

American Orientalism and Vestiges of European Colonialism

Tarik Bouguerba¹

¹ Ibn Tofail University

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Abstract

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"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 representation of otherness. In his *Morocco Bound*, Brian Edwards explains that unlike European Orientalism which revolves around "an exhaustive 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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25 *Index terms—*

1 Introduction

26 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". ?? 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. ?? 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 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 representation of otherness. In his *Morocco Bound*, Brian Edwards explains that unlike European Orientalism which revolves around "an exhaustive 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".

40 as Porter claims in his reading of the imperialist discourse. 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 41 dealings with the East. In her *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, Mari Yoshihara 42 explains her version of American Orientalism. As she puts American Orientalism in direct opposition to European 43

44 colonialism, she clarifies the major difference between Europe and America's dealing with the East. She writes
45 Unlike European relationships to the Middle East, U.S. involvement in China and Japan did not entail direct
46 colonial rule in the form of territorial acquisition and political governance. Yet from the late nineteenth century,
47 the United States built and consolidated its "informal empire" in China and Japan through the Open Door policy,
48 unequal treaties, and the expansion of commerce and cultural exports.

49 Brian Edwards' view captures, within its pictorial nature, both his stand against Edward Said's lop-sided
50 version of Orientalism as well as his own American engagement with the East and its intervention in European
51 territories.

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53 Her study also emphasizes the role white women played in the shaping of American Orientalism. "Their
54 participation in colonialist discourse," explains Youshihara, offered many American women deep insight into
55 this form of philosophy through which became later part of a dominant American ideology and gained authority
56 and agency which were denied to them sociopolitical life in general. ?? In my view, American Orientalism
57 commonly replicates the traditional clichés of the dominant Orientalist discourse that always subjugates the
58 East. 9 6 Ibid. P.2. 7 Mari Youshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*. (New
59 York: Oxford University Press, 2003), P.7. 8 Ibid. P.6. 9 In most Orientalist writings, the representation of the
60 Orient seems to hinge on a binary opposition system aiming at elevating the West to the centre and relegating the
61 Rest to the margin. Mari Youshihara's approach is not dissimilar to that I mentioned earlier. For her, American
62 Orientalism does also invent an East as female and a West as male as both constituting the core of Orientalist
63 dominant ideology. *Ibid*.

64 As opposed to American Orientalism as a discourse that is different from the European version, I would point
65 out that the American Orientalist has made long strides in the process of objectifying, exoticizing, homogenizing,
66 and feminizing the Orient. This claim of difference that American Orientalism upholds is oftentimes ascribed
67 to the evolving relationship USA had and still has with the Orient. ??0 It is worth noting at this stage that
68 the nature of American Orientalism in its global aspect as it marks the entry to the geopolitical moment helps
69 Americans rethink their national identity. 11 This very American model distances itself from the European
70 taxonomizing, vilifying and objectifying discourse on the East and establishes a new course through which the
71 Other is as important as other Europeans. Yet, I would point out that if American Orientalism has dismissed this
72 European colonial hegemonic legacy, it has also switched to a new phase that might be called 'global hegemony'
73 or what Henry Luce labeled as 'the American Century'. I will use Luce's 1941 influential essay 'the American
74 Century' to discuss the twentieth century as American par excellence. Shifting the paradigm of global hegemony
75 from a colonial model to a different one which was central to the understanding of this concept. As Luce has it,
76 the American Century refers to "the rapidly expanding American empire. 12 Put differently, it is the postcolonial
77 phase that marks this American Century as the antithesis of European colonial epoch. In his groundbreaking
78 essay, Henry Luce explicitly refers to the global sway of Hollywood, Jazz and other US cultural forms. ??3 I
79 would use 'the American Century' as a concept to show how America, through Hollywood, writes the Orient
80 according to the American standard that defines itself as the antithesis of European territorial colonialism shaping
81 a new form of hegemony. The American Century inaugurates the Americanization and Globalization processes as
82 twentieth century by distinction. These two discourses, in question, have always taken "economic, cultural and
83 political change beyond geography" 14 10 I am thinking here of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* in the main as a case
84 study through which the Moroccan-American relationship stands in opposition to French or German presence
85 in Morocco. It is this movie of *Casablanca* that communicates the neutral presence of America in Morocco and
86 articulates the intrusive involvement of the French and Germans into 'things Moroccan' ???. 11 In his *Morocco*
87 *Bound*, Brian Edwards writes that "after US entry into a geopolitical space of ascendancy, representations of
88 the world or the foreign played a special role in rethinking the meaning of American national identity". See
89 Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb*, from *Casablanca* to the *Marrakech Express*,
90 P.4. 12 *Ibid*. PP.42,43. ??3 Neil Smith, Book Review: *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in*
91 *the Projection of American Power*, Eds by Slater, D and Taylor, 1999 (sage publications, 2002), P.283. In this
92 study, I will trace the paradigms of this American Century as they translate into new paradigms through which
93 America features as a new global power. 14 *Ibid*. P. 284.

