

Arabs in Post-9/11 Hollywood Films: a Move towards a More Realistic Depiction?

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Synopsis

This essay looks at the way a number of post-9/11 Hollywood films attempts to offer an image more reflective of the real Arabs. Contrary to a wide range of Hollywood films that have perpetuated a racially prejudiced image of Arabs, I argue that post-9/11 films, such as *Babel* (2006), represent Arabs as simple human beings with commonplace problems and identifiable worries. In my paper, I address these questions: how did the events of 9/11 help to change Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs in contemporary Hollywood cinema? How do these contemporary films attempt to break free from the classical stereotypes about Arabs? And to what extent have they been successful?

Biography

Quidyane Elouardaoui is a Fulbright PhD student in the film and media department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her current research interests include Arab Media, transnational media, the representation of Arabs in post-9/11 Hollywood cinema and the adaptation of Mexican telenovelas in Morocco.

Essay

Jack G. Shaheen, in his two latest books *Reel Bad Arabs* and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, extensively discusses the inhuman depiction of Arabs on Hollywood screen. He points out that a large number of Hollywood films has perpetuated a demeaning image of Arabs and contributed in generating several cultural misconceptions about them. Similarly, in his analysis of three particular Hollywood films produced in the seventies (*The Exorcist*, *Rollover*, and *Black Sunday*), Tim Semmerling contends that the misrepresentation of Arabs in these films served to stabilize Americans' feelings of superiority and control that started to shake after the oil crisis in the seventies. Prior to Shaheen's and Semmerling's works, Edward Said, in his milestone books, *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, examined the essentialist approach that western media has invariably adopted vis-à-vis the social, political and economic realms of the Arab world. Said believes that the idea about the Orient as the exotic and inferior

Other can easily be discerned in the early western visual and written cultural productions. He also points out that the focus on presenting certain types of cultural “realities” instead of offering a holistic and a deeper approach is ideologically-motivated. He states that, “it ought to go without saying that the media are profit-seeking corporations and therefore, quite understandably, have an interest in promoting some images of reality rather than others.” (Said, *Covering Islam* 49)

In my paper, I do not simply look at the cinematic works that fall in the trap of reinforcing the classical stereotypes about Arabs. I am more interested in discussing the Hollywood films that challenge this dominant line of (mis)representation. This category of Hollywood films that I believe attempts to present an image more reflective of the real Arabs has noticeably started after the events of 9-11. This divergence is embodied in the way more complex approaches emphasize the humanity of Arabs in contrast to stereotypes denying their equivalence in earlier Hollywood films. I argue that this category of films breaks free from a historically ingrained negative portrayal of Arabs. However, in the first section of my essay, I bring to light the stereotypes that have been traditionally attributed to Arabs, referring to some Hollywood films that Shaheen has classified as racially prejudiced.

In the second part, I provide close textual analysis of three post-9/11 Hollywood films which are *Babel* (dir.González Iñárritu, 2006); *The Kingdom* (dir.Peter Berg, 2007) and *Rendition* (dir.Gavin Hood, 2007) that I argue attempt to offer a more realistic depiction of Arabs. This realistic portrayal is made possible through the focus on ordinary likeable Arab characters and the way their commonplace worries and hopes have been emphasized. I believe that this forthcoming shift, which occurred after the 9/11 events, vis-à-vis the way Arabs are addressed in contemporary American films, should be taken into account. Thus, I address these questions: how did the events of 9/11 help to change Hollywood’s portrayal of Arabs in contemporary Hollywood cinema? How do these contemporary films attempt to break free from the classical stereotypes about Arabs? To what extent have they been successful?

