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Geography of the Middle East through the Western Lens: A Survey of Films Set in the Middle East and Filmed in the American Southwest

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Geography of the Middle East through the Western Lens:
A Survey of Films Set in the Middle East and Filmed in the American Southwest

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Geography

by

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Bachelor of Art in Geography, International Relations, and Middle Eastern Studies, 2016

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Abstract

Representation of cinematic geography is a struggle in the world of film: a power balance between the work of the filmmakers and the place itself. Often, the filmmakers tip the scales in their favor and the true nature of the place is lost in translation. Throughout the history of cinema, the geography of the Middle East has been manipulated into a vision designed for Western audiences that is strikingly disjointed from reality.

The foundation of modern Orientalist interpretations of the Middle East in film can be seen in the early decades of the film industry, through the “Biblical Epic,” and in modern geopolitical depictions. This intertwining of geographic place and themes developed a violent vision of the Middle East that has remained the foundation of what we currently understand to be the region in film.

Studying these early film locations that served as masks for the Middle East illuminates the history of the location on film, even the films that were shot in the true Middle East. The visual history of the region in film can be seen through direct comparison of the physical geographic regions of the Middle East and American Southwest and the ways both were used.

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Dedication

To those who have had their voices silenced and their places reshaped by the cinema

And to the filmmakers and artists who can give it back to them

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Introduction

Can a physical place be “violent?” Aside from risks like disease, fauna, and physical hazards, can an area or environment naturally breed violence? Or is the perception of violence planted, nurtured, and reinforced over time? If so, how are these perceptions created and how can they be altered? These are the questions that began this study and in order to answer them, I turned to the history of Middle Eastern depictions within cinema. In modern political and popular culture, there seems to be an agreed-upon and consistently reinforced representation of Middle Eastern people and culture (Shaheen 2001). Beyond cultures, there is an image of the physical Middle East that remains consistent throughout media. Together, the cultural and the physical perceptions create an image of the Middle East as a place of tradition and mysticism; devout religious adherence and barbaric chaos; crowded Bazaars and vast, empty sandscapes; violence and excessive violence (McAlister 2003). But what if these places that audiences seem to understand weren’t the places they thought they were after all? What if the “vast, empty sandscapes” in film that are so unmistakably Middle Eastern were actually filmed in southern California? What if we are applying a sense of inextricable violence to a place based off an image that is fundamentally disjointed from the place itself?

Geography is essential to all films. By understanding the geography of people and place, filmmakers are able to construct their own perspectives on physical places and those that inhabit them (Dodds 2008). However, this responsibility of representation is a struggle in the world of film: a power balance between the work of the filmmakers and the physical place itself. Just as no place on earth can ever be fully evaluated by any singular map, no story or event can ever be truly captured on film. The cartographer creates the map; the filmmaker creates the film. Martin Scorsese once described cinema as a “matter of what’s in the frame and what’s out” and it is

always important to assess both aspects (Brody 2017). Dr. William Bunge wrote “geography is often defined as the study of the earth’s surface as the home of man. But the view from which men’s home?” (Bunge 1969). In terms of the study of geography in film, the more appropriate question would be “the view from which filmmaker’s lens?”

In both the study of film and the study of geography, evaluating the point of view presented yields the fullest understanding of cultural relationships between people and the relationships with their respective environments. Even in the age of computer-generated environments, no film is created in a geographic vacuum and the choices filmmakers make when applying context to place can have lasting cultural consequences in terms of both thematic storytelling and political relevance. The power of a place will always be limited by the decisions of those that give it power.

Filmmakers often tip the scales of geographic representation within cinema in their favor and the true nature of the place can be lost in translation. Throughout the history of cinema, the geography of the Middle East has been manipulated into a vision designed for Western audiences that is strikingly disjointed from reality (McAlister 2003). The foundation of modern Orientalist interpretations of the Middle East in film can be seen in the early decades of the film industry through the era of the “Biblical Epic” in Hollywood and beyond. Many of the films produced during this era were not entirely shot in the Middle East: many used the American Southwest as a “double” in order to reduce costs of traveling and foreign crews (DiscoverMoab.com, Museum of Western Film History, etc.). This intertwining of geographic place and themes developed a vision of the Middle East that has remained the foundation of what we currently understand to be the region in film.

This research includes analysis of a variety of films from across multiple genres. From understanding the connection between how modern film historians and geographers now look at the treatment of landscape and indigenous people in mid-century Westerns, we can gain a framework of thinking to tackle the similar issues concerning Middle Eastern cultures on film. This research will look at the harsh stereotypes engraved on film concerning the portrayal of Indigenous people in the United States and the people and cultures of the Middle East.

The core of this research is the connection between the use of film sites in the Southwestern U.S. as Middle Eastern location doubles and popular culture links between fictional landscapes of fear and the contemporary Middle East. Does the use of these locations reinforce these connections? Specific questions addressed by the thesis include:

- Are the same (or similar) locations being used for films set in the Middle East as were used for westerns and biblical epics?
- Are these landscapes accurately representing the Middle Eastern landscapes for which they are doubling?
- Do these landscape substitutions have the potential to create an enhanced sense of fear/danger regarding the Middle East?

From this perspective, on-site research concerning the films that were simultaneously set in the Middle East and shot in the American Southwest will be explored. These comparisons and explorations of film raise questions concerning genre and intent that help to develop context concerning the legacy of violence in these films and in these geographies. The research concerns not only Western films and the aforementioned “Biblical Epics” but other genres from modern action/adventure films, comedies, and even fictional geographies developed from the violent

stereotypes constructed in Hollywood around the Middle East. Each film site studied had a story all its own and I have arranged them as such.

An assessment of all the research (both on-ground and from critical film analysis) first reveals the precedent of violent geographies associated with the Middle East in film. Subsequently, the research concludes the role that location doubling in the American southwest plays in reinforcing violent depictions of the Middle East on screen. Furthermore, these conclusions develop an understanding of the necessity for film analysis coupled with site study in further research of human geography on film.

Study Site

For this research, I collected the data necessary to analyze the geographic differences between specific sites and film by taking photographs at each individual site with the intention of lining up specific geologic features with their motion picture counterparts. The film sites explored were chosen based on the significant number of films that utilized them as location doubles for the Middle East and their very general geographic proximity to the American Southwest. These qualifications led me towards researching a cluster of filming locations across southern California and Utah. Unsurprisingly, all of the sites visited are most well known for their cinematic histories associated with mid-century Western films. While some of these sites are actively recognized for their roles as Middle Eastern counterparts, local film communities mostly overlook the association with foreign site doubling.

There are countless reasons for filmmakers and producers to choose specific filming sites over others during the production of a film. Many of the films discussed in this research were filmed during the earlier chapters of cinematic history and, due to production costs, had to make more constraining decisions. Early film technology was difficult to transport and often cumbersome. Early cameras were unable to capture usable imagery in poor lighting so indoor studio sets were the most controllable environments. The specialty equipment required for film production was expensive and needed frequent maintenance so the radius of available locations in order to stay within studio budget was limited. Aside from the costs of technical difficulties, there were more labor-focused issues associated with production costs as well. If an entire film crew were expected to shoot scenes on location, they would have to be housed, fed, and transported by the studios. Cutting down on these costs made the decision to use American landscapes instead of foreign sites an easy one (Roberts 2003).



Figure 1: Algodones Dunes in Southern California

There are also cultural and geopolitical factors that impact the choices of filmmakers in terms of shooting locations. Sometimes studios cannot obtain permission to shoot in a certain country, which forces the studio to consider other options at its disposal. If a location is threatened by conflict or dispute, filmmakers will avoid the potential risks of producing films there. The culture of filmmaking in California is also a factor. Vincent Joliet was a producer for Michael Jackson’s “Heal the World” video and once stated that “We were going to go around the world to film troubled hotspots... Northern Ireland, the Sahara, to the American South — Then, we ultimately shot it all in and around Los Angeles. Not necessarily because it was cheaper, but because L.A. can substitute for practically anywhere” (Roberts 2003). Narratively speaking, there are also elements of perception that filmmakers often consider which leads to some of the problematic issues discussed in this research. For example, even if a filmmaker is attempting to

portray the physical geography of Morocco or Israel as accurately as possible, the use of southern California sand dunes or overlooks in Canyonlands National Park as doubles will inherently cause viewers to misperceive the true geography of the Middle East.

As film technology grew more sophisticated, many of these issues were resolved and more studios were willing to spend larger portions of the budget towards on-site filming. From this point onward, the sites studied in this research became relegated more towards smaller films or “pick-up” shots for larger films that needed footage more to supplement already established scenes rather than as the main setting for the films. Much of the preliminary information I gained concerning film sites and the movies associated with them came from online resources like dedicated film site documenters such as “moviesites.org” or the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com). Once I began on-site research, I was able to formulate a more comprehensive list of the films associated with each individual site.

