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Disney Construction of the Arab Space and Cultural Identity

Abstract

It has often been remarked that forging representations is a form of naturalizing the external world to our perceptions. This form of naturalization is the manner in which distant and exotic spaces, peoples and cultures are made to seem more familiar and more natural to viewers or readers. As case in point, some cartoons about Arabs have functioned to translate strange-looking Arab locations by ordering them according to the codes of Orientalist composition and spatial recession. This has allowed these locations to be apprehended by the cartoon viewers as abstract spaces liable to total conversion and imaginative transformation. In fact, the notion of abstract space is of great importance given that it explains how that lived space and the means of perceiving it through vision are intimately connected by representation. Abstract space is an order into which human activities are placed, but it is ultimately a conception of space that shifts practices. It constitutes a way of perceiving the world that changes what the world is and what happens there. As such, the Disney world transforms territory, making it fit the already existing old traditions of the eighteen and nineteen centuries by caricaturing the Middle East, for instance, as full of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces and heathen Arabs.

Narratively linking Arabs with the desert proves a start for more sweeping misperceptions of the Arab cultural diversity and complexity. Worse yet, Disney tends to present both Muslims and Arabs as one people representing the same dangerous culture and populating the same deserts. Culturally looking at this kind of reductionism would prove that Disney not only gives Arabs a Muslim identity but also gives Muslims an Arab identity. Certainly many parts of the Arab world do feature desert landscapes. However, any ho-

mogeneous marriage of people, identity and space in terms of the connotations of "desert" would ignore both physical and cultural varieties of many Arab countries. Still an inevitable truth is the idea that the Arabland and the people living there, be they Muslims or Christians, are framed in an abstract geography based upon debased terms of exoticism, violence, barbarism, misogyny and excessive lust, to mention but a few. This way, the abstraction of the Arabland, lives, practices and peoples finds a visual analog in the representation of a "dematerialized landscape." Such type of landscape is an exotic sitting full of black beards, palm trees, oases, hooked noses, belly dancers, harem maidens and automatic weapons, to mention but a few. To substantiate its contentions, this paper shall base its data analysis on the Disney movie of Aladdin. Through this movie, this paper shall argue about the idea that Disney constructs the Arabs' cultural identity– synonymous to a variety of odious and demonized traits – based on special implications. Thus Arabs are defined according to their relation to their inhabited denuded, empty geographies. Worse yet, geography, in these Disney cartoons, is used metaphorically to take on a personified quality that translates into attitudes toward that part of the world. For example, when the Arabland means the "desert," this is not just a mere landscape but a state of mind. That is to say, given that the desert and jungle connote emptiness, danger and cultural "backwardness," the hostility of these environments often translates into attitudes about the people who live there. Indeed, such pejorative association between geography and cultural identity shapes the mise-en-scene of much of Disney's negative portrayal of Arabs.

Keywords: Abstract space, desert, cultural identity and stereotypes.

ملخص

تعـرض هـذه الدراسـة مـن خـلال تحليلهـا للصـور المتحركـة التـي تنتجهـا اسـتيودوهات ديـزني الأمريكيـة التمثـلات السـائدة عـن العالم العربـي و الـشرق الأوسـط بالـذات و التـي تسـتند غـلى التصـور الـذي بنـاه الاسـتشراق الغـربي عـن الـشرق بصفـة عامـة و الـشرق العـربي بصفـة خاصـة. مركزيـن اهتمامنـا عـلى فيلـم "عـلاء الديـن" المقتبـس مـن قصـص ألـف ليليـة و ليلـة نـود أن نفكك الصـورة القامَـة التـي

تقـدم عـن العـرب، الشـعب المتخلـف و غـر المتحـضر الـذي يعيـش في الصحـراء المكفهـرة و في محيـط متوحـش لنبـين أنّ هـذه الصـورة التـي تريـد أن تربـط العـرب بجغرافيتهـم فتبنـي صـورة مزيفـة عنهـم و عـن ثقافتهـم. و هدفنـا مـن هـذا التفكيـك هـو الـرد عـلى الخلفيـات التـي تقـف وراء هـذا البنـاء المغالـط و المشـوب بالأفـكار المسـبقة.