Classical Stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood Films Prior to 9-11 Events

Edward Said has pointed out that the prejudiced values which western culture had assigned to the Orient have been advocated through a discourse that helped to justify them. Said believes that “The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be Oriental in all those ways considered common-place by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental.” (Said, *Orientalism* 5-6) Said argues that the truth about the Orient has been constructed and does not necessarily reflect how the real Orient is. Said makes his concern very conspicuous: he is not interested in the way western culture perceives the cultural practices of the Orient, particularly Arabs, as much as in the representative structure that generates general statements about the Orient, which he describes as uncritical, distant and reductive. Moreover, Ibrahim Kalin argues that the present misgivings about Muslims are due to the set of negative connotations that have often been allocated to the religion of Islam. These notions consistently present Islam as being inherently anti-reason, fixed and traditional. Kalin also relates the existing

misconceptions about the cultural and religious beliefs of Arabs to the deep-rooted prejudices about Islam that emerged upon its fast expansion in the eighth century (Kalin 166). Kalin explains that Europe's reactionary attitudes towards the fast growth of Islam have been manifested in the relentless attempts to distort the image of Arabs and their religious doctrine.

On the other hand, Nadine Naber points out that the period of post-9/11 has witnessed an alarming increase in the number of hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims that are justified by the rhetoric of "nation-based racism." Naber makes a distinction between two types of racism. The common one is "cultural racism," which consists of harassing the different other based on their religious and cultural affiliations. The second category is "nation-based racism" in which ethnic groups that include Arab immigrants and Arab Americans are constructed as potential criminals who constitute a danger for the safety of white civilians. Naber asserts that this discourse helped to justify acts of violence against Arabs. Naber also notes that Hollywood has blurred the difference between the categories of Arabs and Muslims. For example, he states that the majority of Muslims resides in non-Arab countries; however, Hollywood has completely ignored this crucial fact in its depiction of the Arab-Islamic culture.

Moreover, Shaheen reveals the existence of more than 900 films that invariably present a very problematic depiction of Arabs. Several of these films are as old as cinema, such as George Méliès's *The Palace of Arabian Nights* (1905), which fosters a clichéd image of the Arab land where dancing maidens try to cheer up the bored Arab sovereign. Shaheen's main concern is the scarcity of likeable Arab characters in Hollywood cinema in general. He remarks:

Think about it. When was the last time you saw a movie depicting an Arab or an American of Arab heritage as a regular guy? Perhaps a man who works ten hours a day, comes home to a loving wife and family, plays soccer with his kids, and prays with family members at his respective mosque or church. He's the kind of guy you'd like to have as your next door neighbor, because—well, maybe because he's bit like you. (Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs 2*)

Shaheen explains that Arabs have seldom been depicted as simple people with ordinary occupations and interests in Hollywood films. He also implicitly suggests that the idea of depicting Arabs as different and inferior on screen is essential to the construction of the superior self of Americans.

This corresponds with Tim Semmerling's argument about the risqué portrayal of Arabs in American films, specifically the ones produced in the seventies. Semmerling considers the creation of stereotypes about Arabs, in that particular historical context, the fruit of Americans' feeling of anxiety due to their possible loss of economic and political hegemony. While Shaheen mainly focuses on the stereotypical images of Arabs that Hollywood has been perpetuating for over decades, Semmerling dissects one reason behind this ethnic profiling, which he describes as "anxiety." Semmerling stresses that the overwhelming wealth of Gulf Arab countries subsequent to the oil embargo in the seventies helped to shake the established myths and ideologies of the

national self of Americans. Semmerling also makes a statement that the indecisive ends in films such as *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973), *Black Sunday* (John Frankenheimer, 1977) and *Rollover* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1981) in which the “good” American characters do not determinedly defeat the “evil” Arabs mirror the national fear that Americans experienced during that period.

As cited earlier, Shaheen has singled out more than 900 Hollywood films that propagate contentious images of Arabs. One of these films is *The Mummy* (dir. Stephen Sommers, 1999) centers on the adventure of a group of Americans in their search for the promised treasure in the Egyptian land. These Americans have had to be familiar with the particularities of the Egyptian desert to ensure their safety, such as avoiding stepping on quicksand. They have also been in need for the locals to be able to decipher the sacred Egyptian books; however, ironically the American Egyptologist is the one who is able to correctly interpret the old writings. Generally, the depiction of the way Americans interact with the Egyptians is absolutely not in favor of the locals.

