

The Wild East: Deconstructing the Language of Genre in the Hollywood Eastern

by John C. Eisele

This article argues for the existence of a genre of films termed the eastern that deals with the Middle East. Subgenres of the eastern (Arabian nights, sheik, foreign legion, foreign intrigue, and terrorist) vary in the degree of identification allowed the character of the Arab other, reflecting the political-historical context of their development, yet they share a number of narrative tropes that function as unifying attributes of the category as a whole.

In the beginning was the sword . . .

An executioner leads his prisoners to a square and chops off their heads with a huge scimitar, then places the heads in a basket. As he dozes off, the heads pop out of the basket and back onto their rightful owners. The reheaded prisoners escape but not before giving their executioner a taste of his own medicine by slicing him in half with his own scimitar. The short film ends as the detached torso of the executioner frantically searches for his lower half.

This scene in *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (Georges Méliès, 1905) provides one of the earliest narrative depictions of the Middle East on film, yet it contains a series of narrative elements that can be found in most films made subsequently in Hollywood about the Middle East and its Muslim inhabitants, be they Turks, Arabs, or Iranians: imprisonment or slavery, mutilation or the threat of amputation with scimitars, and rescue. Subsequent films in this early period¹ added to the inventory of narrative devices and character types in the eastern, mainly by adopting them from earlier traditions of popular and literary Orientalism found in plays, operas, songs, novels, and the like. These elements included abduction and enslavement (of women) in a harem or imprisonment (of men) in jail; identity twists; and the depiction of the East as a place of both terror and redemption for sins. Hollywood's Orient thus shared many features with the Orient of the popular imagination, but its features became reduced and refined in the crucible of repeated reworkings until any film about the Middle East shared a limited set of elements.

Within the first two decades of cinema, a film tradition developed, which I will call the eastern film genre, which continues until today. But, despite this long history and "distinguished" pedigree, the eastern is strangely unnoticed in the literature on film genres, although certain subtypes are recognized as distinct genres themselves (Arabian nights costumers, sheik movies, and foreign legion films).

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Other subgenres that I include as easterns are not recognized as discrete genres (the foreign intrigue and the terrorist types).²

Much of what has been written about easterns concentrates on those in the most recent period, in which Arab characters are reduced to raving, maniacal terrorists, devoid of human decency and morality.³ But, as an overview of the tradition shows, this was not always the case. In the earliest period, the Arab character at times fulfilled the role of the hero as well as the villain. A survey of the tradition also reveals a rather surprising consistency of narrative types that cuts across the boundaries of subgenres and unites almost all easterns, no matter when they were produced. This article presents a summary of the main points of similarity and difference that underlie the eastern film genre, which in turn reflect both the static as well as the dynamic and changing character of the relationship of the West to the East.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to note that I conceive of this genre (and other film genres for that matter) as “prototypical” categories, as defined in the field of cognitive linguistics and summarized in the work of John Taylor.⁴ These categories are not defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions but rather in terms of a prototype, conceived of in the abstract as an entity that possesses most of the attributes that are thought of as being typical of the category as a whole. The prototype of an abstract category may then be exemplified in terms of “exemplars,” or concrete entities that are seen to possess most if not all of the typical attributes of the category. This conception of genre is closer in spirit to that of Rick Altman⁵ but more directly handles the question of “levels of genericity” and the variability of a film’s relationship to a genre. It is unlike Steve Neale’s conception of genre in that it recognizes as genres more than just those that are institutionalized. Neale’s notion of generic and cultural expectations (borrowed from Tzvetan Todorov) is important, however, for understanding the relationship of real events to the traditions of myth-making that are found in generic traditions.⁶

The Distillation of the Eastern and Its Subtypes: Saracens and Sheherazades, Sheiks, Shackles, and Scimitars. The Orientalist tradition out of which the Hollywood eastern emerged had a long history, beginning with the stories and song tradition that grew out of the medieval Christian holy wars against the Muslim infidels, the Crusades. This tradition is represented in its most developed form in *Jerusalem Delivered*, a sixteenth-century work by Italian poet Torquato Tasso that, although clearly on the side of the Crusaders, depicts Christian and Muslim knights as embodying both the best and the worst of the feudal traditions of chivalry.⁷

Thinkers and artists of the later Enlightenment tradition likewise saw in the East both positive traits (whether real or imagined), which enabled them to critique the faults of European culture, as well as negative characteristics arising from the real or potential military and political threat posed by the Ottoman campaigns into Central Europe. The romantic tradition of Orientalism that flourished in the nineteenth century and that continues to sustain popular images of the Middle East today also contained contradictory images of the East as other: a positive or

an irenic one, deriving in part from the popularity of the Arabian nights stories, which saw the East as a land of adventure, ancient knowledge, magic, and fantasy, and a negative one, which viewed the East, through the eyes of colonialism, as a land of ignorance and corruption, savagery and decadence, just waiting for the hand of Western civilization to “recivilize” it.⁸

Early filmmakers adopted and adapted these various modes of Orientalist representation from the prior traditions that existed in theatrical and literary sources.⁹ In the process, these tropes and images were simplified, both in number and kind, and cinematically streamlined, becoming in the earliest narrative films almost telegraphic symbols: deserts and sandstorms, camels and fine Arabian steeds, close-up visual contrasts between Arab and Europeans (in clothes, head covering, beards, etc.), and the vision of the Oriental city as forbidding, exotic, and dangerous. The end results of this iconographic transfer of images forms the basis of Abdelmajid Hajji’s work, which deals with the image of the Arab in early silent films made in the United States.¹⁰

As in previous Orientalist traditions in the West, Hajji finds several contradictory representations of the Arab. He is at times sympathetic, at times inimical, and at other times a combination of both. Hajji sets up three categories of “oriental” film, as he terms them: the “realist-colonialist” type, the “psychological-Orientalist” type, and the “fantastic” type. These categories are rather vaguely defined and overlap somewhat, especially the first two, but they provide a more or less accurate view of the formation of the eastern genre in its earliest period. With some reworking, these three categories may be seen as the proto-forms of the basic categories of the eastern mentioned above—that is, the foreign legion subtype (the “realist-colonialist” type), the sheik subtype (the “psychological-Orientalist” type), and the Arabian nights subtype (the “fantastic” type). Hajji’s classification is based primarily on the central narrative event (military conflict versus personal conflict) and secondarily on the issue of miscegenation, or the relationship between a western, European (or American) character and an eastern, non-European (Arab, Muslim, Turkish, etc.). The latter feature constitutes a more apt element by which to distinguish easterns, since it reflects the degree of identification with the Arab character, a criterion that is important in charting the development of the various subgenres that emerged later on.¹¹

For example, films in the Arabian nights subtype, corresponding to Hajji’s “fantasy” type, typically do not involve any miscegenation at all. They simply involve a relationship between an eastern male (as hero) and an eastern female (as heroine, love interest, etc.). Films of the proto-sheik type (Hajji’s “psychological-orientalist” type) typically include a miscegenetic relationship between an eastern male and a western female. In some films of this type, most notably in the exemplar of the genre, *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921), the eastern male turns out to be a westerner (European or American). The third category, the proto-foreign legion type (Hajji’s “realist-colonialist” type), includes films in which there is a miscegenetic relationship between a western male and an eastern female and often at the same time a western female. The eventual form of the foreign legion type involved less and less miscegenation, as both the male and the female Arab

were marginalized to the point of nonexistence. This is sometimes the fate of the western female love interest as well, as exemplified in the prototypical foreign legion film, *Beau Geste* (Herbert Brenon, 1926), which involves conflicts among a set of western characters, all of whom are male.

In general, then, the earliest easterns are marked by the integration of the Arab characters into the story, as good, bad, or both. However, in later subgenres, the Arab characters are marginalized and their role is restricted to that of antagonist. Aside from the purely eastern Arabian nights type, the Arab character is marginalized, for instance, in sheik films by having the ostensible Arab hero turn out to be European, while in the foreign legion type, the eastern female love interest is abandoned rather early on, her place taken either by a marginalized European female “tramp/vamp,” as played by Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930), or dropped entirely, as in the many *Beau Geste* remakes and their numerous spin-offs.

In a subtype that developed primarily in the 1930s and 1940s, the foreign intrigue film, exemplified first in *Algiers* (John Cromwell, 1938), based on *Pepe le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1936), the marginalization of the Arab character is markedly increased. The romantic relationship, if there is one, is typically between a European man and a European woman, and the Arab characters are relegated to peripheral roles, if they appear at all, as in *Cairo* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1942), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1943), and *Sirocco* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1951), among others.

