

Cinematic Images of the Arab World

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* Men are short of vision, and they see but that for which they look. Some look for evil and they find evil; some look for good and it is good they find.
Conversation between an Arab guide and novelist Gertrude Bell, (*The Desert and the Sown* by Gertrude Bell, 1907)

Abstract

The intent of this essay has been to focus scholarly attention on the ways in which the conventions of Hollywood settings present the Arab world. Regrettably, little attention has been given to locales of films. Thus, this initial examination of the conventions of Arab film locales, and the ways in which those conventions of place are used in film, should help reveal whole sets of cultural assumptions within the films which both Americans and Arabs consume.

This study of film conventions provides a needed historical perspective that is a requisite component of how American cinema presents the Arab world. As film conventions are documented with some precision, they offer particularly telling clues into how Hollywood has selectively framed Arabia. The author presents a convincing case that the movies inherited 19th-century European attitudes, most of which are negative, toward Arabs. He explains how the "Ay-rabland" of contemporary films is virtually the same skewed landscape that film goers have seen for more than a century, in spite of the huge social changes that have transformed in the region. Finally, the author offers an explanation as to why Hollywood's cameras continue presenting a distorted reel image, in lieu of a more realistic Arab world.

Introduction

This essay provides an overview of selected feature films which focus on the Arab world as place. The distinction of settings, embellished by costumes, properties, and music in which the action occurs, will be documented and discussed. For more than two decades this writer has researched the manner in which Arab locales are depicted in more than 600 motion pictures. Included are analyses of representative films from specific regions.

Most films do not display the diverse geographic areas of the Arab world. Instead, moviemakers project a "seen one, seem'em all" setting - a mythical "Ay-rabland," which typically has no geographical, social or political reality.

Ever since cameras started cranking, moviemakers have conjured up and presented to viewers distorted landscapes vis-a-vis "Ay-rabland." This illusory setting functions as a make-believe theme park complete with shadowy, topsy-turvy sites, patronized by us all. By interweaving central myths, the abhorrence of Arabia has embedded itself firmly in the psyche of viewers. Acting as a producer's flashcard - jackals howl when the moon is full-Hollywood's fictive, sterile and corrupt desert culture imitates yesteryear's distorted representations of Africa-as-dark continent.

Supplementing Ay-rabland are instruments of amusement and violence, found in the moviemaker's "Instant Ali Baba Kit." Property supervisors stock the kit with khanjars (curved daggers), lengthy whips, imposing scimitars, magic lamps, magic sapphire, enchanted roses, bakhur (incense), mosaic chairs and tables, giant feather fanx made of ostrich and peacock flumes, feather-backed dias', pillows embroidered in brilliant designs, Turkish baths, "Asses milk baths," hubble bubble pipes, decorative coffee pots, burning incense in brass lanterns peppered with punched out designs, orrate copper and brass trays, thinly veiled litters held aloft by elephants carrying queens and princesses, ropes and snakes which pop out of baskets when flutes are played, World War I switchboards, sunglasses and Rolexes.

Before contemplating screen portraits, we should remember that our impressions of the Arab world have derived from European, especially British and French societies. Portraits of Arab nations were brought to America's shores by colonists who were seeking economic opportunity and freedom from discrimination. And their attitudes were shaped by more than 500 years of religious and political struggles between Europe and the Arab and Turkish worlds (Hamilton 1271).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European writers were both fascinated and repelled by Arabia. The legacy of their writings in travel books, guides, and memoirs are evident in today's motion pictures (Mabro i).

For more than a century, movie goers have been offered stereotypical Arab images. Yet, the presence of film cliches is not a new phenomenon. Most of America's ethnic and religious groups have suffered from denigrating screen images. For example, producers have presented various villains-of-choice: Irish as drunks, Hispanics as slothful, Blacks as happy slaves, smiling as they pick cotton on plantations. Native Americans were painted as savages in more than 1,000 movie westerns.

The "villains" share common characteristics: their color is different, implying evil of all sorts; they speak with a foreign accent; are deceitful, and attack innocents, especially blonde western women. Stereotypes appeal to one's emotions, not one's intellect. History reveals that in the past, demeaning film portraits of Asians helped promote anti-Asian feelings in the West before, during and after World War II. In 1916, the International Film Corporation, part of William Randolph Hearst's empire, produced *Patria*, a motion picture showing Japanese soldiers invading the U.S. Here, a Japanese-American attempts to rape the heroine, as well as commit other atrocities.

In Germany, Nazi propaganda films such as *The Wandering Jew* (1940), presented Jews as venal and threatening characters, infiltrating, then dominating European society. *Wandering* and other Nazi films helped convince some Germans that it was patriotic to rid their country of Jews. Sadly, the image of today's movie Arab parallels the image of yesterday's Jew in pre-Nazi Germany.

It should be noted that "Americans, in general, have an abysmal understanding of the world." Also, they "show little appetite for increasing their understanding," says U.S. News and World Report editor, David Gergen (Serfaty 52). Americans know "less basic geography than the citizens of Sweden, West Germany, Japan, France and Canada, and considerably less than they knew forty years ago," says Gergen (Serfaty 53). When we group different Mideast nations as one and the same, this sometimes leads to serious repercussions. In 1980, at the height of the Iranian hostage crisis, a national opinion poll revealed that "70% of the Americans surveyed identified Iran, the Persian nation, as an Arab country, and 8% admittedly could not identify it. Imagine what effect this misperception has on American attitudes toward Arabs at the time" (Slade 144).

