# Strategies of counter Image-Making
# of Arabs' portrayals in Swedish films
# through a Decolonial Approach

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(Neighbor, 20 Min, 2022, By Yaser Kassab)

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**ABSTRACT**

Many groups and marginalized communities have been struggling for better representation in the media and film in different countries for many reasons. One of them is the direct effects of stereotypification on their lives.

However, counter-image making has not received adequate attention, at least in adopting a decolonial approach to deconstruct the underlying structures behind stereotyping and otherness and its associations with different socio-political aspects.

This paper is a reflective essay based on an inquiry-led project through cinema, in which I pose a question: what are the cinematic ways of producing counter images that aim to encourage rethinking the predominant (Mis)representation of the Swedish Arabs and other marginalized communities in the Swedish film and media.

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## Introduction

I was born and raised in Aleppo, Syria, the second city and the economic capital of the country. It has been provoking to me how the people of this city, in particular, have been represented in the media and TV productions in Syria. That representation was primarily from the perspective of the center/the capital, with its exclusive power and control over media production. When I moved to live in Damascus, I faced some of the implications of this misrepresentation of Aleppians, and I realized how the media has a key role in constituting people's perception of other communities.

The same happened when we had to flee to Lebanon, and then to Turkey. In these two countries, I've also noted how the perception of Arabs and Syrians is influenced by the media, politics, and the colonial legacy.

During my earlier years in Sweden and to learn the language, I liked to watch many films and series, which helped me to get to know the social norms and the cultural codes. Sometimes manifestations of otherness and stereotyping of people of color, immigrants, and other marginalized groups might be explicit in Swedish films and TV series. And coming from a country that is far from northern Europe and being exposed to different episteme has made watching how Arabs and Middle-easterners in particular are being misrepresented a source of deep distress, especially when decoding the politics behind these images.

That was mainly what made representation matter to me as a filmmaker. And this isn't emanating from a nationalist standpoint, but rather from the aim of a better understanding of the association between misrepresentation and the underlying power structures. And how can I, as a filmmaker, explore cinematic methods of creating counter-images as a kind of invitation to rethink the predominant misrepresentative, stereotypical portrayals of any marginalized community? This is important for my artistic practices, and it might be insightful for other practitioners and filmmakers who share the same inquiry of producing portrayals as a form of resistance.

Chapter One starts by addressing the representational issue, by deconstructing the assemblage of misrepresentative portrayals in the Swedish films and TV series that were mainly produced after 2015. Through introducing the decolonial approach, in particular, tracing Eurocentrism, and here I rely on Shohat & Stam's definition (2014), Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. And in highlighting the underlying structures behind the Otherness, I relied on this reference by M. Kamali (2015). War, Violence, and Social Justice: Theories for Social Work.

In chapter two, Strategies of Counter Image-Making, I compile some of the strategies that were used in other contexts and countries, first by replying to Stuart Hall's book (1997)

Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (S. Hall, J. Evans, & S. Nixon, Eds.), in which he reflects upon black American filmmakers in the struggle for better representation. Besides Kristin Knopf's book (2008), "Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America." in which she employs postcolonial filmmaking strategies.

All that comes in and through the degree film of the master's study at HDK-Valand Neighbor, which is a short film written by Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd, where the film comes as a practical tool and a case study in the pursuit of counter image-making. The film talks about a Syrian-Danish man visiting his son in Sweden. A hateful message targeted the family during the visit. The old man had to respond to that unconventionally.

In chapter three, as a conclusion, I start by expanding on the images that don't contest or encounter. Then I problematize the notion of self-representation. Then I introduced the notion of counterfeit diversity in representation.

**Chapter I**

In the decolonial approach, I would focus on tracing Eurocentrism, which is a term that has been mobilized as a key theoretical approach in the critical analysis of media texts in decolonial and postcolonial studies. In particular, I rely on Ella Shohat and Stam's (2014), Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. Shohat is a Professor of Cultural Studies at New York University, where she teaches in the departments of Art & Public Policy and Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, translated into diverse languages. Stam is an American film theorist working on film semiotics. He is a professor at New York University, where he teaches about the French New Wave filmmakers.

"Eurocentric discourse in the film may be relayed not by characters or plot but by lighting, framing, mise-en-scene, music. In the visual arts, space has traditionally been deployed to express the dynamics of authority and prestige. In pre-perspectival medieval painting, for example, size was correlated with social status: nobles were large, peasants small. The cinema translates such correlations of social power into registers of foreground and background, on-screen and off-screen, speech, and silence." (Shohat & Stam, 2014, 208)
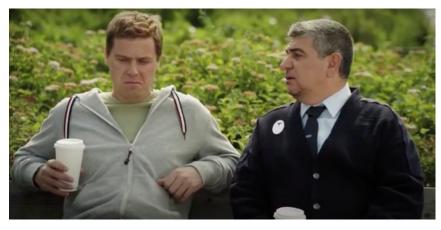
### 1. Assemblage of portrayals of Arabs and POC in Swedish films

There are already a lot of qualitative and quantitative studies about Arab and Muslim portrayals in different contexts that might be in conversation with this, i.e., Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies People by Jack Shaheen, or a documentary with the same title, in which both the book and the film analyze 1,000 films. And a recent study entitled "Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies" by a group of scholars includes both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 200 top-grossing movies released between 2017 and 2019 across four countries.

This chapter aims to situate the inquiry-led project and its reflective essay in a Swedish context by offering concrete samples of portrayals that were mainly produced after 2015 and are mostly Netflix original productions. These assemblages have an intrinsic similarity with the stereotypical portrayals of Arabs in Hollywood. However, it is worth giving space to the specificities of its Swedish context, which is a part of the European context after 2015.

