“A whole new world”? - A comparative analysis of Middle Eastern representation in *Aladdin* 1992 and *Aladdin* 2019

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Introduction

Context

"It's barbaric, but hey, it's home" (Belkhyr 2013, 1369) goes the introduction song to Disney's animated movie *Aladdin* of 1992 (hereafter *Aladdin 1)* (Belkhyr 2013, 1369). The movie opens with shots of deserts, bazaars and sounds of accents in the back (Belkhyr 2013, 1370). The message is clear. The viewer is currently taking an animated "carpet ride" through the Middle East, a (supposedly) barbaric place. In 2019, twenty-seven years after the release of what is now considered a childhood "classic", Disney successfully released a live-action remake of the same movie (hereafter *Aladdin 2)*. While the overall storyline has stayed the same, a closer reading shows that several parts were adjusted. Since its screening, some hailed the movie as "representational breakthrough" (Mouallem 2019) which stands in stark contrast to the negative feedback Disney received for the original version due to overt stereotyping (Belkhyr 2013, 1368 and 1369). In academia too, several articles have dealt with cultural representation on-screen, and more specifically with the representation of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood (e.g. Haydock and Risden 2009, Edwards 2001, or Shaheen 2003). What those authors found is that characters connected to the Middle East (M.E.) tend to be presented negatively in American movies (e.g. Shaheen 2003, 172). Similar arguments exist for *Aladdin 1*. According to scholars, the movie is filled with Orientalist depictions of the M.E., ranging from lyrics that describe the M.E. as violent and "barbaric" (Belkhyr 2013, 1369), to the way people are depicted with large noses, all the way to the description of the unbearable climate (Haydock and Risden 2009, 216 and Edwards 2001, 15). In various articles, authors unanimously agree that the reason Disney employed Orientalism were U.S.-M.E. relations at the time (e.g. Edwards 2001, 21 or Phillips and Wojcik-Andrews 1996, 80 and 82). During the early 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the ensuing Gulf War shaped U.S.-M.E. relations which, according to some scholars meant that the U.S. used its Hollywood soft power to spread an image of the M.E. that fit the narrative needed to justify political actions (e.g. Phillips and Wojcik-Andrews 1996, 80 and 81). However, considering political relations as the sole influencer for representation onscreen seems oversimplified. This becomes especially clear through the two versions of *Aladdin.* While the Orientalism present in *Aladdin 1* was attributed to the negative relations between the U.S. and the M.E., it is difficult to explain why in 2019 producers tried hard to adjust the same movie to be less Orientalist despite continued strained relations between the two regions. In more recent years, tensions between the U.S. and M.E. became evident on the international screen through the migration ban during which the U.S.

banned six Muslim majority countries from entering the U.S., or through the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran (Gökariksel 2017 and Landler 2018). Hence, if tensions between the two regions have remained stable throughout the past twenty-seven years, yet representation has changed, it is evident that political relations alone cannot account for how the M.E. is represented onscreen.

Research Question and Relevance

This above-mentioned discrepancy is why the following paper will deal with the question: "How can we understand the changing representation of the Middle East in Hollywood movies?" In order to answer this question, this research will examine the two cases of *Aladdin* produced by The Walt Disney Company. Based on the ensuing findings, it will be possible to draw more general conclusions for representation in Hollywood movies. Answering this question is significant in multiple respects. First, exploring this topic illustrates the importance of popular culture in international relations and exposes that power dynamics exist in unexpected places. During everyday life, people use means like movies, comic books or pop music for entertainment. These seemingly harmless mediums expose people to different ideologies and are also considered crucial sites of power contestation in terms of contesting meaning (Hall 1997, 340 and 344). This paper contributes to the existing works on popular culture by examining the importance of representation. It suggests a way of understanding it in Hollywood movies by examining a set of qualitative variables, previously used by Daniel Bar-Tal to explain stereotype formation. These variables are: political relations, societal channels and economics and will be examined in detail below (1997, 495).

Another reason why this topic is relevant is the fact that it can provide a deeper understanding of U.S.-M.E. relations and its development over an extended period. It lays bare, certain dichotomies, such as U.S. soft power and how it moulds the opinions of its global audience to justify tensions or political actions. Soft power, according to Nye, is the ability to make other states want to pursue the same goal as you. This idea of making states want to do something rather than forcing them to stands in contrast to the idea of hard power. While military and economic strength are typically associated with hard power, soft power rests on attraction (Nye 2011, 16 and 20-21). Nye emphasises that there are three main ways that a country can increase its soft power: culture, political values and foreign policies (2011, 84). Another significant point is the fact that soft power is not limited to states. Non-state actors such as individuals, companies or NGOs can also have and use soft power (Ibid., 83). In this understanding movies and the film industry are crucial sources of soft power. In the case of the

U.S., Hollywood has become a vital component of the nation's soft power claim. The country has used its thriving film industry to export American values, ideals and lifestyle (Fraser 2008, 174). While it should be noted that Hollywood is not welcomed with open arms everywhere, it would be naïve to dismiss it as a significant source of U.S. power (Ibid., 185 and 186). The fact that Walt Disney is a multi-billion-dollar company, whose combined channels reach 133 countries, demonstrates its potential capacity to influence people's opinions globally (Watson 2019 and The Walt Disney Company 2020).

Last, and perhaps most significantly, movies affect people's opinions and worldviews. In the case of Walt Disney, this is even more pronounced because the company primarily targets a young audience whose worldviews are proven to be influenced by the movies they watch (Hurley 2005, 221 and 222). It also affects viewers in general. Movies are part of discourse. As Hall explains, Foucault argues that representation (e.g. in movies) becomes part of the accepted discourse and in turn produces knowledge about the represented subject. This production of knowledge through representation can also be understood as an exhibition of power by one group over another (Foucault in Hall 1997, 260 and 261). As such, it is essential to critically examine representation in movies as they are an example of power dynamics and influence people's knowledge over what is represented, in this case, the M.E. In order to avoid reproducing knowledge, anchored in Western hegemony and power, it becomes important to produce movies with accurate representations and overcome stereotypes. That way future generations are encouraged to start their lives open-mindedly leading to an open-minded future society. This research can help to work out under which circumstances people are more or less likely to produce movies that accurately reflect groups of people/regions and how to encourage accurate representation onscreen.

Methodology/Research Design

The following paper provides a comparative study of the two versions of *Aladdin.* The case studies were chosen for two reasons. First, their similarity makes extracting differences more meaningful. Both movies deal with the same storyline, were produced by the same company and involve the same characters. With those factors being stable the research can focus entirely on how the characters and settings have changed while ruling out the possibility that the storyline or production company are the factors that encourage Orientalist representation more or less in either of the cases. The other reason is the time between the release of the movies. Since academic literature has not yet provided any comparative analysis between two cases of M.E. representation over an extended period, it is a valuable addition to

the field to look at two movies that are twenty-seven years apart. It also allows for enough changes between the two movies so that if there was a shift, it could be detected.

With regards to methodology, the ensuing research uses three different methods throughout the study. First, it uses compositional film analysis as well as Roland Barthes' understanding of semiotics to identify Orientalism in the two case studies (In Barker and Jane 2016, 89). Compositional film analysis provides the initial tool to draw out certain frames, costumes, lighting, etc. Alternatively, semiotics with its distinction between literal meaning and symbolic meaning is going to be used to interpret what compositional film analysis finds. By understanding symbols on two different layers (the literal vs the interpreted meaning), semiotics is a useful approach for this paper to understand the connection between visuals and their impact on the viewer. Due to the limitations of semiotics when it comes to historical context, this research adds Panofsky's emphasis on context by providing historical background. Semiotics as a method is well-suited for the research of representation in movies because it is not merely descriptive but allows for a deeper understanding of how images affect meaning (Rose 2016, 106). A further discussion of semiotics is outlined in the following chapter.

I use Bar-Tal's model of stereotype formation as methodological approach for the case studies from which I draw several variables to examine what influences the representation of the M.E. in both cases. According to Bar-Tal, a combination of variables influences whether a person is more likely to form and express stereotypes or not (1997, 495). Since representation is dependent on what one group thinks to be true about another group, stereotypes are an important part of representation. Some of the variables he suggests, that influence the intensity and extensity of stereotype formation are societal channels, economic situation and historical/political relations (Ibid.). Unfortunately, the scope of the research does not allow for an extensive exploration of the entire model with all its fifteen variables. I picked three factors Bar-Tal considered essential and that were feasible for this paper. Due to the variety of factors, this method allows for an inter-disciplinary approach and combines qualitative and quantitative analysis. A further discussion of what the factors entail is going to be provided in the case studies below.

Positionality

This research stems from a Western/European standpoint which may bring potential impediments. First of all, while this paper aims at combatting and overcoming Orientalism, it should be noted that it is possible I am unaware of certain stereotypical depictions, unconscious Orientalist knowledge that is taken for granted or similar issues. Despite extensive research on

the topic and previous education on the region, it would be unrealistic to claim that this frees this paper from all unconscious notions embedded in European/Western culture. To further prevent making the M.E. appear as passive, the paper will consult academic and non-academic M.E. perspectives such as Albadrawi, Alsultany, Said, Kerboua and several others. Last, the methodology used is highly reliant on symbolism. Since symbolism is culturally specific, it may be possible that some symbols are not recognised or interpreted differently (Barker and Jane 2016, 89). Especially due to the fact, that I am neither from an American nor a Middle Eastern background, it should be stressed once more that some symbols that are clear for people from those regions may not be so clear for me or summon different interpretations. However, through scholarly research, the paper attempts to identify as many symbols as possible and support them with academic arguments or historical facts.