This trend is reversed in the terrorist subgenre, which began to appear in the 1970s. Here, the Arab is almost without exception antagonistic and his pure evil is counterpoised with the pure good of a European hero, or more often an American, as in *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994) and *Executive Decision* (Stuart Baird, 1996).

In essence, then, the development has been away from identification with Arab characters as heroes, heroines, or love interests toward “disidentification” with them as antagonists, or “unseen” enemies, as in John Ford’s *The Lost Patrol* (1934); as faceless attackers crawling on their bellies, as in *Exodus* (Otto Preminger, 1960), *Four Feathers* (Don Sharp, 1977), and *Overseas* (Brigitte Rouan, France, 1990); or as Nazi consorts, as in *A Yank in Libya* (Arthur Herman, 1942), *Cairo, Action in Arabia* (Leonide Moguy, 1944), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981).

This development from “identification with” to “disidentification against” the Arab other contrasts with the development of the character of the Native American in the typical American western. Westerns produced throughout the first half of the twentieth century unerringly portrayed the Native American as an antagonistic other, adopting the representation of the “red Indian” provided by the pulp western novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which were fed by news accounts of the Indian wars on the frontier. This film tradition bypassed for the most part an earlier tradition that viewed Native Americans as “noble savages” who were suffering a somewhat tragic fate at the inevitable onslaught of “civilization.” Hollywood’s view of the Native American other began to change slowly, most notably with the appearance of *Broken Arrow* (Delmar Daves, 1950), until, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, well after the genre had hit its prime, the most popular westerns were those in which Native Americans played sympathetic

characters, usually by having the hero be either a half-breed or a “white man” who “becomes an Indian,” as in *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), *A Man Called Horse* (Elliot Silverstein, 1970), and, most notably, *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990).¹² Thus, in its depiction of its ethnic other, the western followed a course that was the exact opposite of that of the eastern: as the Native American moved slowly from the role of antagonist and “savage” enemy toward that of protagonist or at least sympathetic other, the Arab other moved from being a (some-time) protagonist and sympathetic other to being an antagonist and savage terrorist.

There are several possible explanations for these shifts in the “identification potential” of non-Europeans in Hollywood films. I will mention only the most obvious one at this point. In both cases, the antagonistic other represented a real or a recent threat to the political interests of the United States.¹³ The cinematic representation of the Native American as antagonistic may be tied directly to the effects on public opinion of the Indian Wars, in which the armed resistance of some Indian tribes to the theft of their land and the unilateral abrogation of treaties by the U.S. government led to clashes resulting at times in casualties among the white settlers who were party to the theft. These clashes were represented to the public at large as massacres, and were exploited to increase public support for military campaigns. As the “Indian menace” was subdued and gradually faded into history, the Native American began to reacquire the status of “noble savage” and with the advent of countercultural movements in the 1960s became an icon for environmentalists and “back-to-nature” proponents, as well as a symbol of the ravages of the colonialist-capitalist system.

The Arab followed the opposite trajectory. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Arabs were not regarded as a threat to the interests of the United States. In fact, they supported the Allied cause against the Ottoman Empire. Zionist settlement and claims in Palestine, however, led to greater resistance among the Arab population to the loss of their land and sovereignty, and with the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 resulted in several wars between Israel and neighboring Arab countries. Yet, while the Arab continued to haunt the American imagination as a feared (or at least an exotic) ethnic other, it did so from the margins. It was only when Arabs began to threaten American interests directly during the 1973 oil embargo, following the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973, that the Arab (and later, the Muslim) emerged as a bona fide threat to American interests. This event, together with the expansion after 1971 of the PLO’s guerrilla/terrorist campaign against the Israelis, led to the Arab being represented as embodying the antithesis of Western values and rationality in the popular narratives of films and television.

In sum, the histories of the eastern and the western converge in that both genres exploit an image of a non-European other, but they diverge based on when this other functions as a sympathetic character with whom the audience may identify. For the western, the Native American starts out as antagonistic but ends up as sympathetic, while the reverse is true of the eastern. In addition, these genres intersect since they both deal with a locale that is “elsewhere” or liminal, other than the site of the dominant ideology (for the western, this is the East Coast of the United States, while for the eastern, it is Western Europe and the United

States). However, they differ in the orientation of this locale. For the western, the locale, although it is “not-East Coast” is still considered “America,” while for the eastern, the locale has always been “not-America.”

The genres also share a point of convergence in the nature of the historical event that forms the backdrop against which the development of the genres took place—namely, the dispossession of a native people of their land: for the western, the Native American; for the eastern, the Palestinian. Yet they differ as to when this dispossession took place vis-à-vis the development of the genre: for the western, it had already happened, while the eastern developed in the context of the dispossession, and its final subtype (the terrorist film) reflects the Palestinian resistance to this dispossession. The eastern genre is, in essence, an inversion of the western (hence the name), with both genres encapsulating in their development a record of the transcendent ideology of their times.

The Coherence of the Eastern Genre: Prototypical Attributes of Character, Locale, and Narrative Structure. Until now, I have been concentrating on describing in general terms the historical development of the eastern and its subgenres, noting the points of divergence, primarily in the area of characterization. I turn now to a consideration of the areas in which the genre gives an appearance of consistency, namely in the paradigms of narrative events. As noted above, I conceive of genre as a prototype category, which is exemplified in, rather than defined in, classical terms. I will therefore discuss the genre as a whole and each of its subgenres in terms of one of its exemplars, generally a film that, through its financial or critical success, crystallized the attributes of the (sub-)genre, whether these were attributes of characterization, locale, or narrative events. For the moment, I will concentrate on the latter two paradigms.

The prototypical locale for the eastern as a whole is the Middle East, usually an Arab country but occasionally Turkey, Iran, or Israel. Each of the subgenres in turn makes use of a certain aspect of that area to reinforce elements of the narrative or character development. For example, in the Arabian nights subgenre, there is an emphasis on contrasting locales that represent openness (the desert or sea, a market or street, a garden or sultan’s diwan) with those that represent confinement (a walled city, a palace, a princess’s boudoir). In contrast, in the sheik subgenre, the contrast is between the city (representing modernity or Western civilization) and the desert (representing tradition, the past, barbarity, etc.). In the foreign intrigue subgenre, in which Arab characters are sometimes marginalized, the Middle Eastern locale comes to stand in for these absent characters and is at times personified, as in the description of the Casbah at the beginning of *Algiers*. In the most recent subgenre, the terrorist, there is a shift away from the Middle East locale toward, albeit on the periphery, the United States, as in *True Lies* and *Executive Decision*.

There are at least ten narrative attributes that are prototypically found in easterns: (1) transgression, (2) separation, (3) abduction, (4) reduction, (5) induction, (6) seduction, (7) redemption, (8) revelation, (9) reaffirmation, and (10) mutilation.¹⁴ Not all of these attributes are found in every eastern, and some are more prominent in certain subtypes than in others. The most prototypical instances of

the first two attributes are found in the foreign legion subgenre, whereby the European hero is accused (usually unjustifiably) of a crime (transgression) and is thereby forced to leave his home (separation) and take refuge in the East (usually in a colonial army). This situation is reinforced cinematically by contrasting the landscapes of Europe (lush, green estates) with those of North Africa (solitary forts in barren desert wastelands). These attributes are found in other subtypes as well but with some variation from the prototype. For instance, the hero in the Arabian nights film is typically a thief or an outlaw who is separated from his beloved and true station in life. For the hero in the sheik subgenre, the transgression is that he is acting too barbarous (i.e., too “Arab”), which again leads to separation from his beloved.