According to Shohat and Stam (2014) "Eurocentrism" is a system that bifurcates the world into the "West and the Rest" and organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe: our "nations," their "tribes"; our "religions," their "superstitions"; our "culture," their "folklore"; our "art," their "artifacts"; our "demonstrations," their "riots"; our "defense," their "terrorism" (p. 2)

To some extent, I believe there are a clear divide in how many stories and film genres are associated with specific racial groups, whereas criminal activities, gangs, terrorism, and extremism heavily stigmatize marginalized groups and minorities.

Below we see samples of portrayals of immigrants from the Middle East. Syria and Iraq, in particular, who came to Sweden after the wars in these two countries, are being portrayed concerning the racial hierarchy in the labor market.



(Welcome to Sweden (2014 TV series directed by Carl Åstrand)

In Welcome to Sweden, the TV series, Hassan, the Iraqi asylum seeker, meets Bruce, an American who moves to Sweden after he falls in love with Emma. After language school, they sit on a bench, and Hassan tells his cousin's story.

**Hassan**: My cousin has been here for four years and the only job they offered him was as a toilet cleaner.

**Bruce**: Uh, that's rough! You shouldn't take just any job, you should follow your heart. What did your cousin do in Iraq?

**Hassan**: He was a toilet cleaner!

My interpretation of the politics behind this joke is that uneducated unskilled immigrants complain about facing discrimination in the labor market, but these stories of injustice and inequality are just invalid, and immigrants, whether skilled or unskilled, get what they deserve in the Swedish labor market, ignoring the statistics and facts that say the opposite. Shohat & Stam, (2014) "Eurocentrism appropriates the cultural and material production of non-Europeans while denying both their achievements and their appropriation, thus consolidating its sense of self and glorifying its cultural anthropophagy" (p. 3).

In Quicksand, a TV series by Per-Olav Sorense, an original Netflix production.
At lunch, a group of young students gathers at Sebastian's parents' villa, where Samir, an Arab/Swede, was invited, and this time Sebastian attacks Samir in an aggressive, racist manner.



(Quicksand TV Mini-Series 2019 by Per-Olav Sørensen, Lisa Farzaneh )

**Sebastian**: I thought your mother was a lawyer, not as you're saying right now that she works as a nurse assistant. Does she have two degrees?

**Samir**: My father is a lawyer, not my mother.

**Sebastian**: So, he doesn't drive a taxi, so every one of the subway conductors or janitors, every taxi driver or assistant nurse, all of them are doctors and lawyers, and nuclear physicists, if there is nobody from Syria and Iraq who just works at the grocery store.

**Sebastian's mother** stops him from clarifying: the refugees who make it all the way to Sweden are most often those who are financially stable and highly educated because such a journey requires money.

Here we see a clear manifestation of the racial hierarchy in Swedish society. What makes matters worse in this scene is when the mother overly simplifies the refugees' narrative, with no mention of war besides an inaccurate reply, because refugees aren't usually financially stable and highly educated as she stated. I see that considering immigrants as a fortune is the other side of considering them as a burden on the welfare system.

(Caliphate 2020 Tv series written by Wilhelm Behrman)

Stigmatizing Arabs with violence and terrorism was very common in Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs in the 1980s and 1990s and later.
In the Caliphate series, I would like to focus on the Swedish Arab family, which seemed, at first glance, to be secular, progressive parents with two young girls.

Zulaikha's father seems to be a secular man married to a housewife, who reacted violently to his daughter's choice to wear a hijab, and when the parents saw a video by ISIS on the daughter's laptop, the father went and visited a guy called Khaled, a Somali-Swede guy who owns a supermarket, to ask for advice since he experienced a similar situation after his children went to Somalia to join a jihadist group called Al-Shabab, and when the girls came back, he forced them to marry one of the relatives abroad. So Zulaikha's father, together with the mother, forces their young daughter to marry one of the family's relatives abroad in the Middle East as a response to her radical-Islamic tendencies.

(Welcome to Sweden 2014 TV series directed by Carl Åstrand)

Going back to the Welcome to Sweden series, Hassan was depicted as an angry, violent Arab. When he noticed an American flag on the pillow at Bruce's apartment, He wanted to burn the pillow. Although Bruce was pretending to be a Canadian instead of an American, fearing Hassan's reaction, Bruce confronted Hassan at that scene and said: "Imagine if I were American." Hassan's glib reply was: "Sorry, I have to kill you!"



(Before the storm 2000 directed by Reza Parsa and written by Mikael Bengtsson, Reza Parsa)

In Before the Storm (2000), a Swedish-Lebanese taxi driver lived a peaceful, calm life with his daughters and his Swedish wife, but when he was threatened by a militant group in Lebanon and asked him to assassinate a guy or they would kill his relatives in Lebanon,

This association and the stigma of terrorism are very similar to Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs in the 80's and 90's. We saw how Arabs were evil, immoral, mean, and narrow-minded. They were committing crimes, either because they were evil or sometimes because they were victims.



(Easy Money 2021 tv series directed by Jesper Ganslandt and Måns Månsson)

Stigmatizing middle-eastern Swedish characters with criminal activities is also predominant in the productions after 2015. In the Easy Money 2021 TV series, which is based on a novel by Jens Lapidus and, interestingly, was previously produced in 2010 and directed by Daniel Espinosa, the film protagonists had different ethnicities, mostly from the Balkans.