The degrading representation of the locals can be first discerned by their untidy and dirty-looking clothes. They are also denied the typical qualities that are usually associated with the Bedouins, as they are pictured as being morally decadent, siding with the party that pays more. The Egyptian Bedouins are also presented as being foolish (they always make wrong and hasty decisions), which is supposed to generate humor. Conversely, the American explorers are offered superiority in terms of clothing, thinking and behaviors. Interestingly enough, the Egyptian characters converse in Moroccan Arabic though the events are set in Egypt, for the simple reason that the film was mostly shot in Morocco. This choice demonstrates both unprofessionalism on the part of the production crew and a clear negligence of the linguistic differences across Arab countries.

Likewise, *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2000), which is an epic war film that glorifies the noble qualities of the warrior, perpetuates the same demeaning image of Arabs. The cruelty of the Arab characters is underscored in scenes where they imprison and enslave the wounded hero. Once more, the Western hero is being attributed the qualities of nobility, bravery and honesty while the Arabs are represented as barbarians. Though Arabs here feature for a very short time, the stereotypical characterization is unequivocally palpable. Additionally, in these films, Arabs are not presented as full-fledged characters that can contribute to the development of the narrative. On the contrary, they are pictured as shallow and marginal characters whose personal human attributes are completely ignored. In *The Mummy*, the Egyptian characters are present to generate laughter, whereas in *Gladiator* Arabs merely serve the function of enslaving the hero. Thus, the stereotypical representation of Arabs is being emphasized through humor in *The Mummy* and violence in *Gladiator*.

While attempting to find out reasons behind such alarming ethnic representation, Shaheen explicates that it is partly due to the large number of Hollywood films, which throughout different time periods, have unproblematically been reproducing one-dimensional portrayal of Arabs. However, Shaheen makes his main contention clear:

I am not saying that an Arab should never be portrayed as the villain. What I am saying is that almost *all* Hollywood depictions of Arabs are *bad* ones. This is a grave injustice. Repetitious and negative images of the reel Arab literally sustain adverse portraits across generations. (Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs* 11)

Shaheen's concern is the nearly complete absence of ordinary Arab characters in Hollywood films, which has led to the construction of fallacies about their character and their cultural and religious beliefs.

Arabs in Hollywood Films Post 9-11 Events: A More Realistic Depiction?

However, in his latest book, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Shaheen positively states that an important number of post-9/11 Hollywood films present a less biased portrayal of Arabs. He remarks that "refreshingly, about a third of the post-9/11 films [...] a total of 29, projected worthy Arabs and decent Arab Americans: Arab champions—men and women—are displayed in 19 movies; Arab Americans appear as decent folk in 10 of 11 films." (Shaheen XV) I believe that *Babel* (dir. González Iñárritu, 2006), *The Kingdom* (dir. Peter Berg, 2007) and *Rendition* (dir. Gavin Hood, 2007) are among the post-9/11 Hollywood films that foster such approach. These films attempt to offer a realistic depiction of Arabs through their focus on the lives of likeable Arab characters.

I examine the aesthetics of these films, which include camera angles, framing, and sound, that I believe are used in a way that highlights the common human characteristics of the Arab characters. I draw on film theory, particularly Bella Balázs' understanding of cinema aesthetics in relation to the notions of subjectivity and identification. Balázs stresses the role film aesthetics play in creating emotional bond between characters and spectators. For example, Balázs underscores the importance of close-ups, affirming that close-ups do not only serve to depict the state of mind and the feelings of the actors but they also bridge the characters' feelings and motivations to the spectators. Moreover, Balázs discusses the role other aesthetic elements, such as lighting and tempo, play in visually unifying the film's segments. I occasionally refer to these ideas in my analysis of the way aesthetics are used in the three films of my interest as a means to highlight the common human features of Arab characters.

