

Cultural Narratives and the Role of Stereotypes: Images of Muslims in Contemporary US Culture

DESCRIPTION

Every society has narratives that it tells itself to explore and confirm its own position vis-à-vis the world outside. Important components of such cultural narratives are sets of stereotypes, which are not negative in and of themselves, because they also allow us both quick orientation and efficient storytelling in an ever more complex world. In today's US we encounter a wide range of images of Muslims in literature, films, television commercials, political cartoons, and so on: the enlightened religious seeker, the fanatic mollah, the sexy belly-dancer, the black political activist, the suicide bomber, the wealthy sheikh, the criminal dictator, or the veiled woman. Such diversity of stereotypes of Muslims indicates the importance of Islam for the US, because at home Islam is the fastest growing monotheistic religion, while in international conflicts abroad—for instance in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians or in the Balkans between Serbs and Albanians—Islam plays a decisive role.

The course doubles as a topics-course in intercultural issues and an introduction to Islam because we will approach current cultural narratives in the US through their presentations of Muslims. Our primary sources range from Arabic and Persian texts, which are bestsellers in their English translations, to Hollywood films, comics, and science fiction. In addition, we will read a selection of secondary sources that will provide a theoretical perspective on the primary sources. Field trips to a mosque in Bloomington and the Islamic art exhibit in the *IU Art Museum* offer us opportunities for a reality check on the fictional representations of Muslims and Islamic culture.

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

You will examine a variety of presentations of the Muslim “Other” in different media to compare them with each other and to analyze their functions as stereotypes in cultural narratives of today's US. During the first half of the course you will concentrate on a series of individual assignments to acquire a theoretical and factual background in semiotics and Islam. The second half of the course will be determined by group work. You will collaborate with two or three of your classmates to develop a project that explores additional aspects of the treatment of the Muslim “Other” in contemporary US culture. During the last sessions of the course, all groups will present their projects to the class. You will gain insights into your own fundamental cultural assumptions and your responses to cultural differences.

PROCEDURES & METHODOLOGIES

On a theoretical level, the class focuses on the observation that cultural narratives depend on positive and negative stereotypes, because stereotypes allow us to identify a complex image with a catchy shorthand, so that, for instance, a veiled woman, clad completely in black, is taken as a stand-in for orthodox Islam. Because we will analyze a variety of materials, that is: comics, essays, novels, films, and artistic objects, you will also encounter different methods of textual appropriation for their analysis. The regular homework assignments will help you to improve your critical reading and analytical writing skills.

The majority of our class sessions will be devoted to a structured discussion of the materials you have prepared at home. Other activities in class will be group work, writing exercises, and short presentations, aside from the two field trips.

The course will be accompanied by a film series. Commercial films are revealing vehicles of cultural narratives because they are collaborative projects made for mass appeal. They present versions of cultural narratives that at a specific historic moment appear to be marketable in a specific society. Though most films in the series were 80s and 90s blockbusters, which you have probably seen, reviewing these films back to back within the theoretical framework of cultural narratives and their stereotypes will allow you to experience what happens if you apply your critical thinking to all-time favorites. I will show three shorts and eight full feature films on eight evenings during the course, though outside our regular classes, so that all of you have the opportunity to see these films on a big screen. The screenings are open to the public so that you can bring along your friends.

Please remember, there are no stupid questions. Although I will prepare you for all assignments there will be still unknown words and so forth in the course material, whose meaning might be unclear to you. Part of each class session will be used to address those difficulties and the possible ways of solving them

Finally, your group project will also give you a chance to enhance your public speaking and communication skills, because each group will present its project in class.

If at any point during the term you would like me to adjust the schedule for an event that from your perspective further contributes to the course (for instance, there is a speaker on campus to talk about Islam among African-Americans), please come and talk to me about it. I will see what I can do about it.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADE WEIGHTING

There will be no exams. The assignments ask for both individual and collaborative effort. I will grade a series of six smaller written assignments that result from both your regular homework and our activities in class. These short assignments will give me an opportunity to get a more concrete sense of your perceptions of the course. The group project is also meant to be fun, while you can take advantage of the synergistic effect that four, six, or eight eyes see more than just two. But to ensure fairness and to remove potential reasons of discontent from your group work I will only grade you on your own written work. The final essay will be in part your personal reflection on this group effort.

