Movies and the Middle East

L. Carl Brown
Princeton University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol13/iss13/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
One culture's image of another may well be best revealed not in explicit dialogue or dispute between representatives of the two, not in the learned disquisitions of scholars, but in the less self-conscious expression of a culture's own self-image.

The cinema can be especially revealing in this regard. Commercial fiction film was born in the marketplace and has always been a pervasive art form. Occasional later efforts to give the medium rarefied chic (e.g., eminent film critics, exclusive film clubs and sporadic college courses on fiction film as an art form) have in no way reined in the power of movies to penetrate all levels of society.

Movies are, moreover, a multi-art medium combining music, drama and visual art. Movies, thus, can evoke the dress, speech, architecture, natural environment and even the physiognomy of another people and their culture.

Movies, or certainly most movies, cater to what is perceived as the prevailing popular taste. Movies are not usually intended to educate or edify but to entertain. They, thus, reflect, record and codify one culture's image of another probably more effectively than any other medium.

What, then, can a review of American films treating the Middle East (plus a few British films that were popular in the United States) tell us about the American image of the Middle East?

I

The United States in the years immediately following the First World War had become a great power but was still somewhat unsure of its role. To say that American society lacked self-confidence in facing the world would be wide of the
As Others See Us

mark. From the earliest days Americans—at least as perceived by others—have been notoriously independent, cocky and assured.

Yet, deeper probing always reveals a certain American ambivalence in relations with the lands from which they or their ancestors had come. Americans have tended to seek both a clean break with that past and an acceptance as members in good standing of the European club.

Americans, on the one hand, saw themselves as having left corrupt class-ridden Europe in order to create the good society (the "city on a hill") in the New World.

Americans, on the other hand, sought Europe's approbation. When General Pershing laid a wreath at the tomb of the French aristocrat who had served the American revolution uttering the simple words, "Lafayette, we are here," he expressed that sense of homecoming that has always haunted Americans in their attitude toward Europe.

When Wilson announced his Fourteen Points and raised the cry for a new world order that would rise above what was seen as the tawdry, immoral European balance of power system he symbolized an equally strong American sentiment of being different and better. The painful, perilous flight from the old home to a new home was, in this way of thinking, a pilgrimage. America had a mission—to many it was a God-ordained mission. Seeking membership in the European club as the ultimate goal was a betrayal of that mission. Perhaps even accepting membership in the European club as a step along the way was to deviate from the true path.¹

In addition, anti-imperialism and free international trade as epitomized in the open-door policy were traditional American shibboleths. There is no need here to address the arguments of revisionist historians that such attitudes accorded with American interests. Of course, they did; but even so such visions of how a world—properly ordered—ought to work had its impact. Not even the latter-day American flirtation with imperialism, personified in Teddy Roosevelt, completely changed older American ideas.

Accordingly, Americans after 1918 could have identified with the Middle East as peoples rightly seeking self-determination, as victims of European imperialism, as societies needing only the opportunity to decide their own fate while engaging freely in commerce with the rest of the world free of Europe's oppressive political, economic and military control.

Or Americans could perceive the Middle East through European eyes as "lesser breeds without the law," as benighted peoples groaning under native despotisms who need the stewardship of a mission civilisatrice or a "white man's burden" in order to emerge from the shadows into the bright light of the modern age.

For all practical purposes American chose to see the Middle East through European eyes.

It is not that Americans totally ignored new developments in the Middle East beginning in the years of the First World War.² They were thrilled or at least titillated by the "Revolt in the Desert" during the First World War and by Abd al-Krim's revolt against France and Spain in the twenties. Americans, however,
looked at Sharif Husayn and Abd al-Krim and saw, not Kossuth or Garibaldi, but Indian chiefs.

Americans, in other words, might have viewed Middle Eastern independence struggles as being in the proud tradition of the American Revolution. They chose, instead, to see these movements more nearly as cultural anachronisms, holding out against the inexorable forces of modernity. In this way, Americans could admire the bravery expended in a lost cause. They could denounce the crude arrogance of European imperialism and feel the more pious for having done so. In the final analysis, however, they could accept with equanimity the outcome.

At this point a cautious step backward is in order. It was suggested above that Americans “chose” to see Middle Easterners and the Middle East in a certain way. This implies more concern, more deliberation and more conscious attention to the issues than was the case. It would be closer to the truth to say that Americans brushed up against these developments, fitted them into well-worn intellectual niches that required no re-examination of America’s own cultural assumptions and thereby proceeded to, as it were, neutralize them.

To have viewed Sharif Husayn or Abd al-Krim—not to overlook Egypt’s Saad Zaghlul, the Sanusis of Libya, the Tunisian Old Destour—as freedom fighters in a good cause would have required giving these struggles a decided political significance. This, in turn, would have subtly and subconsciously challenged the comfortable American self-perception of its civilizing fight against the savage Indian and its paternalistic stewardship of the childlike Black.

Such a challenge was eventually to come. The comfortable, conservative view of White-Black relations in America (glossing over the substratum of violence and injustice that had always pertained) as a stewardship arrangement moving ever so slowly toward an accommodation of political equality was eventually discredited by a rich mix of individual actions and broad social developments.

Thereafter, came a reconsideration of White Americans’ treatment of the Indian, and in the wake of all this a radical rethinking of the American self-image, e.g. a new look at the melting pot thesis, the new acronym WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) with its ironic if not decidedly pejorative overtones, the cult of “roots” as opposed to the earlier cult of America as the “New Jerusalem.”

