

# Vilification and Dehumanization of Arabs in Hollywood: The Concept of the Other

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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Andrea Kolić**

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Završni rad

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Zadar, 2017.



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Zadar, 25. rujan 2017.

## Table of contents:

1. Introduction .....	5
2. Defining the Other in Hollywood.....	6
2.1. The Role of the Film .....	6
2.2. Orientalism and the Concept of the Other.....	7
3. Hollywood- Poisoning the Minds of People? .....	8
4. Depiction of Arabs in Films .....	11
4.1. 1910-1920s- The Exotic Middle East.....	12
4.1.1. <i>The Sheik</i> (1921).....	12
4.2. 1950-1970s- Growth of Tensions.....	14
4.2.1. <i>Exodus</i> (1960) .....	16
4.3. 1980-1990s- Emergence of the Arab-threat .....	17
4.3.1. <i>The Siege</i> (1998).....	19
4.4. 21 <sup>st</sup> Century- Modern Day Representations .....	20
4.4.1. <i>Argo</i> (2012) .....	23
5. Hopes for the Future.....	25
6. Conclusion.....	26
7. Works Cited.....	29
8. Vilification and Dehumanization of Arabs in Hollywood: The Concept of the Other: Summary and key words .....	32
9. Negativan prikaz arapa u Hollywoodu: Koncept Drugosti: Sažetak i ključne riječi.....	33

## 1. Introduction

Hollywood films have been entertaining the whole world for many years. These films are very popular and are seen by millions of people worldwide. Their influence is massive. Hollywood films have become a part of people's everyday lives. Hollywood studios are located in the United States of America and these films are definitely promoting American and Western culture. However, many believe that they are also used for the spread of American political ideologies and propaganda.

It seems like Hollywood films stereotype and dehumanise non-Western ethnic groups and one of the most discriminated are definitely Arabs. They are often seen as the Other while the whole Middle East is seen as the mysterious Orient. Many sociologists deal with the concept of the Other and Orientalism and believe that they are actually Western inventions.

In this final paper, depictions of Arabs in Hollywood films are analysed. The focus is put on the complexity of the characters and stereotypical depictions of both land and the people. The aim of the paper is to find out if these depictions are socially and politically determined and if Hollywood is actually used as a tool for spreading political ideologies of the West.

The first chapter deals with the importance of the film when it comes to the transmission of information to a lot of people around the world. It also deals with sociological concepts of Orientalism and the Other. The focus is put on the "East-West" dichotomy between "us" and "them", where the West is seen as a civilised place and the East as a wild place full of vicious fanatics. "They" are seen as irrational people who, therefore, should not and cannot be understood.

The second chapter deals with the manipulative role of the film, or more accurately, the Hollywood film in which the "East-West" dichotomy can be found. The main concern of this chapter is the one-dimensional and false depiction of Arabs in films. Filmmakers are poisoning the minds of viewers, as Shaheen says, by using "reel-bad-Arab" formula. They

are manipulating the image of Arabs. Possible reasons of these negative portrayals are discussed.

In the third chapter, the depictions of Arabs in Hollywood films are analysed. Films from different time periods are analysed in order to find differences in the representation of Arabs through the years as many believe that these depictions are socially and politically determined. Four films from four different time periods are analysed, starting with the silent romantic drama *The Sheik* from the 1920s. Next is the film dealing with the birth of Israeli state, *Exodus* from 1960, then the action film *The Siege* from 1998 that deals with the terrorist attacks on American soil. Last is *Argo* (2012), a 21<sup>st</sup> century film dealing with events from the past involving American heroes and aggressive Arabs.

The fourth chapter brings more of a positive attitude toward future representations of Arabs in Hollywood films, while the closing chapter summarizes all the previous parts of the paper and offers a conclusion.

## 2. Defining the Other in Hollywood

### 2.1. The Role of the Film

Even though any form of media is important when it comes to the formation of public opinion, the importance of the film is definitely worth mentioning. As Vanhala says, the film has a great power and is an influential medium whose role in shaping the perception of the viewers around the whole world is of great importance (*Depiction* 8). The film has a power to store and transmit a great deal of information and, according to McLuhan, it is filmmaker's task to create a whole another world for the audience to experience and accept it subconsciously (252).

Since the 1920s, films produced in Hollywood are known as the most popular and influential films in the world. Although Hollywood studios are located in the USA and Hollywood is, as Shaheen says, a great American entertainer (*Reel Bad Arabs: How*

*Hollywood Vilifies a People* 29), it is important to stress that their films gained worldwide popularity. These films are made to appeal to popular tastes in many countries and Hollywood has become the worldwide cultural source, promoting American culture to the world (Maisuwong 1). Hollywood films have become a part of people's everyday lives and play a crucial role in the way many of them see the world.

Furthermore, people have always been drawn to something unusual and different and Hollywood prefers to use what sells (Vanhala *Depiction* 36). Therefore, they responded with a lot of films that depict other cultures and races. Sadly, it became common for Hollywood to negatively represent non-Western ethnic groups, to dehumanise and vilify these people. There are many pieces of research of Hollywood films that show how stereotypical and false images of some people are used for entertainment of the masses and many scholars have criticised this kind of representation, Shaheen being one of the most famous. In his book and documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*, he has pointed out many times that these false images can ruin the lives of people.

