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Martina Bär and Franz Winter (eds.)

**Representations of
Islam and Muslims in Film**
From Stereotype to Scenescape

SCHÜREN

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JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

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Representations of Islam and Muslims in Film

From Stereotype to Scenescape Editorial

In an era when media and their narratives significantly shape public perceptions, it is imperative we examine and broaden our understanding of how Islam – a religious and cultural tradition of remarkable depth and diversity – is portrayed on screen. For decades now, the depiction of Islam in film and television has often been reduced to a narrow set of stereotypes, often caricatures of Islam or Muslims portrayed as shadowy villains, sinister figures, and potential terrorists.¹ This final, and frequent, portrayal is associated with the events of 9/11 and their aftermath and with various global political and social developments.² Found across media, it was taken up in particular by the entertainment industry.³ This depiction was not entirely new, as a thorough survey of the representation of Islam in US-American cinema since 1979 has made evident,⁴ but only if Islam was a topic at all.⁵ However, the first decades of the twenty-first century have seen a deepening of the negative stereotypes.⁶

Current scholarship on this topic has pointed to the one-sidedness of such depictions and the problems they create.⁷ Indeed, one-dimensional narratives not only misrepresent the rich traditions and practices of Islam

1 Petersen 2021a, 1–2; Ardizzoni 2021; Valentin 2014.

2 Rane/Ewart/Martinkus 2014, 29–46; Flood/Hutchings/Miazhevich/Nickels 2012.

3 Petersen 2021a, 1–2, pointing to various examples from Britain, France, India, China, and the United States, and Afaqi 2025, on India's Bollywood industry.

4 McAlister 2005, 198–234.

5 See, for instance, the survey in Bodman 1980.

6 Alsultany 2012, 18–46.

7 See also the recent collections and studies in Petersen 2021b; Petersen 2021c; O'Brien 2021; also Staiger/Valentin/Orth 2014 and the relevant section in Valentin 2002.

but also enhance the skewed perception of Islam in the West.⁸ This issue seeks to counter such tendencies, but without falling into the trap of being merely apologetic. To that end it provides a rich and diverse collection of contributions on aspects of how Islam and Muslims are presented on-screen.

Faced with a remarkable response to the call for papers for this issue, we selected contributions that could be grouped together under specific headings. The first section of the issue contains articles focused on particular strands of the Islamic tradition or on a specific ethnicity in the Islamic world. The second section is devoted to the wider Islamic diaspora “in the West”, a topic on which we received the largest number of proposals, likely a reflection of the longer history of academic study of this particular theme. The thematic section of this issue concludes with a contribution on a Muslim filmmaker whose work is widely admired as an example of an alternative view on the Islamic tradition.

Shia Islam in Film

Two articles (and there could have been more) focus on Shia Islam. The rich tradition of Iranian cinema has drawn attention and sometimes intense admiration in the West for a long time.⁹ Several well-known directors and moviemakers who work either in Iran or in exile have received prestigious awards at major film festivals around the globe.¹⁰ As a result, extensive academic scholarship on aspects of Iranian film already exists.¹¹ Within Iran, film-making is closely scrutinized and has faced censorship of varying types, which has resulted in an astonishing range of creative adaptations.¹² Religion is currently a very sensitive issue for the Islamic Republic of Iran, leading Iranian filmmakers (particularly those known in the West) to avoid the topic or approach it with great caution. Studies focusing on specificities of Shia Islam in films are therefore also rare.¹³

8 McAlister 2005, 266–307.

9 Naficy 2011–2012; Mirsepassi/Faraji 2017.

10 See the portrayals in Rahbaran 2016; Zeydabadi-Nejad 2009, 138–160.

11 Javadi 2024, for a recent overview and systematization.

12 Taheri 2024; Zeydabadi-Nejad 2009, 30–54.

13 Pak-Shiraz 2011.

In this issue, two contributions consider the Shia strand of the rich Islamic tradition. The first, by Akif Tahiev, addresses the historical genre and focusses on *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011), a British film production. The titular subject is Fatima, the daughter of Islam's founder, Mohammed, and a prominent figure in the early history of this religion with special significance (and a perception and interpretation of its own) within the Shia tradition; the film therefore addresses gender issues with a historical perspective.¹⁴ It was perceived highly controversial, with various Muslim organizations protesting at its release because they believed its emphasis on the Shia version of the early history of Islam was anti-Sunni. The Shia narrative certainly is evident in the critical treatment of historical figures such as Aisha, the second most prominent of the wives of Mohammed (after his first wife, Khadija) and Omar, whom Sunnis hold to have been the second caliph. Tahiev embeds the film and its plot in a longer history of filmic representations of the early history of Islam, such as the internationally known film *THE MESSAGE* (Moustapha Akkad, US 1976) or the 31-episode TV series *OMAR* (MBC 1, SA/QA 2012), both of which were the work of Sunni filmmakers. Productions supervised and guided by Shia theologians and filmmakers, such as the Iranian series *THE IMAM ALI* (IRIB TV3, IR 1997) and the Iranian film *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD* (Majid Majidi, IR 2015), were criticized even though they do not touch on sensitive topics within interpretations of the early history of Islam. It was therefore always likely that *THE LADY OF HEAVEN*, which addresses controversial episodes such as the attack on Fatima's house by Omar would be met with worldwide protest. Tahiev's careful analysis acknowledges this critical reception but recognizes how the film bolstered the emancipation and self-assurance of Shia Muslims throughout the world.

The second contribution on Shia-related topics in films is by Mohammad Khandan and focuses on aspects of recent Iranian films that engage with a theological debate with deep roots in the Shia tradition. Its starting point is the tradition of filmmaking known as *Illuminative* (or *Illuminationist*) Cinema (*cinema ishrāqi*), which was established by the Iranian filmmaker Morteza Avini (1947–1993). His work, which adhered closely to specificities of the Islamic doctrine as purported by the Iranian Islamic Republic, propagated state propaganda in films and documentaries on the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). It was also deeply shaped, however, by Shia teachings, as is particularly evident

14 On this point see Yaghoobi 2020; Abbaszadeh/Dabbagh 2024.

from its messianic and apocalyptic undertones,¹⁵ which continued to inspire Iranian filmmakers after Avini's premature death. Khandan carefully explores the crucial concept of *ishrāq*, a mystical school of thought created by the eminent philosopher and theologian Suhrawardi in the twelfth century that became very significant in the Shia theological tradition. Avini drew on the idea of the "veil" (*hijāb*) in his films, a concept triggered by and referred to the period of waiting for the future Mahdi and bound in with messianism and apocalypticism in Shia theology. In the moment of "illuminative experience", the sensual "veil" is removed, and there is no longer any distance between the filmmaker and the divine truth of the world. Avini models the notion of transcendence as a fundamental principle for the filmmaker. Khandan uses this concept to guide his analysis of three recent Iranian films, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), and the better-known MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003), and also makes revealing comparisons with recent Hollywood films with apocalyptic content.

Palestinians in Film

Films on and by Palestinians must deal with a complex variety of challenges that includes the history of the founding of the state of Israel and the associated turmoil in the Middle East (and beyond) over the many decades since. Filmmaking can serve Palestinians as a place of imagination and self-reassurance, as the documentary maker Maï Masri recognized: "Our cinematic Palestine can play a powerful role in preserving and developing Palestinian identity and in nurturing the personal and collective dream of a real Palestine."¹⁶ Classic themes in Palestinian cinema include home and belonging, agency and empowerment, and resilience.¹⁷ Films on Palestinians and their fate have found a significant audience and have generated much scholarly literature.¹⁸ In addition, these films have attracted postcolonial and feminist interpretation,¹⁹ to which Jakob Eißner contributes with his

15 Abbasian 2023.

16 Quoted from Armes 2018, 244. On Masri see Brittain 2020.

17 As emphasized by Gerts 2008.

18 See, for example, Armes 2018, esp. 244–281; Armes 2015; Dabashi 2006.

19 Ball 2012, 157–163. See also Trbic 2024.

article in this issue. He looks primarily at the film *BAR BAHR* (IN BETWEEN, IL/FR 2016), by Hungarian-born filmmaker Maysaloun Hamoud (born 1982), who is Palestinian and has Israeli citizenship. Her debut film was well received and honoured with prestigious awards. It focuses on the lives of three Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv as they navigate their way through religious, national, and gender roles. Eißner set the film and its plot in the context of the history of gender debates in the region, with reference to authors such as the sociologist Fatema Mernissi and the specialist of Middle Eastern history Margot Badran. He is able to show that *BAR BAHR* marks a shift in Palestinian filmmaking, for its principle concern is not national identity but gender. Traditionally Palestinians films have explored (heroic) self-sacrifice for the envisioned imagined Palestinian nation, with emphasis on motherhood, devotion, and collectivism; by contrast this film portrays the individualism and even the rebellious behaviour of its female protagonists.