When this happened the way was open for changed American perceptions of the Middle East. To what extent a change has yet taken place, and to what extent such change is observable in fiction films, will be noted in due course. At this point it is worth underlining that the American perception of the Middle East seems consistently to have been more nearly a projection of certain themes and values from America’s own self-image rather than a response to outside developments.

This helps to explain the quite limited impact on American opinion of those few Americans who were openly championing Middle Eastern nationalism after the First World War. The handful of American missionaries and educators, especially those concentrated at the American University of Beirut, had good
contacts with President Wilson and pushed for American support of Arab political aspirations.

The King-Crane Commission, originally intended by President Wilson as an inter-allied body but which became an exclusively American group, presented in August 1919 a report in favor of Syrian independence and a greatly reduced Zionist program. The Commission went on to propose that if there must be a mandate then the United States would be the Syrians' first choice as mandatory power.

All these initiatives would have provided significant political ammunition for an American administration seeking a more forceful presence in the Middle East, but nothing came of them. It is true that they were resisted by Zionist spokesmen in the United States (some of whom also had the ear of President Wilson), and the resulting confusion of advice from the handful of Americans directly concerned certainly helped convince American political leadership that no decisive American action was advisable. More important, however, an indifferent American public, preoccupied with other concerns, paid scant attention to these few individuals proposing Middle Eastern policies, whether Zionists or philo-Arabs.

The American popular image of the Middle East just as the great age of movies began was, most of all, that of a strange, never-never land where things that happened had little or no impact on what Americans saw as the "real world." The Middle East was an exotic realm largely beyond history or politics. It was peopled by those who were simply beyond civilization. They could be, as the story-line required brutal or noble savages, childlike or cunning; but in any case the usual rules did not apply. They had their own code of conduct which the civilized westerner could not penetrate: but there was no need to. These people were not to be judged if only because their lives did not really relate to one's own.

It was, thus, an ideal (and often idealized) arena in which the fairy tales of one's infancy, the robust adventure stories of one's adolescence and the rather more complex exoticism-cum-eroticism of adulthood could mingle unembarrassed by logic, morality or reality.

The American popular image of the Middle East was largely a transposition of the American frontier motif where real and fictional characters merged—Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, Kit Carson, Sitting Bull, the Virginian, Jesse James. Yet, it must not be overlooked how the American popular image of the Middle East also drew upon prevailing European (especially British) sources. Beginning in the early 19th century the European Romantic movement had vaunted nature over artifice, primitive spontaneity over civilized restraint, the noble savage over the circumspect bourgeois, and a more libidinous approach to life and love.

From the time that Byron somehow managed to link the Greek War of independence with the more generalized revolt against European establishment politics, from the time when Eugene Delacroix found in North Africa the mystery, the color, the naturalness and the noble savages he sought, Western popular notions of the Middle East have been filtered through a Romanticist screen.

Later in the century and on into the early decades of this century the works of
Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and John Buchan (and such as Pierre Loti among the French) served to keep alive the thoroughly Romanticized, mysterious and adventurous vision of the non-West, including the Middle East.

The exoticized Middle East in the popular American perception was thus an especially neat fit of American and European attitudes. This plus the virtual absence of intrusive present-day political reality affecting Americans (which did not take place until after the Second World War) insured that the American image would survive in splendid isolation from mundane reality.

Americans tended to see the Middle East as a vast land of shifting sand dunes, nomads on their camels, oases, and veiled women—with just a dash of sybaritic sin and sex in the urban-based seraglio where the story usually begins. Most Middle Easterners were seen as Arabs, or in any case such basic distinctions as Arab, Berber, Turk or Persian were not grasped.4

As a result anyone getting his or her picture of the Middle East from American movies would be surprised to learn that most Middle Easterners are peasants, that more Middle Easterners are mountaineers than desert nomads, and that the Middle East has always boasted a thriving urban life. Damascus, after all, is deemed perhaps the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city.

This is to argue that the movies did not create an American image of the Middle East. Rather, they sustained and fleshed out an exotic image that already existed, at least in germ. Or, to state the matter somewhat more circumspectly, the movies produced the image that Americans sought and felt at ease with. Somewhat like the playing of "Pomp and Circumstance" at a small town high school graduation exercise, it seems that both the performers and the audience realized what was expected.

II

Among the films that began to be produced as early as the last decade of the 19th Century were a few that evoked the Middle East or, more precisely, the Arab. Thomas A. Edison’s A STREET ARAB (1898) was, of course, not intended to suggest the Arab world. It was, rather, the filming of a young American boy doing gymnastics. At this time short silent films were produced mainly to demonstrate what might be possible with this new medium, not yet to tell a story or provide even the simplest dramatic development.

"Street Arab" was simply the accepted word for young vagrants, but symbolic connection should be noted, for since the mid-nineteenth century the term has been used for "the houseless poor; street children. So called because, like the Arabs, they are nomads or wanderers with no settled home."5 In a word, by the time motion pictures were produced the word "Arab" had already come to bear connotations similar to "gypsy."

Other early films, still very much in the phase of showing what movies could do, buttressed this sense of the Arab as exotic. These included ARABIAN GUN TWIRLER (1899) and ALLABAD: THE ARAB WIZARD (1902). The most that can be said about these earliest beginnings is that when the time came for fully developed desert exoticism there was a ready tradition on which to build.

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1985
As Others See Us

Desert Exoticism: Movies and the Middle East may be said to have come together in a dramatic embrace only in 1921 with the filming of The Sheik starring Rudolph Valentino. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that The Sheik accomplished for subsequent movie representations of the Middle East what D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915) did for movie representations of modern America. There, surely, the comparison ends. Griffin combined rare talent for genuine cinema drama with unalloyed prejudice against Blacks and in favor of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Sheik took an absurd English novel and managed to prove that the implausible combination of sand, sex-appeal and silliness added up to box-office success. The plot is simply told: An English girl finds true happiness in the arms of her Arab cavalier abductor. Valentino was able to ride this flimsy, shopworn dramatic vehicle to stardom.

