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Postcolonialism, Orientalism, and Censorship: Decolonisation and the Analysis of Arab Cinema

Word Count: 1,653

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Postcolonialism, Orientalism, and Censorship: Decolonisation and the Analysis of Arab Cinema

Amongst influences of modern pop culture, classical literature and art, and the history of cinema, colonialism has made a direct impact on contemporary cinema and the stories it has brought into the world of filmmaking. Globalisation has become an integral part of how we create, consume, and judge our media, and with westernisation's iron grip on the world's consumable entertainment and filmmaking industries, the spread of colonial ideologies has become prevalent in most forms of modern filmmaking as described by postcolonial theory. Reaching towards the decolonisation of media and understanding the effect of colonialism on developing countries' film industries can be feasible with films such as Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers*. Examining films in which the filmmaker transcends colonial and imperialist concepts can aid us in decolonisation within our own creations. When filmmakers go a step further to decolonise the media they create, modern visual culture recasts previous notions of developing countries and their media, leading to a more diverse industry and globalisation of foreign filmmaking. As we progress as filmmakers, making more politically aware and socially relevant films, we must learn to decolonise what we create. However, colonial frameworks are so heavily ingrained in Western culture that the issue isn't with decolonising, but with making the West aware of what needs to be decolonised in the first place. To resolve this issue, we are left with turning to the past; filmmakers who came before us making films to tell their stories and pave the way for us to fight orientalist and colonial ideals to create a new, inclusive visual culture.

The works of writers and filmmakers in regards to decolonisation were key to the discussion of the study of postcolonial cinema, with books such as *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001) by Franz Fanon and *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said. In terms of films, *Battle of Algiers* (1966) directed by Gillo Pontecorvo and films from Arab communities and brief examples of Arab self-portrayal in postcolonial filmmaking were also examined.

Understanding Neo-Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Erasure

For the Arab world, the after-effects of colonialism have shaped and reformed modern-day circumstances, including the world of filmmaking. The exploitation of developing countries for European economic prosperity may seem to have dissipated in recent years, however, neocolonialism is still a prevailing issue, directly affecting the content of contemporary film. From the negative stereotypes of Arabs to the underlying connotations associating the global south with poverty and dirtiness, these notions can be held responsible for postcolonialism seeping into the media we consume daily. Decolonisation takes these connotations and reprimands them while simultaneously transforming them into progressive ones that uplift those subject to them. In *The Wretched of the Earth,* Frantz Fanon describes that "[the] belief in fatality removes all blame from the oppressor," (2001, p.42) a statement that accounts for just how difficult decolonisation can be for those dealing with the consequences of colonialism. The assumption that reworking colonial frameworks of cinema are the responsibility of the oppressed solely is naive due to how much power past colonial notions have over contemporary media. This power however is not limited to character tropes or damaging stereotypes but goes as far as silencing the voices of the oppressed and controlling what they own and create. One example of this is the destruction of film archives during the colonial sieges in Palestine [Fig. 1.] "Palestinian films…were lost with the disappearance of Palestinian Film Archive during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982." (Shibli, 2013) Settler colonialism seeks to erase the art and innovation of past nations, which has in turn permanently damaged the world of Arab cinema. To begin the process of decolonisation, it only makes sense for those in control of most media to integrate its ideologies into their work. Overall, the effects of colonialism are long-lasting and as a filmmaker, it's one's part to understand how colonialism may be affecting one's work and how to begin decolonising it.
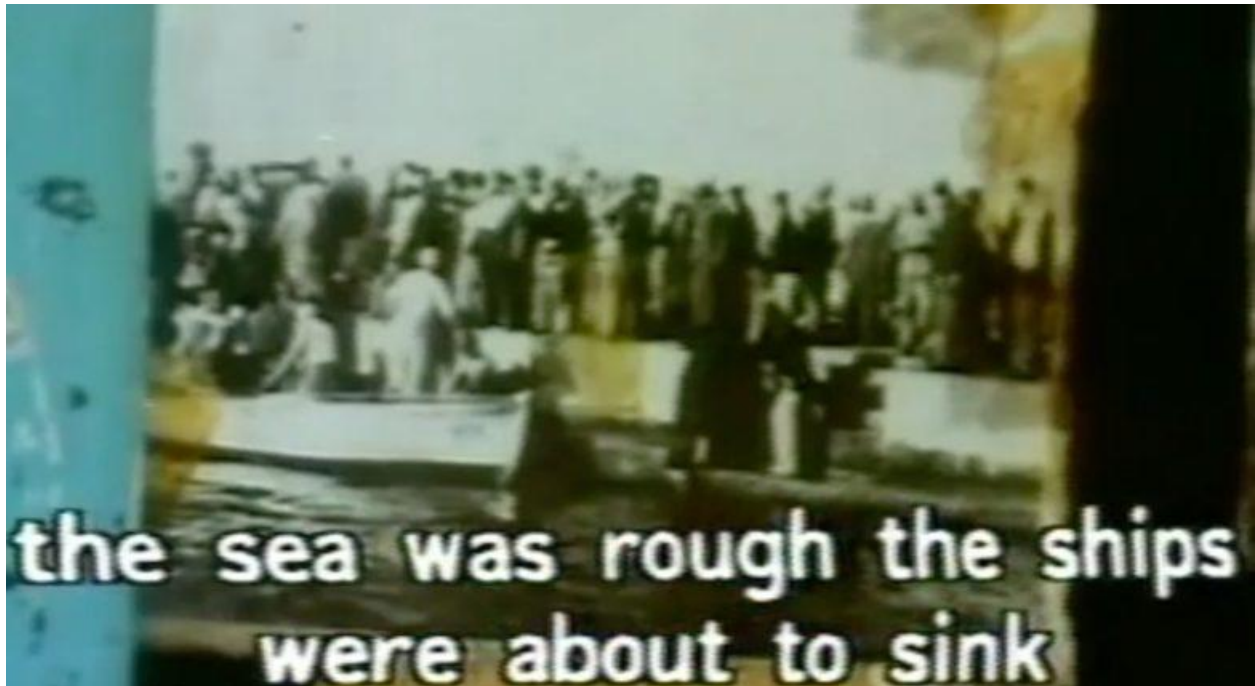
Figure 1: Bawabat Alfawqa *(1991) or* The Upper Gate *directed by Arab Loutfi, one of the many films lost during the Palestinian colonial siege recounting the history of a town and its residents. The film was retrieved by Azza El Hassan during her work on "The Void Project"*

