

# **The Orientalist Representation of the Sahara in Western Cinema: Analyzing the Role of the Desert in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient***

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work:

To all my teachers to whom I owe my knowledge.

To my parents who taught me to love this world.

To my sister and brother who share all the memories of my life.

To all my family members who filled my childhood with happiness.

To my friends who bring me joy.

To my husband, Majdi.

For my homeland, Tunisia.

## Introduction

According to Edward Said<sup>1</sup>, orientalism can be defined as “*a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.*” (Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, p3) This authority was first exercised by Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. After the Greeks, the Romans occupied North Africa as part of their empires. Since that time, many Westerners have appropriated these foreign lands and considered their inhabitants as culturally inferior. As European colonization spread across the globe, Asian lands and North African territories became known as the Orient. This geographical distinction was made to separate the Occidental world from the Orient. Through the long history of colonialism, many Europeans learned about its mysteries. For centuries, Western soldiers were not the only forces of colonial exploitation. Civilian mapmakers, poets, and historians also used their talents to define the Orient. Upon their return to Europe, they shared their experiences with Occidentals, who were fascinated by what they heard. This attraction persisted over time, and North Africa and Asian lands were exploited commercially for their natural resources by European colonialists. Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798 continued the tradition of foreign invasion of North Africa. As a result, the French and the British empires were the most dominant throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their soldiers and citizens saw the region as a privileged destination to enhance their social status in new territories under colonial European control. Of all the Oriental territories, Occidental forces fought over the vast spaces of the Sahara and its resources. Based on these historical and political realities, Edward Said explains how the West was powerful enough to dominate and restructure the culture and memory of the Orient.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said says: “*The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a lace of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.*” (Said, p1) Before the discovery of the new world, European exploration focused on Asian and North African territories. Westerners travelled there to admire the landscape and to experience exotic journeys. Thus, the rich Europeans

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said (1935- 2003) was a Palestinian American academic, political activist and literary critic. He was an outspoken proponent of the political rights of the Palestinian people and the creation of an independent Palestine State. ([www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Said](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Said))

who were greatly influenced by the cultural phenomenon of Le Grand Tour<sup>2</sup>, became interested to learn about the vast mysteries of the Orient. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Western intellectuals spoke of the vast dunes of the Sahara and wrote about the fascinating ruins of ancient civilizations. Moreover, this movement became more popular with many Romantic<sup>3</sup> artists who applied the concept of Occidental superiority to showcase the foreign lands according to their individual perception. In *Orientalism*, Said focuses on history and politics. Nevertheless, he does not discuss the history of art. For this reason, it is necessary to consult other critical works to identify artistic influence in the Orient. Orientalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined as an artistic movement that shows the danger and mystery of the exotic space. In her article “Re-Presenting the Orient: A New Instructional Approach”, Mildred Mortimer<sup>4</sup> explains that “[Said’s] choice of Jean Léon Gérôme’s *Le Charmeur de Serpents*”, for the dust-jacket is significant.” (Mortimer, p298) French painters including Champmartin, Marilhat, Decamps, and Roquepelon joined writers like Lamartine, Chateaubriand, and the British poet Lord Byron to display their works in European museums. In 1835, orientalism had become so popular that “Le Salon de Paris” was dedicated to it. In fact, Théophile Gautier introduced the exhibition with the following words:

“L’Orient, l’Orient, voilà aujourd’hui la grande source de toute peinture comme de toute poésie. Lord Byron y est mort, M. de Chateaubriand y a laissé son nom, M. de Lamartine y était hier, M. Champmartin en revint, Marilhat en revint, Decamps en revint Decamps y retourne, Roqueplan ira, et Léopard Robert est digne d’y aller.” (Peltre<sup>5</sup>, Christine, *Orientalisme*, p86)

In her book *Orientalisme* (2004), Christine Peltre claims that these Orientalists shared their discoveries with other Europeans who developed a particular understanding of the Orient based on what they saw in paintings and read in travel narratives. In fact, European who travelled to the Orient perceived different realities while capturing the North African landscape. The degree of their artistic and literary interpretations varies according to their experiences of nomadic life. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many publications and paintings have become icons of the Orientalist Movement. For example, Eugène Delacroix spent many years

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<sup>2</sup> In the 18th century the so-called Grand Tour became a rite of passage for aristocratic young men. The journey typically involved three or four years of travel around Europe and included an extensive sojourn in Italy. ([www.britannica.com/topic/art-market/The-18th-century](http://www.britannica.com/topic/art-market/The-18th-century))

<sup>3</sup> Romanticism: A movement in the arts and literature that originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual. ([www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com))

<sup>4</sup> Mildred Mortimer is the Professor Emeritus at the University of Colorado. ([www.colorado.edu](http://www.colorado.edu))

<sup>5</sup> Christine Peltre is a French art historian and an expert in orientalism. ([www.bibliomonde.com](http://www.bibliomonde.com))

in Algeria and painted the famous *Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement* in 1833. The concept of orientalism was applied to art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in order to explain the history of colonial imperialism in the Eastern world. According to Christine Peltre, travel writers, painters, and historians inspired the development of other artistic forms such as lithographers and sculptors. However, the most contemporary example of Orientalist art would occur in films. Indeed, many directors adapted previous novels and made references to older works of art. The North African desert in particular has been featured in many historical films. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Sahara was one of the main regions of conflict during the two World Wars. Within the context of orientalism, Paul Bowles<sup>6</sup> and Michael Ondaatje<sup>7</sup> wrote novels about characters coming from the West to discover the Sahara. Later on, *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* were adapted into movies entitled with the same names. Bernardo Bertolucci<sup>8</sup> and Anthony Minghella<sup>9</sup> use the vast spaces of the Sahara and place their characters in certain situations in order to develop the narrative of their films.

*The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* have a similar plot featuring Occidental characters in an Oriental space. Both films feature Western couples who have journeyed into the Maghreb region during the period of the Second World War.

In a foreign Saharan space, Occidental characters must face the consequences of their own friendships and their new love affairs. At the beginning, each of them is amazed by the exotic environment. However, the longer they remain in the desert, the more it becomes clear that the course of their individual lives will change forever. No matter what these characters do, the reality of war does not help them avoid a tragic ending. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci directs Debra Winger and John Malkovich who play the starring roles of Kit and Port, a couple whose relationship is in crisis. George Tunner, played by Campbell Scott, travels with them to Algeria for the first time. Once in Oran, the three American characters discuss the itinerary for their journey. Throughout the trip, they encounter other Westerners who are also interested in the Berber culture of the Maghreb. At the end, the group splits because of the harsh climate and the reality of war. The same happened with the characters of

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Frederic Bowles (1910- 1999) was an American expatriate composer, author, and translator. He became associated with Tangier (Morocco), where he settled in 1947. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>7</sup> Philip Michael Ondaatje (1943) is a Canadian novelist and poet. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>8</sup> Bernardo Bertolucci (1941- 2018) was an Italian film director. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Minghella (1954- 2008) was a British playwright, screenwriter, and director. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

*The English Patient*. Minghella first introduces Juliette Binoche in the role of the nurse Hana and Ralph Fiennes as Count Almásy, her patient. Second, Kristin Scott Thomas and Colin Firth play Mr. and Mrs. Clifton. Finally, Willem Dafoe plays Caravaggio and Naveen Andrews plays Kip. Through a series of flashbacks, Almásy survives a plane crash that opens the movie. He remembers Katherine, his former love from his time in North Africa, while Hana helps him recover in Italy. During this time, Almásy refuses to acknowledge the reality of his current situation. Instead, he becomes a prisoner of his own imagination and assumes the identity of “the English patient”.

My research focuses on how the film adaptations of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* present a version of orientalism. The opening scenes of these movies share many similarities with the descriptions of Oriental life by Maupassant and Forbin. In *Orientalisme*, Peltre cites the work of both artists.

During his stay in Algeria, Guy de Maupassant said “*Once we have set foot on this African soil, a singular desire overtakes us, to go further to the South, [...] The South! The fire<sup>10</sup>!*” (Peltre, p53) According to his own experience, Maupassant may have influenced Bertolucci to present his characters’ itinerary. In the opening scene of *The Sheltering Sky*, three characters discussed the difference between a traveler and a tourist. Port considers himself a traveler, while Tunner is more of a tourist who plans to go back home after his excursion. Kit uses the term “half and half” to designate her ambiguous situation. She is caught in the middle, not sure whether she will go home or she will remain in Algeria indefinitely. Bertolucci’s inclusion of this dialogue showcases the inability of Western characters to understand their proper role in the Sahara. In fact, the moment that Port sets foot on Algerian soil, he wants to go as far as possible into the desert. Thus, he travels further and further South without any previous plan. Kit joins him to try to save her marriage but in doing so she loses her husband. Indeed, they fail to adapt to the harsh desert climate during the journey. The Southern sun burns up Port and Kit’s desire to recapture their life in an exotic place. At the end, Port dies because of a contagious Typhoid fever. Therefore, he leaves Kit alone to follow what Maupassant calls “*the Southern fire<sup>11</sup>*”. (Peltre, p53)

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<sup>10</sup> The original French sentence is “*Dès qu’on a mis le pied sur cette terre africaine, un besoin singulier nous envahit, celui d’aller plus loin, au Sud [...] Le Sud! Le feu!*”.

<sup>11</sup> The Original French term is: “*le feu du Sud*”.

As in *The Sheltering Sky*, the hot Saharan sun is featured in the opening scene of Anthony Minghella's adaptation of *The English Patient*. In addition to Maupassant, Forbin wrote about the Orient during his visit to North Africa after Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt.

In her book *Orientalisme*, Christine Peltre talks about members of the French Aristocracy who were curious about Egypt and its ruins. For example, Louis Nicolas Philippe Auguste de Forbin greatly admired the beauty of land in Giza. Once he encountered the high pyramids, he said "*L'âme est d'abord frappé d'une sorte de surprise, de stupeur, qui ne fait place que longtemps après au sentiment de l'admiration.*" (Peltre, p80) This feeling of wonder is captured in the way Minghella introduces Almásy in his first flashback. Through a gradual transition, spectators follow the image of his copy of Herodotus as it falls down in the monastery and lands in the Saharan desert. There, Almásy is seen drawing a map to get to a cave he is looking for in the Sahara. While asking a native Bedouin about directions, a plane crosses the sky indicating the arrival of Katherine and her husband Geoffrey Clifton. In *The English Patient*, Almásy's face is full of love and wonder because of the beautiful landscape surrounding him. The director continually focuses the camera on his gaze by zooming frequently into Almásy's eyes to transition between scenes. In his flashbacks, the patient maintains the sense of admiration throughout the film. This helps spectators to notice the stupor that continues to surprise any Westerner.

*The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* are both novels that take place in North Africa. Bertolucci and Minghella both use the same Saharan setting in their movie adaptations. However, both were widely criticized for their portrayal of the desert space.

In 1949, author Paul Bowles wrote *The Sheltering Sky*. In his novel, he imagined a Saharan landscape and created characters based on his life experiences in Morocco. Based on his research and his readings, Bernardo Bertolucci adapted the novel 43 years after it was written. Through the fictional adventures that Bowles described, the director interpreted a version of indigenous North African life in the Maghreb. Through the fictional reality, spectators can get lost in the world that he created. Therefore, many critics like Aicha

Ziyane<sup>12</sup> and Silvestra Mariniello<sup>13</sup> analyze how the work of Bertolucci can be perceived differently by diverse audiences. In her article “Contrasting the Aesthetic with the Orientalist: A Comparative Study of Bowles and Bertolucci’s *The Sheltering Sky/Skies*”, Ziyane praises the cinematographic style of Bertolucci’s representation of the Sahara. However, she blames him for modifying some of the novel’s details. Ziyane claims that certain elements of the films were not correctly represented as in the original novels. Paul Bowles never mentioned that Port attempted to reconcile with Kit in Oran when they first arrived at the “Hotel Du Ksar<sup>14</sup>.” According to her, the director made the desert look “sterile” following a failed attempt between Kit and Port “to have a sexual intercourse.” (Ziyane, p2) In her opinion, Bertolucci focuses on too many “orientalist clichés” to over dramatize the story. (Ziyane, p2) These choices ensure that Kit and Port will fail to save their marriage because of their foreign location in the Algerian desert.

Like Aicha Ziyane, Silvestra Mariniello focuses on the Oriental “clichés” in Bertolucci’s adaptation. She analyzes the way he presents the interaction between his different characters.

In the article<sup>15</sup> called “Devenir et opacité dans *Un thé au Sahara* de Bernardo Bertolucci”, Mariniello mentions that the intercultural dimensions are evident in the film. According to her, “[Bertolucci] addresses the common themes among the American, French, and British cultures, [also] between men and women, the explorer and the tourist<sup>16</sup>.” (Mariniello, p2) The teacher relates the Occidental culture to the native Berbers of African Sahara. She also mentions how the director portrays the relationships between male and female characters. During their trip, the American protagonists encounter the English Mrs. Lyle and her son Eric. They also meet French officers and native Arabs. Despite these diverse origins, Mariniello admires the way Bertolucci maintains discourses between foreign characters. She focuses on the importance of communication and interaction between different cultures. She writes: “Since she lost the ability to speak, Kit had lived among the

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<sup>12</sup> Aicha Ziyane’s article was submitted for her Master’s research in Moroccan American Studies from Hasaan II University- Casablanca. (Arab World English Journal/ [www.awej.org](http://www.awej.org))

<sup>13</sup> Silvestra Mariniello teaches in the department of film studies at the University of Montreal. ([histart.unmontreal.ca](http://histart.unmontreal.ca))

<sup>14</sup> Ksar is an Arabic word, it means a castle.

<sup>15</sup> The article was published in August 2008 in the online journal *Cinémas*

<sup>16</sup> The original sentence in French is : “[Bertolucci] traite du rapport entre les cultures américaine, française et anglaise, [...] mais aussi du rapport entre le féminin et masculin, entre le voyageur et le touriste.”



*Touaregs*<sup>17</sup>, the primary contact was limited to gestures, and by the simple fact of traveling together<sup>18</sup>.” (Mariniello, p12) After Port dies of Typhoid, Kit joins a caravan of nomads and travels with them without speaking. Even though she is unable to directly talk with them, she appreciates her nomadic experience in the desert.

In the same article, Mariniello praises several elements adopted by Bertolucci in *The Sheltering Sky*. However, she criticizes the way he films the caravan travelling day and night in the desert. According to her, the series of long shots are too stereotypical. She says:

“Le plan général des chameaux et des hommes rangés dans différentes formations, le plus souvent dessinant une courbe sinueuse ou une ligne droite sur une mer de sable doré, devient tout de suite cliché, comme la caravane qui avance dans le désert à la lumière de la pleine Lune ou du croissant.” (Mariniello, p12)

Mariniello explains that these clichés prevent spectators from truly understanding the distance between Kit and her husband. After Port’s death, Bertolucci’s images are framed in an artistic way that blinds spectators from feeling Kit’s pain. Bertolucci edits the same shots of the sands and the stars several times. In this way, the framing of the dunes becomes more important than what is happening to the characters. As a result, Mariniello explains that “*Kit has become an image and the spectator is confronted by the entire spectacle projected on screen*<sup>19</sup>.” (Mariniello, p13) The teacher describes Kit as part of the image of the dunes while travelling with the caravan. Through a succession of long shots, Bertolucci creates the feeling of “déjà vu” for his audience. This technique allows spectators to ignore Kit in the vast expanses of the desert. Thus, they forget about her grief, and rather concentrate on the beauty of the Sahara.

In addition to Bertolucci, Minghella was widely criticized for the way he filmed the Sahara and its inhabitants.

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<sup>17</sup> The Touareg people are a large Berber ethnic confederation living in between Libya and Nigeria. They speak the Tamasheq traditional dialect instead of Arabic. ([https://mawdoo3.com/من\\_هم\\_الطوارق/](https://mawdoo3.com/من_هم_الطوارق/))

<sup>18</sup> The original sentence in French is : “*Depuis sa sortie du langage, Kit a vécu parmi les Touaregs, le contact s’est établi par les gestes, par le simple fait de partager l’expérience du voyage.*”

<sup>19</sup> The original sentence in French is : “*Kit est devenue image et le spectateur est confronté à du spectacle qui fait écran.*”

Michael Ondaatje portrayed North African traditions and mythologies in his novel *The English Patient* (1992). The author describes a passionate love story between Katherine and Almásy in the Sahara. Minghella changes certain elements of the plot when adapting his movie. He uses his Western lens through which to frame the loss of Oriental civilization. The film received mixed reviews from critics who claimed that Minghella misrepresents the Orient in order to embellish the European image of colonialism during the Second World War. However, others considered it as one of the best Hollywood dramas. In her article<sup>20</sup> “*The English Patient*”, Doaa Abd Al Dayem<sup>21</sup> praises the movie and explains that its success is due to the directing, the acting, and the soundtrack. According to her, Minghella was able to “*transmit the infinite spiritual beauty of the Sahara in order to make spectators fall in love with it at first sight.*” (Abd El Dayem) The journalist also admires the way the director frames the Sahara. She shares with her readers that: “*Without exaggeration, you can feel the heat of the sun and of the sand from the very beginning of the movie.*” (Abd El Dayem) At the end of her article, Abd El Dayem mentions that Minghella’s adaptation had a completely different ending than Ondaatje’s book. She admits that it may have been better to keep the original ending to highlight the loss of the characters’ identity. Nevertheless, she argues that *The English Patient* deserves all of its awards for being an inventive and a creative film.

While Doaa Abd El Dayem respects the work of Anthony Minghella, certain critics believed that the movie misrepresented the real Orient and mistreated its native inhabitants.

In the article<sup>22</sup> “*The English Patient: Britain excuses itself for the cruelty of war and exploitation*”, Nawaf Alkabissi<sup>23</sup> describes the movie as “*one of the most intriguing films in the West.*” (Alkabissi, p1) In the introduction, he explains that *The English Patient* was a complete failure in Britain after it was released in 1996. However, in 1997, it won several international awards and seven Oscars including the best film. Although Minghella knew the original story very well, he wrote the script and changed many details from Ondaatje’s novel. According to Alkabissi, the director did that on purpose in order to “*to pardon the sins of the*

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<sup>20</sup> The article is originally written in Arabic. It was published in February, 2014 by an online journal: [www.elcinema.com](http://www.elcinema.com). I have translated some quotes into English (in italics).

<sup>21</sup> Doaa Abd Dayem is an Arab film critic. ([www.elcinema.com](http://www.elcinema.com))

<sup>22</sup> The article is originally written in Arabic. It was published in November, 2017 by an online journal named [thenewkhalij.news](http://thenewkhalij.news). It reports on the affairs of all countries in the Arab Gulf. I have translated some quotes into English (in italics).

<sup>23</sup> Nawaf Alkabissi is an Arab critic who writes about political affairs. ([thenewkhalij.news](http://thenewkhalij.news))

*British Empire which ruled the world.*” (Alkabissi, p1) For this reason, the journalist considers his movie an example of “*suspicious cinema.*” He states that these types of films are equivalent to “*criminal acts like money laundering*” because they change historical events to fit their purposes. (Alkabissi, p1) Alkabissi divides his article into two major parts; “Cinema: washing the dirty history” and “Everyone is condemned except for al-Sikhi<sup>24</sup>.” In the first part, the journalist lists the cinematographic techniques used to tell the story while keeping suspense till the end of the movie. Alkabissi believes that Almásy’s character represents the British Empire. Through his editing, Minghella justifies “*the forbidden sexual relationship*” between Katherine and Almásy and hides the fact that the Count commits treason till the end of his movie. (Alkabissi, p2) In this way, spectators forgive his actions and consider him as a hero. Similarly, they ignore the British occupation and the suffering it caused in the Orient. In the second part, Alkabissi accuses the director of “*deliberately insulting each character especially Muslims, by portraying them in a way contrary to the truth of their civilization.*” (Alkabissi, p3) The journalist analyzes the portrayal of Islam harshly because he believes that Minghella mocked this religion in order to highlight the sin of adultery committed by Katherine and Almásy. He does not tolerate the fact that the director sets the love affair during the prayer, although the Sharia<sup>25</sup> forbids sexual relations during these times.

Like Doaa Abd El Dayem, Khaled Salah<sup>26</sup> praises the cinematographic elements of Minghella’s film. However, he harshly disagrees with the director’s choice to change the original story as Nawaf Alkabissi.

