

CHAPTER TWO

Reel Negatives

Enemies: We first kill people with our minds, before we kill them with weapons. Whatever the conflict... we're on God's side; they're barbaric.

We're good, they're evil.

—Sam Keen

More than a century of reel injurious Arab stereotypes, including the majority of post-9/11 movies, have helped us “kill people with our minds.” Instead of mainstream studios projecting Arabs as regular folks—family men, women, and children—films continued defaming them as the unkempt, unscrupulous enemy “other.” Here, I offer detailed discussions of those films that display Arabs as Villains, Terrorists, Maidens, Sheikhs, and Cameos (those films where producers inject unexpected, malicious slurs and scenes demeaning Arabs when the movie is about something else altogether). All these categories are noted in the film listings in the second half of the book. I also discuss some films featuring immoral Arab Americans. My explanations are not intended to exhaust you, dear reader; rather my intent is to guide and enlighten by referring to selected scenes from representative films that help damage a people.

Villains & Terrorists

A consistent pattern of reel dehumanization emerges here. Little has changed since the reel US Ambassador in *Hostage* (1986) quipped, “I can’t tell one from another—wrapped in those bed sheets they all look the same to me.” No matter when or where the action occurs, Hollywood presents reel look-alike Arab religious radicals lurking behind every sand dune and skyscraper, terrorizing Christians and Jews.

Hollywood's most violent movie since 9/11 is *The Kingdom* (2007). In this Rambo-in-Arabia shoot-'em-up, viewers applauded the heroics of four FBI agents who fly off to Saudi Arabia and kill Arabs. Before FBI investigators put their "boots on Saudi soil," one agent describes Saudi Arabia as being "a bit like Mars." In fact, it's much worse. Reel Saudi Arabia is a sinister desert, where evil, machine-gun-toting Arabs lurk in the shadows, waiting to kill Americans. The audience is led to believe that we had better kill the Arabs—even the women and children—quick, before they kill us. Yes, the film shows two "good" Saudis, but their presence is mere tokenism. The director could have quoted the Saudi grand mufti, who actually said four days after 9/11: "Hijacking planes, terrorizing innocent people, and shedding blood constitute a form of injustice that cannot be tolerated by Islam, which views them as gross crimes and sinful acts." He could have quoted Crown Prince Abdullah: "Terrorists are criminals and murderers with total disregard for any Islamic and human values or decency." And he could have cited the respected scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who immediately after 9/11 denounced al-Qaeda, saying "Our hearts bleed because of the attacks that have targeted the World Trade Center...." The cleric is widely listened to and read by a huge Muslim audience. Instead, Berg chose to use the broadest, bloodiest brush possible.

This jingoistic film is a setback for efforts to improve relations between the United States and the Arab world. In a time that calls for cultural understanding, we get crude antagonism. In a time that calls for nuance and clarity, we get dangerous simplifications and gross distortions.

In September 2002, one year after 9/11, the historical epic *Four Feathers*, the seventh film version of A.E.W. Mason's book, arrived on movie screens. It's a familiar tale: One white, civilized British Christian "cowboy" crushes scores of dark uncivilized Arab Muslim "Indians." This one scene pretty much sums up the religious divide: As the British prepare to invade Sudan's "godforsaken desert," the camera cuts to a soldier reading a military pamphlet: "Above all," it says, "remember you're a Christian soldier."

Reel Arab terrorists show up everywhere—on land and in the air—in Europe, Hollywood, New York City, Somalia, and Israel. The made-in-Israel film *The Point Men* (2001), shows good Israelis

killing bad Palestinians. The key "terrorist" brutally murders Israelis, Americans, his nurse, even a kind blond woman. In the end, the Israeli hero shoots the Palestinian dead. The Israeli film *Promised Land* (2004) shows ruthless Arab sex slavers selling off Eastern European women. In another Israeli-connected film, *Air Marshal* (2003), an insensitive, crude film that shamelessly exploits 9/11's victims, producers Avi (Danny) Lerner, Boaz Davidson, and Alain Jakubowicz show vicious, stereotypical Arabs on a commercial jet terminating passengers.

