

Aladdin, Al-Qaeda, and Arabs in U.S. film and TV

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- *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* by Jack G. Shaheen (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001) 574 pages
- *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, directed by Sut Jhally, DVD, 50 min., Media Education Foundation, 2006

“Arabs are the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood. They are portrayed, basically, as sub-human *untermenschen*, a term used by Nazis to vilify Gypsies and Jews. These images have been with us for more than a century.” — Jack Shaheen[1]

Shaheen’s new documentary *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, released in conjunction with his book of the same title, takes up the issue of Arab representation in U.S. media. His film effectively demonstrates the influence of Victorian-era Orientalist narratives on the depiction of Arabs in Hollywood cinema, which presents them as backwards, violent, mystical, lascivious, hateful, prejudiced, and misogynistic.

Hollywood cinema has played into near-mythological stereotypes about Arabs, which imply that the Middle East is a land of cultural otherness, full of people who cannot be understood in Western terms and thus should not be thought of as human. From the early 1900s when Edison in the United States and Pathé and Gaumont in France were making films, film has used as a narrative convention that Arabs occupy a mystical land of harsh deserts, tropical oases, genies, magic carpets, thieving bandits, decadent sultans, conniving sheiks, and sensual harem girls. Today, such scripting survives in popular children’s films like Disney’s *Aladdin*, but it has been usurped in large part by the new popular myth: that of Arabs, or Muslims in general, as terrorists who may not only be plotting the destruction of the West from the Middle East but may even be plotting the United States destruction from the suburban townhouse next door (e.g., as in Fox TV’s *24*).

These media stereotypes have a malleability that allows for their manipulation by politicians and policy makers to construct a narrative justifying U.S. imperialism. In these ideological narratives, Arab culture doesn’t matter; what matters is spreading “freedom” and “democracy,” which become nothing more than useful keywords justifying Western hegemony and U.S. cultural exportation and domination. Jean-Luc Godard once replied, when asked why U.S. films are the most popular in the world,

“Because Americans tell the best stories. They can invade a country and immediately construct a narrative justifying it.”

In fact, the WMDs for which the U.S. went to war with Iraq can almost be termed a MacGuffin, one of Hitchcock’s non-existent plot catalysts, which merely serves to launch the story and has no significance in and of itself. What has more consistently served to win U.S. public acceptance of the invasion of Iraq — begun March 19, 2003 — were the continually negative images of Arabs in Hollywood film and television, which gained new acceptance in the aftermath of 9/11.

Arabs, and Muslims in general, have been culturally coded as “others,” a dislocated social position which many politicians and media producers have used to position Arabs as phantom enemies, as scapegoats for latent U.S. xenophobic tendencies. In this regard, Hollywood filmmakers have often used Arabs in narratives in very much the same way as Nazi propagandists portrayed Jews in the 1930s and 40s.

If many politicians have capitalized on negative media representations of Arabs for imperialist ambitions, then we have a causation paradox. Which came first? Is it the neoconservative desire to construct a phantom enemy against whom U.S. values become defined in a mythological battle between good vs. evil, east vs. west, and, yes, Christian vs. Muslim?^[2] Or is it that the stereotypical narratives came first and policy makers used available stereotypes for political ends? We cannot answer that with certainty.

Nevertheless, we can trace shifts in patterns in media stereotyping. Now, while discerning viewers may shudder at the idea of African American actors relegated to playing main servants in Hollywood films through the 1950s, condemn Westerns for glorifying genocide of Native Americans, and loathe a frequently appearing Jewish pawnbroker stereotype — most disgusting in Alec Guinness’ Fagin in David Lean’s *Oliver Twist* (1948) — viewers easily accept as justifiable that Jack Bauer hang the Muslim terrorist who nuked Los Angeles in Season 6 of *24* or marvel at the lush visuals, catchy show tunes, and indeed casual racism of Disney’s *Aladdin*.^[3] As Shaheen describes the easy cultural reduction to stereotype,

“All aspects of our culture project the Arab as villain. These are stereotypes which rob an entire people of their humanity.”^[3]

My essay offers an analysis and critique of Shaheen’s documentary and the particular aspects of that prejudice on which he focuses in order to survey the history of Hollywood’s racist portrayals of Arabs and Muslims.

Myths of Arabland

Cultural identity partly derives from geography so that landscape often points to patterns of economic and social activity. Rivers, such as the Huang and the Nile, have fostered the agrarian economies as well as transportation networks. An island country like Japan often becomes a prime hub of sea-bound trade networks, with fishing playing a large role in local food production. However, topographic-ethnic associations can also lead to reductive connotations. The Inuit people traditionally have lived within the Arctic Circle in frigid, ice-filled tundra environments, but when such an association leads mainly to imagery of Inuits living in igloos and ice fishing, the complexity of a great people’s culture gets reduced to what is little more than Rankin Bass imagery. (**Image 1**) Worse yet, geography may be used metaphorically to take on a personified quality that translates into attitudes toward that part of the world. When Africa means the “Jungle,” that’s not just a landscape but a state of mind. Thus Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, links cultural “backwardness” to geographic “backwardness” and finds Western morality impossible in a realm of incessant Darwinian struggle.

Such pejorative association between topography and cultural identity shapes the mise-en-scene and is the initial locus of much of Hollywood’s negative portrayal of Arabs. As Shaheen puts it,

“The depiction of Arabs always begins with the desert.”

As with depictions of Africa where the jungle connotes both danger and cultural “backwardness,” the “hostility” of the desert environment often translates into attitudes about the people who live there. (**Image 2**) Certainly many parts of the Arab world do feature desert landscapes. However, any uniform marriage of people and place in terms of the connotations of “desert” would ignore both physical and cultural variety, including the modern urban environments of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the Mediterranean climate of Tunisia, Libya, and Lebanon, the fertile fields of the Nile Valley, the rugged plateaus of Kurdistan, and the mountains of Morocco.

Looking at this kind of reductionism in more cultural terms, Hollywood not only gives Arabs a Muslim identity but all-too-often gives Muslims an Arab identity, when in reality Arabs make up only about 1/3 of the total worldwide Muslim population of over one billion people. Narratively linking Muslims with the desert sets in place an even more sweeping misperception of the great faith's cultural diversity and complexity. How could tying Islam to those living in the desert relate to the experience of Muslims living in sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or Indonesia — regions that don't feature deserts as prominent topographical features? For example, Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, is primarily tropical in its climate, with mountains, the rainforest, and the sea as the most prominent geographical landmarks. For Hollywood films to create a link between landscape and religion shows a profound ignorance of the world. (**Image 3**)

“We inherited the Arab image primarily from Europeans.”

Shaheen is referring here to 19th century Orientalism, a movement inspired in part by British and French acquisition of lands in the Middle East and North Africa. European cultural production, both artistic and popular culture, included a plethora of fantastical travel writing which emphasized the exoticism of the Middle East through mythopoetic stereotypes that revealed little about the actual local culture but attracted rich European tourists. In the visual arts, Eugene Delacroix's Orientalist paintings portrayed Arab culture as beyond decadent, with lascivious sultans wearing vibrant colors and sensual silk while surrounded by scantily clad harem girls. (**Images 4-6**) Delacroix also frequently depicted Arab sexuality as paired with death as in *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827). (**Images 7-8**) These exotic stereotypes were transmitted to United States where they found a parallel cultural foothold, especially in the early 20th century when dime novels promoted ethnocentric adventure narratives about the “superior” Western culture taming the U.S. West and its Native American inhabitants. The dimestore novelists attached a similar xenophobic sense of “otherness” to the Middle East, to Native Americans, and to Asians, especially the Chinese. And Columbia University Professor Edward Saïd demonstrated the ways that these stereotypes persist today, even in academic analysis:

“All academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged with, impressed with, and violated by 19th century Orientalism.”[4]

Characterizing this “otherness” is the sense that Arabs are “backwards.” As a character relates about her fictional Middle East-inspired country in the Elvis Presley movie *Harum Scarum* (1965):

“When you cross the mountains of the moon into our country, you will be stepping back 2,000 years.”

Shaheen argues that the mythopoetic trappings of Arab culture as depicted in Hollywood films have become so rigidly codified that they have an amusement park-like uniformity:

“We have this fictional setting called Arabland, a mythical theme park. And in Arabland, you have the ominous music, you have the desert as a threatening place, we add an oasis, palm trees, a palace that has a torture chamber in the basement.”

In a common mise-en-scene, opulent, palatial interiors reveal a cruel, bloated pasha reclining on cushions and surrounded by harem maidens. The pasha possesses an unquenchable appetite for the flesh and requires sensual handmaidens and harem girls to appeal to his lascivious desires. (**Images 9-10**) However, as in the movie *Samson Against the Sheik* (1962), the Arab harem maidens don't attract the pasha's attention as much as the blonde European girl does, so he must abduct and ravish her against her will.