Most commentary on The Sheik, its many imitators that were soon filmed thereafter, and then Valentino’s last film, The Son of the Sheik (1926) has concentrated on the ensuing Valentino craze among American women. This can best be left to students of modern American history, aided—one might recommend—by psychoanalysts and social psychologists.

What image The Sheik established of Arabs and the Middle East is more readily demonstrated. It is the domain of fantasy, pure and simple. The hero is handsome, bold, even arrogant but in the end tender. The solitary desert is frightening with its shifting sands, but then one arrives not at a mirage but a luxuriously furnished dwelling.

Filmed in California’s San Bernadino desert, the locale of The Sheik was supposed to be the Algerian Sahara, but the heavy-hand of French colonial rule was not permitted to intrude upon the more dream-like quality of the Sheik’s homeland. It was, instead, the desert Arab equivalent of Utopia or the Land of Oz.

The Sheik did not offer an unfavorable image of the Arab. Nor as in so many later films were Middle Easterners merely part of the scenery. In this film the hero was the Arab, not the Western sojourner in an alien land.

Yet, The Sheik managed quite effectively to rob the Arabs (and the Middle Easterners, for as already noted no distinctions of Arab or non-Arab Middle Eastern peoples penetrated the popular culture of the movies) of their historical and dramatic interest in much the same way that faithful Mammy and Stepin Fetchit stereotypes of American Blacks long kept the acute problem of American race relations safely out of focus.

The protagonist in The Sheik had no problem with an alien colonizer. Modernity a la francaise posed no threat to his lifestyle or that of his faithful retainers. His status was secure, his exotic otherness equally so. The appeal of what might justly be dubbed “the sheik motif” lay in this willful rejection of reality in favor of pure fantasy.

The point may be clarified by contrasting the threadbare character development of “the sheik motif” with Kipling’s works. Kipling’s themes (the simple soldierly virtues, the foolish and effeminate “Babu” class of Indians, the bond binding together brave antagonists, the foolish over-educated colonial admin-
istrator contrasted with the transplanted English squire, the thankless "white man's burden") can rightly be challenged as distorting reality, but at least his characters and his ideas offer recognizable commentary on a multi-dimensional reality. No such bow to the real world and no such rich character development emerged from Hollywood's use of "the sheik motif." Quite possibly, however, "the sheik motif" did more than Kipling and his school to shape American images of the Middle East.

The success of THE SHEIK spawned other movies of desert drama in which the leading men were "passionate and aggressive lovers who casting aside all prudence swept the women off their feet." These included such titles as ARABIAN LOVE, BURNING SANDS, WHEN THE DESERT CALLS, THE SHEIK'S WIFE, THE VILLAGE SHEIK, and the improbably titled SOAK THE SHEIK—all produced in 1922, just one year after Valentino's success.

Valentino's last film, THE SON OF THE SHEIK, was an early example of what has proved to be an enduring Hollywood trait, the sequel. When a film surprisingly becomes a smash hit, then what could be easier than a follow-up film that remakes and extends the old formula? In THE SON OF THE SHEIK Valentino played two roles—both the father who had earlier won his English lady and the son who was enamoured of a dancing girl. There is, however, no tampering with success. The son repeats the exploits of the father, combining in the process haughty pride and even a streak of cruelty with a solid core of tenderness. In the end, of course, love triumphs.

THE SON OF THE SHEIK does give Valentino a much more active role with feats of derring-do and even stoic submission to torture, probably in order to make the film more attractive to males and in the process to counter earlier male criticism that Valentino was not really all that manly. This, however, scarcely changed the resulting Arab and Middle Eastern stereotypes. They became even more strongly rooted.

Perceptive critics saw what was going on in this spate of Sheik movies. The New York Times review of THE SON OF THE SHEIK included the following ironic comment, "It is a Western thriller in an Arabian atmosphere, except for the exotic Eastern love affair. . . . Not even Tom Mix's horse would be caught in a situation like that." Yes, many critics saw that this Sheik and Valentino madness was both trivial and narrowly formulaic, but dramatic conventions, once given popular acceptance (whether in "high" theatre or "low" popular movies) are not easily pushed aside.

Desert exoticism, American style, had begun not with THE SHEIK in 1921 but two years earlier with Lowell Thomas's very popular film and lecture series about T. E. Lawrence and the "Revolt in the Desert." As a result, the Lawrence of Arabia mystique was well launched by the early twenties. It continues to this day. The combination of Lawrence, Valentino and the desert established the norm. Thereafter, tales of Middle Eastern adventure had to be fixed in the accepted desert context.

The way in which Morocco's Abd al-Krim was adapted in American movies illustrates the tyranny of prevailing dramatic conventions. Abd al-Krim was a Berber, not an Arab. He was a mountaineer, living in the Moroccan Rif, not a
desert nomad. yet, when Sigmund Romberg, apparently intrigued by Vincent Sheean’s reporting of Abd al-Krim’s resistance to the Spanish and French, chose to write a musical loosely evoking the Riffian environment the resulting play and film was entitled THE DESERT SONG. In the climate of America’s twenties THE MOUNTAIN SONG lacked that needed exotic touch. Only the image of the desert fit the formula. Even though one of the most famous melodies from Romberg’s musical is entitled “The Rif Song” and North Morocco’s Rif chain is several hundred miles removed from the shifting sands of the Sahara nothing would do but to continue the established, successful formulas.