Outline of Chapters

The paper will use the following structure: First, a theoretical framework will provide necessary background on theoretical concepts, and outline more closely some of the applied theoretical approaches. Chapter two will examine the first case study of the 1992 *Aladdin* movie by giving a context of the movie and the history of the regions at that time, identify Orientalist features and then analyse the case for the above-mentioned variables (economic situation, societal awareness and encounters). Next, the paper will do the same with the second case study of the 2019 *Aladdin.* Just like in chapter two, the text will provide context, identification of Orientalism, and analyse the same variables. The last chapter is going to be a discussion of the two cases and their underlying connections and major themes. Eventually, the paper will conclude with case-specific and also more general findings, as well as with future research opportunities resulting from this paper.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1 Literature Review

Within the field of International Relations, popular culture has not always been acknowledged as a serious research topic. The widespread belief, within the field, that research should generate policy-relevant conclusions has frequently hampered examinations of popular culture (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 155). More recently, however, scholars have started to make a case for the importance of popular culture regardless of whether or not it has tangible effects on policies (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 155, 160 and 161). One of those scholars is Roland Bleiker who coined the phrase "aesthetic turn" (2001, 510) to describe the phenomenon that visual culture is increasingly significant for global politics (Ibid.). As such, this paper can be considered a contribution to the emerging research that is being done on the impact of popular culture on global politics. Using popular culture in this research can help gain a deeper understanding of the long-term relations between the U.S. and the M.E. It is expected that the representation of both, in the movies, is indicative of their relations over the years.

When it comes to *Aladdin 1,* several scholars have analysed the movie and its representations of the M.E. (e.g. Edwards 2001 or Haydock and Risden 2009). Yet, research on the movie has also focussed on other topics such as its impact on children (e.g. Phillip and Wojcik-Andrews 1996). What is striking is the implicit agreement across topics that representation in the movie reflects political relations. Scholars exclusively refer to either the Gulf War or the end of the Cold War to explain why *Aladdin* represented the M.E. as it did (Edwards 2001, 13 and 14 and Phillip and Wojcik-Andrews 1996, 80). However, this paper argues that it seems unlikely for politics to be the sole influencing factor that dictates the representation of "others".

There is an abundance of literature to be found on the topic of cultural representation in media. Stuart Hall, for instance, examines the representation of "the Other" in popular culture and media (Hall 1997). One crucial conclusion about representation many scholars mention is that representation is always connected to power (e.g. Hall 1997, 259 and Alia and Bull 2005, 157). People who represent, exercise power over one or multiple groups. Moreover, representation can become part of the dominant discourse in a society which, in turn, produces knowledge over "the Other" (Foucault in Hall 1997, 259 and 260). It becomes clear that representation can have a significant impact. While it has the potential to raise awareness for

minority groups, it can also mislead and misrepresent which can have devastating effects when that representation was the only source of information for a person (Alia and Bull 2005, 71). Furthermore, representation is closely connected to stereotyping. Stereotypes can be defined as "beliefs about characteristics of a group of people" (Bar-Tal 1997, 491). According to Bar-Tal, stereotypes are part of group relations in that they help one group understand another group and can take, both positive and negative forms (1997, 498). While classification is part of human knowledge organisation, stereotyping differs from it in that it reduces a person to only their connected stereotypes and in that it differentiates between what is accepted and what is not, often rendering the subject of stereotyping as the "abnormal" (Hall 1997, 258). As movie representation relies on what producers think about the characteristics of a group of people, stereotypes are likely to influence representation on screen. Hence, it seems like a productive approach to compare representation with stereotyping as both are reinforcing each other. What is significant for this research is how negative stereotypes can become positive ones or potentially abandon them altogether in order for onscreen representation to overcome perpetuating negative stereotypes.

In his article, Bar-Tal provides a model that explains stereotype formation as a process consisting out of three categories: background variables, transmitting mechanisms and mediating variables. According to this tripartite structure, background variables form the basis for how and what stereotypes are formed while transmitting mechanisms are places where individuals get their information for stereotypes from and mediating variables are how a person processes new information. Each of these can be broken down into a variety of variables (Bar-Tal 1997, 495-497). I chose two background variables, namely economic situation, political relations (which Bar-Tal calls "nature of intergroup relations" (1997, 495)) and will include, to some extent, also the history of intergroup relations. I also chose one transmitting mechanism, namely "various political-social-cultural-educational channels" (Ibid., 496), later abbreviated into "societal channels" (Ibid., 505). Societal channels include, for instance, books, movies, political speeches, schoolbooks which provide people with opinions on outside groups (Ibid., 505). Examining mediating variables would require an extensive psychological analysis of people which is outside the scope of this essay.

These factors form the starting point of this research as it tries to move away from the simplistic idea that politics is the sole influencer of cultural representation in movies. If representation is to become more accurate, it is likely that these factors connected to stereotype formation play a role and have to be examined in greater detail to understand where changes are meaningful.

1.2 Orientalism

Another concept that is central to understanding how representation of the M.E. in popular culture is Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. In his book, Said introduces the concept of Orientalism which he defines as a culturally constructed discourse by the West, used to exercise power over the region he calls "the Orient" ([1978] 2003, 1). According to his argumentation, Western knowledge about the Orient is always embedded in biases that confirm Western superiority. By portraying the Orient as antithetical to the West, the West creates a positive self-image and negative image of "the Other" (Ibid., 1 and 3). As a consequence, the West operates on a "us vs them" framework portraying Westerners as "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion" (Ibid., 49) automatically rendering the Orient as the opposite (Ibid., 49). Such subjective knowledge, according to Said, is disseminated through literature, art, scholarship and other aspects of discourse and impacts the way the West perceives the "Orient" (Ibid., 2 and 3). Alan Nadel argues that commercial movies are an especially well-suited medium to investigate such discourse because within the film industry the movies go past a large number of people which means that the representation chosen for a particular group, in this case the M.E., is a consensus of all those people that worked on the movie on what the M.E. is and looks like (Nadel 1997, 185). Since its emergence, Orientalism has become the basis for many research projects in academia and has been referred to in a variety of topics ranging from children's literature to tourism (Nodelman 1992 and Yan and Santos 2009). However, it has also been subject to criticism on the grounds of different aspects. Some claim that there is a certain sense of hypocrisy in Said criticising Orientalists while treating it just as passively as the people he condemns (Richardson 1990, 17). Moreover, Halliday disagrees with the term "Orient" because it does not accurately reflect the problem. Instead, he claims, Orientalism as a concept applies to any country that has suffered from a history of imperialism. Furthermore, he questions Said's assumption that knowledge produced by imperial countries is inherently incorrect (1993, 158 and 159).

Whether one agrees with this criticism or not, it is important to keep in mind that Said's book was published 50 years ago. While its influence in academia is undeniable, it seems valid to argue that since then the world has changed. Events such as 9/11, the emergence of ISIS and globalisation have transformed the relation between the West and the M.E. For this purpose, Kerboua came up with the division of Orientalism into three temporal phases ranging from

early Orientalism, to American Orientalism and then Neo-Orientalism and distinguish themselves from each other through different actors, periods, preconceived notions of the Orient, paradigms, and agendas (2016, 21). This paper is going to use this distinction because it gives room for Orientalism to evolve rather than making it out to be static. Moreover, it acknowledges that Orientalism serves different goals. Due to the case studies, the two variations of Orientalism that are relevant here are American and Neo-Orientalism. American Orientalism has been associated with the (Post-) Cold War period of 1945 until the 1990s. Kerboua characterises this form of Orientalism as marked by the U.S. presenting itself as benevolent and trying to help the Orient while trying to secure its own interests in the region. Alternatively, Neo-Orientalism refers to the paradigm of fearing Muslims and its perceived connection to extremism. As such, its starting point was during the 1990s, it gained more influence during 2001 and has remained steady ever since (Kerboua 2016, 20). Hence, the paradigm surrounding the first *Aladdin 1* is American Orientalism, whereas that of *Aladdin 2* connects to Neo-Orientalism.

1.3 Semiotics and Iconography

As a more practical approach, this paper is going to use Roland Barthes' understanding of semiotics in order to extract and analyse relevant visual symbolism from the movies. According to Barthes, any symbol is comprised out of two separate layers. The first one he termed "denotation". Denotation is the immediate understanding of a symbol which refers to the basic meaning of a word, image or other cues (Barker and Jane 2016, 89). Since this paper deals with visual symbols only, it makes sense to use a visual example. For instance, if a picture shows a man in a suit, the suit symbolises simply an article of clothing on the level of denotation. However, Barthes argues that there is another layer that exists with every symbol, namely "connotation". This second layer goes into the interpretative meaning of the symbol that can vary for people due to different cultural settings and backgrounds (Barker and Jane 2016, 89). Hence, to understand the example of the man in the suit on a connotative level means to analyse what a suit can stand for, depending on people's interpretation. For some, it may indicate wealth, for others it indicates reputation or employment.

While semiology is frequently used to analyse advertising, its applicability to images that reproduce ideology makes it a useful approach for this paper (Rose 2016, 110). Especially Barthes' structure of dividing symbols into two separate layers can help this paper to draw out how Orientalism is intertwined with visuals. It should be noted, that Barthes' understanding of

semiotics has not gone uncriticised. For one, he has been accused of mistakenly assuming that people within one community share the same background to understand symbols in the same way (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2004, 92). Moreover, it has been argued that simply taking into consideration the symbol by itself is not enough to understand it. Factors such as historical context of the person interpreting the symbols play a role in how the symbol works (Rose 2016, 198). With regards to the case studies, it is important to keep in mind who is watching the movies as the symbols work differently across countries, cities and even people. For that reason, this paper also integrates Panofsky's approach of iconography in which he emphasises the consideration of the symbol's context. That way, it is possible to understand the symbol their historically- and culturally-specific context, which opens up new interpretations (Ibid.). Thus, in order to have a more well-rounded approach, this paper is going to provide historical background on the cases that will set the tone for the ensuing analysis while semiotics is going to draw out the symbols and how they can be interpreted on the basis of the context.