Much of the political debate in the Middle East revolves around space. Space, both physical and imagined, is not only part of the identity of people, but also a dynamic tool often utilized to define the identity of nations … Space thus is constantly in flux and carries multiple meanings. It is not a given, a neutral stage upon which history is played out. It is part of history and culture, constantly being defined and redefined. In other words, space is a cultural process through which "pasts erupt into the present"[1] (Gregory 1997, p. 228).

It has often been remarked that forging representations is a form of naturalizing the external world to our perceptions. This form of naturalization is the manner wherein distant and exotic spaces, peoples and cultures are made to seem more familiar and more natural to viewers or readers. In view of that, some animated cartoons about Arabs have adopted and adapted to different modes of representations whereby they can be able to translate strange-looking Arab locations by ordering them according to the codes of Orientalist compositions and spatial recession. This kind of translations has allowed these locations to be apprehended by the cartoon viewers as abstract spaces liable to total conversion and imaginative transformation. Therefore, this space is made,

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1 - Qtd. In Lina Khatib. Filming the Modern Middle East Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World: "The Politicized Landscape." (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd. 2006), p. 15

Homogeneous in appearance (and appearance is its strength), abstract space is by no means simple. In the first place, there are its constitutive dualities. For it is both result and container, both reproduced and productive […] For, while abstract space remains an arena of practical action, it is also an assemble of images, signs and symbols. It is unlimited because it is empty, yet at the same time it is full of juxtapositions, or proximities ('proxemics'), of emotional distances and limits. It is at once lived and represented, at once the expression and foundation of a practice, at once stimulating and constraining, and so on…[2]

The conception of abstract space is of paramount significance given that it dexterously draws a setting characterized by a host of opposites, and it is through such represented contradictories that this abstract space is made perceivable, mainly through vision. Simply put, abstract space is an order into which human activities are placed. It constitutes a way of perceiving the world that changes what the world is and what happens there to suit the tastes and agendas of the presenters. Therefore, the function of representation in an abstract space "entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role. That which is merely seen is hard to see – but it is spoken of more and more eloquently and written of more and more copiously."[3] It appears then that the world is changeable as long as it is connected to an abstract space.

In support of this, one would argue that the animated cartoons' world transforms territory, making it fit the already existing old traditions. It should be noted that "the18th and 19th century European artists and writers caricatured the Middle East as full of desolate

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2 - Henri Lefebvre. The production of space. Trans. Donald, Niicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 288

3 - Henri Lefebvre. The Production of Space. Trans. Donald, Niicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 286

deserts, corrupt palaces and heathen Arabs."[4] Linking Arabs with the desert proves a start for more sweeping misperceptions of the Arab cultural diversity and complexity. The abstraction of the Arab space, lives, practices and peoples finds a visual analog in the representation of a "dematerialized landscape,"[5] in which people and things are framed based upon debased terms of exoticism, violence, barbarism, misogyny and excessive lust, to mention but a few.

In fact, some animated movies feature the Arabs' cultural identity as defined according to the Arabs' relation to their inhabited denuded, empty geographies. As Shaheen (2001) puts it, "the depiction of Arabs always begins with the desert."[6] Indeed, such pejorative association between geography and cultural identity shapes the mise-en-scene of much of the animated movies' negative portrayal of Arabs. As a matter of fact, such negative biased shootings of Arabs have been a result of a long-standing history of colonialism and exploitation bringing both the East and West into contact. To understand this interpretation, one must understand Said's (1978) differentiation between the Occident and the Orient. Said (1978) suggests that this relationship between the two has developed into an antagonistic frame; a disagreement over what is Western and what is non-Western.[7] In this regard, the East is always made less in importance compared to the West and is continuously negatively reported.

Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves (1937)[8]*,* for example, draws on both Arab folktales – including *The Arabian Nights* – as well as traditional Western notions about Arabs, the Middle East and the desert. Such cartoon movie features a number of common stereotypes of Arabs and the Middle East, including the depiction

4 - Jack G. Shaheen. Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. (Brooklyn, New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), p. 25

5 - Henri Lefebvre. The production of space. Trans. Donald, Niicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991)

6 - Jack G. Shaheen. Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. (Brooklyn, New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), p. 43

7 - Edward W. Said. Orientalism. (New York: Random house, 1978), pp. 1-2

8 - Max Fleischer. (Director). Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves, 1937. [Motion Picture].