THE DESERT SONG which opened as a Broadway play in November 1926 was made into a film in 1929. New film versions were created in 1943 and 1953. In a sense, Sigmund Romberg managed to combine the American attraction for the Moroccan Abd al-Krim in his resistance against Spanish and French colonial rule with a subtle reworking of the T. E. Lawrence mystique. The hero is a European who, like Lawrence, helps the natives. While pretending to live among his fellow Frenchmen the protagonist actually slips away from time to time to lead the Riffians in battle as the notorious “Red Shadow.” There is, as well, even the requisite, abduction scene, recalling Valentino motifs when Pierre Birabeau, alias the Red Shadow, steals away Margot Bonvalet; but all ends well after the Red Shadow is apprehended.

Foolish as it all was, THE DESERT SONG did introduce a new theme which should have sparked an American response—nationalist resistance to European imperialism (even though diluted by the European hero). Interestingly, this possibility was not developed in later films whose producers seemed happier with the tried-and-true desert exoticism.

The Desert as Fate: Another desert motif introduced early in film history has survived so long as to deserve listing as a variant of desert exoticism. This is a story using the desert and its inhabitants only as a shadowy background. The real action takes place among the handful of Europeans who find themselves surrounded by the forbidding desert and its hostile tribesmen.

The desert and the bedouin constitute fate or the challenge that will test the European protagonists, breaking some while proving the worth of others. (The parallel with a number of movies treating Indian wars in the American West is striking.)

The classic example of this theme is BEAU GESTE. Based on the 1924 novel by P. C. Wren BEAU GESTE first saw life as a silent film starring Ronald Coleman (1926). It was remade in 1939 with a stellar cast including Gary Cooper and Brian Donlevy, made yet again in 1966 and then almost certainly laid to rest by Marty Feldman’s outlandish farce entitled THE LAST RE-MAKE OF BEAU GESTE (1977).

BEAU GESTE provided the archetype for a rash of films on the French Foreign Legion, set in the desert. An interesting illustration of this tenacious tradition is the film MARCH OR DIE (1977) produced the same year as THE LAST RE-MAKE OF BEAU GESTE.

Josef von Sternberg’s classic MOROCCO (1930) also fits into this category of the desert as fate. Co-starring Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich (in her first
By contrast with the SHEIK movies, Morocco does offer considerable attention to realism and character delineation. The film has, understandably and properly, been the object of critical study and learned commentary. Yet, it does seem fair to point out that the film does not bother to explore such questions as who are the people that the Foreign Legion are fighting? What are the goals of these battles?

It is, instead, presupposed that Western Man's fate calls him to fight these Moroccans and not to reason why. Such, in sum, is the essence of the simple, long-lived Foreign Legion theme in Western movies.

The fade-out scene of Morocco offers an example of pure desert exoticism: Marlene Dietrich leaves the rich Adolph Menjou—who had proposed marriage—standing by his chauffeured limousine, kicks off her high heeled shoes and joins the Moroccan women camp followers who with their few goats trail their men, as the Foreign Legion and Moroccan auxiliaries march out of town.

Four Feathers (1939), a British film, offers an identical theme of the desert as fate but without the Foreign Legion. In this case, the action is set in the time of the Anglo-Egyptian reconquest of the Sudan. A man accused of cowardice takes the risky step of going behind the Sudanese lines (and thus—implausibly—passing for a Sudanese Arab) in order to prove his bravery. Remade many times (the last two being a British version entitled Storm over the Nile in 1966 and an American version under the original title in 1977) the 1939 Four Feathers stands alone in dramatic excellence with a cast including Ralph Richardson and C. Aubrey Smith.

Even though the attention to Sudanese and Middle Eastern detail offers a verisimilitude that puts the Sheik films to shame, the Sudan and the Sudanese remain, for all that, only a shadowy, exotic background. What better symbol of the desert as fate than that of the British officer (Ralph Richardson), wounded, separated from his unit, losing his pith helmet and ultimately blinded by the merciless desert sun?

Desert Farce: One of the surest signs that a cinema theme has become commonplace is the rise of satire. A tendency to poke fun at the whole Sheik craze actually arose quite early. The Shriek (sic) of Arabia starring comic Ben Turpin appeared one year after Valentino's success with the Sheik. An early Popeye short cartoon, Popeye Meets Ali Baba (1937), also illustrated the extent to which American movie-goers were prepared to relish the spoof, being by that time so familiar with the "straight" archetype. With a dizzying profusion of camels, robed Arabs, veiled women, sultans and scimitars Popeye Meets Ali Baba managed in a scant quarter-hour to present the ridiculous side of virtually every Arab and Middle Eastern stereotype that the earlier movies had fostered.

Animated cartoons are, of course, expected to be farcical and irreverent. Nor do the short animated cartoons usually receive the attention from critics or movie-goers that they deserve. A successful feature film satirizing earlier films is, however, well-nigh irrefutable evidence that the audience knows enough movie
history to enjoy the joke. This is the importance of ROAD TO MOROCCO (1942) starring, as did all of the "Road" movies, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour.

It is poignant that ROAD TO MOROCCO opened in New York in November 1942, just a few days after American troops had landed in Morocco and Algeria. The landings marked the beginning of OPERATION TORCH, the first commitment of American troops against the Axis, coming just 11 months after Pearl Harbor. The contrast between the beginning of a long war for America and "that beautiful land of whacky make-believe . . . a land of magic rings and mirages" could hardly be more striking.