Chapter Two: Case Study-*Aladdin* 1992

2.1 Historical background

One of the background variables Bar-Tal mentions for stereotype formation, are intergroup relations. According to him, several studies have proven that negative relations between two groups lead to increasing intensity and extensity during periods of conflict. The opposite holds true for positive relations leading to decreased stereotyping between groups (1997, 498 and 499). As such, this paper will start by examining intergroup relations between the U.S. and M.E. in the form of political relations. Disney released its movie *Aladdin* at the end of 1992. Around the same time several political events framed U.S.-M.E. relations. Scholars have referenced two historical events, in particular, as being significant in the context of *Aladdin 1.* One of those events was the end of the Cold War in 1991 marking the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the threat of Communism gone, and a long history of tensions, U.S. attention shifted towards its long-term enemy: The M.E. (Edwards 2001, 13). Previous events like the 1973 oil crisis or the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its accompanying hostage crisis during which U.S. diplomats were held hostage, already paved the way towards antagonism between the two regions (Cleveland and Bunton 2013, 348, 357, 360). The second event during the *Aladdin* production that scholars have focussed on is the 1990-1991 Gulf War during which Iraq invaded Kuwait over oil disputes and which was later liberated by the U.S. (Phillips and Wojcik-Andrews 1996, 80 and Cleveland and Bunton 2013, 446-451). During this time, the U.S. president at the time, George Bush, and his administration made great efforts to vilify Iraqi president Saddam Hussain which is important because it must have had effects on people's opinions on the M.E. as well (Ibid., 450). One of the consequences of the U.S. response was its definite emergence as the sole superpower in the region (Ibid., 446).

The Gulf war is central because of how it was represented to the U.S. population. Studies show that news outlets repeatedly released images of the Gulf War that fed into the narrative of the M.E. as violent and backward. Comparisons between Hussein and Hitler, rumours about Iraqi soldiers killing babies, and the circulation of images of U.S. troops' technologically-advanced weapons, that seemed to work without killing anyone, all contributed to the narrative of "swarthy rapists […] attacking helpless women and children, and Americans [as] honor-bound to save them" (Kamioka 2001, 68). The U.S. population is reminded of that narrative not only when reading the news, but also when consuming popular

culture. Soldiers were invited to talk shows, soldiers were honoured during sporting events like the Superbowl and special episodes about the Gulf War appeared on comedy shows (Kamioka 2001, 68 and 69). As Said argues, Orientalist discourse shapes the Western understanding of the M.E. ([1978] 2003, 7-8). Hence, the repeated imagery of the Gulf War and Arabs as enemies must have highly influenced U.S. opinion on the M.E. Associations of the M.E. as dangerous and scary are formed, and when *Aladdin* was released about a year and a half after the Gulf war, people probably still had the images of war in the back of their heads. Having set the scene for the production of *Aladdin 1,* the paper will continue by analysing the movie for its representation of the M.E.

2.2 Orientalism in the movie

The movie *Aladdin* is about a young man called Aladdin who is living on the streets of the fictional city of Agrabah and is surviving by stealing food from the local population. One day he meets the sultan's daughter, Jasmine, in the streets trying to escape from her fate of being married off to a prince. Aladdin quickly falls in love with Jasmine but the sultan's vizier Jafar separates the two and tricks Aladdin into a quest of retrieving a magic lamp. During his quest, Aladdin gets trapped and discovers that the lamp contains a genie that grants him three wishes. Aladdin uses his wishes to become a prince in order to win the heart of Jasmin and be able to marry her. Before analysing how Orientalism reaches the screen of movie theatres, it is crucial to examine the movie and discuss how the M.E. is depicted. Through compositional film analysis and semiotics, symbols were extracted and analysed, first on the level of denotation (describing the visual), then on the level of connotation (analysing the underlying meaning of the visual). The findings can be differentiated into three categories: the Arab Man, the Arab woman, and the Middle East.

2.2.1 The Arab Man

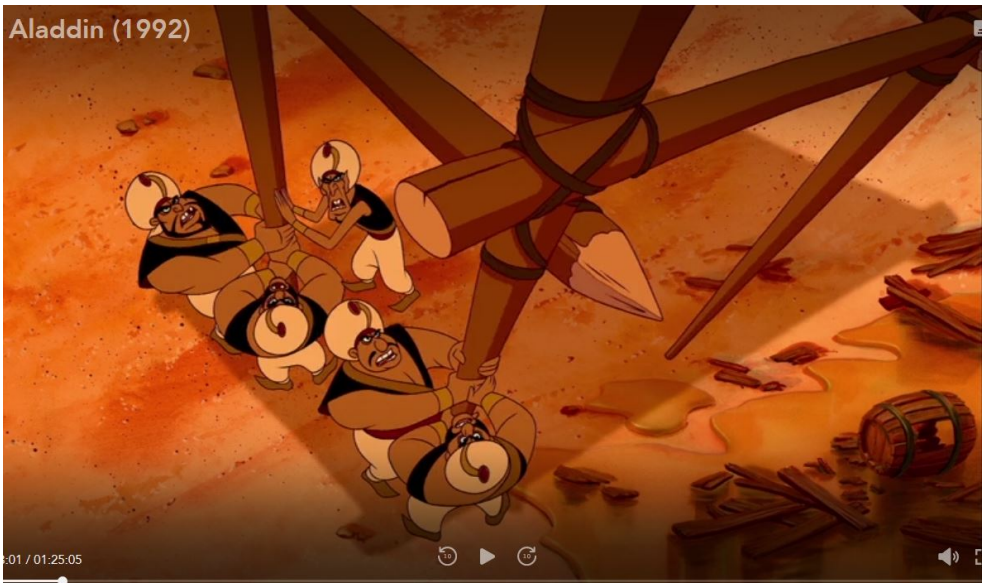
The movie begins with a song that identifies the scene as the Arab M.E. through the line "Arabian night" (*Aladdin* 1992, 0:01:15). As such, this research assumes that the people depicted in the movie are supposed to be Arabs. One of the most obvious forms of Orientalism is the depiction of Arabs in the movie. Throughout the movie, Arab characters are recognisable by their accent, turbans or large noses. Almost every depicted male Arab character is wearing a headpiece whether he is in the background or in the foreground of the scene. The head covers men are wearing, however, seem to be a mixture of Sikh/South-East Asian turbans, Middle Eastern turbans and covers like the Moroccan fez. As such, the movie

is mixing up various M.E. cultures and South-East Asian culture. Another common characteristic among Arab characters in the movie is the large, hooked nose that numerous Arab characters have been animated with (e.g. 0:01:55 or 0:03:27).

Screenshot, 01:56[1]

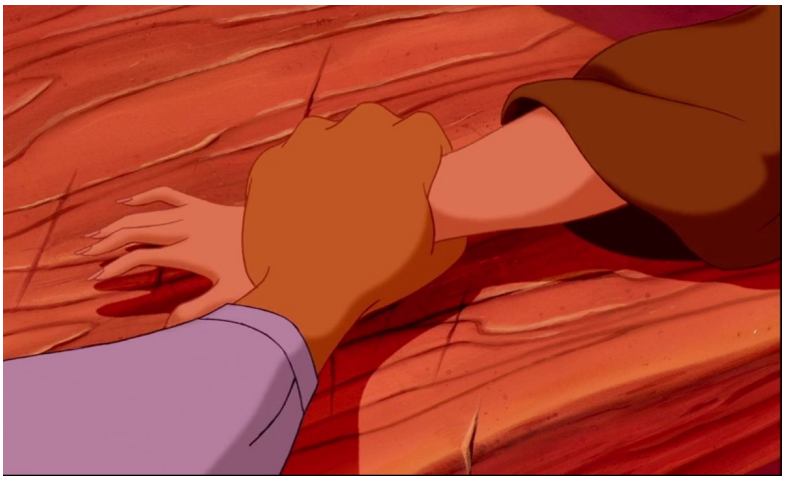
This animation reflects the common stereotype that people of Semitic backgrounds have large noses, a problematic depiction, as it reproduces an image perpetuated in a negative way throughout history and especially in Nazi Germany. During that time, Semitic people (like Jews and Arabs) have often been identified and negatively depicted through large and hooked noses as a way to make them stand out as the "other" and use it for vilifying them. In some instances, children, were taught that in order to spot Jews/Semitic people, they have to look at their noses (Schrank 2007, 26 and 28). Since the Nazi past is part of the collective memory for many Western countries, it can be argued that depicting Arabs in *Aladdin* with large, hooked noses may invoke those past images of Semitic people being inferior to Aryans or the West. Especially when portraying Arabs with large noses as evil (18:33).

[1] The following analysis uses images that are property of the Walt Disney Company. I am using these images in a citational manner and for academic purposes only.



Screenshot, 08:01

It also essentialises, as not all Arabs have those facial features. Similarly, most of the Arab characters are animated as unattractive, unhygienic and scary. For instance, in several shots, Arab merchants, as well as guards, have tooth gaps, large bellies and furry eyebrows making them easier to be identified as the "bad guys" (e.g. 0:06:50 or 0:18:32). This depiction also fits the characters' actions. The Arab guards, for instance, aggressively chase Aladdin across the city, throwing weapons at him because he stole a loaf of bread (0:07:38). This ties into the general representation in the movie that Arabs are violent, barbaric and backwards. One scene in particular, highlights this narrative. When Jasmine visits the market for the first time, she sees a hungry child and gives her an apple from a stand. As she is trying to walk further, the merchant stops her, asking for payment. Unable to do so Jasmine tries to explain that she has no money but can get it from the palace. However, the Arab merchant, a huge scary person with an accent and large nose, is grabbing her hand, takes out his sword and asks "Do you know what the penalty for stealing is?" (0:18:42). He is indicating that the common penalty in the M.E. for stealing is cutting off people's hands. Moreover, looking closer at the frame in which he pushes her hand onto his stand, there are some marks in the wood that imply that he has cut off people's hands before (0:18:42).