Ridley Scott's action-loaded, based-on-a-true-story *Black Hawk Down* (2002) shows valiant American troops shooting dead dozens of dark-skinned Somali Muslims. *The Deal* (2005) shows the US in turmoil: the economy's a mess and gasoline costs \$6.50 a gallon. A radio commentator explains why: "The war with the Corporation of Arab States today entered its third year." Stock footage reveals enflamed Arab oil fields.

Arabic-speaking terrorists pop up nearly everywhere in the popular puppet film *Tenn America: World Police*, and they want to destroy America. Not to fret. Our team heroes fly off to France and gun down all those Osama bin Laden look-alikes and stop the bad guys from launching a worldwide attack that will be "9/11 times 200." Some adults may perceive *Tenn America* for what it is—a satire on President's Bush's war on terror. But other viewers, especially youngsters, will walk away with violent images of fervent anti-Arabism.

We also see Arab terrorists in the intelligent, compelling *United 93*, which effectively displays heroic, ordinary airline passengers and flight attendants sacrificing their lives to save countless others on the ground. Post-9/11's most disturbing movie, *The Stone Merchant* (2006), shows some reel bad Arab terrorists killing civilians at Rome's airport; the villains and their cohorts also explode a dirty bomb with radioactive material, killing scores of civilians aboard a ferry in Dover Harbor. The protagonist, a handicapped professor, preaches throughout the film that Muslims are "in a religious war to conquer the world," adding only "an army of Christians can thwart the Muslim invasion."

There's also *Red Mercury*, a fiction film set in London and released soon after real Muslims killed more than 30 Londoners,

July 7, 2005. Most of the reel scenes are set inside the Olympus Grill restaurant. Here, three nasty terrorists hold brave patrons hostage, constantly threatening them and the Grill's owner. In the end, the police act decisively, preventing the villains from unleashing their dirty bomb.

Cut to Hollywood! *American Dreamz* (2006), too, projects Arabs armed with weapons of mass destruction. Al-Qaeda terrorists decide to blow up the US president, and their chosen assassin is a naïve, peace-loving Arab named Omer. Before Omer can summon the genie from Aladdin's lamp, his wish—to appear on a top-rated TV show such as *American Idol*—is granted. But then three members of a reel Orange County terrorist cell surface, and these al-Qaeda thugs give Omer a direct order: When the commander in chief appears on the show, you must set off a bomb, blowing up the US president and yourself as well. Or else!

Or, hitch a ride to New York City! Most Arab cab drivers in New York are the same as other cabbies: Honest, helpful, and multilingual. Not so in *Fatwa* (2006) and *Crank* (2006). *Crank's* bull-headed cabbie refuses to allow the soaking-wet protagonist back into his cab. So, the hero throws the driver onto the sidewalk, and yells "Al-Qaeda!" Three people charge, beating up the cabbie. In *Fatwa*, a crazed Arab cab driver from Libya, Samir al-Faridi, brutally kills several Americans, a young Israeli girl, and reel US Senator Maggie Davidson. *Fatwa's* closing frames show reel Arab brutality: Samir entraps and forces Davidson to look at a video that shows the senator exactly how he went about murdering her daughter.

Perhaps *Fatwa* and *Crank's* reel bad cabbies helped prompt Republican Senator Conrad Burns of Montana to say that the terrorists "live among us; [they] drive taxi cabs in the daytime and kill at night." No one made a fuss over the senator's anti-Arab comment. Thus, his words advanced the stereotype, adversely affecting real Arab-American cab drivers. Had Senator Burns viewed Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Darkside*, selected Best Documentary at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival, he might have altered his statement. *Taxi* documents real violence—the fatal beating of an Afghan taxi driver by American guards in 2002.

Two Degrees (2001) and three 2005 films—*The War Within*, *Love + Hate*, and *Crash*—target Arab-American convenience store

operators and their dark-complexioned look-alikes. The portraits vary. *Crash's* Iranian women appear as compassionate, respectful, and hard-working Americans. *Love + Hate* presents, for the first time ever, likeable Sikh-American characters. But *The War Within* falls back on damaging stereotypes, projecting a cartoon cutout of a reel terrorist: A Pakistani-American university graduate functioning as an evil sociopath. Though he pretends to be friendly with everyone, he rejects the Quran's message of peace—"To forbid the wrong [and] commend the good"—and joins a New York-based sleeper cell, becoming a reel suicide bomber. He walks into Grand Central Station and sets off a huge explosion, killing scores of commuters.