of Arabs as duplicitous schemers, weak, greedy, patriarchal savages, villains and black magic sorcerers. The desert is pictured as desolate, dirty and dangerous. It is portrayed as a geographical space in the middle of nowhere, away from all that is modern and civilized, thereby constituting a haven for bandits, thieves and hyper-sexualized peoples who are miles away from civilization. Indeed, *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937) draws an image of a desert that functions as a powerful symbol of a landscape existing outside of time (history) and outside of civilization (society/progress). Worse yet, geography, in this animated cartoon, is used metaphorically to take on a personified quality that translates into attitudes toward that part of the world. Given that the desert connotes emptiness, danger and backwardness, the hostility of these environments often translates into attitudes adopted by the people who live there. In this way, the Sahara dwellers are also supposed to feel and act exactly in conformity with their environs. In this sense, any representation of them wouldn't fail showing their harsh and ruthless nature.

Historically, in the European conceptions of space, the Arab desert has been an empty landscape in the sense that it has been by definition uninhabited – an oasis being within, though not part of, the desert – and therefore an open screen for the projection of whatever meaning a viewer might perceive in it. Importantly enough, in *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937), the desert is populated with characters that best fit the imperial imagination of Europe. The clash between the Arab bandits and the Western heroes in the movie perfectly weaves an imperial scenario of two powers (evil vs. good), after which the good (apparently Western) ultimately triumphs and brings peace back to where it was. In fact, this portrayal of the desert landscape translates incomprehensible spaces for the viewer's apprehension, making it possible for each viewer to projecthis or her own meaning onto an apparently "*pure landscape.*"[9] This ability to control is nothing less than an ability to personally colonize that stretch of territory. In other words, "(re)defining space is an act of power (this has most obviously been seen in

9 - Pure landscape is used here to refer to the idea that this landscape is unpopulated, and it is, thus, the moment for animated movies' producers to populate it with things they mostly like to see and have their film viewers enjoy.

the mapping done by Europe on other parts of the world). Cinematic representation of space is here analyzed as an example of the exercise of power."[10] This sort of representation makes the perception of the Sahara landscape private, that is, allowing the viewer to impute his or her own conceptions of the landscape's character and even what sort of narrative might unfold in that space. The logic behind such representation is that any land that is not employed or occupied is defined as vacant or available for the viewer's (European) taking over. Moreover, the symbolic imagery of the faraway land is the stimulus that engenders the viewers' imagination and movement to leave their comfortable boudoirs and travel to distant locales. John Urry's (1990) concept of the tourist gaze can help to clarify the relations between images of an exotic landscape and tourism. He has noted that :

> Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming or fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different pleasures from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce the gaze.[11]

Significantly enough, the passage implies that in order to lay hands on an empty landscape and present it in an adventurous form to a curious audience, some animated movies employ imagery which evokes sensations of exoticism in that space. Such projection of exotic imagery feeds into the developing practices of tourism by reproducing the spaces of the Arab Sahara as distinct and significant landscapes. John Urry (1990) continues to explain that, ''The tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed

10 - Lina Khatib. Filming the Modern Middle East Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World: "The Politicized Landscape." (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd. 2006), p. 15

11 - Urry John. The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 3

because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary […] these enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured."[12]

By reproducing a place as an exotic landscape with the camera, some animated cartoons lead to an interest in this tourist gaze and further explorations of the backward Arab desert and its subjects. In this account, the gaze renders things exotic in some animated movies, especially in its emphasis on the color of a certain gazed-upon geography. This becomes clearer when considering the color of the animated cartoon of, for instance, *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937). The color is noticeably a bit muted, with the exception of the deep green of the oasis and the enormous red, sometimes brown, boulders that crown the hills and dot the dry valleys. The camels and villains of the desert are rendered in a tone that is just darker. The same color is used to articulate some of the houses in the Arab town in the middle of the desert that are barely visible. The time of day and the nature of the location are implied by such a system of rendering the landscape darker. For instance, the desert at midday blinds one's eyes to the effects of the used dark color. This implementation of the dark colors in this animated movie can be regarded as a sign of emptying the Arabland and making it lonesome.