The codified trappings of Arabland which Shaheen identifies as the “Instant Ali Baba Kit” include costuming women in belly-dancing outfits and transparent pantaloons, while giving the male villains long, curved, scimitars. Since Arabland is clearly a mystical land, its inhabitants ride on magic carpets, and snake charmers hypnotize deadly cobras with eerie flute music. These trappings are not merely found in Classical Hollywood films that demonstrate an Orientalist influence like *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924 and 1940) or

The Garden of Allah (1936), or films featuring Jamie Farr, but in even more recent fare including the 1992 Disney blockbuster *Aladdin*. *Aladdin*, in fact, continues the stale Orientalist fantasy, portraying all Arab men as either street thugs, pickpockets, emasculated palace guards, beggars, sultans, or sorcerers. (**Image 11**) A male character early in the film even declares to his master upon stealing a jewel,

“I had to slit a few throats, but I got it.”

The men are short and stocky with thick lips, missing teeth, heavy, menacing brows, and hooked noses, while the hero Aladdin and heroine Jasmine look like suburban, white, U.S. teenagers. (**Image 12**) Arabs are shown as gratuitously cruel, with characters making several references to beheading. One Arab merchant even tries to cut off Jasmine’s hand when she doesn’t have money to pay for an apple she gave to a hungry boy. (**Image 13**) Few U.S. film critics mentioned the visual stereotyping in the villains’ the heroes’ facial characteristics except for Roger Ebert who asked,

“Wouldn’t it be reasonable that if all the characters in this movie come from the same genetic stock, they should resemble one another?”[5]

Shaheen argues,

“The film recycled every old degrading stereotype from Hollywood’s silent, black and white past.”

In this vein, *Aladdin* opens with the expository song “Arabian Nights” which includes the lyrics”

“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.”

The stereotypes in *Aladdin* also draw upon anti-Semitic imagery for inspiration, most notably those from the anti-Semitic Disney animated short *The Small One* (1978), a children’s Biblical tale, about the donkey who would carry The Virgin Mary to Bethlehem to give birth. That film features a musical number called “Clink-Clink, Clank-Clank,” about Jewish moneylenders’ fetishistic “love of money.” Over and over, three dancing moneylenders sing the lyrics “Clink-Clink, Clank-Clank/ Put the money in the bank,” while cruelly humiliating the young boy who is trying to sell his donkey. (**Image 14**) Almost impossible to watch and despicable for its stereotypes, *The Small One* has been covered up by Disney executives. In that film, in particular, Jewish merchants are portrayed with almost exactly the same facial characteristics as the Arab villains have in *Aladdin* and similarly possess both a love of money and penchant for cruelty. (**Image 15**). (**Image 16**).

Of course, cartoonish anti-Arab stereotypes like those in *Aladdin* have long found a home in animated cartoons. The Warner Brothers’ cartoon *Ali Baba Bunny* (1957, Chuck Jones) begins with buffoonish “villain music” playing over a shot of a bearded, mustache-twirling Ali Baba looking through beer bottles as if they were binoculars while palm trees wave in the background and a subtitle declares him to be “The Mad Dog of the Desert.” (**Image 17**)

“The Arab is a one-dimensional caricature, cartoon cutouts used by filmmakers as stock villains and as comic relief...and so over and over, we see Arabs in movies portrayed as buffoons, their only purpose being to deliver cheap laughs.”

Shaheen says this while discussing feature fiction. He points to the cartoonish deployment of Arabs in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981, Steven Spielberg), especially the scene where Indiana Jones shoots the menacing Arab wielding a scimitar, a death meant to be a joke. (**Image 18**) The Joey Heatherton film *The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington* (1977) also features a cartoonish Arab character, Sheik Ali played by

Jerry Fischer, who admits that he has had sex with both dogs and sheep, taking the lascivious Arab stereotype to new depths of depravity. James Cameron's live-action cartoon *True Lies* (1994) also features Arabs cast in the role of villain/buffoon, this time in their modern iteration as terrorists. Not only does *True Lies* subject the audience to Jamie Lee Curtis' pole-dancing, but it features Arab terrorists who are not only dangerous, but also incompetent, bungling fools. One scene features a terrorist who is prepared to detonate a nuclear bomb in Miami with one turn of a key...but has forgotten the key.

Then there's actor Jamie Farr: the man has turned playing Arab buffoons into a cottage industry. To name but one example, Farr plays "The Sheik" in *Cannonball Run 2* (1981), where he spouts lines like, "I have a weakness for blondes and women without mustaches," and, "Have you ever considered joining a harem?" while groping and ogling the white U.S. women around him. (**Image 19**) He is also depicted as being inordinately stupid and incapable of realizing the value of money, demanding to reserve,

"Twelve suites! Better yet, the whole floor!"

The lascivious Arab carries across many Hollywood films:

- In *Jewel of the Nile* (1985) Sheik Omar manipulates Kathleen Turner into coming to "Arabland" with him, where he promptly imprisons her and subjects her to his gross passions;
- *Protocol* (1984) revolves around a Sheik's infatuation with Goldie Hawn.
- In the fake-James Bond film *Never Say Never Again* (1983) Kim Basinger is abducted by Arab terrorists, tied to an auction block, stripped down to her underwear, and sold-off to ravenous Bedouin.
- In *Sahara* (1983), Brook Shields is sold into slavery and bought by a perverse Arab sheik who sexually assaults her while she cries, "Get away from me you dirty creep!"
- Neil Simon's *Chapter 2* (1970) begins with a character asking Paul Newman, "How was London?" to which he replies, "Full of Arabs."

In regards to the Simon film, Shaheen asks,

"What if he had said [in *Chapter 2*] 'full of blacks,' 'full of Jews,' or 'full of Hispanics'? I mean that's ridiculous, why do we say these things?"

In many films like *Chapter 2*, which have nothing to do with the Middle East, Hollywood includes Arab stereotypes and slurs. Shaheen points out that one of the most gratuitous examples of Arab stereotyping occurs in Disney's *Father of the Bride Part II* (1995) where a domineering, sleazy-looking, broken-English-speaking, rich Arab businessman named Mr. Habib tries to buy Steve Martin's house. Habib's submissive wife tries to speak up at one point, and he shouts gibberish at her to make her shut up, recalling the *The Garden of Allah* where gibberish was meant to stand in for Arabic. (**Image 20**) Not only does this characterization connote Arab men treating their wives poorly, it also draws upon degrading anti-Semitic moneylender stereotypes in the scene where Habib has brought a wrecking ball to destroy Martin's house unless Martin pays him an extra \$100,000 to buy back a home which he has owned for only one day.

(**Image 21**) This scene and this stereotypical character were wholly gratuitous in the film, since previous versions of *Father of the Bride* like the 1950 film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Spencer Tracy never featured such stereotypes. Likewise, the slave traders who kidnap Russell Crowe in *Gladiator* are Arabs. Or in Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* (1985), the plot is about a time-traveling mad scientist, but the film inexplicably begins with inept Libyan terrorists trying to gun down the protagonists. As Shaheen puts it,

"This movie wasn't about the future. It was the same old stereotyping from the past." (**Image 22-23**)

Arab women onscreen

In contemporary social terms, throughout the broader Arab world women are attending higher education at the same rates as men. In one exemplary endeavor, Qatar is opening up University City, a massive college campus bringing in the best professors and researchers from U.S. universities to instruct the next generation of young Arab men and women. In fact, female enrollment in University City is, so far, even greater than that of men. In the Muslim world, women are taking jobs in business, communications, social planning, engineering, and government, and while Americans constantly upbraid a Muslim country like Pakistan for its treatment of women, Pakistan has elected a female Prime Minister, when the United States has never had a female President.