Screenshot, 18:42

The theme of violent Arabs continues throughout the movie with guards attempting to drown Aladdin, or Jafar proclaiming that Aladdin was beheaded for his crimes (1:03:07 and 0:24:39). These actions implicitly show the viewer that the M.E.'s justice system is backward, and its people are cruel. Since there is no indication of the period during which this movie is set, the viewer may assume that this sort of violence is still common day practice in the region. Even the introductory song claims that this is a "barbaric" place (0:00:58) contributing to the narrative of the M.E. as static, backward and violent.

Another marker of Arabs in the movie is the noticeable accent when speaking English that can be found in "bad Arabs" like Jafar, angry merchants or the guards but stand in contrast with American accents of the "good Arabs" like Aladdin or Jasmine (0:03:24 and 0:07:32). This dichotomy of "good vs bad Arabs" has also been picked up on in academic literature. According to this distinction, the "good Arabs" not only speak like Americans but also share their physical features such facial structure (Rahayu, Abdullah and Udasmoro 2015, 29).

Screenshot, 44:50

Screenshot, 51:47

This implicitly indicates that Arabs who look and speak like Americans are good, but everyone else, like the entire population in the M.E., is bad. Some scholars have even gone as far as to argue that in this dichotomy, Aladdin can be read as an extension of the U.S., trying to feed poor children, fighting for the good side and saving the princess (e.g. Phillips and Wojcik-Andrews 1996, 81 and 82). Following this understanding, Jafar with exaggerated Arab features and accent could be read as an extension of the M.E. as scary, power-hungry and violent that has to be stopped. While this is certainly not the only interpretation of the imagery, it provides a demonstration of how movies can perpetuate power dynamics between real-life regions. Last, the personalities of Arab characters are also portrayed negatively. The narrator, in the first scene, appears to be a regular Arab merchant. However, he lies to the viewer, who is taking on the role of the customer in that scene. When trying to sell his

products he claims they will not break. Two seconds later, they are breaking, showing that he is lying to make a profit (0:02:23). Hence, the movie perpetuates the image of the M.E. as a place where people are violent, lying, and backwards and contrasts it to the West, creating an Us vs Them narrative for the viewer.

2.2.2 The Arab Woman

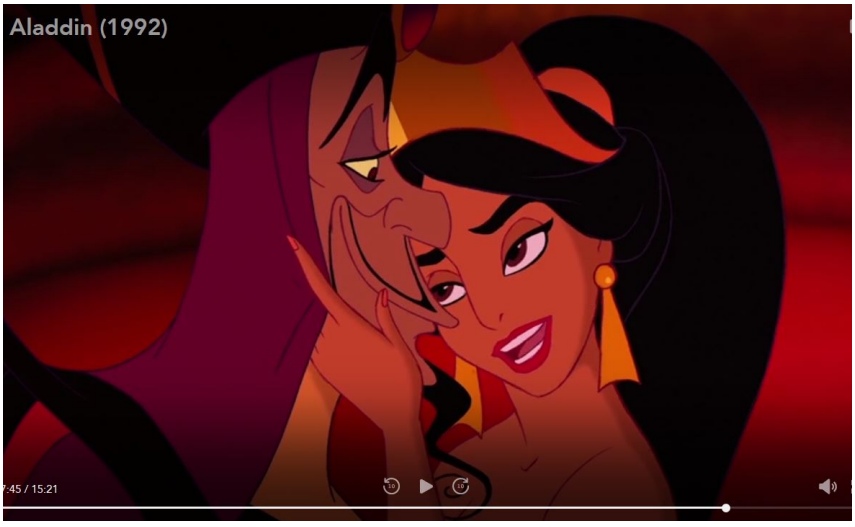
Alternatively, Arab women suffer from different depictions in the movie. Women in *Aladdin* belong to either of the two categories: unattractive older women or sexualised young woman. In the first category, women are mostly large with exaggerated features like big noses and breasts, tooth gaps or tacky makeup (0:08:47 or 0:08:15).

Screenshot, 08:48

On the other end of the spectrum, is the over-sexualised Arab woman who is wearing a short top that shows a lot of cleavage, midriff and shoulders (e.g. 0:12:57 or 0:38:51). Some argue that it evokes images of women in harems for Western viewers (Lacroix 2004, 221). This sexualisation becomes especially apparent in comparison to previous Disney movies with white princesses, dressed in garments that cover up their entire bodies to appear modest (Ibid.). In one scene specifically, Aladdin lands in a small room full of women in belly dancing costumes (bedlahs) which gives the impression of a Harem (0:08:08).

Screenshot, 08:10

The over-sexualisation of M.E. women also plays out in Jasmine's character. In one scene, she overtly uses her sexuality to seduce Jafar in order to distract him (1:16:49). As Celeste Lacroix argues, it would be hard to imagine a white princess using such a technique for distraction. However, when it comes to Jasmine, the preconceived notions of M.E. women as exotic and "sexually enticing" (2004, 224) makes this scene more believable which attests to the subconscious Orientalisation of Arab women (Ibid.). Not only does this depiction Orientalise M.E. women but it has also been argued that it reflects onto the M.E. as a whole as "the moral quality of the society is reflected in the appearance of scantily-clad dancing women" (Hurley 2005, 227).



Screenshot, 1:17:45

In the background of many shots, there are women in headscarves, veils and sometimes burqa's that seem to occupy a sort of middle ground to the two categories (0:07:01

or 0:49:12). However, none of these women gets a voice in the movie. To put this into perspective, one can use the so-called Bechdel test, a test that asks whether a piece of work includes a conversation between two women that centres around something other than men (Selisker 2015, 505). Throughout *Aladdin,* there is not even a single conversation between two women, indicating the passivity attributed to M.E. women. In general, the lines of women throughout the movie are scarce, enforcing the idea of female passivity in the M.E. As rendered evident above, this female passivity only turns into activity when women are used to reflect sexuality or questionable morals of the M.E. Overall, there is a tension between M.E. women as covered up and as oversexualised that implicitly reflects the M.E. society as contradictory.

2.2.3 The Middle East

Last, the portrayal of the M.E. as setting of the movie should be discussed. While Agrabah is a fictional city, producers have previously admitted that in the original version Agrabah was supposed to be Baghdad, in Iraq. However, the name was changed into a fictional one after the Gulf War (Musker in Johnson 2015). Keeping this in mind, *Aladdin* can be read as a reflection of Iraq. However, one may argue that the viewer is not aware of this information. Nevertheless, just because the movie is fiction does not mean that it does not affect a viewer's perception. Scholars argued that (fictional) movies and characters influence a person's emotions which in turn affects their perceptions of reality (Konijn, van der Molen and van Nes 2009). Especially children, who are the target audience for *Aladdin,* are prone to replicate actions and behaviour regardless of whether a movie is fictional or not (Mumme and Fernald 2003, 232 and 233). Looking at the representation of the M.E. in the movie then is still relevant to people's perceptions of the M.E. One compelling narrative the movie puts forward is the M.E. as backward with clay huts, camels and horses as the only modes of transportation and no shops other than market stands (0:21:25 or 0:01:47). The only streets visible are dirt paths with no sign of any infrastructure (0:21:25).

Screenshot, 11:42

Inside people's houses, the lack of furniture or decorations makes it seem like they live clay rooms on the floor (0:08:10). Again, it is important to highlight that there is no indication of when this movie is set, so it seems like the M.E. still does not have cars, shops or any signs of modernity.

Another factor is the M.E. as a monolithic unit. As already established above, turbans depicted are a mix of Sikhism and Middle Eastern traditional garments. Aladdin himself wears a fez which is traditionally associated with Oman or Morocco. Moreover, there are several nods to Iran in the movie by using Farsi writing (0:37:55) or verbal cues like "the boss, the king, the shah" (0:38:15). Yet, the city is part of a sultanate which Iran never had and the song "Arabian nights" indicated the Arab M.E. which, again, excludes Iran. In another scene, Aladdin morphs into an eight-armed figure referring to the Indian god Durga when at other times the characters are alluding to Allah or Islam (0:39:19 and 0:14:11). Even within Islam the representation is not accurate. In one of his lines, the genie sings "brush up your Sunday salaam" (0:49:33), trying to reference the Christian idea of putting on your "Sunday's best" for church while also trying to refer to the communal prayers in Islam, mixing up cultures. While this overgeneralisation of the M.E. assists viewers to maintain an unclear understanding of the region which contributes to stereotype formation, it simultaneously exerts power. When comparing this mixing of various cultures in the movie with another medium, namely colonial architecture, one can find remarkable resemblances. French colonials, according to Gwendolyn Wright, used traditional, local architectural styles next to modern architecture in order to appeal to its colonial subjects (1987, 291 and 292). By using styles that the local population was used to, colonialists believed that it would make

them more popular and that they, in turn, would have higher consent to exert power (Ibid.). Coming back to *Aladdin,* this would mean that the movie might use various local cultural elements to appeal to a M.E./South-East Asian population. Mixing them makes sure to reach as many cultures as possible. That way non-Western audiences may be excited to see parts of their own cultures represented, reinforcing the exertion of soft power by the West over the M.E.