As already mentioned, Hollywood industry was always interested in geographically faraway places and their non-Western exotic cultures and the Middle East is one of these lands. In addition to that, the stereotypical depiction of Arab people and their way of living, which is often seen as complete opposition to what we have in the West, has become one of the standard plots in Hollywood films. To understand completely this kind of representation, we need to deal with sociological concepts of Orientalism and the Other.

## 2.2. Orientalism and Concept of the Other

In the 1970s, Edward Said published his famous book *Orientalism* in which he emphasizes the existence and negative role of the stereotypes the West is creating about the Middle Eastern countries and people, or in other words, the Orient. He believed that Orientalism is a Western invention which contributed to the creation of the dichotomy



between the West and the East, where the East is identified as the „other“, different from the majority (311). Hall also deals with this problem and points out that “they are „them“ instead of „us“ and they are usually exposed to the binary way of representation“ (226). These binary oppositions can be found in Western culture for many, many years now. They are oversimplified and the differences that may exist between the cultures are over-exaggerated. There is a contrast in the representations of „us“ and „them“, where „we“ are nice, peaceful and civilized West, while „they“ are bad, aggressive and primitive East. This dichotomy is also known as “East-West dichotomy” in the sociological circles. Both Said and Hall agree that this image of the Middle East is misleading and far away from reality. These exaggerated and therefore false representations of differences are created by the West because “one must establish a clear difference between things in order to classify them” (Hall 259). In other words, by constructing the Other, the West can define itself. The East became the source of the West identity. The West is using its power to influence the way people see the world in order to identify itself as superior in comparison with Eastern people and culture. As many postcolonial theories point out, the West needed an excuse for the subordination of one whole part of the world and that is why this famous concept of the Other was created. Similarly, Cafnik argues that Orientalism is actually a political doctrine as she says that “Orientalism is a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West. And it is still, in the contemporary world, Orientalism, which shapes our thoughts, ideas, images, and representations of the Other, especially if the other comes from the East“(284). Or in other words, Middle East is being falsely depicted as the Other in favour of Western political goals. These depictions are false and distorted and are far away from reality.

### 3. Hollywood- Poisoning the Minds of People?

When it comes to Orientalism in film, Jack Shaheen is the name worth mentioning. His famous 2001 book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies People* was adapted into a

documentary film of the same name in 2006. In his work, Shaheen is focused on analysing representations of Arabs in American films from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has seen and analysed a lot of films, more accurately over a thousand of them featuring Arab characters and concluded that many American and Hollywood filmmakers use something that he calls „reel-bad-Arab formula“ in their work. Following that „formula“ in their films, they depict Arabs as crazy, dangerous fanatics and Westerners as their opposition, good and brave heroes who always save the day (*Reel 22*). Similarly, Arti argues that „Orientalism produces the idea that the Orient is a perilous place that should be controlled and this is presented clearly in Hollywood movies, wherein, Arab associations continue to be a threat, not just for the West but also for the East itself“(3). Hollywood uses the already mentioned “reel-bad-Arab” formula in order to manipulate and create the false image of Arabs and is, as Shaheen constantly emphasizes in his documentary, poisoning the minds of viewers.

Although most viewers are usually not aware of the fact that the images served by the media are false, a lot of scholars deal with the fact that Hollywood filmmakers never truthfully represent the Middle East and Arabs. The Middle East is always depicted as the Other and even in the films, there is a dichotomy between the East and the West, produced by Orientalistic views, where the West is seen as a civilised and genuinely nice place to live, while the Middle East is seen as a mysterious or dangerous place.

Arabs have been dehumanised and falsely represented from the beginnings of film industry to the present time. As Edward Said argues, these depictions are mainly used as a reflection of the West, a way of identifying itself as a civilised place by way of comparison (311). From many Hollywood films, ordinary viewers can only conclude that all the Arabs are the same but that is, of course, not the truth. Hollywood films falsely put all Middle Easterners in one basket. They present them as a large mass of crazy people under the influence of Orientalism. In his book *Covering Islam*, Said emphasizes that none of these

films actually inform viewers about the different cultures and customs of that area (53). Hollywood has also blurred the difference between the categories of Arabs and Muslims (Elouardaoui 3).

Therefore, what these films show are not only one-dimensional but also false depictions of one whole part of the world and people living there. The culture of the Middle East is actually very diverse; there are many countries, different beliefs and various religions, but viewers get to see only one-dimensional images. Shaheen points out some of the best known depictions of Arabs in Hollywood films: Arab men usually have black beards, hooked noses and are terrorists, primitive sheiks, arrogant or extremely naive people. He stresses how wrong it is to believe that Arabs are uncivilised people by constantly reminding his readers about contributions of many Arabs to civilization, including algebra, geography, architecture and law (*Reel* 22). But sadly, none of these contributions will ever be mentioned in a Hollywood blockbuster. What is more, when there are some good Middle Eastern characters, they are usually whitewashed, meaning filmmakers try to make them more “white” in order to be more likeable and appealing to the American audience.