Few Americans are aware that Arab civilization gave the world a religion, a language, an alphabet. Because of Islam, advances in science and medicine by Arabs and Persians, inspired European thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci. In mathematics, Arabs invented Algebra and the use of the zero. In astronomy, they used astrolabes for navigation, star maps and celestial globes, and the concept of the center of gravity. In geography, they pioneered the use of

latitude and longitude. Arabs invented the water clock, and in music, the lute and the guitar. Their architecture inspired the Gothic style in Europe. And in agriculture, they introduced oranges, dates, sugar and cotton, and pioneered sophisticated water works and irrigation systems.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, great Arab cities with strong governments from Cordoba to Mecca to Bagdad, were centers of trade and learning. Their schools drew students from all over the Arab world. They developed a tradition of legal learning, of secular literature and philosophical and scientific thought, in which the Jews played an important part.

As a result of Fulbright-Hayes Lectureship grants and several speaking tours sponsored by the United States Information Service (USIS), I have lived and traveled extensively throughout the region, having visited 15 nations in North Africa, Southwest Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. Prior to my sojourns, which began in the early 1970s, I, like most Americans, had considered the region to be uncultivated. My sentiments were shaped not from personal experiences, but from a constant diet of allegorical panoramas on silver screens, I was not aware that the region was one-and-a-half times as large as the United States. No, did I know that approximately 250 million Arabs lived in 21 nations, which stretch from the Strait of Hormuz to the Rock of Gibraltar. Eventually, I came to discover that, like America, the Arab world accommodated diverse citizens: farmers, mechanics, bakers, artists, engineers, homemakers, storekeepers, doctors, lawyers, educators and business persons.

I have come to know a people who share religion, heritage and history. Many business and government leaders attended college in the West, which may help to explain why the region hosts more than 100 Rotary and Lion's Clubs. Most Arabs living in villages and cities reside in homes or apartments. The majority are poor, not rich; most do not dwell in desert tents; most have never seen an oil well or mounted a camel and none live in palace harems or take excursions on "magic carpets." Their dress is traditional or western; the variety of their garb and lifestyle defies stereotyping.

Geographically, Arabia is at the center of our modern civilization; it's the point where Asia, Europe and Africa come together. There is no single Arab nation. There are, instead, distinct peoples who reside in three distinct areas: North Africa (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, Somalia, Tunisia); the "Fertile Crescent" (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, occupied Palestine and Syria); and the Arabian Peninsula (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the Republic of Yemen).

Strategically, the area is important because it holds two-thirds of the world's known oil reserves. In 1991, as a result of Operation Desert Shield and

Desert Storm, more than half a million young American men and women went to the area. Also, this region is where the first civilizations originated. The land gave the world an alphabet, writing, agriculture and the three major monotheistic religions. The Arab world is a history rich with scholars and a common language steeped in devotion. Most Arabs are Muslims, but two million Arab Jews and 15 million Arab Christians live in the region (Hayes1).

There exists a mixed ethnicity in the Arab world -- from 5000 B.C. to the present. The Scots, Greeks, French, Romans, English and others marched through the region. Not surprisingly, Arabs have black, kinky hair, dark eyes and olive complexions and as well as freckles, red hair and blue eyes. Occasionally, dialects pose a communications dilemma; a Yemini talking with a Moroccan may encounter the same difficulties experienced by a Texan when speaking with a Bostonian. Also, the differences between each nation's rendition of Arabic induce their own variants; what is mazbut to an Egyptian seeking a dose of sugar for his quhwah (coffee) is wessed to a Syrian.

The Arabs boast of their common heritage, rich culture and history, and exceptional hospitality. Most Arabs I know are warm, outgoing and hospitable people. While visiting Bahrain, I sought to escape Manama's noon day summer heat and traffic snarls, I meditated at the entrance of a cool and peaceful mosque. Soon, Mohammed, a smiling taxi driver who had just finished saying his ritual prayers, approached me. Noticing I was an overtired visitor, he insisted on driving me to my friend's home, gratis. Throughout the region, such gestures are typical; people practice this lasting proverb: "Even this small room is space enough for 1,000 friends." Whether Arabs speak English or not, they often go completely out of their way to escort you to your intended destination.

All-too-often, movie costume, transport, scene and casting directors ignore or gloss over realities. To some producers, black scarves and cloaks relect a sign of backwardness, oppression. The opposite is true. When out-of-doors, to preserve modesty and to prevent the scrutiny of strangers, some Arab women wear the hijab, a scarf used to cover the head but which leaves the face exposed. Others don the abaya, a black floor-length cloak covering the body. Underneath the abaya, they wear bright-colored silk or cotton dresses. Arabs wear abayas for several reasons; political, economic, religious and cultural. Some seek to disassociate themselves from images of sexually promiscuous western women appearing on European and American television shows, such as *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*.

Interestingly, yards of dark cloth adorning Arab Muslim women is similar to the apparel worn by Christian nuns and the (Israeli) Haredim women, says novelist Robin Morgan. The Haredim "must wear their own version of the veil. Their shaven and sheiteled (wigged) heads must be fully covered in public, their

long skirts and sleeves must conceal . . . wrists and ankles." In Israel and in the occupied territories, writes Morgan,"the Haredim wear dark colors, . . . " The flocks of Christian nuns also go veiled." (Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover*, p. 266). Also, some Arab women and girls don veils, and the traditional hijab, an ebony head scarf that covers head, neck and eyes.

When projecting Arab men in western suits, some costumers distort, placing garish, long multicolored headdresses on their heads; some striped headcloths blanket the entire body. Other designers are more accurate, presenting actors in thobes, white, ankle-length, loose-fitting cotton garments resembling lengthy white shirts. In Arab nations, such garb is appropriate, sufficiently comfortable for desert sun and heat. During winter months, the thobes are covered by mishlahs, floor-length robes of coffeehouses, is customary. In Lebanon, I recall walking with my cousin to the village coffeehouse (Ah'we) to meet with friends; evenings villagers gathered to drink Arabic coffee, munch on almonds, smoke water pipes (arkelees) and tell delightful tales.