Admittedly, the Muslim world confronts many unresolved issues related to women's rights. In Saudi Arabia, the religious police enforce a law that women wear the abaya in public and that they not leave home without written permission from a man. Women there are not allowed to drive, associate with a man other than their husband or a close relative, or vote. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, religious authorities forced women in public to wear the burqa under penalty of corporal punishment or even death. In Pakistan, sexist rape laws shift blame onto the victim if she were not escorted by a man and a rape victim herself can be stoned for the crime committed against her. Few Muslim countries have many female politicians. For example, Bahrain elected its first female MP in 2006. That same year, women ran for MP slots in Kuwait, but none won. However, women hold 22.5% of the seats in the United Arab Emirates legislature, higher than the global average of 17.5%. The Tunisian parliament is 23% women. Even though in parts of the Muslim world (such as in Saudi Arabia and Iran), strict interpretations of Islamic law severely restrict women, Islamic law there still gives women certain rights they lacked in pre-Islamic societies. As Islamic history professor William Montgomery Watt suggests:

"At the time Islam began conditions for women were terrible — they had no right to own property, were supposed to be the property of the man, and if the man died everything went to his sons. Muhammad improved things quite a lot. By instituting rights of property ownership, inheritance, education, and divorce, he gave women certain basic safeguards. So, in such a historical context, the Prophet can be seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights." [6]

Hollywood has never reflected these complexities of women's experiences in the Muslim world preferring to instead typecast them in the roles of harem girl, belly dancer, oppressed wife, and burqa-wearer. In Hollywood films like *Protocol* (1984) or *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), Muslim women are always seen in the shadows, completely covered in black, marginalized from the male populace on screen, but also marginalized from the narrative action, reduced to nothing more than being receptacles for Westerners' sympathy. Furthermore, the social assumption in the United States that Arab women have to cover themselves with headscarves and burqas in the Middle East stands in stark contrast to the way that Hollywood frequently presents Arab women in the most sexualized light. Foremost among these sexualized depictions is the belly dancer, who has turned up in films from feature film's very beginning as a cheap erotic spectacle for the attention of the male gaze. The belly dancer scene also reinforces characterizations of Arab men as lascivious. These sensual portrayals have a long history and are, as Shaheen puts it,

"inspired by early images of the Orient, as the place of exoticism, intrigue, and passion." (**Images 24-25**)

Recently the female Arab character has had more agency in Hollywood films, but as blood-thirsty terrorists. Such is the plotline, for example, in *Death Before Dishonor* (1987) and *Never Say Never Again* (1983). (**Images 26-27**) At least this way they are portrayed as having some power, as opposed to what Shaheen calls the "bundles in black," women — usually extras — completely covered from head to foot in black garments or burqas. (**Image 28**) Both the belly dancer and the bundles in black posit Arab women as submissive and subordinated to men, casting men in the role of misogynist oppressor.

Arab threat: Mideast politics and Hollywood

"Washington and Hollywood spring from the same DNA."

Jack Valenti, longtime President of the Motion Picture Association of America, declared this about both industry ties to politics and the kinds of representations most commercially viable in film. Indeed, Hollywood narratives are inextricably tied into politics. Often, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces struggle over how a script will fit into the prevailing political atmosphere, whether it will fit into mainstream expectations or whether it will stand in opposition to the establishment. Sometimes a Hollywood film can popularize a particular social issue, spurring new social awareness — as the films *Philadelphia* (1993) and *And the Band Played On...* did in raising public and governmental awareness of the AIDS crisis. Hollywood films can play an important agenda-setting role but more commonly they react to the government's messages, tacitly reinforcing them. If the Department of Homeland Security's raising of the terror threat level doesn't instill enough fear, then another season of *24* is just around the corner to make Americans suspect their neighbors and look over their shoulders for terrorists. Hollywood and Washington reinforce and react to one another.

Hollywood's image of Arabs and Arab-Americans owes a lot to U.S. foreign policy over the past sixty years, and contemporary U.S. foreign policy finds easy reinforcement in the images Hollywood creates. While the mystical "Arabland" has accompanied Hollywood filmmaking from the very beginning, images of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists are a postmodern phenomenon. In *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen identifies three events responsible for this change in the perception of Arabs:

1. The Palestinian/Israeli conflict has proven the United States always supports Israel.
2. The Arab Oil embargo of the 1970s angered Americans due to rising gas prices.
3. The Iranian Revolution negatively affected U.S. perception of Muslims when Iranian students took U.S. diplomats hostage for over one year.

These events helped frame how Arabs and Arab-Americans would be viewed in U.S. media. Interestingly, the image of the sheik changed the most. The Arab Oil Embargo of the 1970s raised the spectre of the fantastically wealthy sheik, with millions of dollars in his bank account from oil money and diversified investments in worldwide companies including U.S. corporations. Within this ethnocentric view purveyed by U.S. media was the presumption that, despite their vast oil wealth, Arab sheiks craved the respectability derived from of U.S. capitalism and were thus would heavily buy into U.S. businesses. Thus in a film like *Rollover* (1981) a wealthy sheik is determined to use his money to buy up as much of the United States' financial resources as he possibly can in a bid to take over the world. In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, 1989) the fantastically rich sheik wants to translate his wealth into prestige as valued by the West. When Nazis want to buy his help, they give him what he wants most, a Rolls-Royce. (Image 29) These 1980s anti-Arab fears paralleled concurrent fears of Japan as an economic superpower with the potential to eclipse the United States, a fear seen in films like *Rising Sun* (1993) that assumed Japan's surging economy went hand-in-hand with a sinister plot for global domination.

One of the serious flaws in both his book and documentary is the way Shaheen dwells on Sidney Lumet's film *Network* (1976) as presumably anti-Arab. Indeed, in one scene, a corrupt network executive rants to "mad man of the airwaves," talkshow host Howard Beale, that "the Arabs have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back." As Beale sits enraptured, he agrees to talk about how Arabs are "buying up America" on his show. In his book and documentary, however, Jack Shaheen manipulates the sequence of events to make it appear that Beale's famous, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore," monologue, with loyal TV watchers shouting the same from their apartment balconies, comes right after his on-air speech about Arabs. That is not the case. Beale's "mad as hell" mania is already in full swing well before he targets the Arabs. And in no way does the script glorify Beale's eventual rant against Arabs but uses that speech to indicate that this madman is now just a shill for the network's corporate hierarchy, a mouthpiece spouting corporate propaganda given to him by a sinister executive. If anything, Lumet is commenting that television will perpetuate racism because fear sells, a point with perhaps even greater relevance in this age of twenty-four hour cable news where it sells to constantly "raise the threat level."

Sometimes we can be so determined to make a point that we can consciously or unconsciously rearrange facts to give greater weight to our argument. Here Shaheen clearly implies that one of the most famous

scenes in movie history is created at the expense of Arabs, when that in fact is not true. Shaheen says referring to the Nazi's scapegoating of Jews earlier in the century:

"This kind of anger, the anger born of fear, all of it in response to a perceived conspiracy and threat by a specific group of people, well, we've seen and heard this before."

Regrettably, he makes this point as a voiceover in his documentary, heard as we see images from *Network* of the famous scene of people on their balconies shouting in unison, "I'm mad as hell..." Since he incorrectly links up fear and hatred of Arabs with the "mad as hell" speech and Lumet's film as a whole, it's even more dishonest for Shaheen to make a voiceover comparison between *Network* and the Nazis and then dissolve from a scene from *Network* to a clip of Nazi propaganda.

Despite the unfortunate choice of comparing *Network* to Nazi propaganda, Shaheen does make a good point, however, about how xenophobic views of Arabs in the mainstream U.S. media seek to create a level of fear about a scapegoat, and that this scapegoating is not unlike the mechanisms that the Nazis used in anti-Semitic propaganda. At the core of their anti-Semitic media campaigns in films, radio broadcasts, speeches, and posters, the Nazis emphasized what they perceived to be the economic threat of Jewish people. The Nazis painted all Jews as scurrilous moneylenders and pawnbrokers who did whatever they could to rob and swindle non-Jewish people and who also secretly worked as Soviet infiltrators to bring down the West. Why the Nazis thought that Jewish people would automatically be communists since they had already stereotyped them as rapacious, swindling capitalists seems nonsensical, but such propagandistic amalgams show how fear and hatred always override logic. (**Image 30-31**) Today's ideological construction of Arabs unfortunately resembles Nazi stereotyping of Jews seventy years ago. Whereas the Nazis vilified the Jewish pawnbroker, today's Hollywood plays off the Arab trader stereotype, someone willing to sell his own mother or, in the words of a character early in Disney's *Aladdin*, "to slit a few throats" to make a profit. As Edward Saïd notes,

"So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression."

Terror, Inc. — demonizing Palestinians and Muslims

Perhaps the most focused connection between Washington and Hollywood, between foreign policy and media representation, is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, the U.S. government has never wavered in its support for the fledgling nation, with each successive Presidential administration hosting Israeli leaders and donating billions of dollars in aid to the Israeli government. However, Washington has consistently ignored the plight of the Palestinian people who have lived as refugees since Israel's founding. The Jewish state was founded as a haven for Jews wishing to leave Europe in the wake of the Holocaust and to live in a state run by Jewish people, the likes of which hadn't existed since the Kingdom of Israel's takeover by the Roman Empire. In concept, it's a wonderful example of self-determination and self-rule. However, Israel's ethnocratic intentions did exclude from the very outset a place for the Palestinian people who were the majority under British rule before Israel's founding. In fact, most Palestinians have been living as disenfranchised refugees within special zones of Israel, a problem compounded by the fact that Israel's Arab neighbors have admittedly done little to take in Palestinian refugees or provide economic assistance.

Part of the mutual exclusion has to do with obstacles to diplomatic solutions on both sides. After Israel's Arab neighbors immediately declared war on the new country the day it was founded, it was very difficult, even after the armistice in 1949, for any serious diplomatic discussion. In fact, Palestinians had fared little better under Jordanian rule of the West Bank up through 1967 than they have under Israel ever since. Israel was willing for twenty years to allow Jordanian oversight of Palestinians, even letting the capital city of

Jerusalem be split between themselves and Jordan, meaning that Jewish people were denied access to holy sites in the parts of the city they did not control.