In this sense, the Orientalist cartoon producer performs a sort of evacuation of landscape conventions, thereby allowing the animation of the cartoons to be filled instead with traces of his or her artistic activities. In these vast, empty deserts, therefore, the characteristics of the exotic occupy and furnish the cartoon landscape. More importantly, in the desert, the landscape is stripped of its embellishments and is exposed for the cartoon producer to depict as nude. The extended space and barren land of such environment must be confronted as essentially inhuman and of their limited availability for human habitation. Here, the representational mode of landscape depiction draws an image of the world without humans. This annihilation of humanity provides producers and viewers with an instant access to the realm of perceiving and translating the visual phenomena of the vacant Arab Sahara. This sort of 'aesthetic entrance' to the Arab Sa-

12 - Ibid. p. 3

hara provides the illusion that the Orientalist can move through this idealized, aesthetic space without confronting obstacles, while ordering and filling it with traces of his or her confrontation with this vision of a vast and inhuman planet. This includes allowing the eye to define the limits of the Arab desert, which are abstracted from both direct resemblance and the already piled-up human mis/conceptions.

Furthermore, *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937) depicts the Arabian Sahara as an effectively dematerialized space provided with anecdotal features. The movie features some scenes where a tiny group of lined-up camels, and sometimes horses, which are made move, jump or even act like they are dancing in a foolish manner at hearing the bandits (mostly drawn as stocky riders) sing. These Arab Bedouins are heading for an impoverished Arab town with dark and dirty streets where all sort of nasty things take place. Back to their caves, the bandits sing to their victorious day and the mass of wealth they now have, and again the lined-up horses move up and down on the rhythm of music. In fact, the animated movies' producers try to sketch a desert place by a system of signs. this kind of thinking allows us to understand that the Orientalist is not really concerned with the Arab city, but, as is featured in *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937)*, in its environs including the expansive oasis at the town's base, the hills and desert that surrounded the city and the enormous boulders that crown the hills and dot the dry valleys. In other words, the pictorial interests of an Orientalist are not, by any means, focused on the civilized aspects of Arab lands, nor is he or she principally interested, for instance, in monuments, cemeteries and other noteworthy sites. Furthermore, the people and culture found in such an uncivilized space are greatly in conformity with the harsh atmosphere the desert is notorious for.

One more intriguing aspect of the comic depictions of Arab characters in the Saharan space is the manner in which the villains are punished by the western heroes. Popeye is made a savior of Arabia when he tries to restore order; much like the American troops did in Kuwait during the Gulf War. He saves the Arab men, children and women from Abu Hassan and his bandits' evil wrath. This is, indeed,

a construction of a perfect scenario for a benevolent war between the good and evil, the hero and the villain, after which the good always triumphs. No doubt, animated cartoons' popularity and massive public reception is due in part to acceptable constructions: the American or Westernized hero is an avenging angel; the Arab villain, a bloodthirsty and maniacal terrorist.

Furthermore, the movie of *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937) exemplifies this western habit of constructing triumphant American or Western heroes as opposed to vanquished Arab villains. Popeye has come from far to rescue the women and children of Arabia from the tyrannical grip of the bandit Abu Hassan and his forty thieves. The evil side in this movie narrative is an embodiment of a bunch of coward bandits set on terrorizing civilians, mainly helpless women, and wreaking havoc everywhere they go. By contrast, the good side personifies Popeye's, an Americanized character, bravery and heroism: these American values have made him bridge the distance and instantly answer the call of duty – the Western duty or the white man's burden – towards uncivilized nations.

The retribution of the Arab characters, in this regard, is presented even in comical vein, as in the scene in which Popeye punches the bandits, one after another, thereby systematically causing them to fly back to their barrels with wide open mouths and missing teeth. The bandits are defeated so easily. Such comic defeat of the Arab villain (as if telling a joke worth laughing at rather than feeling sorry about it) certainly falls within the theoretical frames of Sigmund Freud's theory of the joke or when laughter becomes a sort of aggression. In this sense, Freud writes that,

> Mankind have not been content to enjoy the comic where they have come upon it in their experience; they have also sought to bring it about intentionally, and we can learn more about the nature of the comic if we study the means which serve to make things comic.[13]

13 - Qtd. In Graeme Harper (Ed.). Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism. (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 2

