

Deconstructing Hollywood: Negative Stereotyping in Film

by Kim Deep

The Western (mainly American) film industry leads to a commonplace and distorted view about people of Arabic descent. Arab characters in such American movies exemplify everything that is anti-Western. Cinema pigeonholes Arabs in three main ways: the Arab as being wealthy, the Arab as terrorist, and the Arab as the “other”—one who is heathen, evil and uncivilised. Popular western cinema also stereotypes the Islamic religion and portrays followers of Islamic faith as religious fundamentalists.

Although many popular movies are made for entertainment purposes, films, being a powerful and popular form of mass communication, invariably transmit social and

British woman and leads her to his wealthy residence in the desert.

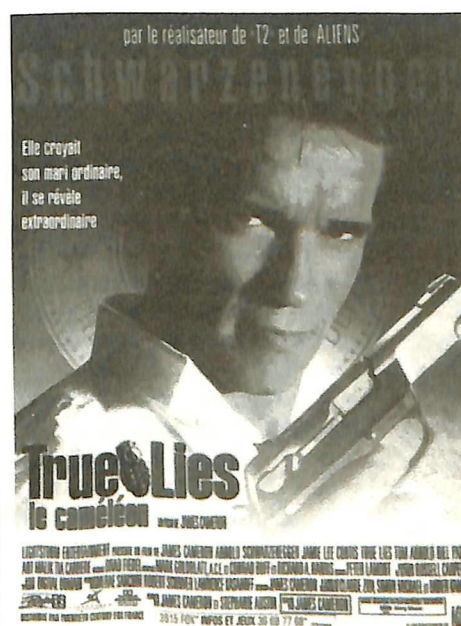
The popular James Bond movie series, heralded as “one of the longest running and most successful film franchises in history,” uses the stereotype of the wealthy, dangerous Arab in many of its films. In *Octopussy* (1983), the villain, Prince Kamal Khan, is described on the series’ official Website as “an exiled Afghan prince with a penchant for fine food, jewels and atomic weaponry” who “teams with a power-crazed communist general in an attempt to unleash nuclear holocaust in Western Europe.” Thus, the stereotype of the wealthy Arab is invariably tied to that of the Arab as terrorist.

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The image of the Arab terrorist is appallingly prevalent within the medium of film. In the movie *Wrong is Right* (1982), a sheik supplies terrorists with nuclear bombs to be dropped over Tel Aviv and New York. In *Iron Eagle* (1986), a United States Air Force pilot is shut down by a fundamentalist Middle Eastern state. The archenemy in *True Lies* (1994), a Muslim terrorist group named the Crimson Jihad, pilfers nuclear weapons and threatens to detonate them. In the middle of the twentieth century, Arabs were seen as

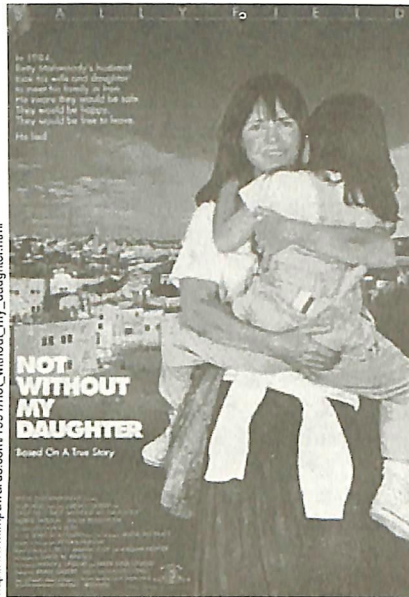
political messages. By portraying Arabs in a negative fashion, the Western film industry only serves to further the ideology of Western expansionism that has prevailed since the Middle Ages.

The wealthy Arab stereotype threatens the security of Americans and the American dream of prosperity. Movies like *Into the Night* (1985) associate Arabs with power and wealth, often through organised crime, such as smuggling operations. Other examples include *Rollover* (1981), where Arabs were portrayed as an evil force trying to bring ruin to the American economy, and the now famous *The Sheik* (1921), in which Rudolph Valentino plays a licentious sheik who captures a

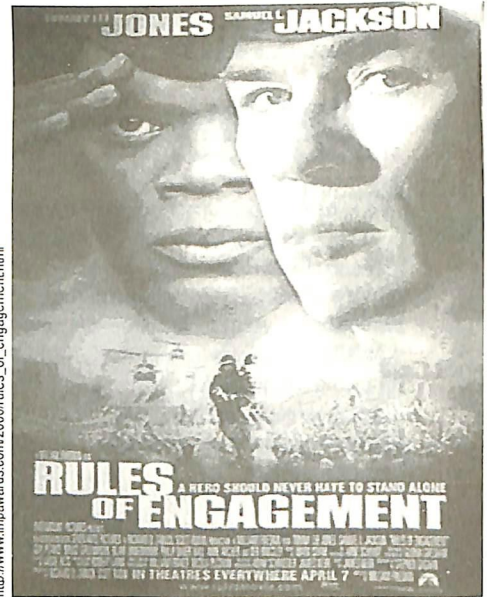




<http://www.impawards.com/1998/siege.html>



http://www.impawards.com/1991/not_without_my_daughter.html



http://www.impawards.com/2000/rules_of_engagement.html

overseas terrorists. Increasingly, however, such terrorists have now become internal, and work undercover, such as in *Wanted: Dead or Alive* (1987). These terrorist images lead to harassment, physical attack, violence and distorted perceptions of Arab people.

