



Evil Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear

Tim Jon Semmerling

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The "evil" Arab has become a stock character in American popular films, playing the villain opposite American "good guys" who fight for "the American way." It's not surprising that this stereotype has entered American popular culture, given the real-world conflicts between the United States and Middle Eastern countries, particularly since the oil embargo of the 1970s and continuing through the Iranian hostage crisis, the first and second Gulf Wars, and the ongoing struggle against al-Qaeda. But when one compares the "evil" Arab of popular culture to real Arab people, the stereotype falls apart. In this thought-provoking book, Tim Jon Semmerling further dismantles the "evil" Arab stereotype by showing how American cultural fears, which stem from challenges to our national ideologies and myths, have driven us to create the "evil" Arab Other.

Semmerling bases his argument on close readings of six films (*The Exorcist*, *Rollover*, *Black Sunday*, *Three Kings*, *Rules of Engagement*, and *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*), as well as CNN's 9/11 documentary *America Remembers*. Looking at their narrative structures and visual tropes, he analyzes how the films portray Arabs as threatening to subvert American "truths" and mythic tales—and how the insecurity this engenders causes Americans to project evil character and intentions on Arab peoples, landscapes, and cultures. Semmerling also demonstrates how the "evil" Arab narrative has even crept into the documentary coverage of 9/11. Overall, Semmerling's probing analysis of America's Orientalist fears exposes how the "evil" Arab of American popular film is actually an illusion that reveals more about Americans than Arabs.

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