Part of Israel's current reluctance to create a Palestinian state today is due to Hamas' influence on the Palestinian government, having won representation in a 2005 electoral landslide. Also inhibiting conciliation is what Israel considers an insurmountable problem, ongoing suicide bomb attacks — which for many disaffected Palestinians seems their only recourse in their fight for independence, to kill themselves along with others. The ideal solution might require a strong Israel combined with a strong, independent Palestinian state. Some have suggested a single secular state incorporating the Palestinian territories and Israel with equal rights for all groups; however, such a strategy would invalidate the original Zionist movement.

Washington never took the plight of the Palestinian people seriously until 2008 when George W. Bush declared he hoped to see a Palestinian state created by the end of the year. How serious he is about this is not clear, considering that his Evangelical followers strongly oppose Palestinian independence (Pat Robertson has stated that he would urge Evangelicals to withdraw from the Republican party if the Republicans ever tried to support a Palestinian state). He may be just a last-ditch effort to save the legacy of his Presidency. Needless to say, countries in the Middle East and Europe have not taken his statement as a serious policy initiative.

Washington's unconditional support for Israel unfortunately has instilled in the U.S. people an indifference or even hostility towards Palestinians. Hollywood has reflected and reinforced governmental views, putting out depictions of Palestinians that make cinemagoers even more likely to support U.S. policy. To begin with, Hollywood films and TV productions frame Palestinians as terrorists. As Godard once suggested, U.S. foreign policy demands a sufficient narrative to justify it. If the United States only supports Israel, then the Palestinians must be narrativized as abject, dishonorable, and worthy of contempt. Anti-Palestinian propaganda reached a new height in the 1980s and 90s with at least thirty films denigrating the Palestinian people. In the 1987 film *Death Before Dishonor* (Terry Leonard), Palestinians are shown as crazed with bloodlust, with one female terrorist graphically committing atrocities. (**Image 32-33**) This sexy female terrorist-siren brutally slaughters an Israeli family in cold blood, sparing not even the children. She takes orgasmic pleasure in torturing an U.S. marine with a power drill and mechanically executes another. Visually, part of the drilling scene is shot from the marine's point of view, maximizing our identification with him and his pain. Another Palestinian in the film becomes a suicide bomber who blows up an U.S. embassy.

A decade earlier *Black Sunday* (1977) had a female Palestinian as its terrorist du jour, who in a ridiculous James Bond-style plot flies a Goodyear blimp into a football stadium in Miami where she intends to detonate a bomb, killing 80,000 people at the SuperBowl.

This way of imagining Palestinians goes back to 1960 to *Exodus* (Otto Preminger) where they are either paired ideologically with Nazis (especially in one scene where a group of Palestinians lynched a Jewish settlement and left a Swastika behind to mark the deed) or totally marginalized. An even more pronounced example of anti-Palestinian propaganda is the Kirk Douglas vehicle *Cast a Giant Shadow* (Melville Shavelson, 1966) where Douglas plays an U.S. military adviser who lends his tactical assistance to the Israelis. The Palestinians in the film are demonized using many of the visual strategies Hollywood filmmakers frequently use to denigrate "native" peoples:

- the Palestinians in *Cast a Giant Shadow* are filmed only in group shots, with no close-ups or dialogue;
- they are merely a force of nature, determined to satisfy their cruel thirst for blood, at one point even massacring a Jewish settlement and carving a Star of David into the back of one dead Jewish woman;
- the only time the Palestinians do speak in the film is when they jeer, shout and intimidate a woman trapped in a bus while firing their guns into the air with rapacious glee.

Another business scripting Palestinian villains is the U.S. production company, Cannon Pictures, run by two Israeli producers, Menachem Golan and Yoram Globus. Over a period of 20 years, Cannon Pictures released thirty films specifically designed to bastardize Arab culture and specifically vilify Palestinians. One particular piece of exploitation trash Cannon released called *Hell Squad* (1985) depicts Vegas showgirls fighting bloodthirsty Arabs in the desert while wearing skimpy costumes and unleashing poorly choreographed martial arts moves. (Image 34-35) Golan and Globus's most effective and popular film *The Delta Force* (1986) takes their racism to new heights depicting Palestinian terrorists hijacking an airliner and specifically targeting the Jewish passengers for horrific torture and beatings.

Certainly U.S. producers in Hollywood have contributed every bit as much to the negative image of Palestinians. Few films have had a bigger impact than James Cameron's mega-blockbuster *True Lies* (1994). This film is perhaps the *ur-text* for depictions of Muslim terrorists; they're bloodthirsty, willing to torture women and children, wish to destroy the United States and Israel, and are cartoonishly incompetent yet still menacing enough to be taken seriously. In fact, this film really predates much of the iconography associated with Muslim terrorists post-9/11; in *True Lies*, a cell known as Crimson Jihad seeks Weapons of Mass Destruction and releases threat videos to the U.S. media à la Osama bin Laden. Crimson Jihad's video even features one cell leader, Salim Abu Aziz, giving this message:

"You have murdered our women, and our children, and bombed our cities from afar, like cowards, and you dare to call *us* terrorists? Unless *you America* pull all military forces out of the Persian Gulf area, immediately and forever, Crimson Jihad will rain fire on one major American city each week, until our demands are met. First, we will detonate one nuclear weapon on this uninhabited island as a demonstration of our power."

Sounds familiar doesn't it? (Image 36) Not only does it resemble al-Qaeda's messages, but prefigures the way those messages have seeped into the post-9/11 popular imagination in TV shows like *24* and *Sleeper Cell*. The odd thing is that Salim Abu Aziz's anti-imperialist message actually makes some sense and has a good bit of truth to it, but by casting him as a terrorist it implies that the evil of his methods must mean that his cause is unjust as well. In fact, this screenplay comes from James Cameron who wrote the jingoistic *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, an exploitation vehicle following the Vietnam War. Cameron cleverly dismisses any legitimate grievances from the Arab world by painting all Arabs as terrorists — so how could there be any merit to their claims that many in the Arab world, including Palestinians, are suffering? Instead, Cameron paints the United States as the underdog in this fight against terrorists and as the unquestioned vessel of freedom, justice and truth. The script progresses toward an unquestioned conclusion that the United States represents all that is good in the world and could never do anything to harm people around the rest of the world. Those who hate the U.S., then, must just be jealous. As if this point were not hammered home already, the film ends with Salim Abu Aziz chasing Arnold Schwarzenegger's daughter up an industrial crane, threatening to throw her to her death if she doesn't give him a detonation key to a nuclear bomb. In defiance, the daughter retorts,

"No way, you wacko!"

And under any circumstances, we never see images of Palestinians' daily life under occupation, with lack of access to arable land and jobs. We never see the effects of living in walled-off cities like cages, quarantined from Israeli territory. As Shaheen protests,

"Is there an unwritten code in Hollywood saying we cannot and will not humanize Palestinians? Is not the life of a Palestinian child, media wise, Hollywood-wise, politically wise as humane, as valuable as the life of an Israeli child?"

The only good Arab...

So far I have been pointing out parallels between government policy and media portrayal, not identifying any planned collusion. Actually, many of the worst anti-Arab or anti-Islamic films produced by Hollywood

have been made in conjunction with the Department of Defense. For example, *Executive Decision*, *Death Before Dishonor*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Patriot Games*, *Navy Seals*, *Rules of Engagement*, *True Lies*, and *Iron Eagle* are all films made with the assistance of the Department of Defense, and all these blockbusters show U.S. soldiers gleefully killing Arabs. For example, the script of *Iron Eagle* has its protagonist, a teenage fighter pilot, pretty much deciding to blow up an Arab country just for the hell of it because, hey, when you're in a cockpit and you don't have to see who you're slaughtering, killing becomes a lot easier. Or, in another case, in *Navy Seals* Charlie Sheen proudly announces after having mowed down a bunch of Arabs with a machine gun:

“Let’s go tag ‘em and bag ‘em.”

But the most appallingly racist of these films is *Rules of Engagement* (2000) written by former Secretary of the Navy and current conservative Democratic Senator from Virginia, James Webb. The script follows a platoon of marines led by Samuel L. Jackson who are assigned to evacuate the personnel at the U.S. embassy in Yemen, where there are massed protests outside from the civilian population. The marines end up opening fire on the protesters, slaughtering dozens, maybe hundreds, of civilians. Tommy Lee Jones plays the lawyer who investigates this atrocity and travels to Yemen to uncover the truth for himself. From all eyewitness accounts it sounds like the U.S. soldiers opened fire without any provocation on the crowd. Jones comes across a little girl on crutches who had her leg shot off during the massacre and follows her to a civilian hospital where scores of children lay dead or mutilated from the firefight. (**Image 37-38**) However, he also finds an audio tape there that says,

“To kill Americans and their allies both civil and military is the duty of every Muslim who is able.”

