TO WHAT EXTENT ACCENTED FILMS INTERVENE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY ON THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM?

Meshari Alotaibi, Mississippi State University

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impact of films and Accented cinema on identities and cultures. The researcher used the Unorthodox series as a case study. This paper concluded that films impact Arab culture and that modern media created globalization that could make many world cultures similar, which could lead to consequences due to the integration of cultures.

Keywords: Accented Cinema, Unorthodox Modern Media, Globalization Arab Culture.

Classifications: Social Science

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that is dependent and influenced by the media in political, entertainment, financial, cultural, and even religious matters. We can see how the media affects people and governments. Some of these effects are positive, such as women's rights, environmental pollution, and many others. On the other hand, there are some negative impacts of media on viewers such as wars, psychological effects that directly influence our identity and cultures. In this paper, the focus will be on the impact of media on different cultures and the impact on our identities. In the beginning, I will provide a background discussion and explanation of the topic's relevance and importance, which will lead to questions that I would like to explore. After that, I will discuss the sources that I have researched as well as their contribution to this paper. Also, I will apply these sources to the analysis of my case study. At the end, I will provide my input on the case study and the material that I read.

Many films, advertisements, songs, and different types of media display different cultures from all over the world; some from popular cultures and some from unknown cultures.

According to Hamid Nafisi, some directors *"tend to represent their homelands and people more than themselves"* (Naficy, 2006). This is one of the elements in which different cultures are depicted, and then they are presented locally or internationally. There are also international ads, songs, series, and news carrying various cultures. The question here is, how does the presentation of these different cultures in the media affect viewers? And what kind of influence?

I believe this topic is important for viewers and directors. To illustrate, directors can understand and see the impact of the material that they are displaying on the media. The viewers, on the other hand, knowing the factors that affect their identities and their cultures might help

them to accept their situations and understand themselves better. Stuart Hall, a founding figure of Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, wrote a book about identity, and *"who needs identity?"*.

The question here is what are the reasons that make a thinker like Hall to write about identity? The answer is because of the importance of identity and the understanding of ourselves.

Many factors affect the way we understand ourselves, such as our backgrounds, cultures, and media. All these elements have an essential role in accepting our identity. I think that studying these factors together will give people a better understanding of their identity, which can lead to the acceptance of their current identities. The absence of understanding ourselves or our culture can lead to a lack of self-acceptance, anxiety, psychological disorders, low self-esteem, and loss of self-confidence. All of these can threaten our communication with others that can lead us to destabilization in our cultures.

What happens after we understand our identities, cultures, and the factors that influence them through the media, such as films? We live in a world that has full of different cultures, experiences, ages, races, and interests. Understanding our identities and cultures is essential to deal with various elements and to achieve many kinds of peace, such as peace with oneself, peace with family members, and peace with the external environment. Moreover, accepting ourselves helps us succeed and continue living a comfortable life. I remember many events that happened between my parents and me due to poor identity understanding. Later, I realized that they are from a generation that is completely different from mine; they believe that the Saudi culture has not changed and has not been affected. Hence, they believe that the new generation carries the old Saudi culture. These led me to think about the reasons that influenced my family, culture, and identity.

Domestic violence is one of the problems stemming from a poor understanding of ourselves and our cultures. For example, Saudi culture did not allow women to do many things, such as driving, self-traveling, marriage, and many other things. However, after the Saudi culture has been affected by various international cultures from the media, several laws were changed, such as allowing women to drive and travel without a guardian. I can see that many Saudi families have not yet accepted these changes and stand against their daughters' views. In fact, they still believe that those lows do not belong to the Saudi culture. Violence arise because some women do not accept the old generation's culture. Therefore, I believe that the understanding of our identity and culture is a key element to live in peace and accept each other.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

The Concept of Identity by Stuart Hall

The concept of identity is one of the complex concepts in media studies. According to Stuart Hall, history, philosophy, phenomenology, and cultural studies are meshing together in a more sophisticated understanding of identity. Identity is built by difference. Also, identity is the attributes, beliefs, personalities, appearance, and expressions that make up a person. Our names are part of our identities. Identity is who we are, how we think about ourselves, how we are seen by the world, and the characteristics that define us. We can *"define identities by marking*

differences" (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). I think all the differences that we have and the changes that happen to us by the media are the process of creating our identities.