In her essay, "*Laughter and aggression: Desire and derision in a postcolonial context*," Virginia Richter (2005) builds upon Freud's theory of laughter as an act of aggression to put forward the idea that the greatest pleasure one can get is often felt after playing jokes on others. These sorts of jokes are called 'obscene or tendentious jokes.' In appropriating pleasure to aggression, Richter posits that when something (e.g. culture, religion or language) or somebody (e.g. a member of an ethnic group) is the object of a joke, these jokes can be 'subversive.' That is to say, the joke no longer retains its fun aspects, but it becomes humiliating and seeks to symbolically vanquish the object of the joke. Therefore, in trying to uncover the comic aspects of the object being laughed at, one is, indeed, exposing oneself to its ominous repressed drives.[14] Therefore, "jokes are based on the release of repressed sexual or aggressive impulses."[15] In this sense, jokes are also described as,

> Manifestations of a symbolic victory over an enemy, a victory that is confirmed by the laughter of the third person (the audience). By laughing, the hitherto indifferent listener is transformed into someone who shares the hate and contempt of the narrator for the object of the joke. In this way, a 'coalition' is formed between the first person (who tells the joke) and the third person (who listens and laughs) at the expense of the second person (the butt of the joke). Freud makes it abundantly clear that the primary impulse of the joke is not 'funny' but hostile, intended to humiliate and vanquish the 'enemy' (Freud: 98). In this constellation, the role of the third person is quite crucial: the listener is the authority who confirms the defeat of the butt, the triumph of the teller, and, consequently, the establishment of a hierarchical power structure.[16]

14 - Virginia Richter. "Laughter and Aggression: Desire and Derision in a Postcolonial Context." In Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (Eds.). Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial. (Amsterdam - New York, NY: Rodopi B.V., 2005), p. 63

15 - Ibid. p. 63

16 - Virginia Richter. "Laughter and Aggression: Desire and Derision in a Postcolonial Context." In Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (Eds.). Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the

It is by inflicting comic retributions upon the Arab villains that some animated movies further bond with their audience, thereby expressing their repressed contempt against their common Arab enemy. The laugh of the audience is proven to be a sign of the triumph of the movie producer over both the audience – for they have accepted to applaud to all that Disney presents them with – and the Arab villain –, since some animated movies' producers believe that in laughing at Arabs, they "touch but their vanity, and [they] attack their most vulnerable part." It is their feeling of being humans that is touched. Therefore, "let them see that they can be laughed at, you will make them angry."[17] Comedy in general and jokes in particular perform quite surprising functions. That is to say,

> Jokes often function as neuralgic points, as points at which the conventionally censored or repressed find expression, they are performing a permissible, indeed institutionalized, function. Thus comedy in general, and the comic in particular, become, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, the appropriate site for the inappropriate, the proper place for indecorum, the field in which the unlikely is likely to occur.[18]

Implicit in this quote is its stress on the unlikeliness of the comic. Jokes, for instance, perform inconsistent functions. For instance, in their dependence on comedy, some animated movies' producers leak their ideologies to audiences in unexpected ways. One of the animated cartoons' strange and intelligent forms of telling stories about Arabs in comic veins is their use of anachronistic humour. When unexpected events or artifacts happen to be placed in different epochs or settings than those where they are meant to exist, some animated movie producers intend to provoke the audience's hilarious laughter. An example of this kind of humour might be the everyday observa-

Postcolonial. (Amsterdam - New York, NY: Rodopi B.V., 2005), p. 63

17 - James Watt. "James Morier and the Oriental Picaresque." In Graeme Harper (Ed.). Comedy, Fantasy and Colonialism. (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 65

18 - Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik. Popular Film and Television Comedy: "Verisimilitude." (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 92

tion of how unintended anachronisms in animated films about Arabs become amusing in the eyes of later generations.

In *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves (1937)*, for example, it is easy to guess the historical epoch the movie intends to shoot, since it is so clearly disclosed by the clothing, the desert setting, the Arab trading gold currency or the use of camels, swords and daggers, among many other features. When unexpected details are added to this historical epoch, some animated movie producers certainly intend (other than filling the desert land and thus laying hands over it) to provoke the audience's laughter and make their movies more entertaining and unexpectedly unique in their own right.

As examples of these additions, the movie inserts technologies which belong to present time, such as Gas stations, electric radios, a tank, the traffic lights in the middle of the desert and a sophisticated plane that can also function as a ship. In short, the movie blends stories from the Arabian Nights with modern Western artifacts so as to create a new space in the desert land. This space is certainly a place where audiences enjoy visiting and discovering in non-conformist and new ways, and upon which they keep laughing hilariously.

