

MEDIA ESSAY

TEACHING THE METER OF THE IMPOSSIBLE IN A CLASSROOM

On Liberal Hollywood's Mission Impossible

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“The meter of the impossible”: through this phrase, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks us to imagine walking a few centimeters away from the confinement of a preconceived script (11)—and this is what I hope to achieve in my classes on representations of Arab Americans in US, and especially Hollywood, film. In this essay, I draw on my experience teaching two Hollywood films—David O. Russell’s *Three Kings* (1999) and Stephen Gaghan’s *Syriana* (2005)—and two Arab films—Tawfik Saleh’s *The Dupes* (1972) and Khaled Youssef’s *The Storm* (2000)—at the Technical University of Dresden, Germany, in winter 2006–07. The class used the two Arab films as contrapuntal narratives that expose the contradictions of the modes of address employed in *Three Kings* and *Syriana*, two Hollywood films that present US foreign policy as just and enlightened. My hope was to encourage students to engage in what Judith Butler describes as “hearing beyond what we are able to hear” (18), thus enacting what Michael Shapiro calls an “ethics of encounter” (57–91). In this case, students “encounter” the Other through their engagement with the films.

“The meter of the impossible” was not always the measure that guided my teaching. My own experience teaching American Studies in Germany and Lebanon led me to revisit my pedagogy. In the aftermath of 9/11, images of Muslims as terrorists became unavoidable frames of US–Arab encounters. Drawing on Michel Foucault, I encouraged my students to focus on the conditions under which a given discursive construction of Islam had become dominant and taken for granted. Assigned readings (including Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells’s *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*, Abbas Alnasrawi’s *Arab Nationalism, Oil, and the Political Economy of Dependency*, Mark LeVine’s *Why They Don’t Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil*, and Edward Said’s *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*) challenged Samuel Huntington’s thesis about the clash between Western and non-Western worlds. These readings also situated US–Arab relations in their political and economic contexts. Because most students in my classes were white middle-class Germans who did not feel implicated in the topics we discussed, I encouraged reflection on the connections between today’s crises and the legacy of European colonialism, genocide against Jews in Europe, and the spread of neoliberal capitalism. As a Moroccan who learned in her childhood about the variety of pre-modern Christian-

The Dupes.

DIR. TAWFIK SALEH.
PERFS. MOHAMED KHEIR
HELWANI, BASSAM LOUTFI,
SALEH KHOLOKI.
ARAB FILM DISTRIBUTION,
1972. EGYPT AND SYRIA.

The Storm.

DIR. KHALED YOUSSEF.
PERFS. YOUSRA, HÉCHAM
SÉLIM.
MISR INTERNATIONAL
FILMS, 2000. EGYPT.

Syriana.

DIR. STEPHEN GAGHAN.
PERFS. GEORGE CLOONEY,
MATT DAMON.
WARNER BROTHERS, 2006.

Three Kings.

DIR. DAVID O. RUSSELL.
PERFS. GEORGE CLOONEY,
MARK WAHLBERG, ICE CUBE.
WARNER BROTHERS, 1999.

Muslim encounters, decidedly not limited to wars and conquests, I was intrigued by the absence of that history from my students' collective memory. I wondered whether Europe's selective establishment of its cultural heritage is partly responsible for students' affective dispositions to apprehend Muslims as irrelevant or as an enemy Other.

After several years of teaching about US-Arab encounters in Germany, in spring 2006 I began teaching American Studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as a Visiting Assistant Professor. Because so many students there felt the direct impact of Washington's policies, the course took a different turn. For instance, some Palestinian and Lebanese students told me they experienced reading US foreign policy documents as glimpsing deaths from the past, while also envisioning impending future deaths. The recurring question that most students asked was: how do we imagine a world where Arab deaths would no longer be accepted as a price worth paying for the world order?¹ Yet the Palestinian and Lebanese students uncritically reiterated universalist values, and saw modernity and coloniality as separate ideologies. I believed that we needed to scrutinize universalism and its long history of adjudicating who is human and what is civilized. I left Lebanon at the end of July 2006, in the middle of Israel's heavy bombing of the country, with questions and concerns that were bound to shape my teaching.