In its 2021 version, which is a conventional thriller focused on suburban immigrant gangs, the heroine of the series is Leya, played by Evin Ahmad, a Swedish-Kurdish actress. Leya's dream is to become a millionaire. She is an entrepreneur who was working in a restaurant, but for her enterprise, she borrowed money from her husband's brother, Ravy, an Afro-Swede, who played the role of Dada Fungula Bozela, who welcomed the idea of lending the drug money to Leya. In addition, two of Ravy's gangs, an Afro-Swede girl and the driver who always carries his gun, recruit the minor white Swede to use him in criminal activities.

Ultimately, we see how this stereotypification reduces the marginalized communities to a few characteristics, and it has a depersonalization and generalization effect on the misrepresented communities. I would refer to the colonial legacy, and here I would introduce the notion of "Mark of the Plural," which does depersonalization of the colonized people.
Ella Shohat & Robert Stam (2014) argues that "Since what Albert Memmi calls the mark of the plural projects colonized people as all the same, any negative behavior by any member of

the oppressed community is instantly generalized as typical, as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence" (p.183).

## 2. Appealing to reality and the role of conventions

The appeal to reality is usually part of the debates on any representational issues. The appeal is that these portrayals are realistic and they reflect reality, shed light on societal issues, and have a constructive role.

This assumption of representing reality can be strongly arguable. Nick Lacey is the Curriculum Leader of Film and Media Studies at Benton Park School in West Yorkshire. He has worked in a variety of media institutions, including Times Newspapers, EMAP, and Yorkshire Television. In his book, Media and Representation, Lacey delves into the question of reality concerning media texts.

Lacey (1998) "media texts cannot show reality as it is; by their nature, they mediate. Realism is a form of representation which has a privileged status because it signs itself as being closer to reality than other forms of representation such as 'genre' texts." (p. 189).
He adds to that and argues in-depth that "All representations are the result of conventions produced at a particular time and place which are determined by the dominant ideology. What appeared 'real' in the past is often laughable now; we should never forget, however, that our mode of realism could be a source of mirth for future generations" (p.189).

Furthermore, cinematic conventions play a key role in this context. I assume that using misrepresentative or stereotypical portrayals in films and TV series doesn't necessarily emanate from a racist or white supremacist mindset or even a conscious adoption, but rather it might be caused by the conventions of a capitalist model of filmmaking, which is a profit-driven model that sometimes takes the shortest way to achieve that profit, where it falls into using stereotypical portrayals and perceptions that sometimes affirm the predominant and falsified beliefs of a specific racial group. Or it might be that these stereotypifications are imprinted in our collective subconscious as filmmakers and screenwriters because of the intense exposure to them, in conjunction with the key role of the episteme.

Lacey (1998) comments on the role of conventions and says "All representations are the result of conventions produced at a particular time and place which are determined by the dominant ideology" (p. 189).

This might explain the similarity between many suburban gangster thrillers, whether in the UK, France, the US, or Australia, which are maligned portrayals of marginalized, segregated communities in the suburbs and which seldom focus on the underlying socio-political structure and its causations.

### 3. Stereotypification as a tip of the iceberg

The Marxist theory of Weber, Gramsci, and Walter Rodney provide different interpretations of the link between substructure and superstructure.

From a Gramscian perspective, the media and the education system are both parts of the superstructure. They are informed by the values of the base and the relations of production. Accordingly, misrepresentation is the surface image that is perched atop an iceberg, which has an association with the underlying structures and the wider socio-political power relations. Starting with these hypotheses could help us deconstruct this discourse and, more importantly, pursue strategies for producing counter images.

Lacey (1998) argues that "We have acknowledged that stereotypes have their basis in the material conditions and social practices of society, so it should come as no surprise that stereotypes express the dominant ideology. Stereotypes serve to naturalize the power relationships in society.; they have a hegemonic function" (p.139).

One can argue that invoking the term "dominant ideology" is obsolete or irrelevant to our modern times, where we see different media platforms. But I believe that having many platforms doesn't necessarily prevent hegemony and stereotypification, especially when these predominant platforms are based on the same standpoint, and it constitutes a key tool to influence the values and norms in society. And how these tools can sometimes be used to spread propaganda.

### 3.1 Reasons behind stereotypification

In concordance with the above, here we will try to deconstruct how the surface is associated with the underlying structures. What might be the reasons behind stereotypification, the reproduction of racism, and the promotion of prejudice?

Lacey's (1998) analysis and deconstruction of the dumb blonde stereotype and the structural reasons behind it. He argues, "A blonde is often thought of as being sexually attractive, but why should she be dumb. If a woman was sexually attractive and intelligent, then there is a likelihood that she would be the dominant partner in any relationship, a role that bourgeois ideology defines as male. (p. 140).

Masoud Kamali is a well-known professor of sociology and social work in Sweden. Kamali (2015) argues that "An interesting example of the subtle, structural and institutional patterns of racial discrimination is presented by David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich (1982), who developed 'Segmentation Theory', or the 'Divide and Rule Theory', which attempted to explain the reasons behind the reproduction of racism and the current social injustices in North American society (as well as in many other societies). They claim that many powerful actors in the 'free market' do, with appropriate help from politicians, use any means to maximize profits. As a result, these exploiters will attempt to: (1) suppress higher

wages among the exploited class; (2) weaken the bargaining power of the working class, often by attempting to split it along racial lines; (3) promote prejudices; (4) segregate the black community; and (5) ensure that the elite benefit from the creation of stereotypes and racial prejudices against the black community" (p. 127).