This is a turning point. From there on, the blame begins to shift from the marines to the victims. In fact, we find out that the Yemeni crowd fired first on the marines, forcing Samuel L. Jackson to give the order “Waste the motherfuckers!” to his troops, which began the carnage. (**Image 39**) And in one of the most horrific shots in Hollywood’s representation of the Arab world, we see that the little girl who lost her leg actually had a gun in her hand and was trying to kill U.S. soldiers. (**Image 40**) Thus the film concludes that the marines were justified in mowing down civilians and it was even okay for them to mutilate the little girl because she’s a terrorist like the rest and got what was coming to her. It’s as if Webb and director William Friedkin are saying, never feel sympathy for the “the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses” in other countries because they could really be terrorists. So when Webb and Friedkin restage the massacre, they frame it as a victory. We see civilian women riddled with bullet holes and blood pouring out of their mouths, but for the writer and director that’s a good thing — they got what was coming to them. The narrative says that those who dare to stand up to U.S. imperialism should and will be brutally mowed down. As Shaheen describes this script’s ideological message:

“Why does this matter? Because the massacre of even women and children has been justified and applauded. It’s a slaughter, yes, but a righteous slaughter.”

Islamophobia

Through the mutually-reinforcing relationship between U.S. foreign policy and Hollywood-produced images and in conjunction with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Americans sadly have come to fear and distrust Muslims and the Middle Eastern world. The United States’ war with Iraq began in 2003 but was surely facilitated by a century of negative images about Arabs in U.S. media. Clearly many people in the United States believe that only a small lunatic fringe of the entire worldwide Muslim population are involved in terrorism. However, after 9/11 when nineteen Arab-Muslim hijackers killed nearly 3,000 people, it has become much easier to generalize from that tiny fringe out to the whole, to fear the 1.3 billion Muslims around the world as possible terrorists. In his book, Shaheen points out dangerous it is to let the part represent the whole and that few in our culture think the Ku Klux Klan represents the feelings, beliefs, and actions of white people as a group or of Christians in general.

Thus, when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Oklahoma City Federal Building, we didn't gather from that that all white, Christian people could be potential terrorists. So why is it so easy to label 1.3 billion Muslims as a "threat" or "terrorists," based on the actions of the tiniest minority who really are terrorists? The likeliest answer is because Americans have been conditioned to believe that Muslims are terrorists based on the media's repetition of fearmongering. The press did not analyze as an important factor McVeigh's ethnic, religious, or geographical background, or even the fact that he had served in the U.S. military. And yet if it had been a Muslim responsible for the bombing, that would have been the first thing everyone would be talking about. In fact, initial news reports from the site at Oklahoma City even went so far as to posit the attack as likely the work of Middle Easterners. (**Image 41**) At the time, for example, Connie Chung cheerfully played into such stereotypes on CBS news:

"A US government source told CBS news that [the attack in Oklahoma City] has Middle Eastern terrorism written all over it."

One government security expert even said,

"This attack was done with the intent to inflict as many casualties as possible. That is a Middle Eastern trait."

Television profits from jingoistic shows like *24*, *The Unit*, and *Sleeper Cell*. Particularly offensive, *24* repeatedly uses Arab villains within scripts that have a staunchly imperialistic worldview. (**Image 42**) The creator of the series is arch-conservative Joel Surnow who, when pressed in 2005 about the depiction of Arabs in the fourth season of *24*, said:

"This is just being realistic. Muslims are the terrorists right now."

Admittedly, the series has featured villains from many other backgrounds in the past including Serbians, Russians, Mexicans, U.S. companies, rogue U.S. military officers, and even the President of the United States. However, Muslims have popped up most frequently on the series as the bad guys. Every season in which they have been featured, however, a controversy erupts; and Surnow attempts to posit a counter-narrative to defuse the situation. For instance, while Muslims are behind the plot to detonate a nuclear bomb in Los Angeles in season two of *24*, we later learn that these figures are nothing more than pawns manipulated by U.S. neo-conservative politicians to make the Democratic administration of President David Palmer seem incapable of defending the country. By scripting the Muslim terrorists as pawns, Surnow seemingly lessens their villainy in comparison to Palmer's rivals. In season six, Muslim terrorists do succeed in destroying Los Angeles with a nuclear bomb, but this time the creators of the show go to lengths to demonstrate the evils of blaming Muslims in general for the actions of a few. The storyline shows a Muslim civil rights attorney jailed just for his religion and the resulting suffering for him and his family. Also in this season's storyline is a character named Assad, a former terrorist turned pacifist. His characterization indicates that within the Muslim world people of conscience fight against extremism from the inside (although the fact that Assad was once a terrorist is problematic). However, none of these concessions to liberal values can excuse the appalling resolution to the season's Muslim-terrorist storyline: we see Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) hang his nemesis. Tantamount to a lynching, this season's plot resolution establishes the racist undertones to the series' repeated theme of "fighting terrorism" more clearly than anything its ever done before.

However, even more complex is the framing of Muslim characters in season four of the series. That season actually begins by suggesting that Arab Americans are likely terrorists, by depicting a middle-class, suburban Arab American family eating breakfast around the kitchen table while discussing plans to assassinate the President and nuke Los Angeles. This kind of plot works like Nazi propaganda fiction film did, like *Jud Suss* (1940) and *Der Einige Jude* that instilled fear that people's Jewish neighbors might be working to establish a foothold in Germany for the Soviet Union.

Later in 24's fourth season, a Muslim terrorist is driving to a rendezvous with his cell leader when his car is cornered by a gang of racist street thugs who want to beat him up or kill him just for being Muslim (because of their anger over the day's terror attacks). In that moment, Surnow is setting us up to *identify* with the terrorist as underdog because he is one against many and he's being discriminated against for being Muslim. The street thugs try to label him as a terrorist:

“Your name Muhammad? Ain’t that all you guys’ names?”

We can sense his fear and isolation in that moment and in fact sympathize for him as he's standing up to these racists. But then we realize...oh...he *is* a terrorist. We've been following him for several episodes and seen him killing people and planning people's deaths. The thugs are wrong in assuming he's a terrorist just because he's a Muslim, but their assumption is completely right. He is trying to nuke LA. This moment perfectly represents the push-pull struggle of contradictory ideological forces played out on 24, and why it's been such a rich series for academics to study. In using this kind of plot development, Surnow is able to throw a bone to critics by saying on the one hand that racism is wrong and that people should never assume who's a terrorist or not, while also completely validating the racists' assumption, because that character *is* a terrorist. In the context of the morally bankrupt pragmatism of the whole series, it is clear that Surnow and the creators of 24 are siding with the racists, because even if politically incorrect thugs make life hell for many innocent people, if they catch even one real terrorist along the way, their xenophobia is justified.

Showtime's *Sleeper Cell* also contributes to the fear-mongering, “raising the terror level,” look-over-your-shoulder zeitgeist. The *Sleeper Cell* series depicts a sinister network of Islamic companies and organizations acting as a front for terrorist activities. In this show, as in 24, not just any Arab is a threat, but the Arab Americans living behind a white picket fence next door could be plotting terror. The show goes out of its way to cast “American looking” actors in the roles of terrorists, suggesting that Muslim extremists could very well have infiltrated all aspects of our society. Therefore, your son's Little League coach, a high school science teacher, or even the homeless man on the street corner could all be terrorists wishing our destruction. (**Image 43**)

Islamophobia has a special presence on religious television channels like TBN and EWTV which actually try to frame Islam as at war with Christianity. One common anti-Muslim ad on TBN utilizes the same voiceover heard in trailers for many Hollywood blockbusters. In his deepest, most menacing voice he narrates — as images of 9/11 flash by:

“Islam — a religion of over 2 billion people and growing by 50 million people per year. Almost every major terrorist network in the world is controlled by Islamic fundamentalists.”

It's no wonder then that, as Shaheen points out,

“When innocent Arabs are killed, when they're bombed, maimed, wounded, when they're tortured in places like Abu Ghraib, is it really any surprise that we don't feel any compassion? Or worse, make light of it.”

Indeed, in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, Rush Limbaugh and a caller went out of their way to make light of atrocity:

Caller: “This [Abu Ghraib] is no different than what happens at the Skull & Bones initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort. You ever heard of emotional release? You ever heard of the need to blow some steam off?”

Rush Limbaugh: “Well, it's sort of like hazing, a fraternity prank, sort of like that kind of fun.”