In his article<sup>27</sup> “Tales from the West: *The English patient*, love, and World War II in the Egyptian Sahara”, Khaled Salah introduces the main events of the Ondaatje’s novel. He says that the novel was adapted in 1996 into a movie and “*has become a masterpiece of classical cinema.*” (Salah, p3) Even though the director succeeded in capturing “*the rich images of the Saharan desert and the decoration of old Cairo*”, the journalist questions how

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<sup>24</sup> Sikhism is a religion practiced in India. Alkabissi references Kip, who is a Sikhi, as the only character with a pure heart. ([www.bbc.co.uk/religion](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion))

<sup>25</sup> Sharia is the religious law of Islam. It is still used as the divine law in some Arab countries, while others have adopted a constitution. ([www.bbc.co.uk/religion](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion))

<sup>26</sup> Khaled Salah is the editor-in-chief of the Egyptian newspaper: *youn7* ([www.youn7.com](http://www.youn7.com))

<sup>27</sup> The article is originally written in Arabic. It was published in May, 2018 by the Egyptian newspaper *youn7*. I have translated some quotes into English (in italics).

the movie achieved so much success. (Salah, p3) Salah argues that Minghella changed the script in order to emphasize the supremacy of the Western characters in the Oriental world over the native inhabitants. According to Salah, “*they appeared in the background, in dim lighting, and their contributions were ignored.*” (Salah, p3) In favor of the superior Occidental characters, Minghella frames the Arabs as silent servants. We learn about them only if foreigners acknowledge their presence or talk about their affairs. Therefore, the journalist accuses Minghella of portraying the Arabs as “*ghostly characters.*” (Salah, p3)

Most of the critics focus on the adaptations of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. However, this research project is more concerned with films and how each director showcases the Saharan space on screen.

*The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* have similar narratives featuring love stories, betrayals and deaths. However, the way spectators experience these themes is different between the two movies. In fact, Bertolucci and Minghella present different historical dimensions of the Berber culture through their filming of the desert space. Both directors adopt Orientalist clichés when framing their characters. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci displays a land full of life to tell a story based on the rich existing elements of desert culture. In contrast, in *The English Patient*, Minghella traces over empty lands to install an Occidental version of history. Therefore, spectators understand differently their representation of the same setting. In order to discover this variation, the study of space is important to justify the Orientalist vision of each film independently and together. The cinematic space differs according to the perspective of the camera, script, gestures, and the soundtrack. These elements allow spectators to discover many versions of the vast desert as well as the diverse cultures that inhabit it. Within this context, André Gardies<sup>28</sup> defines the elements that compose the cinematographic space. In his book entitled *L'Espace au Cinéma*, he writes:

“Concevoir les lieux[...] comme le texte, la parole de cette « langue » que serait l'espace, c'est à la fois se proposer la compréhension du fonctionnement narratif des lieux et se donner pour tâche de faire quelques pas dans la construction du système spatial à partir d'eux.” (Gardies, André, *L'Espace au Cinéma*, p72)

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<sup>28</sup> Gardies is a professor who has a doctorate in cinematography and audiovisual studies from “Université Lumière-Lyon2”. (<http://www.andregardies.com>)

According to Gardies, the study of space requires coherent understanding of the complex elements in order to construct “*le système spatial*.” The author discusses four distinct spaces including the space chosen for the setting as well as the space of spectators, characters, and filmmaker. The interaction between these four spaces is based on the text, the dialogue, the language, and locations. These components allow the author to explain the relationship between the cinematic space and the audience. Gardies claims that a spectator must use his imagination in order to understand how the story unfolds on screen. However, each member of the audience perceives what he sees differently. Gardies also attributes importance to directors’ use of sounds and voices in order to defend his arguments. Through their camera lenses, the filmmakers are limited by the particular dimensions of a movie screen. Thus, they must rely on the sound and the script to express all the details of a film’s narrative. As a result, spectators are no longer limited by the dimensions of the framed image which Gardies calls the “*champ*”. Rather, they have the responsibility to imagine certain actions occurring in the “*hors-champ*”, beyond what is projected on screen. (Gardies, p34) Through their “*regard de l’œil spectatorial*”, spectators can actively participate in understanding elements of the story which are left out of the frame by the director. (Gardies, p26) The interaction between the filmmaker and his audience is fundamental to understand space in cinema. Therefore, *L’Espace au Cinéma* is essential to study the different ways that the desert space appears on screen in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*.

André Gardies studies the space in cinema in general terms. His concepts are essential to understand how filmmakers display their ideas on the screen. However, this research requires a more specific analysis of how particular desert spaces are used in films.

In 2017, the Moroccan newspaper *Aladabia* published an article<sup>29</sup> called “The image of the Sahara in cinema.” The journalist, Mohamed Fetti, mentions that the desert space attracts filmmakers based on “*geographical characteristics and natural elements contributing to the creation of artistic and aesthetic worlds in their films*.” (Fetti, p2) Within this context, each director is free to portray the desert space as an exotic location, in order “*to reflect the values of brutalities and emptiness*.” (Fetti, p2) According to the journalist, filmmakers often rely on studio space to recreate locations in their films. For example, Sergio Leone’s film

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<sup>29</sup> The article is originally written in Arabic. It was published in July, 2017 by the Moroccan newspaper *Aladabia*. I have translated some quotes into English (in italics).

were set in America but filmed in Europe. This did not negatively affect his framing of an invented desert space. According to the article, Leone succeeded in portraying the harsh elements of desert life like “*vast pastures, rocks and high temperatures.*” (Fetti, p2) Technically, he was using spaces in different studios in order to recreate some of the elements of the American West. However, spectators who ignore this detail are able to enjoy the fictional story presented by the director. Because Leone recreated the American desert, many filmmakers adopted the North African Sahara as the setting for their movies. Indeed, the Sahara has been used as a natural space “*especially in colonial and historical films.*” (Fetti, p2) Various directors embraced the desert space as a setting for any fictional battles between heroes and villains in several famous movies. In addition to *The Sheltering Sky*, the article cites *Lawrence of Arabia* by David Lean, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Gladiator* by Ridley Scott. The journalist explains that these famous films are all from a Western point of view. They chose to film in the Sahara in order to capture its foreign space full of wonder, brutality, and emptiness. Therefore, it is the perfect location for scenes of “*violent war between thieves and mercenaries.*” (Fetti, p2) In the conclusion, the article refers “*to the desert in cinema as an important symbolic location to describe mythical examples of suffering, loneliness and transformations.*” (Fetti, p3) These elements relate to the adaptations of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* because they are fictional stories set in the distant Sahara. In fact, the history of film is dependent on a director’s ability to portray any space as if it was real.

The study of Oriental space is important to discover the true nature of the Sahara in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. In addition to cinematographic analysis, this project also includes an examination of the imperial history of orientalism.

Throughout centuries, Europeans considered North Africa and the vast majority of Asian lands as their colonial territories. In fact, the French and the British empires were the most dominant in the Orient. Their soldiers and people were attracted by the stories they heard and read in travel narratives and history books. In 1978, Edward Said published his book named *Orientalism* in order to explain the intentions and consequences of European expansion in the Orient. Said argues that the European colonial expansion only benefited Westerners who used their power to imagine a land and to map it according to their interests. He writes:

“The scope of Orientalism exactly matched the scope of empire, and it was this absolute unanimity between the two that provoked the only crisis in the history of Western thought about and dealings with the Orient.” (Said, p104)

According to Said, travel writers always relate things to what they know and never focus on the real geography of actual cities. Thus, he argues that all the European travelers wrote about the Orient as if they already owned it. Therefore, Edward Said criticizes their imperialist attitudes and accuses them of dehumanizing the native cultures in order to impose their own civilization. However, the traditional lifestyle of foreign settlers and their religion were too different to coexist within the same borders. Therefore, for Said the Western portrayal of Oriental space is only a fictional reality because authors interpreted the place in a way that fits their particular narratives.

Edward Said’s discussion of history, politics and geography of the Orient was widely criticized. In addition to his major work *Orientalism*, he published many articles to defend his arguments and opinions.

In his article “Orientalism Reconsidered” (1985), the author addresses the major issues raised by his critics. For example, Rubenstein, Pipes and Lewis accused Edward Said for siding with the enemy of civilization. According to them, Westerners should not be blamed for being curious about the other side of the world. These critics also claimed that Arabs and Muslims were not motivated enough to study and explore new territories. Moreover, they believed that orientalism was a result of the expansion of Greek and Roman cultures long before other examples of European imperialism. For this and for many other reasons, nativists, nationalists and fundamentalists attacked *Orientalism*. (Said, *Orientalism Reconsidered*, p94-95) However, Edward Said responded that French and British colonialism was just an extension of these previous civilizations. In addition, he says that Orientalists and colonial travelers never intended to meet with the Muslims and the Arabs. They rather planned to expand their borders at the expense of the Orient, and to represent its culture as inferior to the West. For these reasons, Said maintains his opinions, arguing that his work allowed Orientals to speak for themselves and gave them new opportunities to represent their culture.

Edward Said concludes his book saying “*I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism.*” (Said, p328) Many readers adopted his concept of orientalism in order to defend the idea that the West was more industrialized and civilized than other parts of the world. However, some authors proposed that “occidentalism” could be the exact opposite of orientalism. In “Orientalism versus Occidentalism” (1997), Wang Ning<sup>30</sup> applies Edward Said’s theory to Chinese economics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Said invented the notion of orientalism to justify European presence in North Africa and Asian lands. Some critics believe that if orientalism exists, then its opposite must also exist. Wang Ning applies “Occidentalism” to the economic rise in China. In the same way as orientalism, “occidentalism” becomes more of a fantasy than a historical and economic reality. In his article, he explains that Chinese people have worked hard to escape the Third World in order to join the first world economy. The author uses the term “occidentalism” to describe the methods by which China has become a powerful country. According to him, their success is due to the application of Western economic ideals. In “Said, Orientalism, and Japan” (2005), Daisuke Nishihara<sup>31</sup> explains that this also happened in Japan after World War II. He agrees with Edward Said’s notion of orientalism, but he does not associate it with the concept of “Occidentalism”. In many critiques, opinions about Edward Said’s work are divided, but some articles agree with his analysis. In “American Orientalism” (2004), Gina Marchetti<sup>32</sup> compares two works which adopted Said’s approach to examine the expansion of American influence in Asia, just as Europeans had done in the Orient. The author discusses how Western supremacy generated white superiority in America. She analyzes the influence of Orientalist discourse on American politics. In the end, she identifies common points between the occupation of the Orient and the history of American imperialism.

After 1948, Edward Said moved to the United States and dedicated his career to criticize the supremacy of imperialism. In 1978, Edward Said explained how the Orient had been politically and geographically manipulated according to the European rules. After the Second Intifada<sup>33</sup>, he published “Invention, memory and Place” (2000) where he applies the same concept to describe the Israeli expansion into Palestine. In his article, Said explains how

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<sup>30</sup> Wang Ning is an Assistant Professor at Arizona State University.  
(<https://sustainability.asu.edu/person/ning-wang/>)

<sup>31</sup> Daisuke Nishihara is an Associate Professor at Hiroshima University, Japan.  
(<http://hiroshima-u.academia.edu/DaisukeNishihara>)

<sup>32</sup> According to the article, the author teaches in the department of cinema and photography at the University of Hong Kong.

<sup>33</sup> Intifada is an Arabic word which refers to a political uprising or rebellion. (linternaute.fr)



“[...]the history of ancient Palestine was gradually replaced by a largely fabricated image of ancient Israel, a political entity that in reality played only a small role in the area of geographical Palestine.” (Said, p186) In this way, Said introduces the concept of “imaginative geography” to describe the Western appropriation of the Orient. The author notes that during two World Wars the Jews were mistreated in Europe. In order to compensate their loss, Europeans helped them to conquer Palestine although it was populated. Edward Said highlights the religious elements that extend the conflict between Muslims and Jews, Arabs and Zionists, East and West. Therefore, he compares Palestine to Algeria and India because it became the new invented landscape. In his article, the author focuses on “the imaginative geography” which led to the modification and the creation of new borders. According to him, Western supremacy manipulated the history and the culture of the Orient. As a result, the memory and the identity of natives changed to fit with new Western way of life. This research project is not focused on the current conflict in Israel. Nevertheless, the political legacy of “imaginative geography” is relevant for the characters in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*.

My research focuses on how the film adaptations by Bertolucci and Minghella present a version of orientalism. However, long before the invention of moving pictures, painters and writers were responsible for creating Orientalist artwork.

In her book *Orientalisme* (2004), Christine Peltre writes about European painters who travelled to the Orient looking for a source of inspiration in the exotic part of the world. She illustrates her book with several orientalist paintings and presents the artists who went for the discovery of “*this legendary Orient*.”<sup>34</sup> (Peltre, p53) Jean-Léon Gérôme, Eugène Delacroix, Auguste de Forbin and many other painters were interested in North Africa. Thus, the author cites their perceptions while discovering the Orient. She mentions that some enjoyed their stay and studied the language to better understand the culture. For example, Edward William Lane stayed in Egypt for many years where he portrayed the fascinating natural background and highlighted the natives’ rural way of life. In order to prove the authenticity of his artistic works, Lane said “*I lived like they live*”<sup>35</sup>. (Peltre, p108) Similarly, Félix Clément featured Bedouin costumes of men and Berber jewelry of women to symbolize the North African

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<sup>34</sup> Christine Peltre describes the Orient in her book as « L’Orient Légendaire ».

<sup>35</sup> The original sentence in French is: “*j’ai vécu comme ils vivent.*”

identity and the Saharan heritage of previous civilizations. Contrary to Lane and Lewis, Delacroix portrayed nomadic life in a way that supports his European superiority. After a long journey across North Africa, he finally arrived in Morocco in 1832. There, he described the country as “*the most savage of all other barbarian states*”<sup>36</sup>. (Peltre, p61) In *Orientalisme*, Christine Peltre describes the journeys of Orientalist artists and puts their works into their historical context. Moreover, she characterizes orientalism as a scientific movement that allowed European civilization to reach another part of the world. The successful campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt was followed by the conquest of Algeria in 1830. According to Peltre, both events gave rise to this new artistic movement which she refers to as “Oriental Romanticism”<sup>37</sup>. In this poetic way, the Europeans were able to discover the other side of the Mediterranean and to encounter its rich culture and diverse inhabitants.

In addition to the representation of setting in Orientalist art, many critics analyze the way Eastern women were portrayed in their native land. The choice of costumes and colors always reflects the history of exoticism which European travelers fantasized about.

All French colonialists were using art to justify owning the Orient. Therefore, they constructed the space according to what they wanted to show to the world. According to Frederick N. Bohrer<sup>38</sup> “*the current taste and style in art, could all deform the vision of European artists in the Eastern world.*” (N. Bohrer, p50) Either orientalism is telling the complete truth, or it is completely dependent on what Occidentals perceived. In order to explore both sides of the arguments, the author discusses Lynne Thornton’s<sup>39</sup> ideas about the representation of the Orient. In her book *Women as portrayed in Orientalist paintings*, Thornton displays a series of females depicted in the Orient. For N. Bohrer, her work fails to analyze the historical dimensions of orientalism because it focuses too much on collecting pictures of females, rather than displaying their true origins. N. Bohrer’s critique features that nothing is authentic in the representation of the Orient by European artists. Therefore, he also disagrees with Thornton’s claim because “*she approaches orientalist artworks as pure objective transcriptions of Oriental customs.*” (N. Bohrer, p50) For him, Thornton is less concerned about the history of the Orient than about the ideas of orientalism itself. She

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<sup>36</sup> The original sentence in French is: “*la plus sauvage que tout le reste des états barbaresques.*”

<sup>37</sup> The original term in French is: “l’Orient Romantique.”

<sup>38</sup> Frederick N. Bohrer is an art professor at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. ([www.press.uchicago.edu](http://www.press.uchicago.edu))

<sup>39</sup> Lynne Thornton is an English historian of the 20th century and a specialist in orientalism. ([www.babelio.com](http://www.babelio.com))

assumes that orientalism does exist but focuses only on the contributions of Orientalist artists and writers. Thus, she fails to distinguish between the history of exoticism and the stereotypical representation of Harem<sup>40</sup>.

In his article “From visual culture to visual Imperialism”, Esmaeil Zeiny<sup>41</sup> discusses the process of “othering” through the misrepresentation of Oriental female in paintings. According to him “Eastern women” and “Oriental harem” were reduced to the stereotypical representation of “submissive odalisques<sup>42</sup>”. He explains that Scheherazade was depicted as the best example of an exotic and erotic Oriental woman who charmed the sultan in order to remain alive. Orientalist painters were influenced by her role considered as inferior to men. Thus, they portrayed Eastern women as “submissive” and “passive” objects in order “to produce pleasure and consumption” instead of representing their true cultural identity. In his article “Re-presenting the Orient: A new instructional approach”, Mildred Mortimer studies the feminist response to this depiction of Scheherazade. In the 1990’s, Assia Djebar, an Algerian writer, published her short story “La Femme en morceaux”. In her work, the author describes how Atyka plays the role of a storyteller in order to give lectures to her students. During one of her courses, she identifies Scheherazade as “*a courageous woman*” who conveyed “*the importance of reflective attentive listening.*” (Mortimer, p307) In the same way, Moufida Tlatli, a Tunisian director, defended the negative portrayal of Oriental women since the birth of imperialism. In her movie *Les Silences du Palais* (1994), she shows how the Harem were obliged to obey but never choose to be “female servants” for “male masters.” Thus, she features the story of a servant during the colonial period, who escapes the palace in order to break all rules that make her look inferior. In *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, very few examples feature Oriental women in their proper cultural setting. Bertolucci and Minghella do feature them exclusively in stereotypical roles. For this reason, the preceding articles are needed to understand the representation of native women in the desert.

The representation of cultural space and the interaction between characters differs in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. Thus, I studied articles about cinematography in

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<sup>40</sup> The term “Harem” refers to the women occupying a particular space, called “Alharamlek” in Arabic. This part of the house is reserved for the wives or concubines of a polygamous man.

(<http://www.allaboutturkey.com/harem.htm>)

<sup>41</sup> Esmaeil Zeiny is a researcher at the National University of Malaysia. (<https://works.bepress.com/zeiny/>)

<sup>42</sup> An odalisque is a female slave or concubine in a harem, especially one in the seraglio of the Sultan of Turkey. ([en.oxforddictionaries.com](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com))

order to analyze the way the Sahara was filmed by Bertolucci and Minghella. Nevertheless, moving pictures are modern versions of paintings. Therefore, it is necessary to learn about the history of Orientalist Art in order to understand its imperialistic qualities. Different sources showcase that many scenes were based on Orientalist stereotypes. For this reason, a political analysis of cultural fantasies and geographical realities should confirm that art evolves but remains limited to social prejudices.

All the secondary sources discuss the history of the Orient and the art of filmmaking. Thus, they are useful to justify this thesis.

If films are inventions and interpretations of reality, this forces us to question what we can learn from directors about the world. *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* are both examples of historical fiction set in the 1940's during World War II. Despite having common themes occurring in the Maghreb region of the Saharan desert, the ways that Bertolucci and Minghella present the history of its people, culture and tradition are different from each other. These differences rely on an individual understanding of the Saharan region being presented on screen. Thus, the analysis of the various degrees to understand the plots relies on how space is being portrayed by each director.

Through this research, I will examine whether it is possible to “adequately”<sup>43</sup> frame and represent the desert space from a foreign perspective, and I will study how *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* are both influenced by orientalism.

In the first part, I will examine the Occidental history of the Orient as presented in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. In the second part, I will explain the Orientalist influence on Western artists and film directors. In the third and last part, I will analyze the political legacy of Orientalist art in both films.

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<sup>43</sup> In the article “Re-presenting the Orient”, the term “Adequately” is used by Mildred Mortimer when she questions the effects of Western representation of the Orient. (Mortimer, p303)

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#### 2.2. The representation of the desert

- Bertolucci changes certain elements of the original novel in order to represent the desert in a way that fits his narrative.
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- In *The English Patient*, Minghella frames the natives as if they are part of the Saharan background. In *The Sheltering Sky*, they contribute more to the plot even though Westerners remain central characters.
- Western culture is truly more important for each director. Thus, the camera focuses on Occidental characters, whereas the role of native characters is diminished in the narratives.
- The interaction between Occidental characters and natives varies in the two movies. Because of language barriers and cultural differences, Westerners are lost in a strange space which they do not understand.

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<sup>44</sup> This notion is defined by Esmail Zeiny in his article “From visual culture to visual Imperialism.” According to the author, “visual imperialism” began with Napoleon who “*was careful to include 167 artists and scientists whose task was to record and document the civilization of Egypt both in its ancient and modern forms[...]*” (Zeiny, p79)

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- Christine Peltre’s *Orientalisme* explains the historical context of the importance attributed to the native female forms in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
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## **An Occidental history of the Orient in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient***

Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte were two major imperial conquerors of the Orient. The influence of their colonization persisted till the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the entire world was impacted by the Second World War as conflicts spread across the globe. North Africa, more specifically, became a vital region of conflict between the Allies and the Axis during that war. In order to learn more about these events, readers and audiences are dependent upon previous interpretations of historical accounts. Each representation includes an individual interpretation of real history by writers, painters, and filmmakers. Within this context, *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* discuss several aspects of the Saharan culture in North Africa. For spectators who have never visited the region, both films allow them to travel across the dunes of the desert appearing on screen. Throughout this guided tour of the Orient, audiences are affected by tragic events as characters are struggling to survive. While many elements of both films may appear similar, a closer analysis of the details would show slight differences between the narratives. Indeed, *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* take place in the same desert location. However, the representation of screen space helps individual spectators to see the Sahara from different perspectives.