The third and fourth attributes prototypically refer to the kidnapping of the beloved or heroine and to her subsequent enslavement, as found in the sheik subgenre and in many films from other subtypes in which “white slavery” is a theme. However, these attributes may be less typically manifested by the capturing or arrest of the hero (or another male character) and his subsequent imprisonment. Abduction and reduction are two of the most persistent attributes in the eastern genre, and they seem to be an evocation of a longstanding cultural trope that stands in for the attitude of the West toward the East. These attributes are in part a reflection of real historical encounters (“landmark events”) that involved capture and imprisonment. Each of these experiences, abstracted from their historical sources, was reflected in various forms of entertainment, whether novels, plays, art, or music, thereby helping to shape the generic expectations of the audience. Of course, the underlying causes of the conflicts that gave rise to these incidents are not the direct subject of the entertainment. Rather, the focus is on the manipulation of the subjective identification of the audience with the abducted Westerner, powerless and impotent, who is ultimately rescued or empowered enough to escape. This is reinforced in various ways from film to film and subtype to subtype, but, in general, the setting is the primary cinematic device used to reinforce identification. In *The Sheik*, the abduction of the heroine takes place when she is left alone in the desert, and her attempt to escape is dramatized by a close-up of her gun (emptied by the sheik) falling uselessly to the sand. In *The Thief of Bagdad* (Michael Powell et al, 1940), the abducted princess finds herself alone on the high seas with her captor, unable to flee, while the hero has been rendered powerless by the loss of his sight.

The fifth attribute, induction, is symbolized prototypically in many easterns by a European or an American character putting on Arab clothes (a kiffiya or head scarf, a jellaba/galabiyya or loose, robe-like garment, a veil, etc.), as in *The Sheik*. Variations on this prototype may be indicated by any change in identity, whether signified by Arab clothing or not. For example, in the Arabian nights subgenre, the induction is usually signaled by a change in the socioeconomic class of the Arab hero or sidekick from prince to pauper or from thief to prince. In the terrorist subgenre, the induction may simply involve some sort of disguise (whether as an Arab or not), as seen in many spy movies.

Induction is a crucial attribute of the narrative in most of the subtypes, and the different types of induction in each are important barometers of American

attitudes toward the Middle East and Arabs. Other writers, including Ella Shohat¹⁵ and Marjorie Garber,¹⁶ have noted this attribute of the eastern. They both point to the similarities between this identity switch (often brought about by “cultural” cross-dressing) and that occasioned by gender cross-dressing. In both cases, a tension between the two identities inheres in a single individual. This tension is a reflection of the paradoxical nature of the identity change occasioned by the cross-dressing. That is, it is at once a form of disempowerment as well as of empowerment: an individual in a privileged position (either male or Western) gives up one identity (or is forced to give it up) for a nonprivileged one (female or Eastern). In doing so, however, he actually empowers himself by gaining greater knowledge about his self through his identification with the nonempowered other, which leads him to become a better “man” (or Westerner). In the process, he shows the real others (women or Arabs) that he makes a better “other” than they do.

The sixth attribute of the eastern, seduction, refers in its prototypical form to the love or affection that develops between the captor and the captive, whether this is overtly expressed in the film or used as a metaphor for real-life relationships (i.e., marital love). This attribute is most clearly seen in the earliest subtypes (the Arabian nights and the sheik subgenres), where it refers to the actual seduction of the heroine/love interest by the hero, or vice versa, often following a forced encounter such as an abduction. In later subtypes, however, the seduction is much less important, if present at all. In many of these later films, however, the hero is seduced by his new group identity. In the foreign legion film, for example, the hero takes on (or is forced to take on) a new identity; he gradually comes to believe in the foreign legion “cause” to the point that he is willing to give up his life for it, thus expiating his original guilt or a crime.

The attribute of seduction (whether in its typical or atypical forms) is therefore closely tied to the attribute of induction and to the seventh attribute, redemption. The hero must undergo a conversion or epiphany in his encounter with the Orient to achieve redemption. The redemption typically takes the form of being rescued from slavery and less typically of being released from imprisonment. In the earliest films of the genre, there are often multiple abductions and redemptions, involving both the hero and the heroine or love interest. In later films, the redemption may take the form of not just freeing hostages but destroying weapons, often stolen missiles or such, thus “freeing” the West of the Oriental threat. Just as the abduction evoked the apparent powerlessness or impotence of the West vis-à-vis an Eastern threat, so the redemption (especially in its later, atypical forms) clearly evokes the power of the West to overcome this external threat, providing a cathartic experience for the audience, which identifies with the empowered Western hero.

The eighth attribute is revelation, which is related to the notion of induction and involves the notion of identity. In this case, an individual recognizes the true character or identity of another character, enabling either rejection or acceptance to take place. In its prototypical form, the revelation is often the inverse of the induction: the thief is recognized as a prince, the Arab sheik is recognized as a European, and so on. In its less typical form, the revelation may involve the resolution of the transgression, so that the criminal accusation against the hero is revealed

to be either false or expiated, as in many of the films of the foreign legion and foreign intrigue subtypes. Most significant, however, is the idea of revelation in this Oriental context, in which the image of the veil is strong. In each of these subtypes, a veil has been placed in front of the "truth" (whether this is the identity of an individual or the reason for his actions), and the impetus of the narrative is to reveal this truth, as a man might remove the veil of an Oriental woman to gaze upon her face. This aspect of the narrative reinforces the underlying trope of "unveiling the mysteries of the Orient" by associating the trope with the hero or heroine, who is often a European or an American in disguise.

The ninth attribute is reaffirmation, or acceptance of one's state, whether it has been changed by the experience of the action (which it usually has been) or not. In its most prototypical form, the love between the beloved and the hero is reaffirmed. However, the exact nature of the reaffirmation is revealed in the specific denouement of each film; the reaffirmation almost always can be understood as reflecting the prevailing cultural, social, and political values (or what the producers perceive those values to be). Furthermore, these values have both overt as well as covert significance. For example, in the Arabian nights subgenre, the typical reaffirmation occurs between the hero and his beloved, but, at a deeper level, the hero's actions reaffirm notions of male-female behavior, as well as social class structures (which may differ depending on whether the film was produced in Great Britain or the United States). In the sheik subgenre as well, the beloved (or heroine) typically reaffirms her love for her lover, but, at a deeper level, the story reaffirms traditional male-female roles in a traditional marital relationship.

The final attribute, mutilation, is unlike the others in that it is not an event that moves the narrative along but a subsidiary motif that lends a certain atmosphere to the film. I list it here among the narrative attributes since it is one of the most persistent and recurrent. In its most prototypical form, there is an amputation, or the threat of an amputation, of a character's body part (hand, finger, head, etc.), as symbolized in the presence of a scimitar or sword. Less typically, a mutilation is referred to by the presence of knives, daggers, or the use of scalpels and hypodermic needles.

The mutilation is often tied in with the abduction and reduction and thus serves to reinforce the feeling of powerlessness or the threat of impotence that these attributes engender. The cinematic devices that are used to evoke and heighten this effect are varied, but, most obviously, ugly Arab guards wield huge, oversized scimitars, as in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992). Often there is the threat of amputation of a hand with reference to the Islamic legal prescription to cut off the hands of thieves, a practice whose application has been rather selective through the centuries and only rarely occurs today. Nevertheless, this is one of the most potent images in the Hollywood Oriental archive, and it is exploited to the hilt even in the most incidental ways. This is made especially clear when one compares the story behind the loss of Caravaggio's thumbs in the film *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996) and the novel on which it is based. In the novel, the loss is attributed to a sexual escapade Caravaggio had with an Italian woman, and the amputation is performed by an Italian nurse in Italy on the orders of an Italian.¹⁷ In the film, however, the

amputation is done by an Arab nurse on the orders of a Nazi officer, who discourses on “Moslem” methods of punishment: “I tell you what I’m going to do. This is your nurse, by the way. She’s Moslem, so she’ll understand all of this. What’s the punishment for adultery? Let’s leave it at that. You’re married and you were fucking another woman, so that’s—is it the hands that are cut off? Or is that for stealing? Does anyone know?”¹⁸ This dialogue is followed by a close-up of the scalpel as the “Moslem” nurse slices off Caravaggio’s thumbs.

These ten attributes of narrative structure, together with those of locale and character development, define the eastern film genre in “fuzzy” terms. Not every film considered to be an eastern has all these attributes, and some of these elements may appear consistently in other generic film traditions as well. Overlaps, or “fusion,” may occur, but what is remarkable about this class of films and what sets it apart is that the films in this class deal with the Middle East as a locale or with Arab characters, and they all share *some* of these attributes.