That, however, is just the point, just the attractiveness of ROAD TO MOROCCO. It is pure make-believe and even the satire is directed against earlier make-believe. This was the escapism that an America moving from Depression to War relished. ROAD TO MOROCCO can tell us nothing about Morocco. "The only purpose it serves", as Times movie reviewer Bosley Crowther put it, "... is to justify a fairy-tale background of oriental splendors, turbaned villains, Miss Lamour and Dona Drake in scant attire, and a line in a song whereby the heroes indicate that they are Morocco-bound".

Another excellent example of farcical treatment was ABBOTT AND COSTELLO JOIN THE FOREIGN LEGION (1950). Then in 1977 came the ultimate spoof of desert exoticism and movie-created image of the French Foreign Legion with THE LAST RE-MAKE OF BEAU GESTE. Not all that well-received by the critics, and almost unrelievably farcical, THE LAST RE-MAKE nevertheless thoroughly nails down the point under discussion here. The plot itself and the many sight-gags and jokes only make sense to those who know the earlier BEAU GESTE movies or who, at least, have sat through a number of the later less effective imitations of BEAU GESTE's Foreign Legion theme.

The Middle East as a Convenient Alien Background: It is perhaps already apparent that the cinema representation of the Middle East tends both to stereotype and trivialize the area, its people and its ongoing history. The two—stereotyping and trivializing—do not necessarily go together. War movies, for example, manage to stereotype the enemy powers by making them the very incarnation of evil. There is nothing trivial about that. Or antiwar movies usually convey the tragic togetherness of all parties being sucked into the vortex of destruction. This too is no trivial treatment of the subject.

When stereotyping is combined with trivializing it is most likely because the subject area and its peoples are not deemed important. For this reason the stereotyping is, in most cases, not malicious but rather innocently dismissing. Africa as seen in Tarzan movies and Black America until at least the 1940s are two such examples. The Middle East is another.

This serves to introduce several representative films—some excellent, other mediocre—that just "happen" to be set in the Middle East. Some could just as well be set in any other part of the non-Western world. Others introduce a Middle Eastern locale only to satisfy the need for verisimilitude in Western history—the many films of World War II combat in North Africa being the prime examples.
CASABLANCA (1942) is a film that could just as easily have been entitled DAKAR OR SAIGON. For that matter, with only a slight change of plot the film could have been set in any part of Nazi-occupied Europe where at least a shred of political authority had been left the occupied state—as metropolitan Vichy France itself.

CASABLANCA has become a cult film. Thousands of loyalists relish the many now-memorized lines of dialogue with a devotion rivalled by only the hardiest of Shakespeare buffs sitting through a performance of HAMLET. One thus offers criticism with some trepidation. Still, the few bows to local color are wrong. The gestures, the few words of Arabic, even the fez and flywhisk used by Sidney Greenstreet typify the eastern Arab world, not Morocco. Yet, these are minor points since the Moroccan background is irrelevant to the plot.

More important, however, the basic plot is that of a people struggling against an alien rule imposed by military force (Free France against Nazism). Nothing in CASABLANCA, and as far as we are aware nothing in the extensive critical commentary on this classic and powerful film, notes the paradox of a third people, the Moroccans, who would wish to be free from French rule.

The irony of French voices singing La Marseillaise in order to drown out German voices singing Die Wacht am Rhein, both national groups being on alien soil blithely ignoring the mute claims to independence and identity of their reluctant Moroccan hosts, is totally missed.

ALGIERS (1938) starring Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamar is another film with limited Middle Eastern ambience, but in this case at least for a more justifiable reason. A remake of the French film PÉPÉ LE MOKO, the screenplay treats the French in Algeria, then accounting for roughly 10 percent of Algeria’s population. This is surely as valid a subject as, say, the Afrikaners of South Africa.

ALGIERS did not really distort reality in the way so many earlier films set in the Arab world had done. Nevertheless, since the American public was unprepared for such distinctions as the existence of a large settler population in North Africa, ALGIERS probably added support to the implicit notion that the Middle East was an exotic land where the only really important or interesting characters were European. Since the hero hid from the police in the Casbah—that remote, mysterious Arab quarter where the nameless poor lived—the notion of the natives as a rather indistinct background was strengthened.

Several noteworthy films were made treating the North African campaign of the Second World War, but their Arab or Middle Eastern relevance is perhaps indicated by SAHARA (1943), starring Humphrey Bogart. The story of British and American troops trapped in the desert by Axis forces, SAHARA was later remade as a Western entitled LAST OF THE COMANCHES (1952). What better illustration of the Middle East as convenient background than this?

FIVE GRAVES TO CAIRO (1943) featuring Hollywood old-timer, Erich von Stroheim as General Rommel, is a compelling tale of wartime intrigue and espionage, but there is little Middle Eastern about it—even in Hollywood’s terms—except the desert.

Another first-rate spy film was FIVE FINGERS (1952) with James Mason as the spy with the codename Cicero who stole secrets from the British Embassy in
Turkey during the Second World War. Again, except for good local color in the chase scene the film conveys little about Turkey or the Middle East.

To mention Turkey is to be reminded that this country had as leader in the interwar years one of the most colorful personalities in the modern Middle East—Kemal Atatürk. Bent on modernizing and, in a word, making Turkey a part of Europe, Atatürk could well have provided the subject for a full-blown cinema saga. Nothing of the sort occurred. Of course, it can be rightly argued that Hollywood, and the British film producers as well, tended to steer clear of all but the safest political figures—and safe was usually defined so as to treat only those long dead. Atatürk and his new creation, the Republic of Turkey rising from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, does underline the sharp compartmentalization between the Middle East of the movies and the real Middle East. 18

Toward Greater Realism: Signs that movie images of the Middle East were moving toward a greater concern for the area and its peoples as of interest in their own right emerged in the sixties. The two important films illustrating this possible change might seem, at first sight, to be implausible candidates for such an interpretation. LAWRENCE OF ARABIA (1962) and KHARTOUM (1966) treated old themes in the desert exotic tradition. They were, moreover, in many ways latter day examples of that unrestrained Hollywood style that earns the sobriquet “extravaganza.”