Muslim Diaspora in Film

Islam is a world religion: it has a geographical heart but it is represented throughout the globe. Therefore, we can talk of a Muslim diaspora,²⁰ which must deal with alien social structures and issues of gender, class, ethnic origin, and national status.²¹ Movies and TV-productions have been able to capture the emotional and practical tensions of everyday life in parts of the Muslim diaspora. As a matter of fact, Muslims often encounter censorious and prejudiced commentary and criticism, in particular in relation to gender. One leading example, often part of media coverage of Islam, is the issue of “arranged marriages”, which are not unique to the Islamic tradition but tend to be portrayed as such. In this issue, Adam Domalewski discusses the presentation of forced and arranged marriages in various European films, emphasizing their complexities and the implications for Muslims in Western Europe. He notes that as sources of intergenerational conflict and identity struggles, such marriages can be central to the narrative. Domalewski’s article analyses the plot structures of a number of films released between

20 For an older but extensive study of this global scale, see Jenkins 1999.

21 See the various contributions in Moghissi 2006. Sunier/Landman 2014, 20–45 provides a study of a concrete example of an ethnically defined Muslim diaspora. See also Moghissi/Rahnema/Goodman 2009.

the late 1990s and the mid-2010s, including *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS ...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), and *NOCES (A WEDDING)*, (Stephan Streker, BE 2016). He notes the frequent depiction of the struggles of young Muslim men and women who face familial pressure to conform to traditional marriage practices. His analysis reveals a common narrative arc: the protagonist resists an arranged marriage, the protagonist finds themselves in conflict with their family, the protagonist continues to resist an arranged marriage. The protagonists' rebellions, Domalewski contends, challenge traditional gender dynamics and reflect a desire for personal autonomy.

Another aspect of the diaspora topos is the representation of Muslims in films made in the West, whether by Muslim or non-Muslim filmmakers. The latter's portrayal of Muslim characters may develop in the course of their film career particularly when there is a longer list of productions dealing with them. For his extensive study,²² Daniel O'Brien assembled a sample of classic representations of Muslims that range from very positive characterizations of historical figures such as Saladin (1137–1193), founder of the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt and a prominent figure in the history of the Crusades,²³ to very negative portrayals of Muslim leaders as (religious) fanatics, as in films on the rebellion against the Egyptian government in Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century.²⁴ The rich folktales and literature of the Islamic world has been another source of depictions – the fictional Sindbad, an Islamic merchant who appeared in the *One Thousand and One Nights* story collection, had his own Hollywood career.²⁵ More recent depictions of Islam and Muslims in movies and TV-series supplement such traditional accounts.

The article in this issue by Ilaria W. Biano discusses the evolving representation of Muslims in American Prestige TV, particularly in light of the series *RAMY* (Hulu, US 2019–2022) and *Mo* (Netflix, US 2022–2025). The longstanding negative and one-dimensional portrayal, often associated with violence and extremism, has been supplemented recently by more nuanced depictions that reflect the diverse experiences of Muslims in the United States. *RAMY*, which follows the life of an Egyptian-American millennial, explores themes of faith and identity and the struggle to balance personal desires and cul-

22 O'Brien 2021.

23 O'Brien 2021, 145–183.

24 O'Brien 2021, 128–141.

25 O'Brien 2021, 67–116.

tural and religious expectations. The show highlights the protagonist's spiritual journey and the generational tensions within the Muslim community. MO centres on a Palestinian refugee navigating life in Texas while waiting to be granted asylum. It addresses displacement, systemic injustice, and cultural hybridity, emphasizing the lived realities of undocumented Muslims in America, but it also uses humour to showcase the protagonist's resilience and the complexities of immigrant identity. Both shows mark a significant shift away from earlier stereotypes, offering authentic and multifaceted narratives that undermine Islamophobia and promote a deeper understanding of Muslim identities in contemporary society.

(Self-)Orientalism in Muslim Filmmaking

Western representations of Islam tend to overemphasize certain features and may be burdened by a need to take account of consumer expectations. The roots of this approach can be readily traced in the orientalizing images of “the East”. Yet it is not only “Western” productions that pick up on this tradition.²⁶ Its presence in some Muslim productions, sometimes referred to as “re-orientalism”²⁷ or “self-orientalism”,²⁸ can serve as an analytical category, but should not be used, we believe, to censure the director. In his contribution for this issue, Kristian Petersen, who has published widely on “Muslim Cinema”, explores the *Desert Trilogy* of Tunisian director Nacer Khemir (born 1948), which comprises three feature films released between 1984 and 2005. They have been described as beautiful and style-setting examples of the assertion of Islamic tradition in the modern world by a Muslim filmmaker and have inspired producers, directors, and filmmakers. Petersen problematizes this very positive interpretation of Khemir's œuvre by pointing to the director's indebtedness to an “ahistorical repertoire of Islamic nostalgia”. The effort to counter typical Western depictions of Islam through engagement with Sufism does not manage to break free from romanticizing orientalist aesthetics.

All of the thematic contributions in this issue consider topics relevant to contemporary debates about global political, social, and economic develop-

26 See Lau/Mendes 2018.

27 See El Boubekri 2023. On the concept see also Lau/Mendes 2012, 13–26.

28 On examples from fiction writing, see Komel 2014.

ments. They are, we recognize, only a small sample of ongoing research on media representation of Islam and Muslims. Together, however, they will serve readers as a window onto a meaningful and necessary subject.

Finally, a note on the transliteration of Arabic and Persian terms or names: We allowed our authors to keep their own style of transliteration in their contributions in order to facilitate access to their readers in the way they are used to and according to their own academic experience.

All issues of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* hold space for contributions that are not linked to the general theme of the issue. This issue includes a contribution by Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano and Juan Medina-Contreras on the internationally renowned US-American screenwriter and director Paul Schrader (born 1946). Schrader published on his term “transcendental style” in 1972, right at the beginning of his career in film.²⁹ Now, likely towards the end of that career, Floriano and Medina-Contreras explore Schrader’s recent *Man in a Room* Trilogy – FIRST REFORMED (US 2017), THE CARD HOLDER (US 2021), and MASTER GARDENER (US 2022) – to search for evidence of Schrader’s continuing fealty to the transcendental style.

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29 Schrader 1972.

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- THE CARD HOLDER (Paul Schrader, US 2021).
- THE IMAM ALI (Written and Directed by: Davood Mir-Bagheri, IRIB TV3, IR 1997).
- THE LADY OF HEAVEN (Eli King, UK 2011).
- THE MESSAGE (Moustapha Akkad, US 1976).
- VINGAR AV GLAS (WINGS OF GLASS, Reza Bagher, SE 2000).

THE LADY OF HEAVEN (UK 2011) and Representations of Early Shi'i Islam in Films and TV Series

Abstract

This article examines the portrayal of early Shi'i Islamic history in films and television series, highlighting the range of interpretative approaches and varying degrees of historical accuracy. These productions aim to educate audiences about the formative moments of Islam but are often criticized for their lack of historical fidelity and failure to be sensitive to religious contexts. Sectarian tensions further complicate these depictions, particularly in light of the diverse interpretations of early Shi'i Islamic history. This article focuses on the representation of key events from early Shi'i history, in particular in the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011). The film's selection for this study was driven by the controversy it sparked, leading to its ban not only in several Sunni-majority countries but also in the secular United Kingdom and in Shi'i-majority Iran, making it a unique illustrative case.

Keywords

Digital Religion, Shi'i Islam, Islam and Film, Early Islam, *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011)

Biography

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Introduction

The filmic has entered the age of unlimited electronic reproduction and thus also unlimited exploitation.¹ It has been widely used to convey narratives and depict history, including religious history. Particularly in light of the broader implications of media representations on public perception and cultural understanding, research on the depiction of Islam and Muslims in film and on television has become a growing area of academic inquiry. Scholars in this field examine how Muslims and Islamic themes or figures are portrayed, focusing on the accuracy, biases, and cultural impact of these representations.² Such studies often explore how films and TV series navigate religious and historical authenticity while engaging with narrative and visual aesthetics.³ For instance, scholars have investigated the portrayal of key Islamic historical events, such as the lives of the Prophet Muḥammad or his Companions, and the extent to which these depictions align with the historical record or religious teachings. Additionally, scholars have investigated how media representations reinforce or challenge prevailing stereotypes about Islam and its adherents and thereby influence societal attitudes and intercultural relations.⁴ Some research has focused specifically on the portrayal of Shi'ism, mainly within the Iranian context.⁵

The representation of Islamic history in films and TV series involves a complex interplay between historical accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and narrative dramatization. Media portrayals often grapple with the challenge of balancing religious reverence with storytelling. Films and TV series exploring Islamic historical narratives frequently face criticism for their interpretation of religious events and figures, which can range from respectful and educational to controversial and sensationalized. Academic scrutiny of such portrayals has revealed that while some productions aim to portray insightful historical and cultural contexts, others perpetuate stereotypes or simplify complex religious practices for dramatic effect. This dichotomy underscores broader issues within media studies regarding the representation of religious traditions, highlighting the need for

1 Zielinski 1999, 12.

2 See Petersen 2021a.

3 See Petersen 2021b.

4 See Petersen 2021a.

5 See Pak-Shiraz 2011; Pak-Shiraz 2015.

nuanced approaches that respect both historical integrity and audience engagement.