Also, the depiction of women is what Shaheen finds very interesting, too, as they are usually portrayed as over-dressed, mysterious humans who do not mind being oppressed and treated as objects or, more recently, also as terrorists. It seems that strong Middle Eastern women do not exist in Hollywood films. The best example of what is just said about the representation of Arabs is Shaheen's research where out of 1000 films that have Arab characters only 12 were depicted positively, 52 depictions were neutral and the rest were negative. This being said, it is important to emphasize that for many Westerners, the image of the Middle East and its people they receive through the media, especially film, is the only image of it that they know. The film has the power to affect views of many people and if

filmmakers decide to create negative pictures which are then repeated over and over, negative stereotypes which manipulate viewers' thoughts are created (Shaheen, *Reel 22*).

As we have seen, many believe that Hollywood films play an important part in constructing the Other for political reasons. Hollywood's depictions and representations reflect Western and especially American political ideologies. Arti argues that Hollywood films play a propagandist role for the American imperial project, especially in the Middle East and says that the Middle East is presented as „alien“ by America and Hollywood and that „helps to make it an acceptable area for the exercise of American power“ (1). In addition to that, Shaheen believes that there is a connection between some political events such as the revolution in the Middle East and 9/11 attacks from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and negative depiction of Arabs in the Hollywood film. By analysing Hollywood films he managed to prove that there is, in fact, a strong connection between politics and Orientalist imagery found in films.

On the first sight, it may seem to us that Arabs became discriminated only in the last few decades. The emergence of the Arab-threat in the 1980s, 9/11 attacks at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the rise of ISIS in the last few years... However, if we also analyse some American films from the last century, we can see how many stereotypes about Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East existed long before the 2000s. By analysing some important works of Hollywood filmmakers, we can get some picture about the nature of this discrimination and its duration, too.

#### 4. Depiction of Arabs in Films

As already mentioned, it is of great importance to analyse representation of Arabs in Hollywood films through time. There are some proven differences in the depiction of Arabs and the Middle East depending on the year of the release. These differences are, as many scholars believe, socially and politically determined. It is the fact that Arabs are mostly

portrayed as terrorists in the last few decades. Since the emergence of the Arab-threat in the 1980s, the audience has been craving for action films featuring Arabs as the main antagonists. However, many Arab characters can be found in the earlier Hollywood films and, unsurprisingly, they were the uncivilised lunatics even back then. In the following chapters, the representation of Arabs from different time periods will be analysed.

#### 4.1. 1910s-1920s- The Exotic Middle East

The Middle East has always been seen as an exotic and wild place. The Middle Eastern people and their everyday lives were something unknown to ordinary Western viewers, so they have always been interested in these lands. Since its beginnings, Hollywood has depicted Arabs and the Middle East with an emphasis on foreign exoticism (Soberon 27). It can be said that the early Hollywood films were influenced by the Orientalist imagery “posing the Middle East as an exotic place of magic and wonders” (Soberon 27). Therefore, the Middle East was used as a setting for many early films but was usually stereotypically represented as a desert or Arabian palace in the desert. Moreover, Arab characters in this early period were usually only supporting characters in Hollywood films. What is more, their appearance was often funny and comical. Even when there were Arab villain characters, they were depicted as clumsy and silly people, so they were not actually considered a threat. Arab women were seen as objects and there were not many female Arab characters.

Furthermore, in the 1910s and 1920s, the exotic Middle East was depicted as a romantic place. It was used as a setting for the American romantic films, full of adventures and passion (Soberon 26). Many American romantic dramas used Middle Eastern setting, *The Sheik* (1921) and the sequel *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) being among the most famous.

##### 4.1.1. *The Sheik* (1921)

*The Sheik* is a famous 1921 American silent romantic drama. The story takes place in the Middle East where an independent and beautiful European heiress Lady Diana is abducted

by an Arabian sheik. He believes he can force Diana to fall in love with him. At first, Lady Diana is depicted as a strong woman who knows what she wants and refuses to be seen as an object or to be treated badly by anyone. However, she eventually falls in love with the man who abducted her, the sheik. Many believe that this is a classic example of Stockholm-Syndrome and argue that, sadly, sexual slavery is represented as something romantic in this film.

*The Sheik* is a popular classic film. However, this romantic adventure is also disrespectful and full of racist stereotypes and sexism. As we have seen, films from the beginning of the last century were often based on loose interpretations of the Middle East and *The Sheik* is one of the most famous. *The Sheik*, Shaheen argues, plays on the Western fantasies of exoticism (*Reel 51*). Back in the 1920s, Middle Eastern countries were seen as exotic places. These lands were perfect settings for Hollywood films of romance and wild adventure. *The Sheik* is mostly set in a desert and there are a lot of scenes that show beautiful sand dunes, castles and colourful costumes which give the exotic charm to this silent drama, the charm that many Westerners enjoyed back then (Shaheen *Reel 51*). It was something new and exciting for the audience, as the Middle East was perceived as a mysterious place full of wonders. Or in other words, as something completely different from the West.

