

## Original Paper

# *Midnight Express* as a Product of Hollywood Orientalism

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of Orientalism has been a forthcoming issue in film studies, be it the (mis)representation of minority groups in Hollywood, or white-washing people of color characters in remakes of films from “the Orient”, or through a complete omission of representation of these characters. Ideology is a great aspect in shaping the views of the masses, and as they become more embedded in cultural devices such as films, the more soft power they deploy and the more problematic they become. In Foucauldian terms, knowledge about the Orient is produced through films made by the Occident, and thanks to their infinite capital and wide distribution networks, the West, particularly America, is far more successful in retaining a cross-cultural dominance through this power/knowledge structure.*

*This paper aims to deconstruct the motives behind Oliver Stone & Alan Parker’s 1978 film *Midnight Express*, in terms of putting Turkey and Turkish people in the Oriental position and putting Western and White characters in the Occidental epistemological positions. Some questions this paper tackles include “How does Orientalism work in the context of Film Studies? Does the Gaze grant a monolithic and unidirectional look at the Orient instead of the Occident?”*

### **Keywords**

*film studies, Edward Said, Orientalism, Occidentalism, representation*

“Orientalist discourse was neither monolithic nor unidirectional, but much more complex and heterogeneous” (Sinha, 1995, p. 19).

By arguing that Orientalism is not just a product of the West, but a construct that affects both the East and the West equally, Mrinalini Sinha offers an alternative to Edward Said’s take on post-colonial theory. Although what Sinha argues can be applicable to some cases such as specific political discourses, in the entertainment industry, all products regarding “the East” are almost always exclusively both monolithic and unidirectional. This is why I will take the film *Midnight Express* (1978) as a case study to elaborate on how Hollywood seeks to replicate representations of the Orient as

degenerate and incapable compared to the West. By depicting the Turks in *Midnight Express* as evil, masochistic and ignorant, the film rationalizes the Western characters as good-natured, clever people, who just happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. As a result, the dichotomization of Turkey as “the other” inferior counterpart of the Western civilization is just another banal repackaging of “the idea of the Orient” by Hollywood, which serves to preserve the West’s global cultural hegemony established through the entertainment industry.

To solidify my thesis, first the idea of Orientalism according to Edward Said will be discussed. This will give the reader a sense of how the Occident (Western civilizations) tries to define the Orient (Eastern civilizations) in order to protect its hegemony. Secondly, I will elaborate on how Said’s idea of Orientalism operates within films made by the West, in which they maintain and reinforce these stereotypes about the East through a power/knowledge relationship. While doing this, I will be referring to my case study *Midnight Express* in order to illustrate Said’s ideas with examples. Following this, I will try to acknowledge who or what legitimizes Orientalist films, which are overtly reminiscent of each other that aid the West’s cultural hegemony. How some critics approach such repackaged stereotypes will also be touched on.

Before we move on to analyze how Hollywood studios exaggerate the differences between the East and the West to accumulate capital and spread Western ideology, first we must look at why Edward Said’s, instead of Sinha’s, version of Orientalism, is more useful to study cultural products made by the West. In an attempt to identify how Western thought shaped the discourse outside of the Occident, Said argues:

“The imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (Said, 1979, p. 8).

The storyline of *Midnight Express* replicates exactly what Said emphasizes in terms of constructing the Orient, and combines it with the idea of “the Western gaze” in cinema. It is this gaze that “reduces the non-European to the not-yet being of underdevelopment; lacking presence and agency” (Venn, 2000, p. 148). As a result, the protagonist of the allegedly based on a “true story” film is an American called Billy Hayes, who is trapped in a jail in Istanbul in the early 1970s for trying to smuggle drugs back into the United States. He is depicted not as a guilty immoral drug trafficker, but as an unfortunate young White male who is stuck in the “middle of nowhere”, because he is in the “mystical” and “unreliable” East. The White, American man of European origins, is thus the only vantage point of the film. The story is told from his point of view, with the cinematic lens that films the whole experience symbolically becoming Billy’s own eyes. On a broader level, Billy’s perception becomes the Western “gaze” that Venn underlines. In this regard, encounters are never evaluated from the Oriental or Turkish

side, which eschews the East's presence and agency as a legitimate form of existence. This precisely debunks Sinha's argument about Orientalist discourse affecting both the East and the West in a heterogeneous way, because the Oriental subjects are never given a chance in the first place to express themselves.

However, although the film opens with the lines "these events were based on a true story starting on October 6, 1970", in a recent interview even Billy Hayes himself has accepted the fact that the screenwriter Oliver Stone and director Alan Parker had "made up a great chunk of it because of cinematic reasons" (Marnell, 2010). In fact, Hayes admits to the fact that he never was sexually abused as depicted in the film, and the beatings were not as violent. Additionally, in contrast to the ending of the film, Hayes admits that he never killed the sadistic head guard, but another inmate outside the prison shot him once he was released. At the end of the interview, Hayes comes to terms with the reality that the stereotypes in *Midnight Express* have casted on Turkey's reputation: "it creates an overall impression that Turkey is this terrible place and Turks are terrible people. Which is not valid or true, both to my own experience and to reality" (Marnell, 2010). It is arguable whether he says he likes Turkey because he wants to make peace with this nation, but in any regard he still acknowledges the fact that Oliver Stone and Alan Parker had added scenes of no solid accountable background. He names "cinematic reasons" as being the source of distortions, however I think it is evident that these scenes are added in order to submit Turkey, as a part of the East, into the grand narrative of the Orient, which is inferior, untimely, and passive compared to the West.