In the movies, these Arab realities are ignored; make-believe settings dominate motion pictures. Some film titles accent abracadabra- fantasy-type locales, others focus on "exotic" cities, and still others highlight desert ruins and outposts, which act as efficient backdrops for sex-and-slaughter-in-sand scenarios.

For almost 100 years, scores of scenarios have been played out in deserts (the sand dunes appeared bonafide but in many films the rocky hills were Californian), ragged black and white tents, cafes, slave markets, oases and palm trees, ruins, forts, hotels, tombs and oil wells. *The Sheik* (1921) helped initiate the theme: "uncivilized Arabs fighting in savage deserts." In *The Sheik*, the protagonist, Ahmed, helps auction off Arab women and then abducts a European damsel. Explains Ahmed: "When an Arab sees a woman he wants, he takes her!"

Historically, wasteland settings reveal routine melodramas which feature Arabs vs. British forces and/or legionnaires. Armed with up-to- date weapons, rifles, machine guns and a few tanks, the outnumbered forces fire away at hordes of charging Arabs wielding sabers. Conversely, in *Beau Sabreur* (1928), the obese Sheikh El-Hamel employs advanced technology. He frustrates western heroes by desert mines, which he explodes in a secret chamber by means of an electric switch.

Years later, even Elvis Presley had difficulty coping with scoundrels in the sand. In *Harum Scarum* (1965), at the "Palace of Jackals," Elvis survives the "death of a thousand cuts." The Arab female assassin warns him about a land with "oil," but without "cars" or an "airport." She adds: "When you come to our

country you will be stepping back two thousand years." *Paradise* (1982) focuses on savage Arabs who, in 1823, attack a caravan enroute from Baghdad to Damascus. Led by the Jackal, who chopped off the head of an American woman, the knaves gallop through the desert in pursuit of two western youths. The dressed-in-black Jackal is determined to take and rape the young English heroine. Why does he fail? Because two chimps wearing burnouses, and an American youth, out-smart him.

At times, scene designers augment desert vistas by inserting mountain hide-outs, alleyways, suqs (market places), caves, dingy old prison cells and dungeons. In Arabian Nights fantasies, producers play to camel stops in and around ancient Arabia, particularly Baghdad. Viewers are treated to lavishly gaudy sets, complete with harem quarters in gleaming marble palaces topped with shining cupolas. Mabkharas (incense burners) and Egyptian/Aztec decor, are as mixed as the characters' accents, melding civilizations as different as Chinese, Indian and Persian.

Confused free-for-alls feature plenty of action in the "Land of the Cyclops;" appearing are rich-colored carpets, stationary and airborne, nasty ghouls, giant two-headed birds of prey, 12-headed monsters, mechanical horses and serpent-women. In *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), an evil magician places an Arab woman in a large basket, tosses in a snake, garbles magic words and out pops a blue-faced serpent- woman, complete with four arms.

The Thief of Baghdad (1924) helped introduce fantasy abracadabra fables, such as *Arabian Adventure* (1979). Baghdad, "the dream city of the ancient East," is featured in both films. In *Thief*, however, religion plays a positive role. Mosques and Holy Korans are as significant as imaginative settings. The protagonist's innumerable adventures culminate, when, mounted on a winged horse, the thief topples a dragon and sea spider. In *Adventure*, the heroic prince topples both rebel troops and metal monsters. *Thief's* panoramas are impressive: the Cavern of Enchanted Trees, Citadel of the Moon, the Midnight Sea and Mountains of Dread Adventure yield exciting visual treats. The final frames in both films show the heroes saving Baghdad; they triumph in flying carpet duels and fly off with the beloved princesses.

Images of a thousand disappointments and delights enter the collective conscience as falsification and myth. Often, exotic fairy-tale atmospheres are supplemented by the Egyptian desert, countryside and rivers. Cinematographers show houseboats and steamships and feluccas (small sailboats) skimming effortlessly over the Nile. Near river banks, grass and mud-brick huts appear in the shadows of the Sphinx, pyramids, obelisks, temples and other Egyptian ruins. Desert excavation sites feature ancient scrolls, Egyptologists' studies (where else to conceal the mummies?), and

underground treasure tombs complete with secret passages, inscribed hieroglyphic curses and skeletons tucked between coffins underneath pyramids.

In suqs, antiquated taxis, overstuffed limousines and trucks dispute narrow streets with **arbanas** (one horse-carriages), herds of camels, sheep and donkey carts. The melee sends "the milling crowd dashing for cover; carts of goods are overturned and clouds of dust envelop the scene," writes Professor Linda L. Lambe (Lambe 8). "The everyday clamor and swirl of confusion is multiplied," says Lambe, when charlatans hawk slaves and goods on unsafe narrow, dark and dusty streets. To illustrate the influence settings have on viewers, one of Lambe's brightest students remarked, after viewing clips from a number of Arab films in class: "The pushy open-market vendors, the harem girls, the snake charmer, and the fanatical Islamic swordsman.... Surely such things are actually present in the Middle East" (Lambe 25).

Middle Eastern music--cymbals, flutes, violins, derbukes (drums or bagpipes made of animal skin), tambourines, and lutes--alerts viewers to anticipate other properties of destruction: evil medallions ("it means death to whoever holds it"), concealed poison in rings, branding irons and stretching wheels of anguish ('punishment of the slow death") prevail in torture chambers, and venomous darts and "poison asps" dominate Sultans' dwellings.