The first site that I researched was Red Rock Canyon State Park in California near the southernmost foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This site was used most often in the early days of film and became, most notably, a double for Egypt in 1932 with “The Mummy.” The location is known for its distinct red, rounded cliff faces. After that, I traveled north to Lone Pine, California located just east of the Alabama Hills. The Alabama Hills boast an impressively long list of film credits ranging from early Biblical epics to modern day action films like Iron Man. The Alabama Hills are also located relatively close to Death Valley and the film community in Lone Pine represents films shot in that region as well. From there, I traveled south to the Algodones and Imperial Dunes near the southernmost portion of California. Pocketed by mountain ranges and farm land, these dunes are a relatively small geologic feature of the region but, when manipulated correctly, can be viewed as vast, unending stretches of sand. Because of

these attributes, the dunes are used to represent a large swath of the Middle East and North Africa from where Morocco connects with the Sahara to the Arabian Peninsula. Next, I traveled northeast to Moab, Utah where I researched the filming locations in both Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. When these parks are used to double for the Middle East, they mostly represent the Levant and, more specifically, the Christian and Jewish religious geographies of the region. Finally, my research took me to Monument Valley in Navajo Nation which directly falls on the Arizona and Utah border. Monument Valley Park is arguably the most recognizable location for fans of Westerns (John Ford's films in particular) and helped to serve a valuable cultural connection for Middle East doubling in film.



Figure 2: Green River Overlook in Canyonlands National park

These sites all carry the connection of film history; having had countless films shot in and around these areas since the beginning of cinema. Some have had more movies filmed there than others and some have supplanted the Middle East in their geographies more smoothly. The main difference I found between these sites is their dedication to their respective film histories. The

nearest community to Red Rock Canyon State Park is Mojave, CA and there is not much interest in the park's film history. While there are information posts within the park that mention some of the films shot at the location, there is little interest in codifying and capitalizing on the cinematic connections of the state park beyond individual expeditions like my own. The Algodones and Imperial sand dunes have a similar connection to their cinematic histories. Beyond brief statements on informational checkpoints that amount to an acknowledgement of some cinematic relevance, the area does not outwardly express the connection. The Algodones Dunes were also the only site visited which has no popular connection to the Western genre; the films shot at this location are entirely Middle Eastern-set or take place on fictional worlds within science fiction films such as *Dune* and *Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi*.

The location that embraces its cinematic history the most out of the sites visited would be the town of Lone Pine east of the Alabama Hills. Within Lone Pine is one of the most well maintained and curated film museums in California outside of Hollywood: The Museum of Western Film History. The museum is a love letter not only to the Western films shot in the Alabama Hills as it contains information and artifacts from nearly every production that's ever spent time in the community. They have costumes from films ranging from "The Searchers" to "Gunga Din" to "Iron Man" and props including the coaches from "Rawhide" and "Django Unchained" and many more. This was also the only location where I witnessed a film site-dedicated exhibit acknowledge the difficult and problematic nature of shooting Middle East and Asia-set films in the California desert. The only other location that acknowledges the location doubling of the past was the small Moab Museum of Film and Western Heritage at the Red Cliffs Lodge in Moab, Utah which represents the films shot in Canyonlands National Park, Arches National Park, nearby Lake Powell, and even some Monument Valley features. This

small museum contained a poster and write up for the locations used in “The Greatest Story Ever Told” and a prop of an Egyptian pharaoh, although it was unclear which film the prop was associated. This museum was also the only one I visited that pulled screenshots from the films which they exhibit to draw geographic connections for the visitor. The description for the relevance of “The Greatest Story Ever Told” also contained a section that stated “Other Information: This movie used more local extras than any filmed in the area. There were 400 strong.” The final film museum I visited at these sites was the smallest in comparison but still impressive for the amount of dedication and effort it took to compile a comprehensive exhibit: the “Film Room” located in the Goulding’s Lodge’s Trading Post Museum. The Trading Post Museum is dedicated to the original Goulding Family which established a mercantile on the site in the 1920s to help the Navajo Reservation trade goods with outside communities but who quickly found economic opportunity in the courting of filmmakers to the location. The “Film Room” in the museum contains posters and set photos taken during the many productions that have come to Monument Valley with no reference to any of the supplanting of Middle Eastern settings into the region.

Beyond all of the sites with film-dedicated exhibits being specifically concerned with Western films and all claiming to be the favorite filming spot of John Wayne, they were three very separate and uniquely concerned experiences. This description also applies to the geographic sites themselves: while all are connected by their cinematic histories and shared use as doubled environments, the locations themselves are wildly unique in the way filmmaking has affected their roles in modern cultural attitudes.

Literature Review

The study of geographic connections concerning the portrayal of the Middle East through American filmic interpretations shot in the American Southwest is, at once, a matter of cultural, regional, and geopolitical geographic studies. While there have been climatologists and geologists that compare and contrast the deserts of the Middle East/North Africa with the deserts of the American Southwest, little to no cultural comparisons have been drawn concerning the areas on film beyond the foundations in the “Western” genre (USGS 1998). Physically, the regional geographies and MENA have striking similarities: both of the regions land around 30 degrees north of the equator and have been classified as “subtropical” hot desert climates. The regions receive very little rainfall annually, usually around 10 inches or less (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2016). Naturally, it makes a certain amount of sense to use the remarkable vistas and spaces of the American Southwest as cost-cutting alternative to filming in the Middle East. Many times in larger budget films, the shots filmed in the American deserts were just supplementary to more important shots filmed on-location in the Middle East/North Africa. Lower budgeted movies, however, relied heavily on the conveniently located deserts just east of Hollywood.

As the film industry has grown over the history of cinema into a globalized industry, there are far more options available for filming around the globe, on-site. This has led to a reduction in the amount of times the American Southwest is used in films as double for the Middle East but its role in film geography remains important regardless.

While many branches of the field converge within this research, there is a common umbrella connecting them all beyond the physical similarities. The study and development of the “film geography” subfield has roots in published works from as far back as 1947 but gained momentum in the 1980s. It is fitting that the field has remained a peripheral corner of cultural

geography as the field itself is intent on pursuing the peripheral elements that develop an individual's geographic reality. J. Wreford Watson was one of the earliest geographers to elaborate and develop theories concerning imagined "truths" in the field of geography. In 1969, on personal perception and imagination within geographic interpretation, he wrote "not all geography derives from the earth itself; some of it springs from our idea of the earth. This geography within the mind can at times be the effective geography to which men adjust and thus be more important than the supposedly real geography of the earth. Man has the particular aptitude of being able to live by the notion of reality which may be more real than reality itself" (Watson 1969). Individuals assimilate information from not only their first-hand experiences of cultural geography but also their perceived notions of geography gained through second-hand information.

In this research, this theory is important because it helps to assume that cinema audiences and film viewers construct the interpretations of place based on what is shown on screen. These understandings of place may not be solely derived from film but that does not detract from the importance film has on individual geographic understanding. In Michael Wood's 1975 book *America in the Movies*, Wood writes that "much of our experience of popular films resides in the place we usually call the back of the mind, the place where we keep all those worries that won't come out in the open and won't go away either, that nag at us from the edges of consciousness. Movies bring out these worries without letting them loose and without forcing us to look at them too closely" (Wood 1997). This examination of internalized and individual interpretations of film will often create a framework for further viewings within audiences. As long as issues presented in films are not confronted head-on, these "back of the mind" concerns will continue to perpetuate which can cause issues in the world off-screen. The world's created

within films can be assumed to serve as the only frame of reference for many viewers who have no spatial context to compare the images on screen to the physical geographies they represent. In this sense, the world's presented in movies are just as important to the facts of the physical world. Wood reaffirms this sentiment when he writes that "the movies are a world, a country of familiar faces, a mythology made up a limited number of stories [possessing] a relation of wish, echo, transposition, displacement, inversion, compensation, reinforcement, example, warning... what remains constant is an oblique but unbroken connection to the historical world" (Wood 1975). The key words in this statement are "oblique but unbroken" in relation to reality and historical context. While films will blur the lines between fact and representation, they are still intricately connected to the known world and will thus stick into the consciousness of viewers as such.

Burgess and Gold elaborated in *Geography, The Media and Popular Culture* that the largest source of this second-hand information is the media. They harken back to early behavior researchers and, in connection to environmental awareness, concluded that "individual views of the world and environmental behavior were dependent on the cognition of reality- the process by which mental representations of the environment are created" (Burgess and Gold 1985). In the context of my research, the relevant media source is film. Within Film Geography, we must view films beyond just cultural commodities but as cultural texts as well.

As commodities, the truth is often distorted. In *Film Landscapes: Cinema, Environment and Visual Culture*, Ken Fox discusses the paradoxical nature of inaccurate "historical" films in his chapter "In Praise of the Inauthentic" (Fox 2013). He speaks at length in this chapter about the influence of a particular film in Irish culture and how it led to the renaming of a town to fit its narrative. Powerful films and television in the industry can have drastic effects on real world

facts because of the perception that is placed by filmmakers and producers. Fox begins the chapter by quoting Tribe who said “History is... recognized as Truth by the viewer not by virtue of the facts being correct, but because the image looks right. The recognition effect ‘that’s the way it was’ is a product not of the historicity of the plot, but the manipulation of the image” (Rayner; Harper 2013). From this perspective and his example, we see the impact the perception of truth (real or otherwise) can have on viewers and their own understandings of historical (or at the very least, historically grounded) films.

As a cultural text, films have authors and ideologies as well as biases and perspectives. Mark Lacy, in *War, Cinema, and Moral Anxiety*, describes cinema as a space where “commonsense” ideas about “global politics and history are (re)produced and wehre stories about what is acceptable behavior from states and individuals are naturalized and legitimized” (Lacy 2003). Legitimizing problematic geopolitical behaviors on film can have lasting consequences. Concerning the topic of international politics and war as portrayed in film, Michael J. Shapiro constructed the term “violent cartography” for his book, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (Shapiro 2009). Shapiro defines a “violent cartography” as “the historically developed, socially embedded interpretation of identity and space’ that constitute the framework within which enmities give rise to war-as-policy. Violent cartographies are thus constituted as an articulation of geographic imaginaries and antagonisms based on models of identity-difference” (Shapiro 2009). Shapiro talks at length in the book about the relationship between images on the screen and the political world. Specifically, the ways in which cinema have politicized and militarized daily life through their films. He draws many comparisons between the visual appeals and themes of classic Westerns and current films that concern the “war on terror.”