Orientalism and Negative Portrayals of Arabs in Film

A fault of postcolonial cinema has been the colonial framework still set into place, one of which is negative stereotypes in film and TV. For many Arabs and Muslims, these may be the villainous terrorists one can find in a modern action movie. Representation and diversity have been a worthy cause to many in the film industry, however, it seems the only times an Arab can hear their own language is in the context of a caricature of a Muslim about to commit a crime only the white lead can stop. One film deemed by many Arab-Americans as appallingly islamophobic was *Rules of Engagement* (2000), depicting scenes of American soldiers opening fire on Yemeni civilians in a glorified and justified light [Fig. 2]. Some are simple comedies such as *The Dictator* (2012), but even a simple comedy can reinforce damaging stereotypes and Orientalist ideologies towards the Arab community, specifically the Arab-American diaspora. In the age of globalisation and the monopoly of Western media, Edward Said's writings on *Orientalism* can best describe the postcolonial experience (1978, p.26).

"One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds…standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient.'"

These films in turn dehumanise Arabs and Muslims while simultaneously reversing decolonisation in Western media, and so filmmakers end up taking steps backwards on the path to decolonise the media they create simply by not understanding the damage these films may cause.
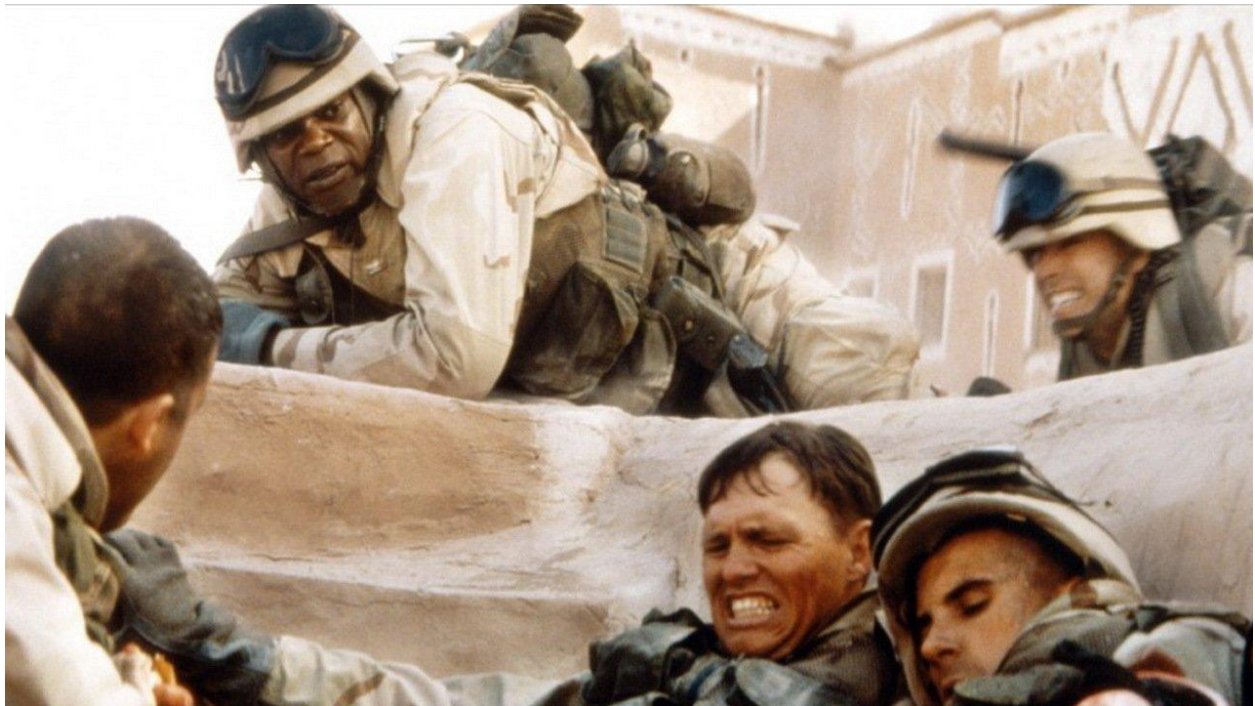
Figure 2: Rules of Engagement (2000) *depicting American soldiers and glorifying violence towards civilians in the Middle East*