For all that, LAWRENCE OF ARABIA and KHARTOUM clearly move the cinema image of the Middle East in the direction of realism plus a more empathetic treatment of Middle Easterners. The plot of these two films could easily have followed the well-grooved path of complex, tormented Western man tested by an implacable Eastern desert and its inscrutable peoples. One could hardly, in the wildest flights of imaginative creativity, conjure up two more appropriate figures for such romanticized treatment than Charles “Chinese” Gordon and T. E. Lawrence. Both were, as movie people would breezily put it, “right out of central casting.”

To their credit the writers and directors for these two films stay out of these ruts. Several of the Middle Eastern characters in LAWRENCE, such as Faisal and others, are given rich character delineation. Although Lawrence is clearly the protagonist, the many others are by no means stock characters.

In British-produced KHARTOUM the plot avoids both desert exoticism and the-desert-as-fate by the simple approach of picturing both Gordon and the Sudanese Mahdi as strong-willed, sincere religious fanatics. In this way the promethean impulse implicit in any drama about heroes is kept in balance. The Sudanese Mahdi is not simply the personification of fate against which the flesh-and-blood Gordon must struggle. Instead, both the Mahdi and Gordon are real persons—faulted as humans must be but equally strong and equally heroic.

Nor is KHARTOUM simply a reworking of Kipling’s idea that “there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!”19 With KHARTOUM’s Gordon and the Mahdi it is not simply a duel of courage but also of conviction. That the Middle Easterner can have ideas and act bravely and consistently on those ideas is a refreshingly new note.20 It moves things lightyears away from the hordes of
Arabs circling the beleagured Foreign Legion fort for no very clear reason and then at long last fading back into the desert also for no very clear reason. This is more than "the natives are restless tonight."

The sympathetic, but by no means patronizing, treatment of incipient Arab nationalism lying behind the "revolt in the desert" is also noteworthy.

These films are, of course, intended as sagas, not documentaries. One can quibble with certain liberties taken. KHARTOUM offers a secret meeting between Gordon and the Mahdi. No such meeting ever took place. Even so, this seems well within the limits of dramatic license.

Attention to detail in both films is exemplary. KHARTOUM, for example, offers a dramatic scene of Gordon's arrival in the capital and his triumphant march to the governor-general's palace hailed enthusiastically by the crowd as the would-be liberator of the besieged city. The clothing is right, the faces are right, the sense conveyed of Khartoum's size and structure at that period is right.

Equally on target, is the genuine acclaim that the Sudanese urbanites of 1884 would give to their alien would-be redeemer. Urban Sudanese Muslims were touched by the messianic faith of Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, but they also feared, for solid historical and cultural reasons, the revolt of the hinterland against the cities.

The film is equally good in conveying—without exaggeration—the strains placed on Khartoum's elders causing them eventually to press for a negotiated surrender to the Mahdi's forces.

KHARTOUM and LAWRENCE OF ARABIA demonstrated that modern Middle Eastern subjects could be presented in such a way as to be critical and box-office successes while offering a verisimilitude gratifying to the area expert, especially after decades of quite different fare.

This is not to say that either film did for American perceptions of the Middle East what THE GOOD EARTH (1937) did for American perceptions of China. The chosen stories were too dangerously close to the swashbuckling, Western man-in-the-desert theme for that. Even with all their steps in the direction of realism LAWRENCE OF ARABIA and KHARTOUM contained too many elements that could bolster the old stereotypes. This, alas, is what seems to have happened.

Slipping Back to the Comfortable Old Stereotypes: ARABESQUE (1966) appeared the same year as KHARTOUM. It is a parody and a playful manipulation of the many cliches found in mystery, gangster and Middle Eastern films. The plot, if it may be so called, involves a British academician specialized in the ancient Middle East (Gregory Peck) caught up in international intrigue that brings him in touch with Sophia Loren. "Exciting, beautifully photographed, minus any message or deep thought," is the way a popular guide to movies puts it. One can hardly quarrel with his appraisal on one level of analysis, but the effect of ARABESQUE is not perhaps so harmless as is implied.

The Arab villain presents all the worst of, say, King Farouk and Adnan Khashoggi. From the perspective of this discussion, ARABESQUE is perhaps not totally "minus any message." The implicit message is that you can take the Hollywood Arab out of the desert but you can't take the desert out of the Hollywood Arab. Thus, mystery, cruelty, houries, harems and even falcons. Such
movies as ARABESQUE may serve as a bridge from the old Hollywood Arab to the new Hollywood Arab, both being equally distant from the real Arab.

The year 1975 brought THE WIND AND THE LION, an egregious example of Hollywood recidivism. In 1904 a Riff mountain Berber leader, Raisuli (or Raisuni) captured an American citizen, Jon Perdicaris, and his father-in-law David Varley, a British subject.

Raisuli used his hostages to put pressure on the Moroccan sultan, the hapless Abd al-Aziz. Following desultory diplomacy the hostages were released unharmed after five weeks of captivity but not before President Theodore Roosevelt had electrified the Republican National Convention with the ringing message that the following instructions had sent to the American consul in Tangiers: "Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead." The president did not bother to mention that the issue was already virtually settled.22

THE WIND AND THE LION made a few changes in the story. Mr. Perdicaris became instead a beautiful young widow (Candice Bergan) with two small children. The film flashed back and forth between the two protagonists with equal zest for the energetic life, Theodore Roosevelt and Raisuli. In this case, however, the matched opponents motif, as in KHARTOUM, did not succeed. Instead a rather tedious updating of the Kiplingesque Ballad of East and West is presented.