2 homework assignments	2 x 5 points = 10 points
2 writing exercises in class	2 x 4 points = 8 points
2 writing exercises during the field trips	2 x 5 points = 10 points
3 short essays of 400-500 words max.	3x 14 points = 42 points
Draft of final essay	10 points
Final version of final essay of 1250-1500 words max.	20 points

If the grade for your final version of your final essay is a whole grade better than the grade you have received for its draft, I will change the grade of your draft to the grade of its final version; for example: you have received a B- for the draft and an A- for the final version so that you will get an A- for both the draft and the final version.

Individual homework assignments

Throughout the course you will have regular homework assignments to prepare the next session. Your assignments will be accompanied with questions that guide you through the material. In addition, you will document your homework with written notes. These notes will help you not

only to share your positions with the class in our discussions, but also to collect ideas for your four essays. Twice I will grade these homework notes.

In-class assignments

The activities in class will be as varied as the issues and difficulties posed by our diverse sources. Four times you will receive a writing assignment in class that I will grade. Two of those will be prewriting exercises to focus your thoughts on a specific problem. The other two will ask you to document your experiences during the two field trips.

The group project

Each of you will participate in a group project. All groups will resume their work halfway through the course. The project will allow you to study in depth with some like-minded classmates further aspects of the role of stereotypes in cultural narratives, for instance:

- Gendered stereotypes in cultural narratives
- Racial stereotypes in cultural narratives
- Cultural narratives and stereotypes in American travel writing about the Islamic lands
- Cultural narratives and stereotypes in advertising, for instance: ads for bath robes and travel
- Cultural narratives and stereotypes in the arts, for instance: Oriental versus orientalizing music with regard to the popularity of Pakistani *qawwali* in contrast to orientalizing elements in Jazz, such as Dizzy Gillespie's *A Night in Tunisia*
- Cultural narratives and stereotypes in reverse, that is: Islamic cultural narratives and their stereotypes of the US

The group work will give you an opportunity to use your newly acquired knowledge for analyzing material that is dear to your heart. Each group has to confirm its choice of project with me so that each group will arrive at an outline for its work in discussion with me. The groups have to accomplish two goals. First, everyone will prepare his or her final essay with the support of this group work. Second, each group will design a comprehensive in-class presentation of its project, through which each group teaches the class about its project and its relevance. Please note, that this presentation is *not* designed as a public reading of the group members' final essays. The last two weeks of the course are reserved for these in-class presentations, though the exact time available for each presentation will depend on the actual number of students enrolled.

The four essays

The four essays will be prepared in a class. In addition, we will discuss the guidelines for these assignments that cover evaluation criteria and plagiarism in detail.

The first three units of the course are accompanied with three short essays of 400-500 words (= ca. 2 pages). Each of those essays will be due at the first session of the new unit. It will allow you to review the material covered in the respective section. The short essay I will be a personal response paper about your own experience with Muslims and your perception of Islam. For the short essay II you will engage in a close-reading of a piece of mystical prose or poetry. For the short essay III you will compare different ways of using the story of *Aladdin* in literature and film.

The final essay of 1250-1500 words (= ca. 5-6 pages) will accompany the second half of the course, during which all of you will participate in a group project. You will analyze material that belongs to your group project, but each group member has to cover a different aspect of the common project.

*MATERIAL COVERED*Texts

- Gibran, Khalil. 1987. *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Omar Khayyám. 1990. *The Rubáiyát*. Translated by Edward Fitzgerald. New York: Dover.
- Rumi. 1990. *Like This: 43 Odes*. Versions by Coleman Barks. Athens, Georgia: Maypop.
- Nasir, Jamil. 1999. *Tower of Dreams*. New York: Bantam.
- Baldwin, James. 1963. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial.
- Sacco, Joe. 2001. *Palestine*. Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics.