The meaning of these attributes as cultural icons in the eastern probably varies, but I shall venture one possible reading at this point: they involve the creation (or the recreation) of an identity, a reconstitution of the self in conflict with another, which initially involves a dispossession. This is played out in various ways: as a separation from the homeland, as an abduction, or as a reduction (to slavery or imprisonment). In general, the dispossession is of the (European) self by the Arab other, which is (generally) overcome and the “true” self restored, reconstituted, or recast. In fact, the Westerners—Europeans and Americans—who play at being abducted and dispossessed by the Arab other in this film tradition have occupied and colonized Arab countries and ultimately dispossessed an Arab people, the Palestinians, of their land and even their identity.¹⁹ It is as if the creation of an identity, a self, must involve the dispossession of an other (of land, sovereignty, existence, etc.), but this process is replayed in our imaginations (through the cinema) as if we are the ones dispossessed—abducted, imprisoned, enslaved, made impotent—providing us, perhaps, with expiation of our guilt.²⁰

I will now turn to a discussion of how the attributes of the eastern are instantiated in films exemplifying each of the various subtypes.

Exemplars of the Subgenres: *The Sheik*, *The Thief of Bagdad*, *Beau Geste*, *Algiers*, and *True Lies*. In the first two decades of the film industry, the “Oriental” film was one of the most popular types, as Hajji’s work makes clear, and it was a dominant force in both shaping and reflecting the public’s tastes in movies. Of the three subtypes that were most prevalent in that period, the Arabian nights subgenre was, by a slight margin, more common than the other two (sheik films and foreign legion films). Films in the Arabian nights category had been made since the beginning of the motion picture industry, the earliest extant example being Georges Méliès’s *The Palace of a Thousand and One Nights* (1905). These films predated movies of the other types. However, it was a sheik film that crystallized the eastern genre and laid the basis for its generic expectations. That movie, *The Sheik*, starring Rudolf Valentino, was even influential in affecting cultural norms and discussion outside the cinema.



Figure 1. In *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921), Ahmad (Rudolf Valentino, right) comes to the rescue of Diana (Agnes Ayres) after she is abducted by an evil Arab, Omair (Walter Long, left). Omair represents Ahmed's "barbaric" Arab side, which he eventually repudiates. Courtesy of Photofest.

The sheik subgenre. The cultural impact of *The Sheik* has been the subject of many analyses concentrating on the figure of Rudolf Valentino as an icon of (a somewhat "feminized") masculinity.²¹ Due in large part to his attraction, the film was a huge success and spawned dozens of imitations throughout the 1920s, when, with the advent of sound, the sheik film boom ended abruptly. Few sheik films were made during the 1930s and 1940s, although there was a small resurgence in the "Technicolor costumer period" (1943–1956). They reappeared in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the sheik was usually reconstituted as an oil sheik, shorn of his charm and European origins.

The story of *The Sheik*, based on a novel with the same title, by Edith Hull,²² concerns a strong-willed, independent-minded British lady, Diana (Agnes Ayres), who is abducted by a strong, barbaric Arab chieftain, Ahmad (Rudolf Valentino), during an expedition into the desert. Their initial meeting occurs while Diana is dressed up as an Arab woman (the first induction). She crashes the "marriage gamble" Ahmad is holding in a casino, where he discovers her. Ahmad later abducts Diana and imprisons her in his camp (the reduction), where she is forced to wear Arab garb (the second induction). This encounter initiates the transformation of both characters.

Through the intercession of Ahmad's European friend, St. Herbert (Adolphe Menjou), Ahmad (developing his "civilized" European side) eventually releases Diana (the redemption), but in the meantime she has come under his spell and fallen in love with him (the seduction).

Diana's second abduction, by the evil Arab Omair (Walter Long), follows Diana's release from captivity by Ahmad. As opposed to St. Herbert, Omair represents Ahmad's "barbaric" Arab side, which he eventually repudiates by coming to Diana's rescue (the second redemption), wounding himself in the process. At his bedside, Diana's final realization of the sheik's true identity—namely, that he is European (i.e., the revelation) leads to her acceptance of her love for him (the reaffirmation). Mutilation has little significance in this film, but it does show itself: first, when Ahmad flogs one of Omair's spies and then when Omair's Arab wife attempts to stab him with a dagger for wanting a white European woman over her.

Each attribute has a place in reinforcing the overall theme of *The Sheik* and of most films in the sheik subgenre: traditional male-female marital relations need to be reinforced during a time of change in gender roles. Stated simply, man is a lustful animal (i.e., a "barbaric Arab") who therefore abducts the female; the female is a civilizing influence (i.e., a "civilized European"), who thus tames the beast ("Europeanizes" him) and then falls in love with him. At the same time, the woman is a free-spirited and independent "modern" European whose actions must be constrained and brought under control by the more conservative man (i.e., a tradition-bound Arab). Both of these themes involve changes in the personality or identity of the characters, thus their induction into the other's world and their realization of their mutual love (revelation), and the final affirmation of that love, which translates into reaffirmation on the part of the audience of traditional gender roles.

The Arabian nights subgenre. The exemplar of the Arabian nights subgenre is Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), starring Douglas Fairbanks. Watching the movie is still a marvelous film experience today, although at the time it was made it was considered a critical success but a financial failure. It was the most expensive film made up till its time, and compared to the phenomenal success of *The Sheik*, *The Thief of Bagdad* just did not make the grade. Unlike *The Sheik*, it did not lead to a spate of look-alike films. In fact, it may have actually slowed down the production of Arabian nights films for more than a decade. The silent *The Thief of Bagdad* did, however, have an impact on future productions in this subgenre, most notably the much more successful *Thief of Bagdad* (1940) produced by Alexander Korda; the large number of "Oriental" Technicolor costumes made in the period 1943–1955 (almost all of them in the Arabian nights subgenre); and finally Disney's animated recreation of the tale, the very successful animated *Aladdin*.²³

The settings in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), as in almost all the Arabian nights films, reinforce in a very clear fashion the themes of freedom and confinement. The film begins in the desert (open) and moves to the city (closed), enclosed by high walls with a large gate, through which people make their way to the market (open) (fig. 2). From there, the focus is on Ahmad the thief (Douglas Fairbanks),



Figure 2. The exemplar of the Arabian nights subgenre is Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), starring Douglas Fairbanks as Ahmad. The film begins in the desert and moves to the city, enclosed by high walls with a large gate, through which people make their way to the market. Courtesy of Photofest.

whom we see picking pockets and stealing food and then a magic rope (transgressions). This instigates a chase through the market (a staple element of the Arabian nights film), including a run through the obligatory jars (the first run of its kind and alluded to many times after).

The Arab escapes but only to witness the fate of a thief—that is, his flogging in the marketplace—the first instance of mutilation in *The Thief of Bagdad*. At this point, the antagonist is introduced, namely the evil Mongol prince from HoSho (So-Jin). Planning to take over Bagdad by marrying the princess, he enters the city in a procession. The procession is a common element of the Arabian nights film and parallels the chase of the thief through the market, highlighting the different social castes of the protagonist and antagonist. The procession makes its way from the public, open market to the closed, exclusive palace, surrounded by tigers, gorillas, and scimitar-wielding guards.

The next day, the thief broaches the palace walls, using the stolen magic rope, and steals a treasure box. He then moves into an even more closed space, the boudoir of the princess (Julanne Johnston),²⁴ with whom he falls in love at first sight. The thief considers abducting her, but his sidekick convinces him to disguise himself as a prince and enter the palace openly. This is the first instance of induction, or

identity switch, in the film, and it results in Ahmad the thief joining in the procession of suitors to the palace as a “prince.” He foils the plot of the Mongol prince to convince the princess that he is the one fated to marry her, by accidentally falling into a rose bush that the Mongol prince was supposed to have touched first. The ire of the Mongol having been aroused, together with the handmaiden of the princess, he works to reveal Ahmad’s true identity. But Ahmad, again on a mission to abduct the princess from her boudoir, finds that he cannot kidnap her since she now truly loves him (the seduction). Ahmad then confesses his true identity to her (the revelation), but this does not prevent him from being arrested (his own abduction), imprisoned (the first reduction), prepared for flogging, and flung to apes (the mutilation). However, the princess bribes Ahmad’s guards and he escapes (the first redemption).

The princess is then put upon by her father to choose a bridegroom, to which she responds by demanding the rarest treasures from the suitors, a common motif in Arabic folk stories and in many of the original tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The redeemed Ahmad now turns away from his life of thievery and, to find real happiness, seeks to make a real prince out of himself by engaging in a quest.