This leaves full scope for all the old cliches—horsemanship and marksmanship, the hero’s blend of haughty cruelty and tenderness, the captured heroine who comes to respect her captor, the romanticized merger of raw nature with presumed true and valuable human nature, stripped of its distorting civilized veneer.

As a hedge THE WIND AND THE LION offers touches of satire-through-exaggeration such as the very proper American consul or the heavy-handed relief expedition. It is as if those responsible for this absurd film would seek to disarm critics by insisting, “Don’t take us too seriously. Just enjoy yourselves.” Unfortunately, this is not good enough if one is concerned with movie images of the Middle East.

A brilliant example of what Anglo-American movie-makers might have been doing during these years is the 1966 Italian-Algerian film BATTLE OF ALGIERS. This tackles head-on aspects of the traumatic, brutal (on all sides) Algerian war of independence against the French (1954-1962). Admittedly a partisan film, BATTLE OF ALGIERS nevertheless manages to convey the full measure of human tragedy that weighed down all sides. The FLN terrorist bombings of innocent civilians are in no way prettied up. Instead, the full horror of such random slaughter is tackled head-on. The film also handles the terrible quandary facing the French authorities in Algeria of whether to torture in the hope of uncovering in time other terrorist plans.

BATTLE OF ALGIERS is, thus, much more than simply a reversal of the customary stereotypes. That would have only given us the Algerian (and not the European) as Promethean man tested by impersonal fate. That would have only given us French colonial rule (rather than the desert and its elusive nomads) as
Fate. *Battle of Algiers* transcends such limited, formulaic plotting. The film presents several memorable characters from both sides of the battle lines and portrays the tragic, complex and human dimension of the Algerian war. It is, in short, a masterpiece. Lauded by critics in this country, *Battle of Algiers* seems not to have inspired Hollywood.

Or can it be argued that *Battle of Algiers* and such films as Z (French, 1969) influenced the makers of *Midnight Express* (British, 1978)? Here, too, the basic theme is that of the individual (or, as with the FLN, the overpowered group) facing the evils of the organized state. Whatever the case, *Midnight Express* sends out ambivalent signals concerning the Middle East. On the one hand, it is, presumably, an attempt to treat reality, even the seamier side of reality (the American hero is apprehended, tried and jailed by Turkish authorities for smuggling drugs). This, as far as it goes, is a needed move away from the Middle East as fantasy.

Yet, the argument that the movie represented an attack on Turkey and the Turkish people must be carefully weighed. *(The Turkish government protested.)* It might well be argued that police, prison officials and especially anti-narcotics agents are a tough breed the world over. Many would insist that they must be. Even keeping this in mind one is left with the difficult inquiry: Do the Turks get fair treatment in this film? Or does the *Midnight Express* build on the generation-old Western prejudice against the “unspeakable Turk”? Then, finally, which is a healthier use of that very powerful medium—the cinema—the depiction of foreign cultures as exotic never-never lands or an effort at realism with all the pitfalls of polemics and partisanship?

### III

*Future Prospects*: Over six decades separate the first feature-length American films treating the Middle East and the present day. In the 1920s America's interests in the Middle East were minimal. The jarring disjuncture between the romanticized, exoticized image conveyed in the movies and Middle Eastern reality was thus of slight importance.

Such is no longer the case. The United States has been heavily involved in the Middle East since at least the 1947 announcement of the Truman Doctrine. What Americans think about the Middle East is now significant, for Americans as well as Middle Easterners. It is worth considering, by way of conclusion, the role of movies in these radically changed circumstances.

At the present time the stability of American perceptions of the Middle East seems very much in evidence. The earlier discussion of films from the 1920s to the present so indicate. The few possible moves toward a radically revised image of the Middle East seemingly have not yet brought about impressive change.

Yet, it seems equally apparent that America in this age is experiencing both a major change in self-perception and in its perception of others, including the Middle East. Such a conjuncture should eventually bring about a sharply different orientation.
American media and American public opinion are now acutely concerned with the power dimension of its relations with the Middle East (e.g. Iran, oil, the perceived Soviet threat, the Arab-Israeli confrontation). Many emphasize the role of special interests in fixing American perceptions of the Middle East. Of course, there are special interest groups, many quite vocal.

The Zionists and the pro-Israeli groups have a vested interest in presenting the Arabs in less than favorable terms. The smaller and less organized groups of Arab-Americans, along with a few pro-Arab forces take the opposite position. Americans of Greek and Armenian background have strong animus against Turkey. Certain business interests are eager for policies that will insure continued profitable trade. Others are inclined to see the "hidden hand" of oil interests manipulating American media representation of the Middle East.

It does not seem that "special interests" have significantly shaped American movie representations of the Middle East. At best, these interests have probably managed to create a marked reluctance among movie makers to take on presumed controversial subjects.

Consistent with this interpretation, when controversial issues are touched on in passing there is a tendency to remain within the bounds of the tried and true stereotypes or prejudices. This is, perhaps, the most sanguine way to interpret ARABESQUE, MIDNIGHT EXPRESS and such recent films as BLACK SUNDAY (1977).

It is, indeed, true that Hollywood is most unlikely to produce in the near future a feature film doing for the PLO what BATTLE OF ALGIERS did for the FLN. Even so, the number of probing documentaries by the major commercial TV networks are an interesting portent. At the same time, in spite of the markedly favorable general American sentiment for Israel, matched by a much more ambivalent and often decidedly hostile view of the Arab world, especially the Arab position on Israel, very few avowedly pro-Israeli films have appeared. One thinks of EXODUS (1960), but how many others can be mentioned?