After he introduces the concept of “violent cartography,” he discusses John Ford’s 1956 film, *The Searchers*, which was filmed, in part, in Monument Valley, AZ (a frequently used filming site for both John Ford and John Wayne films). In the beginning of the film John Wayne’s character, Ethan Edwards, is headed out west after having finished fighting for the Confederate Army in the

Civil War. Like many Americans of this period following the war and their portrayal in film, Edwards migrates westward for opportunity but ultimately finds another venue of violence; a land defined by the forced displacement of indigenous America



Figure 3: John Wayne as Ethan Edwards in John Ford's "The Searchers" (1964)

(Shapiro 2009). Shapiro goes on to describe the moral foundation of Edwards’ brother and sister-in-law, who already live in the vast American west, and why they choose to inhabit the area. He examines that “the couple (Edwards’ brother and his wife) and their children are participants in the romantic ideal of the adventurous white family, seeking to spread Euro America’s form of laboring domesticity westward in order to settle and civilize what was viewed from the East as a violent, untamed territory, containing peoples or nations unworthy of participating in an American future” (Shapiro 2009). He’s describing a common trope in many Westerns during this period of American cinema: the West was raw and untamed until the Anglo-American spirit and

drive towards opportunity gave it value beyond the indigenous population. He discusses the characters of the film in this analysis and positioning of morally upright characters in a naturally violent environment.

It isn't just the thematic representation of the characters on the screen that concerns Shapiro; he also draws attention to the physical places themselves. He summarizes that "a focus on the aesthetic rather than the psychological subject places an emphasis on images rather than the film narrative, and turns the analysis of a film away from personal drama and toward the changing historico-political frame within which the drama takes place" (Shapiro 2009). Shapiro is asking audiences to not only take a critical look when analyzing the characters within their historical, cultural, and media contexts but to also look at the aesthetic environments they are placed into. In this sense, the situations and importance that the filmmakers place on the characters and their storylines can have consequences on how the film viewer then interprets the location. Shapiro draws this conclusion through Westerns; we associate the American southwest with the themes of the films that explore that region. From these assumptions and associations, we also are naturally drawn to consider the tropes of these films and place their burdens on the land itself and its indigenous people by extension. Connecting this sentiment with Middle East-set films of this period and beyond, as many of these films were filmed in the same physical spaces as popular Westerns, we see a new sub-genre form that has been called the "Hollywood Eastern." In John M. Ganim's essay "Framing the West, Staging the East" which was included in Nickolas Haydock's "Hollywood in the Holy Land" collection, Ganim states that since the early 60s...

we have had a certain set of expectations about what we should see when we look at a typical Western film set in the East: an uncannily stable visual projection of history, a message that the world it portrays is empty, silent and timeless, punctuated by brief

images of crowds in the bazaar or armies on the battlefield...Figures on horseback (or camel) ride alone or in small groups across a vast landscape that the camera only needs to suggest in a partial pan; hostile natives threaten outposts of authority, fragile settlements that seem both timeless and temporary in the face of natural and social upheaval. (Haydock 2009)

While some of the tropes that Ganim lists are fairly general if not conventional, there are countless films (both Western and Middle Eastern-set) that are guilty of all of them. The visual dictionary that both genres of films share which filmmakers continue to pull from leaves these films and their messages resonating with the viewer in ways that may be indirectly constructing biases and assumptions.



Figure 4: Yul Brynner as Ramses in Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments" (1965)

Seven months after Ford's *The Searchers* hit theaters, another film that used Monument Valley, Utah for various shots would be released and become the most successful movie of all time at that point: *The*

Ten Commandments. If John Ford serves cinema history as one of the most influential directors to the Western genre, *The Ten Commandments'* director, Cecil B. DeMille is certainly held in the same standard regarding the "biblical epic" in film. The film is a depiction of the life of Moses from the Book of Exodus as well as elements from several novelizations and accounts of Moses from other works. In her book, *Epic Encounters*, Melani McAlister gathers a series of essays that relate to the depiction of the Middle East in American media. In the introduction to the book,

McAlister establishes her argument that no natural perception of the Middle East truly exists (McAlister 2001). All pop culture perceptions of the Middle East, in her research, seem to be crafted (either consciously or otherwise) by media outlets.

The fact that the Middle East became more of a geopolitically relevant area in the 20th century means that media had to find ways to culminate attention towards the region. McAlister states “Representations of the Middle East- of both the ancient religious sites and the modern nations- helped to make the area and its people meaningful within the cultural and political context in the United States. In other words, the Middle East was not immediately available as an American interest; instead, it had to be made ‘interesting’” (McAlister 2003). McAlister is saying that our cultural and political perceptions of the Middle East are, to a certain degree, a crafted vision. To use her words as a framework for an example, from the popularity of the “biblical epic” in Hollywood creating an interesting portrait of the Middle East; we then get a pop-cultural “interest” in the region attached to religious histories. This Middle East trope continues to pervade all U.S. media interpretations of the region for years to come.

While historic sites and religious histories are scattered across the region, the emphasis placed on these sites as a defining characteristic of the land is certainly a well-worn narrative path in film and television. This interpretation of the region stunts the perception of the Middle Eastern nations and peoples’ capacity for growth and forward progress. Americans latched onto the Middle East as a geographic hotbed for religious allegories and ancient metaphors. If the American “Western” is about maintaining American values and pride out towards a mysterious and hostile environment, then the “biblical epic” is about maintain those same values and pride *within* a mysterious and hostile environment. Following the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War, the United States was, more than ever, intricately linked to the geopolitical affairs

of the Middle East. DeMille himself, a lifelong conservative, designed the film with American politics in mind (McAlister 2003). However, his own political message was overshadowed by the current events of the time. DeMille intended for the film to be a lesson on the lack of morality in the American government and the need for individual Americans to hold onto their personal interests and religious values (McAlister 2003). At the beginning of the film, DeMille himself introduces the audience to the picture through a prologue in which he states “The theme of this picture is whether men should be ruled by God’s law, or by the whims of a dictator like Ramses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same struggle is going on today” (*The Ten Commandments*) DeMille is implying that nationalists and non-believers are “the property of the state” and those that question the American government and are aware of its oppressive nature existed as “free souls under God” (McAlister 2003). This was also playing on a popular Cold War concern of the time, which was the fear of oscillating too far from the center of the political spectrum. In DeMille’s view, both hyper-nationalists (fascists) and atheists (communists) were irreprehensible sides of the spectrum and so the only path towards true freedom was individuality.

While DeMille positioned the United States to symbolize the oppressive force of the film, ancient Egypt and its rulers, the political situation of the time led the audience to a different assumption. Only a couple weeks after the release of *The Ten Commandments*, the Suez Crisis erupted in current-day Egypt. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and, in response, the combined forces of Israel, France, and Britain launched an attack in an effort to protect their own shipping interests in the region (McAlister 2001). This conflict involving Israel and Egypt which climaxed so soon to the release of the film was destined to draw comparison. In an article published by the *New York Times*, this “profound” coincidence

was discussed and the journalist even stated that the modern issue between the two countries “has its preamble in the Book of Exodus” (McAlister 2001). However, while the United States were positioned in the film to predictably support the coalition of Israel, France, and Britain as the oppressive creature it is, the Eisenhower administration threw its weight behind Nasser and put severe economic pressure on the aggressors to back down on the conflict. While the geopolitical sidelines of the Suez Crisis didn’t line up with the direct metaphor DeMille had constructed, the coincidence of the release of *The Ten Commandments* and the crisis had a different impact on the perception of American involvement in the Middle East. In McAlister’s words, this situation helped craft a narrative of “benevolent supremacy” for the United States in the region (McAlister 2001). This means that while the U.S. was building up their role in the region in order to protect domestic interests, they were doing it outside the perception of common imperialism. While the U.S. was expanding their role as the world’s leading superpower and armed guardian, they were doing it under the media guise of shepherding peace and democracy throughout the globe. American media has always conflated issues in the Middle East with religious and often biblical perspectives and this early association with the issue of religious freedom and oppression.

