Journey to the Imaginary East: Exploring the Representation of Eastern Cultures from an Orientalism Perspective in the Animation " Azur & Asmar: The Princes' Quest " by Michel Ocelot

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Abstract: The animations of Michel Ocelot, the French animator, who has created works largely based on the "East" stories, can be accused of reinforcing the stereotypical views of some Orientalists. While there have been studies on this matter, a direct, independent, and thorough examination of Ocelot's animated works from this perspective has not yet been conducted. This research article investigates Michel Ocelot's perspective on the representation of non-Western cultures by delving into the ancient beliefs and rituals of Arabic-speaking regions. To achieve this goal, Ocelot's animated work *Azur & Asmar* is analyzed in this article, focusing on its technique and concept using the criteria of Edward Said's definition of Orientalism. One of the most significant aspects of Michel Ocelot's view of the East is his belief in the necessity and importance of peaceful coexistence between Eastern and Western cultures, which is especially evident in *Azur & Asmar.* It seems that Ocelot believes that despite the cultural differences between these two perspectives, Westerners and Easterners can live together peacefully. Ultimately, it can be said that Michel Ocelot's approach in *Azur & Asmar* towards the concept of Orientalism and the representation of East-West interactions is neither entirely domineering and aligned with Orientalist stereotypes, nor is it fully empathetic towards Eastern cultures, beliefs, and rituals.

Introduction:

Animation is considered a very important and influential medium. It is a medium with high capabilities for storytelling and preserving cultural values and traditions. The significance of animation lies not only in its strong storytelling ability but also in the nature of its audience. Education in childhood, often likened to carving in stone, can have undeniable impacts on how the next generation views life and traditions. Therefore, the critique, analysis, and understanding of the themes and content of prominent works in this medium become all the more important. Creative and thoughtful artists in the field of animation, alongside providing entertainment, also consider intellectual nourishment for their audience. One of the underlying themes within the stories of this medium is based on the elements of Orientalism. The term "Orient" is generally used to refer to the lands located to the east of the Mediterranean Sea. However, in this context, Orientalism does not merely refer to a geographical direction or even to the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean; rather, the East and Orientalism represent a certain mindset. " In short. Oriental ism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979: 3).

Orientalism is "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and linguistic texts; it is also the construction of not only a major geographical distinction (the world is divided into two unequal halves, East and West) but also a series of 'interests' which, by means of such things as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, not only creates but also maintains it; Orientalism is rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is manifestly a different (or alternative and novel) world; above all, Orientalism is a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather originated in an unequal exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to this end" (Keshik-Navis Razavi, 1395: 32).

This article begins with an overview of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, emphasizing that Orientalism is not merely an imaginary phenomenon, but a collection of ideas and methods that have developed over centuries in the West's encounter with the East. Edward Said, a Palestinian-American thinker, is one of the most prominent theorists who has deeply examined Orientalism from a historical perspective and has conducted significant research on Orientalism, the critique of Orientalist views, and cultural imperialism. In his view, Orientalism is not an imaginary phenomenon but a collection of ideas and methods that have been formulated since the West's initial encounters with the Eastern world centuries ago. According to Edward Said, the term "Easterners" includes not only Asians but also Africans and even the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Among Europeans, the perspectives of German and Russian Orientalists are relatively milder compared to those of Orientalists from other nations. This can be understood from the way research is conducted, the selection of topics, and the manner of depicting the East and the perception of the Eastern world (Said, 1395: 16).

The reflection of Eastern culture and the portrayal of ancient African stories, beliefs, and rituals in Ocelot's animations have received mixed feedback from his audiences and critics. This representation of Eastern culture has had both supporters and detractors among viewers and critics alike. One of the theories that has been used to analyze Ocelot's animations is the theory of Orientalism. The approach of a Western animator to depicting Eastern and African cultures provides ample space for examining Ocelot's animations through the lens of Orientalism. According to the theory of Orientalism, the Westerner understanding of the East is based on the dominance of power over them and the use of Easterners to further their own objectives. By viewing Ocelot's work as a Western artist who has depicted Eastern culture in his creations, the question arises: Has he, as a Western artist, accurately represented the realities of the Eastern world? Or have the Orientalist stereotypes, as described by Edward Said, unconsciously manifested in his works?