In this first chapter, I will examine how spectators perceive the Orient, and more specifically North Africa, through the Occidental representation<sup>45</sup> of its history in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*.

In the first part, I will explain how Westerns justified their colonial invasion based on what they perceived to be the absence of culture in the Oriental world. In the second part, I will examine how paradoxically Bertolucci and Minghella present the Sahara as beautiful but dangerous. In the third and final part, I will analyze the significance that each director attributes to the inclusion of Westerners in the North African space.

The first part of the analysis is based on the opening scenes of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. Bertolucci and Minghella begin their fictional adventures by welcoming Westerners to the East. Both directors trace the journey of their protagonists to North Africa by air and by sea. In order to justify their presence, they use their cameras to present this territory as an empty space.

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<sup>45</sup> According to Edward Said, Westerners considered that their civilization was superior. Thus, they divided the entire world along this territorial line. They designated the East as the Orient and its people as Orientals. Consequently, Westerners became Occidentals to differentiate themselves from the natives.





Photogram (1): 00:02:17



Photogram (2): 00:02:19



Photogram (3): 00:02:35



Photogram (4): 00:02:43



Photogram (5): 00:03:14



Photogram (6): 00:03:59

### *The Sheltering Sky*

The opening credits of *The Sheltering Sky* feature images of the high buildings in New York shown in black and white. In photogram (1), Bertolucci places a boat in the center of the buildings as part of the New York City scape. When spectators look across the horizon, these skyscrapers appear as part of the cargo under the skyline. Before the ship sails away, Bertolucci metaphorically transports these buildings along with his American passengers. In photogram (2), the director focuses his camera on the boat travelling across the vast natural

spaces. He features his name above the ship in order to guarantee a safe passage across the Atlantic Ocean. After a quick fade out, photogram (3) features an extreme close up of Port's eyes synchronized with a Quran recitation. Then, the camera pans up little by little with a circular movement so that spectators see Port shirtless from above. The piano melody of Ryuichi Sakamoto, which is the main soundtrack of the movie, replaces the Quran recitation in order to signal the inclusion of a flashback. Photogram (4) features a passenger ship and a canoe transporting some silhouettes. Spectators can understand that they are Bertolucci's American protagonists arriving in Algeria. In fact, in photogram (5), Kit, Port, and, Tunner emerge respectively from behind the dock in Oran. In this way, they play the role of cultural missionaries in charge of bringing real progress to North Africa. However, as soon as they arrive, they are surprised by the emptiness and strangeness of the new place. Contrary to the previous close up, Port is now smiling. Spectators may notice this contradiction even though characters appear wearing dark sunglasses to hide their expressions. Port's reaction foreshadows the potential ambiguity of their experiences in the deserted space. Indeed, in photogram (6), Bertolucci places his characters in the background of a much wider shot. He reveals that they are distracted by the discovery of an empty port. The three of them stare into different directions in order to explore each corner of this new land. Once they become more comfortable with the place, their Western missions can officially begin.



Photogram (7): 00:01:03



Photogram (8) 00:02:44



Photogram (9): 00:02:16



Photogram (10): 00:02:58

*The English Patient*

The opening credits of *The English Patient* include several references to the key events of the film through images and sounds. The movie begins in darkness, spectators hear sounds of glass objects striking against each other. Later on, they discover that this sound corresponds to the little glass bottles of the merchant of natural herbs. His remedies will be used to cover the body of “the English patient” in order to save his life. In photogram (7), a brush appears to paint a swimming figure, like the ones in ancient desert caves. Later in the movie, Minghella will reveal that Katherine is the painter. The director features her appropriating these native drawings as her own when tracing them onto her canvas. Thus, he marks the arrival of his Western characters at the beginning of his movie. In photogram (8), the director’s name appears on screen at the same time as Katherine finishes her painting. Through a dissolve, the director transforms the background from a canvas into sand dunes. This transformation is synchronized with a love song interpreted by Marta Sebestyen. She sings a native Hungarian song called “Szerelem, Szerelem” which means “love, love”. Throughout the movie, the song is featured again to symbolize the love story between Katherine and Almásy. In photogram (9), the director holds the image of the swimming figure on screen while the camera pans above the landscape. This superposition allows spectators to admire the shadow of the first silhouette reflected upon the sand. In photogram (10), the figure occupying the entire screen is reduced into the small shadow of a plane. This opening scene allows the spectators to immediately immerse themselves into vast expenses of the North African desert. Minghella chooses to shoot his movie in this abandoned location where his Western characters can occupy a foreign land. The choice to open his movie with Katherine’s drawing in the desert presupposes that Western civilization is already in Africa.

The narrative of invasion is indispensable in both films because they are set during World War II. Therefore, Occidental characters are forced to be in the new continent where they protect natives from Nazi invasions. Consequently, these characters occupy the Saharan space onscreen and they imagine new borders for North Africa in order to enhance the narratives of *The English Patient* and *The Sheltering Sky*.

In *L'Espace au Cinéma*, Gardies explains the cinematographic tools used by filmmakers in order to create a particular "l'espace-cadre". He writes:

“La successivité des photogrammes au sein d’une même unité-plan apparaît alors comme le lieu où se construit ce type d’espace que l’on appelle parfois « l’espace-cadre ». [...] Cet espace-cadre met en jeu un ensemble de codes plus ou moins spécifiquement cinématographiques comme l’angle de prise de vue, la profondeur du champ, l’échelle des plans, les mouvements d’appareil, l’éclairage, le grain de la pellicule et, bien entendu, le code optique de la perspective. ” (Gardies, p91)

In *The Sheltering Sky*, the opening credits highlight a dynamic version of life in New York City. Soon after, Bertolucci features a quiet scene in Oran’s port. From the perspective of the spectator, the images of the American space are well animated whereas the images of North Africa are completely undisturbed. People in Manhattan move quickly compared to the rowers of the canoe transporting Kit, Port, and Tunner onto the Algerian shore. Bertolucci uses different shot angles to suggest that there is a geographical distinction between the Occident and the Orient. In addition to the dynamic perspective of his montages, the director chooses different colors on screen. He showcases the skyscrapers in black and white whereas the North African space is presented in vibrant colors. Although the events take place during the same time period, Bertolucci’s choice to use different colors shows that both locations are not the same at all. The Black and White depiction of Manhattan assumes that the industrialized West was more culturally advanced than the Orient. Thus, when the American protagonists arrive, it takes time for them to familiarize themselves with the new continent. In photogram (5), they are shown in a medium shot, dressed in white, standing in between the sea and the desert. They leave their world in New York and enter a new environment in order to make Algeria their own. Thus, the camera moves in from above, showcasing their tiny silhouettes encountering a truly empty space. In photogram (6), each detail seems new to the

foreign characters. Because the camera remains suspended above the dock, it is unable to focus on any one particular object. In this way, the director uses his lens to show that the characters are lost, searching for a suitable place in which to stand. In order to find their way and reach the desert, they face a difficult mission of locating foreign landmarks in the North African wilderness.

In *The English Patient*, Almásy is searching for “the cave paintings of swimmers in the desert” (Maslin, Janet, “Adrift in Fiery Layers of Memory”<sup>46</sup>, p3). Minghella foreshadows this discovery at the beginning of his movie. Thus, he frames a brush as it begins to paint a swimming figure gradually fading into the dunes. On the one hand, this opening scene allows the spectators to immediately immerse themselves into vast expenses of the North African desert. On the other hand, it shows indirectly that the Sharan space is in need of true civilization. According to Gardies, a director is always limited by the lens of his camera. Thus, he must rely on the camera movements in order to transmit particular ideas through “l’espace cadre”. Within this context, Minghella juxtaposes a progressive soundtrack to follow the camera as it passes above the dunes. This demonstrates the passage of time and begins to reveal the true purpose of the arrival of Westerners. In photogram (9), Minghella focuses on a shadow of an unknown body to emphasize the idea of the strangeness of the place. He holds the image of the swimming figure occupying the entire screen while the camera pans above the landscape. This superposition allows spectators to admire the shadow of the first silhouette reflected upon the sand. Despite the passage of time and the distance, no native appears on screen. Instead, the swimming figure remains fixed, stretched across the dunes. Minghella allows spectators to imagine themselves in the empty desert along with recognizable characters. In photogram (10), the shadow fades, leaving the tiny form of Almásy and Katherine’s plane crossing the desert. At first, the silhouette was unable to land because of the strangeness of the place. However, once the action begins, the silhouette transforms into a plane, preparing spectators for an adventure in the Sahara.

Bertolucci and Minghella send their characters to manipulate the North African territories. They install their civilization and trace new borders to apply their colonial concepts. Through “visual imperialism”, Westerners are free to invent maps while ignoring the will of native inhabitants.

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<sup>46</sup> The article was published by *The New York Times* immediately following *The English Patient*’s release in 1996.

In his article “From visual culture to visual Imperialism”, Esmail Zeiny identifies the concept of “visual imperialism” to explain the history of Western colonization in the Orient. The author claims that this principle began with Napoleon who “*was careful to include 167 artists and scientists whose task was to record and document the civilization of Egypt both in its ancient and modern forms [...]*” (Zeiny, p79) In addition to soldiers, Napoleon wanted painters and writers to play a fundamental role in the conquest of Egypt for the glory of the French empire. Throughout the history of wars and battles, the artistic works would help to archive the conquest of the Orient and transmit the discoveries to Europe. Despite certain differences in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, the protagonists experience the emptiness of the foreign space. Bertolucci and Minghella introduce a painter, a cartographer, and a poet as the main characters of their films. Katherine, Almásy, and Port are charged with manipulating the North African borders as they experience life in the desert. Thus, the opening scenes affect the events of both films, and what will happen to each character during war time. Therefore, both directors may be influenced by the concept of “visual imperialism” because their narratives feature characters taking part in the imperial colonization of North Africa. In *The English Patient*, Minghella chooses to open his movie with a blank canvas. Then a paint brush traces the outline of a swimming figure. Next, the projection of the silhouette of a plane on screen casts a shadow over the sands. Thus, spectators discover the wilderness below his characters. This opening scene serves as a preface to justify the presence of artists during the period of colonization. Almásy and his group of cartographers work for the Royal Geographical Society in Africa. The director features this group of mapmakers explicitly on a mission to draw new borders around Egypt and Libya for the British Empire. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci opens his movie similarly. Once his American protagonists arrive in Algeria, they encounter the empty port of Oran. The director showcases the Algerian land as a vast and unlimited wilderness where Port is desperately searching for inspiration. Although the American character introduces himself as a poet, he fails to write anything during his journey. Bertolucci’s decision to focus on the emptiness of the desert land also affects his other characters. After the loss of her husband, Kit follows Belqassim and crosses the Algerian border without noticing her arrival into Niger.

Following the imperial tradition of Napoleon Bonaparte, Minghella and Bertolucci send their characters to North Africa as explorers instead of soldiers. Throughout the narrative, the characters travel in between cities and villages. As the camera traces the various stages of their journey, spectators are able to experience their own adventures. The artistic



mission of these Westerners becomes an imperialistic one once directors empty the space in order to legitimize their presence in the foreign land. Moreover, they do not stand in one place but they travel across the Sahara by different means. As the camera reveals more of the setting, the scope of the imperialistic mission expands across North Africa. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port, Kit, and Tunner visit many places. When filming them, Bertolucci includes a complex itinerary for his audience. Therefore, spectators need a map of Algeria to follow the visual path of characters. This map is useful for critics in order to analyze the plot of *The Sheltering Sky* and its diverse locations. For this reason, many critics took the initiative to create “*The Sheltering Sky Map Tour*”<sup>47</sup>. As shown in the map below, colored arrows explain the path taken by Bertolucci’s Occidental characters during their travel in Algeria. In *The English Patient*, spectators do not need a map because Anthony Minghella makes sure to include the time and location on screen as the narrative of his film progresses. The director features Almásy’s tormented past through a series of flashbacks. He goes back and forth in time between 1938 and 1944 to feature the entire story of Almásy’s adventures. In addition to the Saharan desert, spectators follow “the English patient” across the Mediterranean to join him while he recovers from his plane crash in Italy. Bertolucci and Minghella artistically showcase their characters on screen in different locations. Although they are not soldiers, the protagonists’ mission is necessary to the war effort. As they cross the desert, these foreign explorers invent new borders for European colonialists. Thus, they are able to leave their mark on the foreign geographical space.



*The Sheltering Sky Map Tour*

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1kYHGvokJzMQ8HTEbzE3wYSb2u50>

The second part of this section concerns the representation of the desert space in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. Bertolucci and Minghella feature the same desert in North Africa. However, they focus on different elements of life in the Sahara to tell their stories. Thus, the role of the desert varies according to how each director understands the significance of Oriental culture and how he frames the desert space.



Photogram (11): 00:44:25



Photogram (12): 00:45:45



Photogram (13) 00:46:00



Photogram (14) 00:47:02



Photogram (15) 00:49:46



Photogram (16) 00:51:44

*The Sheltering Sky*



In her article “Contrasting the Aesthetic with the Orientalist”, Aicha Ziyane explains how Bertolucci was “*utilizing the Sahara as a backcloth setting that reduces and curtails the function of space to a technical one. There is no denying that the analogy between the sterility of the couple and that of the desert is a significant one.*” (Ziyane, p2) Aicha criticizes the way Bertolucci uses the Saharan space to metaphorically explain the failure of a love story. Thus, he diminishes the value of the deserted background in order to follow the plot. The environment is filmed in a way to highlight the sterility of the land because there is no hope of reconciliation between Kit and Port. In this way, the spectators encounter the complicated relationship between East and West. After ten years spent together in New York City, Kit and Port believe that a Saharan adventure is the only solution to save their marriage. With their friend Tunner, they visit several destinations across the Algerian territory. At the beginning of *The Sheltering Sky*, the three characters first arrive in Oran. After they spend a couple of nights in town, they continue on to Boussif, their second destination on the way to the Algerian desert. Once they arrive, Kit and Port ride their bicycles in order to visit the surroundings of their hotel. In photogram (11), both characters enjoy singing “Oh Susannah”, a famous American song by James Taylor. It says “oh, Susannah, now, don't you cry for me; 'Cause I come from Alabama with this banjo on my knee”. The song tells about a lost love between two people who will never see each other again. This particular song highlights the character's journey throughout Algeria. This marks the beginning of the end for the couple who tries to recapture their love in North Africa. Later in the scene, Port and Kit decide to race their bicycles down the road until they arrive at the edge of a cliff. In photogram (12), Bertolucci's camera maintains its gaze through a medium long shot of Kit, while Port quickly fades into the desert background. From the edge, he asks Kit to join him, but the camera does not follow her and remains above filming them from behind. Bertolucci's choice induces spectators to understand that following Kit and Port is not worth the effort. Indeed, the parallel framing between photograms (12) and (16) prove that the couple will fail at the end of the scene.

The preceding shots introduce spectators of *The Sheltering Sky* to a beautiful version of the Saharan space. However, in her article, Ziyane criticizes Bertolucci's attempt to overshadow the beauty of the desert. She believes that the director compromises its splendor by focusing on its emptiness. Thus, she analyzes the way Bertolucci films this particular scene. She believes that his choice demonstrates the inability of the couple to enjoy their moments together. According to the author, Bertolucci uses the Sahara to focus on the details

of his movie rather than on the actual space. Thus, she claims that the director's camera misrepresents the desert because it made it look sterile. In fact, in photogram (13), Kit joins Port far in the distance to admire the landscape. Because the beauty of the desert ignites their passion, the camera focuses on their kiss in photogram (14). However, their attempt to make love fails and next photogram shows their disappointment. The camera remains fixed on this image in order to highlight the rich dialogue between the couple. Port says: "The sky is protecting us from what's behind". His words make Kit think about the strangeness of life, solitude and love. Contrary to what she tells him, he promises her that he cannot live without her. In doing so, Port hides the truth about the sexual affairs that both of them have had previously. In Oran, Port had cheated on Kit with a prostitute. Then, she betrayed him in the same way with Tunner in Boussif. While Port ignores this reality, Kit assures him that she is not afraid of ending up alone. Bertolucci adapts the failed love story of Paul Bowles' novel by capturing the desert space on his screen. In doing so, critics blame him for using the North African landscape as his own. For Ziyane, the desert should not be presented as "sterile" considering its rich cultural history. Thus, the Sahara is not the ideal location to help spectators interpret the complex relationship between Western characters.

As in *The Sheltering Sky*, the representation of the desert is reassessed Minghella's movie. In her thesis "Space in *The English Patient*", Nina C. Bache explains how the director uses the space to push his narrative forward. According to her, he focuses more attention on his Western characters while he completely misunderstands their surroundings. She writes:

"In my view, this is done in order to emphasize the intimacy between Almásy and the desert, and between Almásy and Katharine. Minghella has placed them within a warm-coloured shade in order to express their unspoken passion. The desert could also be shown in such a shade in order to mirror its beauty in accordance with reality. As the winds of Sahara play with the sand, the landscape will dress in a shade of sandy orange". (C. Bache, p81)

 <p>Photogram (17): 00:55:52</p>	 <p>Photogram (18): 00:56:16</p>
 <p>Photogram (19) 00:56:24</p>	 <p>Photogram (20) 00:57:16</p>
 <p>Photogram (21) 00:58:55</p>	 <p>Photogram (22) 00:59:35</p>
<p><i>The English Patient</i></p>	

In *The English Patient*, the British group of cartographers travels into the middle of the Sahara to discover the cave that Almásy has searched for since the beginning of the film. On the way back, one of three cars falls from the dunes and some men are wounded. Madox decides to transport the injured man to the hospital and to bring a radiator to fix the broken car. When Katherine realizes that the car heading to the city is carrying too much weight, she uses it as an excuse to stay behind in the desert. In photogram (17), Katherine looks up at the night sky from the top of a sand dune. Almásy stands behind her on screen and warns her of an approaching sandstorm as featured in photogram (18). He appears in a higher position in

order to display his authority over Katherine who seems to be lost in her thoughts. Minghella sets this up in order to guarantee Katherine's protection under the Count's supervision. A few minutes later, the volunteers are forced to separate into two groups to escape the storm (photogram 19). During the severe chaos, the couple find themselves in the same car, where Almásy allows himself to have a full conversation with Katherine for the first time (photogram 20). In photogram (21), Almásy tells her about the different types of winds that exist in the Sahara while caressing her hair. Thus, she is finally able to enjoy a moment of intimacy with him. Their previous interactions on the ballroom floor were filmed from afar, which emphasized the distance between them, even while their bodies were so close. Thus, this close up is the first shot that Minghella uses to frame them together so intimately. In photogram (22), the sun rises to mark the end of the storm. The camera pans up over the dunes to display the sand covering the front of their car.

In order to increase the curiosity of spectators, Minghella provides a perfect atmosphere for his characters to fall in love during the storm. Throughout this series of images, the director succeeds in uniting Almásy and Katherine by burying them in the sand. At daybreak, the director chooses to frame the beauty of the desert landscape in a way that none of his characters could appreciate it. As Nina C. Bache explains, Minghella uses the Sahara and its climate in this particular scene in order *"to express the unspoken passion between Almásy and Katherine."* (C. Bache, p81) He marks the beginning of Katharine and Almásy's love affair with the desert storm. He also takes advantage of the car to escape the harsh weather so that the situation deepens their attraction to each other. The author adds that: *"The desert could also be shown in such a shade in order to mirror its beauty in accordance with reality".* (C. Bache, p81) The shading of the color spectrum on the screen helps legitimize Minghella's version of the fictional story. During the day, the director uses the warm shades to demonstrate that Katherine will be safe if she follows Almásy. Conversely, at night, he uses the shadows on screen to indicate that his characters will survive the storm. At daybreak, the director features the car partially covered by the sands. Even when they believe they have nothing else to drink, Almásy finds extra water in the radiators. Despite all these difficulties, the desert not only embellishes a love story but it also plays a protective role in advancing the plot. As Nina C. Bache explains, Minghella aims to present the Sahara as a place in which taking risks becomes a kind of pleasure without regards to the consequences of particular actions.