Back in Dresden, I prepared for a seminar on dominant and resistant representational practices. In conceptualizing my syllabus, I kept in mind the voices of my students at the American University of Beirut and the destruction I had seen in south Beirut. My struggle over the material I wanted to assign for my class stemmed from my experience not only of war but also of the absence of any sustained public outrage at the bombing in Western democratic societies.² I prepared my syllabus with the awareness that, even as alternative stories are occasionally heard in Western societies, they fail to disrupt the dominant practices of intelligibility. In discussions of the economy or international relations, stories that pose alternatives to the current dominant order are rendered invisible or irrelevant. I wondered how I could translate for my class that failure and its implications for a collective future. I was sure that most of my students would appreciate the stories I would tell, yet I doubted that they would change their perspectives. Darwish's phrase helped me articulate my awareness of my doomed enterprise, but also prompted me to learn and imagine other ways to engage the students and the class materials.

My class was made up mostly of middle-class white Germans, mainly women; three Arab female students—two Moroccan and one Jordanian-Palestinian—and one visiting white male American student. Close to the end of the seminar, these students' backgrounds would create an opportunity to enact the ethics of encounter. At the beginning of the term, I felt frustrated by the Arab students' silence. Yet during our interactions after class and on the rare occasions when two of these students made brief comments, I learned to listen to their silence. I am still in the process of learn-

1 Then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright flatly stated that Arab lives, the death of half a million Iraqi children, was a plausible price for world order when interviewed by Lesley Stahl on CBS Television's documentary, *60 Minutes*, in May 1996. See Ahmad, 134–35.

2 I think at some level “lack of outrage” is not really the right expression, if I take into consideration then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's description of the destruction of south Lebanon and the thousand Lebanese deaths by Israel's heavy bombing in summer 2006 as “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.” See Abu Nimah.

ing what Naeem Inayatullah describes as “the posture of silence,” which allows one to “become comfortable with silence. . . welcome silence. . . [and] hone. . . [one’s] ears” to “distinguish different textures of silence.” I learned that my Arab students’ silence expressed a struggle between their desire to join class discussions (after all, students are rewarded for participation) and their feeling that the knowledge circulating in class nullified their efforts. One student spoke of feeling tired of having constantly to justify herself, to explain who she is against the distorted representations of Arabs in public discourse as a problem, as adherents of a religion and members of a culture said to feed on violence and women’s oppression. At the same time, she was preoccupied with undoing her people’s dispensability.

Mission Impossible

At the beginning of the course in 2006–2007 in Dresden, I asked my students if they knew the four films. Nearly all students said that they had watched *Three Kings* and/or *Syriana*. None of them had seen any Arab films, except the three Arab students, and even they did not know *The Dupes* and *The Storm*. Those students who could still remember the Hollywood films’ storylines said that they had liked them. A German student said that, unlike “typical Hollywood,” both films offer a humane representation of Arab characters. The American student expressed his appreciation of *Syriana*’s attention to the complex causes of violence in the Middle East. Students also pointed out that, as Hollywood movies go, both *Three Kings* and *Syriana* offer an unusually complex cinematic representation of US–Arab encounters. Through their films, David O. Russell and Stephen Gaghan voice their vexation with US foreign policy.³ And yet the stories they tell exonerate and redeem the very source of their vexation. Their success in salvaging the imperial US set me thinking about how to discuss in class the fact that, ultimately, these movies only offer a variation on Hollywood themes. Although these films do not circulate dehumanizing images of Arabs and Muslims, they mark off as abnormal, unacceptable, or impossible to imagine different articulations of human relations and human purposes. It is this very imagination that I struggle to let into the classroom.

The Dupes, based on Ghassan Kanafani’s novel, *Men in the Sun* (1962), was ideal for discerning worlds that are different from the ones the students and I inhabited. I asked students to locate scenes that speak of conceptions of the human that depart from the modern valorization of individualism. Set in 1950s Iraq, *The Dupes* recounts the journeys of three Palestinian refugees from three different generations: Abu Qais (Mohamed Kheir Helwani), Assaad (Bassam Loufti), and Marouane (Saleh Kholoki). The three refugees try but fail to smuggle themselves into Kuwait where they hope to find employment. Instead, they all die at the Iraqi–Kuwaiti border. *The Dupes* allows us glimpses into the characters’ memories and thoughts through stream of consciousness. We observe Abu Qais’s relationship with the land, which he considers a source of happiness and self-