Quite noticeable is the fact that in some animated movies, "anachronistic humour rarely projects modern-day phenomena directly onto the past: it more often tends to disrupt the harmony of the epoch by introducing elements from other historical contexts."[19]This disruption caused by the insertion of unintended artifacts in other historical contexts is what makes of anachronistic humor a success and further contributes to the wide reception of animated films. In this sense,

> Anachronistic humour often relies on surprising juxtapositions. This comic impression has been explained by using a theory of degradation or psychological opposites, which argues that com-

19 - Hannu Salmi. "Introduction: The Mad History of the World." In Hannu Salmi (Ed.). Historical Comedy on Screen: Subverting History with Humour. UK / Chicago, USA: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 17

ic effect is produced by the appearance of some-
thing other than the expected result (for example,
something small instead of massive or vice versa).
The transgressing of boundaries between epochs
can be seen as utilizing the idea of degradation:
the filmmakers thwart expectations by bringing in
unexpected historical elements, resulting in bathos
for spectator amusement.[20]

In fact what makes anachronistic humour much of a success in an-
imated movies is its ability to provoke different interpretations as to
a certain scenic situation. The viewer tends to link the events seen
on screen with those previously read or taught, and thereby come up
with different interpretations of what the movie intends to transmit as
messages. Importantly, the laughing element makes animated movies
more interesting in that they try to render the whole scenes of a movie
comic in tone so that audiences won't feel tired or bored while watch-
ing. More interestingly, anachronistic humour is more distinguishable
in animated cartoons about Arabs than other movies about other races.

Consider, for instance, the animated movie of *Ali Baba Bound*
(1941)[21] wherein its producer tries to insert some artifacts which
don't belong to the desert land. For instance, the movie features dif-
ferent electric sign posts of Gas stations, the oasis and Soda Pop,
among others. Taken to even a higher degree, the movie shoots cam-
els as analogues of cars for rent, and they feed on gas fuel rather than
grass. Camels are even holding sign posts that read, "Hump-mobile
with 4 heels with gas/ Kiddy Kar."[22] In fact, introducing such mod-
ern features to a desert setting hints to the way the West has always
thought about the East.

In fact, in both cartoons *Ali Baba Bound* (1941) and *Popeye the
Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937) the desert set-
ting is subject to the "mission civilisatrice" of the West, thereby the

20 - Hannu Salmi. "Introduction: The Mad History of the World." In Hannu Salmi (Ed.).
Historical Comedy on Screen: Subverting History with Humour. UK / Chicago, USA:
Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 19

21 - Robert Clampett. (Director). Ali Baba Bound, 1941. [Motion Picture].

22 - Ibid.

desert is changing to something more of a Western idea. That is to say, the movies are far removed from the imagery of belly-dancers inside tents or the notorious image of the Arab sheikh being fed on grapes and drinking wine. Instead, the whole setting is being transformed to a more or less modern Western camp. Such move towards modernization is described in Edward Said's wording as a mission in which "the modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished"[23]

Importantly, in its rescuing of the Orient, some animated cartoons have found relief in using anachronisms, since anachronistic humour can mean more than it tends to make us see. Therefore, "one of the most distinguishing features of humor is the way in which it forces us to shift our initial expectations, and this is true whether the source of the humor is a joke's punch-line or an unexpectedly comic situation."[24] Accordingly, shifting audience expectations is, in fact, a turning point wherein, at times, humour starts to be filtered through the lens of fear and, at other times, fear through humour. This situation results in confusion since audiences tend to reveal quite different reactions at separate moments during the watching of a movie: sometimes they laugh and some other times they are scared. At this point, the boundaries between humour and fear become blurred. Stephen Hessel (2010) spells out this kind of audience oscillation between fear and laughter most clearly in his essay, "Horrifying Quixote: The Thin Line between Fear and Laughter." Hessel (2010) argues that people tend to project their social fears, worries and experiences onto a movie. He explains that:

> All of these very real anxieties are tied in literature to infernal forces (corporeal) and spirits (incorporeal) that assault the systems of reason and piety. The existence of these proto-horror stories employs frightful narrative tools and personalities,

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23 - Edward W. Said. Orientalism. (New York: Random house, 1978), p. 121

24 - Dianna C. Niebylski. Humoring Resistance: Laughter and *the Excessive* Body in Contemporary Latin American Women's Fiction. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), p . 12

but they most obviously lay bare the cause of the preoccupation itself; typically a preoccupation that comes from an aspect of a society in crisis.[25]

Sometimes some film scenes can be reminiscent of spectators' stories of fear that permeate their societies. People find relief in movies since they are sites upon which to contest their fears. Simply put, a movie about Arabs, for instance, projects them in threatening tones that perfectly fit the audience conceptions and anxieties about them. This Arab threat is diminished once Arab terrorists commit stupid faults that bring about their funny end and eventually the audience relief and serenity. A case in point is the cartoon of *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937). In this animated movie pictures of Arabs are so stupid and fool that their silliness can be the cause of their own destruction.