So what does it mean to see these depictions on screen? What sense of the geography of the Middle East do American viewers gain from the cinema and how are filmmakers controlling these perceptions, either directly or indirectly? Why does it matter where a movie is filmed if it not only does not take place in that region but also cover an entirely unrelated subject? To understand this discussion, we will first look at one of the most important concepts in human geography: space vs. place. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan developed the modern notion of the space/place co-dependency discussion in human geography and stated in his 1977 work “Space

and Place: The Perspective of Experience” that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value... From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa” (Tuan 1977). In his definition, “place” is just “space” that has been given meaning (either physically, culturally, politically, etc.) by people or peoples. It follows that the defined “place” can be a uniquely personal and deep-rooted space that can have different meanings to different groups of individuals. Lina Khatib touches on this subject in relation to Middle Eastern portrayals in film in her 2006 book “Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World.” In her discussion on the importance of space, Khatib states that space is constantly in flux, can carry multiple meanings, and that “it is not a given, a neutral stage upon which history is played out. It is part of history and culture, constantly being defined and redefined” (Khatib 2006). From the perspective of human geography, we understand that a singular “space” can be many different “places” to many different groups. How does one objectively define a space that acts as different places? According to Khatib, “there has been a considerable degree of conflict over space and, indeed, (re)defining space is an act of power” (Khatib 2006). Unlike most places, spaces are not fixed; they are dynamic. In terms of Hollywood, spaces are often used and multiple different places can be attached



Figure 5: Algodones Dunes

to them. The Algodones Dunes located in the Sonoran Desert in Imperial County, CA has had multiple places attaches to its large, dusty dunes. The location has doubled as the Middle East countless times as Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and more. The location even doubled as the fictional planet Tatooine in the third Star Wars film, Return of the Jedi, as the crew decided not to pursue returning to Tatooine's original shooting location, Tunisia. Khatib analyzes Hollywood films as too dependent on space as a background and inherently supplemental to the action that is taking place by characters in the foreground (Khatib 2006). In a more geography realized film, space can be brought to the foreground and make statements for itself, so to speak. How filmmakers attach meaning to this space goes back to Khatib's comments on power. When analyzing how American cinema, as a whole, films the Middle East, she writes "Hollywood's relationship with space here is all about mastery, relying heavily on open, wide, and aerial shots of action occurring outdoors" (Khatib 2006). This critique of filmmaking methods can also be applied to many popular (especially John Ford's) Westerns. Shots and vistas like this are a method of exerting control over a landscape and often carry a sense of objective power in the narrative. But just as Edward Said pointed out about the colonizers who came to the Middle East and claimed their maps and findings to be objective science, these films often carry much more emotional and cultural baggage than they claim.

Methodology

The most important goal of my research was to discover what, if any, connections could be made in relation to cinematic violence and geographic space. More specifically, how physical locations can develop thematic connections to violence. To push this goal, I chose to look at films set in the Middle East and North Africa (with a few examples from Central Asia) that were in part shot in the American Southwest in place of the foreign sites. In this research, I am examining U.S. physical sites and analyzing whether they carry deep-rooted connections to foreign violence by way of the film industry.

Going into this research, I carried the assumption that a connection would be made rather directly. I assumed, rather simply, that if Hollywood were to take a location and fill it with scenes of violence for the public to consume then, subsequently, that location would be marred with the association of violence. While this is still the case for the most part, the tangible connection of these sites themselves to violent images is much more nuanced and thematic than overtly realized. While the problematic attitudes of American culture towards the Middle East is very much the leading cause of association with violence, these sites' long-standing association with films from the Western genre cannot be overlooked.

In order to uncover the level of connection these sites have with their cinematic counterparts, I conducted on-site research throughout the sites and their surrounding communities. From this research, I developed connections with the geography for these locations and saw first-hand the ways in which they were manipulated by filmmakers. I traveled throughout the sites and took my own photographs in order to draw the most direct comparisons with the films.

For each site I visited, I followed a systematic method towards understanding the location's connection to film history. Preliminary research before traveling yielded a list of films that would need to be explored for each site. Using resources like IMDb.com and sites dedicated to the films shot in the specific locations themselves like the "Moab to Monument Valley Film Commission's" site filmmoab.com, a comprehensive base was developed. With the films in mind, the next step was to discover which scenes were shot in the sites in question and find screenshots from the films for comparison. Once I was in the sites themselves, I used the resources of the parks and my own research to find the closest comparison photographs I could capture. Tangentially, I also recorded my experiences in relation to the site's connection to the local film history such as museums or exhibits dedicated to the subject. After the on-ground research was concluded, I used the photographs I captured and the screenshots from the films as a starting point to discuss the impact of the site doubling in the regions. My basic system functioned as follows:

- 1.) Develop a list of site-specific films to explore both thematically and geographically
- 2.) Watch the films and gather necessary notes and screenshots for comparison
- 3.) Explore the sites firsthand to find the film locations utilized
- 4.) Gather photographs that most closely resembled the previous screenshots
- 5.) Analyze the photographs and screenshots in relation to the thematic content of the films as well as the geographic similarities and differences between the sites themselves and the intended Middle Eastern counterparts

My intention was to create my database of photographs from all five sites that I visited in order to create side-by-side layouts of my photos and screenshots taken directly from the films themselves. However, while the goal was ultimately achieved, there are inherent problems with

this approach. First of all, I was not with any of the filmmakers when they were choosing the sites. It was often difficult to find the exact footing and angles that the filmmakers were able to achieve which left my photos not entirely directly comparable.

Secondly, I did not have the resources or opportunities to manipulate the aesthetics of the environment to the same degree that large-scale production companies are capable. For example, I did not have the technology to affect the lighting of the photographs in any professional way. Nor did I have the scheduling leniency to wait for the exact seasons and weather conditions that the filmmakers had. For example, this situation is most noticeable in the photographs I gathered from Canyonlands and Arches National Parks. Due to the scheduling of my research, I coincidentally arrived in Moab, UT during the coldest and wettest two-week period of the year. The photos I took in the parks contain remnants of the heavy snowfall that passed over the area just a few days I arrived as well as large blankets of fog that I had to shoot around. My results from the area affected my research in a way that both negatively influenced my photographic comparisons while, consequently, adding a new depth of realism to my research. The primary issue is that the direct comparisons of these sites with the films shot there suffers from the differences in weather. The sites, when used to portray Middle Eastern locales, are almost entirely used in the summer and during clear weather. However, my experience with the sites during a wet, winter period establishes for the reader that these sites are, in fact, dynamic and are subject to weather and climates often left out of the stereotypical molds for the Middle East. Showing only one weather pattern or climate and saying, “this is what the Middle East always looks like” through the repetition of the depiction in film does a disservice to the geography of the regions themselves. For this concession, the unfortunate timing of my research in relation to the weather in Moab became another level to my analysis.

Thirdly, my access at the sites themselves were limited by the spaces provided for me. For example, as a guest of the Navajo Nation during my time in Monument Valley, I respected the access I was granted. While I did have permission to take as many photos as I wanted, I could only take those photos in locations where I was already permitted. Film productions are often able to negotiate more free movement around national parks and private areas which I was simply unable to arrange for myself. For this reason, some of the photographs taken will not directly compare to the images we see in the films as the access to space differs. Many of the older films in this study were shot on locations before they were protected to the degree that they are now. Therefore, it would be difficult to gain access to these specific filming locations. I have approximated many of the locations that I directly compare to cinematic counterparts and, where necessary, can draw more indirect connections to the images presented.

The methods I will use to analyze these images and draw conclusions in relation to assessing the presentation of the Middle East will vary. This research involves a series of mixed methods in order to arrive at my final analysis. At the most objective level is the photograph analysis. For example, I can objectively state that 1932's "The Mummy" was filmed, in part, at Red Rock Canyon State Park in California. I have photographs from the park and screenshots from the film to convey this cinematic connection between film and location. More subjective is my analysis of the films' relation to violence and cultural attitudes concerning the Middle East and Middle Eastern people. That analysis is more of a structuralist approach to the issues presented in the films that will be built upon aspects of film study as art and culture more so than direct connection. The films included in this research are all products of studios and filmmakers whom I have absolutely no affiliation with. I am fundamentally detached from these films at any personal financial level. I do not intend to accuse these films of any amount of intentional

mistreatment of cultural identity or misuse of social responsibility as I can only gather as much context for the process of making these films as is available to me. Filmmakers imbue their films with their own opinions and feelings and, as a film viewer, I am invited to do the same. That being said, I will look at these films from a modern critical point of view and analyze their content as such. As with any amount of film analysis focused on content and thematic material, there will be a level of subjective interpretation to my conclusions. I feel that it is important to acknowledge that each individual critical look at these films could yield different results. The outside critical writings on the associated films that I have chosen to examine have been chosen based on their connection to my central goal: the establishment of violence. Whether the films show on-screen violence first hand, condone cultural stereotypes that perpetrate violence, or portray characters that themselves are violent, then they fit into this research and will be given geographic analysis.

Beyond photographic data, there will also be research included based on my personal observations of these environments. My research is geared towards a geographic approach to a pop cultural issue. Filmmaker John Cassavetes once said that “Film is, to [him], just unimportant. But people are very important” (Cassavetes 2001). In this quote he is putting the importance of the people that films are trying to capture above the films themselves and I think this portrays my attitude towards films in a similar way. But I believe films are very important and that people are then, subsequently, of the utmost importance. Filmmaking is used to portray the human condition but, mostly unintentionally, often the human condition of people unlike the viewer can be influenced by the opinions of the films themselves. This leads to a condition of “othering” in which cultures beyond the viewer’s own are disregarded and disenfranchised based on biases and assumptions that ultimately prove untrue. I subscribe to this social theory and

consider its ramifications in every one of the films I have researched. Some are guilty of it more than others as my analysis will show.

Analysis and Discussion

RED ROCK CANYON STATE PARK CA

Located twenty-five miles northeast of Mojave California by U.S. Highway 14, Red Rock Canyon State Park preserves 27,000 acres of badlands and geologic oddities. In the El Paso Mountains at the southernmost tip of the Sierra Nevadas, Red Rock Canyon State Park is known for its distinct cliffs filled with layers of red rock. The unique cliff visuals are layers of sediment deposits that have been crafted over the course of 11 million years from the time when the entire area was submerged underwater. The cliffs are slightly shifted at an angle thanks to the motion of the nearby Garlock fault which gives them a unique appearance.