Overall, the movie depicts a textbook Orientalist M.E. with features of passivity, exoticism, backwardness, violence, and overgeneralisation. First, features of passivity can be found in the women who barely speak and are in need of saving. Similarly, exoticism comes out in opposing pictures of women who are portrayed as over-sexualised dancers in bright clothes with veils. Exoticism also comes out in the surroundings, depicting animals ranging from flamingos to elephants and pet tigers, or in the markets and palace that are unknown settings to many Western viewers (e.g. 1:09:42, 0:50:36, 12:57). Backwardness and violence go hand in hand in *Aladdin*. Through the surroundings, the M.E. is shown to be backwards. There are no streets, no vehicles and no "modern" rule of law. As such violence by people is portrayed as normal and part of their "backward mentality". Last, in many ways, the M.E. has been overgeneralised in the movie by blending cultural elements. Most of these features fit perfectly with Kerboua's characterisation of American Orientalism during the 90s, discussed in the theoretical framework. Although *Aladdin* was released in 1992, which would technically situate it into the category of Neo-Orientalism, it is on the edge of the categories and when looking at its features, such as constructing the U.S. and Arabs/Muslims rather than Islam, the Muslim world and its people, or how it frames the U.S. as a benevolent superpower while rendering the Orient as backward it fits better into American Orientalism (Kerboua 2016, 21).

After having analysed the movie and its Orientalist depictions of the M.E., the next step is to explore why the producers of *Aladdin* chose this specific representation. To understand this, the paper will move on to some of the factors suggested by Bar-Tal as specified above, to explore whether any of the factors were conducive to stereotype formation at the time of *Aladdin*.

2.3 Societal Channels

One factor that Bar-Tal characterises, as part of transmitting mechanisms are societal channels. According to him, when receiving information from societal channels, they become

an important basis for forming stereotypes (1997, 505). As mentioned above, there is a variety of societal channels ranging from literature to educational material or movies. What makes societal channels so important is that they reach large numbers of inside-group members, in some cases, they may even be the only available information, and they are often perceived as trustworthy, meaning information is accepted without questioning (Ibid.).

Additionally, Duguid and Thomas-Hunt argue that people are more likely to abandon stereotypes if they see other people in their surroundings make similar efforts. Societal channels can thus be role models for stereotype behaviour (2015, 354). This research chose to explore movies and media channels, as those are mediums people consume on a daily basis. If these platforms change their narratives, people may adjust their own stereotypes, too. Moreover, looking at movies and everyday media publications that were released during the same time as *Aladdin,* can help identify the 1992 consensus on the representation of the M.E. and how the movie fitted into this environment.

In 1992, *Aladdin* was the only cinema movie in the U.S. that was alluding to a M.E. setting, indicating a larger problem of portraying diversity. Even if the movie never specifies where exactly Agrabah is located, it alludes to the M.E. through cultural codes like Farsi writing, Middle Eastern dresses, references to Islam, etc. Expanding the focus to the years around 1992, Jack Shaheen's research on 900 movies (up until 2001) illustrates in detail how Arabs were represented on screens during that period. He found that out of 900 movies, 50 do not represent Arabs as the villain (Shaheen 2003, 171 and 192). The rest repeats images of the M.E. as violent or inhumane, referring to its population as "dogs" or "sneaky Arabs, those dirty, filthy swine" (Quotations of *The Ten Commandments* (1923) and *The Lost Patrol* (1934) in Shaheen 2003, 177, 178 and 185). Other popular representations were images of kidnapping, wealthy sheikhs, and over-sexualised women, while images of the ordinary Middle Eastern person are scarce (Ibid., 178, 180 and 183). *Aladdin* with its repetition of Orientalist stereotypes of the M.E. fits right into this cinematic narrative that runs through 95% of the movies that depict the M.E. in any form. As such, it reinforced the already common idea during the 90s, that M.E. is dangerous, exotic and sexual.

The next medium to examine for societal channels is media. Media has been shown to affect people's opinions and how they use the information in the real world (Arshad, Setlur and Siddiqui 2015, 12). In their analysis of emotional language in New York Times headlines related to Islam and Muslims, Arshad, Setlur and Siddiqui found that the majority of related headlines contain negative associations (Ibid.). The authors illustrated that headlines containing those keywords between 1990 and 2014 have consistently been way above the

average negativity in headlines (Ibid., 17). It turns out that these words even surpass negativity in headlines about topics such as cocaine and cancer (Ibid., 19). More specifically, the percentage of negativity in headlines related to the words Muslim and Islam is at one of its highest points in 1990 with 68% (Ibid., 17). This is important because it is likely that Disney started the production of *Aladdin* around this same time. Afterwards, the percentage starts declining to 47% in 1991 and rising again in 1992 to 51% before climbing even higher in proceeding years (Ibid., 17). This indicates that when production started, negative images were extremely pervasive, and after a short dip in 1991, it rose again during the year of release. In a similar article, Ibrahim summarises 52 studies that have conducted research on the coverage of the M.E. in print and broadcast media between 1900 to 1999 (2009, 512). What she found was that the overall media coverage on the M.E. was generally more negative than positive, even if it was not a striking difference since for the most part, the coverage was neutral (Ibrahim 2009, 518). Although she emphasises this difference to be only small, taken together with the aforementioned study it is still indicative of the consensus in media at the time about the M.E. as a place for negative storylines.

Overall, it becomes clear that positive representation of the M.E. was scarce around 1992. Negative images of the M.E. dominated movies and media, indicating a society in which the Caucasian Western narrative is privileged and gives limited space to perspectives outside of this category. It portrays the M.E. as silent as it rarely appears on screen and when it does it is violent, backwards and static. Hence, Disney's *Aladdin* becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is refreshing for people from the M.E. to finally find themselves on the screen as voiced by M.E. audiences who were excited as children to finally identify with movie characters that were not terrorists (Albadrawi 2019). On the other hand, due to the lack of alternative voices, the Orientalism presented in the movie is likely to be even more effective as it is not challenged in other movies. The only image people have now is that portrayed in *Aladdin* and in politics which reinforce each other, making the M.E. out to be violent, backwards and in need of saving.

2.4 Economic Situation

The last indicator to be explored in this analysis is the economic situation. According to Bar-Tal, economic conditions are part of the background variables responsible for stereotype formation. He explains this connection with what he calls the "scapegoat theory" (1997, 502). In this theory, people are likely to blame outside groups when their economic situation is unstable or declining (Ibid.). This argument has also been supported by research

on other minority groups during U.S. recessions. Amy Krosch and Tom Tyler, for instance, demonstrate evidence for the discrimination of black communities during economic scarcity (2017, 905). Similarly, studies have shown that Asian communities are negatively affected in times of economic slumps (Butz and Yogeeswaran 2011), further supporting the argument that economic situations can influence stereotype formation for minority groups. In the case of the U.S. during the early 1990s, the production time of *Aladdin,* there are several indicators of economic hardship.

First, when looking at the U.S.' GDP growth (in %) around the year of 1992, one can see a steep dip in the GDP growth during that time. While it was growing around 4.2% in 1988, the growth went down to -0.2% in 1991 and then up again in 1992 to 3.5% (WorldBank). GDP per capita shows the same trends during that period (Ibid). Moreover, unemployment was starting to drastically rise from 1989 onwards, with its peak in 1992 of 7.5% the highest percentage in the last eight years (Ibid). Hence, economic data suggests an economic downturn around the production of *Aladdin.*

The period around the release of *Aladdin* was later referred to as the 1990-1991 recession. The U.S. output dropped significantly in 1990 and continued to decline until early 1991. Even when it started to grow normally again, its growth rate was not back to where it was supposed to be by the end of 1992 (Hall 1993, 275). Several explanations have been advanced by scholars for the emergence of this recession, such as tax rates, policy changes, or outside impacts on the U.S. economy (Hall 1993, 275). However, one explanation that is important in this context is the oil price shock of 1990 ensuing the Gulf War, which introduces the second point.

After tensions between Iraq and Kuwait started to heat up in July 1990, oil prices in the U.S. doubled, affecting people, businesses and the U.S. economy overall (Tatom 1993). While Hall argues that the oil shock should not have had the power to cause a recession, this paper follows Tatom's argumentation that it does affect an economy when energy prices rise as energy is needed for production (Hall 1993, 275 and Tatom 1993). For instance, it has been argued to influence people's economic behaviour as they were insecure about oil prices. Hall notes that "[c]onsumers responded to the negative forces as they would to a permanent decrease in their resources" (1993, 279). He illustrates this phenomenon by citing lack of car sales that persisted even after the oil price was back to normal (Ibid). So while it may not be the sole reason for the 1990-91 recession, it still played a role.

More importantly, however, it gave people a target group for their frustration. Most people connect oil prices with OPEC, and OPEC with Arab countries, even though only half

of its member states can be considered Arab. As Ridouani argues, the M.E. tends to be held responsible for the world's wealth (2011, 12). Hence, if oil prices go up, people think Arab countries are raising the prices, making them the scapegoat when national economies are declining. The statement by the editor of the Washington Post summarises this sentiment: "the world's supplies of oil and price levels are manipulated and controlled by greedy Arabs" (Ghareeb 1983 in Ridouani 2011, 12). Enhanced through this narrative of "greedy Arabs" and the broadcasts of the Gulf War, people may be likely to blame the M.E. for the recession, increasing stereotyping and hostilities which is expressed in popular culture like *Aladdin*.

2.5 Conclusion Case 1

To sum this case up, Disney released its first *Aladdin* rendition in a situation that fostered stereotyping and Orientalism. During this period, the examined variables are in favour of negative representation. First, history and politics pointed at vilification of the M.E. due to the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War. Second, societal channels show negative associations with the M.E. in movies and headlines. Last, the 1990/1991 recession and the oil shock combined with the preconceived notion that Arabs are greedy and have control of all oil sources likely gave people a reason to target their frustrations at the M.E.