As Kamali stated above, whether, in the American context or the Swedish context, the elite get benefits from the reproduction of racism and promoting prejudices. In addition to other reasons:

**A Tool for the reproduction of power hierarchies**
Kamali points out that stereotypes and racial prejudices are sorts of symbolic violence. He analyses the symbolic violence concerning the reproduction of power hierarchies and domination, and how the assumption of the Others lays the ground for racist and discriminating practices and discourses. Kamali considers the exercise of symbolic violence as much more effective and durable in the reproduction of power hierarchies and domination in society than the exercise of direct physical violence. (Kamali, 2015, 74)

**Building the self-identity**
(Kamali (2015) "The socio-cognitive dimension of the creation of a nation is related to a nation's or a community's common assumptions and understandings of 'the others', which include ideologies, attitudes, norms, and values, along with stereotypes and prejudices" (p. 97).

This could explain the increased reproduction of stereotyping of Swedish Arabs and MENA immigrants by populist nationalists, particularly after the 2015 refugee influx to Europe. In a nutshell, to build self-identity as it's juxtaposed to the relegated image of the other.

**Scapegoat for all socio-political issues**
Othering a specific group is akin to making them the scapegoat for all socio-political problems. In particular, how immigrants have been depicted as a threat to the welfare system, neglecting the facts and statistics of their contribution to the economy and society. Interestingly, we don't even see them being affected by the economic crisis.

Alexander Betts, Professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs, says in his TEDx Oxford talk that the politics of migration actually has very little to do with migration, but simply wants to suggest that the politics of immigration is about economic transformation. He says when you look at maps and the basic logic is that the areas voting for anti-migrant parties or positions don't have very many migrants. What they have are broken economies that used to have labor-intensive manufacturing that has lost that manufacturing industry because of automation or offshoring. " (Betts)

## Chapter II Strategies for counter image-making

After demonstrating the assemblage of some portrayals followed by an analysis and deconstruction in the previous chapter, here I would sum up some of the strategies, the findings, and the approaches for counter image-making, which are based on the previous deconstruction, in addition to relying on Stuart Hall's text The Spectacle of the "Other" (1997), in which he offers different cultural strategies that can combat stereotyping, besides other references and approaches, and in addition to my subjective remarks and the practical findings that were applied in the degree film Neighbor.

### 1.1 Highlighting diversity

I've remarked that many portrayals have been neglected in the dominant depiction of the misrepresented Swedish Arab community in particular and other POC depictions. Here are some of them:

**The empowered women**
Who work and struggle against the patriarchy, as opposed to the invisible, oppressed, and disempowered housewife. How balancing the family hierarchy by depicting an equal-based family can destabilize the predominant depiction of the male-dominant family.

**In the secular progressive characteristics**
As opposed to the stereotyping that stigmatizes middle-easterners with radicalization and terrorism, in a broader sense, celebrating the diversity of the misrepresented, whether in class, sexual orientation, or educational status, constantly adds to the representation.

**Portraying the misrepresented as humans with human concerns**
To regain the humanistic depiction, by simply capturing very mundane, everyday life activities like eating without being portrayed as exotic, going to work, and encountering friends and fellows.

Stuart Hall, in his text, The Spectacle of the "Other," analyses how the generalized narratives stigmatize the entire misrepresented community. Hall (1997) "stereotyping reduces people to a few simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature" (p. 257).

He offers three different cultural strategies to combat stereotyping, here is one of them. Hall(1997) "substituting a range of positive images of black people, black life, and culture for the negative imagery which continues to dominate popular representation is a good strategy for contesting the racialized regime of representation. Underlying this approach is an acknowledgment and celebration of diversity and difference in the world (p. 273)

He argues and adds that "the problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of how 'being black' is represented, but does not necessarily displace the negative" (p. 274).

Thus, producing portrayals as a sort of invitation to recognize the gradient, the thousands of colors in between, is one way of encountering and contesting the misrepresentation.

## 1.2 Claiming the right to opacity

I assume that the capitalist model of filmmaking is obsessed with categorization and labeling; it doesn't like open-ended stories or unconventional ways of storytelling. On the other hand, story gaps, opacity, and ambivalence are useful ways to encourage questioning and acknowledge the diversity and polyvocality of the misrepresented.

Stuart Hall (1997) mentions that there is a counter-strategy that locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself and tries to contest it from within. It is more concerned with the forms of racial representation than with introducing new content. He adds how and why attempting to dismantle or subvert a racialized regime of representation is an extremely difficult exercise, about which -like so much else in representation- there can be no guarantees. (p. 274-276).

In concordance with Hall's point above, Glissant (2010) says that "the colonizer perceived the colonized as different and unable to be understood, constructing the latter as the Other and demanding transparency so that the former could somehow fit them into their cognitive schema and so that they could dominate them. And opacity, according to him, has the radical potentiality for social movements to challenge and subvert systems of domination. Glissant demands the "right to opacity," showing the oppressed can and should be allowed to be opaque, to not be completely understood, and to simply exist as different" (p. 189) Glissant advocates for recognizing and appreciating difference without comparing and judging it on an ideal scale or without building a hierarchy as Western philosophy has done (p. 190)

Thus, claiming the right to opacity and to be portrayed as a diverse polyvocal group, as opposed to a solid homogeneous entity that can be easily maligned and demonized, is also one useful way of encountering stereotypification.

## 1.3 Highlighting the underlying structures

As we saw in the suburban gangster's thriller productions, we usually don't see any referring to the socio-political challenges that face marginalized communities, or to the underlying structures that cause high unemployment rates, or the increased organized criminal activities in these suburbs, but rather we see them demonizing the oppressed and marginalized, which

is more predominant in these productions. Is this because of the insatiable desire to consume condensed and encapsulated stories?