Figure 6: Red Rock Canyon Cliffs

Since the early days of filmmaking, various Hollywood films have made use of the Red Rock Canyons of the area in part because they are located just two hours north of Los Angeles. Like many of these desert locations, the most popular films shot in Red Rocks Canyon are Westerns. These films include “The Big Country” and “The Outlaw.” It was also used in many early science fiction works as the rock formations elicit an extra-terrestrial tone. Some of these works include early “Buck Rogers” serials, episodes of the original “Lost in Space” television series, and 1970’s “Beneath the Planet of the Apes” which would use the site as a dystopian vision of the future. More recently, the site was also used as a location double for the Montana badlands in the beginning of the film “Jurassic Park” when the archeologists find an intact Velociraptor skeleton. As far as Middle East doubling is concerned, the site was used frequently in the early days of cinema and throughout the era of the Biblical epic (most often, as a place for “pick-up” shots and smaller scenes) (IMDb.com; Medina 2003).

Potentially the most common Middle Eastern locale that Red Rocks doubled for was Egypt. In 1932, Red Rock Canyons doubled for Egypt’s Valley of the Kings in the Universal horror film “The Mummy.” The film features scenes of a British-sponsored archeological dig site in Egypt which leads to the discovery of the titular Mummy. Many of the exterior scenes concerning the dig site were shot in Red Rock Canyon State Park in front of a feature within Hagen Canyon that is popularly referred to as the “Acropolis” as it resembles vertical towers on a large hill:



Figure 7: The "Acropolis" in Red Rock Canyon State Park



Figure 8: The "Acropolis" as seen in "The Mummy" (1933)

“The Mummy” film has long been criticized for its manipulation of Egyptian culture, ancient history, and the dichotomy it presents of West vs. East. In the film, Egypt is presented as a dark place full of mystery and deep superstition which is only now being understood by the intellectuals of the west. The religiosity that the film instills into ancient Egyptian superstitions are both factually inaccurate and wholly conjured by the filmmakers for the purposes of the movie. In this sense, the film is a prime example of Orientalism in American filmmaking. The film posits that Western intellectualism and science is at stark contrast with the superstitious and backward nature of the Orient.

The film also goes so far as to criticize the Islamic world that has inhabited the ancient and mysterious land. Early on in the film, one of the film’s protagonists, Helen Grosvenor, is looking out on the balcony of a hotel in Cairo. She gazes out at the Great Pyramids and sighs “the real Egypt...” before the film cuts to a shot of the urban skyline filled with domes and minarets of mosques before she exclaims “are we really in this dreadful modern Cairo?” This scene sets up the film’s full analysis of modern Egypt, its geography, and its people: while the ancient history and lore of previous Egyptian cultures is to be revered for its merit in the annals of Western study, the modern “dreadful” Egypt dominated by Islamic cultural sensibilities is a misuse and degradation of all that came before it. Tangentially related, this scene more than likely was filmed entirely in an American movie studio with available Egyptian film filling in the gaps of scenery for the skylines of the pyramids and the buildings.

The scene with the archeological dig which was shot in Red Rock Canyon takes place in 1932, as the archeologists are uncovering the tomb of Princess Anksenamen, the former love of the mummy Imhotep who currently walks modern Egypt in disguise. They also recover the Scroll of Thoth (a fictional magical item likely based on the Book of the Dead), which the

Mummy plans to use to revive his ancient love. In the film, the mummy has lead the archeologists to this spot where he knows they will find the tomb of the Princess because of his own selfish plots. This puts the modern Western scientific mindset at odds with the “spells” of ancient Egypt that subsequently manipulated them. In the film, the magical religiosity of old Egypt must be understood and taken very seriously by even the most academic minds at work in the movie. This dichotomy puts the modern West and ancient East at odds with one another and leaves no room for the voice of the actual modern Egyptians of the time. In the context of the film, the cultures of Egypt are defined only by the history/mystery of the land they currently dwell on and the film itself is obsessed with questions of “bloodlines” and the biologic certainty of race. Helen herself (who is of both British and Egyptian heritage) is at one point held hostage by her own bloodlines, as she cannot resist the spells that affect all people of Egyptian “blood.” Her retention of her British identity and its blood, however, ultimately help her prevail in the face of magic and superstition.

The example of the case of “The Mummy” serves as one of the most common stereotypical depictions of the Middle East on film. The movie simultaneously bemoans the current state of the Orient and the influence of Islam after the classical period while also telling a story in which that classical mysticism has awakened and threatens modernity and science. In terms of cultural “othering,” this film leaves little narrative space for those currently occupying Egypt; their geographic location is enough of a connection to the past to allow the story to unfold. Yet the past is still full of magically-induced conflict and violence which arises to threaten the western world. By supplanting the Archaeological Expedition taking place in Egypt in Red Rocks Canyon, the filmmakers are even further removing themselves from the reality of classical history in the Middle East. The Mummy, the Scroll of Thoth, and all the curses and

magic in between are forever associated with the history buried under the sands in modern Egypt. However, modern Egypt not only has lost their voice in the discussion in exchange for Orientalist studies, they cannot claim the geography of the scene either.

ALABAMA HILLS

Outside of Hollywood itself, there are few places more passionate and embracive of their film history than Lone Pine, California. Just west of the city of Lone Pine down Whitney Portal Road exists one of the most consistently used film sites in the history of Hollywood: the Alabama Hills. The landscapes and geology of the Alabama Hills are concentrated yet diverse which makes it an ideal filming location for a number of reasons. The distinct rock formations and arches, carved out by millions of years of weathering, are surrounded by desert sands and scrubs which make it suitable for both Western and Middle Eastern locales. But with the simple



Figure 9: A View of the Sierra Nevada mountain range from the Alabama Hills

rotation of the camera, the audience can see a vast and breathtaking view of the Sierra Nevada Mountains including Mt. Whitney, the largest peak in the contiguous United States. Through the

Alabama Hills, there is a strip of dirt road (properly titled “Movie Road”) that connects all the biggest sites used in the area. They call this section of the Hills “Movie Ranch” and it is truly incredible how many films of diverse settings were shot within such close proximity to each other. During my time in the city of Lone Pine, I noticed that the character of the city was often at odds with itself. All at once, it was a small town rooted in its mining history as well as a ski resort for those returning (or embarking) on their next journey in the mountains, and a refuge for those seeking the desert to the east in Death Valley National Park. Main Street was filled with storefronts for skiers, hikers, anglers, hikers, and just about any other outdoor activity possible. The one piece of collective history that seemed to unite all of Main Street was their passion for the area’s film history.

All of this love culminates just south of the main strip in the Lone Pine Film History Museum. The museum makes the most of its size and contains enough props, vehicles, and old costumes to fill a space twice its size. While the museum is mainly focused on the vast library of Westerns that were shot in the area, they also acknowledge and represent the problematic history of some of the films that were shot in the area. The Alabama Hills have often served as a cinematic double for the Middle East as well as India and the mountains of Afghanistan. Middle East-set films include Cecil B. DeMille’s biblical epic “Samson and Delilah” as well as films entitled “Bagdad” and “Flame of Araby.” These three films were all released before or during the 1950s and contain stereotypical depictions of the Middle East as well as white actors utilizing brown-face. The museum acknowledges the issues that pertain to these films with a posting on the wall next to the films’ posters that reads like a disclaimer for all who enter that section:

Orientalism:

Writer and scholar Edward W. Said created the word 'orientalism' and defined it in his book of the same name published in 1978.

According to Said, the West has created a dichotomy, between the reality of the East, and the romantic notion of the 'Orient.' The Middle East and Asia are viewed with prejudice and racism. They are backward and unaware of their own history and culture. To fill the void, the West has created a culture, history, and future promise for them. On this framework rests not only the study of the Orient, but also the political imperialism of Europe in the East.

Said argues that orientalism can be found in current Western depictions of 'Arab' cultures. The depictions of 'the Arab' as irrational, menacing, untrustworthy, anti-Western, dishonest and perhaps most importantly--- prototypical, are ideas in which Orientalist scholarship has evolved.

Many of the Lone Pine movies can be seen as suffering from a misperception of the peoples and cultures of one or more Asian societies. Thus an Orientalist analysis is warranted on the films to see how they affected a generation of viewers' views of this area. Our 'oriental' epics or 'easterns' are, to varying degrees, enjoyable today. Our modern understandings have hopefully changed and now the movies can be viewed as artifacts of our beliefs as a country in another time. The realization of this fact can be instructive in its own right. (lonepinefilmhistorymuseum.org)

While this exhibit's examination of Said may not be as comprehensive as necessary to convey the lengths at which stereotypes were employed in the Middle Eastern-set films shot in the Alabama Hills, it goes much further than expected at a museum of this size. This description of Orientalism leads me to my central discussion of the "othering" and depictions of violence that plague films shot in the Alabama Hills. These films can basically be described as light entertainment fronted by a white man (or men) from the West using the Middle East or Middle Eastern cultures as his playground. The film that cemented this genre and its love for the Alabama Hills was 1939's "Gunga Din" directed by George Stevens and starring Cary Grant. While the film takes place in colonial India and not the Middle East, it raises important questions on Orientalism and its relationship with Imperial powers. In the film, British soldiers are the key to stopping the revival of the villainous Thuggee cult bent on running rampant across India. The film portrays war and violence as fun sport and white westerners as the only key to survival in the brutal lands of the Orient. Below I have a shot of the Gunga Din temple set:



Figure 10: Temple Set built in the Alabama Hills from "Gunga Din" (1939)

The exterior shots of the film were almost entirely shot within the Alabama Hills. I also have my shot of the site as it currently exists for comparison. In order to give a geographic reference of where the temple stood, I have marked a specific set of geologic rock formations:



Figure 11: Former location of the "Gunga Din" (1939) temple set

“Gunga Din” was released in 1939; a time when stereotypical and outright racist depictions of other cultures in big-budget studio films was much more commonplace than in modern films. Or was it? This discussion of the cement laid by “Gunga Din” then evolves into a discussion of the most recent blockbuster to use the Alabama Hills to supplant a fundamentally misguided interpretation of the East: 2008’s “Iron Man” directed by Jon Favreau and starring Robert Downey Jr. In the film, weapons manufacturer Tony Stark is forced to become Iron Man as a means of escaping his kidnapping at the hands of an Arabic terrorist organization operating within Afghanistan. Prior to his kidnapping, Stark is giving a demonstration against the backdrop of a wide mountain range located in the Kunar Province in Afghanistan. The mountains,

however, are the Sierra Nevada mountains to the west of the Alabama Hills:



Figure 12: Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark in "Iron Man" (2008)



Figure 13: The site along "Movie Road" in the Alabama Hills where the scene from "Iron Man" was shot

While the aspect ratios of the photos aren't entirely comparable, I have marked significant cuts on the rock behind Robert Downey Jr. to give a better frame of reference.