In *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, the directors reveal that the Sahara is a beautiful place in which love can be recaptured. However, the particular narratives of each movie force spectators to interpret it as an unsafe place and to acknowledge its danger.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci presents North Africa as a place to encounter people from various origins. Kit, Port, and Tunner are from the United States which played an important role in the Second World War. Once they arrive in Oran, they encounter a British mother accompanied by her son Eric Lyle in a café. Throughout the movie, all these characters interact with colonialists and native Arabs, and Berbers when Algeria was still a French territory. The scene at the Café of Oran plays an important role in the film because it introduces not only the main characters but also it foreshadows the rest of the story. After a long panning shot, Bertolucci's camera stops to focus on the three main characters, sharing the same table. The director synchronizes this scene with the song "Je chante" by Charles Trenet. Spectators hear the artist singing "je chante soir et matin, je chante sur mon chemin". At the beginning, the music is played loudly to help characters overcome their silence. As soon as they start a discussion, the music stops to allow Kit to read a newspaper, while Tunner gazes a lady, and Port studies a map to choose his next destination. As they talk together, Port insists on telling about his nightmare despite his wife's refusal. He claims that he was sitting in a train about to crash. However, he was unable to stop it before it was too late. Because Kit assumes that he is referring to their marriage, she begins to cry and escapes to the restroom. Port prevents Tunner from following her and he explains that she runs away because she felt uncomfortable. The scene ends with a medium close up on Paul Bowles, who follows Kit with his eyes. The author himself appears as an extra in this scene to give credence to Bertolucci's adaptation of his novel. Nevertheless, he makes sure to highlight the extreme danger waiting for his characters before he places them in front of the Saharan background. The story of the accident is essential for the director in order to warn the spectators that anything could happen at any moment. Bertolucci makes sure to convince his audience to be suspicious of the Sahara's natural beauty. Even though it may reconcile the couple, it cannot protect them from certain tragedies. Thus, spectators are encouraged to focus their attention on the fate of characters more than the location of *The Sheltering Sky*.

In *The English Patient*, Minghella explicitly shows a plane crash on screen to introduce the fictional love story between the characters. The movie opens on a high angle

shot featuring the swimming figure on screen. As the camera pans to the left, the shadow of a plane replaces this particular silhouette. Katherine is the first character who appears on screen. A middle shot shows her eyes closed because she is not wearing aviator goggles. The next shot shows Nazi soldiers shooting down the plane carrying Almásy and Katherine. Right after, the bombing in the desert fades out revealing a white screen. This opening scene serves as a bridge between the past and the present. The camera first creates a panoramic view of the Sahara for the audience. However, once they appreciate its beauty, they witness an explosion of the plane transporting its passengers. In this way, Minghella warns his audience about the danger of the place and helps them realize that the main characters will definitely experience a tragic ending. Bertolucci and Minghella call spectators to experience life in North Africa while guiding them towards particular interpretations of the Sahara on screen. In *The Sheltering Sky*, the director frames the desert as the perfect background to reconcile Kit and Port. In the same way, Minghella frames the Sahara so that Katherine and Almásy have no choice but to end up together. However, because of the events occurring at the beginning of each film, audiences are able to understand that the characters on screen are going to be placed in threatening situations. Therefore, the Sahara is introduced as a dangerous place where Bertolucci and Minghella choose to adapt their tragic love stories.

The interaction between Occidental characters and native population varies in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. On the one hand, Bertolucci uses the French language to intermediate between his American protagonists and the Arab characters in colonized Algeria. On the other hand, Minghella neglects the presence of the natives to the point that spectators rarely see them taking part in conversations.



Photogram (23): 00:03:05



Photogram (24): 01:47:07



Photogram (25) 00:15:14



Photogram (26) 00:15:18



Photogram (27) 00:55:40



Photogram (28) 01:03:47

*The Sheltering Sky*

The events described in *The Sheltering Sky* take place right after World War II. At this time, Algeria<sup>48</sup> had been colonized for 117 years, and it would be another 15 years before its independence. Thus, nearly all Algerians understood the language of their colonizer even though many were uneducated. In order to guarantee the participation of all characters, Bertolucci adopts the French language to integrate his American protagonists within the North African culture. Kit, Port, and Tunner were absolutely not fluent, but they made the effort to speak French out of courtesy, with their American accent. Additionally, many scenes feature natives also trying to speak English to make themselves understood. If one of the characters fails to express himself, he must rely on gestures to communicate. Therefore, discussions in Arabic language are almost non-existent throughout the film. Nevertheless, the director compensates for this linguistic omission by synchronizing most of his scenes with North African music and religious songs. Bertolucci's characters mention God when they suffer from illness or death. Indeed, *The Sheltering Sky* opens on Port lying on the ground and covered in sweat (photogram 23). Later in the movie, spectators learn that Bertolucci features

<sup>48</sup> Algeria was colonized by the French government from 1830 until 1962. The events of the movie take place in 1947. ([https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/Alg%C3%A9rie\\_histoire/185573](https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/Alg%C3%A9rie_histoire/185573))



a Quranic recitation during this opening scene, to reflect his character's prayer to recover from Typhoid<sup>49</sup>. At the end, Port cannot recover from his fever and Kit is unable to accept his death. As a result, she joins a camel caravan of Berbers and travels with them to Niger. Bertolucci traces their journey with long shots of the Saharan landscapes and synchronizes this scene with a Remembrance of Allah Nasheed<sup>50</sup> (photogram 24). As Kit's condition worsens, Bertolucci zooms in on her sad face and the sound of Nasheed increases.

In addition to religious songs, the use of romantic lyrics helps to describe the complicated relationship between Kit and Port. Instead of focusing on a dialogue, Bertolucci incorporates Arabic lyrics that can be translated in English as "I'm worried about him". Bertolucci chooses a famous song by Umm Kulthum<sup>51</sup> from her album entitled "Dalili Ihtar" meaning "I am confused". The song highlights Kit's discomfort and Port's disappointment after she dismisses him in their hotel room in Oran. Once they arrive there, Port invites Kit three times to go for a walk but she keeps on refusing his proposal. Therefore, he gets closer to her, and tries to kiss her hoping that she might change her mind. Then, they start a fight about Tunner which upsets Port. Thus, he leaves Kit alone and drops his keys at the reception desk. The camera follows him as he walks downtown in Oran, while Kit sees him from the balcony (photograms 25 and 26). Bertolucci synchronizes her anxious expression with the specific lyrics of the soundtrack played in the background. Throughout the movie, spectators understand that Port recognizes the meaning of the lyrics being sung in Arabic. When the three Americans travel to Ain Krorfa, they are forced to settle in a modest hotel. While there, Port recognizes another Arabic song from the radio during their lunch (photogram 27). Thus, he translates the title for Kit and Tunner into English. The lyrics by Mohammed Abdel Wahhab<sup>52</sup> say "I am weeping on your grave." This tragic song reflects Port's despair as well as Tunner and Kit's guilt. This specific song reflects Port's suspicion that something has happened between Tunner and his wife. Later in the movie, Port reconciles with Kit and travel further south to Bounoura. Throughout their journey, Bertolucci includes different native songs to refer to historical events and to advance and enrich the plot of his movie. Thus, he

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<sup>49</sup> French North Africa suffered serious epidemics of Typhoid, Typhus and food restrictions during World War II. (<https://www.quora.com/Did-the-deadly-virus-typhus-outbreak-take-place-during-World-War-II>)

<sup>50</sup> "Nasheed" is different from recitations. It is an Arabic word which refers to "religious songs" written by Muslim believers to praise God and his prophet.

<sup>51</sup> Umm Kulthūm (1904- 1975) was an Egyptian singer, who mesmerized Arab audiences from the Persian Gulf to Morocco for half a century. She was one of the most famous Arab singers and public personalities in the 20th century. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>52</sup> Mohammed Abdel Wahhab (1902– 1991) was a prominent 20th-century Egyptian singer and composer. ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk))



features long shots of the desert landscape synchronized with a Tunisian song called “Nari ala Zarzis<sup>53</sup>” (photogram 28). Although it deals with the French colonization, the specific rhythm of the song gives the impression of a joyful context.

In *The English Patient*, the presence of native North African people is almost non-existent. Only two characters had the chance to communicate with Almásy in Arabic. More specifically, they speak the Tunisian dialect which is not translated for spectators. In her thesis, Nina C.Bache explains Minghella’s intention. She says:

“When the accessibility of meaningful sound is no longer present, the visible becomes enormously important. Our attention is always drawn towards what we can interpret and make sense off. Thus, a director’s intention by leaving the spectators out of a conversation can be to draw attention to what is going on in the background.” (Nina C. Bache, p92)



Photogram (29): 00:05:05



Photogram (30): 00:05:26



Photogram (31) 00:05:47



Photogram (32) 00:06:02

<sup>53</sup> The lyrics of the song can be translated as “my heart breaks for the city of Zarzis and its women”. Despite its sad lyrics, what is specific about this particular song is that natives sing it during wedding celebrations.



Photogram (33) 00:07:39



Photogram (34) 00:07:51



Photogram (35) 00:08:15



Photogram (36) 00:08:25

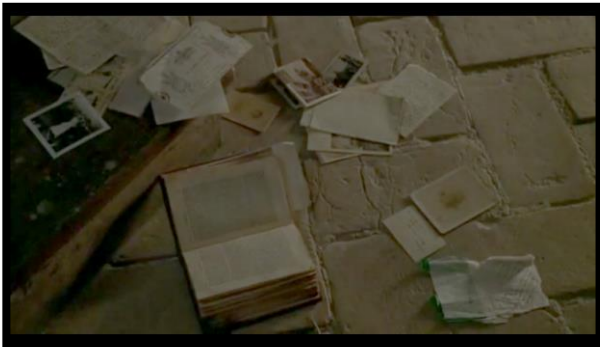
*The English Patient*

After the bombing, the fragments of the plane crash into the Sahara (photogram 29). Later, a group of nomads discover a burned body thrown onto the dunes. Although spectators can barely hear them speaking Arabic, they see them digging into his belongings to discover his identity (photogram 30). Then, they cover his burns to protect him from the sun and carry him with them on their camels (photogram 31). Minghella ends this scene with an establishing shot of their caravan fading behind the dunes (photogram 32). After a brief transition to events taking place in Italy, the director features a nomad's silhouette holding several little glass bottles of natural herbal remedies (photogram 33). The knocking sound of his bottles recalls the opening credits. Then, this ringing continues as Minghella's camera focuses on the Bedouin doctor<sup>54</sup> from a high angle shot. He enters a cave and greets the other nomads who are waiting for him to heal Almásy, who is submerged in a basin in the middle of the screen (photogram 34). Therefore, the Bedouin's face is shown only once in this scene while he treats Almásy's burns. A close up shows him comforting his patient with words in Arabic<sup>55</sup> (photogram 35). Then the camera focuses on his hands applying a medical cream over the

<sup>54</sup> This character is played by a native Tunisian actor called Salah Miled.

<sup>55</sup> The Bedouin doctor speaks the Tunisian dialect. He says to Almásy: "Calm down man, it will be alright".

burns (photogram 36). These scenes are fundamentally important to understand how Almásy survived the plane crash. Without the contribution of the nomads, he never would have made it out of the desert alive. Nevertheless, Minghella synchronizes their dialogue with the movie's soundtrack to the point that spectators are unable to recognize the words. In addition, he does not subtitle the Arabic language for the Western audience. On the one hand, the purpose for native characters in this movie is to save Almásy's life. On the other hand, Minghella blends the natives into the background in order to give more credence to the space in his shots.



Photogram (37): 00:20:13



Photogram (38): 00:20:17



Photogram (39) 00:20:22



Photogram (40) 00:20:43



Photogram (41) 01:04:33

*The English Patient*

In her thesis, Nina C. Bache explains how Minghella focuses more on the visual aspect of the scene when the native Arab people take part in the dialogue. Thus, she takes a particular example that better highlights her idea. Once transported to Italy, Hana, a Canadian nurse decides to stay in a Monastery, where she can take care of her “English patient”. She installs him in a bed upstairs and leaves to take a shower. The next scene starts with an extreme close up of Almásy’s copy of Herodotus. When the patient tries to flip through it, it falls and a collection of letters, pictures and souvenirs are thrown onto the floor (photogram 37). Thus, the patient experiences his first flashback. A dissolve follows the book as it falls down in the monastery in order to lead spectators to the Sahara where Almásy is seen drawing a map (photogram 38). He asks a native<sup>56</sup> about directions to get to the cave he has been looking for in the Sahara. The nomad directs him to a specific rocky mountain that has the shape of a woman’s body (photogram 39). At this moment, Katherine and her husband Geoffrey Clifton are about to land in the Sahara. Their plane crosses the sky when Almásy is having a conversation with the nomad (photogram 40). Nina C. Bache explains that this extract proves how Minghella makes conversations in Arabic seem useless. She says that not only spectators have to predict the subject of discussion by themselves, but they are also distracted by the arrival of the Cliftons. In her thesis, Nina argues that native characters are simply there to occupy the desert space and to validate it on screen. Thus, she cites the lack of native dialogues that Minghella includes in *The English Patient*. In addition to the missing subtitles, the director does not focus on the right dialects of Arabic. Normally, the events of the story take place on the Western Egyptian border with Libya. However, Minghella features his characters speaking the Tunisian dialect at the beginning of his movie, since he was filming there. Because he does not translate the dialogues, spectators are not meant to notice this difference. In addition to the different North African dialects, there is a significant difference between modern and Standard Arabic<sup>57</sup>. After a stormy night spent in the desert, two nomads welcome Madox because he brought a radiator to fix their car. They shout “It is the foreigner! It is the foreigner!” in Standard Arabic (photogram 41). However, natives rarely speak Standard Arabic in daily life. Thus, as Nina C. Bache explains; Minghella’s focus and attention remain exclusively on Western characters at the expense of native ones. For this reason, she adds that the representation of a suitable space matters more for him than traditional culture and language of the Saharan countries.

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<sup>56</sup> The nomad character is played by a Tunisian actor called Abdellatif Hamrouni. He describes the directions to the cave in Tunisian dialect.

<sup>57</sup> Standard Arabic is the original language of the Quran. Modern Arabic is more similar to spoken Arab dialects.

Throughout their films, Bertolucci and Minghella validate their particular interpretation of life in North Africa during the Second World War. In their own way, each director chooses to use English and French as the only spoken languages. In order to compensate for the absence of North African dialects, they feature Oriental songs but fail to translate passages from the native tongues.

In his article "The vanishing point: The Dis-Integration of Female Identity in Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*", Andrew Martino focuses on the final chapter of the novel in order to analyze how Kit interacts with her situation. He writes:

"Kit has vanished into the language of the desert; there is nothing left for Bowles to say. The ending of the novel represents an ending to the narrative and a finitude in the language of representation. Kit is no longer able to exist within the representative language of Western civilization- a white language that always strives to speak on behalf of the black other." (Andrew Martino, p25)

In both movies, Western characters are trying to understand their proper place in the Oriental world. In *The English Patient*, Minghella never translates Arabic dialogues to explain that the Saharan backgrounds are more important than characters' interactions. For different reasons, Bertolucci similarly refuses to subtitle the Tamasheq dialect<sup>58</sup> at the end of *The Sheltering Sky*. According to Andrew Martino, Kit arrives in Algeria to please her husband, Port, and try to save her marriage. Despite the efforts, she not only loses him but she also loses herself. Thus, she decides "to vanish" with Belqassim to Niger. When his camel caravan arrives in his village, he locks Kit in his guest room upstairs where he visits her frequently. Despite their different origins and culture, they fall in love. In order to express their feelings, they must use gestures because they do not speak the same language. Bertolucci presents the Tamasheq dialect in a way that is incomprehensible to Kit. This choice allows spectators to relate to her experience in the Southern part of the Sahara. Despite her efforts to integrate, Kit is forced to leave the village of Niger and to return to the city of Oran. When she learns that the embassy agent brought her there to meet Tunner, she refuses to see him. Throughout the movie, Kit is forced to question her identity but fails to understand her role. By the end of the film, Kit decides to act without thinking and she lets herself get lost in North Africa. As a

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<sup>58</sup> Tamasheq is the traditional dialect of Berbers living in between Libya and Nigeria. ([https://mawdoo3.com/من\\_هم\\_الطوارق](https://mawdoo3.com/من_هم_الطوارق))

result, her individual personality disappears into the sands. Through her character, Bertolucci highlights the difficulties faced by Westerners who are unable to integrate fully into the North African life. As Martino mentions in his article, foreign characters justified their presence as ambassadors defending the rights of all Africans and more specifically “to speak on behalf of the blacks” (Martino, p25). However, he adds that history has proven these representatives wrong. Because their mission has ultimately failed, Kit is unable to fulfill any of her personal projects and purposes during her journey in the Sahara.

The New York Times published an article<sup>59</sup> immediately following release of *The English Patient*. Janet Maslin discusses the role of Western characters and presents it as a good historical reference where Almásy is on mission to map the desert. She writes:

“So in exchange for a sharp central story—or even one that is easily described – the film offers such indelible images as cave paintings of swimmers in the desert, a sandstorm of mysterious (and prophetic) fury as Almásy and Katherine are thrown together, and the English patient’s great treasure, a well-worn, memento-filled volume of Herodotus. Even without that book, the film’s reverence for history and literature would be very clear.” (Maslin, p3)

Janet Maslin’s description of *The English Patient* praises Minghella’s representation of the beautiful Saharan spaces. Although she recognizes the fact that Almásy and Katherine “are thrown in” this particular environment, she argues for the historical dimension of the story. Nevertheless, Minghella presents a love story in the Saharan space, not a love story about the Sahara. In order to prove the contrary, the director features the book of Herodotus<sup>60</sup> as an indispensable tool to survive in the foreign land. Indeed, Minghella introduces the character of Almásy through the lens of Herodotus. Throughout the movie, the count travels with his copy following the tradition of previous historians. He tries to recreate history with a group of cartographers. They are in the Sahara to occupy an empty space for the British Empire, which justifies the absence of native characters on screen. This small detail proves that the director is less concerned with the local culture in which his movie is set. Moreover, it shows that the place lacks its own history and is in need of foreign rules in order to validate its existence. In fact, for centuries, ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, Carthaginians and many others civilizations originated in North Africa. They left many different versions of human evolution

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<sup>59</sup> The article is entitled “Adrift in fiery layers of memory”.

<sup>60</sup> Greek author of the first great narrative history produced in the ancient world, the history of the Greco-Persian Wars. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))



to describe their culture and to preserve their history. However, Minghella chooses Herodotus to introduce a love story born in the desert in the shadow of a Roman tragedy. Thus, when he recreates history, he dismisses the presence of native cultures which have resided in North Africa for thousands of years. The Oriental space is presented as Minghella intends to portray it. For this reason, his characters experience a version of the Sahara. However, they cannot fit in it because they do not understand its traditional life style.

Bertolucci and Minghella feature the desert as an empty space. Thus, native characters live in the shadow of the Western heroes included in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. As a result, natives must prove their proper historical existence in their homeland. However, the question remains: if occupation started with Bonaparte, what does it mean that in art and film it is the native population that is being forced to occupy their own territory under the subjugation of colonial mapmakers?

## **The Orientalist influence on Western artists and film directors**

Western audiences are always subject to a limited understanding of historical, cultural, social and natural space. What they can learn about the Oriental world is defined by the limitation of representational reality. Before the invention of film, travel narratives and paintings were the major sources to consult. Thus, readers and observers of art were often limited by the distinctive literary style of a particular writer or artist. In fact, they often relied on their imagination to invent a space through which to tell a story. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europeans were curious to discover a land different from their own. The dunes, the oasis, and the sun appearing in most of the Orientalist books and paintings attracted Westerners to explore the new exotic space. The different climate conditions impacted the way of life of native North Africans who lived in the vast desert regions. This cultural juxtaposition between East and West led to the birth of Orientalism in art and history. European travel books and paintings did represent a version of the space that readers and viewers encounter. Thus, their artistic interpretations became the only reference for the representation of the Orient and its people. The diverse population and the foreign space played an important role in the Orientalist works. However, the most appealing figures in these works of art were native women. In most paintings and books, they represented the exotic objects intended to excite Western readers and observers. These stereotypes affected the Western knowledge of the Harem and their understanding of social norms in Asian countries and North Africa.

In this second chapter, I will examine the degree to which Orientalist stereotypes affected life in North Africa. Through the artistic and literary depiction of the exotic representation of Oriental Harem, I will analyze how Minghella and Bertolucci incorporate these ideas into their films.

In the first part, I will examine how Bertolucci and Minghella may draw their inspiration from previous Orientalist artists in their way of portraying the space and architecture of the desert. In the second part, I will analyze the incorporation of general Oriental stereotypes about North African culture and the representation of female characters in both movies. In the third and last part, I will apply Laura Mulvey's film theory to explain how each director represents his female characters based on the previous Orientalist understanding of gender roles in the Orient.



Orientalist artists aimed to show their Occidental audiences glimpses of a completely different world. In the same way, Bertolucci and Minghella adapted their versions of this Oriental space in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. Each director may be influenced by this Orientalist Movement in Western art according to the way they represent the native culture on screen.