Many argue that the whole Arabian culture is falsely presented in this film. Arabs are portrayed as one-dimensional, mysterious people living in mysterious lands. They are seen as uncivilised, irrational people. There are many offensive scenes and lines in *The Sheik*, one of the most famous being „when an Arab sees a woman that he wants, he takes her“. This line perfectly sums up the representation of Arabs given in this film. Arab men treat women like their property because that is a part of their culture. They are demanding abductors and rapists and that is presented as something normal and to be expected in the Middle East. What is more, Shaheen points out that the word “sheikh” means literally “a wise elderly person, the

head of the family”, but you would not know that from watching this film (*Reel 51*). Instead of presenting sheiks as wise old men, filmmakers depict them as abductors. Women are portrayed as objects, but even bigger problem is that white women have „greater value” than women of other races. Also, no female Arab utters a single word in the film.

In addition to that, the main character, the sheik, who is an abductor, is also handsome, passionate and charming. He is the only Arab in this film with (some) positive characteristics and that is, as we find out in the film, due to the fact that he has European ancestry. Also, the actor playing the role of the sheik was an Italian actor, Rudolph Valentino. As Shaheen says, this character was whitewashed, meaning filmmakers made him less ethnic and more “white” in order to be more appealing to the Western viewers. The sheik was raised in the Middle East so abducting women seemed normal to him, but he had European blood which made him genuinely a good, lovable person (*Shaheen Reel 52*). That is how filmmakers managed to create a love story that audience of that time craved for, which involves Arabs and the mysterious East.

Other Arab characters are, on the other hand, bandits and vicious lunatics. They are portrayed as crazy, even silly people with black beards, living in the desert and riding camels. This being said, it is easy to conclude that in the 1920s Westerners did have a lot of prejudices about Arabs, but their representations back then were not as negative as they are nowadays. That is probably due to the fact that the USA and the Middle Eastern countries used to cooperate at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and there were no conflicts between them. America even sent missionaries and highly educated people there in order to help the poor and uneducated. Maybe they did have some hidden motives, as many argue, but it was a relatively peaceful period.

#### 4.2. 1950s-1970s- Growth of Tensions

Orientalist imagery continued to inspire Hollywood filmmakers in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the most popular genres were historical films and thrillers (Soberon 27). In the 1950s, political tensions in the Middle East were growing and the negative portrayal of Arabs followed. Lina Khatib argues that this negative portrayal was part of a project that idealizes the American nation while essentialising the problematic Other (174). This was the time of conflicts between Arabs and Jews for the territory in the Middle East and just by analysing American films of the time we can conclude on which side of the history America was. For example, the 1966 American drama *Cast a Giant Shadow* deals with these conflicts and portrays Arabs as evil and dangerous people who captured the Holy City of Jerusalem and needed to be stopped and killed. Furthermore, in the 1976 *Black Sunday* Americans are presented as peaceful protectors and saviours when they were actually invading other countries.

In this period, Arabs were still depicted as mysterious others, but more negatively than before and these negative portrayals were still one-dimensional, lacking depth. Also, there were no more lavish castles and romantic deserts, as the Middle East was becoming more of a dark and scary place, full of villains. Arab men were now heartless camel-riding killers of both Americans and Israelis, while women were depicted as scary, veiled creatures whose faces were never seen.

In his book *Evil Arabs in American Popular Film*, Tim Semmerling also analyses a famous horror film *The Exorcist* (1973). In his work, he is trying to prove that the demon who possessed a girl is an Arab, even though it is not explicitly stressed in the film. He says that “this Orientalist-imagined struggle between an Eastern bogeyman (the Arab demon) and the Western hero (the exorcist), turned upside down, creates suspense, fear, and panic throughout the plot of the film (31)”. He believes that the filmmakers were trying to demonize Islam and



emphasize the distinction between “us”, the West and “them”, the East. However, many scholars say that this analysis is weak.

#### 4.2.1. *Exodus* (1960)

One of the important films from this period is *Exodus*. *Exodus* is a 1960 film about the birth of the modern state of Israel in 1948. It was based on Leon Uris' novel of the same name. It is important to stress that Uris was asked by the American government to create a novel which would introduce the Arab-Israel conflict to many Americans and depict Israelis as heroes. This comes as no surprise as the 1950s and 1960s marked, as already mentioned, the growth of tensions between the East and the West. America and Israel were close allies even back then and were united against Palestinians. This film is a great example of how much influence politics has on the Hollywood film industry. When a certain message needs to be sent to the public, governments can use films, as their influence is massive. As Stam points out, millions of people were influenced by this film and American public opinion poll statistics revealed increased sympathy toward Israel in the months after the release (123).

In this film, the Israeli are portrayed as the good and brave people who are working with Americans and want to live peacefully. They have been treated badly in the past and deserve a better life. However, they are still struggling because they are being attacked by Arabs for trying to found their own country. Arabs, or more accurately Palestinians, on the other hand, are depicted as vicious people and are even linked up with Nazis (Shaheen, *Reel* 625). They will capture, torture and kill people. They are uncivilised and have no compassion. What is more, the only good Arab character is a man who has an Israeli friend. However, he ends up dead because of his friendship. Also, Arabs are often unseen or faceless in the distance. They are anonymous villains, scary masses of aggressive people who „simply won't keep the peace“. Their side of the story is not presented and they seem completely irrational,

behaving almost like animals. Because of them, the peaceful solution to the conflict is not possible to find.

