

## **The Place from Indiana Jones: Jordan's Landscape in Film between the Historical, the Extraterrestrial, and the Aesthetic**

Mohammad Aljayyousi, Ph.D.  
English Department, Philadelphia University, Jordan  
[mohammad.aljayyousi@gmail.com](mailto:mohammad.aljayyousi@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the reference to Jordan's desert in four films: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1968), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), *The Martian* (2015), and *Dune* (2021). The films represent three genres or categories (historical, fictional, and sci-fi). The study shows that landscape in *LOA* plays a multilayered role as a stage for the rise of Lawrence as the tragic hero and part of his journey of self-discovery that makes him torn between the two worlds of the desert people and European culture. In *The Last Crusade*, the Khazneh of Petra is used to stand for the fictional Canyon of the Crescent Moon, mainly for aesthetic reasons due to its colorful terrain and magnificent Siq. In sci-fi films like *The Martian* and *Dune*, Jordan's southern desert is converted into a surrogate extraterrestrial terrain, Mars and Arrakis. The conclusion of the study explains how these three functions are fraught with orientalist overtones.

*Keywords:* Jordan in Film, Middle Eastern Representation, Hollywood and the Middle East

---

## **The Place from Indiana Jones: Jordan's Landscape in Film between the Historical, the Extraterrestrial, and the Aesthetic**

Jordan's landscapes, particularly its deserts, have played a pivotal role in global cinema, serving as more than mere backdrops. These landscapes transcend their physicality, becoming cultural and narrative constructs that reflect historical, fictional, and imaginative dimensions. From *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) to *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), *The Martian* (2015), and *Dune* (2021), Jordan's natural scenery has captured the attention of filmmakers across genres, providing an evocative space that is rich with symbolic and aesthetic potential.

This article examines the multifaceted role of Jordan's landscapes in film, highlighting their function as historical markers, fictional settings, and extraterrestrial terrains. It also explores how these landscapes shape storytelling and audience perceptions, revealing their ability to evoke wonder, signify

cultural identity, and frame complex narratives. For instance, the depiction of Wadi Rum in *Lawrence of Arabia* not only mirrors T.E. Lawrence's internal conflicts but also encapsulates a broader orientalist portrayal of the Arab world. Similarly, Petra's iconic Khazneh in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* transform into a mythical location, blending history and fantasy to create a site of cinematic intrigue. In sci-fi films like *The Martian* and *Dune*, Jordan's desert evolves into an alien terrain, showcasing its adaptability to futuristic narratives that envision worlds beyond Earth.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how Jordan's landscapes contribute to cinema's aesthetic and ideological dimensions. These films celebrate the natural beauty and cultural richness of Jordan, yet they also perpetuate orientalist stereotypes and power dynamics. By analyzing these representations through the lens of postcolonial and cultural studies, this paper reveals the complex interplay between cinematic landscapes, cultural identity, and narrative intent. It argues that while Jordan's landscapes offer filmmakers unparalleled visual and narrative opportunities, their mediated depiction often reflects broader cultural and ideological constructs that merit critical attention.

The top 100 movies list compiled by the AFI (American Film Institute) includes several films that portray Jordanian landscapes. One of these acclaimed films was *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) by the British director David Lean, who is also known for masterpieces like *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Doctor Zhivago*. The film's scenes present wide shots in the desert, such as the Wadi Rum desert, which functions as visual poem. A considerable part of that movie was shot in Jordan. There was a meeting between the late King Hussein and Director Lean. The late King did his best to facilitate everything for the film, and this is something that he was known for, reflecting a passion for intercultural understanding and world peace. In addition, the King had a vision that the film, especially early like the 1960s, would be a great publicity for tourism in Jordan, which turned out to be so true.

The film is a great one by all standards and it can easily be one of the greatest films ever made for a myriad reasons including the direction, the cinematography, and the characterization. What was the role of Jordan's landscape in this iconic film? And what are some formalistic and thematic repercussions of such use of Jordan's desert locations? These are the research questions that will be tackled in this article.

Analogically, landscape and location in film are equivalent to setting in fiction. By virtue of its technology, film language is more flexible since it has the two features of visuality and movement:

Depictions of landscapes, as complex combinations of found or chosen features, emphasize the incredible variety of possible interrelations that make up the world; cinematic landscapes, most often further complicated by movement, rely on the frame to both suggest a reading and limit the range of interpretations. (Harper, 2010, p. 17)

With that kind of flexibility, film can be ultra-realistic or fantastic, naturalistic or surrealist. In terms of setting, the generic term used is location, hence the often-used phrase "shot on location." Directors, however, usually have more than one option regarding the location of shooting. They can shoot the scenes in a studio with built-up sets, on real location (in fact, the term "shot on location" indicates this choice), or, with fantastic or sci-fi stories that take place in imaginary realms, they can resort to computer technology or "the green screen". Thus, choosing to shoot on locations is not only a practical one but can also be an aesthetic one. Directors weigh their choices carefully before making their minds on using a real location or building one in the studio. Sometimes resorting to real location, even if that means more traveling and costs, is to eschew the use of green screen or computer-generated images (CGI), as is the case in sci-fi films like some of the ones shot in Jordan as will be explained later.