Napoleon Bonaparte was at the origin of European painters' interest in the lands and the culture of Egypt. In addition to his army, the emperor sent artists to produce a variety of works in which they featured a version of daily life of Arabs and Berbers. As a result, they painted mosques, souks and native people. In her analysis of orientalism, Peltre quotes Victor Hugo who explained that, by the 1830's, "*the Orient had become a topic of general concern<sup>61</sup> in the field of the science of arts*" (Peltre, p84). According to critics like Edward Said and Esmaeil Zeiny, this action led to the birth of "visual imperialism" in the Orient. Nevertheless, Peltre introduces these Orientalist artists as "painters of exoticism" (Peltre, p86). She also adds that they should be trusted because of their experiences in these foreign lands. Afterward, the author focuses on the content of these works. She explains the importance of the desert background in many paintings and lithographs. According to her, the architecture of Oriental houses was fundamental to convey the difference of their style when compared to the rest of the world. Consequently, In addition to the techniques used to feature the Oriental life style, she argues that the Orientalist art was mandatory to help European admirers learn about the history of "the Egyptian expedition" and "the independence of the Greeks against the Turks" (Peltre, p84). In order to present her arguments, the author illustrates her book with many images of Orientalist works. For each example, she adds historical and artistic commentary to explain the conditions in which the work was conceived and what it symbolizes. Thus, she cites many examples of the Western painters, sculptors, lithographers, and photographs who travelled to the Orient and transmitted their versions of it. She writes:

«Il est difficile aujourd'hui de limiter l'orientalisme à la peinture. Le rôle de la sculpture s'est imposé, comme on l'a vu récemment dans la belle rétrospective dédiée à Charles Cordier<sup>62</sup> au musée d'Orsay (2004). La réédition de « voyages

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<sup>61</sup> Christine Peltre borrows the expression "préoccupation générale" from Victor Hugo's collection of poems *Les Orientales* of 1829.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Cordier (1827-1905) was a French sculptor of ethnographic subjects. He was mainly inspired by people he encountered during his travels and missions in the Orient. ([www.musee-orsay.fr](http://www.musee-orsay.fr))

pittoresques » a attiré l'attention sur la lithographie orientaliste, genre très prisé à l'époque romantique. La photographie, quoique devenue un objet d'étude autonome, enfin, ne peut être oubliée dans une histoire où son rôle fut souverain ». (Peltre, p76)

This citation mentions that the Orientalist tradition goes beyond paintings on canvas. It is also observable in lithographs and sculptures. Each of these artistic forms seeks to portray native life in the Sahara. In order to explain this diversity, Peltre divides her book into four major themes<sup>63</sup>: “Geographies”, “The Orientations of the history of art”, “Occidental lectures”, and “Posterities”. In the second part, she discusses the main issues presented by Orientalist artists and the different types of work they adopted. According to Peltre, the history of Orientalist art from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries allowed spectators to interpret various elements about life in North Africa. These artists considered the desert landscapes and the architecture of Oriental houses as the perfect background to highlight an exotic story emerging from the native characters in their paintings. During this long period, Western painters specialized in Orientalist art to transmit something new to their families in Europe. Since the invention of moving pictures, this diverse interpretation of Oriental lands evolved. For example, in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, Bertolucci and Minghella choose to portray the same North African desert space as the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century artists. However, their cinematographic techniques often vary as each director showcases different focal points of the same landscape.

In *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, Bertolucci and Minghella are most likely affected by the Orientalist movement in art. When framing their scenes in the desert, they seem to be inspired by previous Orientalist artwork. In the following examples, spectators may recognize thematic links with the examples cited by Christine Peltre when exposing Occidental clichés about Oriental life.

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<sup>63</sup> The titles in French are: “Géographies”, “Les orientes de l’histoire de l’art”, “Lectures occidentales”, and “Postérités”.



	
<p>Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps  <i>Corps-de-garde sur la route de Smyrne à  Magnesie</i> (1833)</p>	<p>Photogram (42): 01:10:50  <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>

Christine Peltre introduces Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps<sup>64</sup> as one of the initiators of the Orientalist movement in art. In a section entitled “The Orient in Paris around 1830<sup>65</sup>”, she allocates two full pages<sup>66</sup> of her book to his painting *Corps-de-garde sur la route de Smyrne à Magnesie* (1833), in order to emphasize its significance. Decamps spent one year in Smyrne. In his painting, he exposes Oriental figures in front of an ivory wall. Peltre explains that he aims to establish a natural background composed by real natives. These choices allow Decamps’ particular style to define his vision of the Orient. In her analysis, Peltre also cites Honoré De Balzac who recognizes Decamps’ vision of the Orient “*sparkling and mysterious because of his ability to powerfully communicate his ideas*” (Peltre, p90). In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci may be inspired by the setting appearing in Decamps’ painting entitled *Corps-de-garde sur la route de Smyrne à Magnesie*. In photogram (42), the director juxtaposes what Peltre identifies as “*the amplitudes of classical art with real Orientalist impressions*” (Peltre, p90). The architectural background of Bertolucci’s shot is reminiscent of Decamps’ painting as both feature Berbers in places with limited light. Because of the ivory colors and dark shadows on screen, spectators can barely differentiate native characters from the background of Bertolucci’s shot. Therefore, the director maintains the obscure environment from Decamps’ painting in photogram (42), while keeping the same architectural details.

<sup>64</sup> Decamps (1803- 1860) was one of the first French painters of the 19th century to turn from Neoclassicism to Romanticism. In his youth, he traveled in the Middle East and painted the life and scenery of that part of the world with a bold fidelity to nature. (www.britannica.com)

<sup>65</sup> The title in French is “L’Orient à Paris autour de 1830”.

<sup>66</sup> Pages 98-99

	
<p>Jules Didier</p> <p><i>Jules Laurens peignant l'Euphrate</i> (1857)</p>	<p>Photogram (43): 00:20:28</p> <p><i>The English Patient</i></p>
	
<p>Photogram (44): 00:48 :18</p> <p><i>The English Patient</i></p>	<p>Photogram (45): 00:48:22</p> <p><i>The English Patient</i></p>

The career and the experiences of Jules Laurens<sup>67</sup> in the Orient are also mentioned in *Orientalisme* by Christine Peltre. She notes that in 1846, the artist accompanied a geographer on his expedition between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The scientist died during the journey, but Laurens continued the expedition and visited many other cities in the Orient. Later, he shared his experiences along the Euphrates<sup>68</sup> through many lithographs and paintings. Jules Didier<sup>69</sup> was inspired by his works to paint a portrait of the traveler in *Jules Laurens peignant l'Euphrate* (1857). Although Jules Didier never really saw the Euphrates, his painting of the river looks almost identical. Didier imagined his subject sitting at the edge

<sup>67</sup> Jules Laurens (1825-1901) was a French painter and lithographer famous for his Oriental works. ([musees-occitanie.fr](http://musees-occitanie.fr))

<sup>68</sup> Euphrates is a long river in Western Asia flowing through Syria and Iraq to join the River Tigris. Both were great rivers of the ancient region of Mesopotamia. ([dictionary.cambridge.org](http://dictionary.cambridge.org))

<sup>69</sup> Jules Didier (1831-1914) was a French painter and lithographer. He was a student of Jules Laurens. In his works, Jules Didier was mainly interested in showing landscapes, mythological, biblical, and animalier themes. (<https://rehs.com>)

of a cliff, holding his tools to sketch “a croquis<sup>70</sup>” of the desert below. In *Orientalisme*, Christine Peltre designates this painting as “one of the representations of a travelling artist because of the mysteriously lost profile, the majestic landscape, and the style of costumes that showcases red boots” (Peltre, p113). The position of the artist also attracts her attention as she focuses on his surroundings and the peculiarity of the rocks behind him. In *The English Patient*, Minghella adopts these mysterious elements throughout the narrative of his movie adaptation. Therefore, he takes the position of Jules Didier and casts Almásy as *Jules Laurens peignant l’Euphrate* in photogram (43). At the beginning of the movie, Almásy asks a Berber man for directions leading to a lost cave in the Sahara. Thus, the Count depends on the native’s instructions to reconstruct the location of the cave he has been searching for. According to this description, Almásy plays the role of the artist and draws a croquis of the landscape surrounding the cave. When the count discovers the location of the cave, he checks his notebook. In photogram (44), spectators realize that his croquis shows a nearly perfect image of the real Saharan space. Minghella’s close up frames a mise en abyme showcasing that the Count’s drawing perfectly resembles this particular area of the desert landscape in order to continue the plot. Once again, Almásy mimics Jules Laurens’s position in the painting (photogram 45). Minghella also leaves Almásy’s croquis visible for spectators who are able to notice “the pattern of fortified rocks” (Peltre, p113). Therefore, based on previous stereotypical representations of the Orient, Almásy is able to imagine the surroundings of a place that he has never seen before.

In addition to painters, Orientalist artists used sculptures to share their discoveries about the Orient in Europe. In *Orientalisme*, Christine Peltre describes the value of Orientalist sculptures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to her analysis, this type of art demonstrates the stereotypes about the relationship between North African natives and wild life.

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<sup>70</sup> There are three main types of functional sketches. The first- known as a croquis- is intended to remind the artist of some scene or event he has seen and wishes to record in a more permanent form. (<https://www.britannica.com/art/sketch-art#ref165057>)

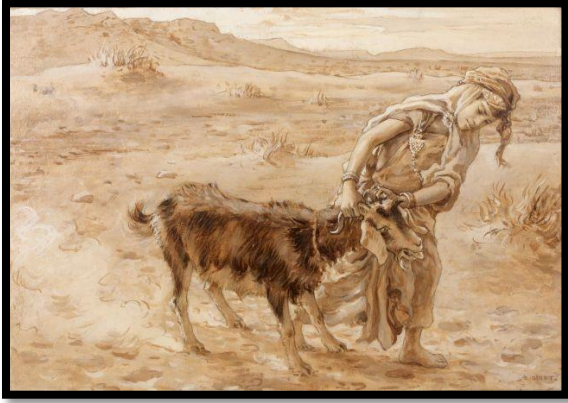





	
<p>Charles Marochetti <i>La mort d'un ami</i> (date : unknown)</p>	<p>Antoine-Louis Barye <i>Lion au Serpent</i> (1832-1835)</p>

In her book, the author cites deferent sculptures featuring domesticated animals from the Orient. Unlike gazelles in the wild, natives used horses to travel long distances. In this way, Peltre explains how “*in Islamic countries, people live with animals in peace*” (Peltre, p100). In *La mort d'un ami*, Charles Marochetti<sup>71</sup> sculpted a man caring for his dying horse. The depiction of their relationship enhances the Orientalist narrative about the close relationship between natives and animals. Although horses were important in Oriental culture, many sculptors focus on the dangerous animals. *Lion au Serpent* by Antoine-Louis Barye<sup>72</sup> is a good example of the wild animals that exist in North Africa. Through their artwork, Western sculptors enhanced the exotic side of the Orient because it is hard to imagine how a human can risk death among lions and tigers. In *The English Patient*, animals in the desert are mostly ignored. Although many scenes are filmed in the Sahara, natives and their means of transportation rarely appear in the background. Throughout the movie, birds are replaced by planes and camels are replaced by cars. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci does not apply the stereotypes of the proximity of wild animals to humans in the Orient. Nevertheless, spectators can discover more about the North African culture and the relationship people have with domestic animals.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Marochetti (1805-1867) was a French sculptor. He was responsible for some of Britain's best known public monuments. ([www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org))

<sup>72</sup> Antoine-Louis Barye (1795— 1875) was a French sculptor, painter, and printmaker whose subject was primarily animals. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

	
<p>Etienne Dinet <i>Fillette jouant avec une chèvre</i></p>	<p>Photogram (46): 01:07:08 <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>
	
<p>Eugène Léon l'Hoëst <i>La Grande Caravane</i> (date: beginning of the 20th century)</p>	<p>Photogram (47): 01 :51 :25 <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>

In the painting *Fillette jouant avec une chèvre*, Etienne Dinet<sup>73</sup> portrays a little Berber girl leading a goat down a path. She is walking barefoot so that spectators may understand that she is not far from her home. Similarly, Bertolucci frames a teenage girl milking a goat in front of her tent in the presence of her little brothers in photogram (46). In order to survive in the desert, native families usually rely on goats to provide milk. In fact, a Berber woman's primary task is to take care of the animal and to feed her family. Therefore, both of these images provide relevant information about the cultural traditions of Berbers. In addition to goats, Saharan people use camels to travel long distances across the desert. Within this

<sup>73</sup> Alphonse-Étienne Dinet (1861-1929) was a French orientalist painter. He made his first trip to North Africa in 1884. In 1900, Dinet set up his first workshop in Algeria. In 1905, he bought a house in the Saharan oasis. (<https://www.babelio.com/auteur/tienne-Dinet/294072>)

context, Eugène Léon l'Hoëst<sup>74</sup> sculpted *La Grande Caravane* in bronze. This sculpture features a Berber family returning from the souk. In the foreground, the patriarch guides his wife and his child, who are following behind. His belongings are carried across the desert on the back of his camel. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci mirrors Hoëst's artistic work by framing Belqassim in the foreground of photogram (47). After a long journey, he brings food and other supplies to members of his village. As in the sculpture, a woman and a little servant appear in the background. Thus, both artistic examples reflect a version of daily Saharan life in North Africa.

The succession of scenes in both movies helps to connect Orientalist art with Orientalist cinema. Based on previous historical examples, the Orient became a symbol of exoticism and clichés. These stereotypes spread widely through Europe because of the exhibition of the artistic works. The representation of the exotic space and the appeal of native life attracted most Western admirers. However, the native women became the most popular subjects for Orientalist artists to portray.

According to Christine Peltre's *Orientalisme*, Orientalist art covered several subjects and themes relating to life in the Orient. Nevertheless, the female body remained a main focal point for many Orientalist sculptors and painters. In addition to the exotic backgrounds and traditional costumes, these artists portrayed native women in the nude. Therefore, the Middle East and North Africa promised for Westerners exciting experiences in an exotic land with erotic women. In the third part of her book, entitled "Occidental lectures", the author references the characters of Sindbad, Aladdin and Ali Baba as the emblematic male figures of Arab literature. However, she adds that despite their exciting stories and their typical Oriental costumes, Scheherazade occupies a significant historical place for Orientalists. Indeed, this character represents the Oriental female who is portrayed and admired for her physical beauty. When comparing the roles of each gender within the history of Orientalism, Peltre writes:

"Mais, au centre de ces réminiscences, rayonne surtout l'univers du harem.  
Après les compositions du XVIIIème siècle de Carle van Loo et de Boucher, les

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<sup>74</sup> Eugène Léon L'Hoëst (1874-1937) was a French sculptor and one of the great figures of Orientalist sculpture. (<https://galerietourbillon.com/biographie-eugene-lhoest/>)



images d'odalisques, de sultanes et d'almées déploient leurs charmes souvent dénudés dans les tableaux du XIXème siècle.” (Peltre, p154)

According to Peltre, *Letters*<sup>75</sup> by Lady Montagu<sup>76</sup> greatly influenced the portrayal of women in the Ottoman Empire. In many of her correspondences, Lady Montagu describes her experiences with native women in a Turkish bath: Groups of native women meet in these public places to share news and relax. Over time, the popularity of these baths spread widely throughout countries in the Islamic world. For Western artists, the nudity of these women functions as the ideal source of inspiration to highlight the exotic side of the foreign culture. Consequently, the main emphasis of Orientalists remained focused on the female form. Most native models appeared either indoors as members of the Harem, or were sold outside as female slaves who would become odalisques. For this reason, Christine Peltre cites several works of art in which the female body is usually exposed in different settings for foreign eyes. In her book, Peltre also refers to several works of art by Jean-Léon Gérôme<sup>77</sup>. This French sculptor and painter was significantly inspired by Oriental culture which he observed over many years of travel across its lands. Several of his paintings also feature Turkish women bathing with the assistance of their maids. These women were usually dedicated to the Sultan. After their baths, many of them joined the Haremlek<sup>78</sup>: In this particular place, they could privately relax together while enjoying the protection of their man.

In *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, Bertolucci and Minghella feature their female characters in an Oriental setting like European painters had done with the Harem. In addition to natives, both directors include their female protagonists and hide their faces under traditional costumes.

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<sup>75</sup> This book has different titles: *Letters*, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, and *Letters from Turkey*. It contains Lady Montagu's letters sent during a period of two years - between August 1716 and September 1718.

<sup>76</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689- 1762) accompanied her husband who became the British Ambassador to Turkey. There, she shared her experiences in the Orient through a collection of letters. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>77</sup> Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824- 1904) was one of the most famous French painters of his day. The range of his works included historical paintings of Greek mythology and Orientalism. ([www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/))

<sup>78</sup> In a traditional Ottoman house, this area was reserved exclusively for women.

	
<p>Fabio Fabbi <i>Slave merchant</i> (1931)</p>	<p>Photogram (48): 01:58:38 <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>
	
<p>Photogram (49): 01:59:05 <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>	<p>Photogram (50): 01:59:06 <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>

In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci applies the same artistic standards to portray Kit as an Occidental woman in an Oriental space. Therefore, he makes sure that spectators see her body without revealing her identity. When Kit arrives in Belqassim's village, she hides her female clothes in a hole and disguises herself as a boy. After they exchange some looks, Belqassim turns back to find Kit and to make sure she remains covered like other Touaregs. He shows her how to stand up like a man then teaches her how to properly stretch her Cheche<sup>79</sup>. Bertolucci focuses much attention on the turban in order to protect Kit's identity in the next scene (photogram 49). Once in his house, Belqassim leaves his three wives downstairs and locks Kit in a room on the roof. Then, he orders a servant for a bucket full of

<sup>79</sup> Cheche is a cotton scarf used to make a turban and worn traditionally by Touaregs, it covers everything but the eyes. It is different from the Arabic turban because they don't cover their mouth.

water. Through a series of gestures, he asks Kit to stand up inside the bucket. The camera tilts from bottom to top to follow the movement of Belqassim's hands as he undresses Kit and reveals her body (photogram 48). In photogram (50), spectators may recognize the Orientalist inspiration of the director's shot from *Slave Merchant* by Fabio Fabi. In the painting, Fabi's model is undressed by her master to be sold into slavery. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Kit is not a slave but she is alone in the desert. When she meets Belqassim, she becomes dependent on him to protect her in the foreign land. As a result, he is responsible for her safety. Thus, he decides to lock her up in a room in order to protect her from his other three wives. Although the context of Kit's imprisonment and the sale of Fabi's slave are different, they both fulfill their masters desire in order to survive. Therefore, Kit takes the same position as Belqasim stands behind Kit to mimic the slave merchant hiding behind the robe of his slave. Therefore, Bertolucci is possibly aware of the history of Orientalism since he is careful to disguise his Occidental female character within a coherent Oriental setting.



Photogram (51): 01:22:09  
*The English Patient*



Photogram (52): 01:22:31  
*The English Patient*



John Frederick Lewis  
*The Siesta (1876)*



Photogram (53): 01:22:37  
*The English Patient*

In *The English Patient*, Minghella follows the example of Orientalist artists when he presents his female protagonist on screen as an ideal erotic woman. Throughout the movie, Katherine is able to hide her relationship with Almásy from her husband until her second anniversary. For this occasion, Geoffrey plans to surprise his wife in their hotel room, but Katherine leaves to join Almásy before he arrives (photogram 51). Thus, the camera zooms in on the anxious face of the desperate husband, who did not suspect anything (photogram 52). Then, it features an establishing shot of Katherine lying in Almásy's bed (photogram 53). The way Minghella frames Katherine in this shot highlights her erotic appeal. The design of the room suggests the presence of a native woman, but Minghella reveals Katherine in her place. However, the director hides her face to feature a coherent Orientalist painting. During this artistic movement, the Oriental woman had been viewed as an object of desire and a status symbol for men. In *The English Patient*, this erotic side of the Harem during this scene becomes more evident through the light reflected onto Katherine's body. In addition to his female subject, Minghella's respect for Islamic architecture could be reminiscent of *The Siesta* by John Frederick Lewis<sup>80</sup>. In this painting, the artist allows his female character to enjoy the sun while she sleeps inside. Similarly, Minghella chooses a room surrounded by Mashrabiya<sup>81</sup>. These traditional windows preserve Katherine's privacy while she enjoys the sun. In *The Siesta*, the green curtain reinforces the intimacy of the model's body and highlights her curves covered by a dress of the same color. Similarly, Minghella films Katherine lying under a white cover with white curtains above her. In order to accentuate the romantic atmosphere between the two lovers, the director focuses on matching the colors of her silhouette with her surroundings. In the painting, John Frederick Lewis also places several decorative items to embellish his female character's posture. The flowers' vases and the plate of fruits are clearly visible without compromising the spectators' view of his model. In the same way, Minghella uses coherent earthy tones to color each item in the frame. He features furniture made of embossed board and a Kilim<sup>82</sup> covering the floor.