Many movies imply that the Islamic faith is closely tied with terrorists. In *Network* (1977), Arabs were seen as barbaric religious fanatics. Recently, *Rules of Engagement* (2000) was criticised because it portrayed Arabs as a senseless, extremist mob attacking a U.S. embassy. (The original, fictional story that the movie was based on used the setting of an unnamed Latin American country, not one in the Middle East). *Rules of Engagement* was criticised for being offensive, racist and prejudiced against Arabs and Islam.

By linking Arab culture and religious practices with terrorism, film creates a false representation of Islam and denounces one of the world's oldest religions. For example, a scene in *Navy Seals* (1990) includes anti-Allah comments against a backdrop of yellow ribbons and American flags. In *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), an Arab husband forces his American wife to wear the traditional veil of Muslim women once they move to the East after living in America. The film portrays Muslims as fundamentalists who are determined to restore the subordination of women. Another film, *The Siege* (1998), met with much opposition from Arab-American groups such as the Council for American-Islamic Relations and American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. The film tied Islamic practices, such as washing before prayers and the call to prayer, with violence. Thus, *The Siege* reinforces the idea that the Islamic religion is closely associated with terrorism.

Islam literally means "submission to God" and is based on peace, patience and equality. It is a monotheistic tradition based on the teachings of The Koran ("divine revelations") as well as those of the prophet Mohammed. The religion of Islam identifies Mohammed as the last prophet, following after the footsteps of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus, Islam shares many qualities and traditions of Christianity and Judaism. The notion that followers of Islam are fundamentalist is false and reductionist.

Arabs are seen as to be continually at war with Western concepts of politics, social economy and order. Yet, the film industry, when referring to Arabs, does not display geographical areas but a fantasy-like, mystical Arabland, which has no geographical, political or social reality. The term Arab is defined as "a member of the Semitic people of the Arabian Peninsula." The word itself is misused. Often, it mistakenly includes Turks, Persians, Greeks and Egyptians. The misuse of the term undermines the truth that Arabs come from different countries, beliefs, religions and cultures. Their background and diversity are complex.

Frequently however, the Arab population is seen as the "other"—an uncivilised, boorish people who are loud, crude and irrational. In *Not Without My Daughter*, the foreign characters are always thronged in large groups that use much hand gestures. The director manipulates the Western audience into feeling overwhelmed by the characters, rather than depict this expressive style of non-verbal communication as an acceptable cultural difference. They are also seen as a people who are heathen, backward and evil. In *The Exorcist* (1973), which was directed by the same director of *Rules of Engagement*, the prologue at the begin-

ning of the movie is set in Northern Iraq. This suggests that the evil that one of the main characters was possessed with originated from the East. In a more recent movie, *The Mummy* (1999), one Arab character is described as a “smelly little friend” and a “stinky fellow.” These examples prove that many films depict Arabs to be a people opposite to how the West perceives itself.

Children’s movies are not exempt from this negative portrayal of Arabs. The Disney movie *Aladdin* (1992) is one example of the idea of the Arab as the “other.” The original lyrics from the beginning number (before they were banned due to pressure from various Arab-American groups) were as follows:

Oh, I come from a land
From a far away place
Where the caravan camels roam.
Where they cut off your ear
If they don’t like your face
It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home!

...a movie does not only entertain. It also has the ability to impart knowledge, whether the director intended it to or not. For mainstream audiences who may not know much about the Arabic people, movies become a real, yet not legitimate, source of learning.

These blatant Arab stereotypes date as far back as the Middle Ages when Islamic expansion into Europe spawned the idea of West vs. East. Later, the Crusades (1095 AD to 1250 AD) came to stand for another reason to detest the Arabs. This historical conflict with people from the Middle East led to cultural and political efforts to discredit Arabic culture and the Islamic religion. Whether deliberately or unintentionally, the Arab world has been reconstructed by the film industry to be inferior. By portraying Arabs in a negative manner, the United States emerges as a hero, and its nationality, along with Western patriotism, is secured.

Media transmits nationwide symbols and thus groups that are not seen as essentially American in character are presented in narrowly defined roles. In film, Arabs have no individual identity. They have become caricatures—marginalised and conventionalised to stress the differences between themselves, the American dream and the American citizen. Films create a hegemonic consensus about the Arab world. The Arab people have become mere puppets in the hands of Western filmmakers to create this ideology.

Many may argue that directors of such movies choose particular stories for entertainment value (not political or social issues), and that each movie has to do with the individual style of the director, as well as financial considerations. Such critics maintain that movies are simply an escape from reality—that they offer pictures of life closer to myth than actual truth.

Yet, a movie does not only entertain. It also has the ability to impart knowledge, whether the director intended it to or not. For mainstream audiences who may not know much about the Arabic people, movies become a real, yet not legitimate, source of learning. It has been proven that stereotyping is significantly more prevalent in groups with less education. Films have a large, substantial impact on viewers whose frame of reference does not expose them to other cultures, as well as people who depend on the media for information about the larger world they live in.

Ignorance about Arab people by no means excuses the stereotype. Films, like other media, have the capacity to transmit messages that will eliminate the use of stereotyping based on ethnic identity. When movies perpetuate the myths of the wealthy Arab, the Arab as terrorist and the Arab as the “other,” they are strengthening a historical clash between the East and the West. Although they have become tired clichés, there is a serious and cumulative effect in repeated stereotyping in cinema. Future film attempts to portray Arabs objectively must challenge the stereotypes of an Arab persona that is diametrical to accepted values. The Western film industry must attempt to reach a state of conscious social commentary in their cultural products. These relentless stereotypes have become dangerously well established in the psyche of the mass audience. Millions of Arabs around the world cannot be summarised by a few all-encompassing categories.

Source: *The Peak*, vol, 110, 18 February 2002, <<http://www.peak.sfu.ca/the-peak/2002-1/issue6/fe-mots.html>>