The most detestable post-9/11 film is *Two Degrees*. This vile movie pits crude Arab-American brothers Faisal and Reza against their African-American neighbors. The ugly, lecherous brothers operate a neighborhood store. One customer, Angela, a down-and-out African-American woman, needs some food; she begs Faisal for groceries, he agrees to help—provided she has sex with him, which she very reluctantly does. Brother Reza, too, tries to force himself onto Angela. In time, Angela's boyfriend enters the room. Furious, he shoots both men dead. The brothers are called "towel-head mother-fuckers," "your camel-eating ass," and "you Ayarabs ain't shit." Should you, dear reader, be interested in seeing more realistic images of Arab-American store owners, without the vile stereotypes, I recommend Rola Nashif's short film, *Detroit Undeclared* (2007); here the protagonists happily interact with their African-American customers, and vice versa.

Two films show vile Arabs killing, abusing, and/or lusting after the protagonists. In Disney's *Young Black Stallion* (2003), a desert bandit leader leers threateningly at an Arab teenage girl, but before he can capture her, she mounts her camel and rushes off to safety. And in *The Mummy's Kiss* (2002), homegrown female college students are seduced and terrorized by a kinky reincarnated sorceress. The sorceress also kills a college professor and a security guard. Finally, the X-rated *Mummy Raider* (2001) presents the reel scale Arab-Nazi connection: A revived rampaging Egyptian mummy tries to bring back "Hitler's Legions" from the dead.

Maidens

Hollywood's reel Arab women surface in several films, the most offensive being *Pretty Persuasion* (2005). Here, producers frame a Palestinian Muslim teenager, Randa, differently from her all-American classmates—as a shy, unwelcome, undesirable outsider. As soon as Randa enrolls at a posh Beverly Hills high school, the film's protagonist, Kimberly, points to Randa's hijab and quips: "What's that thing on your head? You haven't tried to bomb anybody, have you?" At the end of a series of humiliations, Randa kills herself. Her tragic death should have been meaningful and elicited viewers' heartfelt sympathy, but since she was portrayed all along as a cardboard cutout of a character, this is never really possible. If only *Persuasion's* producers had adhered to the wisdom of Rome's Archbishop John Foley: Young viewers, especially, writes Foley, "learn from fiction films how dangerous hatred is [and] how destructive religious ignorance is."

White-hat versus black-hat desert dramas present this stale theme: Arab Princesses prefer reel civilized Western heroes to buffoonish Arab potentates. In Disney's *Hidalgo* (2004), for example, Princess Jazira, the sheikh's bright, veiled daughter, willingly betrays fellow Arabs by helping Hopkins, the protagonist, win the death-defying desert race. Why? Because if an Arab prince wins, he will take her as "his fifth wife." Sighs the princess: "[I will become] the youngest in his harem, no more than a slave in his house." In *Secondhand Lions* (2003), when the lovely Princess Yasmine tries to escape the lecherous potentate's slimy grasp, he catches her and imprisons her in his harem. The princess places a knife to her throat—she would rather die than wed the sheikh. But in time, the American she truly loves, a reel good Texan, rides to her rescue.

Sheikhs

Uncivilized desert sheikhs with too much money and too many harem maidens surface in several films. In *Secondhand Lions* and *Hidalgo*, Arabs oppose Western protagonists and enslave young Africans. The action in *Lions* is projected in a swashbuckling comic-book style, in far-off Arabia, circa 1915. Clichéd images of the sheikh's villainous sidekicks—the dark-skinned "Arab horde"—fill the screen. Cut to a young boy's great uncles from Texas, who shoot dead dozens of the sheikh's slavers. As Uncle Hub cuts down

the ruler's mustached villains—I stopped counting after 30—the sheikh's veiled harem maidens cheer him on.