Early Islamic history has been the subject of various cinematic and television portrayals. While these productions aim to provide audiences with an understanding of the formative moments of Islam, their questionable historical accuracy and response to religious sensitivities may skew their message. Sectarian tensions also complicate these portrayals. Filmmakers may select a singular narrative of early Islamic history that sidesteps historical complexities. These films tend to consider Sunni narratives representative of Islam and often discount Muslims who did not adhere to what became the dominant, or “canonical”, view, namely Sunni Islam.⁶ Islamic scholars also exemplify this oversight by failing to address non-Sunni perspectives, a methodological approach also observable within Islamic studies, where minority Muslim groups are frequently characterized as mere “sects” or are altogether excluded from consideration.⁷

Shi'i Islam, a diverse religious tradition, and its early history, have been depicted by various actors, each driven by their own motivations and interpretations of early Islamic events. The cases analyzed in this article illustrate this diversity. All are prominent examples of historical cinematography. They were chosen for their cultural, theological, and cinematic significance and can be explored in light of their religious interpretations, narrative strategies, and impact on contemporary audiences. I have categorized these films and TV series into three groups that are indicative of the variety of approaches to narrating early Islamic history: (1) non-denominational history, (2) Sunni perspectives, and (3) Shi'i representations.

For evaluating representations of Islamic history in these works, several points are particularly important. One depiction may involve a nuanced and accurate portrayal of key figures and events significant to each respective tradition, avoiding the misrepresentation of Shi'i or other minority beliefs or their reduction to sectarian stereotypes. By contrast, a less authentic portrayal may include historical inaccuracies, simplified narratives, or caricatured depictions of key figures and values.

This article focuses on the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011), a historical drama that was one of the first major cinematic depictions of Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad and is notable for its focus

6 Sahner 2023, 19.

7 Sahner 2023, 22.

on Shi'i Islamic history. The controversy surrounding the film led to its ban in several Sunni-majority countries, as well as in the secular United Kingdom and in Shi'i-majority Iran, making it a unique example.

The article begins with a brief overview of films and TV series about early Shi'i Islam and their creators. The second section is devoted to a case study of the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN*, providing an overview of its plot, the narratives depicted in the movie, its creators, and the controversies surrounding it.

Early Shi'i Islam in Films and TV Series: Overview

Shi'i Islam has been portrayed in various ways in films and TV series. These portrayals, like the depiction of historical events in films and TV series generally, are significantly influenced by the perspectives of the creators, their goals, and the cultural or political contexts in which these works are produced. Most of the films/series analyzed here have been reviewed in popular cinema magazines but have not received substantial academic attention.⁸ Following Banks's criteria for "good visual research", I pay attention to both the internal and external narratives of the films studied. As Banks pointed out, their materiality, their similarity to other objects in their class, and their uniqueness as particular manifestations of that class must all be assessed through an initial reading of the internal narrative. Simultaneously, all films and artworks are products of human action and are intertwined to varying degrees with human social relations.⁹ Therefore, a broader frame of analysis is also required – a reading of the external narrative that extends beyond the visual text itself, which in these instances includes public/state reactions to their release.

Attempts to Present a Non-Denominational History

The most famous and widely studied film depicting early Islam is *AR-RISĀLAH* (*THE MESSAGE*, Moustapha Akkad, US 1976). This historical drama chronicles the life and early mission of the Prophet Muḥammad and the birth of Islam. The film is notable for its respectful portrayal of the Prophet, who does not appear directly on screen, in adherence to Islamic traditions that prohibit

8 Bakker 2006, 77.

9 Banks 2001, 12.

such depictions. Akkad's initial efforts to produce a film about the Prophet Muḥammad were resisted by Hollywood, prompting him to seek funding outside the United States. King Hassan II of Morocco and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi ultimately sponsored the production.

Akkad collaborated with writers and scholars from Al-Azhar University to avoid controversy, having the script meticulously scrutinized and approved page by page by scholars from Cairo. The Supreme Islamic Shi'i Council of Lebanon also gave its approval. To ensure compliance with Islamic principles, Akkad decided that the Prophet himself would not be depicted on screen; only his cane and camel would be shown. Despite these precautions, the production faced significant challenges. After filming began in 1974, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia pressured Morocco's King Hassan II to expel the filmmakers. The Muslim World League in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, ultimately rejected the project, and the scholars who had initially approved the script withdrew their support, labeling the completed film "an insult to Islam".¹⁰ Al-Azhar asserted that it is also forbidden to depict in a film any of al-ʿashara al-mubashsharūn (the ten Companions of the Prophet to whom Paradise was promised during their lifetime, according to Sunni Islamic tradition), and Akkad's film included depictions of Abū Bakr and some other Companions.¹¹ As subsequent case studies will demonstrate, similar issues have arisen in other films and TV series.

Despite these challenges and bans in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt, *THE MESSAGE* has become a significant cultural and educational tool, particularly within the Muslim world. It remains one of the few major cinematic works that portray the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and the origins of Islam, making it a landmark film in both religious and historical cinema.¹²

MOHAMMAD RASOOLLOLAH (MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD, Majid Majidi, IR 2015) presents an extensive cinematic portrayal of the early life of the Prophet Muḥammad, concentrating on the period before he received his first revelations and became the prophet. Directed by Majid Majidi, who had been Oscar-nominated for the foreign-language film *BACHEHA-YE ASEMAN (THE CHILDREN OF HEAVEN*, IR 1997), this film is Iran's most expensive production to date, with a budget of \$40 million. The film drew on notable talents, including cinematographer Vittorio Storaro and composer A. R. Rah-

10 Yorulmaz 2021, 128; Bakker 2006, 78.

11 Bakker 2006, 88.

12 Greene 2016.

man.¹³ Seven years in production, it was intended to be the first installment of a trilogy and portrays the Prophet's life from his birth to age twelve.

Majidi consulted with Sunni and Shi'i scholars from Iran, Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, and Iraq and conducted four years of research using hadith and prophetic biographies. Despite these efforts, the film faced criticism from Al-Azhar, the Muslim World League, the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and several Indian scholars.¹⁴ It depicted the Prophet's childhood and therefore did not cover controversial historical events on which Sunni and Shi'i perspectives differ, but the objections centered on its depiction of the Prophet – a topic to which we will return in the context of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* – and associations with Shi'i Iran. It was positively reviewed by Sunni scholars in Russia, Turkey, and other countries.

While *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD* has garnered significant attention in Islamic countries and among Muslim audiences, it has not achieved the same level of international attention as *THE MESSAGE*. Its impact outside the Muslim world remains limited, though it has been shown at film festivals and appears in academic discussions on Islamic cinema. Both *THE MESSAGE* and *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD* present the Prophet Muḥammad and Islam in a nuanced and positive light and may have been produced with a broader non-Muslim Euro-American audience in mind. Both Akkad and Majidi sought to minimize opposition from Muslim viewers by consulting Sunni and Shi'i scholars. Nevertheless, they were unable to prevent their films from being banned in several Muslim-majority countries. Some objections from Muslim audiences are rooted in the modern disapproval of any depiction of the Prophet Muḥammad, while others reflect differences in cultural traditions.¹⁵

Sunni Representations of Early Islam

The TV series *OMAR / OMAR FAROUK* (MBC 1, SA/QA 2012) consists of 31 episodes filmed at various locations in Morocco and Syria, with technical staff from ten different countries. Produced by the Saudi MBC network and Qatar TV, written by Walid Saif, and directed by Hatem Ali, *OMAR* remains the largest – concerning the number of actors involved, the budget, etc. – TV

13 Linden 2015.

14 Yorulmaz 2021, 129.

15 Yorulmaz 2021, 130.

series produced in the Arab world.¹⁶ This series offers a significant portrayal of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph and companion of the Prophet Muḥammad. It covers key aspects of ‘Umar’s life, including his early years, his conversion to Islam, and his tenure as caliph. The narrative is structured to provide a comprehensive view of his contributions to the early Islamic state and his role in shaping Islamic governance and law. The series was well-received in the Arab world and among Muslims globally, garnering significant viewership and praise for its production quality, historical accuracy, and performances. However, it also faced controversy and debate about its portrayal of historical figures and sensitive events. While adhering to the Islamic tradition of avoiding depictions of the Prophet Muḥammad, the series was criticized for portraying ‘Umar, Abū Bakr, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and other significant figures in Islamic history. One newspaper report recorded that hundreds of people had joined a Facebook campaign demanding the show not be broadcast.¹⁷

Despite the sensitive nature of its subject and its focus on figures who are viewed differently in Shi‘i Islam and Sunni Islam, the series was broadcast in Iran, largely on account of its high production quality and its significance as a historical drama. The reception in Iran was mixed. While some viewers appreciated the historical and educational aspects of the show, others were concerned about the portrayal of figures such as ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a controversial figure in Shi‘i Islam. For historical and theological reasons, ‘Umar is often viewed negatively in Shi‘i tradition, and the series contradicted Shi‘i perspectives on many historical events.