Babel:

The film *Babel* is set in four different locales and its events evolve through the crosscutting between four stories that hardly appear to be connected. The four stories are linked through the presence of a rifle. A Japanese hunter, during his visit to Morocco, offers his rifle to his Moroccan friend who subsequently sells it to another Moroccan whose son uses it and accidentally shoots an American tourist on a bus. Drawing on Balázs' analysis of the importance of aesthetics, the way framing is used in *Babel*, particularly close-ups, helps to underscore the characters' shared feelings of

confusion, anguish and hope for redemption. This particular use of close-ups, which serves to unify the characters' different narratives, is prominent in the way the characters' disturbing emotions are being highlighted, allowing the viewers to identify with the turmoil of each one despite their belonging to different cultural backgrounds.

As to music in *Babel*, sound is used to intensify the fascinating particularities of the four different depicted locales without being biased to a specific setting. For instance, in the Moroccan section, viewers hear natural sounds of wind, water and animals that suit the location of a small village. On the other hand, in the Japanese sequence, industrial sounds are being frequently heard, which are appropriate for a city as busy as Tokyo. In general, the cultural specificities of every locale have been sonically granted an equal importance.

Babel's attempt to present a brighter image of Arabs is evident in Richard's relationship with Anwar, the Moroccan guide. Anwar's positive personal characteristics have been underscored in various instances. Anwar helps to save Susan's life by ordering the tourist bus driver to stop, fetching for a local doctor and volunteering to stay with the couple till the helicopter's arrival. The last scene where Richard hands Anwar a pile of money before heading to the helicopter best illustrates Anwar's benevolent nature. Anwar refuses Richard's money with a sweet smile, which suggests that the two men's relationship was not merely business-oriented. More to the point, the use of relaxing harp music in that scene along with the absence of dialogue draws attention to the facial expressions of the two male characters in which Anwar's natural kindness becomes so palpable as well as Richard's silent gratitude.

Nonetheless, the film reinforces a number of regional stereotypes. For instance, the whole story about the Moroccan family is shot in a small village, exposing the miserable life of the locals. Thus, although the film, to an important degree, presents a realistic image about such remote locations, which is substantiated by the hiring of non-professional local actors, Western viewers might miss the point that the film depicts only one small part of Morocco while urban areas are entirely different. It also depicts the ambivalent attitudes of the two Moroccan boys who while showing respect and obedience to their parents, secretly commits socially disgraceful acts.

The Kingdom:

The first sequence of *The Kingdom* presents sweeping violent scenes of Americans being brutally killed by the attacks of a number of Saudi extremists. More important is the crosscutting between an American officer (Fury) narrating stories to his son along with other kids and a Saudi father forcing his child to witness the terrorist attacks from a faraway window. This segment obviously perpetuates the stereotypes about Arabs nurturing their children the seeds of hatred towards Americans. In fact, Shaheen categorizes *The Kingdom* in the Hollywood films that promote racist stereotyping. He

states that, "Hollywood's most violent movie since 9/11 is *The Kingdom* (2007). In this Rambo-in-Arabia shoot-'em-up, viewers applaud the heroics of four FBI agents who fly off to Saudi Arabia and kill Arabs." (Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* 26)

However, as the film progresses, these stereotypes gradually fade away, allowing for the emergence of a complex treatment of the way Arab characters interact with the FBI agents. For instance, when the Saudi officer, Faris, tells Fury in a concerned way, referring to the American victims, that he "only cares about that 100 people who woke up a few mornings ago, had no idea it was their last," Fury's firm facial expressions relax all of the sudden as he asks Faris in a friendly manner "so is your first name Colonel?" In fact, this is the only scene where Fury and Faris are seen together without the rest of the American team. They also start holding a personal conversation as Faris tells Fury about his two daughters and his "beautiful" son. This particular conversation not only indicates the possibility of a friendship taking place between the two officers but it foreshadows the coming dramatic events.