Chapter Three: Case Study-*Aladdin* 2019

3.1 Historical background

Twenty-seven years after the release of its movie *Aladdin,* Disney released a real-life remake with the same title. *Aladdin 2* was a box office success, reaching ninth place in the list of highest-grossing movies of 2019 and 37th of highest grossing movies in history at the moment of this paper. During this period, several events marked U.S.-M.E. relations. However, arguably the most formative event during that time was the Syrian civil war starting in 2011 and still ongoing at the time of this research. While it is outside the scope of this paper to go into detail about the complexities of the civil war, it is important to note its impact for the U.S., in terms of the portrayal of the M.E. and Syrian refugees. Studies have shown that media coverage of the Syrian civil war and refugees are primarily negative. The images of the war that reached the U.S. population were mainly those of violence (Greenwood and Jenkins 2015, 221).

Syrian refugees, especially, were a significant topic of discussion in media. Studies found that refugees were mostly represented as a threat, either in terms of economic opportunities or in terms of state security. While in 2013, 82% of the American population believed that Syrian refugees would take away American jobs and lower wages, 52% believed that they would constitute a risk to national stability (Yigit and Tatch 2017, 14). This focus on terrorism and national security should be understood in connection to the U.S. collective trauma of 9/11, as well as terrorist attacks carried out by Daesh in Western countries like France that also received extensive news coverage (Ismail and Mishra 2018, 190 and Stone 2017). Between 2015 and 2016, about 75% of news coverage on Muslims was connected to the terrorist organisation Daesh (Stone 2017). While right-leaning media outlets perpetuated the idea that refugees bring terrorism, left-leaning media represented refugees as victims that need help and should be allowed to find safety in the U.S. In several cases, media used a sympathetic approach in order to construct refugees as victims rather than dangers (Bhatia and Jenks 2018, 226 and 232). Thus, the U.S. population was torn by those two narratives of refugees of which the negative one tended to occupy more spaces. Additionally, a Pew survey found that only 45% of Americans have contact with Muslims, and Muslims themselves only take up around 3% of all screen time, meaning people do not get the chance to form their own opinions but are reliant on media outlets and their dominant perspective (Stone 2017). This sceptic and fearful sentiment that many U.S. citizens may have held at the

time also plays out in real-life policies. In 2017, U.S. president Donald Trump announces a travel ban banning citizens from eight different countries to enter the U.S. Six out of those countries were Muslim majority countries. Simultaneously, Trump banned refugees (Gökarisksel 2017, 469). While it was revised relatively quickly, it still shows U.S. attitudes towards the M.E. and increased tensions between Muslims and the United States during the production of *Aladdin 2* (Ibid., 470). Next, the paper will examine the movie.

3.2 Orientalism in the movie

As soon as Disney announced the production of its *Aladdin* remake, many wondered whether Disney would leave out previous stereotypes and appropriately represent the M.E. and its culture. Online, Disney made it a point to communicate its efforts to represent the M.E. correctly. It even consulted with a council of M.E. and South-East Asian experts (Alsultany 2019). While the reviews after the release of the *Aladdin* remake were mixed, progress in representation was acknowledged. One viewer even went as far to call *Aladdin* a "representational breakthrough" (Mouallem 2019). This paragraph will analyse how Orientalist features changed in *Aladdin 2,* and examine whether the movie has made strides in terms of representation. The movie plot has almost entirely stayed the same, with changes mainly in visuals, backstories and details. Still, there is no indication of when this movie is set so that the viewer is led to believe that this could be the M.E. either hundred years ago or today.

3.2.1 The Arab Man

The movie still identifies its settings as the Arab M.E. through its (adjusted) opening song "Arabian Nights". However, the depiction of the Arab man has changed. One noticeable transformation is the switch from animated characters to real-life actors. Disney was praised for casting actors from the M.E. in most leading roles, which is significant as M.E. actors have historically been overlooked for those parts (Alsultany 2019). Hence, in this version, Arabs no longer carry exaggerated features as they are played by regular people; progress compared to the overtly racist depictions in the original version. However, while Disney has made great efforts in casting people of M.E. descent, there are some accounts of white casts having their skin darkened (Alsultany 2019). The costumes of the characters have also become more diverse. Noticeably, the new version describes Agrabah as a "melting pot" of different cultures. Its strategic location next to the sea makes it a port city where people from different countries and cultures meet (*Aladdin* 2019, 0:01:55 and 0:16:32).

Screenshot, 13:56

This description makes it possible to display a wide variety of authentic Middle Eastern and South Asian costumes. The viewer can spot Afghani payraans, Middle Eastern streetwear, fabrics imported from the M.E., Indian sarees, Omani daggers, etc. (Saeed 2019 and Soo Hoo 2019). Moreover, not every Arab man wears a turban anymore like in *Aladdin 1*, but those visible now seem to authentically reflect turbans from the Gulf and Levant (Ibid.).

Screenshot, 17:18

Screenshot, 55:55

Screenshot, 52:41

Screenshot, 52:49

Screenshot, 53:20

Nevertheless, there are also some continuations of Orientalist features. For instance, the backstory of Agrabah as multicultural port city allows for mixing cultures and may reinforce the mental image of the M.E. as monolithic unit. It can be argued that the producers might have used it as a loophole to ensure no criticism can come from a cultural standpoint. Intentional or not, the viewer still leaves the cinema with the idea of the M.E. as "one" rather than as distinct cultures and traditions. Regarding the distinction between "good" and "bad" Arabs, one can observe that these categories remain somewhat present. Aladdin and the genie, the good guys, speak with an American accent, while Jafar, has a slight Middle Eastern, possibly Iranian, accent (Alsultany 2019). However, Jafar's accent is less noticeable in *Aladdin 2* than in *Aladdin 1*. Moreover, it can be argued that the actor himself happens to speak English with a M.E. accent. Simultaneously, good characters like the guard Hakim, who stands up against Jafar, also have M.E. accents (1:40:41-1:40:42). Thus, this distinction may be unintentional and is blurrier than in 1992.

Nonetheless, the depiction of violence has largely remained. The guards are still chasing Aladdin, someone gets pushed into a hole as a punishment and the merchant continues to insinuate that he will harm Jasmine for stealing food, even if he does so more subtly (0:08:39, 0:12:52, 0:06:54).

Screenshot, 12:58

Although some of the features can be justified as part of the storyline for Aladdin, (e.g. saving Jasmine from the merchant, showing how Aladdin gets in trouble with the law) it still perpetuates an image of the M.E. as a place with questionable morals where violence solves problems. It should be noted that the overt description of the M.E. as "barbaric" was removed from the new opening song.

Overall, there is some improvement in the depiction of the Arab man, as M.E. actors accurately represent the M.E. population and costumes are authentic. Moreover, the distinction of "good" vs "bad" Arabs in terms of accent, while still present, is less noticeable and clear cut. At the same time, the portrayal of the M.E. as an overgeneralised whole and the representation of Arab men as violent remain. All those features were certainly toned down compared to *Aladdin 1* but just because they are less highlighted does not mean that they do not subconsciously affect the viewers.

3.2.2 The Arab Woman

The representation of women in *Aladdin 2* changed dramatically from its 1992 counterpart. The previous categorisation of Arab women as either old and unattractive or over-sexualised no longer holds up. Women are shown in different age groups with different costumes and without exaggerated features to make them look better or worse. Some women are wearing headscarves, others do not, and most midriffs are now covered up (e.g. 0:08:57 or 0:19:20). When Aladdin jumps into a building during one of the first songs, he no longer ends up in a harem but in a school with young girls (0:08:57).

Screenshot, 08:58

The most important transformations, however, concern the main character Jasmine. In the new rendition, Jasmine is played by a British-Indian actress which caused substantial criticism as people were hoping for a M.E. actress. People criticised this casting choice on account of overgeneralisation of the M.E., where countries like Iraq and India seem to be interchangeable (Read-Domginuez 2017). Nevertheless, Disney stuck with its choice and mentioned in the movie that Jasmine's mother was from a different kingdom, justifying her casting (0:21:33-0:21:35). What is striking is that Jasmine finally has ambitions and is represented as a strong, modern woman who calls out sexist traditions and behaviours, and eventually succeeds. One instance is when she calls out one of her suitors who reduces her to her looks by pointing out that they would never be described equally (19:52). Moreover, her main ambition is not related to marriage as she makes advances to become a female sultan, which is against tradition and law (22:07). This makes her more three-dimensional and shows that women in the M.E. are not just passive and obedient as Orientalist discourses may present. In the end, she even convinces her father to change the law and make her the sultan. She also no longer uses seduction as a distraction technique. The Bechdel test further confirms this change. In the new version, there are two women (Jasmine and her handmaid) who talk to each other about something other than a man (Jasmine becoming a sultan) (0:26:25-0:26:44). While this may be the only (short) conversation about something other than men, it still illustrates the progress made from 1992, where there were not even two women talking, to now passing the test.

Screenshot, 07:12

Screenshot, 53:55

Still, there are some problems with the depiction of Arab women. One problematic depiction in one of the first scenes shows two women talking to Aladdin in order to pickpocket him (05:09). While on the one hand, it shows that women have agency, wit, and can fulfil any role, it also perpetuates the idea of the M.E. as unsafe, where people who seem pleasant to talk to cannot be trusted. The implicit and underlying message is that the population may pretend to be nice, but does so in order to steal or manipulate. Interestingly, one could refer this point back to the refugee discourse. President Trump, for instance, shared an analogy between a bowl of skittles and refugees. Refugees were to be understood as a

bowl of skittles with a few poisonous skittles mixed in so that one was to take a handful, one could not be certain of what to get. This illustrates the idea that refugees may seem innocent but could be potential terrorists with the intention to manipulate the U.S. population into trusting them (Hauser 2016).