³ For instance, Russell recounts in his commentary on *Three Kings* (available on DVD) that his experience in Central America in the early 1980s made him aware of the plight of the anti-Ba’ath Iraqis, who took up arms against Saddam Hussein in March 1991. They suffered the US–supported brutality of their regime and its military machine only to find themselves during and after “Desert Storm” the target of, on the one hand, American bombs and the cruelty of their president on the other. As Russell points out with regard to what is probably the core impetus driving US foreign policy: “We trained the militaries under a lot of dictatorships. We trained them in the arts of interrogation, sabotage and weapons and all sorts of things. Crazy games we played in the 70s and 80s. That’s what happens when you have a huge weapons industry, as we do. We got to sell weapons.”

fulfillment, making it difficult for him to imagine human life without olive trees or fields, in the refugee camps created after the Palestinian dispossession. When Abu Qais starts thinking about going to Kuwait, after hearing that job opportunities exist in this wealthy country, he assumes that the country must have abundant trees and fields.

Class discussion focused on such topics as the perils of illegal immigration, the Palestinians' responsibility in their own plight, and the controversy around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We looked closely at a scene in which Abu Qais lies on the damp ground, listening to the earth's heartbeat. His description of the earth's smell suggests a relationship with the land with which students might be unfamiliar. I asked whether we could use this scene to imagine the Other beyond the contours of illegality and misery. There was a long silence. Only one student responded, saying that she found it more important to correct her views and knowledge about the Palestinian situation than to hunt for worlds she did not know or that no longer existed. I asked why the corrective gesture was incompatible with other modes of understanding the world.

My German students saw the world only through the categories of illegality and refugee status. They pointed out that refugee status has offered new life to the Kurdish community in Dresden. Turkish and Kurdish migration has been central to the constitution of post-World War II Germany. Debates on the status of immigrants have focused on the access to citizenship, illegality, and refugee status: these are the issues through which my students interpreted the film.

Still pursuing the "meter of the impossible," I asked that students consider how other worlds and world views surfaced—or were silenced—in *Three Kings* and *Syriana*. We used Ella Shohat's and Robert Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, especially the chapter "Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation," as a theoretical framework. Students shifted focus from *Three Kings*' and *Syriana*'s anti-imperialist characters and plots to the films' modes of address, including the privileging of Euro-American characters' points of view, and focalization. Shohat and Stam note that the concept of focalization—the perspective through which the events of a story are presented—"is illuminating when applied to liberal films which furnish the 'other' with a 'positive' image, appealing dialog, and sporadic point-of-view shots, yet in which European or Euro-American characters remain radiating 'centers of consciousness' and 'filters' for information, the vehicles for dominant racial/ethnic discourses" (205). Reading Shohat and Stam helped students see that *Three Kings* turns the Iraqi plight into Major Gates's *bildungsroman*, by means of the focalization technique, thus redeeming both Gates's opportunism and his country's immoral behavior towards the Iraqi rebels.

Similarly, *Syriana* deploys Euro-American characters to not only direct Arab Prince Nasir's reformist plans that lead him to challenge the US military-industrial complex but also attempt to save his life. *Syriana*'s modes of address sandwich the political impasse of Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig)

between the Euro-American focal characters of Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon), an energy analyst, and the CIA agent Robert Barnes (George Clooney). *Syriana* tells several disturbing stories about corporate corruption and Arab and US violence. Its use of focalization foregrounds Woodman's and Barnes's defiant acts in their attempts to help Prince Nassir, whose story mainly ends up onscreen because the two helpers have something to say or do about it. The viewers follow Woodman's endeavor to show Prince Nassir how to achieve economic independence from the US as well as Barnes's courageous uncovering of the motive behind his agency's decision to assassinate the Prince and his attempt to foil the plot. This use of the modes of address relegates to the background the hard question of reform in the Arab world (which is Prince Nassir's story) should the US violently put an end to it, since reform is seen as a threat to US corporations' interests. The assassination itself tells a meaningful story about violence as probably an integral feature of liberal political doctrine.