Lions's producers did not necessarily have to vilify Arabs. They could have offered a more factual, realistic storyline based on the following scenario. During World War I Arabs trying to free themselves from Ottoman rule joined the Allies. Throughout the real conflict they fought side-by-side against the Turks and Germans. Given this historically accurate information, the producers might easily have depicted the two uncles from Texas befriending and fighting alongside freedom-fighting Arabs, contesting Ottoman troops.

Like *Lions*, Disney's \$100-million-dollar Arabian cowboy epic *Hidalgo* replenishes stale stereotypes: Arab versus American, Arab versus Arab, Arab versus Africans, Arab woman versus Arab man. The action in *Hidalgo* takes place in 1890s desert Arabia. On screen: Movieland's first half-cowboy, half-Indian protagonist, Hopkins. Every 15 or 20 minutes Hopkins beats up or or guns down ugly Bedouin "bandits." Ruling Sheikh Riyadh's nephew, especially, wants to kill Hopkins. Here, too, Arab slavers abuse young, chained Africans. And like *Lions's* Uncle Hub, the Western hero intervenes: Hopkins saves a black youth from being auctioned off. The angry sheikh corners Hopkins and orders a gloating Arab to sharpen his blade—to castrate the American. "You are an impure unbeliever," barks the sheikh. "You will be gelded, like a stallion not worthy of breeding."

Malevolent Arabs kidnap the sheikh's daughter, demanding she wed a fellow Arab, or else. In time, Hopkins snatches her from danger. Outnumbered 25 to one, he shoots the abductors dead. In the end, despite impossible odds, Hopkins wins the Arabs' desert race, leaving a hundred Bedouin riders in the dust. No surprise here. Ninety-nine percent of the time Western protagonists cross the finish line ahead of Arabs. Check out Disney's *Dreamer: Inspired by a True Story* (2005), Cannon's *Sabana* (1983), and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Black Stallion* (1979), and *The Black Stallion Returns* (1983).

In *The Majestic* (2001) and *Spartan* (2004) lecherous Arabs lust after blondes, again! Opening frames of *The Majestic* reveal a 1950s movie audience watching a black-and-white film called "Sand Pirates of the Sahara." The screen displays a dark desert tem-

ple, home of "HORUS, the Falcon-Headed God." Cut to the robbed Prince Khalid about to rape the blond heroine. The dashing Western hero rushes into the frame. Sword in hand he declares: "Taste my steel, you dog!" Khalid pulls his sword. Blades clash! The American kills the Arab, and embraces his "desert dove." Dubai's desert sheikhs operate an international slavery ring in *Spartan* (2004), and they, too, are obsessed with ensnaring blondes. The slavers and their cohorts kidnap and whisk off to the Arabian Gulf "blond [American] girls," including the American president's daughter. One Arab sex slaver tells the American protagonist: "When we reach Dubai, I will give you many nice and smooth girls... not women, girls, all young, all blondes."

Cameos

Gratuitous slurs and scenes and dialogue targeting especially sheikhs and villains are injected into 24 Cameo movies—a quarter of post-9/11's 100+ films. Though most scenarios have nothing whatsoever to do with the Middle East, insidious Arabs pop up nearly everywhere, from the Arab desert to the US, and in every kind of tale imaginable, from sci-fi thrillers to contemporary comedies and dramas. Here's a sampling.

—Closing frames in Jackie Chan's *Gen-Y Cops* (2003) show power-mad Ahmed and his uncouth henchmen moving to pursue and turn loose on civilians an awesome, destructive robot. In time the protagonists arrive; they pull their guns and open fire—BANG—BANG—BANG—the burmoosed Ahmed and Arab henchmen are shot dead.

—Faisal and his "plain mad" Iraqi thugs aim to buy weapons of mass destruction in *Time Lapse* (2001). Before they can run off with the "nuclear suitcase," a US agent kills them.

—All the action in *The Marine* (2006) takes place in the US—except the opening frames. An al-Qaeda leader and some despicable Iraqi insurgents move to behead three captured US soldiers. The leader links Islam with terror, screaming: "*Allahu akbar*" (God is great). Abruptly, the marine hero enters the frame. He guns down the can't-shoot-straight Iraqis and rescues the prisoners. —*Symate* (2006) presents a special super-spy hero—Minkley the Chimpy! Opening frames reveal the clad-in-Arab-garb Minkley

performing heroics in the desert. He prevents Arab villains from launching a powerful missile that would kill the "world leaders attending a peace summit."