Course reader

- Humphreys, R. Steven. 1999. "Contemporary North Africa and the Middle East," in *Between Memory and Desire: The Middle East in a Troubled Age*: viii-ix. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . "Introduction," *ibid.*: xi-xix.
- . "The Shaping of Foreign Policy: The Myth of the Middle East Madman," *ibid.*: 83-112.
- Ahmed, Gutbi Mahdi. 1991. "Muslims Organizations in the United States," in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad: 11-24. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stone, Carol L. 1991. "Estimate of Muslims Living in America," in *ibid.*: 25-36.
- Sachs, Susan. 2001. "Muslims in U.S. Seek Financing: Pursuing an American Dream While Following the Koran," *New York Times*, 5 July 2001: C1 and C7.
- Boss, Shira J. 2001. "Loans, Interest Rates and a Religious Principle," *New York Times*, 5 July 2001: C7.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. 1998. "Culture," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor: 70-93. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- ["Juz' 30"]. 1997. In *Koran*, trans. N.J. Dawood: 417-435. 7th ed., London: Penguin.
- Dorfman, Ariel and Armand Mattelaert. 1984. "How to Travel and Get Rich," in *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. David Kunzle: 44-45. New York: international general.
- Irwin, Robert. 1997. "Religious and Secular Architecture," in *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture, and the Literary World*: 56-77. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- "The Story of Aladdin; or, the Wonderful Lamp." 1995. In *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, ed. Robert L. Mack: 651-725 and 934-935. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . "Plot Summaries," *ibid.*: 897-925.
- Irwin, Robert. 1997. "Palace Life," in *Islamic Art in Context* (op.cit.): 103-131.
- Irwin, Robert. 1994. "Street Entertainments," in *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*: 120-139 and 311-313. London: Allen Lane and Penguin
- . "Low Life," *ibid.*: 140-158 and 313-315.
- Nadel, Alan. 1997. "A Whole New (Disney) World Order: Aladdin, Atomic Power, and the Muslim Middle East," in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar: 184-203. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Lincoln, Bruce. 1998. "Conflict," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor: 55-69. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Turner, Richard Brent. 1997. "What Shall We Call Him: Islam and African-American Identity," in *Islam in the African-American Experience*: 1-7. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pope, Hugh. 2001. "Broken Idyll: On the West Bank, a Rare Peace Falls to Snipers' Bullets," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 August 2001: A1 and A10.

Hass, Amira. 2001. "Separate and Unequal on the West Bank," *New York Times*. 2 September 2001: WK9.

Danto, Arthur C. 2001. "In the Bosom of Jesus: Yo Mama's Last Supper," *Nation*, 28 May 2001: 30-34.

Simon, Reeve S. 1989. "Introduction," in *The Middle East in Crime Fiction: Mysteries, Spy Novels, and Thrillers from 1916 to the 1980s*: iv-ix. New York: Lilian Barber.

—. "The Hero: James Bond and the Clones," *ibid.*: 74-89.

—. "The Villain: White Silk Suites, Fezes, and the Mephistophelian Fanatics," *ibid.*: 90-111.

Film series screened on eight Wednesday evenings and open to the public!

Not Without My Daughter (Brian Gilbert, dir., 1990)

Sinbad, the Sailor (Ub Iwerks, dir., 1935) = short

The Thief of Baghdad (Raoul Walsh, dir., 1924)

Popeye the Sailor Meets Sindbad the Sailor (Dave Fleischer, dir., 1936) = short

The Thief of Baghdad (Ludwig Berger and others, dirs., 1940)

Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves (Dave Fleischer, dir., 1937) = short

Aladdin (Ron Clements and John Musker, dirs., 1992)

Three Kings (David O. Russell, dir., 1999)

Malcolm X (Spike Lee, dir., 1992)

The Siege (Edward Zwick, dir., 1998)

Delta Force (Menahem Golan, dir., 1986)

Field trips

The mosque close to the intersection of East Third Street/Union Street

The Islamic art exhibit in the *IU Art Museum*

*CLASS SCHEDULE***Unit I *Historical and Theoretical Introduction*** (= weeks 1-3)*Week 1*

09/03 Formalities
Learning about each other

Background reading assignment: Humphreys about US foreign policy in the Middle East

09/05 The political relationship between the Middle East and US
Muslim US citizens

Background reading assignment: Ahmed, Stone, Sachs, and Boss about Muslims in the US

Week 2

09/10 Stereotypes
09/11 **The film series 1:** *Not Without My Daughter*
09/12 Cultural narratives

Theoretical reading assignment: Masuzawa about culture

Week 3

09/17 Cultural narratives and stereotypes in *Not Without My Daughter*
ESSAY PREPARATION 1: Formal writing and correct grammar and spelling
09/19 **ESSAY PREPARATION 2:** A personal response paper
SUMMARY OF UNIT I: What is the interdependence between cultural assumptions and cultural narratives?