The most interesting aspect of the Kunar Province of Afghanistan being supplanted in the Alabama Hills of California is the physical geography of the province itself:



Figure 14: A Lush Hillside in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan (Moeller 2009)

The Kunar Province is a river valley. While similarly mountainous, the region in reality is filled with green and full of agriculture. By passing the Alabama Hills off for this region of Afghanistan, the filmmakers are telling the audience that the location is a desert; sandy, rocky, and dangerous. Almost immediately after we are introduced to this geography, we see Tony Stark destroy it. For Stark, Afghanistan is a sandbox and war is economic opportunity. Stark is then quickly kidnapped and rushed off to a cave where his brutal captors keep him imprisoned

and demand his participation in the construction of a set of highly advanced warheads. Within the cave, the audience is then introduced to nearly every possible permeation of Jack Shaheen's "Reel Bad Arab." These terrorists are violent, brutal, and larger-than-life in their scarfs, sunglasses, and salvaged military jackets while also remaining aloof and buffoonish. Stark easily evades their surveillance, constructs his Iron Man suit, and escapes destroying the stolen weapons along the way.

While these events at the beginning of the film ultimately lead to Tony Stark denouncing his role in the weapons industry and liberating an Afghanistan village taken over by the same terrorists who captured him, his redemption does not redeem the trope of a "white savior" or such blatant cultural stereotypes and misdirection of geography by the filmmakers. The geography shown on film paints an Afghanistan that is void of civilization and simultaneously filled with villainy in every secret cave and this is not the case. Why did the filmmakers make the decision to shoot here? Most likely, they believed the geography presented on screen would reinforce what the viewer already expects to see in Afghanistan while also emphasizing the brutality of the situation. This reinforcement is a dangerous use of location manipulation and associates the Alabama Hills with a fictional geography of Asia that is filled with violence

ALGODONES DUNES

Located near the southern border of California and situated between Arizona to the east and Baja California, Mexico to the south, the Algodones Dunes stand out as a geologic landmark of the region. The Algodones Dunes (which contains the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area) stretches around 45 miles long and 6 miles wide with an estimated 380,000 million cubic feet of sand (McCoy 1967). The Dunes' unique appearance and location stand out in the agriculturally populated region of southern California. While the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area is home to some of the largest and internationally recognized motorsport competitions, the area can be easily missed if not explicitly searched for. With the region's massive wind-swept dunes stretching for miles, it is easy to understand why Hollywood uses the dunes for desert areas of the Middle East and Sahara. It is hard to find a more typical depiction of "sand dunes" than this area of southern California. The region has doubled for the Middle East in films ranging from "Road to Morocco" through more modern films like "The Scorpion King."



Figure 15: The Algodones Dunes from the Visitor's Area



Figure 16: Aerial Image of the Algodones and Imperial Dunes gathered from Google Earth

The aerial image above contextualizes the relative size of the dunes in relation to the geography of Southern California that surrounds it. The dunes are wedged between agricultural operations to the West, the Mexican border to the South, and the western ranges of the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge to the East. The origin of the dunes themselves are an anomaly with the prevailing theory being they formed from the windblown sands of the prehistoric Lake Cahuilla (Bureau of Land Management).

For every film that uses the Algodones Dunes as a double for the Middle East, there is a standard shot that comes to mind: figures atop camels as the sun beats down on them and the sand blows across the dunes. Dr. Jack Shaheen, author of “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood

Vilifies a People,” is a strong voice in the conversation over the role Arabs play in modern fiction. In an interview with NPR in 2010, Dr. Shaheen stated that “no matter where the film is shot, inevitably we’re going to have camels and we’re going to have the desert and some tents. I mean, that’s how Hollywood traditionally defines the Middle East” (Blair 2010).

Of course, there are no camels in these Southern California Dunes (but there are plenty of ATVs and buggies traversing the hills on most days) but that does not stop Hollywood from bringing them to this region to further the visual that Dr. Shaheen described. One of the films mentioned previously, “Road to Morocco,” starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, did just that. In the same interview, Dr. Shaheen described “Road to Morocco” as “probably one of the most stereotypical films ever to come out of Hollywood” (Blair 2010). The film is an entry in a series of road comedies that Hope and Crosby produced that lampooned other popular genres of the time with “Morocco” being their take on Oriental adventure films of the era. Under the blanket of satire, the film leans into every possible stereotype and misconception of Arabs, Morocco, and West Africa as a whole. The Arab men in the film are portrayed as violent and brutish and the Arab women in the film are subservient and mistreated. Early in the film, Hope’s character sings that in Morocco “the men eat fire, sleep on nails, and saw their wives in half” before adding in details related to Hindu mysticism which is wholly unrelated and unconnected to Islam (*The Road to Morocco* 1942). The film also features no actors of Arab or North African descent. While this film was designed as a satire and a spoof of modern films of the time, by exploiting every possible stereotype of Arabs and North Africans they just perpetuate problematic Orientalist views without adding any real content, message, or originality to the genre or the discussion of these cultures’ role in media.

Another film that was shot in the Algodones Dunes was the third installment of the original “Star Wars” trilogy: “Return of the Jedi.” In the film, our heroes are attempting to rescue Han Solo from the palace of Jabba the Hutt on the desert planet of Tatooine. Solo owed Jabba a large debt and, after failing to pay it off, is frozen in hibernation and held captive in the palace. After the heroes are caught in their attempt to rescue Solo, Jabba demands they be thrown into a “Sarilaac pit” which serves as a gruesome death penalty for all who are subject to it (*Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* 1983).



Figure 17: R2-D2 looks down at his friends in "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi" (1983)



Figure 18: A shot of the Algodones Dunes angled similarly to the "Return of the Jedi" image

The first photo featured above is a screenshot from the film of R2-D2 looking down from Jabba's sail barge onto his friends, moments away from being plunged into the Sarlaac pit. The comparison shot brings us back down to Earth, so to speak. This is not some planet in a galaxy far, far away. This is a series of sand dunes, relatively small in scale, located only four hours southeast of Los Angeles. While the film is set nowhere near the Middle East, that did not stop producers from taking much of Hollywood's cinematic baggage across the universe.

Since the first Star Wars movie was released in 1979, the franchise has had a difficult relationship with the geographic Middle East and the stereotypes associated with it. The original Star Wars film introduced the desert planet Tatooine and all of the exterior scenes that took place on the planet were shot in Tunisia. Tatooine even gained its name from the Tunisian city of Tatuine. That first film draws comparisons with stereotypes associated with the Middle East and civilizations living in and around deserts that are unmistakable. One of the greatest threats to civilization in the area is a group of nomadic tribespeople known as the "Sand People" (canonically referred to as the "Tusken Raiders") that kidnap, pillage, and murder the inhabitants of the region on a whim. They wear long robes, mask their faces, and scream incoherently with their arms raised above their heads when they mean to intimidate their prey. The fictional group immediately drew comparisons to a very stereotypical allegory for North African Berber and Saharan Tuareg cultural groups but deconstructed down to a basic and violent interpretation. Later in the film, we are introduced to a region called "Mos Eisley" which is described as a "wretched hive of scum and villainy" by old Ben Kenobi, mentor of the film's protagonist. Mos Eisley is portrayed as a fracture of civilization; an outpost where marauders and pirates dwell outside the confines of law and order. We are then introduced to the Mos Eisley Cantina, a watering hole for scoundrels filled with dozens of different alien races that have all found

themselves on this planet for one reason or another. The protagonists of the film are weary of this place and it is made clear that it is a dangerous and unwelcoming crowd. Through using architecture and stereotypes commonly associated with Middle Eastern locales, the filmmakers are giving an impression of the audience of what danger looks like and where it can be found. Essentially saying “the desert (North African, specifically) is lawless and the people there are deadly. Get away from this place as soon as you can.”

The implications drawn between the desert planet Tatooine and the Middle East did not improve in the film’s second sequel, *The Return of the Jedi*, as mentioned previously. One of the many Middle Eastern stereotypes perpetuated in film is that of the wealthy Sheikhs. These powerful men are depicted as outlandish, power-hungry, brutally violent, gross, and often lazy. Sheikhs are depicted as anti-Western and stand in juxtaposition of all the morals and standards associated with the Western hero. Edward Said once described the trope by saying “the perverted sheikh can often be seen snarling at the captured Western hero and blonde girl...” (Said). How does this description compare to Jabba the Hutt in the film? Carrie Fisher, the actress who played the captured Princess Leia forced to wear a metallic bikini with a chain around her neck being held at the other end by Jabba, is brunette. Beyond that, there is no difference beyond Jabba the Hutt and the stereotype of the cinematic sheikh beyond Jabba being a giant alien puppet and sheikhs being based off of very real people and cultures. Jabba the Hutt sentences our heroes to death in the most violent possible method he has at his disposal and is ultimately defeated.