When a location is used in the film narrative, it is turned into space, and this happens continuously (Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 6). When the location is a specific landscape (like the case with films shot in Wadi

Rum), the location is a natural place that is endowed with human meaning. In other words, the location becomes a space for action, and this space is both natural and human, it is then termed as landscape. So, landscape (nature with human interaction) is used in films, it can be as a spectacle or a metaphor. A spectacle, as the term shows, is when landscape is foregrounded by its spectacular beauty and visual presence, while landscape can be metaphoric, with cultural politics at stake.

When cinema retains its sense of place the *mise-en-scène* spatial meaning remains open to interpretation. In these instances, narrative films may contain a more realistic representation of a landscape where the viewer can begin to establish a cognitive map of social and physical geography. When landscape functions as a metaphor, spatial meaning is tied to the narrative's text and thus the viewer's cognitive map is influenced by the cultural politics embedded in the metaphors. (Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 15)

Landscape involves isolation of a certain spatial extent and a certain temporal length. That is, all notions of landscape are produced by human interpretation which, simply due to human physiology or due to political or cultural bias, is selective. Subsequent aesthetic treatments of landscape, whether in painting, photography or film, involve further selection, interpretation and omission, whether by an individual or group. Film language thus depends on framing or isolation by selection much like photography, and like all forms of media and art, the space provided by the film is a mediated one. In other words, the film's frame depends on isolation, foregrounding, and backgrounding, emphasis and de-emphasis.

Another introductory note is related to the choice of films to be analyzed. That depended on several factors. The Jordan's Royal Film Commission lists more than 100 films that were shot in Jordan. However not all of them are Western. A good number are Jordanian or other productions. The rest are mainly US productions (mostly Hollywood with few independent ones) and of course not all of them feature the Jordanian landscape in a significant way, at least according to the current purposes which also

required resorting to big productions from the mainstream industry since these reflect the dominant attitudes and reach wider audiences. Another factor is the reception of the film and how critically-acclaimed it is. For example, *Lawrence of Arabia* is one of the films featured in top lists and is widely known and seen globally. After examining the JFC list, the researcher came up with the following short list that includes 10 titles:

1. Lawrence of Arabia (1962), Dir. David Lean
2. Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade (1989), Dir. Steven Spielberg
3. Prometheus (2012), Dir. Ridley Scott
4. The Last Days on Mars (2013)
5. Queen of the Desert (2015), Dir. Werner Herzog
6. X-Men: Apocalypse (2015), Dir. Bryan Singer
7. The Martian (2015), Dir, Ridley Scott
8. Rogue One: A Star Wars Story (2017), Dir. Gareth Edwards
9. Aladdin (2019), Dir. Guy Ritchie
10. Dune (2021), Dir. Denis Villeneuve

These films can be classified into three categories. The first one is historical films, which are based on historical events that took place either in Jordan, at least in part, or in a country close or similar to Jordan. Sometimes filmmakers use alternative locations for economic or logistic reasons. For example, the target country might be inaccessible for one reason or another, usually due to politics or safety. One example of this is the Oscar-winning film, *The Hurt Locker (2009)*, which tells the story of a bomb disposal team during the Iraq war. Instead of being shot in the original location, the Iraq segments in the film were shot in Eastern Jordan and the city of Mafraq. This suggests that Jordan seemed a safer and a more convenient choice, especially that it is also a neighboring country. These choices sometimes create

complications especially in terms of lifestyle specifics such as dressing and dialects like hearing the Jordanian dialect from someone who is supposed to be Iraqi.

The second category is fictional films that chose Jordan as one of their fictional locations, usually for the fantastic touch places like Petra and its Khazanah can give. Sometimes the climactic scene of the film is given to Jordan such as the case with *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989).

The last category is science fiction movies. Those are futuristic films that chose Jordan as an extraterrestrial terrain. We have two directions here, either Jordan is a surrogate terrain for a real planet, like Mars in *The Martian*, or it is the extraterrestrial imaginary planet, like *Dune*. These two films are among the shortlisted ones to be discussed below. Most of the ensuing discussion will go to LOA for justifiable reasons and another three films from each of the previous categories will be discussed. The discussions are not balanced since more focus is directed to LOA. Brief comments, however, focused on some of the remaining films in the list which include a significant aspect.

### **Literature Review**

The role of landscapes in cinema has been a significant area of inquiry, with scholars emphasizing their aesthetic, narrative, and ideological functions. Graeme Harper's *Cinema and Landscape* (2010) provide a foundational framework for understanding how cinematic landscapes create meaning, highlighting their dual role as both a visual spectacle and a narrative element. Harper argues that landscapes are not merely passive backdrops but active participants in storytelling, shaping audience interpretation through framing, movement, and cultural context. This perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing films set in Jordan, where landscapes often embody layered meanings.

