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American Orientalism and Vestiges of European Colonialism

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Introduction- European Orientalism reiterates Western superiority over Oriental inferiority. Yet, American academia claims some indicative shift in the rite of narrating and representing the Other in literature, film and other media. The discourse of American Orientalism as it distances itself from the French frames through which the American writes the Orient tries to "pay nearly much attention to the French Empire" as they do to "those Berber and Arab cultures of the Maghreb and North African landscapes".2 The version of Orientalism they formalize does not solely extend the constructions and presumptions of European Orientalism but it suggests a version through which Americans negotiate the presence of European colonialism.3 It is through this new American copyrighted vision that the discourse on the Other "vacillates between the discourse of the savage and that of the civilized Orient"4as Porter claims in his reading of the imperialist discourse.

In this article, I would discuss American representations of the Orient and at the same time I would look at how the global flow of Orientalist discourse frames forms of narration and repsentation of otherness. In his *Morocco Bound*, Brian Edwards explains that unlike European Orientalism which revolves around "an exhau stive sense of the history, religion, languages and cultures of the Maghreb", American Orientalism, points out Edwards, detaches itself from "the sense that such precision is needed to understand and represent the world".

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Tarik Bouguerba

I. Introduction

EUropean[1] Orientalism reiterates Western superiority over Oriental inferiority. Yet, American academia claims some indicative shift in the rite of narrating and representing the Other in literature, film and other media. The discourse of American Orientalism as it distances itself from the French frames through which the American writes the Orient tries to "pay nearly much attention to the French Empire" as they do to "those Berber and Arab cultures of the Maghreb and North African landscapes".[2] The version of Orientalism they formalize does not solely extend the constructions and presumptions of European Orientalism but it suggests a version through which Americans negotiate the presence of European colonialism.[3] It is through this new American copyrighted vision that the discourse on the Other "vacillates between the discourse of the savage and that of the civilized Orient"[4] as Porter claims in his reading of the imperialist discourse.

In this article, I would discuss American representations of the Orient and at the same time I would look at how the global flow of Orientalist discourse frames forms of narration and repsentation of otherness. In his *Morocco Bound*, Brian Edwards explains that unlike European Orientalism which revolves around "an exhau stive sense of the history, religion, languages and cultures of the Maghreb", American Orientalism, points out Edwards, detaches itself from "the sense that such precision is needed to understand and represent the world". [5] Such examples of American Orientalism are not merely as "unmediated Orientalist or Africanist discourse, but as texts that engage the geopolitical order of the post-1941 period."[6] Brian Edwards' view captures, within its pictorial nature, both his stand against Edward Said's lop-sided version of Orientalism as well as his own American engagemen with the East and its intervention in European territories. The term American Orientalism is very much symptomatic of American involvement in various parts of the world and the strategic system that is used in USA dealings with the East. In her *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, Mari Yoshihara explains her version of American Orientalism. As she puts American Orientalism in direct opposition to European colonialism, she clarifies the major difference between Europe and America's dealing with the East. She writes Unlike European relationships to the Middle East, U.S. involvement in China and Japan did not entail direct colonial rule in the form of territorial acquisition and political governance. Yet from the late nineteenth century, the United States built and consolidated its "informal empire" in China and Japan through the Open Door policy, unequal treaties, and the expansion of commerce and cultural exports.[7]

Her study also emphasizes the role white women played in the shaping of American Orientalism. "Their participation in colonialist discourse," explains Youshihara, offered many American women deep insight into this form of philosophy through which became later part of a dominant American ideology and gained authority and agency which were denied to them sociopolitical life in general.[8] In my view, American Orientalism commonly replicates the traditional clichés of the dominant Orientalist discourse that always subjugates the East.[9] As opposed to American Orientalism as a discourse that is different from the European version, I would point out that the American Orientalist has made long strides in the process of objectifying, exoticizing, homogenizing, and feminizing the Orient. This claim of difference that American

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[1] This article is part of an MA paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Master Degree in English Studies and Culture at the school of humanities, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco; this paper is entitled: The American Century and Global Hegemony: Acts of Narration and Representation of Morocco in Hollywood.

[2] Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*. (Durban and London: Duke University Press, 2005), P.2.

[3] Ibid. P.1.

[4] See Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism,* P. 52.

[5] Ibid. P.2.

[6] Ibid. P.2.

[7] Mari Youshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), P.7.

[8] Ibid. P.6.

[9] In most Orientalist writings, the representation of the Orient seems to hinge on a binary opposition system aiming at elevating the West to the centre and relegating the Rest to the margin. Mari Youshihara's approach is not dissimilar to that I mentioned earlier. For her, American Orientalism does also invent an East as female and a West as male as both constituting the core of Orientalist dominant ideology. Ibid.