In sum, the commercially produced fiction film stands out as a very conservative medium. Movie break-throughs to daring new views of potentially explosive social or political issues are few, and the first steps that might occasionally be taken in that direction are usually quite timid. For this very reason movies are best studied as the distilled representations of well-established stereotypes and prejudices than as indicators of future cultural directions. This in no way dilutes their importance as sources for the scholar. It is surely as important to know where we have been as where we are going.

What seems beyond doubt is that we are most unlikely to remain much longer just marking time. Examples of the way in which the American Western film has evolved over the past half century or so offer an intriguing suggestion of what might take place. Even more pertinent is the revolutionary change in Hollywood's treatment of Blacks. That story is beautifully summed up in the titles of books studying that change: Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film, 1900-1942; Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks; and From Sambo to Superspade: the Black Experience in Motion Pictures.23

Some day, and probably sooner than many think, a book treating the
evolution of American movie images of modern Middle East will appear bearing some such title as *Up from the Desert: from the Sheik to Sadat*. When it does, Americans will read the book to find out where we have been, not where we are going.
Notes

1. This is essentially the self-image of White America. The bitterly different experiences of Black America must be kept in mind. The relevance of American White-Black relations to American perceptions of the Middle East is noted later.

2. Of course, most people in all societies tend to ignore foreign developments that do not directly impinge on their own lives. Moreover, most people routinely ignore the details of public life even in their own nation-state. From time to time, savants and schoolmarmis wring their hands at the findings of polls showing that x percentage of high school graduates cannot identify, say, the chief justice of the Supreme Court or NATO or the secretary of state. Those interested in scientific inquiry would do well to see such data as a challenge to look for sounder gauges of public opinion and group attitudes. Perhaps more time at the movies and less time in poll-taking is indicated.

3. Founded in 1866 as the Syrian Protestant College, it was rechartered in 1920 as the American University of Beirut.

4. Lest this appear exaggerated, let Abba Eban describe a visit to President Eisenhower’s Secretary of Defense: “Charles Wilson surprised me once by a pointed question: ‘Is Turkey one of the Ayran countries with which you don’t get on very well?’ ” Abba Eban, An Autobiography (New York, 1977), p. 188.


6. Briefly noted in Sari J. Nasir, The Arabs And The English (London, 1976), p. 143. Pages 142-162 offer a useful summary of many films treating Arab themes from the earliest beginnings until the 1960s. Nasir’s interpretation of this film history is, however, disappointing, monotonous and often, we would argue, inaccurate.


10. An interesting discussion of these events is found in John E. Mack, A Prince Of Our Disorder: The Life Of T. E. Lawrence (Boston, 1976), pp. 274-277.


12. The second filming of THE DESERT SONG (1943) offers updating appropriate to the mood of the Second World War. The protagonist is an American who after having fought against fascism in Spain finds himself a piano player in a Moroccan night club. He rallies the Riffians against Nazi agents and foils Nazi war plans. The good French colonel is induced to petition his government that the Riffians eventually be granted their freedom. “This was one of the few films to hint that Arabs under French colonialism did not have complete freedom and rights.” Nasir, pp. 153-154. Ten years later with the third DESERT SONG, and when the Moroccan struggle for independence was peaking, Hollywood reverted to essentially the screenplay version of the twenties.


15. Beautifully captured in Woody Allen’s PLAY IT AGAIN SAM (1978). It leaves one to wonder when either a whimsical or a satirical film entitled ROUND UP THE USUAL SUSPECTS will appear.

16. The role given Dooley Wilson, as Sam the Black American piano player, can, however, be seen as a forthright early statement favoring racial toleration. See Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade To Black: The Negro In American Film, 1900-1942 (Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 371-372.
17. Charles Boyer never said "Come with me to the Casbah" in the movie, but the sentence has become part of American cinema folklore. The Casbah became as a result associated with mysterious romance rather than the squalid warren of native Algerian poverty which it was.

18. The continuing impact of Romanticism on Western perceptions of the Middle East in all ways, not just the movies, can hardly be exaggerated. "Perhaps Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* may be taken as a fitting literary epitaph for this romanticism—fitting both for its preoccupation with various 'tendencies' (as Scobie used to call them) and for the fact that, in more than a thousand pages, not a single member of the Muslim majority manages to obtrude himself on the reader's consciousness." Dankwart Rustow, "Political Ends and Military Means in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East", in V. J. Parry and M. E. Yapp, *War, Technology and Society in The Middle East* (London, 1975), p. 390.

19. *The Ballad Of East And West*.

20. Kipling, of course, greatly admired physical, military courage in the "native." Witness the lyrical tribute to the Sudanese Beja tribesmen who were followers of the Mahdi:

So 'ere's to you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your 'ome in the Soudan;  
You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first-class fightin' man;  
Ad 'ere's to you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, with your 'ayrick 'eadh of 'air—  
You big black boundin' beggar—for you broke a British square!  

Nothing about ideas in this.


22. Whenever a similar problem arises, as in the recent Iranian hostage crisis, a few columnists always come forward to evoke "Perdicaris alive or Raisuli Dead" as symbolizing the way the United States handled things in the good old days. The reality was rather different. Roosevelt's secretary of state, John Hay, rather wrote concerning the Perdicaris cable, "It is curious how a concise impropriety hits the public."

23. By, respectively, Thomas Cripps (New York, 1977), Donald Bogle (New York, 1973) and Daniel J. Leab (Boston, 1975).