In this animation, when Azur (meaning "azure-color" in French) and Asmar (meaning "wheat-colored" in Arabic) reach adulthood, they find each other in the African continent and then pursue their dreams. The story of the film *Azur & Asmar*, which takes place in a completely magical and wondrous setting, depicts the coexistence of a European and an African individual, who live together with two different cultures— Western and Eastern—and two languages, French and Arabic. Given the extensive use of folklore and ancient stories in animation, this research seeks to answer the question of whether Ocelot, despite being a French animator, has been able to depict African and non-Western stories in his works with a perspective close to that of the original narrators and free from Western stereotypes. "This comment is part of a standing debate, and one the film touches upon, about how far a non-Arab creator can discuss Arab culture without bringing with them the desire to colonise that has always followed the West in its approach to the Other" (Apostolou, 2009: 100).

Given Edward Said's argument that the Eastern world is constructed by the West through a form of imaginative geography, this paper examines how the East is depicted in *Azur & Asmar.* It examines how this animation presents the East as an imaginary, diverse, and complex place and what images of this imaginative geography are depicted. "By inhabiting the distant and unknown world of medieval North Africa, Ocelot transcends temporal, spatial and cultural boundaries, and attempts to comment on contemporary hostility toward the immigrant/Other in the West. His universe comprises characters who are perpetually transferred between continents, languages, traditions, standing at the liminal space of the

in-between, never quite managing to find a 'motherland'. Through the film's endless transportation, the homely is turned into the unhomely and vice versa, thus revealing the fallacy of any preconceptions, exclusions or prejudices" (Apostolou, 2009: 96).

The next section analyzes how this animation creates a confrontation between East and West. It also examines the cultural, political, and economic impacts of these representations in Michel Ocelot's animation.

Representation of the East in *Azur & Asmar: The Princes' Quest*

In *Azur & Asmar*, Ocelot's storytelling was revealed to both audiences and critics of animated films. Ocelot's style took a significant leap forward with this animation, expanding his reach within European animation. The film *Azur & Asmar* had its first unveiling during two weeks of exclusive screenings at the Directors' Fortnight at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival.

"The film starts with the image of a dark-skinned woman breastfeeding a white-skinned baby who suddenly opens his eyes wide to reveal their unique sky-blue colour, that makes him look like an angel. This is Azur. Then, another baby starts crying, and the woman takes this dark-skinned baby in her arms to breastfeed him too; his eyes are black and his name is Amar. Their names, evidently indicative of their difference__one means sky-blue in French while the other means dark in Arabic___directly associate and identify them with superstitions and discriminations long established in the cultures of the two countries: the superstition concerning the curse of the blue eyes still surviving in some individuals prevalent in the West. The fact that the two children have no surnames which would immediately ground them in a particular and unique identity clearly implies their universal character" (Apostolou, 2009, p. 104).

The contrast between these two cultures is clearly reflected in their interpretations of the meaning of blue eyes. In the European context, blue eyes are likened to those of angels, whereas in the Arab region, blue eyes are seen as a symbol of misfortune and bad luck. The film portrays this superstitious belief as an unfounded notion that lacks any evidence. Even Azur's father, upon learning of Azur's plan to save the genie, refers to "the Arab poison of Janan" in Azur's blood, illustrating the European skepticism towards Easterners.

Richard Neupert writes: "The bracketing narrative device of Princes and Princesses, with the characters planning out their shows, foregrounds that this is a movie about representation, narration, and animation. The movie also exploits frames within frames, doubling the fictional activity. The self-conscious style was also apracticalsolutionto Ocelot's original red icamentoftell ingeminated stories with almost no budget. By devising a story of characters like himself, innocently animating tales for their own pleasure, the production ends up justifying perfectly its own eccentric, home-made look. The six tales are quite different in their fictional settings, including ancient Egypt, medieval Europe, Hokusai's Japan, and even a futuristic science fiction story with rocket ships, but they share several basic plot devices in which one character must demonstrate spunk and cunning to reach their goal. The articulated paper figures prove quite compelling, thanks in large part to the vocal work of the actors and the saturated colored backgrounds. Further, the characters are built from numerous pieces with hinged body parts, and the dragon in one tale is constructed from scores of small cut-out discs, each connected with tiny hooks invisible in the projected print" (Neupert, R. 2011, p. 132).