It is obvious that this film is creating stereotypes and is intentionally portraying Arabs as one-dimensional antagonists. It was a part of the American and Israeli propaganda of that time. *Exodus* deals with the struggle of Israelis and ignores the other side. Arabs are portrayed as the Other, negative Other (Stam 121). They cannot and should not be understood, their story is not important as they are irrational human beings. Shaheen focused a lot on this film in his work and found numerous scenes which were, he believed, disrespectful and distorted the reality (*Reel* 626). *Exodus* seems to completely ignore the fact that both Arabs and Jews were fighting for the same goal- freedom and independence.

#### 4.3. 1980s-1990s- Emergence of the Arab-threat

Later, in the late 1970s, the depiction of Arabs in Hollywood films became even more negative and they got “roles of dramatic evildoers” (Semmerling 8). Marger argues that this negativity can be associated with political events of that time, most famous being the Iranian revolution and the terrorist actions of the PLO (qtd. in Soberon 27).

When talking about the middle of the 20th century in Hollywood, it is important to mention the domination of Russian antagonists in films from the 1950s who started to be traded in for Arab antagonists during the 1980s (Soberon 28). According to Douglas Kellner, the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s led to a shift in the identity of Hollywood film villains (qtd. in Soberon 27). Russian communists were no longer seen as a big threat in the eyes of Americans so they could not be the main villains anymore. They were not that interesting to the audience and filmmakers now had to find another antagonist. As this was the time of many tensions between the Middle East and the West and the Middle East was seen as a potential threat, Middle Easterners became the main villains of Hollywood films. Therefore, we can conclude that political tensions and different political events, such as the beginning of

the Gulf War, led to “the promotion of the Arab from an unreliable side- character to full-on villain” (Boggs and Pollard 338).

Arabs were now depicted mainly as hijackers, killers and bombers. What is more, they were now, for the first time, killing people on the American soil. No more feeling safe in your own country, in your own home. Also, in some films where Arab was not the main villain of the film, he would still be mentioned as a possible threat to the country. Female Arabs were still depicted as mysterious creatures and who do not mind being treated like an object. However, they were also portrayed more negatively than ever before. Sometimes they were terrorising people, too. These depictions were lacking any depth.

One of the most popular films back then was the 1985 American science-fiction comedy film *Back to the Future*. In his *Reel Bad Arabs* documentary, Shaheen mentions this film many times, saying it is a good example of how negative representations of Arabs could be found even in the films that are made for children and young people. For example, Libyans are depicted as terrorists and bombers and in one scene they attack one of the main characters. Another important film to mention is a 2000 film *Rules of Engagement*, which is described as “one of the most racist films ever made” by American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. It negatively depicts Arabs who are seen as irrational people full of hatred. Filmmakers did not attempt to humanise Arabs at all and even their killings are justified.

As we have already seen, there is an obvious connection between political events and portrayal of Arabs in Hollywood films, but some scholars argue that there is more to it. The 1980s were actually the time when the action film became very popular and of course, profitable. As Daniel Mandel says, “the emergence of the Arab-threat in the 1980s American cinema could be seen as intertwined with the birth of a new cycle of ultra-violent Hollywood action spectacles” (qtd. in Soberon 27) . These films are full of violence and conflicts, usually between the United States and the scary, aggressive others, where the United States are seen

as a peaceful community which was threatened by the other, foreign evil. In addition to that, there is always one American who catches or kills bad Arabs and saves the day.

After analysing the villains in films, Robert Ferguson also said that many of the traits attributed to Arab villains in the films could also be applied to other ethnicities as these characteristics actually belong to the discourse of the Other, and not specifically to Arabs (qtd. in Soberon 28).

#### 4.3.1. *The Siege* (1998)

*The Siege* is a 1998 American action film. It is about a fictional situation in which Islamic terrorists carry out attacks in New York City. The main character is an FBI agent Anthony Hubbard, the head of the FBI Counter-Terrorism Task Force who has to catch Arab terrorists.

After the release of *The Siege*, many Arab Americans protested against it, saying that this film depicts Arabs stereotypically and helps to create prejudicial attitudes towards them (Vanhala *Civil* 1). The film depicts Arabs as terrorists and crazy fanatics. Arab terrorists blow up theatres and vehicles full of people, American citizens. These attacks can be seen as the attack on the Western culture and way of living. It is emphasized that once busy streets became silent, people no longer felt safe. In many scenes we can see how much the lives of the ordinary American people have changed because of the terror group coming from the Middle East. As it has been said in the film, “they are attacking our way of life”. Of course, “they” are the vicious and aggressive Middle Easterners, who came to the civilised West to ruin it. This is a clear example of the dichotomy many scholars have been talking about, the dichotomy between the East and the West. These images and representations of the Middle East are created by the West itself and are far from reality. The differences between cultures and people are exaggerated, and all Arabs are represented as bad people who come to America to destroy it.

