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CHAPTER THREE

Reel Positives

The fractured post-9/11 world we are now living in has made xenophobia and racism [acceptable]... But my film [Babel] is about compassion... people sharing pain, sharing love.

—Alejandro González Iñárritu

When I began researching this book I sensed that post-9/11 images of Arabs would be the same as pre-9/11 ones. They're not. Even though the majority of post-9/11 films do, in fact, vilify a people, I am somewhat encouraged to report that since 9/11, silver screens have displayed, at times, more complex, evenhanded Arab portraits than I have seen in the past. Some producers did not dehumanize Arabs, and instead presented decent, heroic characters—champions, even, in several films. Not all women were displayed as submissive clad-in-black objects. Nor were all Palestinians and Egyptians uniformly depicted as crazed radicals.

Hollywood's not a monolithic place; it's a diverse community with lots of different opinions about people and politics running in different directions. Several filmmakers projected Arab Americans as normal, everyday Americans: Government agents, entrepreneurs, teachers, computer specialists, victims of prejudice. For example, *Flightplan* (2005), starring Jodie Foster, begins with Foster's six-year-old daughter disappearing aboard a passenger jet en route to New York. Instantly, Foster points accusing fingers at the dark-complexioned Ahmed and his two Arab-American companions. She tells the pilot: Those Arab passengers "have my daughter. I don't give a shit about being politically correct." Concluding frames, however, show Foster bringing down the non-Arab kidnappers, and being happily reunited with her daughter. Unexpectedly, the harassed Ahmed enters the frame; he walks over to

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Foster and hands her a bag that she'd mistakenly left behind. There is silence. Foster contemplates the man she wrongly accused. Acknowledging her mistake, she offers Ahmed a grateful smile.

In the futuristic film *The Final Cut* (2004), the protagonist's (Robin Williams) best friend is Hasan (Thom Bishop), an Arab-American specialist. Only Hasan has the necessary expertise to help Williams cope with his scary childhood memories, and he does.

In *Enough* (2002), an Arab-American diner owner named Phil is the best friend and primary protector of the heroine, Slim. Phil stops Slim's abusive husband from harming her and her baby daughter. When Phil learns that Slim's husband is beating her, brutally and regularly, he and his friends barge into their home. Phil fights with the husband, rescuing Slim and her child. He then whisks them off to a safe place, to be with his Arab-American friends in Michigan.

An intelligent Arab-American, Layla, surfaces as the female protagonist in the CIA spy thriller, *The Recruit* (2002). Layla's heroics save her lover's life, and she also brings down a corrupt agent. In *The Sentinel* (2006), Aziz Hassad performs like any other dedicated US Secret Service agent. Aziz is a vigilant Arab-American agent who tracks down extremists. One scene shows would-be assassins attacking the commander in chief, Aziz and his colleagues draw their weapons and open fire, protecting the president.

Refreshingly, the compelling movie *Rendition* (2007) presents an Egyptian-born American engineer as a victim of torture, and *Sorry Haters* (2006) features a compassionate Syrian Muslim cab driver, a likeable, refined, religious, hard-working man. *Esquire* editor Lisa Hintelmann was so impressed at seeing a reel Arab cabbie with integrity that she told her fellow critics: "Never—I've never seen such a positive image [of an Arab immigrant] in an American film." Director Gavin Hood's *Rendition* presents not only fair and balanced images of Arabs, but also features as protagonist an Egyptian immigrant, Anwar. Anwar is on his way home from South Africa to be with his American wife and family in Chicago. Suddenly, he is kidnapped, taken to a foreign country, stripped naked and brutally beaten. The film's theme—torture doesn't work; torture breeds more violence—reminds viewers that since 9/11 fear and civil rights abuses have changed us, and not for the better.

Disney's film *Young Black Stallion* appeared and then soon vanished from theater screens. True, the 45-minute movie is boring, poorly written, and shabbily produced. Yet its protagonists are a loveable Arab teenager, Neera and her wise, benevolent grandfather, Ben Ishak. Final frames reveal a movie first: Neera rides her horse to victory, besting the Arab male riders.