Hypodermic needles are vogue in several contemporary films. In *Black Sunday* (1977) a Palestinian terrorist disguised as a nurse pokes an Israeli intelligence agent with a poisoned hypodermic needle. In *Trenchcoat* (1983), Arab sheikhs inject the kidnapped American heroine with a hypodermic and in the *Black Stallion Returns* (1983), an Arab cur thrusts an Arabian stallion with a hypodermic (Michalek 7).

Producers augment Ay-rabland's landscapes and Instant Ali Baba Kits with unsightly stock characters in sundry silhouettes and sizes. Costumers reveal Arab women as either being clad very heavily or very scantily. They often appear as enslaved vixens in the marketplace's auction block, or as bending belly dancers in cafes and courtyards; seldom are they seen as being loved or as loving others. Although harems no longer exist in the region--"the word 'harem' simply means the segregated part of the house where strange men do not have access-- costumers display harem maidens in satin or transparent slacks with tight-fitting vests which highlight as much bosom as possible. The girls don tassels and wear coquettish tiny black, blue and white veils, often semitransparent (Mabro 3).

Because some costumers perceive women as men's slaves, not as men's partners, they adorn Arab women from head to toe with yards of black cloth. This bundles-of-black fixation conveys a warning to possible suitors: the

woman's attractiveness is "tainted with the blackness of sin." Like Americans, many Arabs elect to wear one fashion in the privacy of the home, then another style of clothing when mingling in a public place. The women who wear scarves, veils, and cloaks in public do so out of love and modesty. Some wear this mode of dress for religious, economic and sexual reasons, or as a form of political protest. Customs and style of dress are not dictated in the region; many opt to put on Western-style clothing, which range from blue jeans to Parisian dresses. Others opt to put on the veil, the hijab, a head scarf that covers head, neck and part of the face, and the abaya, a cloak to cover the body. Interestingly, costumers only place Arabian garb on women-of-the west when these distressed heroines are being made ready to fend off Arab scoundrels seeking to seduce the spotless super stars.

Excluded from screen wardrobes are exquisitely designed clothes from Syria, Morocco, Jordan and other nations. Beautifully embroidered Palestinian dresses which reveal "the history of Palestine," contain representative examples of patchwork, of cross-stitch, and of the elaborate crouching associated with cities. For women of Bethlehem, for example, "the costumes reflected "their standing in society--their economic status, whether married or single, the town or area they were from" (Grutz 38). A colorful **jilayah**, or coat from Galilee--"appliqued with bright patches of red, green, and yellow taffeta" and embroidered in a myriad of vivid patterns--hints at "origins that might date back to Joseph's coat of many colors," writes Grutz (35).

As for men, symbols of treachery are found in their head-gear and worry beads. The Arabs call worry beads or prayer beads the **misbaha**. Scenarios frequently show a tricky Arab man contemplating dastardly deeds, moving the beads--made of wood, coral, amber, plastic, glass, mother-of-pearl or almost any other hard material--rhythmically between thumb and index finger so that one bead clicks against the next one. What viewers fail to comprehend is that each bead represents a reference to God and in Arabic there are 99 such expressions. A 33-bead **misbaha** would require the cycle to be repeated three times.

Costumers cover the heads of male Arab characters with black and white or red and white **kuffiyehs**. On heads of others, they place red fezes with or without tassels, multi-colored turbans and tarboushes. Often, they cover wily character types with white **thobes** ("walking bedsheets"), which blaze with slated sunlight in casbahs; the caricatures prance about in pointed babouche slippers. Covering the man's body are khaki-colored fatigues, or striped and checkered robes; the robes and some **kuffiyehs** resemble glaring tablecloths pinched from Italian restaurants. If not attired in pajama-type **thobes**, costumers show men wearing fashionable suits with red fezzes, turbans, or lengthy **kuffiyehs**, a sight I have yet to see.

When cinematographers focus on Cairo and other North African municipalities, viewers are initially introduced by the mosques' slender minarets gleaming in the background. Shady cafes and puzzling bazaars follow; they function as symbols of backwardness. Most screen suqs resemble not the reality--a wide variety of restaurants and shops with friendly proprietors--but emulate Hollywood's *Algiers*' casbah settings. Cinematic images reveal mazes of crooked cobblestone walkways, swallow up unsuspecting tourists as well as Western thieves, seeking temporary sanctuary from the law. Uneven stone steps lead to shadowy and hidden passageways where beggars squat before graffiti on walls.

Consider the similarities of *Algiers* (1938, a re-make of the French film, *Pepe le Moko*, 1936) and *Casbah* (1948, a re-make of *Algiers*). In both films, Algeria's lower depths appear as a decrepit thicket--a sweeping maze of narrow winding passages. In *Algiers*, the narrator cautions, "There is not one casbah, but hundreds; there are thousands. It's easy to go in, but not so easy to come out." Several French policemen explain the area to a recently arrived inspector. "The reality of the casbah is something stranger than anything you could have dreamed," says one. "It's like "entering another world; a melting pot for all the sins of the earth," says another. Warns the third: It's "the filth of centuries."

Algiers and *Casbah* begin with the muezzin's call to pray, followed by sounds of an upbeat Parisian tune, and a haunting Arabic melody. The implication here is the clash of cultures. In *Algiers*, the narrator cautions, the "casbah's population includes many...drifters and outcasts...and criminals." Confirms a policeman: "it's always been that way." *Casbah* opens with an Algerian guide gliding western tourists off a bus. He advises: It's "not wise to be left alone in the streets of the casbah." Nor is it wise to trust *Casbah*'s Arab counselor, whose blatant flirtations aggravate Western tourists.

The scenarios focus not on Algerians in love, but on romance between the French couple, Gabrielle and Pepe. Says *Algiers*' narrator: "Supreme on these heights rules one man, Pepe le Moko, wanted by the French police." Pepe loathes the casbah; he's repulsed by his environment--beggars, whores, corrupt merchants, thieves--and longs to return to "marvelous" Paris "where they speak French."