Since 9/11, hate crimes against Muslims and more generally against people who appear Middle Eastern (whether they are or not) have surged dramatically. There's no question that when somebody like Rush Limbaugh degrades the human dignity of a whole people, as he frequently does on his show, that the U.S. public will become more desensitized to suffering like that at Abu Ghraib. Furthermore, the sense of "otherness" people perceive about Arabs, based on media images and U.S. foreign policy, is in fact institutionalized by the United States government, if only through racial profiling at airports. And sadly some affected by this propaganda absorb it into their worldview and will even take it to the next level and act out violently against those seemingly "lesser" than them.

Getting real

When Americans think of Arabs, or Muslims in general, what do we imagine? We may briefly think of white robed men wearing skull caps and "bundles-in-black" women completely covered from head to toe. Part of this reductiveness might come from the U.S. media's short attention span. Just as policy and opinion must now be reduced to sound bites, letters to the editor reduced to Internet lingo, and feature-length articles reduced to little more than a headline, so too the media today usually require images that are instantly recognizable onscreen so as to gain the viewers' attention immediately. We see it even in Presidential campaigns: complexity is shunned, substance ignored, branded images and slogans preferred. In May 2003, for example, mainstream U.S. reportage didn't care that the war in Iraq was far from over when President Bush strutted around an aircraft carrier wearing a flight suit and declaring, "Mission accomplished." The visual presentation of this moment, incredibly false though it was, was more marketable to an image-crazed public than any serious analysis of the progress in Iraq. More generally put, if CNN or FoxNews present a story about Islam or the Arab world, are they going to lead off with a trenchant analysis by a professor of Islamic history? Of course not, they're more likely to show hundreds of white-robed men prostrating themselves before the Kaaba. That is the image that sells, that the U.S. public expects to see, because we've been trained by the news media to expect a certain image. (**Image 44**) In turn, the news media must now fulfill the public's expectations for certain kinds of images, expectations that they created themselves.

Secular life in the Arab world does not appear in any detail or with any complexity in Western media, both television and film. We almost never see images of Arab women attending universities, working outside the home, or caring for their children. No, Arab women must always be presented as victims of a religion that seeks to keep them in their place. Certainly in parts of the Islamic world women have been treated poorly, and women's rights are virtually nonexistent today in Saudi Arabia and were terrible under the Taliban in Afghanistan. But to compare the conditions women endured under the Taliban with the role of women in modern, cosmopolitan cities and states like Dubai, Qatar, Cairo or Bahrain, to name just a few, is nonsense and an insult to those women who are forced to endure true repression. In addition, Arab men do not appear in film in roles of loving husbands and fathers who care about their family's welfare. Rather, Hollywood loves to depict the lascivious Arab man who lusts after blonde-haired Western women while treating his Arab wives terribly. Or he's a stern, fundamentalist father who never gives his children love, only discipline, and teaches them to hate. Is any secular life in the Arab world ever portrayed in the news media or in films?

Interestingly, there is a highly diversified range of media production in the Middle East that is largely unknown here. For example, MTV has proven so popular throughout the Middle East that Viacom recently began broadcasting a specialty channel called MTV Arabia just for the Middle Eastern market. Female pop stars like Haifa Wehbe and Elissa from Lebanon have risen to mega stardom throughout the region through glamorous images, provocative lyrics, and suggestive, Madonna-inspired dance moves. (**Image 45**) To listen to the U.S. media one might think that freedom of expression is lacking in the Middle East, but how does that account for the popularity of talk shows, discussion panels, and call-in shows on Al-Jazeera? (**Image 46**)

Film is a massive part of cultural life throughout the Islamic world. Turkey has a thriving film industry that produces a huge variety of motion pictures, including Hollywood-style action thrillers, genre parodies (G.O.R.A.), transnational awards-bait for foreign consumption (Baba ve Oglum, Gegen die Wand) and

serious art films (the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Zeki Demirkubuz). In fact, in Istanbul there are as many movie theaters as there are mosques. Egypt's film industry has long been in dialogue with the west, even experiencing its own Neorealist movement in the 50s led by directors like Youssif Chahine. And in the eyes of many Western critics like Jonathan Rosenbaum and Dave Kehr, Iranian cinema is one of the freshest, most formally inventive in the world today with groundbreaking directors like Mohsen and Samira Makhmalhof, Ebrahim Golestan, and Abbas Kiarostami, whose films have lit up the festival circuit. But this rich secular life in the Islamic world remains ignored in the United States and in most Western media.

It's a vicious, mutually-reinforcing cycle of production and reception, but not one that remains unchallenged. In fact, a number of Arab Americans have tried to diffuse these stereotypes, especially through comedy. In a way similar to that of many African Americans and Jewish comedians who re-appropriated stereotypes to debunk them, a number of Arab American comics have done the same. One of the more popular comedy specials on Comedy Central right now is the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, featuring comedians of Arab descent talking about their lives in relation to the stereotypical roles in which they've been cast. Part of this stand-up routine is also featured on the DVD of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). On that DVD, the funniest bit comes from a young Arab American stand-up comic Dean Obeidallah, who talks about how a convenience store cashier grilled him over the origins of his name when the cashier saw it on his I.D.

"That's an Arabic name," Obeidallah replied.

"Oh yeah, what Arab country does your family come from?" asked the cashier.

Wondering what Arab nation could sound the most benign, Obeidallah said, "We're from the same country as Aladdin." (**Image 47**)

Another comedian, Ahmed Ahmed, is interviewed on Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* DVD. Ahmed found comedy one of the few options open to him in the entertainment industry because every casting agent wanted to have him play a terrorist. He says that when he did once read for the part of a "Terrorist No. 4," he decided to play the role as campy and over the top as possible. Since that was in fact how the director imagined Arabs, Ahmed got the part.

One possible goal and remedy for these kinds of representations would be to have Arabs and Arab Americans presented in films and in the newsmedia just as everyone else, no better and no worse. In feature film, a number of U.S. filmmakers have already taken it upon themselves to depart from these stereotypes. Andrew Davis's *A Perfect Murder* (1998) features an Arab detective (David Suchet) who befriends the film's heroine and helps her solve a crime. His ethnic identity is not ignored but it is not an issue, just as the ethnic identities of co-stars Michael Douglas and Gwyneth Paltrow are not an issue. Likewise, Rick Berman's and Michael Piller's superb television series *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* featured a prominent character of Middle Eastern descent Dr. Julian Bashir, played by Alexander Siddig. Not once was Bashir's ethnic background questioned, discussed, or made a point of contention. Rather, he was defined by his personality, skills, education, and friendships. (**Image 48**) Bashir was developed no differently from the white, African American, and Asian characters on the show (a series notable for its exceptional diversity, including *Star Trek*'s first black captain, Avery Brooks' Captain Sisko). In a film set in Morocco, Gillies MacKinnon's *Hideous Kinky* (1998), about a single mother (Kate Winslet) and her two daughters living in Morocco, presents its Moroccan characters as on a par with its Western characters. In particular, Winslet's love affair with a Moroccan man is deeply moving, so that when she doesn't have enough money to return to England, her lover makes great sacrifices to help her out, even though it means she will leave him.

David O. Russell's satiric political feature, *Three Kings* (1999), develops characters and plot situations that represent the complexity of the Arab world. Focusing on the first Gulf War, Russell goes to great lengths to define the various political factions in Iraq at the time, including political dissidents who were imprisoned by Saddam Hussein, freedom fighters working to bring down the Ba'ath regime, and also pro-Saddam

loyalists. Significantly, Shaheen served as a consultant on this film. [See [Jump Cut 46, 2003, essay](#) on this film.]

In an historical vein, Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) takes an alternative view of the Crusades to develop as a plotline that human rights and freedom of religion were respected more under Muslim rule during the Middle Ages than under Christian rule in Western Europe. In particular, in Spain under the Moors, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived in harmony, but once the Vatican's Inquisition was established following the Christian reconquest of Spain...well, we know what happened. Likewise, under Saladin, the Arab general who ruled over much of the Holy Land during the 12th century, Christians, Jews, and Muslims were able to live together. In fact, *Kingdom of Heaven* ends as Saladin enters a church and sees a dislodged Christian icon (a cross), at which point he picks it up and replaces it on the altar, indicating his religious tolerance. In the film's reception, audiences in Beirut watching that film actually cheered at that particular moment because it signified a reconciliation between Christians and Muslims which still has relevance, considering that Christians and Muslims have long lived together in peace in Lebanon. (**Image 49**)

Detailing the interrelations between current politics, international economics, and local cultural forces, Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* also tries to capture the complexities of the Arab world by showing not only terrorists but also a Western-educated Saudi prince (Alexander Siddig) who is working to bring democracy to his country. (**Image 50**) The film develops various aspects of the reality on the ground, exploring the pockets of extremism and terrorism across the Arab world, but it doesn't try to act like that is the entirety of the Arab world.