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Orientalism upholds is oftentimes ascribed to the evolving relationship USA had and still has with the Orient.[10]

It is worth noting at this stage that the nature of American Orientalism in its global aspect as it marks the entry to *the geopolitical moment* helps Americans rethink their national identity.[11] This very American model distances itself from the European taxonomizing, vilifying and objectifying discourse on the East and establishes a new course through which the Other is as important as other Europeans. Yet, I would point out that if American Orientalism has dismissed this European colonial hegemonic legacy, it has also switched to a new phase that might be called 'global hegemony' or what Henry Luce labeled as *'the American Century'*. I will use Luce's 1941 influential essay 'the American Century' to discuss the twentieth century as American *par excellence*. Shifting the paradigm of global hegemony from a colonial model to a different one which was central to the understanding of this concept. As Luce has it, the American Century refers to "the rapidly expanding American empire.[12]Put differently, it is the postcolonial phase that marks this American Century as the antithesis of European colonial epoch. In his ground-breaking essay, Henry Luce explicitly refers to the global sway of Hollywood, Jazz and other US cultural forms.[13]

I would use *'the American Century'* as a concept to show how America, through Hollywood, writes the Orient according to the American standard that defines itself as the antithesis of European territorial colonialism shaping a new form of hegemony. The American Century inaugurates the Americanization and Globalization processes as twentieth century by distinction. These two discourses, in question, have always taken "economic, cultural and political change beyond geography"[14]. This new form of neocolonialism features in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* and Alejandro Gonzalez Inárritu's *Babel* as they both articulate America as a non-territorial power meant at liberating the Orient from the denigrating and demeaning European colonial frames. This new globalist form that Henry Luce foresaw in his 'the American Century' "invests power in the market, in ideas and information, in cultural capital rather than in territory."[15] Henry Luce argues that 'the American Century' "did much of the ground clearing that would allow Americans to see North Africa as an extension of the American West". In his explanation of this concept, Henry Luce claims that "We are not in a war to defend American territory. We are in a war to defend and even to promote, encourage and incite so-called democratic principles throughout the world".[16]

As it operates in mainstream Hollywood, American Orientalism comes as the antithesis of European colonialism. Yet, they both engage into the same disparaging discourse *vis-a-vis* Orientals. Although Hollywood filmmakers contribute to that possible difference in narrating the Orient and more specifically Morocco in this context, America and Hollywood in particular have participated in heightening this Orientalised image of Morocco and at the same time it has contributed to the invention of a new American global colonial power. In his *Morocco Bound*, Brian Edwards highlights America's conspiracy, so to speak, against Morocco as well as its engagement into French territorial expansionism. He writes

Hollywood filmmakers shifted their attention away from the native population of North Africa and contributed mightily to the failure for Americans to recognize that the war to free the world from fascism and imperialist aggression was fought while the United States allied itself with French colonialism.[17]

As it offers ways of reading the French control over Morocco, Hollywood shapes forms of power that appear to legitimize America's intrusion in the Orient and more specifically Morocco. Hollywood representations claim to have produced Morocco striding away from the French frames through which the image of Morocco was more than faulty. "Hollywood representations", Brian Edwards explains, "of those years are obvious and distant fantasies and offer a less threatening site than the more elaborate and proximal French representations of the Moroccan reality".[18]At this stage, I would point out that the American cinematic discourse essentially claims some radical stand against the European mainstream colonial discourse in its dealing with Morocco. This American anti-European colonialism position has been taken a stage further; it distances itself from the

[10] I am thinking here Of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* in the main as a case study through which the Moroccan-American relationship stands in opposition to French or German presence in Morocco. It is this movie of *Casablanca* that communicates the neutral presence of America in Morocco and articulates the intrusive involvement of the French and Germans into 'things Moroccan'.

[11] In his *Morocco Bound,* Brian Edwards writes that "after US entry into a geopolitical space of ascendancy, representations of the world or the foreign played a special role in rethinking the meaning of American national identity". See Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, P.4.

[12] Ibid. PP.42,43.

[13] Neil Smith, Book Review: *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power,* Eds by Slater, D and Taylor, 1999 (sage publications, 2002), P.283. In this study, I will trace the paradigms of this American Century as they translate into new paradigms through which America features as a new global power.

[14] Ibid. P. 284.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Henry Luce quoted in Brian Edawrds' *Morocco Bound, Disorienting America's Maghreb: from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, P.49.

[17] See Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, PP.60, 61. I am here thinking about *Casablanca* at first place as it invokes this paradoxical paradigm in the American involvement with Morocco. *Casablanca* features America as a liberating force for Morocco but at the same time it shows up Americans red-handedly involved in the colonial enterprise.

[18] Ibid. P.72.

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European -the French in particular- vilifying imperialist discourse.

The Orient has been at the heart of Western canonicity - I mean here the American- as it has engaged with it and invented its image. Hollywood thereby seems to have played a major role in narrating the Orient, representing it and even theatricizing this very image. This theatrical image participates in some measure in writing the Orient. This image turns later on into a form of a stereotype then into fiction. The process of stereotyping runs so high in the Hollywood discourse in the way it hegemonizes the West and de-hegemonizes the Orient.