On the other hand, it is important to stress that Hollywood filmmakers did try to show more depth and ease tensions by introducing an Arab FBI agent and a few other Arab American characters ready to co-operate and help the American police (Vanhala *Civil 2*). It is stressed that New York Arab community condemns terrorism and wants the justice just as badly. It is also emphasized that Islamic terrorists kill other Arabs, too. They also introduced depictions of everyday lives of peaceful American Arabs to show that they are also human beings.

On the one hand, we have Arab terrorist cells carrying out numerous attacks on the streets of New York, and on the other hand the picture of peaceful American Arabs who are also portrayed as victims of violent ideologies held by other Arabs. However, these were only failed attempts, says Vanhala, as the final message of the film is that there is a growing threat coming from the East and that Arabs are crazy and ready to do horrible things to “us” (*Civil 4*). These depictions are racist and only create more tensions. As Shaheen emphasizes in his documentary, these depictions divide humanity and blind us. In one of the final scenes, the film’s main terrorist says: “There will never be the last cell”. These words remind the audience of the reality of terrorism and create fear (Vanhala *Civil 4*). After watching this film, you will not remember these few good Arab characters; you will remember the scenes of the terrorist attacks carried out by uncivilised “towel-heads” and their lack of compassion. That is the picture of the Middle East that this film sends to its audience. The false and distorted picture.

#### 4.4. 21<sup>st</sup> Century- Modern Day Representations

Some believe that Orientalism is being used today, in this information-soaked age, more than ever before (Alsultany *Arabs 6*). Shaheen says that there have been some changes of depiction over last century but the image of Arab has not really changed; Arabs have always been and remain the Other (*Reel 23*). In the last two decades there has been a lot of

real-life conflict between the West and the East so there has also been a demand for Arab villains in films. Soberon emphasizes that the constant portrayal of Arabs as villains continues today because West is now afraid of Arabs and wants to distinguish itself from them (25).

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hollywood filmmakers are often inspired by America's foreign policy and real-life terrorist attacks. Evelyn Alsultany says that the Bush administration introduced the „they hate us for our freedom“ discourse after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (*Arabs* 17). These attacks marked the beginning of *War on Terror*, the war between the „civilized and rational“ West and the „primitive and aggressive East“, the war that has changed the picture of the world we live in. This discourse provided the justification needed to pass racist foreign and domestic policies (Alsultany *Arabs* 17). Americans were now ready to tolerate the discrimination of Arabs and Arab Americans, with no evidence needed, because Arabs were now considered a threat.

A lot of films are now dealing with a threat of ISIS militants. Arab men are usually portrayed as irrational terrorists, yelling “Allah Akbar” and killing innocents in the name of God. They are wearing traditional Arabic clothing, speaking unintelligible languages and committing suicides. They use knives, guns, bombs and even gas in the attacks on Americans. In addition to that, the importance of female Arab characters is on the rise. Nowadays, they are also, very often, depicted as ruthless terrorists. They often put suicide vests on their own children and are the masterminds standing behind the attacks.

A lot of 21<sup>st</sup> century films are based on actual events, such as *World Trade Centre* (2006) or *Patriots Day* (2016). Both films deal with terrorist attacks on American soil, attacks that were (presumably) carried out by Arabs. These films are usually very emotional for the viewers and make them very angry as they show how everyday lives and, most importantly, freedom of Americans, are attacked by outsiders. Sometimes the story is set in the Middle East. There are no more romantic deserts, only ruins of the cities. We can see how destructive

the war is but it is often stressed that America has nothing to do with it. Maybe Americans do bomb these cities, but they are doing it for the good cause. Promoting democracy.

In many Hollywood films nowadays, Arabs are represented as villains and Americans as heroes who save the day. There are many films in which the antagonists are Arabs who get killed by main protagonists, who are almost every time white Americans. Arabs are usually aggressive terrorists who pose a threat to the West and are eventually killed by a Western hero. In a 2014 biographical war drama *American Sniper*, the main character is a soldier protecting his country against the threat of Islamic terrorism. However, this film is said to be a propaganda film that misleads the audience and rewrites history. *American Sniper* depicts Arabs stereotypically as heartless lunatics and irrational barbarians. While Arabs are seen as the ultimate evil, Americans are the ultimate good.

In addition to that, there is an increase in numbers of comedy films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that deal with Arabs and the Middle East. For example, a 2012 American black comedy *The Dictator* is based on exaggerations and generalizations about Arabs and is deliberately very offensive. There is also a 2016 American black comedy *War Dogs*, a film full of stereotypes about Arabs and the Middle East. As we can see, in the recent years the war in the Middle East is being used for entertainment by American filmmakers and these films are accepted by the Western audience.

On the other hand, some argue that the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought more positive depiction of Arabs. For example, Ouidyane Elouardaoui deals only with films that send positive messages and portray Arabs as normal human beings and says that there is a positive shift in Hollywood industry (3). In his newest book, Shaheen argues that it is the fact that most post-9/11 films represent Arabs negatively, but it is also the fact that these depictions are more complex than they were before and some filmmakers even create heroic Arab characters (*Guilty* 35).