These portrayals of Middle Eastern cultural stereotypes often feel like they deserve less scrutiny than more direct offenses. After all, it is just a comedy! It shouldn’t be taken seriously! Or, it is just a science fiction movie made for kids! It shouldn’t be taken seriously! While these tropes and depictions may fit within the context and narratives of the films, their impacts may

not stay within these films. There is no justification for cultural voices to be silenced just so filmmakers and storytellers can crack a joke at their expense or show the audience a “strange, otherworldly, environment.” In both the comedy “The Road to Morocco” and the sci-fi “Star Wars,” these stereotypes are countered by white Western protagonists who leave those worlds behind. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby leave Morocco just as Luke Skywalker, Ben Kenobi, and Han Solo leave Tatooine. What’s left behind, however, are the outlandish depictions of Middle Eastern and North African cultures that never receive any amount of redemption or justification for their problematic representations. Just like the Algodones Dunes themselves are located within an unassuming environment that appears drastically different than its surroundings, these tropes and exaggerations of cultures in films are present and should be taken seriously.

CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Outside of Moab, Utah, Canyonlands National Park boasts some of the most amazing canyons, buttes, and other geologic wonders in all of the United States. Crafted by the Colorado River, the canyons that can be viewed from the Island in the Sky and the Green River Overlook and beyond are breathtaking and awe-inspiring. The park has been featured in numerous films from “Wagon Master” and “Rio Grande” in ’49 and ’50 to more recent films like “The Lone Ranger” remake from 2013 and “Transformers: Age of Extinction” in 2014. One film in particular that features a shot of the Green River Overlook is 1965’s “The Greatest Story Ever Told” directed by George Stevens and starring Max von Sydow as Jesus.

The film was almost entirely shot throughout this region of the southwest from Canyonlands and Arches National Park near Moab, to Death Valley National Park, to Lake Powell which is a few hundred miles on the other side of Canyonlands from Moab. The biblical epic follows the entire life of Jesus Christ and features as many familiar faces as Hollywood could fit in including Charlton Heston as John the Baptist and John Wayne in a cameo as a Roman Centurion. The film was criticized upon release for its misrepresentation of Biblical events and inauthentic setting. In his original New York Times review of the film, Bosley Crowther criticized the film saying “There is very little simple realism in this massively scenic Passion Play...from the tiny hand of the infant Christ-child that fills the screen in an opening scene to a vast panorama of Death Valley in California that is meant to represent both the outlook and feelings of Jesus emerging from a period of temptation in Galilee, the concept and style of illustration are on an exalted level and scale” (Crowther 1965). Through the casting decisions and the geography of its production, the producers of the film made it very clear that this was a wholly Western and uniquely American interpretation of the events of Jesus Christ’s

life. In the Sermon on the Mount scene of the film, von Sydow's Jesus is perched atop the Green River Overlook at Canyonlands National Park:



Figure 19: Max von Sydow as Jesus Christ in "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965)



Figure 20: The Green River Overlook in Canyonlands National Park near the filming site of "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965)

Director George Stevens was criticized at the time of release for “The Greatest Story Ever Told” for choosing to shoot it entirely in the American southwest. He sacrificed the geography and physical history of the Biblical world in favor of a more familiar face for American audiences. While Biblical geographers and scholars are not entirely certain of the exact location where they believe the Sermon on the Mount (or Plain) took place, early Christian traditions rooted the geography in the Galilean hillside “Mount of Beatitudes” between Tabgha and Capernaum in modern-day Israel (Kent 1983). A website that photographs these possible Biblical geographies known as “BiblePlaces.com” includes a few plausible sites based on the agreed upon plains. Two possible locations include one that overlooks the Sea of Galilee and a hillside setting that was once known as “Mt. Eremos” (Bolen “Mount of Beatitudes”).



Figure 21: Hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee (BiblePlaces.com)



Figure 22: Hillside once known as "Mt. Eremos" (BiblePlaces.com)

The geography portrayed by these two images, whether wholly Biblically accurate or not, are at the very least in the agreed-upon region that the Sermon on the Mount supposedly took place. Comparing these photographs to the earlier photos from *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, there is a considerable difference in the amount of geographic drama being conveyed. In the film, the cliff heights are exaggerated and the stature of Christ is more foreboding than the greener, Biblical possibilities. This choice by George Stevens not only rooted Christ in American geography but also in a sense of American power and position in the world.

By filling the film with the recognizable white Hollywood faces, he takes a story rooted in the Middle East and transforms it into a story that Western audiences want to see themselves as a participant in. Beyond just casting white actors in roles that would've undoubtedly been more diverse in reality, making these Biblical stories line up with American forms of Christianity were commonplace during this period of filmmaking. Melani McAlister described this technique

in Epic Encounters by deriving that “through a powerful set of parallels, overlaps, and refigurations, the ancient Jewish and/or Christian histories of the films are infused with a particularly national signification, and thus recuperated as a usable past, suitable for imagine ‘America’ at the moment of European decline” (McAlister 2003). Stevens’ film relished in its wholly American interpretation of the life of Jesus with the parallels of the decline of the Roman Empire in favor of a new (American and democratic) ideology rising up to replace it. After John the Baptist (played by Charlton Heston) baptizes Jesus, he describes the blue-eyed son of God as “The one we’ve been waiting for.

The world is waiting... it sleeps, waiting to waken” and thus gives the audience even more reason to cling the themes of hegemony and moral superiority onto the shoulders of the film’s protagonist (*The Greatest Story Ever Told* 1965).

One of the most interesting decisions George Stevens made when telling this American interpretation of the story of Jesus Christ was the inclusion of one of America’s most popular actors of the time: John Wayne. Wayne plays a Roman Centurion, responsible for

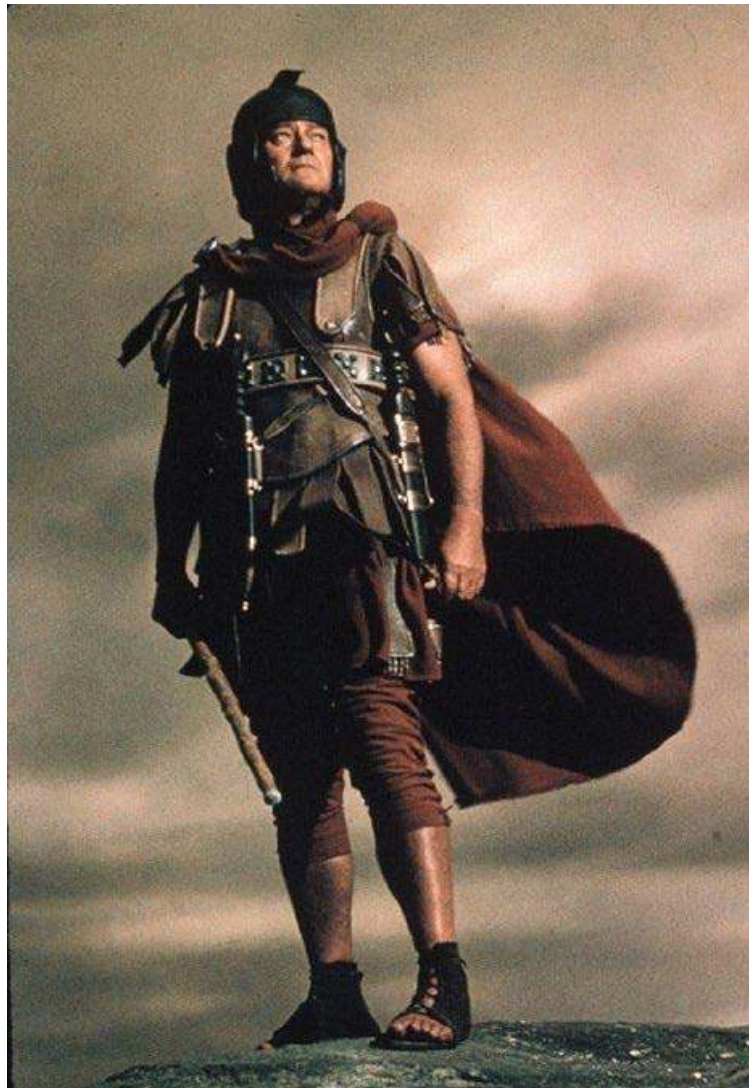


Figure 23: John Wayne as a Roman Centurion in "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965)

guarding Sydow's Jesus as he carries the cross to his crucifixion. Even the Roman Centurion, however, cannot deny the glory of Christ and film ends with Wayne, standing by himself next to the crucifixion and stating that "truly, he was the Son of God" (*The Greatest Story Ever Told* 1965). It is a moment that encapsulates the entire message of the film: Christianity and America are inseparable. By giving this cameo and this line to John Wayne, an actor whose filmography made him the face of the American Western moral mythology, is a statement so massive it immediately removes the audience from any level of realism they may have still been clutching onto. John Wayne and the American southwest and inextricably linked in cinematic history and even in stories that could not be further removed; the American stamp is still present.