Lukinbeal's (2005) concept of "cinematic landscapes" further explores this idea, emphasizing how natural locations are transformed into spaces of human meaning through the medium of film. His argument that landscapes are both natural and human spaces resonates with the use of Jordan's deserts,

which serve as both dramatic settings and cultural symbols in films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Dune*. In a similar vein, Martin Lefebvre's *Landscape and Film* (2006) investigates the relationship between cinematic landscapes and narrative structures, arguing that landscapes can function as metaphors, reflecting cultural, historical, or psychological dimensions.

The specific use of Jordan's landscapes in cinema has been addressed in various scholarly works. Sumayah Abed's *Deserts in Cinema: A Cultural Geography* (2017) explores the role of desert landscapes in shaping narratives and cultural perceptions, noting how Jordan's Wadi Rum has become synonymous with cinematic depictions of Mars and otherworldly terrains. This aligns with Davis's observations (2021) on the "analogue simulation" phenomenon in *The Martian*, where real-world locations replace digital simulations to enhance authenticity.

Orientalist critiques of cinematic landscapes are central to understanding the ideological implications of films shot in Jordan. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) provides a critical lens for examining how Western films depict the Middle East as an exotic and othered space. Laura Marks' essay "Asphalt Nomadism" (2006) applies Said's framework to analyze desert landscapes in Arab and Western films, arguing that these spaces often symbolize cultural otherness and serve as sites for Western characters' self-discovery. This is evident in *Lawrence of Arabia*, where the desert becomes a stage for Lawrence's transformation from a British officer to a "blue-eyed Bedouin."

Sci-fi films like *The Martian* and *Dune* expand this discourse by portraying Jordan's landscapes as alien terrains. Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (1987) discusses how sci-fi films use landscapes to explore the boundaries of human experience and imagination. Sobchack's insights on the interplay between real-world locations and speculative narratives illuminate how films like *The Martian* use Jordan's Wadi Rum to evoke the unfamiliarity of Mars while grounding it in visual realism. Similarly, Mark Bould's *Science Fiction: The Routledge Film Guidebook* (2012)

examines how sci-fi films construct fictional worlds through a mix of real and imagined elements, offering a framework for analyzing the visual and narrative strategies in *Dune*.

The historical dimension of Jordan's cinematic landscape is equally significant. Roger Ebert's reviews of *Lawrence of Arabia* emphasize how David Lean's direction elevates the desert to a character, reflecting Lawrence's psychological journey. Peter Bradshaw's (2017) review in *The Guardian* echoes this sentiment, describing the film as a visual masterpiece that uses Jordan's landscapes to convey the vastness and complexity of Lawrence's experience. These perspectives are complemented by Kathryn Bigelow's commentary on filming *The Hurt Locker* in Jordan, which highlights the practical and symbolic reasons for choosing the country as a stand-in for Iraq.

The intersection of tourism and cinema is a recurring theme in studies of Jordan's cinematic landscape. Eliasoph (2014) documents how films like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* have boosted tourism in Petra, transforming it into a global icon. Similarly, Jack G. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001) critiques the duality of cinematic representation, where landscapes like Jordan's are celebrated for their beauty but also implicated in perpetuating stereotypes about Arab cultures.

This literature review underscores the complexity of Jordan's cinematic landscapes, situating them within broader discussions on aesthetics, narrative, ideology, and cultural politics. By drawing on diverse scholarly perspectives, it provides a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the multifaceted role of Jordan's deserts in film.

### **Interpretive Analysis of Selected Movies**

#### **Lawrence of Arabia (1962): "A Blue-Eyed Bedouin"**

Any discussion of Jordan in film would naturally begin with *Lawrence of Arabia* (LOA). This monumental film by David Lean won several awards including a Best Picture Oscar and is often voted

as one of the greatest films ever produced. The film tells the life story of Lawrence of Arabia (played by Peter O'Toole) based on Lawrence's autobiographical book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1962), with certain creative liberty on the part of the director. Lawrence's adventures in Arabia took place in Egypt, the Arab Peninsula, and the Greater Syria. The locations where the film scenes reflecting those events were shot in Jordan, Spain and Morocco. Thus, Jordan is the only real location that is featured in the film, where "real" does not signify a documentary treatment of the story material. Lawrence had been to Jordan but not necessarily in the exact spots featured in the film, nor in the same kind of interaction. Moreover, the Jordan-based sections of the film might also have been used to represent some other parts of Arabia where Lawrence had wandered. Like all literary and artistic productions, we end up having three versions of the story: the Lawrence of history, the Lawrence of the text of history (his book and other sources), and the Lawrence of the film who has elements from the other versions.