Gabrielle does not say to Pepe, "take me to the casbah"; instead she silently screams, get me out of the casbah. Pepe concurs. "Gotta get out of here. The dirt and the noise, day in and day out." In *Casbah*, Pepe explodes, "It's like being in a grave. I can't stand much more of it." To him, death offers more freedom than the casbah. Both Films conclude with the inspector saying to the fatally wounded Pepe, "I'm sorry Pepe, he (the inspector's colleague) thought you were going to escape." Says Pepe, "And so I have, my friend."

The scene is played *Outside* the casbah, by the ship, with Gabrille on board, bound for Europe.

At times, directors transfer the action to seaports, complete with hodgepodge costuming, language and geography. Consider *Morocco* (1930) and *Song of Scheherazade* (1947). In *Morocco*, the few women who appear don not abayas, but Spanish garb; they speak not Arabic, but Spanish. *Scheherazade* opens with two Russian soldiers, Rimsky-Korsakoff and a count, discussing their upcoming liberty in "Morocco, a Spanish port." *Scheherazade's* producers and writers project Morocco, an Arab nation, as Spain. Although flamenco dancing accompanied by the penetrating Moorish tunes of the cante *jondo* with its rhythms separated by slight pauses is of Arab origin, viewers hear not Arabic songs of the Moors, but traditional Russian and Spanish songs accompanied by flashy dance routines (Salloum 3).

The Arabs of Morocco appear briefly in two scenes, as vendors mulling about in the background. Also, serving a Spanish family is "Hassan, the little Arab boy," who is mostly invisible, always silent. Although Korsakoff's opera, *Scheherazade*, was inspired by the tales of a beautiful "Arabian" woman, in this film, the beautiful Cara, a Spanish lass, arouses Korsakoff's passion.

Why did filmmakers transform locales and characters? Did they think American viewers would not accept the film's hero, Russian composer Korsakoff, romancing an Arab woman? Whatever the reasons, consider an early scene which takes place inside the Cafe Oriental; Cara wears a veil. A male patron inquires what other patrons ask: "How'd a nice girl like you come to be in a (bad) place like this?" The implication here? The Spanish Cara is better than other women, mostly Moroccan, who work at this seedy spot. When Cara departs the Cafe Oriental, she tosses off the veil, confirming her emancipation.

Romance and adventure among the sand dunes is the theme of the Kalem Company's, *Captured by Bedouins* (1912). In *Bedouins*, the Egyptian desert is a treacherous setting for westerners and Arabs alike. Filmed at 'Luxor, Egypt, on the Nubian Desert," the film opens with Doris, the American heroine, visiting the Sphinx. Here, she is "discovered by prowling bedouins" and taken to their "native village" where she's held captive inside a straw hut resembling a tepee. Doris' suitor, an Englishman by the name of Lieutenant Grieg, poses as an Arab and rides to the rescue. States the title card, "A Strange Arab," as Grieg's face is covered with black polish. A shoot 'em up ensues, creeping bedouins on camels versus khaki-clad Egyptian soldiers with fezes on horses. During the melee, Grieg and Doris hide behind a camel (in a Cowboy-versus-Indian film, a horse or covered wagon serve as protection) and fire away at charging bedouins, who eventually retreat.

Opulent tents in mountain ranges complete with sand dunes, represent

Samari, a mythical Arab nation, in *I Cover the War* (1937). In *War*, "fanatic tribesmen" reappear; they pine for rifles to use against the British. When an American newsreel producer arrives, the British officer, wearing pith helmet and khakis, greets him, saying: "Welcome to Samari. Although why in the world you should come here, I don't know."

Several scenes focus on the "Oasis Hotel," and the suq where veiled women saunter and bearded beggar spies dwell. Additional action occurs inside the British compound and at Muffadi's, the rebel leader's, tent encampment. On entering his tent, Muffadi wears a fez and a white western suit; his followers are mute. Moments later he greets his comrades wearing a burnoose and flowing robe; they cheer. Muffadi rides off with his "horde of tribesmen" to attack the compound. But the Arab's reign of terror ends as British pilots arrive in time to drop bombs on the charging "horde."

The British and Americans topple Arab hordes in *Adventures in Iraq* (1943). Here, "the wastelands of Iraq," complete with "devil worshippers," and Ali-Babble dialogue are featured. Opening frames show a plane encountering technical difficulties and being forced to land. Suddenly, "Arab tribes that lie in the foothills and come out only to rob and kill," kidnap three westerners, Tess, Doug and George. Previously, George had warned Doug: "Don't land here. Try to find a place with some civilization." Look, says George, "a castle in this godforsaken wilderness." The castle, complete with "sacrificial altar," is a "palace and fortress, all in one." Boasts castle-keeper Sheikh Ali, "many nations covet my oil." Ali considers Hitler's Germany a possible market for his kingdom's oil.

Several scenes show Iraqis bowing before a serpent carved in a wall, which represents "the image of Satan." Explains Ali: "The religion of my people has always been primitive idolatry and superstition." Boasts Ali, "We know very well we are barbarians." Wearing a turban with his western suit, Ali apologizes for the "medieval punishment" about to be inflicted on the captors. Tess and Doug are forced to tolerate the crowd's insults and threats as they are carried through the suq on chair lifts. *Iraq* concludes with the western hostages being rescued not by the Foreign Legion but by Captain Carson of the United States Air Force, who arrives in the nick of time. When the Iraqis hesitate to release the prisoners, Carson orders his pilots to dump a few bombs on Gotsi, the Iraqi fictional kingdom. On seeing the telling effects of U.S. firepower, Sheikh Ali capitulates, bowing to the "superior force."