The book *History of French Animation* tells the story of an Englishman and his Lebanese nanny, who reconnected after thirty years. It also notes that Ocelot's choice to omit subtitles for the dialogue between the two foster brothers, Azur and Asmar, was a deliberate decision intended to emphasize linguistic diversity in the world and the importance of embracing these differences. Richard Neupert, on the other hand, interprets *Azur & Asmar* as a film exploring the cultural clash between East and West, including themes of migration. He sees this conflict as "Ocelot's fanciful, carefully structured story is built around rich binary oppositions. Yet the visual style also contains many productive contrasts. While the figures are built in computers, with access to 3D, most of the film, including the backgrounds, nonetheless preserves a hand-drawn, 2D aesthetic. Much more than Kirikou and the Sorceress, Azur and Asmar creates a vibrant tension between flatness and depth. Alain Bergala points out that Ocelot seems to be exploiting a sort of pre-

Renaissance visual layout, with two incompatible perspective systems in the same film. Ocelot agrees that Azur and Asmarrecalls the fifteenth century when the illusion of depth and realistic lighting cues were voluntary. Further, Ocelot points out that artists of Persia were unconcerned with monocular perspective, and he too is not interested in creating three-dimensional imagery for most elements. His characters may shift their bodies as they walk, but the clothing remains one flat color and surface: " (Neupert, R. 2011, p. 138).

Richard Neupert continues to discuss Michel Ocelot's techniques in *Azur & Asmar*, explaining how Ocelot ignored all light sources in the clothes, as he did not prioritize the depiction of fabrics: "The figures in Azur and Asmar are thus presented in bold, uniform colors. Though the facial gestures are controlled by sliders in 3D software, the faces and bodies retain a 2D look. Ocelot has never approved of conventional, mainstream 3D visuals, so he reserves 3D modeling for only occasional details, such as Jenane's exotic jewels. For the most part, despite the access to 3D software, the depth cues in Azur and Asmar, like those in Kirikou and the Sorceress, spring primarily from overlap between foreground and background objects, while the characters generally move horizontally across the screen in one flat plane of action. Ocelot has also famously stated that characters look better in profile; straight on, he claims, they resemble potatoes. The combination of storybook settings (including medieval Europe and the Orient, wild seas, barren deserts, fantastic creatures, and vibrantly colored fairies) with strong, appealing characters, made Azur and French Animation's Renaissance 139 Asmar another major success for Ocelot and French animation. " (Neupert, R. 2011, p. 139).

In the animation *Azur & Asmar*, Michel Ocelot explores the clash of cultures, particularly between Western and Arabic cultures, addressing issues related to migration, colonialism, and the interaction between different societies. This work was released at a time when hostility towards immigrants, particularly Arabs, was on the rise in the West, and issues concerning identity, borders, and the fear of "the other" had become prominent topics. Moreover, *Azur & Asmar* places Africa at the center of attention, crossing multiple boundaries. Through this continuous movement and translation from one culture to another, from West to East, the film demonstrates that different cultures can complement each other. In this process, the film connects a culture different from the West with its primarily Western child audience, while also aiming to raise public awareness about the role of immigrants in contemporary societies.

The film highlights an unknown culture and the society of medieval North Africa, celebrating this distant and unfamiliar East, with borders imposed on everyone by past and present powers. As Pierre Bourdieu suggests, these borders. "Ocelot's film comes at a time of great hostility toward immigrants in general in the Western, developed world, and toward those of Arab origin in particular, a hostility shaped within the context of what is considered as an 'invasion' of immigrants in Europe, and the fear of terrorism that immigrants of Arab origin have been associated with since the 9/11 attacks. Within this context, borders suddenly become of paramount importance in excluding immigrants from a process of opening up, or even completely eliminating, all forms of boundaries when capital and the larger economy are concerned" (Apostolou, 2009, p. 101).

At the end of the film, Ocelot emphasizes the international nature of the production team, trying to convey a message of cooperation and peaceful coexistence among different cultures. By placing Africa at the heart of the narrative, he seeks to demonstrate to Western audiences that diverse cultures can enrich one another, and that peaceful coexistence is ultimately achievable. At the same time, the film symbolically addresses historical and contemporary conflicts between the West and the East, particularly Arabs. Azur, who has a Western father and was raised by his Eastern nanny, symbolizes this cultural conflict. Positioned in a liminal space, he belongs neither entirely to the West nor to the East. This makes him a Bicultural Individual whose identity is in flux, searching for his identity as he returns to his imagined homeland.

