**Week 7 Script: Arab Representations in Hollywood Film, 1920s–1980s**

Slide 2: Silent Era 1920–1940s: Silent era; 87 films

1. exotic adventure melodramas, like *The Sheik:* violence and sex.

typical plot, like that of *The Sheik:* Arab man falls hard for European woman (i.e., white woman). Although the Arab protagonist was associated theft, sexuality, abduction, rape, weapons, fighting, murder, and non-Western attitudes, he was represented as not all bad. Often there was another Arab character whose negative qualities could highlight the protagonist’s good qualities.

1. light comedies: the Arab as buffoon

Slide 5: Early Sound Era, 1930s–1940s

Slide 6: pix

The *Mummy* films reintroduce the themes of abduction of the white woman and attempted miscegenation.

Foreign-Legion films such as *Beau Geste* and *Morocco,* both starring Gary Cooper. The Foreign Legion films work like westerns: the Arab is in a binary opposition to the European heroes, as Indians were in the classic westerns. Civilization/Wilderness as genocide rationale.

Said’s idea of *penetration:* the Europeans penetrate the Middle East, but the Arab’s attempt to penetrate them, with swords or his penis, is frustrated.

*Casablanca* despite being set in Morocco, has only one major Arab character, and he is slimy.

Post­­–World War II

Slide 7: 1950s

Slide 8: pix

light comedies like *Abbott and Costello in the Foreign Legion*

strong man films like *Hercules*

biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments, Ben-Hur, Solomon and Sheba:* compete with TV

Slide 8: 1960s

Slide 9: pix

1920s stereotypes continue

Historical epics: *Exodus* (1960); *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962); *Khartoum* (1966)

*Exodus* is the first Arab-Israeli historical melodrama, but “the only good Arab in the film is a dead Arab.”

At least 10 films were pro-Israeli and/or anti-Arab. “The Israelis are typically European, while the Arabs are undifferentiated bearded killers.”

*Lawrence of Arabia* distorts history to show Arabs as “hopelessly violent, incompetent, and divided by tribal jealousies.”

*Khartoum:* British overrun in the Sudan by a massive army; “Chinese” Gordon killed, against the Mahdi’s orders. Film was shot in CINERAMA!

Slide 12: 1970s

Oil embargo, US forces Israel withdrawal from occupied land

1972 Munich Olympics: PLO massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics

Films represent Arabs as direct enemies of the US for the first time

Slide 13: pix

key film is *Black Sunday* (1977)

generally terrorism is domestic

Slide 14: 1980s 🡪 Arab as Terrorist

“While earlier decades gave us the Thief, the Sheik, the Mummy, the Foreign Legion, and the Arab-Israeli melodrama, the 1980s have given us the Terrorist.”

Key Events

Iranian revolution

Deposition of the Shah, an American ally

Hostage crisis (444 days captivity)

Increasing instability in Lebanon

Attack on Pan Am 103 from Libya

Anti-Israel actions by PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah, etc.

All create an indelible connection of the Middle East and terrorism, with Americans, not the Israelis, as the primary victims.

Hollywood casts US presence in the Middle East as protection rather than invasion. Hollywood’s partiality towards Israel casts Arabs’ attitudes towards Jews as similar to Nazis’ attitudes (cf. *Raiders of the Lost Ark)*

The first protest by an Arab group was in 1984 over *Protocol,* a Goldie Hawn comedy. Among the objections raised by the committee are the character of the Emir, who is shopping for a new wife; the portrayal of a Muslim holy man, which is “deeply insulting to Islam and outrageously incorrect”; and the “abusive and hurtful” comments Miss Hawn's character makes about a costume worn by a Jordanian security man.

“For the first time, an Arab-American organization protested stereotyping—and received national media coverage.”

Later in 1992, another Arab-American group had partial success protesting *Aladdin.*

Slide 15: *Aladdin* info sheet

Slide 16: Considerations for a Disney film

How does the film represent Arabs and the Arab world?

The role and power of Disney in relation to Arab stereotypes

What sorts of values would you say that Disney, as a brand, embodies? What kinds of messages do Disney films send to children? to White children? to children of color?

What messages does *Aladdin* send to White children and to children of color?

Consider the Disney Princess as a trope: note that Jasmine is the first nonwhite Disney princess.

Slide 17: Let’s Watch the Movie

**DISNEY POWERPOINT**

Slide 2: *Aladdin*’s Agenda

To calm the audience by making the “Oriental Other” less frightening (Context: the Gulf War [1990–1991])

To display technical innovations of animation

To assert Western dominance through **textual appropriation**

Per Said: Orientalism is “a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative or novel) world.” Thus, **appropriation** and **cooptation** are key strategies 🡪 substitutes for understanding the world of the Other and for ensuring domination over that world through representational practices.