"Live images on big screen and television go beyond a thousand words in perpetuating stereotypes and clichés".[19]It is this super power the visual narrative entertains that aggravates the image of the Orient in the psyche of Americans. *Reel bad Arabs*: *How Hollywood Vilifies a People,* thereby traces in a historicist method the way the Orient has featured in American popular culture. Hollywood has contributed to this systematic, pervasive, and unapologetic degradation and inhumane dehumanization of Arabs by 900 films, the overwhelming majority of which portray Arabs by distorting at every point what this Arab race really means.[20] These distorting lenses and frames of Hollywood very often interrupt and disorient at the same time the discourse on the Orient. Put rather succinctly, the representation of the Arab in Hollywood has always been the same, according to Jack G. Shaheen; the Arab has thus been and is still a cultural other *par excellence*.[21] Seen through these Hollywood's distorted lenses, the Oriental looks very different and threatening to the extent that from 1896 until today filmmakers have collectively charged all Arabs of felony and indicted them as public enemy. Following the same line of thinking, all Arabs feature in Hollywood screens as "brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural others bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners".[22] In a movie like *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937), the image of Arabs as brute murderers and sleazy rapists was reproduced again. The fact that Arabs look very much the same has been a commonplace activity so that Hollywood manages to produce them of the same image that you could not distinguish one from another.[23] I would say that this is very indicative of the Orientalist discourse through which Arabs are never individualized. In Hollywood too, I believe that the same discourse has been used as the American hero always shows in full screen whereas the Arab and the Moroccan have never been individualized nor have they featured as full humans. It is very hard through this marginalizing and hegemonizing grammar of camera that the Oriental in general is always kept behind the screen and never shows in full screen. In portraying Arabs in Hollywood, moviemakers seem to have changed these people's real identity. It is not the Arab who dwells in tents and mounts camels, drives magic carpets or is surrounded by harem maidens as Hollywood tends to translate mistakenly through its distorting lenses. The Hollywood's contribution to vilify the Arab race is, to my understanding, part of America's imperialist project that drives at dominating the globe's culture. Hollywood's renditions of the Arabs have thereby fashioned the American audience's minds. It is the American Century of global hegemony through which America has already ranked first in exporting screen images to the world that constitutes this power. "We are the world's leading exporter of screen images_ the all-pervasive Arab stereotypes has much more of a negative impact on viewers today than it did thirty or forty years ago".[24]

The Orient or the Arab world in particular has featured in many other filmic works whose major occupation has been to orientalize the Arab world in the very way it has been vilified in earlier Orientalist writings. *The Sheik* (1921), *The Mummy* (1932), *Cairo* (1942), *the Steel Lady* (1953), *Exodus* (1960), *The Black Stallion* (1979), *Protocol* (1984), *the Delta Force* (1986), *Ernest in the Army* (1997), and (2000) are samples of such rite of Hollywood's representation and narration of the Arab world through which the discourse of vilification runs so high as it dehumanizes the Arab character and it demeans his culture by and large.[25] Thus, I would argue that Hollywood draws its denigrating hegemony from the powerful collages of hurtful images that further deepen such dehumanizing strategies.

However, there has always been a Hollywood discourse that claims this different stand that American Orientalism adopts. A handful of heroic Arabs could still surface in Hollywood screens in few 1982s and 1990s scenarios. In *the Lion of the Desert* (1981), for instance, righteous Arabs overthrow invading fascists. Other Arabs have been introduced as humane as in *Hanna K* (1983) and *the Seventh Coin* (1992). In *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* (1991), this discourse on Muslims persists in presenting a devout Muslim who "fights better than twenty English knights". He helps Robin

[19] Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Book Review July 2003(Sage publications), P.171. On a critical banner, Los Angeles Times TV critic Howard Rosenberg calls *Reel Bad Arabs: Hollywood Vilifies a People* "a groundbreaking book that dissects a slanderous history dating from cinema's earliest days to contemporary Hollywood blockbusters that feature machine-gun wielding and bomb-blowing evil Arabs". Ibid.

[20] Ibid. P.172.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid. At this stage, I am thinking about *Babel* and about the very scene through which the Moroccan teenager shot dead an American woman, reiterating the stereotypical image of the Oriental as terrorist.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid. P.174.

[25] Ibid. PP.174,175.

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Hood carry out his agenda against the evil Sheriff of Nottingham. In The *13th Warrior (*1999), another Arab Muslim scholar features befriending Nordic warriors, helping them defeat primitive cavemen. This flow of images has saturated the discourse on the Arab race to the point that the Iraqis who for so long have been projected as evil caricatures, a movie like *Three Kings (*1999) celebrates and humanizes them.[26] Yet, the mainstream discourse is that which holds close the Orientalist stereotype and produces rather fiction on the Arab world. The derogatory stereotype was a constant feature in movies such as *Black Sunday* (1977), *Ishtar* (1987), *Five Weeks in Balloon* (1962), *Things Are Tough All Over* (1982), *Sahara* (1983), and *Operation Candor* (1997).[27]

[26] Ibid. P.176.
[27] Ibid.

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