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<sup>80</sup> John Frederick Lewis (1805-1876) is considered one of the most important Victorian artists to visit the Middle East. In 1840-1 Lewis travelled, via Italy, Greece and Turkey, to Cairo, where he remained for the next ten years. Lewis made nearly six hundred watercolors and drawings throughout the decade. (<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/john-frederick-lewis>)

<sup>81</sup> Mashrabiya are wooden walls with openable windows. They provide shade and protection from the hot summer sun, while allowing the cool air to flow through.

<sup>82</sup> Kilim, a word of Turkish origin, denotes a pileless textile of many uses produced by one of several flatweaving techniques that have a common or closely related heritage and are practiced in the geographical area that includes parts of the Ottoman Empire for example North Africa. (<https://www.kilim.com/kilim-wiki/whatskilim>)



In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci expands the tradition of Orientalist artists who had represented life in the desert through exotic paintings and photographs. Similarly to the traditional postcards by Lehnert & Landrock<sup>83</sup>, the director presents Berber women to a Western audience to admire them as desirable objects.



Photograph (1): *Portrait en Tunisie Orientale*



Photograph (2): *Deux belles études de nus*

Photographs by Lehnert & Landrock



Photogram (54): 00:20:39

*The Sheltering Sky*

In order to present his adaptation of *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci focuses on the artistic movements that introduced the Orient to the rest of the world. Because of the way it was displayed in paintings, the Orient became known for its exotic appeal. In fact, as Said

<sup>83</sup> These European photographers settled in Tunis in 1905. They specialized in orientalist clichés. Their work was appreciated for their perfectly balanced composition and their absolute mastery of framing and lighting effects. <https://www.auction.fr/fr/lot/lehnert-et-landrock-5412003#.XMbFjOgzaUk>

explains “*Napoleon had been attracted to the Orient since his adolescence*” because of his “*youthful manuscripts including Marigny’s Histoire des Arabes*” (Said, p80). In addition to travel narratives, paintings allowed Westerners to travel through time to experience what they believed was an exotic, foreign place. These artists relied on stereotypes to attract the maximum number of admirers. Therefore, adventurers visited these places in order to experience the wonders of native Orientalist life. During their trips, they exchanged many letters with their families and friends to share their discoveries. As a result, the demand for postcards increased significantly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her interview with RFI<sup>84</sup> radio, Safia Belmenouar<sup>85</sup> discusses her exhibition entitled “*Bons baisers des colonies*” in which she traces the history of Orientalism through postcards in French colonies. In response to a question from Sébastien Jédor<sup>86</sup>, about “propaganda”, she explains that these postcards support the imaginative colonial narrative. She states:

“Elles servaient de propagande et sont le support de l’imaginaire colonial. C’est-à-dire que la société française de l’époque y projette ses propres fantasmes, ses propres stéréotypes qui sont donc différents selon les aires géographiques.” (RFI online on 08/08/2014<sup>87</sup>)

In addition to writers and painters, many European photographers specialized in capturing the deserted landscapes and the native Harem. Photographs were circulated around the world featuring attractive native women in the nude. These images made native models the most popular characters in travel catalogs and postcards. In a similar way, Bertolucci’s characters mimic the details and gestures of former Oriental models to validate his moving pictures. In particular, Maghnia portrays a native Berber and acknowledges the work of previous photographers in photogram (54). The director films her in the same way as previous Occidental artists had posed their models and framed their subjects. Therefore, *The Sheltering Sky* shares these cultural elements with former Orientalist artworks.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, the American tourists arrive for the first time in Algeria. After they settle in “Le Grand Hôtel” in Oran, Port and Kit end up blaming each other over who invited Tunner. After the fight, Kit refuses to join Port for a walk through the city despite his

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<sup>84</sup> RFI refers to *Radio France internationale*.

<sup>85</sup> Safia Belmenouar trained as a historian. Her interest in colonial photography led her to highlight the history of specific countries – Algeria, Cuba – through their iconographic representations. She is the author of *Bons baisers des colonies* (2007). (<https://rencontres-arles-photo.tv/en/artiste/belmenouar-safia/>)

<sup>86</sup> A radio presenter for RFI radio.

<sup>87</sup> <http://www.rfi.fr/culture/20140808-exposition-bons-baisers-colonies-vous-livre-cartes-postales-coloniales>

insistence. Thus, her husband gets angry and leaves the hotel. When Port walks outside, he meets a beggar who introduces him to a Berber prostitute called Maghnia. Port pays in advance for his time with her and accepts her offer of tea. In this particular scene, the film expresses some of the same themes as Orientalist artwork. In photogram (54), Maghnia's breasts are partially exposed. The part covered by her melia<sup>88</sup> helps to prove that she is in Northwest Africa. Thus, Maghnia is undressed in a similar way to the models in photographs (1) and (2) by Lehnert and Landrock. These artists were most focused on capturing the nude Berber figures, the life on the Arab streets, and the space in the Sahara. This transference of Occidental stereotypes into the Oriental culture is what most clearly defines Orientalist Art. In the above images, the hat and the golden jewelry around Maghnia's neck confirm her origins. Her big loop earrings also show that Bertolucci understands the importance of traditional accessories in Berber style. Therefore, the camera is focused on Maghnia's face in order to accentuate her beauty and to display the cultural tattoo that identifies all Berber people.

*The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* raise several interesting questions about Orientalist art and how Occidentals perceived life in the foreign desert space. When the films' photograms are compared to other Orientalist works of art, certain similarities and differences appear. For this reason, my analysis includes many examples of how Bertolucci and Minghella's works are connected to the past. The study of space and the representation of characters are useful to determine whether they succeed in portraying the Saharan space and its culture. Moreover, the way in which the female body is captured is reminiscent of previous artists' understanding of gender roles in the Orient. For these reasons, the third section will examine the way both movies address the topic of male gaze and its interconnection with native and foreign women in the desert.

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<sup>88</sup> Melia is a traditional dress of Berber women in Northwest Africa.



Photogram (55): 00:20:53



Photogram (56): 00:22:02



Photogram (57): 00:23:30



Photogram (58): 00:23:30

*The Sheltering Sky*

For centuries, Occidental artists had sculpted Oriental female forms in statues, painted their surroundings on canvas, and photographed them in the nude for travel books and postcards. Once their artwork was transported to Europe, admirers could share an Orientalist vision of the desert and its inhabitants. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, directors gathered these Orientalist works in a series of moving pictures to promote the exotic mysteries of the Orient. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci finds inspiration for Maghnia's role from the Orientalist art of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By accepting her role as a Berber prostitute, Maghnia becomes the object of Port's desire (photograms 55 and 58). This example allows Port to play the role of an observer of art as he focuses his voyeuristic gaze on Maghnia's body. Because of this particular framing choice, spectators are able to project themselves into the scene through Port's gaze. Thus, the audience can identify with characters who take their place on screen according to the director's vision of the Orient. Bertolucci adopts an Orientalist perspective in order to capture Maghnia on camera. Thus, her character embodies the same characteristics as Scheherazade, a fictional character from the 5<sup>th</sup> century Arab literature. In her article "Re-Presenting the Orient: A New Instructional Approach", Mildred Mortimer also refers to the importance of this character. She writes:



“Scheherazade has long been an important symbol of storytelling, the frame narrative of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, fascinating readers and listeners in the Orient and the Western world with the unique relationship between sexual and narrative desire.” (Mortimer, p12)

In *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, the Sultan marries many girls and kills them the day after the wedding in order to avenge the adultery of his first wife. Nevertheless, Scheherazade is the unique woman who survives the Sultan’s attempt to kill her. In the introduction of her book *Death Comes to the Maiden: Sex and Execution 1431-1933*, Camille Naish<sup>89</sup> introduces the adventures of Scheherazade with the Sultan as an example of “*the irrational cruelty of men, or the impotent and inferior state of women in classical Araby*” (Naish, P3). Later, the author adds that thanks to her intelligent way of telling stories, Scheherazade wins the Sultan’s affection and puts an end to his indignation against women. At the beginning, readers are introduced to a weak woman who is at the mercy of a powerful man. For months, she continues to link different stories together in order to keep the Sultan interested, and to discourage him from killing her. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Maghnia incorporates the elements of Scheherazade’s character to seduce Port. Thus, she mixes her seductive power with her stories in order to manipulate his mind and to have control over him. At the beginning of the movie, Port joins Maghnia in her tent. As she undresses, he yields easily to her temptation and kisses her without thinking (photogram 55). The camera shot then fades to feature a medium close up of two Berber women sitting outside (photogram 56). His camera choice allows spectators to imagine what is happening in Maghnia’s place. Later, the director rejoins Port, in bed with the prostitute. While she tells him a story, she takes the opportunity to steal his wallet and to hide it underneath the pillow at the edge of the bed (photogram 57). When Port realizes this, he discreetly reaches for it. He kisses her then stands up to reveal his wallet.

Although Maghnia uses Scheherazade’s “feminine wiles” <sup>90</sup>to distract Port, he does not fall into her trap. In this particular scene, his focused gaze allows him to notice Maghnia’s intention to rob him. In her 1975 essay, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, Laura

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<sup>89</sup> Camille Naish obtained her PHD in French literature from Madison University which qualified her to teach at Harvard University. In 1991, the author published her book *Death Comes to the Maiden* to discuss feminist issues. (<https://www.lautrelivre.fr/p/camille-naish/>)

<sup>90</sup> This term is used by Camille Naish when describing *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. The author writes, “this particular story is often referred to disparagingly as a paradigm for feminine wiles” (Naish, P3).

Mulvey<sup>91</sup> analyzed Hitchcock's films through Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan<sup>92</sup>'s theory of the gaze. She recognizes Freud as the first to develop the psychological theory of "scopophilia".

Many film theorists had adapted Freud's ideas to analyze man's desire. Mulvey accentuated all of these theories and focused more on how movie directors choose to frame their female characters on screen. In her article, she claims that "*Freud's particular examples center around the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and the forbidden*" (Mulvey, p59). She adopts Freud's term of scopophilia to describe the male gaze, which refers to the pleasure in looking. She also focuses on "the *traditional exhibitionist role*" dedicated to female characters in movies. She explains how "*women are simultaneously looked at and displays, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact [...]*" (Mulvey, p62). Mulvey's theory can be applied to *The Sheltering Sky* because of the way the director artistically frames his characters in an Oriental setting. In fact, in photogram (55), Maghnia understands her position and uses all her means to become the object of the man's desire. Consequently, Port is gradually seduced by her, and falls to his knees in admiration as she gets undressed. Bertolucci's framing of Port's scopophilic gaze adds value to his character. In photogram (58), the shot over Port's shoulder does not reveal his face, whereas the image of Maghnia is blurred in the background. Bertolucci's editing accentuates the spectator's voyeuristic desire, and this allows them to imagine what Port is experiencing inside the tent. In his research, Christian Metz<sup>93</sup> also applied Freud's theory to the analysis of cinema. He believes that movies have become as important as any other art form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and focuses on the voyeuristic aspect that produces pleasure for its spectators. Therefore, Port's position in this particular scene is meant to welcome spectators into his experience with Maghnia. Through Port's gaze, spectators of *The Sheltering Sky* are able to gratify their physical needs. As a result, they can experience the Occidental perception of the Oriental female who has long been portrayed as an object of desire. Nevertheless,

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<sup>91</sup> Laura Mulvey was born in Oxford on 15 August 1941. Much of her early critical work investigated questions of spectatorial identification and its relationship to the male gaze, and her writings, particularly the 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, helped establish feminist film theory as a legitimate field of study. (<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/566978/index.html>)

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst who gained an international reputation as an original interpreter of Sigmund Freud's work. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>93</sup> Christian Metz (1931-1993) was a French film theorist. Metz introduced film studies to both structuralism and psychoanalysis and in the process helped initiate the establishment of film theory. Instead of asking what films mean, Metz set out to discover how they make meaning, and in doing so revolutionized the way film was written and thought about in the academy. (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100154425>)

through Bertolucci's camera angle, audiences join the faceless character without feeling guilty for staring at a forbidden object (photogram 58).



Photogram (59): 00:22:19



Photogram (60): 00:22:21



Photogram (61): 00:22:28



Photogram (62): 00:22:31



Photogram (63): 00:22:33



*The Sheltering Sky*

Although Lacan does not speak directly about film theories, Mulvey have applied his ideas about voyeurism to explain its relationship with the cinematic world. In his article, “Visual Drive and Cinematic Narrative”, Manlove<sup>94</sup> states that “*Lacan's theory explains [...]*

<sup>94</sup> Clifford Manlove is Professor in the English department at Pennsylvania State University.  
(<https://greaterallegheny.psu.edu/person/clifford-manlove>)

*the power of the eye, the idea of spectatorship, and the visual nature of agency*” (Manlove, p84). In the context of voyeurism, the philosopher introduces the concept of sexual espionage to define the gaze. Therefore, Freud’s ideas about voyeurism lead to another element that can be described as sexual espionage in cinema. According to Lacan, spectators go to the movies in order to watch the fantasies of the world coming true. Cinema allows them to freely embody any character appearing on screen in order to identify similarities with human behavior. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci’s montage incorporates Lacan’s theory in photogram (59-63). In this particular scene, spectators rejoin Tunner as he spies on Kit and Port in Oran’s “Grand Hôtel”. However, instead of sharing one bed, the voyeur discovers that the couple stays in connecting rooms and lies in separate beds. Above each of their doors, the interior of the place is visible through stained glass windows. After they fight, Port leaves Kit to spend the night alone. In photogram (59), Tunner climbs the wall to spy on her while she sleeps. However, when he checks the second window, he discovers that Port is absent (photogram 62). Tunner voyeuristically commits sexual espionage, but he fails to share an intimate moment with Kit and Port. In order to fulfill his character’s desire, Bertolucci juxtaposes the scopophilic intention with a shot seen through a V-shaped opening formed by the poles of Maghnia’s tent (photogram 63). The director presents the scene to the spectators through the blurry images of Port and Maghnia in bed together. Although Tunner hopelessly observes them through the stained glass windows, spectators are able to see the couple through Bertolucci’s use of a frame within the frame. Through Bertolucci’s blurry lens, audiences experience Tunner’s Occidental view of the Orient. Moreover, they share Tunner’s scopophilic desire through his act of sexual espionage.

Following Freud’s psychoanalysis, Bertolucci films Tunner like a child who holds the closet door open to see what is happening outside with the utmost emotion. Although the character is standing in a different place, he is able to see Port and Maghnia through Bertolucci’s camera. Therefore, the director allows his character to keep an eye on Kit while maintaining his gaze on the other couple. The interpretation of this particular scene in *The Sheltering Sky* may go even further with Laura Mulvey's theory.

	
<p><u>Alexandros of Antioch</u>  <i>Venus De Milo</i>  (Dated in between 130 and 100 BC)</p>	<p>Photogram (64): 0:20:21  <i>The Sheltering Sky</i></p>

Mulvey's work with psychoanalytical ideas received much praise from Feminist film critics, and was also heavily criticized by other film theorists. She reported that filmmakers assumed that a majority of the audience would be exclusively male in popular films. Therefore, they decided to objectify women for erotic purposes on screen. Consequently, they show female characters lacking strength while male characters are expected to drive the action of the film. Laura Mulvey's theory can also explain other elements of Bertolucci's framing of the tent scene. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Maghnia appears on screen exclusively to look attractive and to please males. The Berber woman offers a cup of tea in order to establish contact with her client and to make him comfortable (photogram 64). As she stands up to take off her traditional dress, she exposes her upper torso but maintains the draped lower legs as *Venus De Milo*. The director transforms Port's gaze from a fictive possibility into a tangible reality. This allows Port access to the Berber body who takes the place of Venus on Bertolucci's screen. Port takes pleasure in looking at Maghnia as he fantasizes about being with her. The camera's light becomes a source of seduction as she reveals more of herself. While Port is still captivated by her charming pose, she asks him to touch her skin. Thus, he bends down and follows her instructions, as if his hands were being guided by his deep sexual desire. As a result, the Saharan tea takes the place of the American Whiskey and Maghnia takes control leading him into bed. Throughout the narrative, the male character fixes his eyes upon Maghnia. Although Port is married to Kit, the reality of a nude Berber woman in front of him captures all of his attention. Even with her legs covered, he struggles to resist her seductive manners. Maghnia neglects his discomfort and she continues to hypnotize him until he obeys



her without protest. By playing the role of Scheherazade, the charming storyteller, Maghnia recognizes her position and directs Port like a character lacking power to stop her. The situation threatens Port's ability to control the object of his desire. Port's scopophilic gaze hypnotizes him until he is able to recognize his mistake. Thus, he regains power and retreats as soon as he realizes her trap.



Photogram (65): 01:22:40



Photogram (66): 01:23:01



Photogram (67): 1:23:17



Photogram (68): 01:23:21

*The English Patient*

According to Laura Mulvey, the presence of female characters usually affects the narrative progress, whereas males actively drive the action forwards. She argues that “*the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet [she] tends to [...] freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation*” (Mulvey, p62). In this way, Mulvey criticizes directors who frame passive female characters as a source of inspiration for dominant males. Thus, in *The English Patient*, the way Minghella portrays Katherine as an object of desire can be explained through Mulvey's theory regarding scopophilia. Throughout the scene in the Count's room, Katherine takes the time to rest on his bed while he actively moves around. Therefore, his scopophilic gaze is mandatory to push the narrative forward and to fulfill the stereotypical roles examined in Mulvey's criticism. In

photogram (65), she occupies the center of the frame when lying in her lover's bed. While he watches her sleep, Almásy plays his favorite song by Marta Sebestyen to wake her up. In order to confirm Katherine's position on screen, Minghella focuses on Almásy's view of the female character through a series of point of view shots (photograms 66 and 67). Later, the director presents her through an over the shoulder shot while Almásy maintains his gaze on her body (photogram 68). Once Katherine wakes up, Almásy provides her with an English version of the traditional Hungarian song. Instead of faithfully translating the lyrics, Almásy invents another story and uses the song's rhythm to describe his adventures with Katherine. As long as Almásy fixes his gaze on Katherine's body, he is inspired to reveal the truth about his feelings for her. Once Katherine realizes his intention, she beats him on his head to make him stop his lies. Her reaction compromises the scene but her beauty inspires Almásy to continue translating the song lyrics incorrectly.

In *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, spectators are able to notice similarities between the directors' shots and previous artistic representations of the Orient. Both films can be interpreted through a study of the Orientalist movement in art. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said analyzes the political legacy of these ideas according to their place and role in social history.

## **The political legacy of Orientalist art in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient***

The history of North African civilizations is full of mysteries and dangers because of the harsh climate and the lack of water. Thus, all stories taking place in that region are affected by the vast desert landscape. *The Sheltering Sky* is set in Algeria while *The English Patient* features a drama set in Egypt. These specific countries have historically been a battle ground for human societies fighting over the land because of its rich material resources. Consequently, people of the Sahara have encountered a number of different colonial rulers throughout its history. Although the French and the British empires came into contact with them, the interaction between natives and foreigners is not always evident. Some natives are easily influenced by foreign cultures, whereas others resist in order to preserve their heritage. According to Edward Said, this difference also occurs among the Westerners who either choose to integrate fully into the Oriental culture or to impose their imperialistic values onto a world they fail to understand. Because the resulting decisions are generally based upon political and social factors, Edward Said argues:

“The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire. If this definition of Orientalism seems more political than not, that is simply because I think Orientalism was itself a product of certain political forces and activities. Orientalism is a school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples, and localities.” (Said, p.202-203)

Nonetheless, those who refuse to interact with natives must have a minimum of historical and geographical knowledge to survive in the Saharan desert. However, when many Westerners ignore some facts about Oriental culture, they do not hesitate to invent their own version of reality. Thus, this reinterpretation of Oriental culture led Edward Said to focus on the political aspects of Orientalism. Within his analysis, he focuses on the concept of “imaginative geography” in order to explain how the perception of space can be invented through the imagination of Orientalist writers. Therefore, the Orient can be an ideal setting for any story but its representation varies according to how each artist portrays the richness of its culture. Depending on the choices made by the artist, the final presentation demonstrates a specific understanding of either a Western fantasy or an Eastern reality.



In this final chapter, I will examine how the political legacy of Orientalism informs the narratives of *The English Patient* and *The Sheltering Sky*. Depending on the perspective of the camera and the editing techniques used by directors, I will also analyze how these adaptations present the desert space and expose the dynamic relations between Westerners and natives, regardless of cultural differences and geographical borders.

In the first part, I will examine how Bertolucci's cinematographic choices encourage his spectators to understand his particular narrative. In the second part, I will analyze the means used by Minghella in order to influence the audience and to encourage them to support the presence of Western characters in the desert. In the third and last part, I will explain how the political dimensions featured in *The English Patient* depend on the context of war in a subjective way.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said challenges the previous conceptions made about the Orient and questions the sense of this particular place. When defining his concept of imaginative geography, the author explains how the Orient is "*the stage on which the whole East is confined*" (Said, p63). In this way, orientalism becomes a fictional representation of North African history which can be manipulated by foreign cultures. The desert space in particular is used to invent a new reality about native people and their homeland.

