Media(ting) Otherness: Visual Representations of the U.S./West in the Post-9/11 Era

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Hollywood has been instrumental in propagating images of Arabs/Muslims as backward, irrational, and violent. However, the post-9/11 sociopolitical climate catapulted the Arab/Muslim subject onto the center-stage as an unambiguous terrorist. As numerous scholars have argued, this visibility and the various cultural forms through which it is disseminated have become contested areas of inquiry. This paper adds a new dimension to ongoing scholarly debates about visual representation of Arab/Americans, by looking at Arab movies and soap operas.

This paper critiques the media(ting) of others by examining the Egyptian soap opera “Al Horoob Men Al Gharb” (Escaping the West) (2010) through liberal conceptions of “freedom,” (neo)Orientalist notions of “otherness,” in the context of globalization. Moreover, this paper maps out how recent Arab films humanize American characters and often counter the Occidental mindset. It examines the various forms of pro-Arab and anti-American sentiment that inflect post-9/11 Arab films, and, more specifically, how their Occidental discourses and assumptions serve to re-inscribe an East-West dichotomy in service of Arab-nationalism. In addition, the paper seeks to theorize emerging patterns in Arabic films that forge transnational spaces in which Arab Americans are re-imagined as a reconciliatory model that bridges the US-Arab cultural divide. This pattern engages with the racialized, sexualized, and gendered stereotypical images of Arab Americans, and nuances Arab American identities as constructs beyond the “citizen-terrorist” trope.

While the paper discusses positive images of Americans and “the West,” it also examines continuing processes of Occidentalism. Yet, they fit together in looking at motion pictures which look at “crossroads” and mediated movements across the seas. In this paper, there is an investigation of how certain stereotypes about Americans and “the West” shape public understandings of the appropriateness of an American foreign policy that relies on military intervention.