But this approach generally is similar to the way of dealing with stories from the global south; many stories have been harshly simplified, even though we live in a very complicated reality where causes intervene with their intersectional roots. In addition to the fact that the predominant western media platforms always have the right and the authority to define and redefine what's happening in the global south following their interests and policies.

**Survivors, not victims**
In portraying immigrants as survivors of a bloody liberation revolution that largely turned into a proxy war after a global silence, similar to what followed the Arab Spring revolutions, which resulted in a later refugee influx to Europe, and highlighting the intersection roots of their issues and the causes of their displacement, rather than portraying them as victims who have been removed from their political contexts and stripped of their political subjectivity.

 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist, in her Ted Talk The danger of a single story says "Show people as one thing, as just one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become". She adds and quotes the Palestinian poet Mourad Barghouti when he says "if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, secondly. If you start the story with the failure of the African state rather than the colonial construction of the African state, you'll have a whole different story"

According to Chimamanda "The problem with stereotypes, is not that they are false, but that they are incomplete. They turn one story into the only one. The single story has one consequence: it deprives people of their dignity. It makes it harder for us to recognize our shared humanity. It accentuates our differences rather than our similarities" (The danger of a single story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

Thus, highlighting the underlying structures, the systemic nature, and causes of any socio-political issue, as well as linking thoughts and notions, and the past and the present, are important as a decolonial act, to combat the simplistic and reductive narratives.
Shohat & Stam, (2014) "Eurocentrism minimizes the West's oppressive practices by regarding them as contingent, accidental, and exceptional. Colonialism, slave trading, and imperialism are not seen as fundamental catalysts of the West's disproportionate power." (p. 3).

## 2. Through the aesthetics and storytelling

The strategies of counter-image-making come in conjunction with a proper consideration of aesthetics and storytelling, whether these counter-images are defined as counter-cinema, postcolonial cinema, or third cinema.

Lacey's (1998) analysis and comparison between old cinema and counter cinema, and how the counter cinema is constituted by many elements and themes. Here I will summarize it, using his own words.

**"Narrative intransitivity**: Counter cinema interrupts narrative flow with digressions and irrelevances which serve to prevent the audience from getting 'caught up' within the narrative development.

**Identification versus estrangement:** Most fictional texts offer the audience a character with whom to identify. Counter cinema attempts to prevent this by using distancing techniques such as introducing real people into the diegesis. For example, although Godard did use film stars, he represented them as 'stars' rather than 'stars playing characters.'

**Transparency versus foregrounding:** The conventional system of continuity editing strives to hide its operation; counter cinema foregrounds the technique by simply ignoring the 180-degree rule. Once the convention is subverted it becomes noticeable; it is foregrounded.

**Single diegesis versus multiple diegeses:** In counter cinema, the sanctity of the narrative diegesis can be broken at will. For example, showing the film being edited introduces, to an extent, the 'real world' into the film world.

**Closure versus aperture:** Counter cinema, however, can produce meaning through allusion to other texts; indeed, knowledge of other texts may be essential for any meaning to be generated at all.

**Pleasure versus un-pleasure:** Counter cinema aims to make the audience think, to alienate them, to deny them entertainment, to make them think, and, ultimately, to change them.

**Fiction versus reality:** In conventional cinema, the fictional world is created as if it were real. This is, of course, an illusion; it is a representation. Counter cinema consciously deals with representations and informs its audience of the fact. The belief is that by demonstrating to the audience that it is seeing a representation, truth is, in some way, being shown" (p.118-120)

In dialogue with Lacey, Krestin Knopf (2008) in her book Decolonizing the lens of power, indigenous films in North America, introduced strategies of postcolonial filmmaking, and according to her, many themes make up postcolonial cinema. Here I will summarize what Knopf wrote in her own words.

**"The aesthetic of hunger:** This often appears in sparse or low-key lighting, with basic camera equipment, long takes, a basic audio track avoiding lavish musical scoring, and the frequent use of a hand-held camera. Needless to say, most of these films do not hire star actors but non-professionals, which may result in somewhat contrived dialogue and acting" (Knopf, 2008, 69)

**"Carnivalesque film style:** Carnival served as a platform for protest against inequities and oppression in colonialist societies. Postcolonial filmmakers develop a carnivalesque film style, by grossly violating established filmmaking conventions. They may purposely employ jump cuts, a digressive narrative or digressive narrative threads without closure, a re-shooting of the same scene, a jamming camera" (Knopf, 2008, 72)

**"Non-linear digressive narrative:** The integration of traditional orality: first, as a narrative formula in which characters or the plot present (traditional) oral accounts, myths, and legends or elements thereof; and, secondly, as a structuring formula in which a non-linear digressive narrative shapes the form, and the film comes to resemble an oral account.
In the latter case, the film form is characterized by circular structure, repetitions, pauses, and/or a slow rhythm, all echoes or imitations of oral rhetoric" (Knopf, 2008, 69)

To summarize, my goal for this demonstration between Lacey and Knopf was to broaden the perception of the cinematic tools and the possibilities of producing counter-images. And to link different experiences.

### 3. The Neighbor as a case study

To begin with, the family has always been attractive to me as a filmmaker to locate the film story in, to see through it the interaction with the outside world, how it is influenced by external socio-political issues, and how this is reflected in the dynamics among its members, how the small gestures might reveal the gender roles in it.
The family is the microcosmos that I focused on even in my previous works, a trilogy that started in 2012 in which we see the Syrian tragedy and its episodes through the observation of my relationship with my family, my parents. Over 10 years and three films, we have seen through the lens of the personal the wider socio-political events and different episodes of the Syrian revolution. In a poetic style, we approached many themes, i.e., grief, displacement, and exile.