94 . This new form of neocolonialism features in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* and Alejandro Gonzalez Inárritu's
95 *Babel* as they both articulate America as a non-territorial power meant at liberating the Orient from the
96 denigrating and demeaning European colonial frames. This new globalist form that Henry Luce foresaw in
97 his 'the American Century' "invests power in the market, in ideas and information, in cultural capital rather
98 than in territory." ??5 Henry Luce argues that 'the American Century' "did much of the ground clearing that
99 would allow Americans to see North Africa as an extension of the American West". In his explanation of this
100 concept, Henry Luce claims that "We are not in a war to defend American territory. We are in a war to defend
101 and even to promote, encourage and incite so-called democratic principles throughout the world". ??6 Hollywood
102 filmmakers shifted their attention away from the native population of North Africa and contributed mightily to
103 the failure for Americans to recognize that the war to free the world from fascism and imperialist aggression was
104 fought while the United States allied itself with French colonialism.

105 As it operates in mainstream Hollywood, American Orientalism comes as the antithesis of European

106 colonialism. Yet, they both engage into the same disparaging discourse vis-a-vis Orientals. Although Hollywood
107 filmmakers contribute to that possible difference in narrating the Orient and more specifically Morocco in this
108 context, America and Hollywood in particular have participated in heightening this Orientalised image of Morocco
109 and at the same time it has contributed to the invention of a new American global colonial power. In his
110 *Morocco Bound*, Brian Edwards highlights America's conspiracy, so to speak, against Morocco as well as its
111 engagement into French territorial expansionism. He writes 17 As it offers ways of reading the French control
112 over Morocco, Hollywood shapes forms of power that appear to legitimize America's intrusion in the Orient
113 and more specifically Morocco. Hollywood representations claim to have produced Morocco striding away from
114 the French frames through which the image of Morocco was more than faulty. "Hollywood representations",
115 Brian Edwards explains, "of those years are obvious and distant fantasies and offer a less threatening site than
116 the more elaborate and proximal French representations of the Moroccan reality". 18 15 Ibid. ??6 Henry Luce
117 quoted in Brian Edawrds' *Morocco Bound*, *Disorienting America's Maghreb: from Casablanca to the Marrakech*
118 *Express*, P.49. 17 See Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb*, from Casablanca to the
119 Marrakech Express, PP.60, 61. I am here thinking about Casablanca at first place as it invokes this paradoxical
120 paradigm in the American involvement with Morocco. Casablanca features America as a liberating force for
121 Morocco but at the same time it shows up Americans red-handedly involved in the colonial enterprise. 18 Ibid.
122 P.72.

123 At this stage, I would point out that the American cinematic discourse essentially claims some radical stand
124 against the European mainstream colonial discourse in its dealing with Morocco. This American anti-European
125 colonialism position has been taken a stage further; it distances itself from the Volume XVIII Issue V Version I
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127 European -the French in particular-vilifying imperialist discourse.