Perhaps the best of these more "enlightened" films is *Paradise Now* by Hany Abu-Assad (2005) about two young Palestinian men who decide to become suicide bombers. The scripts shows their political involvement and decision as a symptom of bigger problems of poverty, statelessness, and religious fundamentalism. (**Image 51**) In the course of the film, the two men meet a Western-educated Palestinian human rights worker who adamantly opposes what they're doing, causing the two men to question the justness of their cause. (**Image 52**) Such a plot doesn't try to glorify suicide bombers or terrorism, but rather seeks to explore the desperation and displacement of logic required to consider something so horrific.

The fact that such films seek to debunk the myths of Arabland suggests that not only will some contemporary filmmakers question the validity of images inherited from the past but that audiences may be ready to challenge their own preconceptions as well. Already we are seeing many film and television productions that view the Iraq War and its aftermath critically, and the Internet makes many opposing views readily available. Regrettably, the continued U.S. imperialist presence in the Middle East will likely delay the rehabilitation of Arabs in the U.S. media, but it will not snuff out the possibility for it.

Notes

1. Dr. Jack Shaheen has written for many years about media stereotyping of ethnic groups and how these stereotypes can, and have, hurt innocents, whether they be blacks, Latinos, Jews, Native Americans, Asians, or Arabs. He considers himself to be a "committed internationalist and humanist." Having grown up in Pittsburgh, PA, Dr. Shaheen holds degrees from the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Missouri. His books include *Nuclear War Films; Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture; The TV Arab; and Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. He has also contributed to *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. He has appeared on CNN, MSNBC, NPR, *Nightline*, *Good Morning America*, *48 Hours*, and *The Today Show*. He has served as a consultant for Dreamworks, Showtime, Hanna-Barbera, and Warner Brothers and has worked on David O. Russell's *Three Kings* and *The Lucy Show*. The DVD presentation of *Reel Bad Arabs* runs for 60 minutes and is directed by Sut Jhally.

3. Much of contemporary neoconservativism derives from ideas of Leo Strauss. Strauss was a formerly liberal professor of political science at The University of Chicago from 1949-1969 who rejected a progressive approach to politics after World War II, declaring that liberalism can only lead to relativism or nihilism and could facilitate the rise of the totalitarian extremes of fascism and communism. Instead, a return to traditional values wrapped around a nationalist mythology could restore a sense of national purpose that liberalism supposedly had undone. A new nationalism, however, would require an enemy against whom the national identity could be defined. This profoundly Manichean worldview would constantly pit the U.S. against a foreign (or sometimes even internal) threat. The Soviet Union was the most obvious antagonist for a good vs. evil pairing during the Cold War. This Manichean worldview would influence the Reagan administration's hawkish attitude toward the Soviet Union since his administration would be the first to include many students of Leo Strauss including Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. International terrorism (particularly Al-Qaeda) has become the antagonist for this "us versus them" bifurcation since 9-11. See the BBC documentary series *The Power of Nightmares* for a more complete articulation of these ideas.

4. Sidney Lumet's film *The Pawnbroker* (1965) is a notable recasting of the Jewish pawnbroker in a more sensitive role.

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Images for the above article:



Image 1. The condescending pairing of geography and culture often creates a stereotype, in this case, for the Inuit people.



Image 2. Geography = culture: in fiction film the desert mise-en-scene becomes a reductive signifier of Arab culture.



Image 3. Hollywood uses the harsh, forbidding quality of the desert to personify Arabs. The desert is harsh and violent; therefore Arab characters are harsh and violent.



Image 4. Delacroix uses bright colors to emphasize the sensual opulence of Arab sultans and denote Arab culture as exotic.



Image 5. The popular image of male-female relations in Arab society, first promulgated during the 19th century. Women are chattel, objects of sexual fascination. Men are lascivious and dehumanizing.

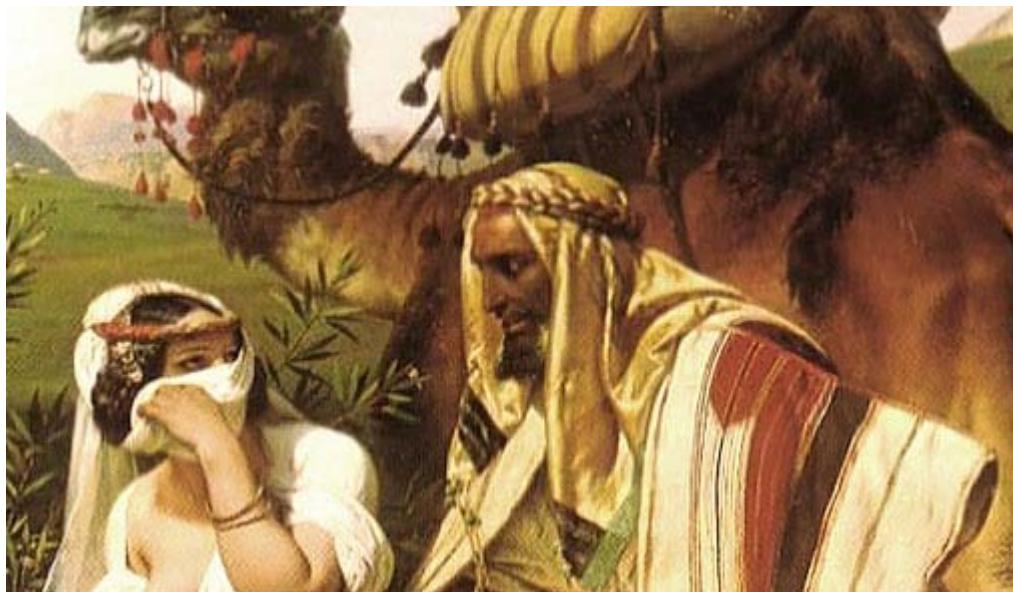


Image 6. The lascivious Arab man: note how the man has a darker skin color than the woman, pairing race with unbridled sexuality.



Image 7. Delacroix's "Death of Sardanapalus," the ultimate rendering of perceived Arab decadence: naked harem girls are about to be slaughtered as Sardanapalus' kingdom falls. Such a pairing of Arab sexuality with violence still informs much of our contemporary understanding of gender relations in the Arab world.



Image 8. Decadence and violence.



Image 9. Hollywood Orientalism.



Image 10. Palatial splendor with magnificently embroidered carpets, bejeweled goblets, beautiful women, rich silk.



Image 11. Disney's Orientalism. *Aladdin* presents the highly sexualized belly-dancer as its one mode of representing Arab women. Even Princess Jasmine is sexualized in similar terms.



Image 12. Disney animators gave a menacing palace guard stereotypical facial features including a heavy brow, hooked nose, thick lips, and missing teeth.



Image 13. This stunningly violent image from *Aladdin* shows a hateful Arab merchant swinging a sword to cut off Princess Jasmine's hand, since she doesn't have money to pay for an apple she gave to a hungry boy.



Image 14. The origin of Disney's anti-Arab caricatures lies in its anti-Semitic cartoon *The Small One* (1978) directed by Don Bluth. The Jewish moneylenders here possess almost identical facial features to the Arabs in *Aladdin* and share a similar rapacious glee for accumulating wealth.



Image 15. A love of money paired with a penchant for cruelty defines Disney's depiction of Jewish merchants in *The Small One*, much like...



Image 16. The greedy Arab trader who narrates the opening of *Aladdin*.

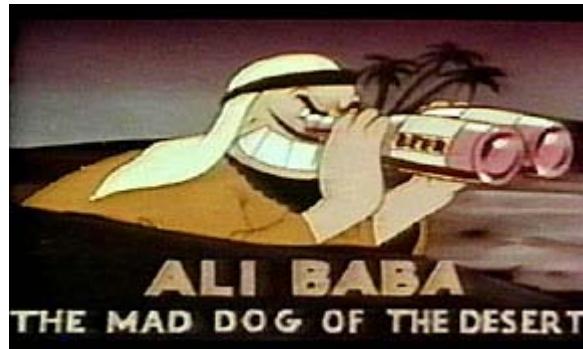


Image 17. *Ali Baba, The Mad Dog of the Desert* is another cartoon depiction of Arabs, painting them as buffoons or fools.

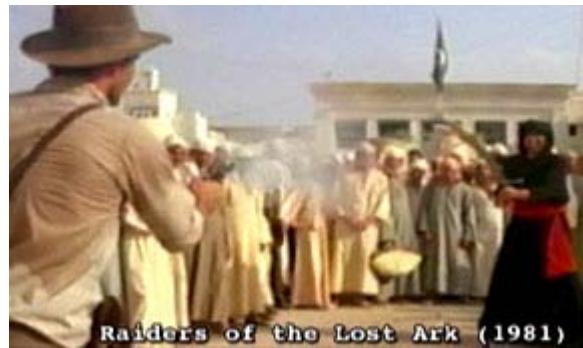


Image 18. A live-action feature-length cartoon is Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In Spielberg's attempt to make a joke out of a death, Jones casually shoots an Arab menacing him with scimitar.