LOA was the first film to present Jordan's southern desert and the mountains and dunes of Wadi Rum in a powerful way to the degree that the Jordanian landscape in the film can be considered another character. As the famous film critic Roger Ebert puts it, the film "uses the desert as a stage for the flamboyance of a driven, quirky man". Lean should be given the credit for starting what has developed into a pattern in many films whose setting is the desert. Jordan became a favorite destination for many of these. Lean manipulates the Jordanian desert not merely as a background but also as an active actor in the narrative. For a biopic, the main character is the focus, and it is not different in LOA. Lawrence is the progenitor of events but also often falls victim to them.

The epic representation of Lawrence's life happens within a triad consisting of his personality, war, and the Arabian desert (represented for a great portion of the film by Jordan's desert). He is being forged in two furnaces: war and the sunny desert. Like iron in fire, Lawrence's character bends, weakens but also stretches and becomes more flexible. The three elements are not in harmony all the time. In fact,

conflict seems to be the norm. Lawrence defies the emotionlessness of war by engaging with it passionately and this makes him sometimes change loyalties. The Arabian desert is both Lawrence's challenge and haven. As an alien space, Lawrence will struggle until he feels comfortable, but the desert is also an escape from the routine of the army's life.

In addition to this tripartite external conflict, there is also an internal one that takes place within the soul of Lawrence. He finds himself torn between his allegiance to his home country, England, and his passion for his new desert friends among which he feels at home. On several occasions, he finds himself choosing the desert people over his countrymen like when he ignores the orders from Cairo to not try to attack Aqaba.

We are first introduced to the desert in a notable transition shot that some deem the best transition ever made in film. The shot starts with Lawrence at the office of General Allenby (after he tells him about his new mission in Arabia). Lawrence lights a match and then the scene cuts to the desert at dawn. Visually, the scene is fascinating. However, narratively, the shot is not meant to indicate an easy entrance to the desert on Lawrence's part. We are just introduced to the beauty of the new landscape. The transition also marks the shift from Cairo to the Arabian desert and from Lawrence as an ordinary army officer to someone with an important mission. Following that scene, a series of wide shots follow that juxtapose the tiny figures of Lawrence and his Bedouin guide to the vastness of the desert.

The desert in these shots is awe-inspiring with the double meaning of "awe" equally present (respect and surprise). One of the general effects of the introductory shots is diminishing Lawrence at the cost of the desert's presence, and this foreshadows Lawrence's imminent fall for the desert and its people. The powerful introduction of the desert, both visually and narratively, prepares the stage for Lawrence to rise as a hero, albeit with tragic overtones as we will come to know with the advent of events. In other words, there is a dual narrative function of these introductory scenes: showing the vastness of the desert

and the incomparable power of Lawrence (or any human being for that purpose) to it and preparing the stage for Lawrence's rise as a hero.

Using an Orientalist lens, the desert becomes more significant than the landscape of the other. Laura Marks goes on to claim that films like LOA "comprise an 'eastern' genre, an orientalist adaptation of American cowboy movies with Arabs standing in for the Indians". A less harsh view is expressed by Natarajan (2020) in the following segment:

As a rogue army officer, Lawrence is the counterpart of the cowboys in the Western. Like them, he takes on the mantle of negotiating the desert's wilderness, even though, like the frontier in the Western, there are others living there with better survival skills. (p. 73)

Lawrence's heroism is also tested in the face of the inhabitants of the desert, the Bedouin tribes, and their socio-cultural code. Lawrence's original mission was to understand the mentality of those Arabs in order to influence their decisions and gain their confidence to the benefit of Great Britain (GB). He might be compared, in this context, to the Napoleon of Egypt who fakes conversion to Islam in order to control the Egyptians. In normal circumstances, this should make a typical colonialist, but in Lawrence's case, it is much more complicated. Director Lean creates both an action hero and a tragic hero. Lawrence is not presented as an English Hercules, though he seems as larger-than-life, or a Hamlet but a mixture of them. This is one cornerstone of the film's greatness. Viewers witness the first victory of Lawrence when he and the Arab tribesmen were passing the Nefud desert on their way to Aqaba, and against the "rules of engagement" of roaming the desert, he insists on going back to rescue the stranded Bedouin boy.

In the memorable scene featuring him coming back victorious after rescuing the boy, viewers see him emerging gradually against the vast desert horizon to be greeted and hailed with Bedouin chants.

From now on, Lawrence starts to develop his own agenda, which later contradicts that of the official policy of GB, and even goes on to disobey the orders of his superiors. This inaugurates his path to the tragic fall and his becoming a man torn between two worlds and two allegiances. The reasons that make Lawrence take this path are deeper than his compassion and admiration for his new Arab friends and their lifestyle and ideals. What begins as compassion transforms into identification with the moral code of the Arab Bedouins and a break from the pragmatic schemes of GB. In the scene when Prince Ali, who is played by Omar Sharif, explains to Lawrence that they are going to have limited number of drinks while crossing the Nefud desert in order to preserve water and tells him that he is exempted from this self-imposed rule since he is not “Bedu”, Lawrence adamantly tells him that “I will drink when you will”. His official mission does not require this total identification with the Arabs, but Lawrence seems taken away by their moral code and dares himself to live up to it.