According to Edward Said, the "Orientalist stage" attracts many Westerners who would like to learn about its history (Said, p67). Thus, as soon as they arrive in this foreign environment, colonists are able to blend the new environment with what they already consider to be familiar. Based on the representation of the foreign space, Westerners expect to appropriate the strange new world as their own. In this regard, Edward Said writes:

"The geographical boundaries accompany the social, ethnic, and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is "out there", beyond one's territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own." (Said, p54)

According to Said, geography represents more than simple territorial borders between neighboring countries. Thus, he examines the need throughout history for Orientalist colonization of North Africa. Although the author refuses to support the idea of Occidental superiority, he admits that “*there can be no Orientalism without, on the one hand, the Orientalists, the other, the Orient.*” (Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered”, p3) The portrayal of Western characters in *The Sheltering Sky* allows them to play the role of American Orientalist explorers in French Algeria. However, throughout his movie adaptation, instead of allowing her to play the role of an Orientalist, Bertolucci presents Kit as an Oriental. Because of this radical change, Kit displays the complex personality of someone searching for answers while ignoring the aim of her discoveries. Along her journey, Kit seems to stare into the emptiness of the horizon waiting for something in particular. Spectators wonder if she will ever find it. Consequently, they may question the aim of her presence in the Orient. Since she recognizes nothing, she leaves the spectators searching for more of an explanation than she can provide. The presence of Kit among the Touaregs’ caravan reinforces the aspects of imaginative geography in *The Sheltering Sky*. Even though Kit is far from her country, she integrates easily into the unfamiliar space. The female protagonist associates herself with different people without considering the geographical boundaries or cultural differences. Thus, all of the peculiarities of her character persist, allowing the director to conceal her mysterious presence in a North African country. Although Kit knows little about what is “out there”, she does not worry about the new environment where she does not really belong. Because of her ambiguous personality, she is able to adapt into the unknown. Thus, she enjoys a new way of life and welcomes all the particularities of the Saharan space. In her mind, she expects that a new life waits for her in this new mysterious space.



Photogram (69): 01:41:09



Photogram (70): 1:41:46

*The Sheltering Sky*

In her article “Devenir et opacité dans *Un thé au Sahara*<sup>95</sup>”, Mariniello writes that: “[Kit and Port] occupy the two extremes of the frame and between them the desert extends, one’s gestures suggest resistance to this territory where nothing is familiar, the other’s gestures suggest a willingness and a desire to integrate into this world<sup>96</sup>.” (Mariniello, p8)

Through his adaptation of Bowles’ fiction, Bertolucci crowds the unfamiliar space of the desert with Western characters. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port and Kit travel to North Africa to solve their personal problems, but both fail in the end. When Port dies, Kit does not bury his corpse, rather she abandons it without looking back (photogram 69). Thus, she abandons her former principles and boycotts the religious rules as a response to the new cultural conditions she encounters. Her character dissolves into the Sahara with the hope of finding an ideal world. After leaving her civilized country, Kit plunges into the depths of a lonely depression. Thus, she ends up alone in a deserted space where time seems infinite. Because of her grief, Kit decides to dig her own grave in the desert. These events suggest that Kit’s life will have a tragic ending. However, contrary to all expectations, Bertolucci provides his character with a new hope for her life in the desert. In photogram (70), she sits desperately alone at the side of a dry riverbed to follow the first traveler she encounters. A few moments later, Kit joins a caravan after she catches the attention of the master, Belqassim. Through a variety of sounds and a succession of short scenes, Bertolucci showcases the Touaregs travelling day and night across the Saharan dunes. As time passes, Kit enjoys her adventure and gets closer to Belqassim and his servants. Bertolucci plays joyful songs to heighten Kit’s spirits and to please the Touaregs. This feeling of happiness is reflected through the choice of music and the director’s subjective framing.

Through Bertolucci’s representation of the Saharan space, spectators are able to suspend time and to enjoy the film. The audiences experience a new temporal feeling, distinct from what characters are supposed to feel. In this regard, it is possible to apply Badiou<sup>97</sup>’s theory about the political perspective of such scenes. In his article “Cinema as democratic

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<sup>95</sup> The French version of Bertolucci’s film is entitled *Un thé au Sahara*.

<sup>96</sup> I translated the original French quotation into English. The author writes: “Kit et Port occupent les deux extrêmes du cadre et entre eux s’étend le désert, les gestes de l’une suggèrent la résistance à ce territoire qui n’a rien de familier, les gestes de l’autre suggèrent l’ouverture et l’envie de fusion avec ce monde.”

<sup>97</sup> Alain Badiou (1937) is a French philosopher and professor of philosophy at The European Graduate School.

emblem<sup>98</sup>”, the French theorist applies Deleuze<sup>99</sup>’s cinematic theory to explain how films can be classified as mass art. He writes:

“Cinema is mass art because it transforms time into perception [...] More precisely, it transforms “the intimate sense of time” into representation. It is this representative gap which destines cinema to the immense audience of those who desire to suspend time in space in order to push fate aside”. (Badiou, translated by Ling and Mondon)



Photogram (71): 1:49:13



Photogram (72): 1:50:10

*The Sheltering Sky*

In *The Sheltering Sky*, spectators may wonder what will happen to Kit after Port’s death. Although they expected her to vanish into the Saharan space, the audiences choose to suspend their disbelief in order to experience the end of the character’s journey. Bertolucci features Kit riding a camel safely across the Algerian border with Niger. Through his editing, the director transports his spectators into a new land in order to experience a new culture. On screen, the director focuses on the natural elements featured across the North African landscape in order to manage time and space on screen. In photogram (72), the director makes sure that every character takes their specific place in the desert. Kit sits in her jahfa<sup>100</sup> and offers her hat and sunglasses to the two young servants. Meanwhile, Belqassim guides the camel with the rope, then turns back to identify the source of their joy. Through a medium long shot, Bertolucci frames the young servant sharing his excitement with all members of the caravan, even if they are still far behind. The director relies on the traditional Touaregs’

<sup>98</sup> The Original title in French is “Du Cinéma comme emblème démocratique”, published in *Critique*, p692-693.

<sup>99</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1925- 1995) was a French writer and antirationalist philosopher. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

<sup>100</sup> Jahfa (Arabic word) is a kind of small tent attached to the back of the camel. It was used by the desert nomads of North Africa to avoid sunburn while travelling long distances. Today, it remains part of traditional marriage ceremonies in Southern Tunisia in order to transport the bride to her new home. (<https://www.noonpost.org/content/11635>)

lifestyle to transport his female protagonist to frame the Sahara in a perfect shot. His camera crosses the desert following the sinusoidal path of the sandy Saharan dunes. This allows him to minimize the great distances between the characters on screen, while highlighting time as an illusion. Bertolucci is able to capture the entire caravan in a single image (photogram 71). In doing so, he provides a relaxed atmosphere for his spectators to imagine the space in the middle of Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, the director focuses on the unity between members of the caravan so that spectators can follow as the characters experience the harsh desert climate together. In photogram (72), each character maintains his gaze on someone else; Belqassim looks at his servants while they stare at Kit. The continuity of these elements appearing within the frame represents the traditional structure of Oriental cultures.

The space between the characters on screen allows spectators to notice the triangular structure of Bertolucci's image. The base is formed by a group of Touaregs holding Kit at the top. Their shape helps Kit to hold her position at the top of a pyramid on screen. As the characters move forward together, they maintain their positions in order to keep a solid structure. While the caravan crosses the desert sands, spectators see two images superimposed upon each other, creating one complete establishing shot. In the foreground, Bertolucci frames the blue Saharan sky at the top of the screen, while the grains of sand occupy the bottom. The separation is clearly visible through white clouds. This color contrast enhances the landscape and emphasizes its importance in pushing the Orientalist narrative forward. Because the action takes place in the North African desert, the Touaregs and their camels occupy a large portion of the screen. Their dark silhouettes showcase their unity and prove their familiarity with this environment. Kit, who is supposed to play the role of the lost foreigner, is protected by natives who belong in the desert. The further the caravan travels, the more she is able to suspend time. Thus, Bertolucci allows his Western character to conquer fate by crossing the Saharan borders with the native African population. Regardless of what the future holds, Kit is able to avoid her tragic ending. By crossing the geographical limits, she imagines a better future beyond the fictional border set by human consciousness.

The end of *The Sheltering Sky* is a game of chance that the director plays with the destiny of all his characters. After her loss, spectators expected Kit to return to New York with Tunner. However, she acts against her domestic interest and imagines a better future for herself in the foreign land without him. Despite her attempts, her adventure with Belqassim in Niger ends tragically.





Photogram (73): 2:12:19



Photogram (74): 2:13:31



Photogram (75): 2:13:44



Photogram (76): 2:13:56



Photogram(77) 2 :14 :05



Photogram (78) 2 :14 :14



Photogram (79) 2:14:21



Photogram (80) 2:14:52

*The Sheltering Sky*

Tunner spends months looking for Kit while she flees deep into the Sahara. Finally, the US Embassy arranges for her transport to Oran to join Tunner. Once she arrives, Kit refuses to get out of the car. The woman who works for the American Embassy asks her to stay there until her friend meets her (photogram 73). Later, Tunner gets out of the Grand Hotel and runs towards Kit's taxi but finds it empty (photogram 74). The scene ends with a close up of his anxious face looking everywhere for Kit. In the last scene of the movie, Kit returns to the coffee shop where she sat with Port and Tunner at their arrival. She seems to recognize the place. After an establishing shot features her reading the sign "CINE ALCAZAR", the camera pans to the right then it zooms in as she crosses the road (photograms 75 and 76). Kit looks through a window before she enters the coffee shop (photogram 77). She hears Charles Trenet's song playing again over the noise of a boy shouting to sell newspapers (photogram 78). Kit looks to the left, then to the right, and again to the left as she begins to smile (photogram 79). She is searching for the story teller who was standing in the same place at the beginning of the movie. When he asks whether she is lost, she is happy to respond "yes". Bernardo Bertolucci ends his movie with an extreme close up of this character's face (photogram 80). When spectators hear Paul Bowles' voice over, they realize that the author of the book is a character in the movie. This intertextual reference encourages spectators to reconsider everything they have seen in Bertolucci's adaptation of *The Sheltering Sky*. Through his voice over at the end, Bowles is able to reveal the most important aspect of his novel dealing with fate and human existence. He says:

"Because we don't know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that is so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more, perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless." (Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*)

The director chooses to end his movie with a monologue explaining details that seem obvious to all spectators. According to Bowles, the meaning of events in our daily lives may relate to simple facts of human existence. Thus, everyone should focus more attention on the details of life in order to find its deeper meaning. The director is very careful to provide the

necessary details to clarify the hidden meanings of his film. In order to accomplish this, Bertolucci focuses on issues of time and fate. He encourages viewers to wonder about the personalities of characters and their behaviors in a foreign land. Therefore, the director uses his camera to influence the spectators' impressions of the desert. In his movie adaptation, Bertolucci becomes the master of his characters' destiny. In this regard, geographical limits become an insignificant obstacle that does not prevent foreigners from deepening their understanding of another world. Through her stories, Scheherazade had manipulated death and saved her own life. No one would have heard of Scheherazade if the Sultan had killed her. Similarly, Kit follows the Orientalist narratives and manipulates geographical limits in order to suspend time. Her life seems to have a new beginning after she loses her husband. Thus, Kit does not return home and continues Port's journey to make his existence real. Although her husband's life ends, Kit's character is resurrected to experience a new life in the world where there are no borders.

In *The English Patient*, Minghella introduces the Sahara as an empty place ready to be conquered by foreigners seeking to explore its space. The director uses cars and planes to create tension, while being conscious of the fact that these items are barely used in the desert. Thus, he juxtaposes a traditional version of the desert culture with a more modern one in order to serve his narrative. Through Minghella's editing, spectators accept his frame work. According to Comolli<sup>101</sup>'s analysis of documentary films, the philosopher writes:

«Le cinéma dit documentaire, parce qu'il est infirme et pauvre, se heurte à l'impossible (impossibilité de remonter le temps, de filmer, de reconstituer, de recourir à des comédiens, impossibilité tout simplement d'accéder aux lieux, aux institutions, aux autorisations), et dessine du coup une cartographie actuelle des états du Visible, des contours du Secret. Il y a une éthique à la place du spectateur ». (Comolli, *Corps et cadre : Cinéma, éthique, politique*, p26)


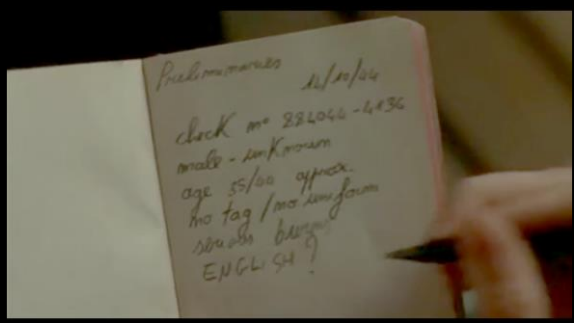


Although Comolli focuses his analysis on documentary films, his thoughts can also be applied to feature films. For example, in *The English Patient*, Minghella's camera guides the audiences across the desert. The director's creative editing commands the admiration of spectators who can readily identify with the characters in the opening scene of the movie. At the beginning of *The English Patient*, a brush begins to paint one of the swimming figures

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<sup>101</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli (1941) is a French writer, editor, and film director.



which will gradually fade into the sand dunes. In this context, “the cave paintings of swimmers in the desert” is a good representation of the hidden treasures that can be found in North Africa. (Maslin, p3) For this reason, Minghella transforms the painted silhouette into the shadow of a plane transporting Almásy and Katherine. Thus, he encourages his audience to welcome the arrival of Western characters into the Sahara in order to freely explore the land. Instead of walking across the desert, Minghella sends his characters swimming above its dunes so that spectators can notice the fascinating desert landscape. Thus, spectators follow the plane’s path and are curiously waiting to find out what will interrupt Minghella’s serene introduction. As the film continues, the director leads his spectators into North Africa by juxtaposing the peaceful rhythm of a Hungarian love song with the swimming of the silhouette. Based on Comolli’s theory, Minghella draws a map for spectators of what he wants them to see on screen. In this way, he captures their attention in order to influence their interpretation.

	
<p>Photogram (81): 00:08:44</p>	<p>Photogram (82): 00:09:06</p>
	
<p>Photogram (83): 00:09 :11</p>	<p>Photogram (84): 00:09:28</p>
<p><i>The English Patient</i></p>	

Minghella introduces his characters through a series of shots sequencing events in between the Sahara and Italy. Through flashbacks, spectators follow the director’s chronology in order to realize that the protagonist in the Sahara is the same patient who is recovering in

Italy. Later, the director features a nurse called Hanna who is caring for wounded soldiers transported by train. Then, a clear cut brings the audience back into the desert where a group of nomads pick up a burned body thrown onto the dunes. The soundtrack stops at the moment Hanna reappears on screen working in an Italian camp. The scene ends with bombing and cries of the wounded soldiers. The next shot showcases a nomad holding several little glass bottles of natural herbal remedies on the screen. Thus, he approaches the injured man as he is placed into a basin. The native treats Almásy's burns and tries to comfort him with some words in Arabic. Then a gradual transition through the patient's eyes transports the audience to hear the waves crashing onto a beach in Italy. The opening scene enables spectators to project themselves in between Minghella's two storylines about Almásy. Thus, he focuses on visual elements that happen to be politically relevant during the 1940's. He describes the chaos in the North African desert during the Second World War. However, Minghella exposes the Western presence and guides his spectators to empathize with his protagonists. The audience learns specifically about the setting of the film when "Italy - October 1944" appears at the bottom of the screen (photogram 81). It appears on the establishing shot of a new camp on an Italian beach. A sequence of shot-reverse shot shows a policeman questioning Almásy about his identity to make sure he is not German (photograms 82 and 83). Meanwhile, Hanna pays no attention to the dialogue and helps the patient take a drink of water (photogram 84).

Minghella succeeds in making natives invisible on screen by focusing all of his attention on the fate of his Western protagonists. As secondary characters, natives are projected on the background in a very particular way. They are only essentially featured as part of the accident scene that leaves Katherine and Almásy in the desert.

Few native characters directly participate in the events of *The English Patient* on screen. Although they saved Almásy's life, spectators may fail to notice the director's negligence towards secondary characters and their surroundings. As the narrative progresses, spectators realize that Katherine does not survive the plane crash. In fact, once Almásy arrives in Italy for medical treatment, he does not accept this reality because he is afraid of losing Katherine again. Thus, he refuses to abandon her memory even in death and he appropriates parts of her life as his own. As a result, he becomes a prisoner of his own imagination, by claiming to live in the place where Katherine spent her childhood before she knew him; a house with a beautiful garden by the sea. In order to overcome his past, the patient avoids

interactions with current situations. His loss of consciousness makes certain characters doubt the injured patient's true identity. Contrary to the others, Hanna becomes so attached to Almásy that she responds to his desire to die. At the end of the movie, she decides to let him join Katherine by injecting a big quantity of morphine into his body. By focusing on the adventures of Western protagonists, spectators remain curious about the circumstances that led Almásy to become the English Patient.

In *The English Patient*, the way that Westerners occupy the cinematic space makes sense, and the beauty of their surroundings helped to make the movie internationally successful. Minghella transports his characters from Europe to Africa in order to explore an empty place where they will be able to maintain their way of life. Thus, the native presence does not contribute to the evolution of the film's events. Spectators may not notice this detail because they are distracted by the Minghella's focus on the love affair Between Katherine and Almásy. Throughout the movie, natives remain in the background whereas European characters occupy the foreground. Contrary to other international movies set during the Second World War, spectators learn very little about the social inequality that native North Africans had to endure at that time. It is true that *The English Patient* primarily focuses on the dramatic romance between Western characters. However, without the war, neither Katherine nor Almásy would be in the desert to fall in love. Thus, the reality of war cannot be ignored in the story.

According to the Jacques Rancière<sup>102</sup>, the audience plays an important role because everything depends on the individual who receives the message. In fact, spectators' understanding is always limited to what they see on screen. The political and a philosophical foundation of a cinematic expression is featured through the director's techniques and editing choices. In this regard, Rancière writes:

« Ces histoires d'espaces et de trajets, de marcheurs et de voyages peuvent nous aider à inverser la perspective, à imaginer non plus les formes d'un art adéquatement mis au service de fins politiques mais des formes politiques réinventées à partir des multiples manières dont les arts du visible inventent des

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<sup>102</sup> Jacques Rancière(1940) is a French philosopher who made important contributions to political philosophy, the philosophy of education, and aesthetics from the late 20th century. ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com))

regards, disposent des corps dans les lieux et leur font transformer les espaces qu'ils parcourent. (Jacques Rancière, *Les Écarts du cinéma*, p136)

Rancière is a French philosopher who continues the traditional Marxist interpretation of art and history by describing cinema and the aesthetics of political history. According to a lecture by Professor Laurent Mellet<sup>103</sup>, Rancière believes that all art must have a political dimension. The fictionalization of art can help the audiences to discover new political ideas that may encourage them to change the world. Even without a particular political cause, art can motivate spectators to take action. *The English Patient* movie can be interpreted like other works of Orientalist art. The director focuses on the drama between his Western protagonists. This editorial choice may indicate a lack of political awareness. Nevertheless, Minghella's framing of the car accident may provide new information about life in the Orient. For this reason, Rancière discusses the theory of reception to explain how a film is perceived by the spectators. In this way, the director's editing choices are valuable to help spectators understand a specific political idea. This can occur subconsciously through an examination of the context of the story. However, any director wants to guarantee that each spectator understands what the film is trying to convey, while following his own narrative and ideas. For this reason, directors are careful to frame certain images and to include particular examples of dialogue. Therefore, Minghella is very meticulous with the aesthetic choices he makes for the structure of *The English Patient*. Even if spectators have different historical backgrounds, the director seeks to guarantee their support for Almásy's treason and Katherine's adultery through emotions and visual elements. Consequently, spectators will barely notice the lack of natives on screen even though the movie is set in their homeland. The few moments when spectators are able to see natives on screen showcase their inferior position in the film. In this way, peoples' vision is transformed into a new interpretation of the oriental world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>103</sup> Laurent Mellet is a Professor of literature and British Cinema in Toulouse at the University Jean Jaurès.