Although most students were critical of Hollywood films' use of modes of address to redeem the imperialism the films' narratives seem to condemn, they found the suicide bombing in *Syriana* abhorrent. This subplot of *Syriana* follows two Pakistani laborers, Wasim Kahn (Mazhar Munir) and Farooq (Sonell Dadrall), presumably workers in Prince Nasir's state, who become suicide bombers. Several students expressed their revulsion towards suicide bombing in general. Some said that, while they sympathized with the Pakistani laborers, they could not comprehend how they had turned to suicide, for Wasim and Farooq seem to cherish life, in spite of their poverty, as exemplified by their games and family relationships. Students pointed out that Wasim and Farooq were not very different from them: the two were seeking a decent life for themselves and their families in Pakistan through their work in the Gulf State. Students concluded that the Islamists, with whom Wasim and Farooq meet on several occasions, exerted a sinister influence over them. An Arab student pointed out that such sinister influence is applicable, in *Syriana*, both to Islamists and US corporations. Trying to look at *Syriana* as representing two spaces, we juxtaposed "ours"—decision-making, law, and power/corruption looming large—to "theirs"—extreme poverty, extreme wealth, corruption, and suicide bombing.

In response to my suggestion that we discuss the film's representation of these spaces, most of the German students identified themselves with the space of power, even as some recognized that power is tied with corruption. In fact, some students quoted Jimmy Pope's (Chris Cooper) answer upon his being charged with corruption: "Christ, China's economy isn't growing as fast as it could because they can't get all the oil they need. Now I'm damn proud of that fact." They suggested that Pope's words exemplify a simultaneously repulsive and attractive power. Interestingly, those same students also noted the presence of law and values, within that same space, keeping watch over unethical behavior. After all, *Syriana* tells of a legal investigation of Pope's company merger, even if the investigation proves

impotent in the face of corporate power. Yet students were not as troubled by US corruption and violence as they were by the Islamists' influence upon their disciples. In challenging these seemingly contradictory ethical stances, I used Judith Butler's argument that

[o]ur collective responsibility not merely as a nation, but as part of an international community based on a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation, requires that we ask how these conditions [that led to attacks on the US on 9/11/2001] came about, and endeavor to re-create social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds. This means in part hearing beyond what we are able to hear. And it means as well being open to narration that decenters us from our supremacy, in both its right- and left-wing forms.... Only then do we...begin to offer another vision of the future than that which perpetuates violence in the name of denying it, offering instead names for things that restrain us from thinking and acting radically and well about global options. (17-18)

Did these films (and our own political imaginary) thereby consolidate the power of providing "names for things that restrain us from thinking and hearing beyond what we are able to hear?" What could possibly be said in that beyond? Does "our" power/knowledge appear universal, or does it instead look like a blood-soaked history that has achieved quite a feat of "perpetuating violence in the name of denying it"? These are some of the questions for which no simple answer could be articulated.

The Meter of the Impossible

In a final class assignment I required that students use the Egyptian film *The Storm* to read a scene from either *Three Kings* or *Syriana*. After some students confessed ignorance about most of the issues raised in the Arab films, I suggested that they compare the films' use of the *kuffieh* and/or their representations of borders in the Middle East. In one scene in *Three Kings* in which Major Gates (George Clooney) shares the gold with the rebels, an Iraqi woman, whose face is beaming with gratitude, uses her *kuffieh* to wrap her share of the bullion. A German student found the scene plausible since the *kuffieh* is ubiquitous in the Middle East. The majority of students linked the *kuffieh* with German teenagers and the trendy neighborhoods in Dresden. Indeed, during my decade-long stay in that city I had noticed that German teenagers wear *kuffieh*. One student explained that most of the young people who wear the *kuffieh* in Dresden have no idea about its origins or history. In *The Dupes*, the *kuffieh* is a central, iconic element of farmers' life—the *kuffieh*, which farmers used to protect themselves from the sun, is worn by men as an embodiment of dignity and respect towards their tradition.