This is the gist of Lawrence’s internal conflict. One of the film’s posters demonstrates this aspect of the film beautifully by making his face half-lighted and half-dark. His complexion is also brownish or Arabish. We cannot see his eyes which lie in the darkened part. The film ends with a note about this internal conflict, with Lawrence as a disturbed man who must leave the war, physically but never psychologically or spiritually. We see him being driven back home following the orders and in what was supposed to be a promotion and appreciation of his service. We part with him seeing him through the blurred glass of the Jeep. Natarajan (2020) summarizes the transformation of Lawrence in the following passage:

The dramatic change in Lawrence, from the cheeky and cynical young officer to the affable companion to his Bedu guide, suggests an immediate affective softening. The gentle movement of the camels in the spectacular golden desert contrasts with the harsh roar of the motorbike and is sensuous. (p. 79)

The film does not end with Lawrence's death. In fact, the opening scene that starts with the credits shows his death by motorcycle accident and then we see journalists talking about him before we move back in time to his service in Cairo before being sent to Arabia. It is as if Lean wanted to say that his real death was when his mission in Arabia ended. He looks like a knight from the Middle Ages who was sent through a time travel device to a modern war. The imminent result is a conflict of ideals. Peter Bradshaw (2017) in his review of the film in the Guardian expresses a similar thought:

But Lawrence's own loyalties become divided, and he falls in love with the Arab nations and all their fondly (or condescendingly) imagined ascetic martial heroism, perhaps the way Byron did with Greeks during the war of independence a century before.

Lawrence wanted to behave as a knight rather than a colonialist and this led to his tragic end, even if only at the psychological level. Jordan's landscape is one side of the triangle (Lawrence, War, the desert) that drives the action and decides the fate of the hero in the film.

### **Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade (1989): "The Fantastic Temple"**

This film belongs to the second category of films that use Jordan as a fictional place. It is a sequel to the more acclaimed film by Steven Spielberg, *Raiders of the Lost Arch*. Starting from the second one, the sequels took the name of the protagonist of the series, the adventurer and archaeologist, Dr. Henry Walton "Indiana" Jones, Jr., played by Harrison Ford in all the parts. The plot, which recurs in all the installments of the franchise, is about the quest for the legendary Holy Grail. The action-packed story is also a competition and rat-race with the Nazis for the Grail. *The Last Crusade* includes two additional elements. First, viewers meet Jones's father, played by Sean Connery, and second, the Grail is found at last. The climactic scene would naturally be with the finding of the Grail, and the location chosen to stand for the Holy Grail Temple is Petra's Al-Khazneh. Spielberg's work with Petra is "made-to-measure" as Gowlett thinks (1990, p.157), and it is said that the film gave a boost to tourism to Petra and Jordan and Westerners

nicknamed the site as “the place from *Indiana Jones*”. Philip Eliasoph wrote an interesting travelog piece tracing the route to “the jaw dropping revelation in Spielberg’s 1989 “*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*” of ancient Petra’s temples” (2014, p. 44).

The Khazneh is said to be the entrance to the Temple at the fictional Canyon of the Crescent Moon where the quest for the Grail ends. Choosing Petra and Khazneh as the venue for the climactic scene is due to the natural beauty of the place in addition to its historical aura. The facade of the Khazneh is impossible to neglect. A fantasy adventure like *The Last Crusade* requires such a magnificent location especially for its culmination. More convenience and attraction are secured by the famous Siq that leads to the Khazneh. No filmmaker can resist the temptation of filming his star hero riding through the Siq until the facade of the Khazneh is gradually revealed which creates an out-of-this-world experience. This is what we see in the last sequence in the film: In terms of cinematography, contrasting the rose-colored Khazneh with Jones’s silhouette is eye-candy. When the Joneses reach the end of the Siq, they are amazed by what they see. In other words, they transform into tourists.

Just like Wadi Rum dunes in LOA, the Khazneh (the entrance to the fictional cave), poses a challenge to the Western hero. He stands in awe but with confidence that he is able to conquer it and then emerge from adversity to enjoy its beauty, this time as a tourist. An important observation that deserves a little elaboration is related to the duality of roles. Jones and his company are on a quest, one that requires supernatural heroism. Such a grand mission does not prevent them from “stopping by woods” (in Robert Frost’s words) to enjoy the scene. This stopping might be a break within the quest, or a self-reward taken at the completion of the mission. Both are featured in *The Last Crusade*. Jones here is the tourist-hero or the hero-tourist. Petra is not only a candy for the eye but a chance for the hero to be a tourist, even if ephemerally. Also, like LOA, there is a visual juxtaposition between the hero and his company and the grand location. Jones and his father are shown as tiny dots in front of the Khazneh. This is to exaggerate

their soon-to-be-achieved feat (in this case it is the capture of the Holy Grail after going through some intricate traps). In this sense, Jones has more resonance with Hercules than Lawrence.