Photogram (85): 00:51:14



Photogram (86): 00:51:22



Photogram (87): 00:51:24



Photogram (88): 00:51:27



Photogram (89): 00:51:55



Photogram (90): 00:51:57



Photogram (91): 00:53 :09



Photogram (92) 00 :53 :33

*The English Patient*

In Minghella's adaptation of *The English Patient*, natives always remain outside of the circle of civilization. After discovering the lost cave, the group of cartographers returns to the city. On the way back, Madox wants Almásy to know that he has a good relationship with the natives sitting on the top of his car. He knocks on the roof to call for his servant and impress Almásy. In photogram (88), the Count is surprised when he sees the native leaning over to catch a biscuit in his mouth. This servant accidentally slips off of the roof into the sand (photogram 90). As a result, Madox turns the car around but fails to avoid an accident as the car falls from the dunes. In photogram (91), Minghella's camera focuses on the injured servants riding in the back of the car. Spectators realize that there was enough space for everyone to sit inside of the vehicle. However, the natives remained outside because they do not enjoy the same social status as their colonial rulers. In this scene, Minghella makes it clear that Madox did not hurt his servant on purpose. Nevertheless, this does not hide the fact that based on their positions on screen, Madox considers himself superior to the native. Minghella reinforces this cliché that all Occidental characters are protected from the weather while the natives are left to endure the harsh desert sun. After the accident, Madox transports the injured man to the hospital and Katherine remains with the rest of the group in the Sahara. Despite Almásy's initial refusal, she insists to spend the night there until Madox returns with a radiator to fix the broken car. In photogram (92), Minghella is careful to include clear visual elements that speak to the emotions of spectators and to keep them immersed in Katherine's story. She decides to go forward into the desert with a vague look on her face. In the background, the four men stare only at her, unable to fix their gazes elsewhere. In this way, Minghella focuses his primary attention on his Western protagonist.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains the problem of the social hierarchy that divides humans according to their origins. He claims that Occidental geographers and historians "existed to prove that Romans and Greeks were superior to other kinds of people". According to the author:

"The Orient was therefore subdivided into realms previously known, visited, conquered, by Herodotus and Alexander as well as their epigones, and those realms not previously known, visited, conquered". (Said, p.58)

The scene in which spectators see natives on the top of cars provide enough information about the lower status that they were awarded by colonizers in the past. For thousands of years, Pharaohs, Carthaginians, and many other civilizations originated in North Africa. Minghella focuses on Herodotus to introduce a love story born in the desert in the shadow of a Roman tragedy. Applying Said's theory, his choice proves that the director is less concerned with the local culture in which his movie is set. Moreover, it demonstrates that the film recognizes the history of Greek civilization in the Orient. In this way, Herodotus and Alexander are the heroes of imperial history. Thus, Minghella relies on their stories to invent his particular version of the Orient without considering the cultural history of the natives. In *The English Patient*, Minghella traces over an empty land to install an Occidental version of history. For this reason, Almásy carries his copy of Herodotus as a sort of travel guide. This book plays a fundamental role in the development of Minghella's adaptation. First, it helps spectators to recognize Almásy's identity despite his burns after the plane accident. Second, a series of close ups on the book allows the director to transition from real time back to Almásy's adventures in the Sahara. Third, it allows Katherine to reach Almásy despite his attempts to avoid falling in love with her.



Photogram (93): 00:25:48



Photogram (94): 00:26:43

*The English Patient*

At the beginning, the communication between Almásy and Katherine is confined to secret looks and smiles from a distance. In photogram (93), the camera pans away from the nomads' camp to showcase the cartographers gathered around a separate fire. The Western characters take turns telling stories in their camp (photogram 94). Katherine notices that Herodotus is Almásy's favorite historian. Thus, she decides to recount the mythological story of Gyges in order to impress the Count. The story is about a queen who kills her husband in order to be with her lover. Katherine's story makes Almásy uncomfortable because he understands the reason she tells this particular chapter. According to the mythological



narrative, Almásy would be the new king while Katherine plays the role of his queen. Therefore, as long as he remains with her, the Saharan space can allow them to enjoy their love affair. The director's choice allows the couple to metaphorically reign over the North African territories. In this case, the presence of Herodotus on-screen refers to Edward Said's ideas about the significance of Greek mythology in the desert. In the context of Minghella's movie, Almásy's copy of Herodotus metaphorically justifies another conquest of Africa. As Said explains, the principle function of all stories in the desert is to visit the land. Nevertheless, the experiences of characters push them to play the role of conquerors in love and war.

Because the director successfully passes over the natives on screen, he proves that the presence of Greek and Roman cultures in the desert is perfectly logical. In order to explain his version of imperialism, Said argues that "*Orientalism concerns a humanistic study that can responsibly address itself in politics and culture*". (Said, p15) In fact, *Histories* of Herodotus plays an important role throughout the narrative of *The English Patient*. It not only symbolizes a story of sentimental betrayal, but also a story of political treason.

In *The English Patient*, Caravaggio<sup>104</sup> is the only character who knows the truth about Hanna's patient. Ondaatje chooses this particular name for his character because it references the Italian painter<sup>105</sup>. In the movie, the character appears to be a stranger in need of Hanna's assistance. In order to steal morphine to treat his injuries, he finds an excuse to join the nurse in the Monastery. As the narrative progresses, spectators discover that his true purpose is to expose the truth about the Count and to shed light on Almásy's real identity. In fact, the Canadian soldier crosses the Mediterranean looking for Almásy to avenge being tortured during the war for his act of treason. From the beginning, Caravaggio suspects that Hanna's patient was the man he is looking for. Thus, he finds a way to remain in the monastery until he confirms his doubts. At that moment, he explains to the English patient that he has been looking for those responsible for his misfortune for years. However, before killing him, Caravaggio wants to know why Almásy betrayed his country. Up to that point, the patient does not seem to feel any guilt. However, he decides to reveal the truth as soon as Caravaggio explains that Madox committed suicide because he never expected his friend Almásy to be a

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<sup>104</sup> Caravaggio was blamed for the Count's act of treason in the Orient.

<sup>105</sup> Michelangelo Caravaggio was an Italian painter during the renaissance. His paintings focus on the dichotomy between light and darkness to distinguish between the physical and emotional aspect of art.

spy. In *The English Patient*, Almásy commits treason by giving British topographies to the Nazi enemy in order to save Katherine's life. Certainly, spectators may choose to agree or disagree with his actions. Once they watch *The English Patient*, they witness a new fictional representation of war time. Minghella seeks not only to influence spectators' opinion but also pushes them to perceive the reality of war differently.



Photogram (95): 02:03:49



Photogram (96): 02:04:26



Photogram (97): 02:05:46



Photogram (98): 02:08:27



Photogram (99): 02:14:36



Photogram (100): 02:16:56

*The English Patient*

Minghella's camera presents Almásy in very intimate ways in order to justify his act of treason. In fact, Almásy is presented as a hero at the end of the movie. Through a series of flashbacks, Minghella's camera transports the English patient back into the desert. In

photogram (95), spectators recognize Geoffrey's plane heading towards Almásy from a distance while he gathers his tools. Fearing for his life, Almásy jumps behind a rock as the plane crashes into the Saharan dunes. In photogram (96), Almásy realizes that Katherine is seriously injured and that Geoffrey lies dead. Almásy tries to help his lover, while she reveals that Geoffrey has discovered their affair. Minghella's close up on Katherine's neck wearing his thimble and the sad music in the background emphasize the tragic mood of the scene (photogram 97). Almásy finds shelter for Katherine in the cave and he leaves her with good supplies of water, food, and his favorite copy of Herodotus (photogram 98). In order for spectators to empathize with the character, Minghella juxtaposes the voice over of the English patient with an establishing shot of Almásy under a threatening sky. After walking for three days, Almásy meets a British lieutenant who asks him for his papers that he refuses to provide. Back in the monastery, the English patient tells Caravaggio that the only reason Katherine is dead is because "Almásy" sounds like a German name. As a result of this confusion, British soldiers transport him as a prisoner of war in a train heading to Benghazi (photogram 99). Almásy escapes in order to make a deal with the enemy. Thus, he trades English topographies with the Nazis for gasoline so that he can return to the desert (photogram 100). Finally, the patient reveals that he returned to the cave but it was too late to save Katherine. Therefore, spectators are encouraged to remember his sacrifice of love instead of his treason.

By the end of the movie, Almásy's copy of Herodotus becomes Katherine's journal where she questions the purpose of all the mapmaking missions. Therefore, before her passing, Katherine writes a letter to her lover. Minghella includes her words in a voice over while spectators see Almásy mourning her death. They hear Katherine's last words as Almásy reads:

"My darling, I'm waiting for you — how long is a day in the dark, or a week? The fire is gone now, and I'm horribly cold. I really ought to drag myself outside but then there would be the sun. . . I'm afraid I waste the light on the paintings and on writing these words. We die, we die rich with lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have entered and swum up like rivers, fears we have hidden in, like this wretched cave. We are the real countries, not the boundaries drawn on maps with the names of powerful men. I know you will come and

carry me out into the palace of winds. That's all I've wanted — to walk in such a place with you, with friends, on earth without maps...” (Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*)

In her letter, Katherine evokes the winds that Almásy identified in the car during the storm. She wonders if things would be different if she had never met him. However, she realizes that because of the war, she had no choice but to fall in love with him in North Africa. Minghella includes the desert storm in *The English Patient* to shift the Saharan sands. The director also uses it as a metaphor for the reconfiguration of African lands during the war. Similarly to sand during a storm, the North African borders are unstable. Additionally, the storm showcases the significance of the environment in Minghella’s adaptation. In the end, the inclusion of the sandstorm foreshadows that Almásy and Katherine’s love is doomed. Because the couple does love each other, Katherine wishes for a world without maps as she dies. In this way, Minghella chooses this setting in order to make spectators support a forbidden love affair between characters that challenges social ethics. Through his montage, he proves there are no rules for social norms in the context of war. Thus, Almásy’s act of treason is justified by his love for Katherine. Nevertheless, in all wars, there are rules of engagements that are followed. Caravaggio believes that Almásy has broken the most important of these rules by betraying his country. Thus, he searches everywhere for him in order to avenge his capture in North Africa. However, as soon as he understands that the Count had acted out of love for a woman, he decides to spare the patient’s life. Caravaggio realizes that if he kills the traitor, he will be just as guilty of murder as Almásy is of treason. From this perspective, Caravaggio notices that the patient is already suffering from his burns in the monastery. Thus, killing him out of revenge would be too kind. Therefore, Caravaggio decides to forgive him, so that the patient lives with guilt and will die with the knowledge that his treason caused the death of millions of innocent people.

The director dramatizes Almásy’s betrayal of his country through a series of slow actions and long discussions. This cinematic depiction allows spectators to identify with a fictional timeline for the events of Minghella’s adaptation. The movie represents a new experience for viewers, which plays on their emotions. However, Minghella’s fiction can convey different ideas about the reality of war. In *The English Patient*, the director’s choices affect the continuity of an Orientalist narrative. Minghella blends together shots of the Sahara with the sad words of the patient to create a sense of suspended time. By slowing down the pace, the director uses the character’s voice over to introduce the flashbacks. Thus, he can

justify Almásy's actions before revealing the truth about his treason. After Caravaggio leaves, Almásy feels guilty for the first time, and asks Hanna to accelerate his death by injecting a big quantity of morphine into his body. Although she knows about his true identity, the nurse responds to his request and cries for his loss. Later, spectators see her sitting at the back of a truck, smiling at a little girl. The sounds of a piano remind spectators of Almásy's favorite Hungarian song as the image of the overwhelming sun remains the last thing visible on screen. This framing allows spectators to end the movie with a positive view of the patient's act although he committed treason. Minghella's emotional ending portrays Almásy as a soldier and a victim of war. Therefore, from Minghella's perspective, spectators understand that Caravaggio decides to forgive Almásy because he is emotionally affected by the tragic love story. The Count's treason accentuates spectators in admiration for his love. Therefore, they consider his suicide as an act of mercy to end his suffering and join Katherine's soul in the Sahara.

Almásy arrives in the desert to redraw the maps of North Africa for Britain and to protect the land from Nazis. Port goes to the Orient without previous plans. He simply wants to discover the Sahara and to learn about a new culture. However, both characters fail miserably to accomplish their missions. By manipulating the borders, the political reality of war becomes an obstacle for the cartographer and the explorer. Both directors reflect upon the political dimension of war through their depiction of the Saharan space and through the particular cinematic techniques they use to adapt their scripts. By the end of *The Sheltering Sky*, spectators may ask if Port's death in the Sahara is justified by his desire to occupy the Saharan space. In the same way, by the end of *The English Patient*, spectators may wonder if the whole movie successfully humanizes the Count.

## Conclusion

This research project aims to compare and contrast the role of the desert as seen in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. Although these historical fictions focus on romance and drama, Bertolucci and Minghella frame the Saharan space in a way that allows spectators to visualize life in the Orient during the Second World War. Throughout history, the splendor of the desert has attracted many foreigners to North Africa, the Middle East, and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. The North African desert in particular was the center of interest for European empires fighting over control of the land. Although it is hard to adapt to its harsh climate, entrepreneurs were usually encouraged to mount their financial projects in these territories. In many cases, foreigners and natives were able to interact with each other and to maintain friendly relationships. However, in the context of war, many soldiers and civilians suffered and died because of the Western colonization of the Orient. For this reason, the desert space has become an important subject for historians, artists, and politicians. The Western protagonists in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* visit North Africa hoping to discover its culture and to exploit its lands.

Through my analysis of orientalism, I was able to examine previous historical events relating to the relationship between East and West. The complex interaction between Orientals and Occidentals exposed several cultural differences during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The comparison between *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* offers different definitions and understandings of the desert and the diverse cultures of its inhabitants. Both movies provide spectators with relevant information about the experiences that Occidentals had in the Orient, and how they were received by natives. In this context, the desert space projected on the screen plays an important role for Bertolucci and Minghella. It reflects the temperament of characters and explains why the directors rely on specific sources to adequately represent their Saharan fictions. For the purposes of their narratives, spectators may notice how both directors incorporate previous stereotypes from Orientalist writings and paintings. Within this historical context, Edward Said's theory in his book *Orientalism* is useful to determine how the Orient has been perceived by Westerners. The author references the territorial conflicts between Palestine and Israel as evidence of his theories regarding the political dimension of the Oriental space. He also focuses on previous literary works to discuss the political history of Imperialism. In fact, Oriental countries experienced many

political conflicts throughout history. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all countries in the Orient progressively gained their independence. However, democracy has not yet been established for everyone. Although things are better today, the current situation is not absolutely favorable for all natives. Women are still fighting for their rights, most of children study in poor conditions, and men still hope for a better future.

This cinematic study of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* requires a detailed examination of several elements including the historical and artistic fields of Orientalism. For this reason, I consulted a variety of sources in my bibliography relating to the specific themes discussed in my analysis.

While Edward Said focuses on political issues, Christine Peltre presents the Orient through the perspective of 19<sup>th</sup> century art. In her book *Orientalisme*, she discusses how painters used their art to enforce the concept of Western superiority. Although her book shares the same title as Edward Said's *Orientalism*, both authors showcase the presence of Westerners in the Orient differently. In this way, they focus on the same topic with different methods and use different terms to discuss similar topics related to the representation of Oriental history. For example, Christine Peltre uses the term "expedition" to describe the arrival of Westerners in the Orient, whereas Edward Said prefers the term "invasion" in the same context. Moreover, Peltre uses the verb "to discover" in her historical analysis of civilization, while Said prefers to speak of a military conquest of the Orient. These few examples distinguish Edward Said's theory about orientalism and the way the Orient is perceived by Peltre. This idea of diversity becomes more evident as more sources are consulted. In general terms, the study of history depends on the comprehension of diverse explanations about singular events from different dimensions. For this research, each relevant source deals with the historical interpretation of the Orient. Their nuances are necessary to explain whether the framing of the desert space can adequately portray the truth about North African culture throughout the passage of time. If critics apply Peltre's analysis to *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*, Bertolucci and Minghella may be seen as new Orientalist artists who feature the truth about life in North Africa. However, according to Edward Said's logic, no Occidental source can reveal the exact truth about the Orient. As a result, the author explains that it is hard to distinguish one version of the truth from another, because the majority of these sources were written by Westerners for Occidental audiences.



Because the cinematic adaptations of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* are my two primary sources, my research concerns film studies, camera techniques and especially the study of space on screen. When commenting on both films, professional film critics and amateurs have focused on the different techniques used to represent life in North Africa. Thus, my research requires a critical reading of history and art to identify the directors' choices to frame a particular narrative within each film. In this regard, *Espace au cinéma* by André Gardies is an excellent source to start discovering the world of cinema and more specifically the framing techniques. His theories are applied to analyze a series of photograms in order to determine how filmmakers frame space. Additional articles dealing with cinematography complement Gardies' study and present a more detailed analysis about how to capture the Sahara in movies. Because films are fictional representations, the perception of each filmmaker is influenced by his own understanding of reality. André Gardies claims that directors depend on the "champ" to project their ideas onto the screen in new interesting ways. Moreover, the author discusses the "espace cadre" which is the basis of my research on the presentation of the Sahara. In his book, Gardies also focuses on the role played by spectators to understand the movie and the means used by directors to influence the communicated message. In addition to *Espace au cinéma*, my previous lessons were helpful to analyze the political aspects adopted by both directors to convey their particular messages. Through the movements of cameras and the editing techniques, each director is able to balance the cinematographic elements with the artistic and political history of the Orient.

The next step of my research required an examination of what the critics had discussed about *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. In fact, their opinions have been fundamental in order to complete my work. Moreover, the two representations of the Saharan space may affect how spectators of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* understand how Bertolucci and Minghella represent the Orient. After having consulted many articles, I encountered mixed reactions concerning these two films. Some critics favored the directors' choices, while others were less convinced by their adaptations. Several articles have been written by English and French film theorists and movie critics in order to influence spectators of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. Moreover, film criticism has focused on the representation of the Oriental world and its vast desert spaces. Since both films were shot in North Africa, native film critics and spectators have also influenced the reception of these Orientalist films in the Arab world. In order to study both perspectives of Arab critics and Western writers, I had to translate some quotations from Arabic articles into English. In *The*

*Sheltering Sky*, the arrival of three Americans in a new place relates to any Westerner visiting North Africa for the first time. However, some critics disagree with Bertolucci's use of the Saharan space during war time to project the complicated relationship between Kit and Port. In *The English Patient*, the framing of the love story born in the middle of the Sahara fascinates the majority of spectators. Nevertheless, the degree of its significance within the narrative poses problem for some Arab critics.

My research about the history of Orientalist art helped me discover that Bertolucci and Minghella achieved success by relying on the work of previous artists. Through their camera lenses, each director is free to capture the space and to adapt it according to their particular narratives. As a result, both films seek to enhance the exotic dimension of the desert for spectators. Since all art is a representation of actual reality, I have based my cinematic analysis on particular scenes of *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*. In the first chapter, I demonstrated how spectators are immersed in an empty space where Westerners are welcome to treat its lands as their own. The second chapter reinforces this idea of Occidental superiority by framing the natives as secondary characters, and portraying them like the figures appearing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Orientalist works of art. However, the perception of reality in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient* is dependent on the strength of the directors' narratives. Even though both directors are influenced by Orientalism, they choose to adapt a version of historical truth into fictional representation of the colonial narrative in North Africa. In the final chapter, I analyzed how political realities of the Second World War allow Bertolucci and Minghella to manipulate space through their lenses. The camera work and the plot must complement each other for the film to remain significant. However, relying on the beauty of the Sahara is not enough to adequately frame the Orient. Thus, both directors incorporate the exotic elements that still exist in the region, within the narratives of their contemporary adaptations.

Each artist is responsible for balancing every element of their artwork. The narrative and the cinematography are both essential for the movie to be a success. In this way, Bertolucci and Minghella rely on the context of global war to justify the ending of their films. Both directors utilize the Sahara to feature tragic love stories. Their choice of the setting is intentional to help spectators accept the death of Western protagonists. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Bertolucci concentrates on true dimensions of the Algerian landscape to feature an exotic travel for his Western characters. He relies on real historical facts of war to justify Port's illness from Typhoid in the Orient. Because of these harsh conditions, spectators expect Port

to die in the desert. However, they are more worried about Kit's fate than Port's loss in response to Bertolucci's script. In his movie, the director is more concerned with Kit survival to change the expected narrative of a classical tragedy. In *The English Patient*, Minghella must rely on his artistic talent to make spectators believe in his fictional story set in the Oriental world. Thus, he features a controversial love story between his Occidental protagonists in order to justify their presence in a foreign land. Spectators choose to accept the tragedy because they expect that the war will end badly. Although they know what is going to happen to the characters, it is up to the filmmaker to keep them interested in the narrative of their work. Bertolucci and Minghella choose the North African desert as an ideal setting for their film adaptations. In this way, the Saharan space becomes the exotic background for the romantic dramatization of war in *The Sheltering Sky* and *The English Patient*.

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- Concept of orientalism

<sup>106</sup> The article was published in the Art Critics' part of the online Arab journal (*www.elcinema.com*).

<sup>107</sup> The translation of these Arabic terms is: film- 1996- film crew, video, advertising, pictures, technical criticism, and film screenings.

<sup>108</sup> The article is originally written in Arabic and entitled "Tales from the West: The English patient, love, and World War II in the Egyptian Sahara." (My translation)

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