In Khaled Youssef's *The Storm*, set in 1990-91 Egypt, the *kuffieh* stands as a symbol of defiance of borders imposed by Western colonial powers. *The Storm*'s main character, history professor Mahmoud (Hécham Sélim),

points out to his colleague, geography professor Hoda (Yousra), the artificiality of borders between today's Arab nation-states. These borders have made even simple acts of direct communication or interaction difficult. Mahmoud feels indignant about the bitter reality borders have created: not only do they impose the use of passports and visas between Arab countries, they also mandate that Egypt communicate with Iraq through the mediation of the US, as was the case during the 1991 Gulf War.⁴ *The Storm* questions this reality by beginning and ending with angry demonstrations. First, a large crowd of students spills out of a campus, demonstrating against the occupation of Palestine; at the end of the film, people take to the street to protest against Egypt's joining the 1991 US war on Iraq. The film's plotline symbolically frames Egypt's action as a fratricidal one. In the protest scenes, the *kuffiehs* articulate a different reading of Arab relations. In the Arab films' context, the *kuffieh* is explicitly the holder of memories of violence and resistance to that violence. No wonder Mahmoud Darwish's immensely popular poem "Identity Card" (1964) lists the *kuffieh* as an Arab identity marker along the value of "learning pride/dignity before literacy."

⁴ See Hetata 241-47.

In our discussion of national borders, a German student expressed his irritation with the character of a CIA chairwoman (Viola Davis) in *Syriana*, probably modeled on Condoleezza Rice. This character collapses all countries from Morocco to Pakistan into a single problem, as though the two countries were not distinct nations. This student compared this character to former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, pointing to his dismissive remark about France and Germany as "old Europe." Yet this student, who was a supporter of the European Union, argued that borders helped implement law and order, especially in the Middle East. In the Arab films, however, borders do not tell stories of law and order. They often literally mean death (*The Dupes*) and point to the lack of communication between countries that are historically engaged in linguistic, cultural, and intellectual exchanges across and beyond contemporary Arab national borders (*The Storm*). Since a large number of Arab peoples consider borders as the continuity of colonial legacy, why don't these peoples work towards an Arab union? This very important question pushed us to discuss the responsibility of the Arabs within geometries of power in present-day relations.

In our discussion of borders in *Three Kings*, it became clear that the US-patrolled Iraq-Iran border is what enables the storyline's happy ending. By reaching the boundaries of Iraq, the Iraqi rebels near their emergency exit. Indeed, after some complications, solved again by the US Army, they freely walk into Iran and a better tomorrow with the *kuffieh*-wrapped gold tucked away in the women's 'abayas (a long dress worn by Muslim women). In the same vein, Major Gates and his companions earn their crossing of another border: they move from their low-paid jobs to developing their own businesses: Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg) starts his own carpet company and Chief Elgin (Ice Cube) quits what he considers his boring job at the

Detroit, Michigan airport. I invited students to consider whether this latter crossing would still look unproblematic if the film made visible the West's border-drawing in most of the Third World, and the resultant violent displacements of identity and space. If that history and the avalanche of crimes it engendered were visible, would Hollywood be able to capture, shoot, and display such signs in a narrative that places US supremacy and benevolence at its center? The point is not to displace the imagined generous gestures or the happy endings onto some other signs and spaces. Rather, we must listen and look beyond, because these acts reveal signs that are potentially bursting with stories that speak of a form of justice different from that found in the Hollywood script. In response to these questions, my American student responded that if Hollywood were to learn to listen to the Arab stories, about which he was doubtful, Hollywood as we know it would end.

A German student told the class that she understood, from the material we discussed, that what is sometimes celebrated as a moral victory from a Western perspective is experienced as a loss from the Arab view, and what is coded as an act of saving in the Western narrative is remembered by Arabs as a criminal act. Another German student responded that, despite the West's glaring injustices, it remains the best form of life humanity has achieved.

My three Arab students in this class told me privately that the points I had raised were very important to them. The Jordanian-Palestinian woman apologized for her silence and said that for her some of the assigned readings felt like the exposure of a heavy secret, a trauma she could not put into words. My student's remark brought to the fore the very dilemma and hope that both I and the students were groping for: how to listen to those silences. Here she was, sitting in our very classroom while the majority of us remained oblivious to her story. While most of my students were highly motivated to hear "beyond," they didn't hear the pounding of her heart when I mentioned olive trees, dispossession, borders, Ghassan Kanafani, or Mahmoud Darwish. Is it because she is too close, too controversial? In the following class, I tried to find ways to call students' attention to Arab women's silence, an issue I am committed to examining in my current classes at Vassar College. I still push for the meter of the impossible.

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