"Azur was brought up as the son of an alien 'mother' and native father, so he stands in his liminal space, neither here nor there; he *does* have white skin, but his upbringing identifies him with the dark continent, its threatening religion, culture, myths (something that his father acknowledges when he hints at the 'Saracen's venom' always running in his veins). His existence, therefore, is even more marginal that that of

his dark-skinned 'brother', Asmar, who can partly identify with his native culture and language" (Apostolou, 2009, p. 100).

In the end, *Azur & Asmar* reflects on the historical and cultural roots of these conflicts, reminding its audience that coexistence and mutual understanding among cultures, though challenging, are essential. Ocelot uses a story from the East and West to critique stereotypical and racist views of Arabs while emphasizing the importance of cooperation and peaceful coexistence among cultures.

Throughout the film, Azur embarks on a journey with a positive view of Jinan's homeland but encounters a different reality there—one characterized by poverty, inequality, and ugliness. This negative portrayal of the Eastern culture symbolizes the colonialist and racist attitudes that exist in the West towards Easterners. On the other hand, the relationship between Azur and Asmar also reflects the complexities of this cultural clash. Asmar, depicted as a representative of Arabic culture, humiliates Azur and asserts his superiority after gaining power and wealth. This scene illustrates the effects of colonialism and power dynamics between the East and the West, where roles are reversed, and the once-oppressed individual now acts as the dominant power.

"It can be asserted that certain realities or prominent facts are purely products of the human mind, and that these realities, though they appear to have objective presence, are actually imaginary constructs" (Said, 103). However, the film cleverly shows that not all Arabs accept these superstitious beliefs. Characters like Jeanne, Prince Shams Al-Sabah, and Asmar resist these beliefs by the end of the film. This indicates that even in societies where superstitions are deeply rooted, there are individuals who fight against these beliefs.

Krapus, the migrant beggar who comes to the region in search of the fairy, has an ambivalent view of superstitions. With having blue eyes himself, he rejects the superstition associated with them but still believes in the bad luck attributed to black cats, which is part of Arab superstitions. He also believes in the legend of the fairy and has come to this land to find it. Krapus's ambivalent perspective reflects the complexity of beliefs and the various cultural influences on individuals.

Krapus's behavior indicates that despite mocking the music and nature of this land, he is somehow dependent on it. These contradictions and dependencies symbolize the intricate interactions between different cultures and their mutual impacts on each other. The film critiques superstitions and their negative effects on societies, emphasizing the importance of understanding and mutual respect between cultures.

Michel Ocelot's film *Azur & Asmar* presents a complex and dualistic view of both Arab and European cultures. The film depicts two different cultures: European and Arabic (Eastern). While a negative view of Arab culture might initially seem apparent. However, the film does not merely present differences but attempts to blend these cultures. This is symbolized at the end of the film with a combination of French dance and the participation of all races and cultures. The marriage of Azur and Asmar to fairies of different races is also a symbol of this cultural and international blend.

In the film, the character Jinane is portrayed as a powerful and influential figure. Not only does she play a crucial role in the upbringing and education of Azur and Asmar, but she also challenges common stereotypes about women by rejecting the superstitions beliefs among people in her land and also by succeeding in business. Femininity is another characteristic often attributed to Eastern lands in the discourse of colonialism. According to this theory, "a woman is a symbol of a land (or people) that has recently been linked with a new ruler (husband) and is looking forward to sweet tomorrows. The gender of the woman is also a thought-provoking point from the postcolonial theory. In the role of a symbol of the land/colony, she represents the Orient. This phenomenon aligns with Spivak's view of assigning a feminine title to the subaltern East" (Haghighi, 2018: 79). Overall, *Azur & Asmar* delivers a message of peaceful coexistence and collaboration between cultures by depicting two distinct cultures and attempting to blend them. The film addresses not only cultural differences but also the importance of mutual respect and understanding.