The Arab TV drama series *MUAWIYA, AL-HASAN WA AL-HUSAYN* (AL HASAN AND AL HUSEIN, JO/SY 2011) portrays early Islamic history by focusing on the figures of Mu‘āwīya and the Prophet Muḥammad’s grandsons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī. This series is notable for its exploration of the political and religious conflicts that shaped the early years of the Islamic state. It recounts events in the early Muslim territories, including the rebellion against the third caliph, ‘Uthmān, and his subsequent assassination. ‘Uthmān’s death was followed by conflicts during the fourth caliphate under ‘Alī, including the Battle of the Camel, in which he fought the Prophet’s companions Ṭalḥa and Zubayr and one of Prophet’s wives, ‘Ā’isha, and the Battle of Siffin against Mu‘āwīya. Following ‘Alī’s assassination by the Khawārij,

16 Adway 2023, 69.

17 Al-Masry Al-Youm 2012.

Mu'āwiya assumed the caliphate. These ten years of civil war launched major Islamic political and doctrinal divergences that have been studied by historians and scholars. The screenwriters disregard much of the contentious historical account and present a simplified narrative, in which a Jewish man from Yemen, 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā', is depicted as the orchestrator of the civil war.¹⁸ In anti-Shi'i literature, 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā' is often portrayed as a founder or ideologue of Shi'ism and is held responsible for the wars and conflicts among the Prophet's Companions.

The series was well-received in many Arab countries. Its dramatic portrayal of significant historical and religious figures attracted a large audience, and it was praised for its production quality. However, Shi'i and some Sunni viewers were particularly opposed to its positive portrayal of Mu'āwiya and his son Yazīd. Indeed, the series polarized Sunni audiences, with modernists celebrating the portrayal of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn – a subject previously considered taboo – while Salafis were critical of the series but at least satisfied with the reproduction of a narrative that traces Shi'i denomination to the malign figure of 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā'. This perspective represents a consumerist form of Salafism that has adopted a modernist façade and is marketed by some contemporary actors in the Arab world.¹⁹ In Egypt, the series was banned by Al-Azhar due to its depiction of the Prophet's family, specifically his grandsons. In Iraq, the ban was attributed to the series' anti-Shi'i narratives. Notably, the series presented endorsements from a list of Sunni scholars, including some Shi'i scholars, which, according to Sayyid Hazem al-Mayyali,²⁰ was intended to create an appearance of agreement between denominations on the historical content of the series. Al-Mayyali's critical analysis highlights distortions of historical facts, referring to Sunni and, primarily, Shi'i sources. His critiques include the propagation of the 'Abd Allāh ibn Sabā' narrative, the misleading portrayal of harmony between the Prophet's Family and their adversaries, the glorification of Companions who opposed the Prophet's Family, and the defamation of prominent Shi'i figures such as Mālik al-Ashtar.²¹

18 Al-Masry Al-Youm 2011.

19 Al-Masry Al-Youm 2011.

20 al-Mayyali 2021, 33.

21 See further al-Mayyali 2021.

Shi'i Representations of Early Islam

IMAM ALI / SHAHEED E KUFA (THE MARTYR OF KUFA, IRIB TV3, IR 1992) is an Iranian historical TV series produced in 1992 (the series has been broadcast as telefilm since 1997) and directed by Davood Mirbagheri. This series is one of the most significant portrayals of the life and times of Imam 'Alī, the first Imam in Shi'i Islam and the fourth caliph in Sunni tradition. It is highly regarded in the Shi'i Muslim world for its in-depth and respectful depiction of Imam 'Alī's life, character, and leadership. The series chronicles in 22 episodes the life of Imam 'Alī, focusing on key events from the time after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad to Imam 'Alī's assassination. The narrative begins with the final days of the Prophet Muḥammad and the controversy surrounding his succession – a critical moment in Islamic history that led to the division between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Imam 'Alī is portrayed as a paragon of justice, wisdom, and piety who faces numerous challenges and political intrigues. The series was very well-received in Iran and other Shi'i-majority regions, where it is considered a significant cultural and religious work. It has been praised by Shi'i audiences for its strong performances and historical accuracy. However, the series was controversial in Sunni-majority countries, where some of the events and interpretations presented are viewed differently. Despite these differences, IMAM ALI remains a landmark in Islamic television, offering a detailed and dramatic portrayal of one of the most important figures in Islamic history. It continues to be broadcast and widely viewed, particularly during religious observances in the Muslim calendar, such as the holy month of Ramadan.

TANHATARIN SARDAR (LONELIEST LEADER, Sima Film, IR 1997) is a historical TV drama series written and directed by Mehdi Fakhimzadeh. The series centers on the life of Imam Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, the eldest grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad and the second Imam in Twelver Shi'i Islam.

The narrative delves into Imam Ḥasan's life, particularly during the turbulent period following the assassination of his father, Imam 'Alī. After 'Alī's death, Ḥasan is recognized as the rightful leader by many in the Muslim community, but his leadership is immediately challenged by Mu'āwiyā, the governor of Syria and a powerful political figure. The series explores Imam Ḥasan's efforts to consolidate his leadership and maintain peace within the Muslim community despite facing immense pressure from Mu'āwiyā's forces. Ḥasan is portrayed as a compassionate and wise leader, deeply committed to the well-being of the Muslim community and striving to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

TANHATARIN SARDAR is deeply rooted in themes of sacrifice, justice, and the moral complexities of leadership. The series presents Imam Ḥasan as a tragic figure, forced to make difficult decisions in the face of overwhelming opposition. His story is held to be one of immense personal and spiritual significance, especially within the Shi'i tradition, where his actions are seen as a continuation of the principles established by his father, Imam 'Alī. The series was well-received in Iran and among Shi'i audiences, where it is considered an important portrayal of a pivotal figure in Islamic history. However, like other religious and historical dramas from Iran, TANHATARIN SARDAR was less well received outside Shi'i-majority regions because of its interpretation of historical events, particularly the depiction of figures like Mu'āwiyā, who is viewed differently in Sunni traditions.

MOKHTARNAMEH (THE BOOK OF MOKHTAR, Sima Film, IR 2010–2011) is an Iranian TV miniseries directed by Davood Mirbagheri. This historical drama portrays the life and revolt of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, a notable figure in early Islamic history renowned for his role in avenging the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn and his followers. The series begins by exploring Mukhtār's early life in Ṭā'if and his initial encounters with Islamic teachings and figures. It proposes this background as explanation of his personal motivations and his early political and social activism. The series highlights Mukhtār's profound sorrow and his determination to seek justice following the tragic events of the Battle of Karbālā, where Imam Ḥusayn and his followers were martyred. The narrative focuses on Mukhtār's rebellion against the Umayyād Caliphate and his quest for retribution. He is eventually defeated and executed. The series underscores his legacy and the impact of his actions on Islamic history, particularly in avenging Karbālā and challenging oppressive rule.

MOKHTARNAMEH is notable for its exploration of themes such as justice, resistance against tyranny, and the moral and spiritual dimensions of leadership. The series portrays Mukhtār as a heroic figure deeply committed to the principles of justice and retribution, reflecting broader Shi'i values associated with the aftermath of Karbālā. It was well-received in Iran and among Shi'i Muslim audiences, praised for its historical accuracy, production quality, and strong performances. However, it has been the subject of scrutiny and debate on account of its portrayal of political and religious conflicts. Its depiction of historical events from a Shi'i perspective is not always well received in Sunni-majority contexts, but it remains influential and widely discussed within the Shi'i Muslim world.

The cases of IMAM ALI, TANHATARIN SARDAR, and MOKHTARNAMEH illustrate how Iranian filmmakers actively explore Islamic history through films and TV series, positioning themselves as major contributors to the representation of Shi'i perspectives on Islamic history within the cinema industry. The Iranian government and various religious organizations provide substantial support for films that highlight Shi'i Islamic history. The perception of Iranian religious films outside Iran is multifaceted and influenced by religious, cultural, and political contexts. In Shi'i-majority countries and regions, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and parts of Pakistan and India, these films are often applauded for their detailed and respectful portrayal of Shi'i religious figures and historical events. They resonate with audiences familiar with these narratives and contribute positively to religious and cultural identity. Conversely, in Sunni-majority countries, their reception may be less welcoming, in particular when they depict figures like Imam 'Alī or events such as the Battle of Karbālā, which are viewed differently in Sunni traditions. In such locations they can face criticism or censorship.

I turn now to the unique case of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN*, which according to its creators presents a Shi'i perspective on early Islamic history and yet was banned in Iran and criticized by Shi'i scholars.

The Case of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (UK 2011)

The film opens with a contemporary narrative set in war-torn Iraq, where a young boy named Laith witnesses the death of his mother during a violent attack by ISIS. Traumatized and orphaned, Laith is taken in by a compassionate woman who begins to tell him the story of Lady Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad. This historical tale is intended to offer Laith spiritual guidance and strength amidst his harrowing circumstances.

The narrative then shifts to a historical setting over 1,400 years earlier, during the early days of Islam. The story centers on the life of Fāṭima, focusing on her childhood as the cherished daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad. It highlights her close relationship with her father and her eventual marriage to 'Alī, who is both the Prophet's cousin and the first Imam in Shi'i Islam. Following the death of the Prophet, the Muslim community is thrown into political turmoil regarding the leadership succession. The film presents these events from a Shi'i perspective, depicting the conflicts and betrayals that lead to the division between Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Lady Fāṭima emerges as a central figure in these events, particularly

in her opposition to perceived injustices against her family, especially her husband, 'Alī.