Slide 3: Source for the Story

*Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights,* first translated in the early 18th century, was widely popular.

The story of Aladdin was inserted into the *Arabian Nights* by Antoine Galland, an early translator of the text. One scholar (Robert Irwin, *TLS,* 24 December 1993) suggests that Galland may have written the story. Thus, “the intermingling of Oriental fancy dress and European fantasy that marks the story of Aladdin throughout its history might have been traceable back to its very conception” (Felperin 139).

Galland adapted the *Arabian Nights* for children by cutting the sensual parts of it

Richard Burton put them back, but that version not popular

Children still seen as main audience

Slide 4: Visual inspirations for *Aladdin*

Persian miniature paintings c. 1000–1500 AD

Victorian paintings of Eastern cultures

Coffee-table books of photos on the Middle East

Mid-1940s and mid-1950s Disney films

Alexander Korda’s 1940 *The Thief of Bagdad*

Except for the first, all of these are Western representations of the Middle East

Slide 5: Oriental tropes in “Arabia”

A grab bag of stuff from all over the Middle East and Asia

Belly dancers

Elephants

Bengal tigers

Cobras

Taj Mahal

Slide 6: Objectionable Elements in *Aladdin*

opening song: “Where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face. It’s barbaric, but, hey, it’s home” offensive to Arab-Americans. They protested and got action, but it took 6 months to schedule a meeting. Eventually Disney changed some of the lyrics, but kept “It’s barbaric, but, hey, it’s home.” *The New York Times:* “it’s racist, but, hey, it’s Disney.”

brutal merchant wants to cut off Jasmine’s hand for giving an apple to a hungry child. Audience is offered the impression that this would happen all over the Arab world. In fact, it is unique to Saudi Arabia, and even there would only be the punishment for a real thief and after 3 warnings. In any case, the merchant’s response is against Islam, since she was feeding a hungry child.

character appearance: Creation of Aladdin = Michael J. Fox + Tom Cruise in M. C. Hammer’s trousers (according to his creator). His skin color is lighter than other Arabs’. He is the only adult male without a beard; his head covering is tiny; he *smiles.* “He and Jasmine are the only human beings in the film with American accents and without conspicuously aquiline noses.”

Jafar = a dark man with a dark purpose; color = character; = politician (bad)

the Sultan = small and pudgy; = royalty (good)

Aladdin = freedom: frees Jasmine from a forced marriage; frees the Sultan from Jafar’s power; the Genie from servitude. “Call me Al,” at the end, like an American

non-Western values: no coherent families. Aladdin is an orphan. Why doesn’t Jasmine have a mother? Omitted to avoid dealing with the harem and the image of roly-poly midget Sultan among his women?

Slide 7: Oriental imagery

Oriental imagery as a special effect, background to characters

Smoke and fire based on Arabic calligraphy, but care was taken not to use actual Arabic letters, “Otherwise, we might be saying words that we don’t know we’re saying” (qtd Felperin 141)

A fictionalized orientalist text that only makes sense in opposition to a complementary “Occidental” text

Slide 8: Gender Representation

Female caricatures: busty, narrow waists, large eyelashes, undulating walks

Women may be active, but need a man’s help to get out of the mess they make. Aladdin saves Jasmine at least 4 times

Women can change men through kindness and love

Slide 9: Key Disney Princesses

Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* loses her voice and has to use her body to communicate: a male ideal?

Mulan: after the war it’s as if her bravery never happened

Belle in *Beauty and the Beast:* the Beast’s domestic abuse is reinterpreted romantically

Jasmine in *Aladdin:* distracts Jafar using seduction to protect Aladdin

Slide 10: Race in Disney Films

Animals: crows in *Dumbo,* Hyenas in *The Lion King,* Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp*

Chinese people in *Mulan*: China is the most sexist and oppressive society in Disney films

no black people at all in *Tarzan,* only apes!

Slide 11: So What?

Slide 12: Issues relating to Disney Films

So entertaining

So visually entrancing

Appeals to emotion

Aimed at children

Not taken seriously by adults

Slide 13: Disney Power

Giant corporate umbrella: (ABC, ESPN, A&E, the History Channel, Lifetime; Lucasfilm, Touchstone Pictures, Pixar, Marvel Studios, Walt Disney Studios)

Global reach: Walt Disney World Resort, Disneyland Resort, Disneyland Paris, Shanghai Disney, Disney Hong Kong, Tokyo Disney Resort, Disney Cruise Line, and a host of other vacation-related properties

Film franchises: *Star Wars,* The Muppets, the MCU, The Chronicles of Narnia, The Pirates of the Caribbean, the Indiana Jones Franchise, Grey’s Anatomy (and other popular ABC shows)

Strict licensing control over Disney properties; possible that Mickey Mouse will be out of copyright.