In another shot toward the end of the film and after the completion of the mission, we see the Sean Connery character (Jones. Sr.) trying to fit what looks like a head scarf or “silik”. He is probably trying to imitate the locals, protect his head from the heat of the sun, or celebrate the success of the adventure. The scarf looks fake and can easily be spotted and ridiculed by the natives. However, this is a typical tourist attitude.

#### **V. The Martian (2015): “A Terrestrial Mars”**

This film belongs to the group the researcher identifies as “Extraterrestrial”, and they are films that present a sci-fi plot with Jordan landscape (Mostly Wadi Rum) used as surrogate for a real territory. The film uses Jordan's landscape as an extraterrestrial terrain to magnificently represent the exterior shots on the planet, Mars, which contrast with the scenes on Earth. One might wonder why Jordan seems appealing and fitting as an extraterrestrial location. The Martian is a good example of what can be called “analogue simulation” to differentiate it from the more common digital simulation, using computer technology. From our literary and aesthetic lens, this is an interesting phenomenon. Fiction writers of fantasy or sci-fi genres used to depend on verbal descriptions that appeal to the imaginary arsenal of the readers, and playwrights, with the help of limited (and limiting) stage props and mise-en-scene, could “conjure” some alien worlds on stage. Now, films have taken us literally to new worlds, and full-fledged ones.

What made Wadi Rum a popular destination for directors who were seeking inspirational locations or wished to go for “analogue” rather than digital simulation choose this place? On the visual, topographical level, Rum has sand dunes that look pristine and uncharted, and this is one feature that sci-fi filmmakers look for. But this is not unique to the place. In my opinion, what is a unique aspect is the combination of perfectly shaped dunes and darkly colored Rocky Mountains. This combination, which

naturally recalls alien worlds, is hard to find elsewhere. Directors and cinematographers love this kind of visual uniqueness. In several scenes in the film, we see the Matt Damon character, Astronaut Mark Watney, with the background of Rum mountains (posing as Martian mountains), and sometimes with a vehicle cruiser. The Rum landscape here is contracted with future technology. With affinity with LOA, landscapes here are also a challenge. The astronaut left alone on Mars has a battle for survival, and this battle gets greater in an alien world. He must be the first farmer and settler on Mars. To conclude this part, *The Martian* is a good example of experimenting with what I called “analogue simulation”. The location provides endless visual possibilities for driving the narrative forward and making it look realistic.

#### **VI. Dune (2021): “An Alien Planet Amongst Us”**

Dune is a recent film (2021), and it is based on a sci-fi novel with the same name by the writer, Frank Herbert, published in 1965. The film, much like *Star Wars*, presents a world with nation-planets. Each planet has its own climate, landscape, and a corresponding “alien” nation or tribe. Wadi Rum is used to represent the planet Arrakis and its desert people. It seems an obvious choice due to the natural beauty of the Rum desert and its “dunes”, and the topographic and colorful combination we talked about before. Here, one might also say that the title of the film leads naturally to the dunes of Rum. The crew of the film pointed to the inspirational nature of the place as Horst reports here:

The colors of the rocks in the Jordanian desert inspired West’s costumes for Arrakis, the desert planet. When the head of locations, Peter Bardsley, went to Jordan, West asked him to bring back rocks and vials of sand: “There was like a kind of coral color, a rose color, a peach color, a beige kind of tan color.” She still has the sand and rocks in her L.A. office. (Horst, 2021)

What is different here is that we have an alien nation “The Arrakis people” who inhabit this fictional planet that Wadi Rum is used to stand for. In LOA, Bedouin tribes and Arab royalties were

presented, and, in *The Martian*, no alien race is featured since Martians are scientifically impossible. In *Dune*, by contrast, the alien race is invented but not totally from outside the box. The costumes, for example, seem to be inspired by local people too. The depiction of the Arrakis people who inhabit the harsh planet have strong post-colonial overtones. Due to the spice Melange, a natural resource in high demand all over the galaxy, the planet is subject to control by the imperial proxies. Different nations take turns in invading and colonizing the planet for the valuable spice. In this sense, Arrakis and its people seem to have affinity with third-world nations that were subject to imperialist greed.

In *The Martian*, Wadi Rum stands for Mars and perfectly fulfills this role. No human being has had first-hand experience on the planet yet, but we are accustomed to NASA images besides previous sci-fi films. The planet is also known as the red planet. So, our expectations are met in the film. In *Dune*, on the other hand, we have no previous conceptions about the planet Arrakis. So, the director should be freer in his depiction of the alien planet. However, Jordan with its dunes and Rocky Mountains and the colorful contrast they create were hard to neglect as a location for the fictional planet.