During my Master's study in film at HDK-Valand, which in the program description defines itself as "in relation to the world," I aimed to attach myself to my new country, Sweden, with its socio-political questions, by constituting an inquiry-led project, which is for me a sort of reservoir and constant research that might influence my artistic practice from now on.

The Neighbor is the graduation film of my master's studies at HDK-Valand. And it is a short film written by Yaser Kassab and Rima Alhamedd. This film was a case study, and a practical tool to search for cinematic ways of producing counter-images. Through the film I will elaborate on how the theories met the practice, when did they meet and when did they raise tension.

(Neighbor, 20 Min, 2022, By Yaser Kassab)

**Synopsis:**
A Syrian-Danish man visits his son and daughter-in-law in Sweden. He finds them both in
distress; his son is preoccupied with making a TV report about the new Danish law of
revoking Syrian immigrants' residency, and his wife is anxious about losing her job.
The visit coincides with a violent hate message targeting the family. The man has to consider
the family's circumstances and thus responds in an unconventional way.

**The originating point:**
The film's idea originated from my observations of many stories about pork and how it's
overused in everyday conversations to an extent. A Danish politician said in an interview, "I
dream that our children and their children eat pork everywhere" (Understanding Denmark's
Growing Anti-Immigration Stance, 2019). Or when a Hungarian member of the European
Parliament suggested that pigs' heads could be put on border fences to deter refugees.

For me, using this object, the pig head, in our modern times is offensive per se, because it's
based on a stereotypical distorted perception of the other and it's associated with a long
history as a primitive way to deliver a threat message. It has also been used by right-wingers,
and once it was sent to Angela Merkel's office.

**The intention of making the film:**
When the idea was in its earlier stages, I told a friend that the film is basically about an immigrant family receiving a plastic bag containing a pig's head as a threat message. They decide to cook it at the end, but we don't see if they're eating it or not. His glib response was, "So that means that they're not Muslims, maybe Christians!"

Evoking this anecdote here isn't to judge the friend's comment, rather it sheds light on the simplistic perception of others as solid entities. Thus, we felt that highlighting the gradient and the polyvocality of the immigrants from the Middle East, in particular, is significant to encountering the simplistic reductive perception of the Others.

Submerging the viewer in the emotive journey of an old man's dilemma in searching for the proper way to respond to a racist threat message might not be pleasant, but it aims to question the effect that these sorts of symbolic violence can leave on the marginalized and oppressed communities.



(Neighbor, 20 Min, 2022, By Yaser Kassab)

**The film production phase:**
The journey of finding actors started during writing the script, or at least it went simultaneously. In one of the draft versions of the script, the couple has a kid but finding a kid actor was hard so we had to edit the script accordingly.

Finding an Arabic association in Stockholm called "The Arabic Theater" helped us in finding the actors, because it was a place for networking, and the actors who played in the film previously worked with this association, and later they were based in different cities; Malmö, Stockholm, and Umea. We were lucky enough to find actors who could easily relate to the

film story. Mansour Salti, who played the father role, during the production could absorb the role and live in the character's dilemma as well as he was a professional actor and director. The same applies to Helen Aljanabi and Yazan Alqaq, who played the couple's roles. The production phase took three intensive days of shooting, and we had an exciting experience of making our first fiction.

Shooting with actors that are familiar with the story context or have already had similar lived experiences was a pivotal choice to achieve an authentic performance. I think this is one of the reasons that usually cause misrepresentation when relying on actors who play the roles of Arabs or immigrants but don't have the ethnic background or they lack a deeper understanding of the complicated experience of both exile and displacement, but rather their perception is based on a stereotype or a predominant depiction of immigrants through the media.

### The strategies used to contest the misrepresentation of Swedish Arabs

**The family dynamics**
We started by balancing the family hierarchy to become an equal-based relationship. We see a middle-class, educated, working couple. The woman is empowered and working; she buys the groceries while her partner is doing the household chores.

Concerning the mundane activities, and depicting the misrepresented as humans with human concerns, we see them with the guest having dinner, as well as how they're connected to the socio-political situation in the outside world. They share with society the same concerns about the precarious situation in the labor market at a time when some multinational corporations moved to Asia. In addition to the extra difficulties they face because of the strict migration policies that applied in Sweden in 2015, in which they have to have a stable fixed-term job contract to obtain permanent residency, regardless of the residence period in the country.

Furthermore, we see that the father in the film has a past and lived experiences, how he was a political prisoner in Syria, to highlight the political subjectivity of the film's character.

**The film story and the right to opacity**
That initial idea evolved, and in the end, the pig head was cooked and returned to the perpetrator. Here is the question that faced us—me and the co-writer—what does cooking the pig head and sending it back even mean?

The first occasion that faced us with this question was with the main actor who played that role during the film production. His interpretation was that cooking the head and sending it back meant to reverse the threat message and send a similar equivalent reply to the perpetrator.

More interestingly, one interpretation that I don't support is that the pig-head is merely a metonym of the maligned, vilified portrayal of immigrants that you, as a maker, want to subvert.

The second occasion was in the Q&A that followed the screening of the exam presentation. I briefly answered: here the right to opacity comes through creating this gap and space that's open for multiple interpretations; it creates ambivalence that might help to destabilize any fixed assumptions.