The concept of culture by Pierre Bourdieu

We can define culture through Purdue's concept of cultural capital. A culture is a group of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, positivity, clothing, behaviors, material goods, credentials, etc. that one acquires by being part of a particular social class. Also, culture is an integrated pattern of knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, values, ethics, goals, and customs that societies share.

The Concept of Accented Cinema by Hamid Nafisi

Hamid Nafisi explains a type of cinema that interests the post-colonial films, the Third World, and the displaced who are living in the West. Also, Nafisi shows us how this kind of cinema transfer some personal experiences and cultures from exile or diaspora to the cinema. From here, we can see some aspects of Netflix, and how many cultures are being transported to different viewers. Netflix began to gain light in Arab countries for several reasons. The most important reason is the filming that is taking place in Arab countries such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia; this resulted in attracting many Arab viewers. Additionally, the company, Netflix, paid close attention to the Arab actors which developed the concept of cinema in Saudi society. Many people did not accept this idea, while some others encouraged and accepted it with pride. They considered it as a vast improvement in the field of media in Saudi Arabia.

Small Stories and the Visual and Aural Techniques

Netflix is directing its production to miniature stories, and I think this strategy can affect viewers significantly. According to Caitlin Manning and Julie Shackford-Bradley, the strategy of small stories *"allows the films to convey ideas about larger abstract forces even as they engage audiences emotionally through the depiction of ordinary people, intimate relationships, and everyday life"* (Manning & Shackford-Bradley, 2010). Also, Netflix is using visual and auditory techniques for cinematography woven through small stories. These techniques help small stories to influence viewers more. Netflix uses these techniques to *"add layers of meaning that expand narrative elements"* in meaningful ways to represent cultures. For example, the music and images used in many films can affect the viewers. According to Manning and Shackford-Bradley, *"Each of the films invokes, through image and sound, multiple time-space constellations. On one level of reception, these technical elements add to the overall drama of the experience and dramatize the collision of new chronotopes"* (Manning & Shackford-Bradley, 2010).

Accented Cinema and Foreign Viewers

Watching a film or any kind of media that contains similar cultural elements, a viewer may not be heavily influenced. However, the influence comes when those films contain elements that are culturally different. These kinds of films can preserve culture, as we see. Several films contain small stories that represent different cultures. Some types of films preserve local cultures by continuing to produce films that contain a culture similar to the viewer's culture.

On the other hand, the differences between the cultures that are presented in films and the viewers' cultures can affect the identities of foreign viewers. These effects might lead to a change in foreign viewers' cultures or/and identity. According to Nava Dushi, *"The interface between local cinematic texts and their foreign viewers is one of great intricacy. Members of juried committees in international film festivals, potential distributors, and general audiences worldwide perceive such films from some distance, outside of their local context"* (Talmon & Peleg, 2011).

The Influence of Media on Identity

According to Rahmiati Lita and Yoon C-Cho, "*Perceived reality of a media presentation may influence mental processes, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors"* (Lita & Cho, 2012). The influence of media on viewers is considered as one of the most important topics in the study of culture and media. The importance of studying these effects is to understand the role of the media in various aspects of life. My interest rose in exploring the influence of media on ouridentity and culture as those influences are driving the change to our culture. According to Tom Boellstorff and Heather Horst, *"the role of media and communication in culture - and particularly cultural change - is undoubtedly massive"* (Boellstorff & Horst, 2020). Some of these changes are positive for us to develop, and some of them are negative because they cause a situation in which we do not understand ourselves and understand our external environment (Schrader, 2020).

Media Text analysis by Encoding and Decoding Theory

The encoding and decoding model is one of the finest theories through which we can analyze films that contain short stories. With this theory, we can decipher messages, songs, visual and aural techniques. I will use this theory to analyze and study some scenes from a Netflix series called Unorthodox. Also, I will explore how the audience receive those messages, which will help us in studying the audience as well. Some films contain subtle details within some of the hidden elements that have some messages that could affect our culture and identities. According to Naficy, many films include *"hidden messages from our cultural heritage, messages that often reach beyond the capacity of the ordinary words of any language" (Naficy, 2006).The process of these messages"* is greatly facilitated by the operation of discrepant codes" (Hall, 1973).

Critical Analysis of a Netflix Show

Unorthodox

Unorthodox series has a great story to be analyzed by several theories. The story is about a girl from Jewish ultra-orthodox community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where women are not allowed to sing in public because a woman performing loudly among men is considered to be immodest, even seductive. Esty, the main character in the series, did not have access to the proper training of any kind of music when she was in school. However, before she fled to Berlin, a musician woman who is living in a building that belongs to her grandfather gave her piano lessons in exchange for rent. I will analyze some scenes that I believe can influence our cultures and identities.