As the narrative unfolds, the film portrays the suffering and oppression faced by Fāṭima, particularly following the Prophet's death. Her home is attacked, and she sustains severe injuries that lead eventually to her death. Despite these trials, she remains a symbol of unwavering faith, resistance, and piety, embodying the spiritual and moral virtues central to Shi'i beliefs. The film then returns to the present-day narrative, where Fāṭima's story inspires young Laith to find courage and resilience in the face of his own suffering. The film concludes by emphasizing the enduring legacy of Fāṭima and her significance in the spiritual and moral lives of Muslims, particularly within the Shi'i tradition.

The film weaves together two narratives: one set in the present day and the other in the early Islamic period. This dual narrative structure, blending past and present, underscores the timeless relevance of Fāṭima's story and its impact on contemporary issues of faith, identity, and resistance against oppression.

Controversies

THE LADY OF HEAVEN (fig. 1), produced by Enlightened Kingdom and written by Yasser Al-Habib, is the first film to focus on the life of the historical figure Fāṭima during the early Muslim era. The narrative is told from a Shi'i perspective, which significantly differs from that of Sunni Muslims. Originally scheduled for release in 2020, the film was postponed by industry uncertainties related to the COVID-19 pandemic and eventually premiered in 2021.²² THE LADY OF HEAVEN had generated considerable controversy even before its production began. Initially titled "Yawm al-'Adhab" ("The Day of Punishment/Doomsday"), the film was later renamed "The Lady of Heaven".

The controversy surrounding the film intensified when followers of Grand Ayatollah Hussein Nouri Hamedani sought a Sharia ruling regarding the support, promotion, and viewing of the film. They expressed concern that a British-based Arab television channel had raised millions of pounds from Shi'i Muslims worldwide to produce a film that would, for the first time, depict the first caliph, Abū Bakr, and his companions attacking Lady Fāṭima's house and violating her sanctity. The film's purpose was purportedly to narrate the

22 Ruaa 2024, 463.

life of Fāṭima. In response, Ayatollah Hamedani condemned the project, declaring “any assistance and attention to the process of making and watching this movie as haram (forbidden) and against the Sharia”.²³ A similar response was expressed by other prominent Shi’i scholars. Grand Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi issued a statement declaring, “Without doubt, those who help to produce and release this film, as well as those who watch it, have committed a mortal sin.” Ja’far Subhani described the making of the film as fulfilling the demands of the enemies of Islam and as being far from reason and piety. He also prohibited its production and any financial support for it. Additionally, Safi Golpaygani forbade Shi’i Muslims from engaging in activities that would lead to insults and disrespect for Islam and the Shi’i community.²⁴

Yasser Al-Habib, the creator of the film, is a controversial figure, criticized by both Sunni and some Shi’i Muslims. In his home country of Kuwait, he was sentenced to imprisonment for insulting the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad; he fled to the United Kingdom, where he founded the Al-Muhassin Mosque. The mosque is named after the unborn son of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, who, according to certain narratives, was killed during an attack on Fāṭima’s house by ‘Umar. Al-Habib’s primary activities take place, however, in the digital space, where he maintains an official website (<https://alhabib.org/en/>), social media profiles, and the Fadak TV channel (fadak.co.uk). The name of the TV channel references a significant event in early Shi’ism – the dispute between Fāṭima and Abū Bakr over the ownership of the Fadak land.²⁵ Al-Habib’s activities are largely characterized by the intolerance of Sunni perspectives that is evident in his representation of early Shi’i Islam.



Fig. 1: Official Poster – Canada. Retrieved from the film’s official website, <https://www.ladyofheaven.com/> [accessed 22 August 2024].

23 Hawzah News Agency 2022.

24 Waqar 2020.

25 Tahiiev/Lukianov 2022, 64.

Many Shi'i scholars disapprove of his actions. In 2010, in response to Al-Habib's public insults directed at 'Ā'isha, the wife of the Prophet Muḥammad, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a decree prohibiting insults against 'Ā'isha and other figures or symbols revered by Sunni Muslims.²⁶

As a result, the Iranian government banned *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* from being released, stating that the film was intended to divide Muslims. Ahead of the protests in the United Kingdom, eight Shi'i scholars in the country criticized the film, expressing concerns that it would exacerbate sectarian tensions among Muslims. In the United Kingdom, hundreds of people in cities such as Bradford, Bolton, Birmingham, and Sheffield protested against the film's release. The film was accused of being blasphemous by some Sunni groups, with much of the criticism focusing on the negative depictions of several supporting characters, including the Prophet Muḥammad's Companions, Abū Bakr, and 'Umar.²⁷ The movie suggests that Fāṭima Al-Zahrā' was the first victim of terrorism and portrays ISIS as a continuation of Wahhabi thought, which it links to the three caliphs revered by Sunni Muslims.²⁸ This connection is highlighted through the analogy with the death of Laith's mother, who is killed by an ISIS terrorist in a manner reminiscent of 'Umar's attack on Fāṭima (a door is forced and she is assaulted). Consequently, Pakistan, Egypt, and Morocco have all banned the film.²⁹

Another point of criticism was the portrayal of sacred figures from early Islamic history. While Fāṭima is never shown directly and is always completely covered in a black or white veil, the negative depiction of Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Ā'isha drew significant censure. The filmmakers cast dark-skinned actors in these roles (fig. 2), leading to accusations of racism, as some claimed the movie used black actors to portray negative characters. The filmmakers responded by noting that there were also light-skinned negative characters and positive dark-skinned characters, and they referenced certain historical narrations that describe Abū Bakr and 'Umar as having dark skin. Moreover, the film depicted the faces of figures sacred to Shi'i Islam, namely the Prophet Muḥammad (see fig. 3) and Imam 'Alī. A disclaimer at the beginning and end of the film states that "the performances of Holy Personalities were achieved through a unique synthesis of actors, in-camera effects, lighting, and visual ef-

26 Khamenei 2016.

27 Stolworthy 2022.

28 Waqar 2020.

29 Ruaa 2024, 463.



Fig. 2: The portrayal of Abū Bakr in *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011). Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/theladyofheaven/photos/> [accessed 22 August 2024].

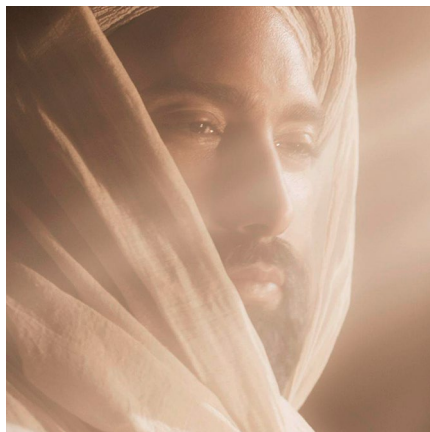


Fig. 3: The portrayal of the Prophet Muḥammad in *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* (Eli King, UK 2011). Retrieved from the film's official Facebook account, <https://www.facebook.com/theladyofheaven/photos/> [accessed 22 August 2024].

fects". No single actor is credited with portraying these holy figures; instead, their faces, often shown as dazzling sunbursts, were computer-generated.³⁰ This approach was unusual, not least as it marked the first time a movie produced by Muslims depicted the Prophet's face in any form. In films analyzed earlier in this article, other strategies were employed. In *THE MESSAGE*, Moustapha Akkad avoided showing the Prophet Muḥammad's body entirely, using camera movements to provide his point of view and having companions voice the Prophet's sentiments by saying, "The Prophet said that..."³¹ In *MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD*, Majid Majidi showed the Prophet's entire body, including his feet, legs, hands, arms, chest, and turban, but kept his face covered with a gold or white veil or illuminated by a flaming halo. Throughout the film, Majidi employed these techniques to obscure the Prophet's direct image, subtly concealing his face with veils, lights, and hands.³²

Interestingly, the historical narratives depicted in the movie were not the primary focus of criticism from Shi'i scholars; the main criticisms were directed instead at the filmmakers and their perceived "bad intentions". This

³⁰ Hoad 2022.

³¹ Yorulmaz 2021, 130.

³² Yorulmaz 2021, 131.

response is largely due to the fact that most of the history depicted in the film is recognized by Shi'i Muslims, although some aspects remain open to historical debate (such as the alleged poisoning of the Prophet and the purported involvement of specific individuals, the authenticity of narration(s) about the attack on Fāṭima's house, the depiction of Abū Bakr and 'Umar as dark-skinned). In one of his lectures, Sayed Ammar Nakshawani discusses the authenticity of some of these historical narratives.³³

Some points of criticism centered around the portrayal of Fāṭima as a faceless character who, more importantly, never seems to be the central focus, with the Prophet Muḥammad and 'Alī emerging as more significant personalities. Therefore, Loayza concludes, "the film is hardly about Fāṭima".³⁴ Also, the filmmakers' repeated message of peace and their attempt to represent Islam as a peaceful religion suggest that it was primarily intended for a non-Muslim audience. In this regard, however, the movie may be challenging for viewers unfamiliar with Islamic history and its key figures, as it does not provide an introduction to many historical figures, and their identities only become clear when they are explicitly named.

The movie serves as a reminder of the sensitivities involved in portraying religious figures and the potential impact of such portrayals on contemporary religious and cultural dynamics. Following protests, screenings of *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* at a Bolton movie theater were canceled, to ensure the safety of employees and customers. The UK cinema's decision to revoke permission to screen was criticized as dangerous for free speech and detrimental to the arts. *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* raised numerous questions and sparked discussions on the limits of free speech and on ideological bias in media coverage of the film.³⁵

Conclusion

Representations of early Shi'i Islamic history in films and TV series often focus on historical events, figures, and themes central to Shi'i identity. These portrayals aim to capture the spiritual, political, and emotional dimensions of the formative period of Shi'i Islam, particularly the events surrounding the succession to the Prophet Muḥammad.