Thus, "based on a true story" tagline is used as an effective marketing technique for the film, even though most of the script is *not* based on the autobiographical account of Hayes. Therefore, Parker and Stone are projecting a myth about Turkey through the medium of cinema with the help of unscientific imprecision about this foreign country, and circumstances of interpretations of encounters (Said, 1997, p. 163) with Eastern subjects that fill the plot with banal stereotypes.

Said also stresses that "while the West was modern, civilized, and progressive, the Orient remained, at least from a Western perspective, a static and backward society" (Said, 1979, p. 3). In this sense, *Midnight Express* seeks only to represent the Oriental identity as inferior and incompatible to the West, without giving the Orient a chance to express its individuality. Cinematically, this degradation is achieved through the music and lightening, as well as casting and costume choices. The opening scene of the film is depicting the sunrise over Topkapi, the historic peninsula of Istanbul, with the prayer voice hailing from the minarets of the mosques, and a lazy, yellow light, that immediately directs the audience to feel that the context is Middle Eastern. This peculiar yellow light and Oriental music is reused in many other scenes of the film to come, in order to underline the "strangeness" of the setting. Additionally, prison guards, who, with their exaggerated Turkish accents, are depicted as evil people who don't miss out on a chance of verbally and physically abusing the inmates for no apparent reason. Alongside with the barbarian traits of the fellow Turkish cellmates, who love to snitch on the foreign

inmates just to sadistically watch them getting beat, collectively the Turkish characters are depicted as “backwards and uncivilized” through the casting choices. On another note, although the film is set in the 1970’s, the Turks are still seen wearing fez caps and ridiculous Ottoman outfits from the 19th century, which again highlights how “oriental” Turkey is, even though that fashion was abandoned more than a hundred years ago. Thus, representation of the Turks in this film is in perfect resonance with what Said offers about Eastern stereotypes, since they are continually projected as ignorant and dirty people with no solid historicity.

In contrast to the barbarian, inhumane and passive Turks, Billy and his other foreign cellmates are busy making plans to “catch the Midnight Express”, which is a term used to describe an attempt to escape. This is another cliché reinforced by Hollywood in such movies as *The Mummy* and *Indiana Jones* as well, where the Western protagonist is trying to “solve the mystery” of the static East by using maps and other devices to get around mazes and pyramids, or in this case, an old sketch of sewer tunnels to run away. As Albert Memmi advocates, this stereotype also exemplifies the “active agent” role of the Western man, in which the protagonist is the conqueror and the colonizer ready to take over the treasures of the passive East, which is in Billy’s case, his own freedom (Memmi, 2003, p. 172).

These stereotypes are so casually reproduced that as a result, they lead to a dichotomizing process vis-à-vis to the Western gaze and audience in which the West is “us”, and the East is “them”. In this dichotomy, the East and the West are differentiated in terms of being incompatible civilizations, where the West has the upper hand. Moreover, in this dichotomizing process, Hollywood in general is influenced by potent racial and cultural stereotypes that seek to represent the Oriental way of being as “as decadent and inferior... tends to dismiss Muslim aspirations for self-determination as politically primitive, economically suspect, and ideologically absurd” (Little, 2008, p. 11). To exemplify, in *Midnight Express*, Billy’s foreign friends in jail mention this “ideological absurdity” quite explicitly while talking about his prison sentence: “This ain’t the good old USA. This is Turkey, man. It’s an accident if you are innocent!” which suggests that even though drug smuggling is pretty much a crime in almost every country around the world, because the White protagonist is likeable and identifiable to the Western gaze, it is unlawful and unfair for the Turks to sentence him to prison.

On the other hand, the Western values and beliefs are attributed to such qualities as being rational, fair, and as the core aspect of Christianity, merciful. Billy’s monologue in court when he finds out that he is sentenced to 30 years is such a typical display of the “fair and just Western ideology”, in which the White subject rationally questions the value system of what is not his own culture. He cries: “Concept of a society is based on that mercy, fair-play sense of justice, but it’s a ton of shit to you. For a nation of pigs, it’s funny because you don’t eat them!” Here, Billy does not only act the part as the “rational” conscience of the Colonizer, but also as a White subject driven by banal stereotypes of Islam, such as not eating pigs, who is “witty” enough to make ironic jokes about it. The fact that he is “witty” and able to make fun of this cultural aspect further elevates his position in the Western audience’s eye as a White

character with whom they could identify with if they were to be in the same situation instead of the evil Turks. Through this Western gaze, that is “rational” and “normal”, the audience feels safe in regard to the Turkish subject, because the West is “powerful” enough to question and decide what is right or wrong in this foreign civilization.