Overall, the image of women has improved, as female characters have more dimension and screen-time. They are depicted as active, smart women with ambitions and dreams, like becoming the leader of a city. Moreover, they are no longer overtly put into categories of over-sexualised dancers or unattractive, old women. Despite all of this, some Orientalism remains such as portraying the M.E. society as dangerous.

3.2.3 The Middle East

While the representation of Arab women experienced a dramatic shift, several problems remain with the representation of the M.E. as a setting. As noted before, the main difference is that Agrabah is now a multicultural port city that justifies the mixing of cultures, and facilitates producers to make the movie seem even more exotic. As such, it continues to overgeneralise the M.E. This problem becomes especially evident in the design of the settings. In an interview, the responsible designer explains that different locations were inspired by countries in and around the M.E. In her vision, Agrabah's markets emulate Marrakesh's markets in Morocco, while its surroundings of sand resemble Namibia, and the sultan's palace was inspired by a Burmese monastery with its interior reflecting Iranian and Indian design (Avery 2019).

Screenshot, 14:59

Screenshot, 13:56

Herein lies exactly the problem. The producers picked and chose which elements of the M.E., and other non-Western countries, they liked and just put them all together as if they were interchangeable to create a fictional, magical city that takes the, supposedly Western, viewer on a trip to a foreign place. It reinforces existing images of interchangeability between cultures and also refers back to Wright's argument that using these pastiches is a way of exerting power over colonial subjects (Wright 1987, 292). The M.E. also continues to be depicted as backward by its lack of infrastructure, such as unpaved roads, markets as sole place to buy things, or schools without chairs and tables (e.g. 0:02:36, 0:08:57).

Screenshot, 06:28

As with *Aladdin 1*, this movie is fiction, yet it still holds true that fiction influences people's reality. It has even been argued that 3D movies, which *Aladdin 2* was, do so more intensely as the viewer involves more senses (Visch, Tan and Molenaar 2010, 1442).

Another remaining feature was the exoticism connected to the M.E. that is not only reinforced by the M.E. as backward, in need of Western modernising but also by its continued magic elements. While Alsultany finds this continued narrative of the magical Orient the most pressing issue in the new movie, it would be complicated to think of the plot without the magical elements it is based on (Alsultany 2019). It would have been surprising for Disney to change such crucial features of the movie. So this essay argues that, like in the first movie, this point of criticism, while not unimportant, should not be weighed as heavily as the other points because it is still a rendition of a story that contains magical elements.

Last, there has also been a change with regards to the historical background of Agrabah. According to the new storyline, Agrabah seems to be at war with nearby cities. Jafar, as the typical "bad Arab" suggests invading the city Jasmine's mother was from (0:21:15-0:21:35). While there is hesitance and pushback against this idea, it perpetuates the image of the M.E. in constant war. It implies that Arabs want to invade and strategically think about conquering, implicitly making viewers see the M.E. as a place of war itself and as a potential threat to the West.

With all the criticism of the depiction of the M.E., there is also some progress to be found. Most cultural elements have been authentically depicted throughout the movie. While it may represent a large variety of cultures, the parts that were used are represented well. The costumes, as previously mentioned, were authentic costumes with some fabrics imported from the M.E. (Saeed 2019). Moreover, there was a switch from using mainly Iranian references to using Arabic references which is more in line with being in the Arab M.E. as the introduction song claims. For instance, in the background, people speak Arabic (0:02:29 or 0:11:10-0:11:15). Another example, is the Arabic documents presented at 1:54:41 which are actual Arabic documents (Saeed 2019).

Screenshot, 1:54:40

Last, cultural references that were wrong in *Aladdin 1*, like the "Sunday Salaam" were corrected to be accurate. "Sunday Salaam" is now "Friday Salaam" referring to the Islamic traditions of Friday prayers (0:56:21).

Overall, the movie has continued its overgeneralisation and portrayal of Middle Eastern backwardness which remains problematic. However, there was small but noticeable progress in terms of authentically reflecting M.E. and South-East Asian culture.

The analysis of *Aladdin 2* shows that there have been strides in terms of casting, representation of Arab women, correct usage of M.E. cultural elements and taking out overtly racist features from the original movie. Thus, Disney made visible efforts to represent the M.E. more authentically. It even sought out advice from a council of M.E. experts indicating an awareness of the problems in the first version, and the willingness to listen to M.E. voices. However, many Orientalist notions remain, such as overgeneralisation, violence, or backwardness of the M.E. Interestingly, the Orientalism that can be identified in *Aladdin 2*, does not entirely overlap with Kerboua's above-mentioned characterisation of what Orientalism looks like post-2001.

Kerboua identifies Neo-Orientalism with characteristics like an emphasis on Islam, on Muslims in Western societies and the idea that the M.E. is a threat to Israel and the West. While we do see tendencies of constructing the M.E. as somewhat of a threat, for instance when Arabs are shown to be plotting invasions and manipulating people on the street to pickpocket, there is no overt reference that the M.E. would attack Western populations. All these cues are relatively subtle (which does not mean they are less harmful). Moreover, the movie does not emphasise Islam which is a crucial part of Neo-Orientalism, according to

Kerboua. In Neo-Orientalism, Orientalism is born out of Islamophobia and the fear of terrorism (Kerboua 2016, 21 and 22). Neither of these appear in the movie, which could point towards a new form of Orientalism that started in recent years. Some of the features like constructing the M.E. as a threat are still to be found in the movie, which may indicate a transition taking place.

3.3 Societal Channels

As outlined in previous sections, Bar-Tal considers societal channels as important factors for stereotype formation. In the historical background of this chapter, we already explored media coverage of Arabs and Muslims which concluded an overall negative representation of Arabs, Muslims and the M.E. The following paragraph will look at different societal channels before and during the period of *Aladdin 2,* namely social media as a new opportunity for the visibility of minority voices, and movies, as discussed in chapter two as well.

Since the original *Aladdin* in 1992, societal channels have experienced a growth in opportunities with the emergence of social media in the early 2000s. According to academic literature, social media contains a myriad of opportunities in favour of minority voices, such as social media presenting a space for minorities to express their voices and be heard (Georgiou 2013, 80). Its user-generated content may also expose its users to societal problems, novel ideas and people from all over the world. While one should be critical to what extent this media perpetuates traditional power relations, it has been argued to facilitate Putnam's idea of "bridging social capital" by giving people the chance to meet new individuals and to help facilitate dialogue between different groups (Georgiou 2013, 83, and Peeters and D'Haenens 2005, 202). At the time of release in 2019 of the new *Aladdin,* approximately 245 million US citizens (three-quarters of the U.S. population) used social media platforms (Clement 2019). The opportunities mentioned here would mean that joining a social media platform increases the chances to meet people from a M.E. background, and it would also increase potential encounters with people who are openly raising questions of discrimination, stereotyping, and representation.

To support those claims, we can use the example of the criticism on the casting of a British-Indian actress as Jasmine. People voiced their concerns via social media platforms (Read-Dominguez 2017). If people are sharing why they find this problematic, it might bring thoughts and ideas to the computers of people that normally would not have thought about this particular casting as problematic. There are also many pitfalls to social media. For

instance, that there is no guarantee that representation changes on a new platform due to the reproduction of power relations (Georgiou 2013, 83). However, social media still poses a great opportunity for encountering new people and ideas.

Another societal channel that should be examined is other movies released and produced during the same period as *Aladdin*. Looking at Box Office numbers of movies with a minority cast like *Crazy Rich Asians* or *Black Panther* it becomes clear that they were extremely popular and profitable (Hunt et al. 2019, 63). Moreover, those movies also received amazing press for diversity in casting and leading roles (Bradshaw 2018 and Ho 2018). As such, Disney may have been inspired by current trends in the movie industry of diversifying stories and casts because they realise that this is what sells. It is not too far-fetched to propose that Disney may be profit-driven. Robert Saunders suggests, movies like *Black Panther* use the display of diversity and progressiveness as a way to generate high profits (2019, 140). Thus, for Disney, it may be beneficial to release movies with a non-Western cast because other examples during the same period have proven extremely profitable. However, we should be careful when celebrating those examples of high diversity movies as becomes clear when looking at the Hollywood Diversity Report. According to its statistics, the rate of minority casts has continuously increased over the past years, yet people with a minority background remain vastly underrepresented onscreen (Hunt et al. 2019, 21). Despite all this, one could argue that increased representation in movies, whether driven by profits or not, still increases the visibility of minorities and raise public discussion about the movies. As such, this paper argues that the period of *Aladdin* was marked by other (profitable) movies with diverse casts that may have opened up the space to new voices and rewarded accurate representation through press and profits, which may have influenced Disney's attempt to represent the M.E. more culturally sensitive than its original version in *Aladdin*.

Overall, social media and the movie landscape during the production of *Aladdin* indicate that societal channels could have been positive drivers towards stereotype reduction and more accurate representation.

3.4 Economic Situation

As discussed above, Bar-Tal argues that the economic situation of a country and people's perception thereof increase stereotype formation as people are looking to target their frustrations towards outside groups (1997, 503). When examining the economic situation

before and during the production of the movie, it stands in stark difference to the economic situation of 1992. Throughout the 2010s the US' GDP per capita was continuously rising while unemployment was drastically falling from 9.6% of the total labour force being unemployed in 2010, to merely 3.7% being unemployed in 2019 (WorldBank). One should keep in mind that the US experienced the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009, so the extreme rise in GDP and drop in unemployment from 2010 onwards must have been noticeable for the US population who were better off during the production of *Aladdin* than they had been in about ten years.