Minkley was not the first reel chimp to wear a burmoose and terminate and ridicule Arabs. In *Paradise* (1984), for example, Doc the Chimp topples reel bad Bedouins. And in *Cannonball Run II* (1981), a burmoosed primate kisses an Arab sheikh—full on the lips. The sheikh smiles, telling his son: "If only your mother could kiss like that."

—Reel sheikhs are sexual perverts and white slavers in *Out of Reach* (2004). Two Arabic-speaking bad guys run an Eastern European human trafficking network; the men kidnap, hold hostage, and sell young girls to the highest bidders.

—*Click* (2006) displays, for about 99 seconds, the no-class Prince Habeeboo and his five bearded sidekicks wearing robes. The prince barks orders at his classy American architect, demanding he scrap his classic, well-designed "Arabian Palace." What the Prince wants is not class, but trash—an estate that resembles an "Arabian hoochie house." He thinks a hoochie palace will make it easier for him and his silent Arabs to have sex orgies with "hoochies." The dense Arabs also insist on a much "longer bar," and demand a water drain be placed in the center of the main room—for "wet-T-shirt contests."

—Reel rich Arabs buy up chunks of the US, again. In Disney's *Dreamer: Inspired by a True Story* (2005), robbed moguls invade the US and acquire racehorses and lush Kentucky farms. In *What's the Worst that Can Happen?* (2001), the two American protagonists convince a realtor they have more than enough money to buy anything, including a posh building in Washington, DC. Why does the realtor fall for their ruse? Because they are dressed like reel wealthy Arabs. Boasts one bogus Arab: "For right amount of money, camel can dance up a pyramid!"

—And in the Academy Award-winning epic, *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (2003), the climactic battle scene features bad guys in black head scarves. Unlike the film's otherworldly villains, these Bedouin clones possess human features.

Taken together, reel negative movies impact and demoralize viewers, especially American Arabs and American Muslims. One

example: Consider clean-shaven Bay Area resident Sam Hachem, who has sandy-brown hair and gray-green eyes. Because Hachem is usually thought to be Eastern European, he's seldom harassed. But when folks find out that he's actually a Lebanese immigrant, and that his first name is really Hussein, he's suddenly perceived as a threat. Once at a bar, a patron joked, asking Hachem if he was going to blow up the place. When *United 93* (2006) was shown at a Phoenix, Arizona movie theater, two angry people confronted several young Arab-American women, telling them: "Take off your f— burqas and get the f— out of this country. We don't want you in this country. Go home." Some people fail to realize that wearing a veil or headdress does not make one less American; nor does wearing a yarmulke or a Mennonite bonnet.

Some youngsters are humiliated because vicious slurs are sometimes used to justify harassment and exclusion. Stereotypes prompt other teens to deny their roots, dye their hair blond, and tell their friends that they're Italian or Spanish—not Arab. Though one's name and faith are points of pride and dignity, some anxious youngsters trying to fit in change their names. Suha becomes Susan, Jihad goes for Jay, and Hussein opts for Harry.

The pervasive power of reel negative stereotypes impact the political and moral values of viewers worldwide. Yet imagemakers continue pitching to the studios Middle East action films riddled with clichés. Future bang-bang films, says *Variety's* editor-in-chief Peter Bart, should be: "The classic good-versus-bad guy story; the sort of yarn that stamped the Western as a studio staple." Only this time around the "bad guys would be al-Qaeda; they are all mad at the US." But is it really in our best interests to draw on post-9/11 fears and resentments, and to project the Arab people, or any other people for that matter, as being evil all the time? Yes, al-Qaeda is our enemy, but as *Chicago Tribune* critic Roger Ebert reminds us: "Every individual is somebody's child, and some hope to have children of their own. Movies fueled by hate... are not part of the solution." Fortunately, some imagemakers concur with Ebert, believing that instead of a bunch of "bad guy versus good guy" movies, more evenhanded films should rule the moment.