

From Sheikh to Terrorist? Arab Characters in American Film

by Mita Banerjee and Günther Sommerschuh

The following text provides a brief discussion on how to integrate visual materials such as the film *The Wind and the Lion* (1975) in the EFL classroom when discussing the use of stereotypes in Hollywood productions especially in regards to Arab culture. The ideas were gathered in a workshop during the Teacher Academy 2005 and summarized for this publication.

Introduction

Due to easily accessible videos and DVDs, films in recent years have entered the English syllabi of the Länder and—as a consequence—the classrooms. Using the extended text definition, films are seen and treated as any other text as far as their analysis and interpretation is concerned. In the EPA (Einheitliche Prüfungsanforderungen der Länder) from 2002¹ films figure on the list of possible text types for the written Abitur.

Compared to printed texts, the advantage of films in the classroom lies in the fact that the teacher and the student are often on a similar level as to their viewing experiences. In order to enable students to gain a deeper understanding of how films work on the viewer one first has to deconstruct them. In other words, one has to look at the film's constituents and the features directors deliberately or subconsciously use to affect and thus influence the viewer before constructing one's own 'reading resp. meaning' of the film.

This text will explore how the movie *The Wind and the Lion* (1975) could be incorporated in the EFL classroom when discussing the use of stereotypes in Hollywood productions especially in regards to Arab culture. Exposing students to films like *The Wind and the Lion* enables them to experience the cultural clashes the protagonists also face. This clash, however, can be the first step in a process of acculturation and thus of gaining intercultural competence.

Plot Description of *The Wind and the Lion*

In the early 1900s, an American businessman was kidnapped by a rebellious Arab chieftain, principally as a means to embarrass the Sultan of Morocco. This abduction sparked the threat of armed intervention by President Theodore Roosevelt, which was never carried out. In *The Wind and the Lion*, the unattractive male captive is replaced by the gorgeous female Mrs. Pedecaris, an American widow played by Candice Bergen. The ruthless but essentially decent Arab chief Raisuli is portrayed by Sean Connery, while Teddy Roosevelt is depicted as a jingoistic blowhard by Brian Keith. The film's main theme, that of America's emergence as a world power, is largely secondary to the growing mutual-respect relationship between Mrs. Pedecaris and Raisuli. After releasing his hostage, Raisuli is himself captured by German forces, who at the behest of the Kaiser are seeking out methods of laying the groundwork for what would evolve into World War I. With the help of Mrs. Pedecaris—and, in long-distance fashion, President Roosevelt—Raisuli escapes. Director John Milius' screenplay bears little relation to the facts of the matter, but this is forgotten in the light of the film's dynamic action sequences, not to mention the marvelous rapport between its two main stars.²

Ideas for the Classroom

Possible key questions and observation tasks for the film *The Wind and the Lion* especially in the context of clichés and stereotypes are:

- What does the film portray?
- How are the people (e.g. different ethnic, social, political groups) portrayed?

- How can we define and resist the stereotypes presented in the film?
- To what extent does the film constitute a colonialist/anti-colonialist movie?
- Which role does the casting play?

To come to terms with the multi-layered message of the film, the following reading projects are suggested:³

- American expansionism in the first half of the 20th century
- Roosevelt's presidency
- The role of the British in North Africa
- Maroc independence
- Strategic implications of the building of the Panama Canal
- Fictionalisation of history and of intercultural relationships
- M. Rowlandson's *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration*⁴
- Arab American literature as a counterbalance to the stereotypes conveyed by Hollywood film

The results of group research can, for example, be communicated in inter-groups with one representative from each 'expert group'. This background knowledge is important to support or contradict a certain feeling one might have watching the film 'that something is not quite right', that there are opposing clues in the film's narrative. As Homi Bhabha points out, every text has one or several subtexts, which contain elements that contradict the apparent message.⁵

Work in the classroom should therefore concentrate on reading against the grain and activating levels of resistance towards—in this case—stereotypes. The resistance can be located within the film (e.g. contradictions and gaps in the logic of the narrative) or outside. Resistance from the outside can come from the study of historical documents, photographs, other fictional texts, and related works of art (painting, sculpture).

In other words, students will combine *bottom-up* reading strategies, i.e., looking for *clues* in the particular text, with *top-down* processes, i.e., activating and increasing their contextual knowledge and experience to be used as *tools* to investigate the fabric of the text. Exploiting inter-textual references can lead to a deeper understanding of what the respective textual clues look like and how they affect us.

The Wind and the Lion should be best viewed after establishing a solid factual basis by assigning research projects. The advantage of this approach is that students will detect more discrepancies between reality and fiction on their own. In this case the additional teaching goal could be to take a close look at the interdependency of reality and fiction, i.e., show that also "objective" documents contain subjective elements and vice versa.

Additional film material

Numerous films coming out of Hollywood would work in this context. Film critique and media expert Jack G. Shaheen explored more than 900 movies and television shows in his study "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People."⁶ The nine-minute trailer-like version of this book by film maker and artist Jaqueline Salloum was presented at the Sundance Film festival 2005. It depicts scenes from action movies like Schwarzenegger's "True Lies," but also children's programs like "The Muppet Show," Disney cartoons, or family movies like "Back to the Future." The short film can be watched on Salloum's home page at <www.jsalloum.org>.

Notes

1 Cf. <http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/pdf/PresseUndAktuelles/Beschluesse_Veroeffentlichungen/allg_Schulwesen/epa_englisch.pdf> (30 May 2006).² Hal Erickson, "All Movie Guide,"

<<http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll>> (3 September 2006).

3 An excellent bibliography on Arabs in Film and Television can be found in an online bibliography at the UC Berkeley Library <<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/arabbib.html>> (3 September 2006).

4 Cf. <<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>> (30 May 2006).

5 Cf. <<http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/commit.html>> (30 May 2006).

6 Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch, 2001).

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