Through this power structure, Orientalism operates as a cinematic optic legitimized by the Western gaze in films like *Midnight Express*, because it is “an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” (Said, 1979, p. 6). Although Billy is physically “victimized” by the evil Turks, the power of the White subject comes from his mentality and ability “to be rational”, which is historically affiliated with the West (Kennedy & Danks, 2001). As a result, since they are viewing Turkey from an Orientalist lens of the director Alan Parker, the audience is most likely to adopt these negative stereotypes and affiliations with Turkey. Due to the economic dominance Hollywood holds over other national film capitals, American values, expectations, norms, or in Althusserian terms, ideology, is enforced upon anybody who is subjected to Orientalist films such as *Midnight Express*.

In Foucauldian terms, knowledge about the Orient is produced through films made by the Occident, and thanks to their infinite capital and wide distribution networks, the West, particularly America, is far more successful in retaining a cross-cultural dominance through this power/knowledge structure (Little, 2008, p. 310). Although he does not directly mention Foucault, Said also acknowledges the importance of power relations in Orientalist discourse: “unbroken arc of knowledge and power connects the European or Western statesman and the Western Orientalists” (Said, 1979, p. 104), which brings us to the question of the legitimizing forces of such Orientalist films as producing “true” knowledge about the East.

The Academy Awards is seen as the authority in selecting the best motion pictures of the year, and the films that are lucky enough to get an Oscar are almost always huge box office successes. *Midnight Express* is no exception to this, with two wins in the year 1979, as well as an astonishing six wins in Golden Globes that same year, including the best picture award. Anthony Appiah identifies Orientalist directors such as Alan Parker as a part of a “comprador intelligentsia”, who are constituted “of relatively small, Western style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (Appiah, 1992, p. 5). Thus, to combine Appiah with Said’s argument about the “inbroken arc of knowledge and power”, the Western statesmen institutionalize the film industry in such a way that by crowning Orientalist directors like Alan Parker with awards, the West legitimizes its source of hegemony, and engrains it within the Western culture, thanks to extensive press and coverage these events accumulate.

As a result of this legitimization process, the viewer is highly likely to regard Orientalist films such as *Midnight Express* as true representations of the East, and take how Turkey is projected in the film as granted, which is exactly where the hegemonic power of the West is most succinct. These stereotypes are so recycled and reused that the Western audience does not even question them anymore, but just

accept images of the East as depicted on silver screen as truth. Thus, what Lewis offers about the operational distinctiveness of stereotyping the East is verified: “it is the hegemonic ability of Orientalist discourse to retain the upper hand even whilst it accepts and incorporates challenges that accounts for its longevity” (Lewis, 1996, p. 20). Potentially, to take such representations of Middle East as granted could be dangerous in the sense that it can feed feelings of xenophobia and intolerance against foreign people among the people of the West.

On the other hand, as a response to the global achievement of the film, several critics recognized the monolithic gaze evident in *Midnight Express* and how problematic such projections can be. Mary Lee Settle states that “The Turks I saw in *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Midnight Express* were like cartoon caricatures” (Settle 1991, p. 8). In this sense, she verifies that this Western gaze directed at Turks is common in Hollywood, and equally ridiculous. In resonance with her, David Robinson observes *Midnight Express* as being a “more violent, as a national hate-film than anything I can remember— a cultural form that narrows horizons, confirming the audience’s meanest fears and prejudices and resentments” (Wakeman, 1988, p. 741). His insight verifies what Said had to say about the Western consciousness, which can only project and imagine investments about the East, which can lead on to more serious problems such as racism or xenophobia.

However, what famed film critic Pauline Kael has to note just hits the Orientalist spot of both Oliver Stone and Alan Parker. She writes: “this story could have happened in almost any country, but if Billy Hayes had planned to be arrested to get the maximum commercial benefit from it, where else could he get the advantages of a Turkish Jail? Who wants to defend Turks? They don’t even constitute enough of a movie market for Columbia Pictures to be concerned about how they are represented” (Kael, 1980, p. 499). Due to its Oriental position, that is, as Little argues, politically primitive and economically suspect, Turkey is not even seen “worthy enough” to be worried about its representation in such Orientalist films. As a result, Turkishness is used as a stepping-stone to accumulate capital and reinforce Eastern stereotypes in order to preserve Western hegemony by the way of “entertaining” people around the world.

To sum up, *Midnight Express* is just another Hollywood product that’s main aim is to display an Oriental civilization as monolithically different from the Occident. The clearly Orientalist storyline is justified by offering that it is “based on a true story”, even though many events are imagined by the screenwriter to make the film more dramatic. Additionally, the awards the film had acquired repute the film as a rightful account of Turkey, which has destroyed the country’s reputation back in the 1970s, and can still act as a source of “true knowledge” about the country since its depiction is legitimized by Western institutions that help to maintain their cultural hegemony.

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