Source reading assignment: *The Prophet* and excerpts from the *Koran*

Short essay I: Personal response paper

UNIT II *Religious Ecstasy* (= weeks 4-6)*Week 4*

09/24 Essay I is due
Khalil Gibran, the Prophet and excerpts from the Koran

Source reading assignment: Omar Khayyam

Theoretical reading assignment: Dorfman/Mattelart about the exotic places outside Duckland

09/25 **The film series 2:** *Sinbad, the Sailor* and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924)

09/26 Poetry by Omar Khayyam

Source reading assignment: Rumi

Week 5

10/01 Poetry by Rumi
Collecting topics for your group work

Background reading assignment: Irwin about mosque architecture

10/02 **The film series 3:** *Popeye the Sailor Meets Sindbad the Sailor* and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940)

10/03 Preparation of mosque visit: The spaces of mystical experience in mystical writing

ESSAY PREPARATION 3: Beginning and ending an essay

Week 6

10/08 **Field trip to the mosque**

10/10 Follow-up of mosque visit: Mystic poetry and religious life of Muslims in the US

ESSAY PREPARATION 4: Close-reading a poem

SUMMARY OF UNIT II: In which cultural narratives are religious seekers cast?

Source reading assignment: The story of Aladdin in the Galland-translation

Short essay II: Close-reading of a piece of mystical prose or poetry

UNIT III *Miraculous Wealth* (= week 7-9)

Week 7

10/08 Short essay II is due

The story of Aladdin in the Galland-translation of the *Arabian Nights*

Background reading assignment: Irwin about palace life

10/09 **The film series 4:** *Popeye the Sailor Meets Ali Baba's Forty Thieves* and *Aladdin*

10/10 Preparation of IUAM visit: Islamic art and material culture in Aladdin's story

Discussing the state of formation for the groups and their projects

Background reading assignment: Irwin about street entertainment and low life in the *Arabian Nights*

Week 8

10/15 **Field trip to the IUAM**

Theoretical reading assignment: Nadel's article about the Disney musical *Aladdin*

10/17 Follow-up of the IUAM visit: Islamic art and material culture in the different film versions of Aladdin's story

Your group work is now in progress

Source reading assignment: *Tower of Dreams*

Week 9

10/29 Islamic material culture and themes from the *Arabian Nights* in science fiction

ESSAY PREPARATION 5: Naming your sources in formal writing

10/30 **The film series 5:** *Three Kings*

10/31 **ESSAY PREPARATION 6:** Description, analysis, and comparison

SUMMARY OF UNIT III: What is the role of miraculous wealth in cultural narratives?

Short essay III: Different ways of using the story of Aladdin in literature and film

UNIT IV ***Political Activism, Fanaticism, and Terrorism*** (= weeks 10-13)

Week 10

11/05 Short essay III is due
Elements from the *Arabian Nights* as opposed to international politics in *Three Kings*

Background reading assignment: Lincoln about conflict

11/06 **The film series 6:** *The Siege*

11/07 Fanaticism and the difference between terrorism, political activism, and resistance against oppression

ESSAY PREPARATION 7: Structuring paragraphs

Source reading assignment: *The Fire Next Time*

Week 11

11/12 Baldwin's essay about the *Nation of Islam*

Background reading assignment: Turner about Islam in the African-American community

11/13 **The film series 7:** *Malcolm X*

11/14 Islam among African-American Muslims

ESSAY PREPARATION 8: Structuring essays

Source reading assignment: *Palestine*

Background reading assignment: Pope and Hass about conflicts between Israeli settlers and Palestinians

Week 12

11/19 Politics and stereotypes in *Palestine*

Theoretical reading assignment: Danto's article on Yo Mamma's *Last Supper*

11/20 **The film series 8:** *Delta Force*

11/21 The rough draft of your final essay is due

Political activism among Middle Eastern Muslims and African-American Muslims

Theoretical reading assignment: Simon's chapters on heroes and villains

Week 13

11/26 **SUMMARY OF UNIT IV:** Which heroes and villains appear in which cultural narratives?

11/28 No class because of Thanksgiving break!

UNIT V ***Synthesis & Conclusion***

Week 14

12/03 Group projects

12/05 Group projects

Week 15

12/10 Group projects

12/12 The final essay is due

Final discussion of the whole course

The last class since next week is finals week!