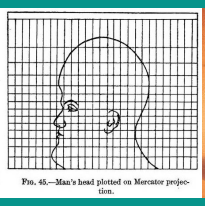
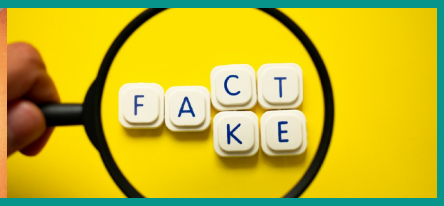
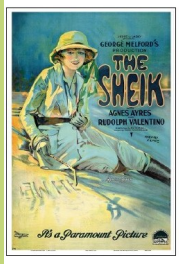

Fig. 44.—Man's head plotted on stereographic projection.

Fig. 45.—Man's head plotted on Mercator projection.

I. FIRST PART: What to expect from *The Sheik*?

In groups, carefully study the posters for the 1921 American silent movie *The Sheik* starring Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres and get ready to discuss the following questions.







1.Paying close attention to clothes and gestures, imagine the plot of the movie.

The female wears the stereotypical Euro-centred or occidental colonial outfit. Sitting on the sand, she obviously travelled to an "Oriental" setting in the Middle East. What she is writing in the sand is not that clear – it could either be "He/Me" or "Help me," alluding to themes noticeable in the second poster. There is obviously desire, but the gestures are charged with physical tension and violence (hint at strangling; and position of submission from the woman) – she must have been abducted by the man referred to as the Sheik, wearing exotic clothes, and placed in an archetypal Oriental palace. The third poster clearly shows a closeness has developed between the characters, despite the conflictual, violent, utterly criminal context of their meeting: this is the cliché of the fantasized so-called love story in which the victim of abduction falls in love with her "Oriental" captor.

2.What would you say about the presentation of the cultural setting in general, and more specifically of the male character?

The setting is a summary of all the cultural fantasies regarding what is called the "Orient," through place, clothes and behaviours. The man is a warrior, but he is also dressed in an elegant, highly ornamented outfit, which seems even more precious than the woman's. On the third poster, his lips look as red as the woman's. His elegance and delicacy are qualities traditionally associated with women. Moreover, one might notice the low-cut neckline, opening onto his torso, and turning the male character (more than the female one) into a visual object of pleasure: the Sheik is definitely sexualized, presented as a potential object of sexual desire.

3.Do you think a love story can be expected between the female and male characters? Why or why not?

There is a clear opposition between the occidental, blond woman and the male embodiment of all the (European/western) archetypes related to the East; but it does not seem to prevent a relationship from emerging.

II. SECOND PART: Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)



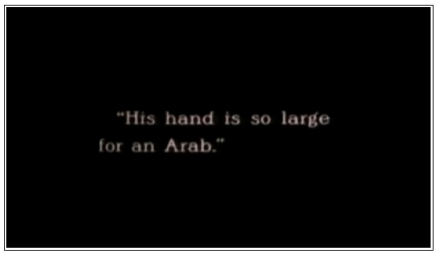
4.Get more familiar with the concept of "orientalism" by watching and taking notes about the *BBC* video available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZST6qnRR1mY.

You may read excerpts from Lorenzo Forlani's article on Célène as a detailed summary of "Orientalism" ("Said's book is 45").

III. THIRD PART: The Other in *The Sheik*

5.It has been polemically suggested recently, notably because of the historical, racial context in Victor Fleming's 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind*, that warning labels and disclaimers should accompany works of art.

Given the conceptual framework provided here, can you try and explain to viewers it might (legitimately) offend that line from *The Sheik*, uttered by the female character sitting at the bedside of the Sheik after he has been wounded in battle? How does it relate to Orientalism?

According to Said's theory, the "Oriental" man has been constructed by "Westerners" as the opposite of the values they cherish and wish to appropriate. An essentialist view of the world imposes that men from the West embody masculinity and virility – as a result, the Oriental man is pictured as more transgressive of gender codes, that is to say slightly "effeminate" from a patriarchal, binary point of view, hence the small, delicate hands expected from an Arab by the occidental woman.

6.In this light, can you comment upon the closely linked gender and racial issues raised by the movie as far as Rudolph Valentino's character is concerned?

The Sheik can be sexually objectified because in the context of the movie he is the Other and not a white man. As such, he can be constructed (just like African-Americans were) as a passionate, sensual being, utterly driven by desire (in opposition to reason valued and so appropriated by the West). At the time, exposing one's body would have been a form of vulnerability, irreconcilable with the strength associated with traditional, Western views of masculinity: a white man would not have been treated the same way in the movie. It is acceptable from the Sheik precisely because he epitomizes "the Other".

7.In this context, what would you see as one of the reasons Rudolph Valentino, who became Hollywood's first male sex symbol, was chosen for the part?

Valentino is an Italian immigrant, so not exactly a White man from the American perspective at the time. As a foreign, slightly exotic man, he can be treated, like the character of the Sheik, as a potential visual object of pleasure without threatening the values traditionally associated with white masculinity.

8.At the end of the day, given everything that has been said, do you believe a love story between the characters is still possible? Why or why not?

The two characters stand for two worlds constructed as different, plainly put, "races" constructed as antagonist. American culture and literature, especially in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, show traces of what has been coined a fear of **miscegenation**, that is to say a fear of interracial sexual relations, in keeping with a strict segregation between what were constructed as different races. A relation between the Sheik and the western woman would not have been socially acceptable – unless one realizes that the man has hands that are "so large for an Arab" precisely because he was adopted and is actually the son of an Englishman and a Spaniard. Now the two are socially allowed to be in love.