Find Your Identity

In the first episode, Esty fled to Berlin and met a musician group: one Israeli girl, one Arabic girl, and three men from different cultures. The scene is depicted when Esty goes for a trip to a river with this group and swims with her regular clothes. While Esty was swimming, the Arabic girl opened Esty's wallet and found a picture of Esty's grandmother and a passport. As Esty was walking into the water, she took off her wigs and throw it away to feel more comfortable and as a symbol of freedom. According to Lita and C-Cho, *"the media plays a role in changing attitudes and behavior by different degrees depending on how audiences perceive and are involved" (*Lita & Cho, 2012). These scenes show us the importance of identity, and the importance of our understanding and acceptance of our identities. Also, it shows us how Esty was affected by this group which led her to create a new identity for herself. Now the question here is, how the audience receives these messages? (Hadacs & Schulcz, 2021).

The expected impacts of these scenes on the viewers are significant. From using the encoding and decoding model, the effect varies due to the differences when receiving those messages. It is important to understand the encoding messages behind those scenes and how the audiences decode these messages. According to the first episode, Esty encounters another Israeli girl in Berlin, who has a completely different identity, regardless of culture. This is an example of how differences create identities. Moreover, the scene of Esty throwing her wigs and swimming in the river shows us the importance of understanding our identity. The message behind this scene is to have the freedom and to remove restrictions and boundaries that we set to ourselves. Also, the scene conveys to viewers the idea that identity is variable and not fixed.

The sight of swimming in the river is one of the most impressive scenes that contain a lot of messages for the viewers. Most religions use water for many reasons, such as cleansing, blessings, treatment, and many others. Using the encoding and decoding model, the river conveyed the message of Esty's new birth, a new identity. The message for the viewers is that identity is acquired, and we can be reborn with a new identity that is different from our old one.

The second scene that I believe important to analyze is how old identities and cultures are transferred to new generations, and how this causes a lack of understanding of our identities and cultures. The scene shows Esty before traveling to Berlin when she was preparing to get married. An older woman comes to Esty and teaches her that *"The man is the giver, the woman is the receiver."* Also, she teaches Esty the time when she should have sex with her husband. *"Bourdieu defines habitus as a property of actors that comprises a structured and structuring structure. It is structured by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing*

and educational experiences" (Grenfell, 2014). These habits shape our identities. Therefore, the old generations' cultures are transferred to the children; then, the children create their identities. According to Bourdieu, *"Habitus helps to shape one's present and future practices"* (Grenfell, 2014). Here is the problem; when getting older, these children find that their identities do not fit them, so they try to change their old identities. Again, this creates a lack of understanding between different generations.

The third scene that I want to analyze is when Esty explains to the music group why she fled from her old community. Esty said, *"God expected too much of me, and now I need to find my own path." Here, I think "path"* means identity. In this scene, Esty shows us the effect of not accepting our identities, which leads to having instability. According to Dushi, *"Israeli identity takes on new forms rendered not from a collective submission that either confirms or disputes a master narrative, which characterized much of twentieth-century Israeli culture"* (Talmon & Peleg, 2011). Here I am not talking about the type of identity but the reasons for changing or not accepting the identity. Doshi said that Israeli identity has taken on new forms, and for me, this means that Israeli viewers tend to understand their identity more and more.

The fourth scene that is essential to analyze is in the last episode of the series. After Esty escapes to Berlin, Esty falls in love with a young man from the music group, while her husband just arrived in Berlin looking and trying to find her. One of the reasons for Esty's escape is that her husband repeatedly tried to make Esty pregnant. Also, the community in Williamsburg harassed Esty about the fact that she is married for a year, but she did not get pregnant which is the main reason Esty decided to run away. At the end of the episode, Esty's husband finds her and buys her a gift. He gives her the gift and asks her to return home to Williamsburg with him, but she refused. Esty's husband tries to persuade her to return with him by saying that *"I can be different, too,"* yet she keeps her decision to refuse. In this scene, we move from how identity is changed to how it is preserved. Here Esty accepted her new identity and refused to go back to her old identity and culture.