Many desert films later, western heroics are again displayed in *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy* (1952). Cameras focus on Egypt's pyramids, complete with secret passageways and hidden treasures, tombs and a sacred medallion. The story concerns Klaris, a prowling mummy, who still lives after

4,000 years in musty wrappings. Tagged "bandages with eyes," Klaris is kept alive by drinking a mysterious elixir. Although it's simple for writers to terminate shifty Egyptian villains, it's arduous for them to annihilate skulking mummies. In *Mummy*, however, property masters set off a dynamite charge in the tomb's sacred temple, destroying the tattered Klaris and revealing the legendary treasure. To preserve the legend of Klaris, Abbott and Costello transform the temple into a nightclub. *Mummy* concludes with interior shots of the duo's new establishment, "Cafe' Klaris." Here, disguised as mummies, more than a dozen band members perform.

Nearly three decades later, Egypt's cities, tombs, and desert remain menacing backdrops for Westerners who conduct research on Pharaohs. In *Sphinx* (1981), no sooner does Erica, the American Egyptologist, clear customs in Cairo, she is harassed on the street by assertive Egyptian youths begging for cigarettes. Other adolescents pinch her buttocks. Erica's problems accelerate when she announces herself at a suq's antique shop. She is greeted by the murdered body of an unscrupulous art dealer; he was killed with a saber. In her hotel room, fearful of being robbed, and doubting the security of the hotel's safe, she tucks away her valuables.

Filmed in Egypt, most of the action in *Sphinx* takes place in and around Luxor, especially the gigantic monuments of the Valley of the Kings. Here, Erica befriends Ahmed Khazzan, an official of the antiquities division of the United Nations. She also stumbles onto a smuggling operation designed to relieve Egypt of all the treasures left in the country's tombs and museums. Prior to rescuing Erica from a sealed tomb, the dying Ahmed explains: "Egypt's great natural resource? Death."

In order to record Egypt's historic landscape, producers from many nations visit Cairo, the cinematic centre of the Arab world. Yet, Egyptian officials and imagemakers are concerned because they believe Hollywood does not project their nation and its peoples in a fair or favorable light. *Sphinx*, for example, is banned in Egypt because of a highly improbable scene in which an Egyptian policeman tries to rape Erica inside the police shed at Saqqara, a busy archaeological tourist attraction. This attempted rape scene was not in the screenplay shown to Egyptian authorities; after *Sphinx's* film crew left Egypt, producers shot the scene in Europe and added it to the footage (McDougal 23).

As with *I Cover the War and Adventures in Iraq*, American ingenuity, air power, up-to-date armaments and desert forts are featured in films focusing on Palestinians. In *Prisoner in the Middle* (1974), a B- 52 bomber on a routine mission to the Middle East, develops mechanical trouble and goes off course. A nuclear warhead is accidentally jettisoned, landing on the Jordanian side of the Jordanian-Israel border. On leave in Jerusalem, Colonel Stevens, a U.S.

officer, is asked to locate and "deactivate" the warhead. Israeli troops also seek the device. Desert scenes focus, not on Israelis and Jordanians, but on unshaven Palestinian "terrorists" clad in fatigues and wearing red and white, or black and white **kuffiyehs**. When asked by Stevens what they plan on "doing with that thing," the Palestinian Major replies: "Very simple, use it. One bomb, no Jews."

The action begins in the desert with Israeli girls singing on a school bus. Suddenly, Palestinians shoot off a rocket and subsequent frames reveal bloodied bodies of innocents and a toy bear. Property supervisors often use toys and dolls among rubble when producers opt to show Palestinians slaughtering children, especially in films such as *Wanted Dead or Alive* (1987) and *Death Before Dishonor* (1987). Prisoner's Israeli soldiers deride the Palestinian villains as either having "hash" for sale or being "too busy making love with their sheep to do business." The contemporary Jordanian desert setting reveals Palestinians on camels committing barbaric acts, similar to primitive deeds carried out by Indians in Hollywood's early Westerns. They not only slaughter schoolgirls but one rapes an Israeli woman. An Israeli soldier is torn apart when Palestinians tie his arms to two horses. Also, the screenplay contends that more than 15 Palestinians are not sufficiently strong or bright enough to load the captured warhead onto the back of a pick-up truck. *Prisoner* concludes at an abandoned fort where the outnumbered Israelis, assisted by Colonel Stevens, terminate scores of Palestinians.

An American soldier directs his guns at Kuwaitis in *Best Defense* (1984). *Defense* features Wylie Cooper, an American officer stationed in Kuwait; Cooper pokes fun at dumb Kuwaiti soldiers with Italian accents. The unfit soldiers are unable to steer an innovative U.S. tank; they play with themselves in locker rooms. The producers opt not to show a progressive and highly developed Kuwait, complete with modern highways, mosaic twin water towers, museums, beach resorts, hotels, gardens or arabesque government buildings. Instead, Officer Cooper belittles Kuwait, which is represented on screen by gobs of camels and untidy street people mulling about in messy **suqs**. In one scene, uniformed American officers and Arabs in **thobes** appear on a reviewing stand; a U.S. officer repeatedly stumbles when trying to explicate commonalities. "Kuwait and America share a common heritage. Like. Ah...Ah...Ah...Your desert. We, (Americans) too, have deserts."

Defense shows the Iraqi air force dropping bombs on Americans and Kuwaitis. The scenario further confuses viewers when Kuwaiti women dressed in black, and youths, toss stones not at the invading forces, but at Officer Cooper. He grunts to the Kuwaiti soldiers, "pull out your prayer rugs." Cooper then points the tank's guns on Kuwaiti youths: "Okay, you desert rats, now you die." Interestingly, *Best Defense* is based on Robert Grossbach's 1975 novel,

Easy and Hard Ways Out, which concerns Vietnam and North Vietnamese aggression.