" The rich colours of the forest paint a picture of majestic fruit-bearing palm trees that provide a green canopy. The scene is enhanced by instrumentation with chimes and strings reflecting the wonder of the forest. " (Shah, 2017: 119). Technically, Ocelot has used a combination of 2D and 3D animation techniques to create visually stunning and richly detailed settings. The movements of the 3D characters in the film are close to the limited movements typical of cut-out style, making the animation space recalling of Iranian miniature paintings. He did not use lighting and shading in this film, keeping the settings very simple and without chiaroscuro.

In *Azur & Asmar*, Ocelot has adeptly preserved the film's connection to its inspirational sources as well as to the cultural and environmental setting of the story. This is reflected in the film's design elements, including the intricate patterns, vivid colors, musical score, and linguistic choices. He conducted research in various African regions to ensure this authenticity. The design elements in the film, such as those in clothing and architecture, draw from traditional Eastern art and architectural motifs. The film's score is elegantly influenced by Arabic music, and in certain scenes, characters speak Arabic, with their dialogue presented without subtitles.

Ocelot, drawing from these motifs and his distinct style, has crafted a film that is richly detailed, vibrant, and dazzling. His signature approach, which continues from previous works like *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, is evident in the cutout-like animation and the flat presentation of spaces and characters. Certain segments of the film reveal inspiration from Persian miniatures, particularly in the use of flat colors without shadows and the absence of conventional perspective. The Simorgh, a bird with colorful wings from Persian miniatures and legends, infuses *Azur & Asmar* with a magical quality. This magical realm, which includes fantastical elements like the Lion Scarlet and Djinns, creates a new and imaginative universe. The combination of visual splendor and the enchanting narrative results in a captivating and magical experience.

Conclusion of the Research

Ultimately, Michel Ocelot's approach to Orientalism and the depiction of East-West interactions in his works is neither wholly imperialistic nor entirely empathetic towards Eastern cultures, beliefs, and traditions. While Ocelot acknowledges some fundamental flaws and general superstitions in the Eastern world, and the irrationality of Eastern societies, he also highlights the positive aspects of the Eastern world. He suggests that, for the East to advance, it is more beneficial to utilize its own intellectual resources rather than fully submitting to Western influences.

In *Azur & Asmar*, Azur after reaching adulthood, travels to an Eastern land to win the hand of a princess, enduring many hardships along the way. He also confronts his foster brother, Asmar, and ultimately achieves his goal. Ocelot, through his storytelling in *The Night and even *Kirikou and the Sorceress*, demonstrates that if Easterners rely on the wisdom of their wise elders, they have the ability to overcome their enemies. In this film, Ocelot both acknowledges the role of scholars in Eastern societies and addresses the widespread superstitions among these communities. Azur and Asmar ultimately succeed in reaching their goal with the help and guidance of Princess Shams Al-Sabah, who holds a high position in knowledge and learning. The role of women, traditionally depicted in Orientalist stereotypes as passive and powerless, is redefined in this film, where they play guiding roles. The goal of the two brothers is also shaped by the influence of their mother's stories. A powerful and unique character like Princess Shams Al-Sabah is rare in stories and portrayals of women. All of these indicate a breaking of the strong pre-existing stereotypes about the role of women, especially in Eastern societies.

Ocelot's commitment to the East is evident in the dialogues between Arabs spoken in Arabic. Another difference in Ocelot's perspective compared to Orientalist elements is his empathy towards migrants, which is clearly visible in this animation. He addresses both the loneliness and vulnerability of Jinan and Asmar in Azur's land and the helplessness and solitude of Azur in the Eastern land. Even Krapus is not accepted in the Eastern land. The main characters in this film have all been migrants at different times in their lives and have each struggled with this issue in their own way.

Ocelot, as an artist with a distinct personal style, continues his flat visual approach in this film. Despite the presence of three-dimensional pressures, the film still exhibits a two-dimensional space. The characters are as detailed and ornate as the motifs used in Eastern architecture. The pure and vibrant colors all recall the hues found in Eastern decorative arts and architecture.

Ocelot's aspiration is to achieve the utopia of a "world without borders." This is a dream he portrays in his works, showing that humanity still has a long way to go to reach it. In his animation, this artist strives to create a cultural reconciliation between the West and the East. In his world without borders, all people strive to live together and complement each other's lives.

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