Image 19. Jamie Farr has set the acting standard for exaggerated portrayal of Arabs. "Have you ever considered joining a harem?" is the line given him when he meets a bunch of blonde, white women, reinforcing the notion that Arab men are not only lascivious, but are particularly lustful after white women.



Image 20. The obnoxious Mr. Habib shouts gibberish (intended to sound like Arabic) telling his submissive wife to shut up in *Father of the Bride Part II*.

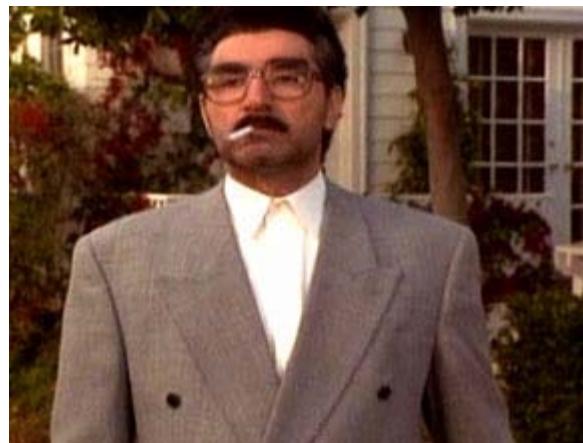


Image 21. Recalling the Jewish pawnbroker stereotype, Mr. Habib extorts \$100,000 from Steve Martin's character, or else he will destroy Martin's home.



Image 22. Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* recycles the same old stereotypes from the past with its depiction of an Arab terrorist menacing the film's heroes.



Image 23. The terrorist even shoots down Christopher Lloyd's mad scientist. Why would an Arab terrorist appear in a film that has nothing to do with the Middle East? The script goes out of its way to include a stereotype in a setting where it doesn't even make sense.



Image 24. Hollywood casts Arab women as either objects of eroticized spectacle, submissive “bundles in black” treated horribly by men, or psychotic terrorists.



Image 25. A belly-dancer tries to entice Kirk Douglas in *Cast a Giant Shadow*.



Death Before Dishonor (1987)

Image 26. When an Arab woman actually has agency, however, she's a psychotic terrorist, killing people with glee.



Image 27. Showing them as killing with cold-blooded efficiency, Hollywood suggests that when Arab women are liberated, they must naturally become killers.



Protocol (1984)

Image 28. Bundles in black.



Image 29. The sultan may be fantastically wealthy, but he craves Western respectability in Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. He negotiates with the Nazis for a Rolls-Royce.



Image 30. Anti-Semitic propaganda disseminated by the Nazis in the 1930s.



Image 31. *Jud Suss* (1940), an anti-Semitic film produced in Nazi Germany.



Image 32. The female Arab terrorist in *Death Before Dishonor* prepares to sink a power drill into the hand of a U.S. army colonel. This shot takes the POV of the victim, so as to maximize our identification with his pain.



Death Before Dishonor (1987)

Image 33. The U.S. army officer writhes in agony as the power drill bites into his flesh.



Hell Squad (1985)

Image 34. Hell Squad, a regiment of Vegas showgirls, trains to fight Arabs in the desert in Cannon Pictures' *Hell Squad*.



Hell Squad (1985)

Image 35. The Hell Squad trounces their Arab foes.

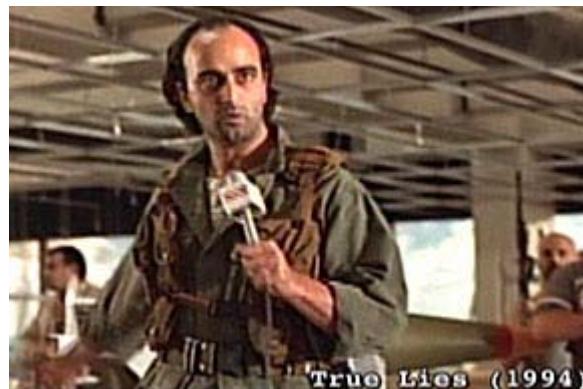


Image 36. In James Cameron's jingoistic *True Lies* (1994), terrorist Salim Abu Aziz of Crimson Jihad delivers a videotaped threat to the American people, eerily foretelling Osama bin Laden's tapes post-9/11.



Image 37. The U.S. military unleashes unspeakable carnage against Yemeni civilians in *Rules of Engagement*, written by the current conservative Democratic Senator from Virginia, James Webb.



Image 38. A sad victim of the massacre, the little girl becomes a receptacle for our sympathy.



Image 39. “Waste the motherfuckers!” Samuel L. Jackson’s platoon leader cries, beginning the massacre.



Image 40. The victim becomes the murderer. Webb’s script develops the little girl for whom we felt sympathy as, in fact, acting with the crowd shooting at U.S. soldiers. The plot chastises viewers’ for feeling sympathy for her since it indicates she got what she deserved when she lost her leg.



Image 40a. The audience is encouraged to applaud the U.S. soldiers’ massacre of Yemeni civilians and revel in the graphic, brutal nature of the carnage.

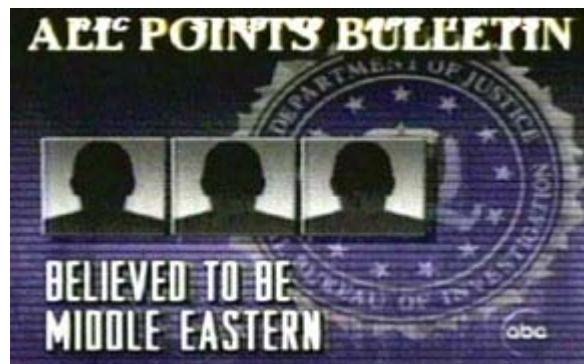


Image 41. The reportage after the Oklahoma City bombings assumed this must be the work of Middle Eastern terrorists.



Image 42. Jack Bauer, terrorist-fighter extraordinaire: *24* has pandered to post-9/11 fearmongering, going so far as to suggest that Arab American families in suburbia may actually be plotting terrorism around the breakfast table.



Image 43. In the paranoid world of Showtime's *Sleeper Cell*, even the homeless man on the street may be secretly working for Arab terrorists.



Image 44. Defining the Arab world as being wholly religious, U.S. media often use reductive images such as this, with men wearing white robes, skull caps and bowing before the Kaaba.



Image 45. Haifa Wehbe is a Lebanese pop star whose provocative lyrics and suggestive dance moves defy the image of the submissive, covered-up Arab woman. And yet you can never see her in the mainstream media because she confounds easily digested stereotypes.



Image 46. Likewise, female-oriented talk shows are very popular on Al-Jazeera. The participation of women in Arab media is something you'll never see reported in the United States.



Image 47. Comedian Dean Obeidallah confounds cultural reductionism through comedy.

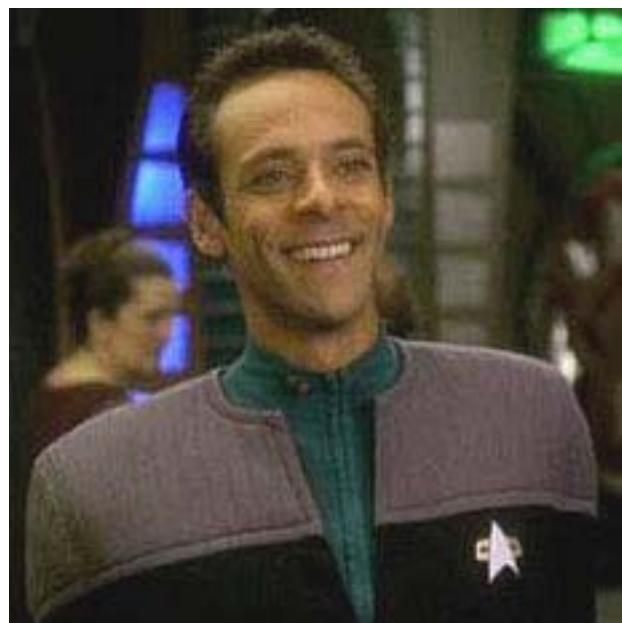


Image 48. Dr. Julian Bashir, played by Alexander Siddig on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, is a notable exception to the absence of Arab characters on U.S. television. Bashir is never defined by his ethnicity, but rather by his friendships, personality, skills, experiences, and education. The series' casting is notable for its ethnic diversity.



Image 49. Saladin replaces a dislodged crucifix at a Christian church at the end of Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*, symbolizing peace and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims.



Image 50. Alexander Siddig plays a well-educated Saudi prince in Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana*. The politically oriented plot indicates that the prince's efforts to institute reform and bring liberalism to his country are stymied by his government's obligations to U.S. companies.



Image 51. *Paradise Now* is the story of two Palestinian suicide bombers preparing for their one-way mission. The film is notable for advocating the justness of the Palestinian cause while also condemning terrorism.