Settings shift from the desert to eastern Mediterranean locales in *Navy Seals* (1990). The viewer encounters "scum-bag" Palestinians wearing **kuffiyehs**. Here, "these cheese-dicks" shoot at a U.S. helicopter and kill one crewman and capture another. Also, action occurs aboard ships, in warehouses, "Arab strongholds" in Lebanon's dungeons and fortresses, and in Beirut, the "ass-hole of misery." In *Seals*, Palestinian "ragheads" and "fuckers" seize American-made Stinger missiles, "the ideal weapon for terrorist actions." Thus, the movie focuses primarily on bombed out Beirut where the SEALs destroy both the missiles and the "terrorists."

Initially, the SEALs, disguised as Palestinians, land "somewhere in the Arab world." The "somewhere" is represented by a fortress where American prisoners are held. Advanced U.S. weaponry is employed to blow up "a piece of shit" and "his assholes." Their hideout is engulfed in flames. Next, still in search of the missiles, the SEALs board a merchant ship "off the coast of Syria." Arab passengers on deck intermingle with "terrorists," sheep and goats. One wonders whether the producers intended to have viewers judge the Arab travelers by the company they keep. Midway through the film, producers insert a television set. A late-breaking news item is projected in order to enforce the "Arab lands as violent places" theme; the TV newscaster reveals "Algerians" have attacked "a civilian aircraft."

Final frames reveal the defeated "terrorists" chasing after the SEALs in a Mercedes. Missiles destroyed, the SEALs look to rendezvous with their submarine. One SEAL sighs, "Looks the same. It all looks the same."

In the credits, *Seals'* producers extend "thanks to the Department of Defense and the Department of Navy." But, according to J.P. Mitchell, Commander, U.S. Navy and Assistant Chief of Information, "the Navy did not formally cooperate with Orion Pictures' *Navy Seals*." Added Commander Mitchell, "Quite recently the Navy denied support to another SEAL movie. Support was denied not only because of the inaccurate portrayal of the Navy SEAL community but also because of the negative portrayal of Arabs in the Middle East."

Summary. The Middle East Peace Conference, beginning in 1991, provides moviemakers with opportunities to unlearn stereotypical depictions of the region. They could challenge students and the general public by developing and presenting scenarios which display a wide range of costumes, properties and landscapes. Continued representation of the Arab world, complete with mythical, Ay-rabland settings and Instant Ali Baba Kits, benefits no one. As President John F. Kennedy said: "The great enemy of

truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and realistic" (Shaheen 10).

The most distorted and misunderstood aspect of the Arab world is that its landscapes have markedly changed since the early 1900s. The trouble is that the screen images of Arabia have not changed in the past 90 years--except to worsen. Consider this scene extracted from a late-1940s *Movietone* newsreel entitled, "Immigrants Arrive in Palestine." Summing up Palestine as place, the narrator states: "These Jewish immigrants found a hostile land, filled with swamps, snakes, scorpions and Arabs." The insinuation here being, Palestine was a parched land populated by barbaric peoples awaiting civilized conquerors to enter (AMC Channel, May 1991).

Repetitious and negative images of Palestine and other Arab nations literally sustain adverse portraits across generations. There is a commanding link between make-believe aberrations and the real world. Unless moviemakers take time to become informed about genuine landscapes, Arab settings on movie screens will continue to exhibit properties of terror such as guns, bombs, tanks and air bases. Viewers will proceed to see alongside camels, goats and donkeys, sleek limousines, complete with tinted windows. The sleek automobiles let them (villains in **thobes** and/or fatigues) see you, but you can't see them. And Arabesque military forts, complete with basement torture chambers, will continue to supplement ornate twelfth-century palaces.

Scholars and imagemakers understand that there is a dangerous and cumulative effect when static and offensive pictures remain unchallenged. Yet, as of this writing producers remain adamant; they selectively structure Ay-rabland as outlandish "over there" scenes for stale camel-operas. Perhaps ignorance and fear of the "different" prevents them from projecting more accurate pictures. Perhaps filmmakers are not conscious of their own motives or messages.

The stereotype exists for several reasons. First, ignorance, the handmain of bigotry is partly responsible. Most Americans simply do not know the Arab peoples, nor do they know much about Islam, even though there are approximately 6-8 million American Muslims. Indolence and apathy play a role. Many writers and producers are simply too lazy, or simply unwilling, to make an effort to alter their preconceptions of the Arab peoples. The Israeli-Arab conflict, in spite of current peace negotiations is also a key cause. Films such as *Iron Eagle*, *The Delta Force* and others that were produced in Israel, in cooperation with the Israeli government, propel audiences to hate Arabs.

Another reason for the stereotype is greed. Films such as *True Lies* (1994) which ridicule and dehumanize Arabs, attract audiences, to box offices. Thus, the studios make money--lots of it. The lack of presence is yet another cause.

Few American-Arabs work in the industry. There is only one prominent producer with Arab roots, director Moustafa Akkad, the producer of *Lion of the Desert* and *The Messenger*. Arab nations, too, share the blame. Films humiliating Arabs, *Ishtar*, *Jewel of the Nile*, *Protocol* and others, are filmed in Morocco and Tunisia. Before giving producers permission to film in their respective countries, why didn't government officials peruse the screenplays, check for stereotypes. Also, to this writer's knowledge, no Arab official has ever contacted a major U.S. film studio, suggesting a dialogue to discuss the hurtful stereotypes. Finally, American-Arabs and American-Muslims too, are responsible. For some unexplained reason, too few speak out against the stereotype; others are reluctant to support those engaged in combatting the negative images. For example, there is not one Distinguished University Research Chair which has been established to document, teach courses on the Arab and Muslim stereotype.