### **Conclusion**

Jordan's landscape in the films that have been discussed functions as a space for action, a surrogate for similar historical sites, or an otherworldly, extraterrestrial terrain. This triangle of functions, visualized in this figure, confirms the possibilities offered by this natural stretch:

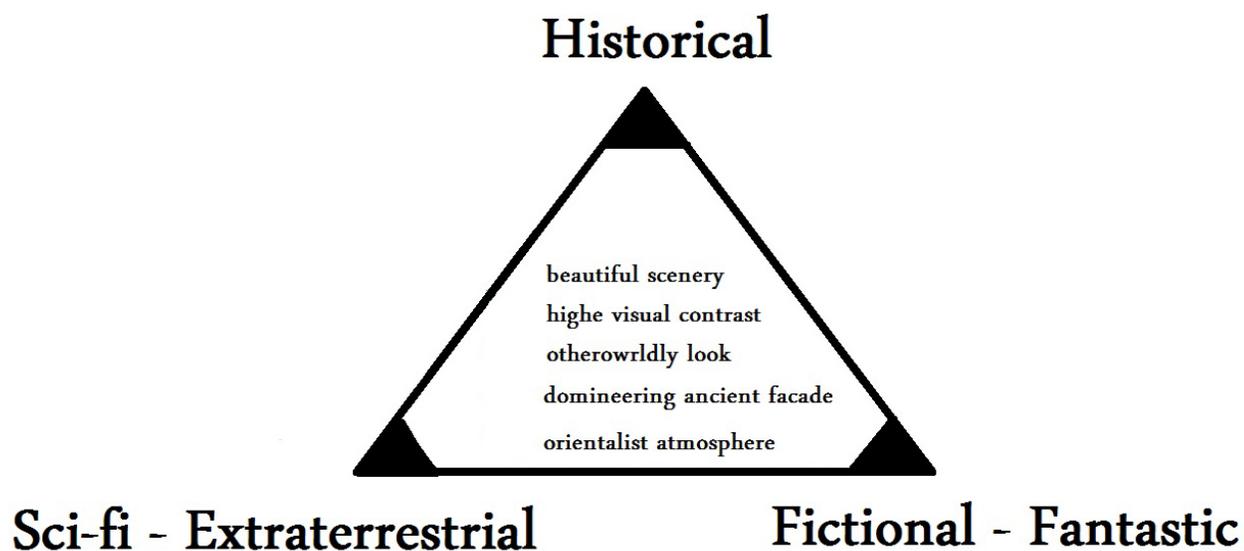


Figure 1

*The Triangle of Functions Served by the Jordanian Landscape Portrayed in Movies*

However, the functions are neither natural nor automatic since we, in the humanities realm, know better than claiming any essentialist value. The beauty of Jordan's nature is made into landscape by human interaction. Further, it is endowed with extra meaning by mediated treatment, as the case is in film. There is some form of ideology behind any cultural production; therefore, using Jordan's landscape in that tripartite function, entails a set of expectations, preconceptions and aesthetic traditions. Hopefully, the previous discussion has illustrated this.

From an Orientalist, Saidian perspective, the relation between the desert and the Western character takes place in a duality of roles and with a set of paradoxical attitudes. The character, such as Lawrence or Indiana Jones, starts with an explorer / colonialist attitude. The desert is an alien land, the land of the other and, of course, an uncivilized terrain, both geographically and demographically. With the advent of the narrative, the hero gains confidence or at least develops more familiarity with the place,

and he or she assumes the role of the tourist. The place now reveals its mesmerizing beauty, often an exotic one. The land shifts from a menace to a sight, and from a challenge to a playground.

Part of this duality and paradoxicality is a psychological influence. The oriental land is a site for initiation for the Western hero. We witness this effect in *LOA*, although the psychological influence, besides personal growth, is disturbing. Collectively too, the invaders in sci-fi films when they encounter the desert planets (like in *Dune*), leave changed, usually in a positive manner. The challenge of the desert teaches them a moral lesson.

Film as a medium provides extra possibilities (and limitations for that matter). Jordan's landscape as a directorial choice is also a pragmatic and an economic one. It can help avoid the use of simulated locations. More importantly by virtue of framing (i.e. Isolations and selection), film shots can create and recreate, present and represent real locations. For example, in the scene where Lawrence is coming from the distance appearing as a tiny dot. The background of the desert is shown as dominating vastness because of this framing. In addition, with the progress of the shot, Lawrence on the camel carrying the saved boy gets bigger to take over the place of the desert. Here, the vastness of the desert is replaced by the vastness of the hero. In terms of color, sci-fi films like *The Martian* often tend to manipulate color tuning to the desired effect. For creating a Martian atmosphere, red tones are raised. On the other hand, in a film like *Dune*, the look is more yellowish.