Imagemakers have often injected the Arab "other" into remakes, or tossed them into films based on books where the original text had nothing to do with them. Not the producers of *Sahara* (2005) and *Flight of the Phoenix* (2004). They avoided gratuitous stereotypes. For example, in the original *Phoenix* (1966), Bedouin desert bandits slice the Western protagonists' throats (offscreen, but still). There are no Arab villains in the 2004 version. In *Sahara*, viewers see heroic robed freedom fighters rescuing the endangered protagonists. But in Clive Cussler's book of the same name, the heroes are UN troops and Westerners. Why the switch? Director Breck Eisner explains: "I didn't want to it to be that Americans come in and simply save the day."

Brilliantly revealing our common humanity and meriting special attention is director Gonz lez In rrius's *Babel* (2006), Golden Globe winner for Best Picture. *Babel's* Moroccan characters—portrayed by real Moroccan villagers—appear as regular folk: Doctors, elderly nurses, husbands, wives, and children—just like us. In the opening frames, a stray bullet accidentally wounds an American tourist, Susan Jones (Cate Blanchett). Cut to several Moroccans providing needed care. One passenger on the bus, Abdullah (Mustapha Rachidi), takes the heavily bleeding Susan and her husband Richard (Brad Pitt) to his remote village; Abdullah finds a doctor who tends her wound, and has an elderly woman care for Susan.

Several memorable, heart-wrenching scenes reflect irrational post-9/11 paranoia. US Embassy officials wrongly assume that Arab terrorists shot Susan, and they believe the assassins are somewhere out there, lurking behind every olive tree. Thus, the ambulance that was en route to assist the critically ill Susan is "cancelled." The embassy's overzealous security behavior, combined with a barrage of false media reports about "terrorism," also affects the behavior of Moroccan policemen. When they find the two brothers

responsible for mistakenly shooting Susan, they panic. Refusing to ask questions first, the police fire away, killing the older teen.

At the movie's end, real mutual respect exists between the Moroccan and American characters. Such respect was also carried over to the local Moroccans who appear in *Babel*. Director Iñárritu was so appreciative of their fine performances that he invited them to attend the world premiere screening. Before a packed house, he personally thanked the Moroccans, each and every one of them.

Sally Potter's radiant and remarkable *Yes* (2005) illustrates that although differences in cultures may cause clashes, love and mutual respect between an American and an Arab can triumph. This excellent film projects, for the first time in contemporary cinema history, a reel adult love story: an Arab man romances an American woman—or vice-versa, for it's the talented American scientist who pursues the Lebanese ex-surgeon. When the two make love, they do so joyously. The Arab protagonist could be Muslim or Christian. No matter; he reveres both Islam and Christianity. The dialogue, spoken in rhymed iambic pentameter, expresses sharp, controversial views about American involvement in the Middle East, notably the war in Iraq. Though this over-looked film has received limited distribution, Potter's poignant message—despite differences cultures can successfully connect—reminds us that besides the history of conflict, there's also the history of multicultural friendship. See also Ken Loach's heart-warming film *A Fond Kiss* (2004), a love story between a young, dark-complexioned Pakistani Muslim and a fair, young Irish woman, set in Glasgow.

Writer-director Stephen Gaghan effectively projects *Syriana's* Arabs, Pakistanis, and Americans as compelling characters complete with conflicting motives. (Full disclosure: I did some consulting on this film.) During *Syriana's* clash of modernity and radicalism, Gaghan eschews stereotypes. He does not vilify the region, its people, religion, or culture. For example, two unemployed Pakistani-Muslim oil refinery workers appear not as hateful suicide bombers, but as innocent victims easily seduced by an Islamic fundamentalist. *Syriana* warns us to be wary of moguls, of merciless men who consider the deaths of innocent people acceptable. Everyone is expendable: Educated Arabs seeking democracy,

unemployed Pakistani immigrants desperate to find jobs and a meaningful purpose to their lives, covert CIA operatives pursuing justice, even Arab and American children. Power and money matter most. This lucid geopolitical thriller explores what happens when corrupt, influential corporate officers and American government officials mix greed, oil, and terrorism in order to maintain their monopoly on Arab oil.