But what is the aim behind the act of cooking the pig head and sending it back to the perpetrator? It's basically to liberate the sign from the signifier, which makes it a threat message, but after it's cooked, it's something else that is more open to multiple interpretations.

**Highlighting the underlying structures**
As a decolonial act, by connecting symbolic violence to its systemic nature and underlying structures. We see how the threat message that targeted the migrant family came from an extremist right-winger, who might be legally organized, and how the message coincides with the strict immigration laws and policies that were applied in both Sweden and Denmark, as these policies pave the way for more microaggression and targeting the exposed groups.

The son works as a journalist and is preoccupied with working on a documentary film about Denmark's new decision in 2021 to revoke the Syrian refugees' resident permits and send them to detention camps till they decide to go back to Syria, where they might face death and torture after they have been living in Denmark for over 5 years and have established their life there.

The wife, after she was threatened to lose her job during downsizing, was concerned about finding a fixed-term contract to overcome the anxiety of having a temporary resident permit in Sweden and how these anti-immigration policies might get changed and result in deportation to Syria.

**The film language and the language in the film**
Language is an essential component of identity; it symbolizes it and plays an important role in representational issues. We weren't hesitant about choosing Arabic as the language of the film because of its relevance to the story per se.

Although this choice added some translation tasks to the script to get feedback during the short time of writing and making the film, working between two languages has created a distance and a vantage point from which we could reflect on it. In addition, having Arabic as the film language might make it difficult to distribute the film in Sweden, since many broadcasting platforms, i.e., SVT, and TV4, rarely broadcast films in Arabic.

Concerning the language in the film, we see how the couple with the father started talking about the language in both Sweden and Denmark, commenting on their similarities and differences. This scene in particular is intrinsic in the sense that it gives the film characters the right to reflect on the host's language, which might destabilize the power status in the immigrant host dynamics.

**Through the structure and aesthetics**
Whether it is fiction versus reality or single diegesis versus multiple diegeses, here I might reflect on subtly applying these two points.

First, we see multiple diegeses through the protagonist's world. When we see that the son is working on a documentary, we see the challenges that face the filmmakers in finding protagonists that agree to take part in the film, especially when it might affect their lives.

In one of the first scenes, we see the couple having a conversation about work and the documents' concerns. This scene might lead the viewer to believe that they're the main protagonists, but the narrative flow is interrupted by one actor who occupies the space in a silent, slow cinematic style. The film digresses from the couple's stories to the challenges that face the old man and his inner dilemma of finding the proper way to respond to the hate message. This might be perceived as a weak point in the script from a conventional way of structuring the story.

In the editing, we use jump cuts that were associated with the French New Wave; this choice helps to manipulate the time, and it enhances the emotional journey of the viewer in pursuing the protagonist's dilemma. In addition, that jump cut has an estrangement effect on the viewer by reminding them of the editing process.

The Neighbor was shot mainly by two people, the director and the director's assistant, who are the writers of the film. And here I would argue Krestin Knopf's point about the aesthetics of hunger as one of the themes of postcolonial cinema, especially in a time when technology such as DSLRs and mirrorless cameras can capture high-quality and cinematic materials at a very affordable cost, and with a very small crew, to an extent, one can't guess how big the crew is.

Overall, I found out that conventional cinema, in its ways of structuring and its aesthetics, has constituted the way we perceive cinema, and the immediate question that comes to my mind is, how can we, as filmmakers and film curators, and juries, evaluate and rate counter-cinema or postcolonial-cinema, without being tied down by the conventional cinema aesthetics and structure.

**The sound design:**
The film overall is made up of a minimal sound design. For example, the film doesn't have a soundtrack, instead, it relies on a diegetic sound, the classic Egyptian film dialogues that

come from the TV in the dinner scene. This idea of having a sound coming from a TV while eating is inspired by my observations of diasporic families as a way to familiarize themselves with their space. The film also doesn't rely on score music, which is usually used to complement or contrast the image; rather we relied on manipulating the ambient sound.

## Chapter III

Starting with a brief reflection on the applied decolonial approach. For me, applying a decolonial approach has opened up many cinematic choices, and it reminded me that other ways of thinking-making also do exist, although decoloniality has not been an easy choice, in reading nor in applying in a cinematic practice, particularly when it's related to representational issues with its complexity, and infinite societal implications.

**In pursuit of portrayals that contest or encounter**
In Hall's analysis of portrayals that contest the stereotypical misrepresentative portrayals of black people in the US, he started with a nuanced distinction that during the Civil Rights movement, in the 1960s and 70s, and the struggles for representation, the first fruitful series of films, i.e. Sweet Sweepback's Badass Song (Martin Van Peebles, 1971), in which he values all characteristics positively, we see the black hero as a professional stud; he evades the police with the help of a succession of black ghetto low-lifers, sets fire to a police car, shafts another with a pool cue, lights out for the Mexican border.

In Gordon Park's film Shaft, a black detective struggles with the black underworld, a band of black militants and the Mafia rescues a black racketeer's daughter. What marked Shaft out, according to Laclau, was the detective's absolute lack of deference towards whites. A violent man who lived a violent life in pursuit of black women.

Hall(1997) comments on these films mentioned above and says "These films carried through one counter-strategy with considerable single-mindedness -reversing the evaluation of popular stereotypes. To reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it. Escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme (blacks are poor, childish, subservient, always shown as servants, everlastingly good" (p. 272).