In addition to that, when talking about more complex representations in post-9/11 films, Evelyn Alsultany talks about special kind of representations filmmakers use called “simplified complex representations”. These strategies are used by filmmakers to give the impression that the representations they are producing are more complex than they actually are (*Arabs* 21). For example, they use strategies such as “humanizing the terrorist”, where viewers learn their back stories and see them in a family context or “flipping the enemy” which involves “leading the viewer to believe that Muslim terrorists are plotting to destroy the United States and then revealing that those Muslims are merely pawns for Euro-American or European terrorists (*Arabs* 23).

Alsultany also talks about an interesting phenomenon that she calls „Mourning the Suspension of Arab American Civil Rights“. After 9/11, Arab Americans lost their civil rights. People became suspicious of them and the government even started detaining and deporting them, usually with no special reason needed. That is when filmmakers, under a lot of influence of human rights organisations, started using strategies such as inserting patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans and stressing in their films that discrimination is unjust (*Alsultany Arabs* 27). This is the opportunity for the audience to mourn Arabs and Arab Americans and relieve themselves of any blame, as Alsultany says, ”knowing it is wrong makes us good” (*Arabs* 70). It is easy to conclude that the mentioned strategies were not used because filmmakers wanted their viewers to understand the situation in which Arabs have found themselves in, but to enable them to feel sympathy in order to feel good about themselves.

#### 4.4.1. *Argo* (2012)

*Argo* is a 2012 Academy Award-winning biographical drama which deals with real-life events during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. The story follows CIA agent Mendez (Ben



Affleck) who is trying to rescue American diplomats from Iran by pretending to be a film producer.

At the beginning of the film, there is a preface, a short video clip with narration that offers some context to the audience. This opening actually questions American foreign policy as it is explained that this whole crisis was provoked by Americans themselves. This is a very clever strategy used by filmmakers in order to give the impression to the audience that the representations in the film are complex. As already mentioned, Evelyn Alsultany calls it simplified complex representation (*Arabs 21*). Arabs, in this case Iranians, are still depicted as uncivilised and dangerous people in the rest of the film, and their portrayal is actually one-dimensional. As Evelyn Alsultany says, *Argo* is an example of the film that tries to defuse stereotyping but fails miserably (*Argo Tries 1*).

This preface is followed by an opening scene in which aggressive Iranians are protesting on the streets and burning American flags. The American embassy is attacked, Americans fear for their safety because Iranians are crazy and violent. This scene is scary and immediately decreases the importance of the preface. Throughout the whole film, Iranians are seen terrorizing American hostages and killing innocent civilians. Dead bodies are lying on the streets; people are being hanged on a daily basis. These scenes imply that violence is a part of the everyday life in Iran because Iranians are aggressive and crazy, and that is how they live. These depictions are, of course, exaggerated and not true. We can conclude that the preface is just a strategy used by Hollywood filmmakers to give the audience the impression that this film is offering them complexity and a true representation of events.

Alsultany also emphasizes that *Argo* is based on the true story but the writers altered and created some scenes for dramatic effect (*Argo Tries 1*). It is well-known that Hollywood films based on true stories are not completely historically accurate but the problem with *Argo* is that these introduced changes are actually stereotyping of Arabs. Iranians are depicted as

the dangerous and uncivilised people in order for the film to be more interesting and captivating. Even bigger problem is the fact that the audience is informed that this film is based on a true story, so the Iranians truly appear crazy.

Furthermore, there is another technique used in *Argo*, says Alsultany, to make it seem like this film is more complex than it really is- it is the insertion of one good Arab who is willing to help Americans (*Argo Tries 1*). In this case that is an Iranian housekeeper who will betray her own country in order to protect Americans.

Even though the 21<sup>st</sup> century Hollywood films do have more complex plots and more positive representations of Arabs, as we can see from *Argo*, stereotyping and discrimination are still very much present. *Argo* was acclaimed by critics and praised by the audience. The fact that this film won an Academy Award shows that people are still comfortable with stereotypical depictions, says Alsultany (*Argo Tries 1*).

## 5. Hopes for the Future

If the media and Hollywood films continue to show only these false portrayals of Arabs, the rest of the world will continue to see them that way. Although the film is not the only tool used to promote Orientalistic images and political ideologies, its influence in public opinion formation is massive. What is more, these negative depictions have ruined the lives of many Arabs, especially Arab Americans who have lost their basic civil rights in the last few years. However, many scholars believe that there is some hope for the better future. It can be said that the times are changing. As we have seen, the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought more complex stories and Arab characters are no longer exclusively one-dimensional. Elouardaoui says that there is a positive shift in Hollywood industry and that recently produced films show Arabs in more positive light (11). Arabs are no longer exclusively anonymous masses of people, terrorists and fanatics. Their characters are more complex now. There is an increase in the number of female Arab characters. It is now important to promote these positive changes. In

addition to that, Shaheen also emphasizes that he is optimistic about the future of the Hollywood film. It seems to him that a new generation of filmmakers sees things differently and are accepting and respecting other people and cultures. These people are our best hope for the better future with, at least, fewer stereotypes.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse and describe stereotypes about Arabs that can be found in Hollywood films. As we have seen in the first chapter, the film is a powerful tool for the formation of public opinion and for delivering certain messages to a lot of people. Hollywood films, which are very popular in the whole world, therefore hold a lot of responsibility. While many viewers are usually not aware of the distorted images that are served to them by the film, a lot of scholars deal with the fact that Hollywood films never show the real picture of the Middle East and its people. The film has a power to create a negative picture and to create stereotypes. As we have seen, many Hollywood filmmakers use the Orientalistic „reel-bad-Arab formula”. Hollywood films tend to present Arabs as the Other. Arabs are discriminated and images of them are distorted from the beginnings of the film industry to the present time. From many Hollywood films an ordinary viewer can only conclude that all the Arabs are the same; crazy, mysterious and aggressive people, and most importantly, different from „us“, the good and civilised West.