What follows is a more faithful adaptation of a number of the quest motifs than in subsequent thief films or in any other Arabian nights film. Ahmad fulfills his quest by obtaining a magic silver box, which, unlike the other suitors, he earns by his own efforts. Together with the magic box and many other magical implements, Ahmad overcomes the plans of the wicked Mongol to take over Bagdad by force (a kind of “abduction” of the city), thereby rescuing the princess and Bagdad itself (the final redemption).

The ostensible moral of the tale, given at the end of the film (“Happiness must be earned”), hides the real lesson at the time for American audiences, full of first- and second-generation immigrants: even the lowliest person on the social ladder can make something of himself (gender intended) and marry a princess or move up the socioeconomic scale in some way. However, that process generally involves a change of identity: to become part of the upper classes, you must think and act like people in the aristocracy, transform yourself into them. Thus, the element of escapist fantasy in this film, and in almost all the films in this subgenre, reinforces the social and economic status quo that striving for upward mobility, masking one’s origins, and becoming “American” are all worthy objectives.

The foreign legion subgenre. The third category of eastern is the foreign legion film, long a staple of Hollywood. No film in this subgenre has enjoyed greater popularity than the various versions of *Beau Geste* (1926, 1939, and 1966).²⁵ These four renditions are essentially the same, with an important difference: the nationality of the primary antagonist. In the 1926 version, the nemesis of the hero, Beau Geste (Ronald Colman), is a French officer, Sgt. Lejaune, while in the 1939 version he has been transformed into a Russian, Sgt. Markov. I will concentrate on the best-known version of the tale, namely William Wellman’s 1939 version starring Gary Cooper.

The 1939 *Beau Geste* opens, as do many easterns, with an authenticating Arabian proverb, which gives way to views of a French fort in the desert, thus

establishing the Oriental locale. An approaching column of French soldiers stops to wait while a bugler scouts the fort and then mysteriously disappears. After the commanding officer enters the fort, the native tribes, the Tuaregs, attack, as they do numerous times throughout the film; they are nameless, faceless, of unknown motivation, creeping, crawling, and flowing out of the sand dunes.

This scene of Oriental death and danger is juxtaposed with a scene of a lush English estate, shown in flashback fifteen years earlier. The Geste boys (Beau [Gary Cooper], John [Ray Milland], and Digby [Robert Preston]) are playing soldier/sailor with other children, when the family is visited by a mysterious turbaned Indian gentleman. He is the first connection to the “mysterious East,” where the boys’ fates will be determined. As a boy, Beau sees his guardian Aunt Pat secretly selling a sapphire, on which the family fortune depends, to the “wild Oriental gentleman.” This lays the basis for Beau’s (apparent) transgression fifteen years later, when he steals a fake sapphire so as to hide Aunt Pat’s secret and, after taking the blame for the theft (which is an important element in other easterns as well), joins the French foreign legion (separation/emigration).

Beau’s two brothers follow him to the desert fort of Saida, and they are all inducted into their new identities, which includes new uniforms and new names, as guardians of the “natives.” At the fort, they meet up with the evil Sgt. Markov (Brian Donlevy), who was too depraved even for the Siberian labor camps (fig. 3). Digby Geste, the bugler, is separated from his older brothers, who march off with Markov to a different fort. There we see the wretched state of the legion, as the legionnaires talk of desertion and mutiny, confirming that they are basically prisoners (reduction). Even as the just commander lays on his deathbed, Markov begins his vile program, thus pairing his behavior and his identity with that of the Arab natives; the first soldiers to be caught deserting are forced by Arab scouts to walk out into the desert to die of thirst, on Markov’s orders.

The soldiers mutiny against Markov, but the Geste brothers prove their honor by not joining in, thus reaffirming their new loyalty to the French flag. However, unlike the Arab scouts, the brothers cannot carry out Markov’s order to summarily execute the leaders of the mutiny. It is at this point that the Tuaregs intervene by attacking, thereby uniting the troop. Gradually, the incessant (and unexplained) attacks of the Tuaregs (who attacked at first on horseback, then on foot, appearing as if they arose from the shifting sands themselves) decimate the troop, as Markov is heard exclaiming to Beau: “Maybe the Arabs’ll save me the trouble of killing you.” Just before an attack that leaves Beau near death, he begins the process of revelation by handing his brother John a letter for Aunt Pat in which Beau explains his transgression. After the attack, Markov’s identification with the Arab enemy is again reinforced as he exclaims (about the Tuaregs): “Look at them—they come when I want them, and they go when I don’t need them anymore. They’re beaten. They’ve helped put down a mutiny for me. They’ve given me the Legion of Honor and they’ve made me an officer.”

After Markov again tries to get the jewel that he believes the dying Beau has on his person, Markov gets into a fight with John over Beau’s letters, culminating in John stabbing Markov to death with a bayonet (mutilation). This takes us back to the



Figure 3. *Beau Geste* (William Wellman, 1939) represents the archetypal foreign legion formula. At the desert fort of Saida, Beau (Gary Cooper, under lamp) and his two brothers (Ray Milland, third from right) and Robert Preston (second from left) meet the depraved Sgt. Markov (Brian Donlevy, second from right). Courtesy of Photofest.

beginning of the film, when Digby discovers the body of his brother and sees John run off into the desert. After giving Beau a “Viking funeral” (he burns him), Digby runs off after John as they try to make it together to Egypt (which is a long way off). In the course of their flight, in which they are aided by two “American Legionnaires” on horses, Digby performs the ultimate sacrifice, thus saving John (the redemption) so he can bring Beau’s revelation back to the family in England.

Beau Geste represents the archetypal foreign legion formula, which is recapitulated in scores of films with only minor variations (e.g., *Under Two Flags* [1912, 1916, 1922, and 1936], *Four Feathers* [1915, 1929, 1939, and 1978], *Morocco* [1930], and *March or Die* [1977]). The aim of the film is to reinforce patriotism and the stratification of the class system, by playing out these themes against a background of colonialism and the stratification of the military system (officer versus non-com officer). The hero’s liminality, brought on by a supposed transgression, is expiated by his patriotism as evidenced by his participation in a colonialist enterprise, which, in these films at least, involves primarily killing Arabs. The supposed offense is paralleled by a conflict within the troop of legionnaires, usually involving a non-commissioned officer (read: lower class), in which the hero proves his higher-class mettle.

The foreign intrigue subgenre. The fourth subtype of eastern, the foreign intrigue type, began to develop seriously in the mid-1930s and was the dominant subgenre from then until the 1960s. This subcategory contrasts with the previous three subtypes in a number of important ways. First, the major romantic relationship does not typically involve miscegenation—it is between a Western or European man and a Western or European woman. Also, the European hero is typically a liminal figure, a criminal or a shady operator who nevertheless has a spark of good. Second, with the minimizing of the Arab character, the eastern locale provides the primary exoticizing “oriental” element, and in some films comes to personify a threatening “oriental” character in itself. This is seen most clearly in the way the Casbah is described in a conversation between the local police inspector and a visiting police inspector from Paris in the exemplar of the subgenre, *Pepe le Moko*. This French film was remade very faithfully except for the ending in the United States as *Algiers* (John Cromwell, 1938), from which the following exchange is excerpted:

LOCAL INSPECTOR: Pepe le Moko lives in the Casbah.

FRENCH INSPECTOR: Why can't you go in and take him out of it?

LOCAL INSPECTOR: You can't arrest a king in his own palace. Pepe's well guarded; let me show you . . .

FRENCH INSPECTOR: Fantastic

LOCAL INSPECTOR: As a civilized man you don't like fantasy.

FRENCH INSPECTOR: As a police officer I don't believe in it.

LOCAL INSPECTOR: But here it is (*points to a map of the Casbah on wall*). The native quarter known as the Casbah. As you look at it here it's just a few lines on the map, but the reality is far stranger than anything you could have dreamed. It's only a step from the modern city, the Casbah, but when you take that step you enter another world, a melting pot for all the sins of the earth . . . the Casbah's . . . like a crawling anthill, a jungle of homes, a labyrinth of narrow passages and winding alleys, rotten with vermin and decay, the filth of centuries. . . . Forty thousand inhabitants from all over the world have been settled here for generations. There are Qabyles in their white robes, Chinese faithful to Confucius, Gypsies and their fortune telling and their songs, there are many Czechs, many Slavs far from home, Negroes from every corner of Africa. Sicilians and Spaniards, hot-blooded and quick to hate, and women—women of every age and every shape—women caught in the net of the Casbah. . . . The Casbah rises like a fortress from the sea: colorful, sordid, dangerous. There isn't just one Casbah, there are a hundred, a thousand, and in that labyrinth Pepe le Moko is at home, and he's safe as long as he stays there.