**(self)-representation**
One of the most heartening debates that identity politics has sparked thus far is self-representation as one of the most prominent ways for marginalized communities and some minorities to be better represented. But this might be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. Here I would problematize the notion of self-representation, in which I am not advocating the idea that only those who belong to a specific racial or social group can only address their questions, mainly because this might undermine shared struggles against injustice and inequality.

Shohat & Stam (2014) "When does the fear of appropriating turn into a form of mental segregationism and the policing of racial borders, a refusal to recognize one's co-implication (Chandra Mohanty's term) with otherness? How can scholarly, curatorial, artistic, and pedagogical work deal with multiculturalism without defining it simplistically as a space

where only Latinos would speak about Latinos, Mexican- Americans about Mexican-Americans, and so forth" (p. 343).

In concordance with Shohat, Edward Said, in the interview with Michael Zeeman, directly comments on this point. Here I would like to transcript the question from this long interview.

**Michael**: Nowadays we see subdivision of subdivision in dealing with the art if you want to talk seriously about a novel by a homosexual writer you at least have to be a homosexual yourself, of his age and health, same as those of cultural minorities based on the idea that the classical canonical way of dealing with arts is always the fruit of power structure when you see this subdivision this isolation of parochial dealing with art history do you feel guilty?

**Said**: No, not at all, because it has nothing to do with what I wrote, it's a misapprehension and a misappropriate, this is the most damaging crime and misapprehension of what I am saying, I am talking from a universalistic, a cosmopolitan point of view, which I adhere and which is the only way that the world makes sense to me, I don't believe in the politics of identity, although in many ways paradoxically I seem to be the father of identity politics, it's the thing that I disbelieve in because I realize the damage that identities have done to not only in powerful and powerless but also identities between each other, communities aren't made up of divisions of this sort but rather of overcoming of the division without destroying the differences. (Said, 2012)

Ultimately, providing a new aspect of the story is constantly being sought to enrich and expand our perceptions as humans, but when the filmmaker is approaching topics that are far from his/her subjectivity and situatedness, and without ending up with an overly simplified narrative, or reproducing the power narrative, it requires discernment and some methods and approaches, i.e., engaging with the community, or adopting a participatory mode, in addition to other cinematic ways, to offer a new and valid perspective of the story.

**Counterfeit diversity in film and media**
I would introduce the notion of counterfeit diversity in representation, which for me might be in dialogue with the notion of fake decolonization, by Bhakti Shringarpure, writes in her article Notes on Fake Decolonization, "The most dangerous fake decolonization is when governments decide they will spearhead such efforts" (Shringarpure, 2020)

What I mean by "counterfeit diversity in representation" is when the government declares in its agenda to approach integrationist strategy and racial diversity, but for structural reasons and other challenges, i.e., the influence of cultural hegemony, we might still attest to the same othering and stereotyping, through representatives from the oppressed and marginalized communities.

Stuart Hall(1997) analyzed the discussion of racial stereotyping in American cinema. An integrationist strategy in US film-making in the 1950s, "Blacks could gain entry to the

mainstream, but only at the cost of adapting to the white image of them and assimilating white norms of style, looks, and behavior" (p.270).

Going back to our Swedish context, in January 2022 the Minister of Culture in Sweden said about the Film Institute's new guidelines, "Culture must be free from political interference." And political interference is the diversity criteria.

An article in the Arbetaren newspaper, entitled in English (Cultural practitioners on the Film Institute's guidelines: A slap in the face) (Kulturutövare Om Filminstitutets Riktlinjer: Ett Slag I Ansiktet, 2022) is commenting on that statement and says "If we do not create measures to raise the weaker voices, then art will unfortunately not be free for everyone, says Anna Sise regarding the Film Institute's new guidelines where a formulation that deals with the business's gender equality, diversity and children's perspective has been removed."

For me, this is concerning, and I assume it concerns many filmmakers in Sweden, who felt that they have been culturally marginalized even when the diversity criteria were applied.

## Conclusion

Misrepresentation might perpetuate segregation and create boundaries, and it affects people in their daily lives and affects the intergroup relations in society, paving the way to more discriminatory and anti-immigration laws. In addition to the fact that othering and the stereotypification of films and media are just an implication of inequalities and a violent hierarchy,

Stuart Hall (1997 ) "Stereotyping occurs when there are gross inequalities of power. Again. remember Derrida's argument that between binary oppositions like Us/Them. We are not dealing with peaceful coexistence, but with a violent hierarchy" (p. 258)

The pursuit of counter-image making is constant in many contexts and by many filmmakers and other artistic practices all over the world.



(Ramy TV Series 2019–18)

Ramy, a TV series from 2018-to 2019, succeeded in producing a distinctive portrayal of the Arab community in the US, in how it uses humor to delve into problematic and sensitive topics. It revolves around the Arab family's concerns, particularly the second generation's search for identity, and the question of religion and its collision with modern times in a subtle way that aims to encourage questioning rather than judging.

The representation in the TV series Ramy is very close to my idealized conception of representation of any marginalized group, and a self-representation should not be accomplished by demonstrating any manifestation of dominance or superiority of one race or class over another.

Acknowledging that the lack of productions or representations of a culturally marginalized ethnicity makes it harder for any image-maker and it creates a burden of representation since it's almost impossible to speak for everyone or to encapsulate a culture or a community in one or a few productions.

Representation matters to the misrepresented for many reasons, first for the negative impacts otherness has on their lives and self-image. I would quote the British Pakistani actor Riz Ahmed when he says in the companion against misrepresentation, "dehumanizing and demonizing people legitimize hate, discriminatory laws, violence, and war"
Similar to how Hollywood has been portraying Arabs before and after invading Iraq and other countries.

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