33 Nakshawani 2020.

34 Loayza 2021.

35 Ruaa 2024, 463. Ruaa studied linguistic bias in reports about the film *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* in the *Tehran Times*, *Kuwait Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Al-Estiklal*.

These representations often face the challenge of balancing historical accuracy with artistic interpretation. The result may be controversial, especially when the portrayal of sacred figures and events does not align with the religious views of certain audiences. In some regions, the depiction of Shi'i Islamic history can be subject to censorship owing to political and sectarian sensitivities. On this count the production and distribution of Shi'i-oriented films and series have been limited in some countries, as was the case for *THE LADY OF HEAVEN* and most Iranian-made films and series.

The representation of early Shi'i Islamic history in films and TV series plays a crucial role in preserving and propagating the Shi'i narrative of Islamic history. These portrayals help keep alive the memory of foundational events that are important symbols of justice and resistance in Shi'i Islam. The sensitive nature of this history means that these representations are often approached with reverence and care, acknowledging their deep religious significance.

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Apocalypse and Shi'i Messianism in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

Three Case Studies

Abstract

This article examines the representation of themes related to Shi'i messianism (*mahdaviyat*) in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. It presents Morteza Avini's theory of Illuminative Cinema (*cinema ishrāqi*) as an approach to the presentation of spiritual and religious themes in cinema in light of structural elements. Labov's model of narrative analysis is employed to explore three films, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), and MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003). Analysis of these films is an opportunity to explore the doctrine of Waiting (*intizār*) in Twelver Shi'a, a concept that plays a pivotal role in Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. The three films criticize the present condition of society and describe the ideal society waiting for the Promised *Mahdi*. Apocalypse as it appears in these films does not conform to the science-fiction genre but is instead part of the philosophy of Waiting in the Shi'i worldview. The article shows that in comparison to Hollywood apocalyptic films, Iranian Shi'i cinema's depiction of apocalyptic themes, including Waiting, is less susceptible to secularizing influences.

Keywords

Iranian Cinema, Apocalypse, Shi'i Messianism, Waiting, Illuminative Cinema, Narrative Analysis, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003)

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Introduction

Throughout history, religious art has served as a means to express and disseminate divine messages. Religions have used artistic forms to describe their sacred thoughts and rituals and to represent spiritual and religious themes.¹ According to Mircea Eliade, art was essentially sacred in early times, as a product of efforts to represent religious ideas in aesthetic forms.² Sacred art uses visible forms to represent the invisible, shaping religious beliefs and directing awareness to the supernatural. One of the religions that has considered art as a tool for transmitting religious ideas is Islam. Islamic art issues forth from the Islamic revelation. It crystallizes the inner realities of Islam in the world of forms and leads the believer to the inner truth of the Divine Revelation.³ Islamic art began with the mosque, but developments in Islamic community (*ummah*) and the elaboration of a more sophisticated worldview caused an evolution of art in the Islamic world.⁴ Artistic forms that emerged in the Islamic world, such as calligraphy, painting, gilding, and poetry, served to promote the religious faith.

The encounter with non-Islamic cultures has played an important role in this evolutionary process within Islamic cultures. Today, in the Islamic Republic of Iran the use of new artistic forms to represent religious themes is seriously discussed. According to the Unitarian Islamic philosophy and worldview, cinema, like any other creation in the world, is a manifestation of the God (*allah*) and therefore can serve to express religious and spiritual ideas.

In this article, we first give an account of Morteza Avini's theory of Illuminative Cinema (*cinema ishrāqi*). We then deploy narrative analysis in the case of three Iranian religious films, GHADAMGAH (FOOTHOLD, Mohammad-Mahdi Asgarpour, IR 2004), INJA CHERAQI ROSHAN AST (HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, Reza Mirkarimi, IR 2002), and MARMOULAK (LIZARD, Kamal Tabrizi, IR 2003), particularly in light of Shi'i Messianism (*mahdaviyat*) and the concept of Waiting (*intizār*). Finally, we explore the contrast between Iranian and Hollywood cinematic representations of apocalyptic ideas.

1 Eliade 1985, 55–56.

2 Eliade 1985, 55.

3 Nasr 1987, 7.

4 Leaman 2004, 126.

Cinema and the Representation of Religious Themes

Morteza Avini, an Iranian filmmaker and theorist, explored cinema's relationship with religion, philosophy, and mysticism in post-revolutionary Iran. His best-known documentary work is *RIVĀYAT FATHE* (NARRATIVE OF THE VICTORY, Morteza Avini, IR 1980), in which he portrays religious aspects of people's lives in post-revolutionary Iran. Beyond filmmaking, Avini developed "Illuminative Cinema" as a philosophical approach.

In the philosophical and mystical literature of Islamic philosophy, illumination (*ishrāq*) and illuminative philosophy (*hikmat al-ishrāq*) refer to the teachings of Šihabaddin Suhrawardī.⁵ Illuminative philosophy, rooted in Suhrawardī's concept of a hierarchical universe emanating from the "Light of lights" (God),⁶ posits that human existence is distanced from its divine origin. Achieving peace necessitates a return and unification with this primordial light, which is possible only through faith (*imān*) and purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). Suhrawardī's concept of "illumination" signifies spiritual purification, achieved through opening the heart to divine Light. This illumination is essential for a religious life. This ontological position has epistemological implications: it is only through the illuminative experience, or *ishrāq*, that the truth can be discovered.⁷ Avini has been a pioneer in the application of the ontological and epistemological insights of illuminative philosophy to cinema.

According to Avini, cinema is distinguished from other modern arts by its "technical aspect".⁸ Avini, who believed in the artistic expression of religious themes in cinema,⁹ proposed that the filmmaker should not only master the technique of cinema but also go beyond the veil (*hijāb*) of technique to attain a kind of transcendence. Cinema must balance such artistic expression with technical and commercial demands, but how can religious cinema avoid compromising its spiritual integrity for mere technical or commercial appeal?¹⁰

Avini proposed that religious cinema must be simultaneously in the service of religious themes and appealing, but its appeal should lie in its commit-

5 Noorbakhsh 2012, 11.

6 Akbari 2008, 80.

7 Suhrawardī 1999, 86–87.

8 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 192.

9 Avini 2011, vol. 1, 20.

10 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 22–23.

ment to truth. Instead of feeding the audience's carnal desires, the filmmaker should seek to reveal to them the spiritual truth of the world. It is at this point that Illuminative Cinema comes into play. According to Avini, "illuminative experience" is the moment when a filmmaker gets so close to the truth that all sensual veils are removed; there is then no longer a veil between the audience and the divine truth of the world.¹¹ In Suhrawardī's illuminative philosophy, the term "veil" (*hijāb*) refers to human egoism and subjectivism, which distort the human's relationship with the divine truth of the world.¹² Religious cinema, according to this perspective, prioritizes the revelation of divine truth over subjective expression, which requires the filmmaker's heart to become a conduit for divine Light. Conversely, over-reliance on technical cinematic language risks obscuring divine truth through the imposition of the filmmaker's subjectivity. If a filmmaker is captured by the "veil of technique", that filmmaker will make a film based only on "technological imagination", while the mission of religious cinema is to draw out various dimensions of good life (*hayāt tayyebah*) and good morals (*akhlāq hasanah*).¹³

According to Avini, attractiveness should serve the spiritual truth of human life. Religious filmmakers will try to make their work attractive, but they must center the teaching of religious morality to help overcome evil. The world is the battlefield between good and evil, and illuminative filmmakers are aware that they must support the good and defeat the evil. Such a filmmaker would never produce an attractive film to fulfill the sensual passions or erotic desires of the audience. Rather, that filmmaker would consider aspects of human perfection that originate from human's divine nature.¹⁴

Avini's theory largely focuses on the "transcendence of the filmmaker". The filmmaker's religious and illuminative experience is of great importance to him, for he believes that only a work which is derived from the spirit of a unitarian (*movahhed*) and faithful (*mo'men*) filmmaker can represent religious ideas. Unitarian artists will consider the world as the sign of God, and their art should go beyond material life and refer to transcendental truth. Moreover, they will find the symbolic language of objects, for each object is a sign of God and reveals a specific aspect of the divine truth of the world.¹⁵

11 Madadpūr 2005, 53–55.

12 Noorbakhsh 2012, 132.

13 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 22–23.

14 Avini 2011, vol. 3, 14–15.

15 Avini 2011, vol. 1, 26.

Methodology: Cinema and Narrative Analysis

Media representation, along with the audience's response, exists in relationship to the actions of message senders and their semiotic, cultural, and social circumstances. According to Peter Dahlgren, the concept of representation as it relates to media embraces what the media portrays, the way in which topics are presented, the modes of discourse at work, and the character of debates and discussions.¹⁶ Representation refers to both the informational and extra-informational aspects of media products, including their symbolic and rhetoric dimensions. Representation is a response to fundamental questions about, for example, the content that will be selected for portrayal and how that content should be presented to the audience.