The humanity of the Arab officers including Faris is more emphasized in silent scenes where they are depicted interacting with their family members. For instance, Faris is seen in his Arab pajamas relaxing and playing with his children. Though this scene has a simple visual content that draws attention to the commonality of the life experiences of Arabs, such approach is absent in a large number of Hollywood films. Thus, this scene that offers viewers access to parts of Faris's personal life serves to stress Faris's humane characteristics, such as his fatherly love, allowing the viewers to identify with him. Similarly, the compassionate personal traits of Faris's friend, Haytham, are being highlighted when he is seen taking care of his crippled father. The importance of these silent scenes that are loaded with central dramatic implications has been pointed out by Balázs. He contends, "but when an actor has no lines to speak, his entire body becomes a homogenous expressive space and every crease of his clothes takes on the same significance as a wrinkle in his face." (Balázs and Carter 28-29) This applies to these scenes, given that they draw attention to the relaxed bodily gestures and the serene facial expressions of the Arab characters in their private spheres.

The last scenes of *The Kingdom* are the ones that powerfully insinuate the common human characteristics of Arabs, including the religious fanatics. In one of the scenes where Faris introduces Fury to an ex-al-Qaida member, who is repenting by engaging in community service, both Fury and Faris seem appreciative of the old man's collaboration. The scene ends with Fury shaking hand with the ex-Qaida member who says in a sorrowful tone in response to Fury's inquiry about his missing fingers that "every bomb maker gets bitten at some point by his own work." This scene offers a totally different take on the issue of terrorism, pointing to the psychological turmoil of the fanatics, which serves to highlight their willingness to repent and hope to be redeemed.

Also, the intense moment that depicts Faris dying in Fury's arms demonstrates the degree of Fury's concern about saving Faris's life. Fury holds Faris in his arms, begging him to survive saying "you gotta stay with us" but as Faris breathes his last, Fury looks at Faris's still face, confirming "yea, we got them, baby." The next scene where Fury

visits Faris's family and talks to his little son substantiates Fury's considering of Faris as a friend; he tells Faris's son that his father "was a good friend of mine." Fury also describes Faris as a brave man that points to the meaning of the word Faris, which literally means knight in Arabic as well as brave, honest, noble, and all the positive connotations that are culturally associated with knighthood.

In addition, Faris is a good-looking and elegant young man, which obviously impacts the viewers' judgment about his moral stances. This detail has been emphasized by Balázs in his study of the role physiognomy and type casting play in suggesting the personal traits of characters. He notes: "in film what determines character from the very first moment on is his or her *appearance*. The director's task is not to find a 'performer', but the character itself, and it is the director who creates the film's figures through his selection." (Balázs 27) Balázs holds the same opinion about the role of costumes. He describes its function as "discreet, but it still defines character right from the outset." (Balázs 28) Faris's looks and neat clothing in addition to his calculated and yet benevolent acts set him as one of the most important main characters, and thus helps to create a sort of empathy between him and the viewers.

Nevertheless, the last scene in *The Kingdom* complicates the issues of terrorism and cultural stereotypes: Fury discloses to his colleague that he had told Janet that "we were gonna kill them all" referring to those responsible for the terrorist explosions. Parallely, the grandson of Abu Ahamzam, the terrorists' leader, tells his mom that his grandfather whispered to him before dying "don't fear them, my child. We are going to kill them all." This conclusion denies the viewers a decisive ending since the problematic themes that the film has unconventionally dealt with are still presently at stake.

Rendition:

Rendition begins with violin music that has an orientalist spin. After the short scene of Anwar informing his wife Isabella that he is heading back home to Chicago, the orientalist nature of the music becomes more prominent with the playing of drums and tambourine. However, Anwar gets detained and interrogated about a violent attack that took place in an unknown North African Arab country. Fawal, a high-ranked Arab inspector subsequently takes charge of interrogating the guiltless Anwar. Interestingly enough, despite Fawal being a cruel inspector, there are a number of scenes that point to his extremely humane personal characteristics.