MONUMENT VALLEY

Monument Valley is one of the most recognizable filming locations in the world. Notable for its sprawling collection of sandstone buttes, the area has been open for filmmakers since the earliest days of filmmaking. Monument Valley itself is located within the Navajo Nation and is operated under their parks department. The imagery of the landscape was made popular by director John Ford who took the geography of the region and made it synonymous with American Western films. Ford shot ten films in the region with the most popular being “Stagecoach” and “The Searchers,” both of which starred John Wayne. Even when the films setting was nowhere near Arizona or Utah, Ford still found ways to supplant his narratives into the area. On the driving tour provided by the Navajo, one of the most important markers is for “John Ford’s Point” which is said to be Ford’s preferred viewpoint in all of the valley.



Figure 24: View from John Ford's Point in Monument Valley

While the cinematic history of Monument Valley and films set in the Middle East are less connected than other sites, the location’s history in film impacts the role of the Middle East in film to this day. This site, more than any other discussed, was used mainly for supplementary

material in Middle East-set films such as reshoots or pick-up shots. Because of this, it is difficult to line up shots from films directly with landmarks in the park. The history of the Middle East geography in the region is somewhat lost. The most popular Middle East-set films that were shot in part at Monument Valley are Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 film "The Ten Commandments" and his much more popular 1956 remake of the same starring Charlton Heston.

While the 1923 film relied heavily on Monument Valley and the American southwest, even going so far as to build elaborate Egyptian sets on-site, the 1956 remake had a much larger budget and was able to expand further. By 1956, the Biblical Epic genre was at its peak and the production was given a much larger budget than the previous film. This larger budget, coupled with advancements in film technology, enabled DeMille to shoot more internationally than before. However, it should be noted that while DeMille didn't rely on the American southwest as much as he did previously, most of the film was still shot in Italy and Europe rather than Egypt.

During the entirety of the remake, DeMille is making a statement that Moses and the Hebrews parallel the Judeo-Christian moral integrity of the United States and that Ramses and the Egyptians represent fascism and communism run rampant. While DeMille's intentions may be more geopolitical than culturally motivated, his representation of these ethnic groups speaks volumes. In the film, Moses' morals are tied to his Hebrew ethnicity and his Hebrew ethnicity are tied to American interpretations of Judeo-Christian values. As far as the film is concerned, these are all inseparably connected. And by juxtaposition, Ramses' morals are tied to his Egyptian ethnicity and his Egyptian ethnicity is tied to religious practices that are polytheistic and advocate slavery and subjugation. The film makes it very clear which side is the "correct" side and which side is not. Through the thick layers of bronzer covering up the white actors portraying the Egyptians, we see the true enemy. DeMille's intentions may be merely to show

the superiority of American democracy in the time of the Cold War, by showing the audience an interpretation of Egypt and saying “these people are right and these people are wrong,” he is making a statement that viewers will carry beyond the theater. These depictions of the historical Middle East on film create violent cartographies for viewers that place “traditional” Judeo-Christian (and, by association, American) at odds and thereby “othering” outside nations, cultures, and religions.

Sadly, films that “other” cultures are nothing unique in Monument Valley. While Monument Valley may be located within the Navajo Nation, some of the depictions of Indigenous Americans in films shot there have been less than respectful to these communities. In “The Ten Commandments,” a man learns of his “true” ethnicity and leaves the society he knows and is threatened with death because of it. In John Ford’s “The Searchers,” a young woman is kidnapped by a Comanche known only as “Scarface” and, after adopting the ethnicity of her captors, is threatened with death by John Wayne’s character after she is deemed unfit to rejoin the civilized world. Both of these films deal with identity and ethnicity and draws lines in the sand between which ones are and are not acceptable. In “The Searchers,” John Wayne consistently reiterates his distaste for Native Americans and calls his relative a “half-breed” at one point in the film. Eventually, however, he grows to accept this relative while still degrading his Cherokee heritage. By accepting the individual who is willing to assimilate within society despite their own cultural ethnicity but threatening death to an individual who is unable to assimilate, we see the darkest side of the American mythology presented in Western films.

In Westerns, the white Americans travelling west and establishing order in a lawless land aren’t just renegades with six-shooters: they are the true embodiment of the American spirit. John Ford presents a “with us or against us” argument with these portrayals which illustrates a

divisive sentiment on which cultures should assimilate and which should not. In these Westerns, Indigenous Americans (again, white actors in brownface) are seen as lawless and brutal and unable to function within “civilized” society without significant conditioning. These themes are incredibly similar to those seen in stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern people and cultures. Even in the case of “The Ten Commandments,” the Egyptians (just like the Native Americanas) that choose to leave their brutal ethnicities are seen as morally superior than those that don’t.

Conclusion

The specific questions this research set out to answer were:

- Are the same (or similar) locations being used for films set in the Middle East as were used for westerns and biblical epics?
- Are these landscapes accurately representing the Middle Eastern landscapes for which they are doubling?
- Do these landscape substitutions have the potential to create an enhanced sense of fear/danger regarding the Middle East?

Are the same (or similar) locations being used for films set in the Middle East as were used for westerns and biblical epics? Yes. Every film site that was used to shoot scenes of biblical epics also had a history of Western film history attached to it. Referring back to John Ganim's essay from *Hollywood in the Holy Land*, both Westerns and "Middle Easterns" often include "Figures on horseback (or camel) [riding] alone or in small groups across a vast landscape... hostile natives threaten outposts of authority, fragile settlements that seem both timeless and temporary in the face of natural and social upheaval" (Haydock 2009).

Concerning "violent cartographies," Michael Shapiro describes the nature of them as "historically developed" and "socially imbedded" interpretations of space and reality. As far as these interpretations of Middle Eastern geographies are connected to historical developments, the roles of religious identities appear to be the largest factors. In many of the interpretations discussed such as the Biblical Epics and the horror film "The Mummy," the cultures and histories of the Middle East are funneled into an essential religious nature. Similarly to the voices of indigenous Americans in Western films, this leads to voices of the modern Middle East being

silenced. In every film discussed that was shot in the southwest but represented Egypt, the Egyptian people were given credit only so far as to say the history that predated them was of significance. Some of the examples even carried narratives that would disenfranchise the modern Islamic community of positive significance in the region.

While all of the films studied in relation to these geographic sites carry significant meaning, none of these filming sites exist in a vacuum and many of the themes discussed with some locations transfer over to the others. For example, there have been science fiction depictions of remote desert planets in nearly every site discussed. I focused mainly on “Star Wars” and how those films relate to the Imperial Sand Dunes but there are many more examples including Planet of the Apes sequels shot at Red Rock Canyon State Park and John Carter of Mars being shot at Canyonlands and Monument Valley. As stated, every single one of the sites mentioned (with lesser emphasis but not exception placed at the dunes) has had countless Westerns filmed in them.

Are these landscapes accurately representing the Middle Eastern landscapes for which they are doubling? As far as “socially imbedded” interpretations go, we see stereotypes across every film discussed. Many filmmakers chose the American southwest to familiarize the audience to the locations or to give them what they already expected to see based on perpetuated visualizations. There is a reason the filmmakers who made Iron Man chose a desert area in the Alabama Hills instead of a more realistic location to represent the Kunar Province: deserts and Islamic terrorists are already a familiar connection. There is a reason Jabba the Hutt resembled the stereotypical sheikh: it reinforces a stereotype the audience already knows. As film viewers and audience members, it is essential that every individual thinks critically concerning what they are being shown on screen. As long as stereotypes are perpetuated without confrontation, they

will continue to exist. By using film sites and geographies that we are already familiar with, we normalize these stereotypes and these behaviors and further remove ourselves from their falsehoods.

As mentioned numerously throughout the research, all of these film sites were subject to racially insensitive casting. Many of the films featured at this site used white actors to portray Middle Eastern or Native American people. For the entirety of cinematic history, the decision to cast white actors for ethnically non-white roles has been an issue and is still an issue in the film industry today. These casting choices, as noted in this discussion, are dangerous and misleading and allow for stereotypical and false narratives to perpetrate without the involvement or consent of the culture's voice.

Do these landscape substitutions have the potential to create an enhanced sense of fear/danger regarding the Middle East? Are geographic areas "violent?" Can physical geography perpetuate violence and create violent behavior? On screen, yes. The films studied in this research carry with them portrayals of violence that transcend screen. As long as violence is connected to specific geographies and reinforced consistently in film, then the geography will remain subject to those perceptions. If, however, filmmakers are able to transcend the tropes attached to place and culture, this can be avoided. Geography is not just physical; its cultural and personal. In Jack Shaheen's "Reel Bad Arabs," he quotes William Greider of the Washington Post as saying "much of what Westerners 'learned' about Arabs sounds similar to what nineteenth-century Americans 'discovered' about Indians on this continent... acceptable villains make our troubles so manageable" (Shaheen 2003). By projecting these cultures on screen as strange and savage, they are then effectively othered and the violence against them both abroad and in the U.S. is normalized. Viewers develop violent associations in their personal

cartographies that are fundamentally attached to place and subsequently attached to people. If this chain can be broken or at least loosened in the film industry, violent connections can be avoided.

Moving forward, critically speaking, if filmmakers are unable to move past tropes and stereotypes that have existed since the beginning of cinema, then audiences must. Films are never exactly how they appear; they are the vision of a specific creative force and thus are biased. Films are views into stories from a specific lens and should be treated as such. It is often difficult to maintain critical thinking down to the geographic level when evaluating films but it is critically important. Just as the viewer must evaluate the geography they are presented with on screen, they must also evaluate the cultures and behaviors presented with those geographies. Because, as this research has shown, the location presented may not be the location imagined and the cultures presented may be just as blatant of a misrepresentation.

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