As for *Munich*, I approached it with caution. In Spielberg's films, reel Arabs have tended to be nefarious. Arab terrorists try to machine-gun Michael J. Fox in *Back to the Future* (1985). Dr. Moriarty's murderous "Egyptian cult" abducts young girls from London streets and torches them alive in *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985). In his Indiana Jones film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Egyptians appear as Nazi sympathizers, and in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), we see trigger-happy Egyptian Christian fanatics trying to gun down the heroic archeologist. And perhaps most disappointingly, Spielberg missed a golden opportunity to humanize Muslims in *The Terminal* (2004), a film based on a true story about Merhan Karimi Nasseiri, an Iranian Muslim stranded at Charles de Gaulle airport terminal, when the filmmaker opted to make the protagonist a loveable Eastern European.

But in *Munich* Spielberg makes a genuine attempt to offer balanced images. Most Palestinians are not tarred in black and most Israelis are not white knights. Both have a conscience, both articulate thoughtful arguments about what it means to be a displaced people. Following a somewhat tedious opening, *Munich* goes on to capture the varied motives and emotions of an Israeli hit team as they proceed to kill, one by one, Palestinians responsible for the deaths of eleven Israeli athletes during the 1972 summer Olympics. At times, watching Israelis shoot Palestinians is as painful and heart-wrenching as watching the assassins shoot Israelis. The lives of Munich's reel Palestinians are worth almost as much as the lives of reel Israelis.

As did Spielberg's, Ridley Scott's early films painted Arabs with a sinister brush: a corrupt, obese Egyptian pops up in his sci-fi epic *Blade Runner* (1982); war-mongering Libyans are inept, disposable bad guys in *GI Jane* (1997). In *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), however, Scott projects evenhanded images of Christians

and Muslims. The Christian knight Balian and the Arab leader Saladin are both models of chivalry; they are devout, merciful, and compassionate.

Though Scott's Crusades drama makes an eloquent plea for peace and tolerance, it was not a huge box-office success here at home. Yet, the film did well overseas, especially in the Arab world. When *Heaven* opened in Beirut, journalist Robert Fisk was there to see it. "Most of [the Lebanese Muslims and Christians in the Dunes theater] were in their 20s," says Fisk; "the scene showing Saladin sending his own doctors to look after the leprous Christian King of Jerusalem prompted from the audience in Beirut a round of spontaneous applause," he writes. "The Lebanese admired this act of mercy; they wanted Saladin to show kindness to a Christian."

Near the end, observes Fisk, "After Balian has surrendered Jerusalem, Saladin enters the city. He sees a crucifix lying on the church floor, knocked off the altar during the three-day siege. He carefully picks up the cross and places it reverently back on the altar." At this point, "the audience rose to their feet and clapped and shouted their appreciation. They loved that gesture of honor. They wanted Islam to be merciful as well as strong." Fisk left the Dunes cinema in Beirut uplifted by the extraordinary performance, of the audience as much as the film. "See it if you haven't," he urges. "And remember how the Muslims [and Christians] of Beirut came to realize that even Hollywood can be fair."

Hood's *Rendition*, Gonz  lez In  rritu's *Babel*, Potter's *Yes*, Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*, Gaghan's *Syriana*, and Spielberg's *Munich* help offset old clich  s by creating decent characters and compelling scenarios as only cinema can. The films demand our attention. Forcefully and eloquently, they illustrate that cultural stereotypes, along with unabated power and unconstrained violence, are a barrier to coexistence and therefore expedite terrorism. The dramas also pose incisive questions relevant to today's quest for peace in the region: Are political objectives achieved by acts of revenge, by an unending cycle of violence that continues to the present day? What has the use of force—from the Crusades to the present—accomplished? Advises Spielberg, "There has to be a prayer for peace... because the biggest enemy is not the Palestinians or the Israelis; the biggest enemy in the region is intransigence."

Though not widely distributed, five positive, non-mainstream features present humane Arab protagonists: Roberto Benigni's Italian antiwar film, *The Tiger and the Snow* (2005); *Satin Rouge* (2002), a Tunisian movie written and directed by Raja Amari; and three Arab-Israeli co-productions: *Paradise Now* (2005), *Rana's Wedding* (2002), and *The Syrian Bride* (2004).

Benigni's *Tiger and the Snow*, not yet available in the US, offers telling, memorable images of the war's devastating effect on Baghdad's ordinary citizens: Doctors, patients, the elderly, a shoe salesman, a young girl, a brilliant pharmacist. Most impressive are scenes that focus on the friendship between two great poets caught up in the Iraq war, an Iraqi and an Italian.