As Stuart Hall notes, representation is the application of language for producing a meaningful attitude about the world. Meaning does not exist *per se*; rather, it is the consequence of implicative procedures. Hall believes that representation is produced and distributed under the supervision of disciplinary powers; it is controlled by a dominant power that determines the legitimacy of the messages.¹⁷ New methods have been proposed to identify the context of media and cultural phenomena. Narrative analysis and discourse analysis, which have emerged from advances in linguistics, semiotics, hermeneutics, and literary theory, are key methodologies. While quantitative content analysis has long been applied to news and reports in written media,¹⁸ qualitative methods such as narrative analysis have been taken up by researchers in recent years. Unlike quantitative methods, such as content analysis that focuses primarily on the numerical frequency of words, qualitative methods consider the contextual elements that affect the mediated representation of ideas.¹⁹

Qualitative methods are particularly helpful in case studies, for they are more useful for identifying cultural, social, and historical contexts. Narrative analysis, as a qualitative method, was therefore selected for the case study this article explores, as a means to analyze contextual and ideologi-

16 Dahlgren 1995, 15.

17 Hall 2001, 509.

18 Riff/Lacy/Fico 2014, 16.

19 Stokes 2012, 67.

cal elements in the films that are its subject. By analyzing the narrative structure of films, it is possible to identify a variety of understandings of Shi'i messianism on the basis of the films' interrelations with their context.

As Boje has suggested, a story can have a variety of narratives.²⁰ The variety of experiences of a single reality create many narratives, each of which is indicative of the philosophy or worldview of its narrator. By studying the narrative structure a film, we can recognize its discursive formations: as Stokes has written, "Through narrative analysis, the 'context' will be subjected to analysis."²¹ We interpret the world by narrating it. Narratives also convey the worldview of cultures and are thus effective means of cultural promotion, including the propagation of values and ideals. For this reason, narrative analysis is often used to explore the ideological orientation of media and works of art.²²

Narrative Analysis in Labov's Model

William Labov, an American linguist, has identified six elements in the structural organization of narratives: *abstract*, *orientation*, *complication*, *evaluation*, *result*, and *coda*. Each of these elements is a specific stage in the narrative sequence. Not all narratives necessarily follow this sequence, though this sequence is observable in most of them.²³ Labov's model is undoubtedly helpful for narrative analysis of films.

A narrative starts with an optional *abstract*, which provides information about the beginning of a story. The *abstract* announces that the story is beginning and determines its type; it indicates what the story is about, says something of the story to come, and draws the audience's attention to that story.²⁴

Orientation points to referential functions within the narrative, which are characteristic of most narratives and help the audience identify the time, location, characters, and social circumstances of the story. *Orientation*

20 Boje 2001, 62,

21 Stokes 2012, 68.

22 Stokes 2012, 70.

23 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 32–39.

24 Patterson 2008, 25.

consists of a group of independent clauses which precede the *abstract*.²⁵ It provides a setting for the events of the story.²⁶

Complication creates and continues the story through a series of actions and events. It may appear suddenly and makes the audience eager to know what its impact will be. It generally leads to conflict, whether physical, mental, moral, or emotional. Without a *complication* there is no way to flesh out the story.²⁷ Patterson points out that the *complication* can be considered the “skeleton plot” or “spin” of the narrative.²⁸

Without *evaluation* the narrative would have no significance. It consists of clauses that reveal the attitude of the narrator.²⁹ *Evaluation* can explain why a particular event is included in a narrative sequence and why it is important to the audience. It is an external stimulus that elicits personal interest and action.³⁰ In other words, *evaluation* justifies the story.

The *result* follows the *evaluation* in the narrative sequence and explains what happens.³¹ It decodes earlier *complications* and engages with the final key event of a story.³² Most narratives end with the *result*, but some will also have a *coda*.³³ The difference between *coda* and *result* is a matter of time. The *result* is part of a sequence of events in the past tense, while the *coda* links past events with the present world of the narrator.³⁴ It turns the verbal perspective toward the present moment.³⁵

In Illuminative Cinema, the structural elements of the narrative should represent religious and spiritual themes. In Avini’s terms, these elements are a kind of technical veil. The filmmaker must subdue them through his/her “spiritual wayfaring” (*suluk ma’navi*) and employ them in such a way that they transmit divine and spiritual truth to the “present world”. Only by linking the events of the narrative with the current world of its audience can Illuminative Cinema fulfill its mission. Illuminative Cinema is not neu-

25 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 32.

26 Patterson 2008, 25.

27 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 32–33.

28 Patterson 2008, 26.

29 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 37.

30 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 34.

31 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 39.

32 Patterson 2008, 27.

33 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 39.

34 Patterson 2008, 27.

35 Labov/Waletzky 1967, 39.

tral; it seeks to foster spirituality and transcend apocalyptic evil. The *coda*, which connects other elements of the film to contemporary life is therefore a crucial aspect of the narrative analysis undertaken in this article.

Narrative Analysis of Shi'i Messianism in Iranian Cinema

Feature films made in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution include a number that pay attention to Shi'i messianism. Shi'i messianism has an important role in the worldview of the Twelver Shi'ism. According to the doctrine of spiritual leadership (*imāmah*), Twelver Shi'ies believe in twelve spiritual leaders (*imāms*) that guide the people after the death of Prophet Muhammad.³⁶ They believe that the Twelfth *imām*, the Promised *Mahdi*, ascended to heaven and will return at the end of history to cleanse the earth of evil and oppression and to establish justice.³⁷ Accordingly, the Shi'ies must always wait for the return of the Promised *Mahdi*. This doctrine is called "Waiting".³⁸ The increased prominence of the doctrine of Waiting in post-revolution Iranian society is reflected in increased Shi'i messianism themes within post-revolutionary cinema. As waiting for the *Mahdi* involves purification of the soul, messianic films accord with Illuminative Cinema's ethical goals.

The feature films *FOOTHOLD*, *HERE, A SHINING LIGHT*, and *LIZARD* all address Shi'i messianic ideas. Their makers narrate their stories by showing the current state of society and its neglect of religious ideals. They do not refer directly to the Savior or Twelfth *imām* (*imām Mahdi*) but do provide indirect references to signs such as the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony (the anniversary of the birth of *imām Mahdi* according to the Shi'i calendar) or *Sir (āqā)*, which is an allusion to the *imām Mahdi*. However, the sequence of their narratives is such that the viewer can recognize that the story of each film symbolically conveys the idea of a worthy society waiting for the Promised Savior.

36 Lāhiji 2022, 584.

37 Makārem Shirazi 2013, 162.

38 Makārem Shirazi 2013, 96.

FOOTHOLD (IR 2004)

FOOTHOLD narrates the story of a young boy, Rahman (Babak Hamidian), who lives alone in a village. Rahman, an orphan raised communally, considers all village homes his own. Years earlier, he had vowed that for ten years he would seclude himself on the night and day of mid-*sha'bān* in a holy shrine outside the village. Now is the tenth and last year of his vow, but he returns to the village before mid-*sha'bān* and claims that Sir (i. e. *imām Mahdi*) ordered him to return to the village to receive his reward. His return and revelation displease the villagers. As the story proceeds, the cause of their unhappiness becomes clear: Rahman's mother, pregnant after his supposedly infertile father's death, was wrongly accused of adultery and stoned by the villagers. This happened in the mid-*sha'bān*! Burdened by guilt, the villagers raised Rahman to atone for their crime. They exiled him on mid-*sha'ban* to ease their guilt, which is why his return to the village has upset them. Rahman finds out the truth and recognizes that his mother was the victim of the villagers' crime. The villagers realize in turn that Rahman's mother was innocent and that they had punished her out of resentment and delusion. Although Rahman ultimately forgives the villagers, he suddenly departs from the village on the day after mid-*sha'bān*, leaving the villagers burdened by distress and regret.

The *abstract* of this film is the village location, which is, in fact, an allegory of Iranian society. The audience is confronted with an atmosphere created by the various characters, many of whom are either involved in everyday worldly business or trapped in ceremonial ritual (in this case the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony). There are, however, a few who truly adhere to the moral and inner virtues of religion. The filmmaker indicates the *orientation* of the narrative by reference to Rahman's vow, according to which he will perform as a servant at the holy shrine on the anniversary of the birth of the Promised Savior. However, the reason for his action is not obvious to either the audience or Rahman himself. His reason for being at the shrine on this anniversary and the truth of Rahman's birth and being orphaned form the *complication* of the narrative. This element creates suspense, in which the audience remains until the end of the story. The villagers' regretting of their crime can be identified as the *evaluation*, which is represented by the villagers' kindness toward Rahman. Then the *result* emerges. The reasons for such kindness were at first not clear to Rahman, but he learns the truth from revelations from the unseen world. The *coda* of the narrative is cre-

ated by the endless path along which Rahman advances, while the people of the village, who are an allegory of the Waiting community, remain in place where they are.