This paper shows that different social and political situations have an influence on the representation of Arabs and that American ideologies are spread through the Hollywood film. This was proved by analysing Hollywood's portrayal of the Middle East through time. Differences between the West and the East are overexaggerated in the Hollywood film from its beginning. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Middle East was seen as an exotic place, the Orient, and was depicted as a romantic place full of wonders. Arabs were sometimes depicted as abductors and bandits, but they were also good and silly. It is easy to

conclude that the prejudices about Arabs did exist, but their depictions were not as negative as they are today. That is due to the fact that, many scholars agree, American and Arab governments were cooperating back then.

Sadly, as we have seen, stereotypical representations of Arabs only intensified through time. Representations started to change around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of changed political circumstances and since then, Arabs have been portrayed extremely negatively. Since America has been involved in a lot of real-life conflicts with the Middle East, the audience craves for films with that thematic. The middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by tensions between the East and the West so the negative portrayal of Arabs in the Hollywood films immediately followed. Films were now dealing with various conflicts and Arabs were depicted more negatively than ever before. They were still seen as mysterious creatures, but it was no longer romantic, they were now seen in an exclusively negative light. They were often unseen or faceless in the distance. They became anonymous enemies, scary masses of aggressive people. Furthermore, political events in the 1980s led to the promotion of Arabs to main villains. Arabs were now represented as crazy terrorists, carrying out attacks in America. These films were very emotional for the Western audience as they were watching Arab terrorists attacking their everyday life and freedom, which Americans care the most about. Arabs were back then still portrayed one-dimensionally but there were some (mostly failed) attempts to show them in the positive light, too.

Political changes from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have, as we have seen, brought changes to Hollywood, too. Films are now dealing with the Arab threat and are sending the messages to the public that Americans need to defeat Arabs before they defeat America. Violence against Arabs has become a part of American reality. However, depictions of Arabs are now more complex, too. Filmmakers are now using various strategies that only seem to enable the audience to understand the real Arab experience. The truth is that these

films are still full of stereotypes and these strategies are used to only provoke the feelings of sympathy in order for the Americans to feel as Good Samaritans.

This final paper shows that the media's power in the formation of public opinion is massive. Therefore, until the media starts to portray Arabs and their culture in more positive light, negative stereotypes will continue to be served to the viewers. It seems that, sadly, viewers do not mind these negative, one-dimensional images that can be found in Hollywood films, but there is still hope for a better future. As many believe, there is already a positive shift in the representation of Arabs in films and there is also a new generation of filmmakers who are accepting the differences between people. As we have seen, the film is just one of the tools used for the promotion of Orientalistic ideas and dichotomies but, bearing in mind how influential Hollywood films are, maybe these changes will eventually change the whole world. It is important to educate people about other nations and world events, to show them the real picture of the Middle East and its people. Stereotypes distort reality and divide people. It is time to end them. There is already too much terror and sadness in the world.

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## 8. Vilification and Dehumanization of Arabs in Hollywood: The Concept of the Other

**Summary:** This paper deals with the depiction of Arabs and Middle East in Hollywood films. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Arab characters and depictions of the Middle East can be found in these films. Unfortunately, these depictions are often one-dimensional and full of stereotypes. They are the consequence of the Orientalistic “us” and “them” dichotomy, created by the West. Furthermore, many people believe that the Hollywood films are actually used for the promotion of American propaganda and that socio-political changes in the world have an effect on the depictions in the films. The fact that the Arabs have been and still are one of the most discriminated ethnic groups in the world is evident in the Hollywood films, too.

**Key words:** Hollywood film, Arabs, depiction, stereotypes

## 9. Negativan prikaz arapa u Hollywoodu: Koncept Drugosti

### Sažetak:

Ovaj rad se bavi načinima na koje su Arapi i Bliski Istok prikazani u hollywoodskim filmovima. Od samog početka 20.stoljeća pa sve do danas u ovim filmovima možemo pronaći arapske likove i prikaze Bliskog Istoka. Nažalost, ti prikazi su često jednodimenzionalni i puni stereotipa. Oni su posljedica orijentalističke podjele na „nas“ i „njih“ koju je stvorio Zapad. Nadalje, mnogi se slažu s tezom da se hollywoodski filmovi zapravo koriste za promoviranje američke propagande i da društveno-političke promjene u svijetu jasno utječu na prikaze u filmovima. Arapi su kroz povijest bili i ostali jedna od najdiskriminiranijih etničkih skupina u svijetu, a to je vidljivo i u hollywoodskim filmovima.

Ključne riječi: Hollywoodski film, arapi, prikaz, stereotipi