Additionally, oil was also a topic of interest. Between 2014 and 2018, the world experienced a so-called oil glut. During this time, the overproduction of oil caused the prices of barrels to globally drop from around 125 US$ in 2012 to under 50 US$ in 2015 (Tuzova and Qayum 2016, 140). In 2016, right before production for *Aladdin* begun, oil was at its lowest price in over ten years (Sönnichsen 2020). Whereas the 1990 oil price shock might have antagonised people to the M.E., the oil glut was a positive development for consumers who benefitted from low prices which meant there was no need to find outside groups as targets for frustration.

In summary, the economic situation around the time of *Aladdin* was favourable. The U.S. experienced positive growth, low unemployment and low oil prices. According to Bar-Tal's reasoning, if the economy is doing well, anger and frustration in the population should be low, and would not be redirected at certain outsider groups like the M.E., which is in line with the progress made in the M.E. representation of *Aladdin* (1997, 503).

3.5 Conclusion Case 2

As becomes clear from this analysis, most factors connected to stereotype formation according to Bar-Tal, were relatively favourable around 2019, the release of the *Aladdin* remake. The only factor that showed a definite indication of being detrimental to stereotype reduction and accurate representation was the factor of intergroup relations. The civil war in Syria, its refugees and the accompanying media coverage perpetuated negative images of the M.E. and its populations. However, societal channels showed rising opportunities through the emergence of social media, and efforts for accurate representation in other movies released during the same time. The economic situation of the U.S. was also favourable with low unemployment, rising GDP per capita and low oil prices. The movie itself has shown some significant progress with regards to accurate representation of the M.E. but has also left many

issues unaddressed. The following chapter will be a discussion of how the two cases compare with each other and what that means for representation in general.

Concluding Discussion

Returning to the question of "How can we understand the changing representation of the Middle East in Hollywood movies?" the two case studies provide valuable insights for the topic of representation in movies. To draw out those insights we have to start by comparing how the two versions of *Aladdin* represented the M.E. and its population. In 1992, *Aladdin* contained explicit racism in forms of depicted Arabs with large noses and exaggerated characteristics. It also hung on to stereotypes of the Arab man as violent, the Arab woman as sexual/passive and the M.E. as backward and exotic. In 2019, the explicit racism was substituted with significant efforts to cast M.E. actors and represent different M.E. cultures authentically through settings and props. Moreover, adjustments to the storyline meant that women were no longer represented as passive. While the M.E. was still shown as backward, exotic and violent, it was no longer explicitly considered "barbaric". Moreover, it adjusted its cultural references to represent different cultures appropriately. In Kerboua's understanding, that was referenced for each of the case studies above, it is also telling that *Aladdin 1* fit perfectly in the narrative of American Orientalism, whereas the new version did not meet most of the criteria that were associated with neo-Orientalism. Either this is an indication that Disney is trying to move away from Orientalism towards accurate representation or it may mean that we are entering a new period of Orientalism with different characteristics. Overall, while it does still have a long way to go, Disney made noticeable strides toward an accurate representation of the M.E.

Next, it is essential to revisit the idea, put forward in academic literature, that political relations are the sole influencer of cultural representation. In 1992, U.S.-M.E. relations were extremely tense due to the Gulf War. The U.S. government vilified Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein, while media coverage on the events also reinforced images of violence and American superiority (Kamioka 2001, 68). Similarly, in 2019 the U.S.-M.E. relations are strained by the Syrian civil war and its ensuing refugees trying to find new homes in safe environments like the U.S. Just like in 1992, media portrays Arabs and Muslims as a threat, not only to the U.S. economy but also to state security (Bhatia and Jenks 2018, 226). After 9/11 and ISIS-organised terrorist attacks in Western countries like France, this narrative becomes a real concern for many Americans, instilling them with fear and hostility towards Muslims, Arabs and the M.E. Hence, political tensions remained stable throughout the two cases. If one were to follow academic argumentation that political relations inform

representation in movies, one would have to conclude that since both periods show equally intense tensions between the regions, the movies must both be exhibiting negative images and stereotypical representation of the M.E. Yet, as we concluded above, this is not the case. As such, there must be complementary factors that influence representation leading to the first insight that representation is not only connected to politics but to also to other factors.

To support this claim we looked at societal channels as Bar-Tal considered those as a significant factor for stereotype formation. Around 1992, media portrayals of the M.E. often painted a negative picture of the M.E. (Arshad, Setlur and Siddiqui 2015, 12). Moreover, movies during the same period represented people from the M.E. in various stereotypes ranging from sheikhs with harems to terrorists (Shaheen 2003, 178 and 180). Looking at movie releases during 1992 also shows little diversity in actors and storylines indicating a lack of representation in general. In 2019, the picture somewhat changed. Movies that were successful, in terms of box office numbers and press, are movies that represent diversity such as *Black Panther* or *Crazy Rich Asians*. Additionally, the emergence of social media platforms has given minority groups the opportunity to get their voices heard (Georgiou 2013, 80). It also allows people to interact (actively or sometimes accidentally) with social issues and people they may have been unfamiliar with, like people from a M.E. background. So while in 1992, people were bombarded with negative imagery from the M.E., in 2019, they were able to find their own information online and could stop relying on the narratives from traditional media. Moreover, the presence of movies with a diverse cast and storyline may have raised awareness of other communities. Since Duguid and Thomas-Hunt argue that people reduce stereotypes when they see other people make similar efforts, the 2019 situation can be considered a fertile ground for the reduction of stereotyping in the U.S. (2015, 354). Thus, societal channels may have contributed to the reduced Orientalism in Disney's *Aladdin* of 2019.

Next, this research explored the economic situations during both releases. Right around the production of the 1992 *Aladdin*, the U.S. experienced a recession. The country had to deal with high unemployment rates and negative economic growth, which, following Bar-Tal's argumentation, would make people prone to blaming others (1997, 502). Additionally, the oil price shock of 1990 made people insecure about energy and investments. Since people seem to connect oil prices to Arab countries, the increase in oil prices gave people in 1990 a group onto which they could blame their economic frustrations: The Middle East (Ridouani 2011, 12). Alternatively, around the production of the 2019 *Aladdin,* the U.S. economy has already tackled the most recent recession and has experienced economic growth

and low unemployment for a few years by then. This would make the U.S. population less agitated and gives no reason for trying to find a target group responsible for their economic demise. Moreover, 2012-2016 the oil glut ensured people were getting cheap oil, taking attention away from the idea that the M.E. is trying to destroy the U.S. economy. Hence, the economic situation in 2019 was much more favourable for the representation of the M.E., as the U.S. was doing well economically. Thus, the economic situation may have also contributed to the reduction of Orientalism in *Aladdin 2*.

What becomes apparent when contrasting the various factors for the two periods, is that they almost contrast each other. The period of production for the original *Aladdin* around 1990 was marked by everything that Bar-Tal would consider fruitful for stereotype formation. The political relations between the M.E. and the U.S. were tense due to the Gulf War, societal channels depicted the M.E. negatively, and perpetuated continuous stereotypes, and the economic situation in the U.S. at the time was declining due to the recession and high oil prices. On the other hand, in 2019, Bar-Tal's factors seem much more optimistic. While political tensions remained, societal channels represented more diversity and new opportunities in the form of social media to get into contact with the M.E. and gain awareness and understanding of minority groups. Additionally, the economic situation in the U.S. was favourable, considering the low unemployment, positive economic growth and low oil prices (Worldbank). As such, the first conclusion this paper draws from the analysis above is that representation of the M.E. in Hollywood movies are not exclusively dependent on the political situation as suggested previously by scholars looking at *Aladdin 1.* Instead representation is connected to a variety of intertwined factors like societal channels and economic situation as well as politics. It should be noted that this paper does not suggest any causal relation between representation and the factors. It merely finds a correlation. The conclusions drawn here simultaneously seem to be a confirmation of the applicability of Bar-Tal's theory on stereotype formation on movie representation.

However, it is important to remember that *Aladdin 2* was not free from Orientalism which leads up to the second conclusion of this paper: not all factors weigh equally and there are more factors to be considered. In *Aladdin 2* images of violence, exoticism, overgeneralisation and mysticism remained, even if to a lesser extent. If we were to take Bar-Tal's factors as weighing equally, *Aladdin 2* should be mostly free of Orientalism as the only factor conducive to Orientalism in 2019 was political relations/history. However, this paper would argue that the movie still contains many Orientalist features that do not correspond to the optimism the factors would suggest for 2019. As such, two options can be deduced.

Option one: not all factors weigh equally. In this understanding, politics and historical relations weigh more than the other factors, as that would explain the continued Orientalism in 2019. This would align with Bar-Tal's argument that it is difficult for people to forget and let go of past perceptions of people. If a country had the same stereotype about a place for decades, it is passed down in generations and difficult to change (Bar-Tal 1997, 496). The other option is that one of the other factors that Bar-Tal mentioned in his article but were excluded here, like family or encounters, show negative trends around 2019. This paper considers it highly likely that there are even more factors that influence a complex topic like representation which makes this a valid explanation.

To sum it up, the question "How can we understand the changing representation of the Middle East in Hollywood movies?" can be answered with the conclusion that the changing representation of the M.E. in Hollywood movies can be understood by examining the trends in political relations and history, societal channels, and economic situation during the time of production while being aware of the fact that not all factors weigh equally and that there are even more factors to be considered.

Future research should study the remaining factors of Bar-Tal and potential factors that have not been mentioned in his article, and explore how each of these factors weighs in comparison to the rest. Alternatively, an examination of Occidentalism in Arab movies would be an interesting contribution to test whether the findings hold up for representation outside of Hollywood.

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