The last conclusive remark is related to the deserted people, especially in sci-fi films. Jordan's landscape seems to serve well as the alien space, but parallel with this, is the creation of the corresponding nation or people, the desert people, like the Arrankis nation in *Dune*. The customs, traditions, and fate of those people recall third-world nations, or postcolonial communities. This indicates a persistent Eurocentric view. Further study of this phenomenon is recommended.

Last, the limitations of this study include its reliance on a selected corpus of films, which may not fully represent the broader scope of cinematic depictions of Jordanian landscapes. Additionally, the analysis primarily emphasizes visual and narrative elements, potentially overlooking other dimensions such as audience reception or the perspectives of local communities on these portrayals. The study also draws heavily on Western productions, leaving space for further exploration of Jordanian or regional films that engage with these landscapes differently. Future research could expand this scope by including a more diverse range of films and integrating interdisciplinary approaches to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of using Jordanian landscapes in cinema.

## References

- Abed, S. (2017). *Deserts in cinema: A cultural geography*. Routledge.
- American Film Institute. (n.d.). *AFI's 100 years...100 movies*.  
<https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-movies/>
- Bigelow, K. (Director). (2009). *The hurt locker* [Film]. Summit Entertainment.
- Bould, M. (2012). *Science fiction: The Routledge film guidebook*. Routledge.
- Bouzereau, L. (Director). (2003). *The making of Lawrence of Arabia* [Film]. Columbia Pictures.
- Bradshaw, P. (2017, September 20). *Lawrence of Arabia* review – David Lean’s sandy epic still radiates greatness. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/20/lawrence-of-arabia-review-david-lean-peter-o-toole>
- Davis, H. (2021, September 21). Wadi Rum’s extraterrestrial landscape brings sci-fi movie “Dune” to life. *The Jordan Times*. <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/wadi-rums-extraterrestrial-landscape-brings-sci-fi-movie-%E2%80%98dune%E2%80%99-life>
- Edwards, G. (Director). (2017). *Rogue One: A Star Wars story* [Film]. Lucasfilm Ltd.
- Ebert, R. (n.d.). *Lawrence of Arabia* movie review (1962). *RogerEbert.com*.  
<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-lawrence-of-arabia-1962>
- Eliasoph, P. (2014, June–August). Bucket list bonanza: Petra’s ancient pagan sites inspired *Indiana Jones* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. *VENUE*, 24, 44–45.
- Gowlett, J. (1990). Indiana Jones: Crusading for archaeology? *Antiquity*, 64(242), 157.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00077355>
- Harper, G. (Ed.). (2010). *Cinema and landscape*. Intellect Books.
- Herzog, W. (Director). (2015). *Queen of the desert* [Film]. IFC Films.
- Horst, C. (2021, September 17). “Dune” costume designers break down the construction of stillsuits

and each planet's unique look. *Yahoo Entertainment*.

<https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/dune-costume-designers-break-down-161549308.html>

Lawrence, T. E. (1962). *Seven pillars of wisdom: A triumph*. Penguin Books.

Lean, D. (Director). (1962). *Lawrence of Arabia* [Film]. Columbia Pictures.

Lefebvre, M. (Ed.). (2006). *Landscape and film*. Routledge.

Lukinbeal, C. (2005). Cinematic landscapes: Theoretical perspectives on the cinematic city. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 23(1), 3–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08873630509478223>

Marks, L. U. (2006). Asphalt nomadism: The new desert in independent Arab cinema. In M. Lefebvre (Ed.), *Landscape and film* (pp. 125–148). Routledge.

McCarthy, T. (2015, September 11). *The Martian*: TIFF review. *The Hollywood Reporter*.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/martian-tiff-review-820882/>

Natarajan, N. (2020). *Romance and power in the Hollywood Eastern*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ritchie, G. (Director). (2019). *Aladdin* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures.

Robinson, R. (Director). (2013). *The last days on Mars* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Scott, R. (Director). (2012). *Prometheus* [Film]. Twentieth Century Fox.

Scott, R. (Director). (2015). *The Martian* [Film]. Twentieth Century Fox.

Shaheen, J. G. (2001). *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people*. Interlink Publishing.

Singer, B. (Director). (2015). *X-Men: Apocalypse* [Film]. Twentieth Century Fox.

Sobchack, V. (1987). *Screening space: The American science fiction film*. Rutgers University Press.

Spielberg, S. (Director). (1989). *Indiana Jones and the last crusade* [Film]. Lucasfilm Ltd.

Travis, B. (2020, August 31). *Dune*: Timothée Chalamet on the “awe-inspiring” desert shoot –

exclusive images. *Empire*. <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/news/dune-timothee-chalamet-on-the-awe-inspiring-desert-shoot-exclusive-images/>

Villeneuve, D. (Director). (2021). *Dune* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.