Bride, Wedding, and *Paradise Now* effectively examine current realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the ground, revealing how the Israeli occupation injures and disrupts the lives of Arabs, young and old alike. Winner of the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film, *Paradise Now* reveals the tragic humanity of Palestinians who live under Israeli occupation, and who are trapped in a vicious cycle of violence. Instead of advancing Hollywood's "demon" stereotypes of Palestinians, Israeli-born Palestinian director Abu-Assad illuminates the darkness by offering political realities and three-dimensional characters. His Palestinian protagonists are different from each other. They are not one-dimensional bad guys; nor are they freedom fighters, pacifists, or terrorists. They are human beings, with all the faults, excesses, ideals, and sorrows of being human. The director does not ask us to choose sides, but to choose humanity.

Abu-Assad's warm, romantic comedy *Rana's Wedding* also addresses the occupation and the border—the one separating Palestinians from Israelis and from each other. In this film, young Rana has less than 24 hours to determine the whereabouts of her beau and convince him to marry her. Even if Rana does find him, will he, given such short notice, agree to wed her? And if so, will they manage to get through several Israeli roadblocks separating Jerusalem and Ramallah, all before the 4 o'clock wedding? Can Rana track down a registrar? Can she find and purchase the necessary wedding garb, get dolled up, and finally locate and bring together all her friends and family? Can she pull it off? Best sum-

marizing *Wedding's* heart-warming scenario is critic Roger Ebert: This film "gives a more complete visual picture of the borders, the Palestinian settlements and the streets of Jerusalem than we ever see on the news.... And we understand that the Palestinians... in many cases are middle-class people like Rana and her circle, sharing the same abilities and aspirations as their neighbors."

A bevy of delightfully fresh images of Arab women are found in the entertaining *Satin Rouge*. The story concerns a bright but bored 40-something Tunisian widow. She is lonely, has nothing to do, and nowhere to go. Suddenly, her life begins to change. She becomes a confident, successful dancer. Throughout, frames reveal her and other attractive, exuberant, middle-aged women dancing joyously. Rhythmic Arab music celebrates their classic movements. Scenes inside a local cabaret display Arab women performing. An assortment of Arab men, young and old, embrace and applaud the graceful women, especially the widow's newfound dancing skills.

The Syrian Bride, winner of the 2004 Montreal Film Festival, boasts a crew and cast of Israelis and Arabs. The director, Eran Riklis, is Israeli; Palestinian Suja Arraf wrote the screenplay. Most of the action takes place at a Golan Heights village and at remote border crossings. The reel key question: Can the protagonist Mona, a spirited Druze bride-to-be from the Golan manage to outwit Israeli and Syrian bureaucrats? In order to marry a likeable Syrian TV star, Mona must find a way to cross from her home—the Israeli-occupied Golan border—into Syria. It's Catch-22 in the Middle East: Syrian officials tell Mona she is already in Syria; Israeli guards argue she's in Israel. Again and again, Mona tries to cross from a place that one side says does not exist to a place the other side says does not exist. Even if Mona does manage to get across the border, as a Syrian citizen she can never return to her village on the Golan. The Israelis won't let her back in; she will never see her family again. At the end, the determined Mona contests the bureaucrats. She starts walking across the border to meet her intended husband. Will she make it?

Finally, Hollywood's reel positive scenarios demonstrate that movies do not have to perpetuate harmful stereotypes to be successful. Imagemakers should keep in mind that their motion pictures continue playing an important role in world politics; con-

stantly repeated, reel enhanced images may help advance peace. The five independent films cited here, especially the Arab-Israeli co-productions, remind us that films that humanize a people are not merely entertainment; such films may help bring people closer together off-screen as well. As *Syrian Bride's* co-star, Hiam Abbass, points out: "Political borders dropped down on our cinema set. This film shows how we—Arabs and Israelis—can work together, and create something humanly possible that reaches people all over the world." Israeli actor Yigal Naor, who was in *Rendition*, told journalist Bob Strauss that his Arab and Muslim costars are "my best friends, my brothers. I wish our leaders would come and see how easily this can be done."

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