Filmmakers Investigating Colonial Narratives

It is no surprise that filmmakers are constantly inspired by the world they're in, and the stories from imperialist periods are often the subject of historical films. One of the most iconic films regarding this narrative is *The Battle of Algiers*, a film praised for its combination of techniques of classic documentary filmmaking and fictitious storytelling. In radical communities and

organisations such as the IRA, PLO, and black panthers, the film had become an essential and inspirational viewing with its retelling of the Algerian fight for national liberation (Daulatzai, 2016). Italian neorealist filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo documents the lives of the Algerian people under French colonial rule, and through scenes of violence and despair, we get a look into the world of revolution [Fig. 3]. Pontecorvo himself was an Italian revolutionary, and with quick cuts, haunting close-ups, and jarring handheld camera movements, he created a film perfectly encapsulating the heat of a people's revolution (Keenyslide, 2004); crowds of people atop one another, the atmospheric depiction of Arab communities in contrast to the French cafes and bars, and the translation of revolutionary hearts onto the screen. The film is less one that revolves around characters in a situation, but more so of the situation itself and how it has affected those in it. All actors were non-professionals, Algerians who were even part of the war themselves, which creates an even more raw and realistic viewing experience with brilliant lifelike performances. In an interview with Edward Said and Pontecorvo, the latter talks of the influence of music and score to how he shot and decided which scenes to include in the film, and how the sound was just as important to the film as was the image (Said, 2000.) *The Battle of Algiers* has over time become a symbol of liberation, inspiring young filmmakers and radicals wherever in the world.

Figure 3: The Battle of Algiers *directed by Gillo Pontecorvo displays the scenes of revolution, civilians and revolutionaries, atop one another in a crowd of outrage and determination*

Arab Cinema, Censorship, and the Egyptian Golden Age

While many Arab civilians were becoming accustomed to their newfound liberation, so were their governments, and while censorship had always existed under colonialism, it had not disappeared overnight within these independent nations. Censorship still ran rampant in Egyptian cinema, often attributed as "the Hollywood of the Orient." It had been heavily influenced and controlled by foreigners with westernisation in mind, creating films that often avoided political and social topics and instead favoured melodrama and orientalist views of Islam and Egyptian culture (Helal, 2014, p.3). But with time and shifts in power, films in Egypt had become less centred on these past standards to more realistic and representative ones of the Egyptian people; *Al-Azeema* (1939) directed by Kamal Seleem was groundbreaking in that it was one of the first to bring up more taboo topics within the industry such as arranged marriage and critics on capitalism [Fig. 4]. But the Egyptian film industry still has a long way to go, with new films that continue to delve into often frowned upon topics such as sexuality and adultery and still met with waves of controversy online. For example, the film Perfect Strangers (2022), an Egyptian remake of the Italian film with the same name, received an outrage both online and even the law, with people calling for the film to be banned (Welk, 2022). So while the Golden Age of Egyptian Cinema, consisting of the safe melodramas that fit in perfectly with tradition is widely loved, censorship on new and realistic stories may still be among us way past colonial influence.

Figure 4: Al-Azeema *or* The Will *(1939), the first Egyptian film to discuss realistic crises in the Egyptian community rather than melodrama, a film still widely praised in Egypt today*

Decolonisation: A Duty for Arab Filmmakers?

Decolonising media is needed more than ever, although time has passed, and the film industry has developed, its effects are still present. With globalisation growing more and more, it's not only a duty for filmmakers in countries once under colonial rule to decolonise, but for filmmakers everywhere. Colonial frameworks are so heavily ingrained in Western culture that the issue isn't with decolonising, but with making the West aware of what needs to be decolonised in the first place. Negative stereotypes and filmmaking techniques that frame the global south as poor or dirty such as colour grading and oriental background music are all at the fault of colonial frameworks that remain from old cinema portrayals of the Orient. In the future, as diversity becomes more prevalent in the filmmaking industry, decolonisation will be a much easier task, and promoting foreign filmmaking in a mostly Western industry is just another way the industry can rise up above an outdated contemporary cinema.

Abstract

As we progress as filmmakers, making more politically aware and socially relevant films, we must learn to decolonise what we create. However, colonial frameworks are so heavily ingrained in Western culture that the issue isn't with decolonising, but with making the West aware of what needs to be decolonised in the first place. To resolve this issue, we are left with turning to the past; filmmakers who came before us making films to tell their stories and pave the way for us to fight orientalist and colonial ideals that creates a new, inclusive visual culture.

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