By using the theory of the encoding and decoding model, I found many important messages behind these scenes. The most important one is how our understanding of ourselves and our identities helps us make decisions and be satisfied with ourselves. Identity is variable and consists of differences as Esty's husband said, *"I can be different too."* Additionally, I found many several techniques that are used in the series that affect viewers to receive those messages, such as sound, language, and songs. According to Manning and Shackford-Bradley, "*The visual and aural techniques of cinematography that are woven through small stories to add layers of meaning that expand on the narrative elements"* (Manning & Shackford-Bradley, 2010).

Netflix as an Accented Cinema

Netflix has become one of the most influential media platform these days because it contains many different types of films that include different cultures. In the past, the Saudi audience used to watch American and Hollywood movies, but with Netflix, the situation seemed to change. In Arab society, viewers are now moving to watch Spanish, Mexican, and many films from different cultures. According to Naficy, *"The accented cinema is one of the offshoots of the Third Cinema, they may be made anywhere, by anyone, about any subject, and in a variety of*

styles and forms, as long as they are oppositional and liberationist" (Naficy, 2006). Thus, this is an essential element that shows us the diversity of filmmakers, with their differences and cultures. Moreover, Netflix has expanded its channels significantly over the past five years. To illustrate, most new TVs, computers, phones, and various systems like Mac and Android have Netflix subscriptions. Consequently, the effect of Netflix on viewers is very significant and vast.

The Influence of Films on Identities affects Cultures

After we have seen how films influence identities, I am going to explain how these influences affect our cultures. According to Lita and C-Cho, "*The effects of the cultural wave have spread into many areas, such as the growth and acceptance of songs or the soundtracks that are embedded in drama or movies*" (Lita & Cho, 2012). The impact on identities leads identities to change through the acquisition of new habits. When a community acquires new habits, the community creates a new culture, and this has a major impact on our lives. For example, I have three sisters, and our ages are close, but my parents are from a different generations. My sisters and I have a culture that is different from my parents' culture even though we live in the same home and have the same nationalities. The reason behind this is that we are affected by the media such as films. We watch many films from different cultures that affected us and affected others who are from the same generation as us. The reason that makes my parents and the people who are from the old generation to contain their old culture is that they do not engage in those platforms and films. The people who are from the old generation see teenagers as they are not following the real culture. Understanding the effects of films and cinema on culture helps us to have family stability and makes us understand each other more

For instance, many parents in Saudi culture consider songs as a flaw, while many young people consider them a daily habit. According to Lita and C-Cho, "*There is an emerging trend of recognition of songs and singers. In many countries, this has become a daily entertainment program*" (Lita & Cho, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Media consumption is becoming a daily habit for many people around the world. There are many types of films and media platforms, and each of them has a specific audience. Netflix is one of these media platforms that has become very popular nowadays. The impacts on viewers from those platforms are one of the most critical topics of media and cultural study. I found that these platforms and the different kinds of movies can influence our identities. These influences can lead us to acquire new cultures that are completely different from ours. These impacts affect our understanding of our identities and cultures. Also, it can lead to many problems, such as family violence, depression, anxiety, and instability. I do not want to ignore the good side of these influences, such as self-development, knowledge of different cultures and people, and women's rights. This paper is focused on the importance of understanding these influences on different cultures and audiences. The research results helped me understand the reasons for the disagreement between my generation and the old generation, which will help me better deal with people who belong to the old generation as my parents.

With the development of platforms, watching movies has become more reachable; anyone can watch many kinds of films from different platforms such as Netflix, through mobile, computer, smart TVs, and many devices. The vast expansion of movie channels will affect many viewers. Looking at the similarities between many different cultures shows us how the media, like cinemas and films, have influenced these cultures to create a lot of similarities like celebrating Birthdays, Halloween, New Year's, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and many others. These elements, which belong to other cultures, began to become a basis in Arab culture, even though the old generation fights against these elements because they believe that the idea of culture is fixed.

After completing my research on the topic of the influence of media on cultures and identities, I began to think about the possibility that the world will contain one global culture. According to Manning and Shackford-Bradley, *"The films offer new perspectives on globalization. Each suggests, to varying degrees, that the forces of globalization may also offer alternative histories, divergent paths, and hybrid formations that function as forms of resistance to the inevitable forward march toward a global monoculture."* I believe it is important to consider the idea that the world will contain one culture or very similar cultures. According to Lita and C-Cho, *"The impacts of the media and technology have been described as cultural globalization about forming and reforming cultural values."* Finally, it is very important to study what are the consequences of the fusion of cultures into one culture around the world.

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