."](#) for example, positively reveled in it.

But the dance can be more delicate when viewers find a potentially divisive message in big studio movies that were meant more to entertain than enlighten. The danger is that an accidental political overtone will alienate part of the potential

audience for a film that needs broad appeal to succeed.

Spontaneous debate on the Internet and around the office can be a film's best friend when, as with a picture like "The Passion of the Christ," even potential negatives, like accusations of anti-Semitic undertones, feed curiosity.

"Whatever the question is, it's wonderful for the movie," said Peter Sealey, a former Columbia Pictures executive who is now an adjunct professor of marketing at Claremont Graduate University's Drucker School of Management.

Yet studios can be wary of seeming to foster it. Walt Disney largely sidestepped arguments about whether its Pixar-created animated film "[The Incredibles](#)" was quietly channeling Ayn Rand. "We feel that the longer we either refute or debate a subject like that, the more the story will live," said Dennis Rice, senior vice president of marketing for Disney's Buena Vista Pictures unit. "So we chose to do nothing."

Executives at Warner, which is releasing "300" in the United States on Friday declined to discuss the studio's approach in marketing the film. Billboards and trailers, seeming to mirror Disney's tack with "The Incredibles," have focused heavily on the picture's battle action and visual flamboyance — "Prepare for Glory!" runs the most oft-repeated advertising line — while avoiding some deeper story elements that are stirring unexpectedly heated reactions, especially abroad.

Shortly after his press-junket grilling Mr. Snyder — an established commercials director, whose best-known previous credit was a remake of George Romero's "[Dawn of the Dead](#)" — ran into some surprising reactions at the Berlinale film festival in Germany. Some attendees walked out of a screening there, while others insisted on seeing its presentation of the Spartans' defense of Western civilization in the face of a Persian horde as propaganda for America's position vis-à-vis Iraq and Iran. (By contrast it drew applause at a Los Angeles screening last month.)

"Don't you think it's interesting that your movie was funded at this point?" Mr. Snyder recalled being asked in Berlin. "The implication was that funding came from the U.S. government."

When a Feb. 22 report on [Wired.com](#) carried a brief mention of the question about Mr. Bush's proper parallel in the film, Web commentators in the United States began to lock on its supposed political vibe. Yet attempts by both the left and the right to appropriate the lessons of Thermopylae clearly predated the movie.

Mr. Bush has been compared to Xerxes at least since his "axis of evil" speech in the wake of 9/11, for instance, while the Spartan cry "Molon labe," or "Come and take them," has long been a rallying call for supporters of the right to bear arms.

According to Deborah Snyder, Mr. Snyder's wife and an executive producer of "300" (which has more than a dozen credited producers of various levels, including Mark Canton and Gianni Nunnari), some changes to Mr. Miller's original story may have inadvertently amplified its political resonance.

In a key twist Mr. Snyder and his collaborators expanded the presence of Gorgo, the Spartan queen and Leonidas's wife, including, among other things, a sequence in which she inspires a wavering populace and weak-willed council to resist the Eastern armies even at the cost of battle deaths. "Her story is that she is trying to rally the troops," said Ms. Snyder, who dismissed as irrelevant a question about her and her husband's personal political philosophies.

Mr. Snyder acknowledged that Mr. Miller — who declined to be interviewed for this article — had opened the door for contemporary comparisons with his passionate, if not entirely accurate, portrayal of the ancient Spartans as saviors of Western civilization. "He'd be on their side regardless of who they were fighting, because he just loves them," Mr. Snyder said.

Thanks to computer-generated effects that contribute to "300's" highly stylized look, the film's cost, according to its makers, was considerably less than the outsized production budgets of "[Troy](#)," which did relatively well for Warner, and "[Alexander](#)," which did not. But Warner could use a hit after finishing last year behind several competitors at the domestic box office. (A success in the second half of 2006, like "[Happy Feet](#)," could only do so much to make up for duds like "[Poseidon](#).")

And the enormous expense of making and marketing any major studio picture — the combined costs appear likely to exceed \$100 million in the case of "300" — sharpens the risk in alienating a portion of the hoped-for audience.

In any case Mr. Snyder said he was pleased about the debate, though he never meant the movie to provoke it. "If that's a by-product, that's good," he said.