FRENCH INSPECTOR: You mean to say that you don't go into this quarter?

LOCAL INSPECTOR: It's easy to go in—sometimes it's not so easy to come out.

This quasi-ethnographic description is accompanied by newsreel-like clips of views of the Casbah from the outside or from above, along with scenes that depict the filth of the streets and the perfidy of the “natives” (few of whom, it seems, are actually Arab). A kind of perversion of the market scenes in Arabian nights films, this sets up what becomes one of the main themes in the work—namely, the seeming abduction of Pepe le Moko by his haven, the Casbah, which eventually becomes his prison.



Figure 4. In *Pepe le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1936), the European antihero, Pepe (Jean Gabin), is a jewel thief who finds refuge in the Casbah. Courtesy of Photofest.

Finally, this type of film differs from the first three subtypes in a third way: there are only a few examples from the silent film era, the most notable and influential being Rex Ingram's *Garden of Allah* (1927), a remake of a 1916 film of the same title that was remade again in 1936. However, I consider *Pepe le Moko* and its American remake, *Algiers*, to be the most influential films in setting the prototype for this category.

The generic elements of transgression, separation/emigration, and induction are all alluded to in *Pepe le Moko* but are not made explicit: the hero is a jewel thief (transgression) named Pepe le Moko (Jean Gabin), who has found refuge (separation) from the police in the Casbah, which has become his new "home" (induction), or more like his fortress. These events form the background of the film, which opens with a shot of the Casbah, the native quarter, "standing like a fortress above the sea." The Casbah is home to drifters, outcasts, and criminals, the greatest of whom, we are told, is Pepe le Moko (fig. 4).

The scene then shifts to a police station, presumably in the modern section of the city, where a visiting detective gets a lesson in the perfidious East (quoted above) and decides to go after Pepe in his hideout. Cut to Pepe and his gang in the Casbah, where we are let in on Pepe's dream: to settle down in Paris and open a jewel museum. The police raid the Casbah (an attempted abduction of sorts), but, thanks to his spies and supporters (including his local love, Ines [Line Noro]), Pepe manages to outwit the police (the first and only redemption).

In his flight, Pepe runs into a European woman, Gaby (Mireille Balin), with whom he trades significant glances. She is in the company of the local inspector, who tells Pepe ominously that he will be the one who gets him. The inspector's plan is, working with an informer in Pepe's gang (Regis), to draw out one gang member whom Pepe will follow.

Pepe's ultimate downfall is his attraction for Gaby, with whom he eventually falls in love (the seduction), since she reminds him of Paris, his old self, and his old haunts. This reawakens his former identity, and he yearns to return with her to Paris (the reaffirmation, this time of his old self). However, once he decides to return (the revelation, the return to his original identity), he finds himself trapped in the Casbah by the police. What had been his refuge, his "fortress," has now become his prison (reduction). Ultimately, his yearning to return to Paris forces him out of the Casbah, and into the hands of the authorities (the abduction). But rather than simply be arrested, he tries to escape to Gaby's ship and is shot (the antiredemption). Thus, rather than offering salvation, his dreams of Paris destroy him. There is an additional transgression of sorts, this time not on the part of the hero but on the part of the local love interest, Ines, who betrays him by helping the police because Pepe deceived her. In the end, Pepe is trapped in the Casbah.

In *Pepe le Moko*, the European antihero reaffirms the allure of the West, the dominant culture, by being attracted to a European and the perfidy of the East by being betrayed by his native love. The Orient, at first a haven for the criminal, becomes the abductor of his identity, of his freedom of action, and leads eventually to his downfall and death.

The terrorist subgenre. The final subgenre of eastern is the terrorist movie. This category developed gradually out of the foreign legion subtype in the 1960s and 1970s and flourished in the late seventies following several important events related to the Middle East: the Palestinian terrorist operations against the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics in 1972, the Arab oil embargo after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and the successful Israeli antiterrorist operation at Entebbe airport in 1976. Each of these events was reflected in at least nine films (whether purportedly historical or fictional) made between 1972 and 1977 that dealt with the threat of Arab terrorists.²⁶

The 1980s and 1990s gave rise to an even greater number of terrorist easterns, due in part to the trauma to the American psyche of having two rounds of hostage taking in the Middle East involving U.S. citizens (the Iranian hostage crisis of 1980–1981 and the Beirut hostage crisis in the mid-1980s). Many of these films are rather pared-down action-adventure movies, with the emphasis on stunts and explosions to the exclusion of narrative development and characterization, but the eastern elements are nonetheless clear. Many are, quite frankly, of the same quality as one of the earliest exemplars of the genre, *Rosebud* (Otto Preminger, 1975), described in many books today as a "bomb."

Black Sunday (John Frankenheimer, 1977) was the most successful of the early terrorist films, both at the box office and in its technical achievements, and perhaps qualifies as the "landmark film" about which later reworkings of the



Figure 5. *Black Sunday* (John Frankenheimer, 1977) was the most successful of the early terrorist films. The main antagonist is not an Arab, however, but a disgruntled American blimp pilot, who is hired by a German terrorist working with an Arab. Courtesy of Photofest.

subgenre coalesced. *Black Sunday* is remarkably consistent with earlier foreign intrigue films (in the marginality of the Arab character and in relating German and Arab characters), but it marks an important break with that tradition by shifting the locale from the East to the West, namely to the United States (fig. 5).

In *Black Sunday*, the main antagonist is not an Arab but a disgruntled American blimp pilot, who is hired not by an Arab terrorist but by a German terrorist working with an Arab. The terrorist act that they plan to carry out is to occur not in the Middle East, however, but in the heart of the United States, at perhaps the most centrally defining modern American ritual of the late twentieth century, the Super Bowl. This shift in locale represents the most important break in the eastern generic tradition, and for some may be significant enough to disqualify it and other terrorist films as an eastern. Despite this change, though, these films share so many characteristics with the preceding subtypes that the locale should not be of such overriding importance to delimit this subgenre.

The exemplar terrorist eastern is James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994). *True Lies* is a quintessential Hollywood film, an entertaining "spy story cum eastern cum domestic comedy" that shows off Cameron's ability to combine narrative elements (intrigue, action, explosions, romance, comedy) in a technically outstanding mix so as to appeal to many audiences. More so than most films of the terrorist subgenre,

True Lies makes reference to the wide range of conventions used in the eastern, while it recasts those conventions in a hip and ironic fashion that ultimately reinforces the image of the Arab as an inimical other in the West's reconstruction of its identities and social and gender roles.

The hero of *True Lies*, Harry Trasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger) is, like Ahmad (a European acting as an Arab sheik) in *The Sheik*, leading a double life: pretending to be a mild-mannered accountant with a wife and kid in the 'burbs, but a super-spy in reality. In both movies, one identity is unmarked with regard to the audience—that is, that of the non-Arab, whether a European or an American—while the other is marked as Arab or super-spy. As with the locales, there is an inversion in the way these identities are marked and unmarked. In *The Sheik*, Ahmad is identified for the heroine, Diana, with his marked identity, as the Arab, and his underlying, unmarked identity is gradually developed and revealed. By contrast, in *True Lies*, Trasker's wife, Helen (Jamie Lee Curtis), knows his unmarked identity, as a mundane accountant, while she learns about his true, marked identity, as a super-spy, only gradually as she gets enmeshed in his secret life.

The Arab characters in *True Lies*, as in other terrorist easterns, are depicted in an unremittingly negative manner, the better to set off the strength and goodness of the American hero. Continuing the tradition of the foreign intrigue eastern, the primary antagonist in *True Lies* is not even an Arab but Juno Skinner, played by Asian American actress Tia Carrere, who is used as a foil for Harry's humdrum wife, Helen. The male nemesis is Arab Selim Abu Aziz (Art Malik), portrayed as a hateful and vengeful madman whose motives for wreaking havoc on America remain unclear, as is usually the case. The other Arab characters in the film (with one exception) are rather bumbling terrorists whose primary purpose is to stop the bullets that splay out from the hero's and the heroine's guns.