For instance, one of the scenes presents him lying down on his bed with his little daughter in his arms as he playfully cuddles her. This particular scene serves to restrain the viewers from forming a hastily negative judgment about Fawal, as it offers a nuanced picture of his personal characteristics. Besides, even after his second daughter's elopement, Fawal tries to contact her and expresses his willingness to forgive her if she decides to return home. Fawal's stand here helps to break the old stereotypes about Arab men being revengeful if their daughters defy their authority.

Upon knowing about his daughter's death during the suicide attacks when she was trying to persuade her lover, Khalid, against his devastating plan, Fawal is so emotionally moved that he bursts into tears. His facial expressions correspond to those of Khalid's grandmother whose wrinkled face expresses her deep pain and agony after she has lost two of her grandsons (one of them is Khalid) the same way.

Still, *Rendition's* presentation of the Arabic language evokes previous inconsideration of this important cultural aspect. Though the North-African country is unspecified, there are several important hints which indicate that it is Morocco, mainly Marrakech's *Jamaa el Fna* square. Ironically, the Moroccan characters do not talk in Moroccan Arabic; rather the Arabic dialect they use is Egyptian with insertions of Syrian and Lebanese terms. This treatment leads to the perpetuation of old stereotypes about the Arabic language as it does not consider the local differences across Arab countries.

On the other hand, like *The Kingdom*, *Rendition* audaciously offers the terrorists' perspectives in attempt to explore their psychological conditions and convoluted motivations. *Rendition* clearly discusses how brainwashing takes place and draws a line between "moderate Muslims" embodied in Fawal and Anwar and the fanatics that make use of people's ignorance of the principles of Islam to serve their self-interested agendas. For example, under Fatima's pleas, Khalid was about to change his opinion; however, sensing his hesitation the leaders of the terrorist cell decide to shoot him and he involuntarily releases the handle of the detonator, causing the bomb to explode.

Nonetheless, Khalid's death evokes sympathy from the viewers although he is a member of an active terrorist group because of the way he has been depicted in earlier scenes. His love for Fatima, his deep sadness over his brother's death (who was killed during an unseen investigation led by Fawal) and more importantly his hesitation to carry out his deadly plan at the end all contribute in presenting Khalid as a young man with psychological problems, due to the unjust way his brother was executed, rather than a hateful extremist with destructive schemes. These three films also made it clear that the issue of terrorism is multi-faceted and is grossing victims in both sides. In *The Kingdom*, the Saudi officer dies at the end, which makes the FBI team grief-stricken despite their success in capturing the terrorist cell. In *Rendition*, Fawal's daughter gets killed while trying to stop Khalid from carrying out his suicidal plan.

Shaheen, observing the representation of such complex Arab characters in several post-9/11 Hollywood films, positively affirms:

Even though the majority of post-9/11 films do, in fact, vilify a people, I am somewhat encouraged to report that since 9/11, silver screens have displayed, at times, more complex, evenhanded Arab portraits than I have seen in the past. Some producers did not dehumanize Arabs, and instead presented decent,

heroic characters—champions, even, in several films. (Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* 35)

I believe that three films I have examined fit within this particular category mentioned by Shaheen. Unlike old Hollywood films that confine Arab characters to particular stereotypical molds, Arabs in these films are round characters who change opinion and experience a wide range of feelings that affect their decisions and acts. These different feelings are being highlighted through the frequent use of close-ups that serve to bridge the Arab characters' reactions to spectators. The use of silence in these films also helps to direct the viewers' attention to the characters' affective experiences.

Moreover, Arab characters are central to the narratives in *Babel*, *The Kingdom* and *Rendition* and are not used to generate humor or elicit fear. This can be discerned from the way screen time is structured as there is an equal focus on both Arab and American characters. Also, given that Arab characters play major roles in these films, their physique helps situate them within the narrative. Balázs discusses the significance of beauty in a medium that heavily relies on the element of visual attraction. He observes, "where nothing but the eye is the judge, the beautiful stands witness. The hero is outwardly beautiful because he is inwardly beautiful as well." (Balázs and Carter 30) Balázs explains that the physical aspects of characters influence the way viewers perceive them in terms of ethical stands. This applies to Faris in *The Kingdom* and Anwar in *Rendition*, given that they are both physically attractive and morally correct, elements that are very difficult to find in pre-9/11 American films.