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

133 "Live images on big screen and television go beyond a thousand words in perpetuating stereotypes and clichés".
134 ??9 It is this super power the visual narrative entertains that aggravates the image of the Orient in the psyche of
135 Americans. *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, thereby traces in a historicist method the way the
136 Orient has featured in American popular culture. Hollywood has contributed to this systematic, pervasive, and
137 unapologetic degradation and inhumane dehumanization of Arabs by 900 films, the overwhelming majority of
138 which portray Arabs by distorting at every point what this Arab race really means. ??0 These distorting lenses
139 and frames of Hollywood very often interrupt and disorient at the same time the discourse on the Orient. Put
140 rather succinctly, the representation of the Arab in Hollywood has always been the same, according to Jack G.
141 Shaheen; the Arab has thus been and is still a cultural other par excellence. ??1 Seen through these Hollywood's
142 distorted lenses, the Oriental looks very different and threatening to the extent that from 1896 until today
143 filmmakers have collectively charged all Arabs of felony and indicted them as public enemy. Following the same
144 line of thinking, all Arabs feature in Hollywood screens as "brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and
145 money-mad cultural others bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners". 22 19 Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How*
146 *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
147 Rosenberg calls *Reel Bad Arabs: Hollywood Vilifies a People* "a groundbreaking book that dissects a slanderous
148 history dating from cinema's earliest days to contemporary Hollywood blockbusters that feature machine-gun
149 welding and bomb-blowing evil Arabs". Ibid. 20 Ibid. P.172. ??1 Ibid. ??2 Ibid. At this stage, I am thinking
150 about Babel and about the very scene through which the Moroccan teenager shot dead an American woman,
151 reiterating the stereotypical image of the Oriental as terrorist.

152 In a movie like *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937), the image of Arabs as brute murderers and sleazy rapists was
153 reproduced again. The fact that Arabs look very much the same has been a commonplace activity so that
154 Hollywood manages to produce them of the same image that you could not distinguish one from another. ??3 I
155 would say that this is very indicative of the Orientalist discourse through which Arabs are never individualized.
156 In Hollywood too, I believe that the same discourse has been used as the American hero always shows in full
157 screen whereas the Arab and the Moroccan have never been individualized nor have they featured as full humans.
158 It is very hard through this marginalizing and hegemonizing grammar of camera that the Oriental in general is
159 always kept behind the screen and never shows in full screen. In portraying Arabs in Hollywood, moviemakers
160 seem to have changed these people's real identity. It is not the Arab who dwells in tents and mounts camels,
161 drives magic carpets or is surrounded by harem maidens as Hollywood tends to translate mistakenly through
162 its distorting lenses. The Hollywood's contribution to vilify the Arab race is, to my understanding, part of
163 America's imperialist project that drives at dominating the globe's culture. Hollywood's renditions of the Arabs
164 have thereby fashioned the American audience's minds. It is the American Century of global hegemony through
165 which America has already ranked first in exporting screen images to the world that constitutes this power. "We
166 are the world's leading exporter of screen images—the all-pervasive Arab stereotypes has much more of a negative
167 impact on viewers today than it did thirty or forty years ago". ??4 The Orient or the Arab world in particular

169 has featured in many other filmic works whose major occupation has been to orientalize the Arab world in the
170 very way it has been vilified in earlier Orientalist writings. The Sheik (1921), The Mummy (1932), Cairo (1942),
171 the Steel Lady (1953), Exodus (1960), The Black Stallion (1979), Protocol (1984), the Delta Force (1986), Ernest
172 in the Army (1997), and (2000) are samples of such rite of Hollywood's representation and narration of the Arab
173 world through which the discourse of vilification runs so high as it dehumanizes the Arab character and it demeans
174 his culture by and large. ??5 However, there has always been a Hollywood discourse that claims this different
175 stand that American Orientalism adopts. A handful of heroic Arabs could still surface in Hollywood screens in
176 few 1982s and 1990s scenarios. In the Lion of the Desert (1981), for instance, righteous Arabs overthrow invading
177 fascists. Other Arabs have been introduced as humane as in Hanna K (1983) and the Seventh Coin (1992).
178 In Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves (1991), this discourse on Muslims persists in presenting a devout Muslim
179 who "fights better than twenty English knights". He helps Robin Thus, I would argue that Hollywood draws
180 its denigrating hegemony from the powerful collages of hurtful images that further deepen such dehumanizing
181 strategies.

182 Hood carry out his agenda against the evil Sheriff of Nottingham. In The 13 th Warrior (1999), another Arab
183 Muslim scholar features befriending Nordic warriors, helping them defeat primitive cavemen. This flow of images
184 has saturated the discourse on the Arab race to the point that the Iraqis who for so long have been projected
185 as evil caricatures, a movie like Three Kings (1999) celebrates and humanizes them. ??6 Yet, the mainstream
186 discourse is that which holds close the Orientalist stereotype and produces rather fiction on the Arab world. The
187 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). ??7 ¹

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engage the geopolitical order of the post-1941 period." 6
Such examples
of American Orientalism are not merely as "unmediated
Orientalist or Africanist discourse, but as texts that

[Note: 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.]

Figure 1: 5 1