There is no actual transgression or separation on the part of the hero of *True Lies*, but it may be understood as being related to Harry Trasker's occupation as a spy, a professional liar, and a thief (albeit for a "worthy" cause), which metaphorically separates him from the life of his wife and family. The film emphasizes these transgressive traits of Harry's occupation throughout, starting with the opening scene when he crashes a party at a Swiss chateau to steal computer records (transgression), to his convoluted lying to and concealment of the truth from his wife, to his abduction and torment of her purported lover, to his detention, interrogation, and deception of his wife, which leads to Harry's own abduction and revelation of his identity. In addition, there is no one act or event that constitutes Harry's "induction" into his new identity (e.g., there is no "dressing as an Arab"). However, the film is so pregnant with issues of identity and disguise that there is no need for an explicit act of "changing clothes" for the induction motif to be expressed.

The film opens with Harry's trespassing and intrusion into the party at the chateau. As in the Arabian nights films, while the hero is in the palace going about his business of thievery (here it is computer records that are stolen, not a silver chest), he encounters a beautiful woman—the female nemesis, Juno Skinner. They tango seductively, at the end of which Harry barely escapes (the first of many redemptions). His commonplace identity is then revealed to the audience, as he

returns home to his bored wife and sullen teenaged daughter. At the spy agency the next day, details are filled in on Juno and the Arab terrorist group she works with, the Crimson Jihad (which sounds more like a rock band than a terrorist group). On Harry's way home that day to attend his birthday dinner, his two identities almost impinge on each other, as he is tracked by the terrorists and has a shoot-out at the Georgetown Mall, followed by a chase through the streets of Washington, D.C. (a chase through a market is a staple of the Arabian nights subgenre).

Longing for excitement, Harry's bored wife sets up the first abduction when she secretly meets with a used-car salesman who pretends to be a secret agent (a spurious identity switch), leading to their detention by Harry and his agents (abduction and reduction). In the course of interrogating her, Harry sets up a further sting, by which he hopes to test his wife's fidelity: she is asked to "work for" the agency (her first induction, a spurious one). Her mission is to plant a bug in the hotel room of a foreign agent (her husband) while posing as a hooker (one spurious identity confronting another). Although she performs sexually suggestive dances for him (another seduction, again spurious), she refuses his advances. The charade comes to an end when the real terrorists invade the hotel room and take both Harry and his wife as prisoner (the second abduction, this time a real one).

In the course of their imprisonment at the hands of the terrorists (the reduction), Helen Trasker reverses the roles of the earlier interrogation that her husband conducted on her and *she* proceeds to interrogate *him*, until she finally learns his true identity (the revelation). At first incredulous, then angry, she joins with him in an escape attempt (the beginning of her induction into her new identity of spy). Following an attempt to torture them, which includes the application of a hypodermic needle (mutilation), Harry's near-superhuman powers help them break free of their handcuffs (the second redemption), at which point they learn the terrorists' secret plans. She and Harry are discovered, however, and Helen is retaken (the third abduction) and kept as a hostage (reduction).

Meanwhile, with the help of his sidekicks and other agents, Harry chases down the terrorists, who are attempting to escape across the Florida Keys bridge back to the U.S. mainland. Hanging from a helicopter, he finally manages to pluck his wife (the third redemption) from the clutches of the evil Juno. This redemption, together with the earlier revelation, helps bring Harry and Helen back together (the reaffirmation), against the backdrop of an exploding atomic bomb, but not before they learn that an Arab terrorist has taken their daughter hostage (the fourth abduction and reduction).

The final action-packed sequence recapitulates the earlier scene on the bridge, Harry manages to rescue his daughter (the fourth redemption), which serves to strengthen the familial bond between them (reaffirmation), while simultaneously making the Arab terrorist ride his own rocket into his own helicopter (mutilation). The final scene recalls the first scene (with the super-rich and powerful at the Swiss chateau) and confirms Helen's induction into her husband's exciting life of espionage.

In all, *True Lies* serves to buttress the traditional relationships of husband and wife and father and daughter as those of protector and provided but with the added

twist that the woman is shown as capable of offering protection. As *The Sheik* did in 1921, so *True Lies* did in 1994: it reinforced traditional Western views about male-female relationships, while allowing for the acceptance of some change in those roles. All the gender conflicts and resolutions in *True Lies* are played out against the backdrop of an Oriental threat, which is the source of both the “disease” and the “cure” for the identity crisis that afflicts the American characters in the film.

Conclusion: The history of the eastern genre and of its subgenres is one of difference and similarity, development and stasis. Like all film genres, there is considerable overlap with other categories, yet almost all Hollywood films made about the Middle East share an easily discernible set of features. This article has identified the prototypical narrative and character elements of the genre as a whole and of each of its subgenres, but there is a great deal more to this generic tradition than can be discussed in this brief study. Several related but more hybrid subgenres have not been mentioned. The most important of these are historical films depicting events in the Middle East, such as *The Crusaders* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1934), *Exodus* (Otto Preminger 1960), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), and what I term bricolage or incidental easterns, in which the eastern element shares narrative space with elements of other genres, or is alluded to only incidentally or superficially. Examples include *Beat the Devil* (John Huston, 1954), *Dune* (David Lynch, 1984), *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1993), *Stargate* (Roland Emmerich, 1994), and *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996). Future work will examine films made in Hollywood and elsewhere that are set in the Middle East but that are not prototypical, including *Princess Tam Tam* (Edmond Greville, France, 1935), *America America* (Elia Kazan, 1963), *Ramparts of Clay* (Jean-Louis Bertucelli, France-Algeria, 1971), and *Arabian Nights* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1974).

One could argue that the films included under the rubric of eastern are far too varied a collection, especially in the myth-making functions ascribed to them, to constitute a genre. However, individual films even in a genre as coherent as the western can vary over time at the level of “myth making” (in their depiction of class, race, gender relations, etc.) yet remain within the genre at other levels (locale, time period, costumes, characters, etc.). It is also useful to keep in mind that the eastern is a less prototypical film genre than others; it is more varied (both synchronically and diachronically), and it is less coherent in its themes, locales, and costumes than the western. Nevertheless, the variety of subforms that the eastern has taken over the same course of time as the western should not blind us to the underlying coherence and consistency of many of the elements in every eastern.

For some scholars, the range of films designated easterns may seem too large; for others, the classification may not be inclusive enough, since I have not dealt with films set in Asia (India and the Far East). Based on Gina Marchetti’s observations,²⁷ there seems to be some overlap in specific narrative elements, for example, themes of miscegenation, captivity, seduction, salvation, and assimilation, but films set in the Far East do not appear to form a specific generic tradition. These films stand apart from Middle East easterns, in part because different historical experiences

have influenced Western cultural and generic expectations about China, Japan, and India and these locales (and their inhabitants) were exploited less often in Hollywood-style films than were Arabs and North Africans. These comments are only preliminary, however; the connection between the two types of easterns may be much stronger than appears at first glance.

Finally, it would be misleading if the reader came away with the impression that my goal has been simply to show how positive and/or negative the representation of the Arab is in Hollywood movies. That has been done elsewhere. Rather, my goal has been to give coherence to a large number of films dealing with the Middle East that were thought to be lacking in generic unity. In so doing, I have provided an outline for further research, using any number of theories (feminist, postcolonial, queer), on identification and identity formation (exploiting an ethnic other and reinforcing an identity) and of positionality and power (and the institutionalization of these cultural formations). I also hope to have provided a basis and background for evaluating and contextualizing the theoretically astute comments that are already in print, such as those in Shohat and Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism* and in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar's anthology, *Visions of the East*.²⁸

In sum, the unifying narrative attributes of easterns reflect the long-standing European tradition of using the East as a sounding board for the creation of myths of identity. It is important to be conscious of the features of this tradition if we hope to understand how historical developments have influenced and continue to influence the making of Hollywood movies.

Notes

Earlier versions of this article were delivered as papers at the 1997 Southeast Regional Middle East Islamic Studies Seminar, the 1998 meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Languaging 1998 (University of North Texas), and the University of Chicago. I would like to thank the audiences for those talks, in particular Farouk Mustafa, Taffy Bodman, Chuck Kennedy, Caroline Williams, and Waddah al-Khatib. I would also like to thank Naomi Sakoda, Adam Lowenstein, and the anonymous reviewers of *Cinema Journal* for their comments on the written version of this essay, and Jennifer Taylor for her initial suggestion of this topic.