The same approach is dominant in other post-9/11 films that include *Flightplan* (dir. Robert Schwentke, 2005), *Kingdom of Heaven* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2005), and *Syriana* (dir. Stephen Gaghan, 2005). For instance, there is a scene in *The Kingdom of Heaven* when Salah al-Din picks up the cross and puts it back respectfully on the altar, upon his conquest of Jerusalem. Shaheen here quotes Robert Fisk's statement of the reaction of Lebanese audiences towards such evenhanded scenes. Fisk affirms that "the audience rose to their feet and clapped and shouted their appreciation. They loved that gesture of honor. They wanted Islam to be merciful as well as strong." (Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* 40) This important detail signifies that Hollywood's huge cinema productions are keenly consumed in Arab-Muslim countries and this is solidified by the fact that Hollywood's revenues from the Arab-Muslim world constitute ten percent of its total overseas profits (Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* XVII). Nevertheless, the occasions where Arabs can see a fair portrayal of their cultural and religious beliefs on Hollywood screen are scarce.

It is undeniable that the depiction of Arabs in this specific category of post-9/11 Hollywood films is, to an important degree, devoid of classical stereotypes and heralds a new approach regarding the way Arabs need to be addressed on screen. However, the public sphere in the United States has experienced a deterioration in terms of tolerance vis-à-vis Arabs, Muslims and generally anyone who could be identified as Middle-Eastern. Shaheen states that "In 2006, hate crimes against Muslims in the US increased 22 percent, according to the FBI." (Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* 16) Correspondingly, Jen'an Ghazal Read states that during the

aftermath-9/11, the American public opinion shared a misconceived generalization about the Arab ethnicity. She notes that the cultural and religious heterogeneity of the seventeen Arab countries have been usually overlooked. Instead, Americans would identify Arabs on the ground of their physical features which are not obviously static. In the same vein, Mohamed Nimer states that Hollywood's demeaning images of Arabs have had damaging effects on the lives of Arabs and Muslims in America's public sphere, in terms of the increase of violence and hate crimes. He reveals that the Arab population has engaged in a number of initiatives to face up to the profusion of the American media's stereotyping of Arabs. For instance, he points out the importance of the interfaith activities led by the Public Affairs Council situated in Southern California in order to help shatter the old stereotypes about the Arab-Islamic culture.

Conclusion

The stereotypical image of the Arab character in American cinema has induced critical and rich scholarship, which proves that the prejudiced portrayal of the Arab ethnicity and the Islamic religion are no longer seen as unproblematic as they used to be. This is strongly related to the role the 9/11 violent attacks have played in inciting professionals from both the academia and the media industry in the United States to approach the Arab-Islamic culture with inquisitive and unbiased mind, aiming at a better understanding of its main tenants and principles. This might be in part the reason behind the shift that has taken place in regards to the representation of Arabs in several post-9/11 Hollywood films. In addition, the way Arab viewers reacted to the general stereotype-free representation of Arabs (they stood up and gratefully clapped when they saw Salah al-Din picking up the cross) in *The Kingdom of Heaven* during its screening in Lebanon proves that the Arab audience, particularly the youth, are not heedless of the way Hollywood treats their collective cultural heritage. However, as recalled earlier, even this category of films also occasionally falls in the trap of reinforcing some misconceptions. For example, the first sequence of *The Kingdom* presents a controversially disturbing portrayal of Saudis, who are pictured as hatred-feeders. Moreover, the distorted depiction of Arabs on Hollywood screen is believed to have negatively impacted the lives of Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans in America's public sphere. Thus, this forthcoming shift in Hollywood industry, embodied in recently-produced films that are generally devoid of the classical debasing images of Arabs, needs to be further promoted for the benefit of both cultural spheres.

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