Stereotyped settings may be slow to fade away, because so much of the cinematic library dates back for generations. Most probably, previous panoramas served as the imagemaker's visual lesson plan. Exposed to scores of past portraits, perhaps producers realized Arabian expanses were effortless to clone. Also, dreary Ay-rabland may remain attractive to cinematographers because their cliché vistas have gone largely unchallenged, a result of complacency about the misrepresentation of the region. Or perhaps imagemakers simply do not care that the Arab world emerges as a dissimilar environment.

Donned in different garb and speaking a different language, Arabs continue to be shown as shadowy types, worshiping a "different" deity. Nearly all peoples are lumped together as a mass of wretched beings in need of mental modification. Myopic emphasis on desert dunes, where Western heroes vanquish Arab villains, are reminiscent of open plains scenes where just-like-us Cowboys overpower "different" Indians. Note scholars Miller and Woll, "From the silent era to today, the Arab image has stalked the silent screen as a metaphor for anti-Western values" Sharply "etched in black, Arabs appear as lustful and exotic villains to Western heroes and heroines" (Miller and Woll 179).

Ay-rabland's inhabitants herald an almost Satanic presence. Lurking behind Saharan landscapes, Arabs "live by sword and intrigue and function as ultimate un-assimilable aliens," threateningly different from us (Ibid). Author Robert J. Lifton explains the possible consequences of selective framing, "It's much easier to make an enemy out of somebody who looks different, who is from a different race, a different background, a different religion" (Lifton PBS).

How much longer must viewers wait before imagemakers unlearn their Ay-

rabland? When might they expect to see rational pictures? Fresh scenarios could illuminate, not darken, perceptions. The ultimate result would then be an image of the Arab world as neither hell or heaven, but as a fitting component of planet earth

"Men (and women) hit only what they aim at," writes Thoreau. "Therefore, though they fail immediately, they had better aim at something high." Because the telling effects of insidious settings narrow our vision and blur reality, moviemakers could not aim higher than by working to dispel unsightly portraits of the Arab world. It becomes ultimately an issue of conscience and morality.

Works Cited

Note. The author selected representative films based on the number of film titles for each of the regions discussed.

North Africa: 78 titles, total. 59 titles relate to Egypt: Mummy, 13, Cleopatra, 9, Nile, 8, Egypt/Egyptians, 8, Cleopatra, 9, Pharaoh, 5, Sphinx, 2, Suez, 2, Tomb, 1, Pyramids, 1, and Scarab, 1. And 18 titles relate to Morocco, (18) Morocco, 9, Tangier, 6, Casablanca, 3.

Abracadabra Arabs and Settings: 33 titles, total. Sinbad, 9, Aladdin, 7, Ali Baba 5, Harem, 5, A Thousand and One Nights, 4, Hajji Baba, 1, Magic Carpet, 1, Sultan, 1.

Arabian Peninsula: 17 titles, total. Arabian/Arab, 9, Arabia, 8.

Fertile Crescent: 16 titles relate to Iraq: Baghdad, 12, Babylon, 3, Iraq, 1.

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Filmography

<u>year</u>	<u>Film</u>	<u>Director</u>
1912	<i>Captured By Bedouins</i>	Kalem Company
1921	<i>The Sheik</i>	George Melford
1924	<i>Thief of Baghdad</i>	Raoul Walsh
1928	<i>Beau Sabreur</i>	John Waters
1930	<i>Morocco</i>	Josef von Sternberg
1937	<i>I Cover the War</i>	Anhur Lubin
1938	<i>Algiers</i>	John Cromwell
1943	<i>Adventures in Iraq</i>	D. Ross Lenderman
1947	<i>Song of Scherazade</i>	Walter Reisch
1948	<i>Casbah</i>	John Berry
1955	<i>Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy</i>	Charles Lamount
1965	<i>Harum Scarum</i>	Gene Nelson
1974	<i>Prisoner in the Middle</i>	James O'Connor
1979	<i>Arabian Adventure</i>	Kevin Connor
1981	<i>Sphinx</i>	Franklin J. Schaffner
1982	<i>Paradise</i>	Stuart Gillard
1984	<i>Best Defense</i>	Willard Huyck
1990	<i>Navy Seals</i>	Lewis Teague
1935	<i>The Last Outpost</i>	Louis Gasnier
1937	<i>Ali Baba Goes to Town</i>	David Butler
1937	<i>Slave Girl</i>	Charles Launont
1939	<i>Beau Geste</i>	
	(Other versions: 1926, 1966, 1977)	William Wellman
1939	<i>The Four Feathers</i>	
	(Other versions: 1915, 1929)	Zoltan Korda
1941	<i>Outlaws of the Desert</i>	Howard Bretherton
1942	<i>Road to Morocco</i>	David Butler
1944	<i>Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves</i>	Arthur Lubin
1949	<i>Bagdad</i>	Charles Lamont
1958	<i>Desert Hell</i>	Charles M. Warren
1963	<i>Captain Sinbad</i>	Byron Haskin
1964	<i>John goldfarb, Please Come Home</i>	
1979	<i>Ashanti</i>	J. Lee Thompson
1984	<i>The Ambassador</i>	Richard Fleischer
1986	<i>Iron Eagle</i>	J. Lee Thompson
1985	<i>Jewel of the Nile</i>	Sidney J. Furie
1987	<i>Ishtar</i>	Lewis Teague
1990	<i>Duck Tales The Movie: Treasure of the Lost Lamp</i>	Eliane May
1991	<i>The Sheltering Sky</i>	Bob Hathcock Bernardo Bertolucci