1. I am here referring to narrative films that began to appear after 1908 or so, including *A Tale of a Harem: The Caliph and the Pirate* (Vitagraph, 1908), *The Cobbler and the Caliph* (Vitagraph, 1908), *The Captive* (Pathé, 1910), *Captured by the Bedouin* (Kalem, 1912), *A Prisoner in the Harem* (Blache, 1913), and *Saved from the Harem* (Lubin, 1915). This article does not treat these early films in detail. For more information about them, see Abdelmajid Hajji, "The Arab in the American Silent Cinema: A Study of a Film Genre," Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1994.
2. In addition to these central subtypes of easterns, there are more peripheral ones, including (1) the historical, which has many of the motifs and elements of typical easterns but the narrative has an independent rationale; (2) the bricolage or incidental, in which generic elements of the eastern share narrative space with elements of other film genres; and (3) those that fall outside the category altogether but are about the Middle East.
3. This approach is represented in several articles by Jack Shaheen and in his book *The TV Arab* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984).

Also included in this category are the articles in the *Supplement to "Cineaste": The Arab Image in American Film and Television* 17, no. 1 (1989), which includes Laurence Michalak's "The Arab in American Cinema: A Century of Otherness," 3–9. The essays in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), offer much more sophisticated analyses of some "orientalist" imagery, but they do not address whether these films constitute a generic tradition.

4. John R. Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
5. Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (spring 1984): 6–18, and *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).
6. Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (spring 1990): 45–66, and Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). For details on these questions, see my "Prototypes, Cultural Salience, and Cognitive Identification in Hollywood's 'Eastern' Film Genre," unpublished paper
7. Joseph Tusiani, trans., *Torquato Tasso's "Jerusalem Delivered"* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1970).
8. This obviously touches on Edward Said's critique of Orientalism in *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), as well as on Homi Bhabha's work. Suffice it to say that while there are many fruitful ways to incorporate Said's and Bhabha's insights into this approach, it is beyond the scope of this article to do so.
9. Many aspects of the genre, especially in the early period, reflect a *European* colonial perspective (primarily British and French) that American producers and audiences embraced from an early period and developed for new purposes. Many of the cultural and generic expectations regarding the (Middle or Near) "East" were therefore shared by American, British, and even French audiences and producers. But it was the American (i.e., Hollywood) adoption and expansion (or distension) of, and consistent resorting to, these elements that had the most wide-ranging and important effects, helping to crystallize them into generic forms that eventually appeared in European (especially British) productions.
10. Hajji, "The Arab in the American Silent Cinema."
11. By identification, I mean the *potential* for cognitive identification with a character on the part of the intended audience, as viewed by the film industry. Generally, the hero and those close to him have traits the producers assume are much admired on the part of the intended audience, which varies in age and gender for each subtype but is predominantly white, European, and Christian. Also note that while I am concerned here with the cognitive identification with character, this does not mean that I think there are no other identification processes at work in these films that may be important to uncover.
12. This phenomenon, termed ethnic syncretism, is referred to and discussed in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994), 236–37. This element is also prevalent in Hollywood "Asian" films as described in Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): "Occasionally, too, these interracial romances end 'happily' with the union of the couple at the film's conclusion. Often, however, these narratives rationalize their endings with a plot twist that involves the revelation that the Asian partner in the romance was in reality white" (4).
13. This is not meant to espouse a simple "reflectionist" account regarding the relationship of this film tradition to "real events." Because of space limitations, I can refer to only the most superficial level of the relationship between these events and this genre,

but the process is a complex one involving cultural expectations and stereotypes that influence the interpretation of events and then affect the generic expectations underlying creative traditions such as popular movies.

These films in turn may have an effect on the general culture-wide expectations and preconceptions (e.g., reinforcing them, revising them, or rejecting them), which then get resifted and redigested to provide the basis for further interpretation of real events and their creative expression in films, plays, or works of literature. This notion of generic and cultural expectations is based on Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (spring 1990): 45–66, which is, in turn, influenced by Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*.

14. Credit for much of this terminology is due Rusty Foster, who participated in my seminar on this topic at the College of William and Mary in spring 1997.
15. Ella Shohat, "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," in Bernstein and Studlar, *Visions of the East*, 19–66. This is also discussed in Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 167–70.
16. Marjorie Garber, "The Chic of Araby: Transvestism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation," in Garber, ed., *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), 304–52.
17. Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 55–59.
18. Anthony Minghella, *The English Patient: A Screenplay* (New York: Hyperion-Miramax Books, 1996), 114. I am grateful to Farouk Mustafa for pointing out this contrast to me.
19. I am referring here not just to the establishment of Israel in 1948 but also to the more than half-century of Western and Zionist effort that went into it, starting with Moses Hess's mid-nineteenth-century vision of the Zionist project being connected with European colonial expansion in the Middle East; to Theodor Herzl's (1897) vision of a Jewish state being a rampart of civilization against barbarism, including the slogan "A land without a people for a people without a land"; to the first three "aliyas" or emigrations of European Jews to Palestine (1882, 1904, 1919); to the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement during World War I to divide Arab lands between the French and the British; and to the expansion of the Zionist settlement in Palestine after the war.

All these events occurred prior to the production of the first of the film exemplars examined here, *The Sheik* (1921). Also, all these events, and all the earliest film exemplars, happened in the context of almost total European occupation and control (and, at times, colonization) of the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa. This is what I mean by the phrase "dispossession of the Arab by the West," which is reflected in an inverse fashion in this film tradition by the narrative tropes of abduction and induction (of the Westerner by the Arab).

20. One can see a similar inversion in the western genre vis-à-vis Native Americans. In retelling the tales of their settlement, European settlers cast themselves as being abducted and forced to change their identities (the captivity narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), dispossessed, driven off their land, and massacred, when in fact these cruelties were more often perpetrated by Europeans on Native Americans and with far more fatal consequences. There is also a similarity between both of the above cases and what Gina Marchetti describes as the "fantasy that projects Euroamerican desires and dreads onto the alien other" (in Hollywood films dealing with Asia and Asians): "Thus, as Western nations began to carve up Asia into colonies, their own imperialist expansion was in part rationalized by the notion that a militarily powerful Asia posed a threat to 'Christian civilization.'" Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, 2.

21. See, for example, Gaylyn Studlar, "Discourses of Gender and Ethnicity: The Construction and De(con)struction of Rudolf Valentino as Other," *Film Criticism* 13, no. 2 (1989): 18–35, and Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
22. E. M. Hull, *The Sheik* (1919; reprint, London: Virago Press, 1996).
23. While I think Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* is the prototype/exemplar of this subgenre, other vehicles predated it, the most important being *Kismet* (stage play 1911, film versions 1920, 1930, 1944, and 1955). The stories are similar in some respects (a beggar makes out well), but the story of *The Thief of Bagdad* (in its various incarnations) has been much more of a template for films of this subtype than *Kismet*, whose many versions reflected these developments in the genre rather than influenced them.
24. This closely parallels a scene in *The Sheik* in which Ahmad (the Sheik) secretly enters Lady Diana's boudoir to empty her revolver before her trip into the desert.
25. As with Arabian nights tales, a prior work—namely, *Under Two Flags* (1864) by Ouida—was extremely popular and established the foreign legion subtype in popular literature long before the advent of the cinema. This work was adapted many times as a film (1912, 1916, 1922, and 1936), but, like *Kismet* and its relation to the Arabian nights subgenre, *Beau Geste* had greater success as a film and hence had greater influence on the subgenre than did the various film adaptations of *Under Two Flags*.
26. Another significant aspect of the terrorist subtype is that many of its generic elements were deployed and developed in television shows rather than in films. This forms the basis of many of Jack Shaheen's observations in *The TV Arab*.
27. Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, 1–9. Although the films Marchetti deals with do not form a coherent genre (as I believe films about the Middle East do), the themes of these films are remarkably similar to many of those in the easterns described in this article. Marchetti attributes these themes to the "mythic patterns" found in the Judeo-Christian tradition and, more specifically, in American popular literature. If this is the case, then easterns may simply be the most coherent of a number of Hollywood film traditions that exploited a racial and ethnic other in the service of audience identification and narrative strategies.
28. Two articles in Bernstein and Studlar's anthology, *Visions of the East*, are particularly relevant to this study: Janice Morgan, "In the Labyrinth: Masculine Subjectivity, Expatriation, and Colonialism in *Pepe le Moko*," 253–68, and Alan Nadel, "A Whole New (Disney) World Order: Aladdin, Atomic Power, and the Muslim Middle East," 184–203.