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Course

Date

Orientalism in French Cinema: *Pépé le Moko* (Duvivier) (MLA Style)

The concept of Orientalism gives the impression that this is a form of racism against people of the Orient but this is not really the case as Said sees it as referring not only to the east. Historically, the colonialist countries colonized huge territories worldwide. It just happens that, by the end of the nineteenth century the Western colonies had been liberated so, basically, the remaining colonies were to the east or the south, i.e. in Africa. Said even exemplifies with Flaubert's Egyptian courtesan (Said 6). Additionally, Algeria, where much of the film is set, is not geographically Oriental in relation to Europe but it is culturally Oriental insofar as it is an Arab country and, therefore, associated with the Middle East in the mind of the European. For Said, Orientalism "connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism ... Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental" (2). When he refers to Orientalism as discourse, he means that we construct an idea of that which is foreign to us and over which we should have power, or as Fanon argues, "[it] is the colonist who *fabricated* and *continues to fabricate* the colonized subject" (2). Cinema provides a unique opportunity to construct a world where everything can be presented in black and white terms – the good (the French, including the criminal Pépé) and the bad (those foreigners whose customs we do not understand).

The mise-en-scene, without doubt, reflects the Orientalist perspective as described by Said. As the camera takes us through the casbah during the initial scenes, we get an intimate view of the overpopulated, dirty, narrow streets, teeming with a mixture of races and animals

in constant movement. There is no need to distinguish between the different races as a large variety is lumped together to make up the “others” (Fanon 5) – Arabs, Jews, Chinese, Muslim women wearing burkas, Sicilians, etc. – those people over whom we, the French, feel superior. The important point is that they are not the same as us. They might, as Fanon argues, be “the quintessence of evil” (6). So we are supposed to identify with the French, who



Fig.1. French men in suits and ties.

are easily spotted because the men wear ties and suits, and trilby or fedora hats (fig.1) as opposed to the “Oriental” men, many of whom are easily identifiable by the ever present fez.



Fig.2. Immaculately dressed, P p  drinks water in the sweltering heat.

The French women are dressed up for ballroom dancing or a night at the opera even though the very first scene of police inspectors fanning themselves tells us that they should dress down rather than up. P  p  , himself, is always immaculately dressed even though he has been in hiding in the casbah for two years (fig. 2). ‘‘Oriental’’ women are typically dressed with headscarves and have bangles around their wrists while the Western women wear expensive



Fig.3. In  s. Gypsy stereotype.

bracelets. In  s, P  p  ’s long-standing girlfriend, is a gypsy so she is suitably clad in long billowing dresses, bangles, a necklace that looks like it was made from teeth, a huge Oriental-looking broach pinned to the front of her dress, and huge earrings (fig.3). Central to the Orientalist project is the fact that P  p   rejects In  s as the symbol of the casbah and everything that stops him from living a free and easy life in Paris, in favor of Gaby, the well-to-do *parisienne*.

The d  cor is designed to display the unhealthy, intimacy of the casbah. Men lie about in the narrow streets or waste away their time in dingy, smoky bars playing board games. ‘‘Oriental’’ women run inside when they hear that the police are coming, closing their front doors where their street names are advertised. The interiors are dark to emphasize the claustrophobic atmosphere of the casbah. Names are visual cues to the crudity of the directors understanding of Algerian society: there is the Rue de L’Impuissance (Inadequacy St.);

Lola's door with her name on it telling us that she is a prostitute (fig. 4); and a bar named Ali Baba. These are clichés which point to Western ignorance of the Arab world – if the shot had been in India there would probably have been a restaurant called the Curry Inn.



Fig.4. Lola rushes indoors.

There are aerial shots of the casbah which accompany the voiceover of one of the inspectors. As he talks of a maze of maze of labyrinthine streets, a crane shot gives us a view directly over those streets. We then cut to street level views inside the maze. Many of these shots are at knee level showing pair after pair of legs bustling through the busy streets (fig. 5). This increases the spectator's feeling of claustrophobia and the desire to escape. This is a



Fig.5. Knee level shot.

foreign land where we, the spectators, along with P  p  , are trapped. We are kept in close proximity to the "Orientals" by a series of close-ups at eye and shoulder level (fig. 6). This reinforces the feeling of overcrowding as the voiceover tells us that forty thousand people are

crammed into a space fit only for ten thousand.



Fig.6. Close-up of an “Oriental”.

“Orientals” are framed to highlight their subservience, their slyness, or some other negative characteristic. For example, in the frame of Inspector Slimane talking to the Chief Inspector, while the Chief is sitting at his desk, Slimane is standing, curved over in an obvious pose of subservience (fig.7).



Fig.7. Slimane’s subservience.

The romantic subplot is a forerunner for later movies such as *Casablanca* where many of the same ingredients are present – antihero, beautiful white Western woman, dark settings,

“Orientals”, etc. – are replicated. We are supposed to sympathize with P  p   as he sees, from a distance (POV long shot) the *parisienne* disappear on a liner. Her POV is not of him, however, but of the casbah which, presumably, she is happy to leave and get back to civilization.

Duvivier’s film is shot through with Orientalist ideology. It gives us the perspective of the colonizers; never that of the colonized. Without doubt it is well-crafted but, like other films of its time, the basic ideology of white Western civilization pitted against primitive races of all types goes unchallenged. The Second World War and the decolonization of most of the Indian subcontinent and much of Africa was to change all that.

Works Cited

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