Such view coincides with a scene in the movie where the Arab bandits try to all attack Popeye at once while crying out in a cacophonous noise. However, the bandits and their chief Abu Hassan are so easily defeated and made to drag a huge cart full of stolen gold and jewels. At this juncture, the movie becomes comic and a relief to audiences from their anxieties. The message the movie transmits here is that though Arabs are the source of fear and danger, they will eventually destroy themselves and get transformed into the butt of jokes of every movie and, more than that, even in reality, thereby allowing spectators to laugh at them hilariously.

More interestingly, "the Arabland is clearly a mystical land; its inhabitants ride on magic carpets, snake charmers hypnotize deadly cobras with eerie flute music and its merchants have a fetishistic love of money and penchant for cruelty."[26] These trappings are found in the animated movie of *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937). Importantly enough, Arabs can not only stand

25 - Stephen Hessel. "Horrifying Quixote: The Thin Line between Fear and Laughter." Ed. Stephen Hessel and Michèle Huppert. Fear Itself: Reasoning the Unreasonable. (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi B.V., 2010). p. 27

26 - Jack G. Shaheen. Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. (Brooklyn, New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), p. 85

as epitomes of cruelty and evil, but their bringing up to limelight also aligns this image of the Arab Sahara with a specific stereotype about Arabs who possess numerous sources of oil wells, precious jewels and magnificent palaces. This links the Arabs to a particular period in the history of trade between Arabs and Europe, and when trade was the banner issue of imperial expansion. The Arab merchants have made the image of the landscape ripe for colonial possession and greedy quests. This way, the Arabland is rich and shall provide income to its colonizers.

Significantly enough, the cartoon of *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves* (1937) features a scene in the middle of the Arabian Desert, where the bandit Abu Hassan stores all his treasure in a cave, the door of which he closes with the command "Close, Sesame." This scene is emblematic of the fact that the caves of the desert are a common place for Arabs to hide their treasures, since they have no banks where to secure their wealth and keep it out of the reach of each other's greedy eyes. Clearly, greed is another characterizing element that stamps the Arabland into a rigid state of constituting a haven for a bunch of money-crazed and greedy Bedouins notorious for their deception and infidelity even among themselves, thereby willing to sacrifice one another for the sake of money. In support of this, Jack Shaheen (2001) argues that, "we have this fictional setting called Arabland, a mythical theme park. And in Arabland, you have the ominous music, you have the greedy merchants, you have the desert as a threatening place, we add an oasis, palm trees, a palace that has a torture chamber in the basement."[27]

Again, this kind of construing life in the Arab Sahara captured by an Orientalist gaze hides a wealth of assumptions about the relationship of the representation to the real world. Such Orientalist imaging offers two central and interrelated illusions: that the "Orient" is utterly distinct from Europe – unaffected by European civilization – and that this Orient is frozen in time, more or less the same as it had been for hundreds of years. Both of these illusions offer the artist an elevated position vis-à-vis its purported subject, and they

27 - Jack G. Shaheen. Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. (Brooklyn, New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), p.45

also mask the Arab history as existing outside of reality and only in representation. Therefore, the Arab subject who lives faraway in the desert is both uncivilized and is still living outside of history. In fact, by characterizing an entire region as barbaric and dangerous, some animated movies cultivate an incredibly negative stereotype of Arab people that children will absorb and retain for generations.

To bring this discussion back to where it started, the cartoons about Arabs have indeed functioned to translate strange-looking Arab locations, thereby offering the Orientalist's eye a chance to penetrate the Arab geography and move along the streets to order and draw exotic images that appeal to the Western viewers. Therefore, the representation of the Arab Sahara has proved to exert a sort of power to control places and choose the people who can reside in those places while providing them with distinct characters.

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