FOOTHOLD is a prominent example of Illuminative Cinema in Iran. The title of the film appears to refer to a religious phenomenon. The word “foothold” (*ghadamgah*) is common in the popular religious culture of the Iranian people. A foothold is a place that a spiritual leader (Prophet or *imām*) is said to have passed and has his footprints incised on a stone. The film uses the concept of foothold metaphorically, to point to the signs of the presence of the Twelfth *imām*. In addition, divine manifestations are felt in every moment of the film: from Rahman’s spiritual revelations to his forgiveness of the villagers’ crime to his departure from the village. The film is narrated such that the direct connection with Waiting is not immediately evident. However, the *coda* and conclusion make event to the audience that the filmmaker is criticizing the hypocrisy of the people, who pretend to be waiting for the Promised Savior but do not exhibit the good morals expected of a Waiter (*montazer*).

HERE, A SHINING LIGHT (IR 2002)

Despite its delayed release and box-office failure, HERE, A SHINING LIGHT is a thought-provoking film within the realm of Illuminative Cinema. The film narrates the life of Qodrat (Habib Rezaei), a young man with intellectual disabilities who lives with the custodian of a holy shrine in a remote village. The custodian laments the villagers’ indifference and questions their faith. The villagers’ belief that the shrine ignores their needs clashes with the custodian’s view, resulting in his temporary move to the city. Since nobody is willing to run the holy shrine in his absence, he asks Qordat to take his place. Qodrat accepts responsibility for the administration of the holy shrine. He has extraordinary abilities: next to the holy shrine is an old cemetery, and Qodrat can see the spirits of the dead, hear their words, and understand what they mean. He has a gentle spirit that pays attention to the inner meanings of religion, instead of its outer shell. Gradually, he becomes acquainted with the sufferings and problems of the villagers and spends all the resources of the holy shrine on solving them. Soon the holy shrine has lost all its money and assets. It is no longer like the holy shrine the audience saw at the beginning of the film, but it has solved the problems

of many people. In this way, the high status of the holy shrine is revived among the people. At the end, Qodrat leaves for an unknown destination by train, which in his opinion is the residence of the Sir.

The *abstract* of the narrative begins with Qodrat's dialogue about Waiting, in which he states, "We must search for the Sir and if we sit around and do nothing, we will waste our lives." He is surprised to realize that nobody knows the Sir. We also see the reference to the Sir at the end of the film as the *coda*, in the sequence that depicts Qodrat on the train intending to go to the Sir. The references to the Sir and to waiting for him at the beginning and end of the film are reminiscent of the Promised Savior in Shi'i culture. Although at the beginning of the film the custodian of the holy shrine is an obstacle to Qodrat's departure, at the end of the film nobody can stop him, and he simply continues on his way to get to the Sir.

Like *FOOTHOLD*, the film *HERE, A SHINING LIGHT* also contains a village as allegory: here the villagers are extremely involved in their daily affairs and have lost faith in the holy shrine, which no longer responds to their demands and vows anymore; they are therefore unwilling to pilgrimage to it or financially assist it. Some villagers believe that neighboring holy shrines are better at helping them and meeting their needs. These are *evaluations* used by the filmmaker to convey the atmosphere of the narrative to the audience. Here, the village is a metaphor for Iran's modern society, whose people are trapped in a materialistic life and pay too little attention to spiritual affairs. The custodian of the holy shrine is hypocritical and insincere in collecting money, while the villagers are too busy with their own issues. This is the *complication* of the narrative. Mistrust is part of all aspects of their lives, and they are no longer a "waiting society". Here, the principal issue is why most people have lost their faith. The filmmaker raises this question everywhere in the narrative and seeks to answer it through Qodrat's practices in the absence of the custodian, including expressing affection for the villagers, assisting them, and gifting the holy shrine's property to them. The shrine is now a ruined enclosure, but their faith has increased. Finally, in the *result*, the narrator concludes that Qodrat, as a real Waiter, has the capacity to visit the Sir because of his good morals. In the *coda*, as noted, we see him on the train, travelling to visit the Sir, and nobody can stop him.

HERE, A SHINING LIGHT has a metaphoric language that refers intelligently to Iran's modern society. The filmmaker criticizes a society that claims to be Waiting for the Promised *Mahdi*, but does not have the good morals that a Waiter should demonstrate. Blame for the creation of such a hypocritical

society lies primarily with the rulers, whose misconduct has made people pessimistic about religion.

LIZARD (IR 2003)

The controversial film *LIZARD* was the first to portray clerics in post-revolutionary Iran. It has been examined in light of its depiction of preaching methods and religious morality, but its narration of the Waiting, a significant aspect of the film, has received less attention. Perhaps most remarkably, its last sequence, which illustrates the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony, has been overlooked in analyses of the film.

The story tells of “Reza the lizard” (Parviz Parastui), a veteran thief who can skillfully climb walls, like a lizard. He reveals this ability in the first scenes of the film, when he climbs the high wall of prison to save a white dove trapped in barbed wire at the top, an action which he has bet with the head of the prison he can carry out. However, despite his success, it earns him nothing but solitary confinement. His imprisonment for life and frequent solitary confinement lead him to attempt to commit suicide, after which he is moved to a hospital. There he becomes familiar with his roommate, a cleric who is not wearing clerical dress as he lies on the bed reading Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. He preaches to Reza and invites him to trust and hope in God, saying that the ways towards God are as many as there are people. Yet Reza talks about suicide and despair. When the cleric is absent, Reza steals his clothes and manages to escape. It seems, however, that the clergyman has deliberately made it possible for him to flee and find hope in his life. With the help of one of his friends, Reza leaves for a border area to prepare to depart the country. At the railroad station, he is mistaken by the people for the cleric who is to be sent to them to try to reanimate their moribund mosque. He soon increases the health of the mosque through his tolerant and kind behavior and becomes one of the most successful clerics in the region. At the end of the film, he is arrested, but he is now a changed man. In the final sequence, the previously empty mosque is filled with a vast number of people at the beginning of the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony.

LIZARD begins its *abstract* with a prison in which individuals who have demonstrated major social depravity are detained. Reza's escape from the prison and his entering more positive social arenas decreases such immorality day after day and at the same time increases his moral virtue. Reza

becomes more mature and more aware. The *complication* is found by asking about the crimes committed by those in the prison, the indifference of the people, why neighbors have turned away from the mosque, and why they lack faith. The filmmaker employs *evaluation* by depicting corrupt prison authorities, flawed religious propagation, the manipulation of public sentiment, and political hypocrisy. Evil is not inherent in certain characters: it is the product of a corrupt and immoral society. These people will find the right path if they are guided and trained properly.

The result occurs when, because of Reza's actions, the mosque is crowded for the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony. Reza's success is a product of his kind, tolerant, and honest behavior with the people. However, this is not the end of the story. In the last sequence, when numerous people affected by Reza's programs come together in the mid-*sha'bān* ceremony, he is arrested by the police. However, even the head of the prison realizes that Reza has changed: he arrests Reza but does not place him in handcuffs, another sign that Reza's religious propagation has been effective and that he has raised people's hopes for the Promised *Mahdi*. The final *coda* stresses that standard religious propagation must be changed if it is to create the ideal society. LIZARD, like HERE, A SHINING LIGHT, also directs a shining light at the concept of Waiting.

Conclusion

In Shi'i philosophy, the doctrine of Waiting has apocalyptic resonances.³⁹ In the Shi'i worldview, an apocalyptic society is a kind of dystopia mostly characterized by lack of spirituality and wisdom. According to Shi'i narratives, apocalypse is a period of history in which the earth is full of corruption, there is little wisdom and abundant ignorance, betrayal replaces trust, the wicked rulers reign over the people, lies and hypocrisy spread everywhere, wealth is preferred to faith, and people have human faces but their hearts are the hearts of devils.⁴⁰ The Promised Savior (*Mahdi*) is the one who puts an end to this situation and fills the world with justice, kindness, and good morals. A true Shi'i is one who does not give in to the apocalyptic status quo, but "waits" to end it with the help of the Savior (*monji*). The films dis-

39 Khandan 2013, 22.

40 Khandan 2013, 23.

cussed in this article illustrate the concept of Waiting through protagonists who despite societal rejection remain steadfast in their waiting for the Promised Savior.

The apocalyptic imagination in Iranian Illuminative Cinema is different from what we see in some apocalyptic Hollywood films. Conrad E. Ostwalt writes of a “secular apocalypse” in Hollywood,⁴¹ where the traditional religious concept of the apocalypse has been secularized for a contemporary audience. Traditional religious expressions of apocalypse are becoming less frequent, and instead, the apocalypse is represented by themes such as world destruction, pandemics, global warming, nuclear disasters, and zombie invasions. Secularization has eliminated the religious implications of the concept of the apocalypse and has transformed it into a kind of entertaining science fiction. Special effects and technical appeal take precedence over religious meaning. By contrast, in Iranian Illuminative Cinema, the technical is secondary to the representation of spiritual truths, and filmmakers do not make films simply to please their audience or to earn a return on their investment. In Iranian apocalyptic cinema, the concept of Waiting plays a pivotal role; it also has social aspects and serves as a metaphor for denying the status quo.

Dozens of apocalyptic films have been made in the United States since the first, *DELUGE* (Felix E. Feist, US), in 1933. These films have significant differences but many also have common elements. Ākhundi has identified some such common elements in Hollywood’s apocalyptic cinema in his analysis of *BABYLON A. D.* (Mathieu Kassovitz, US 2008), *THE BOOK OF ELI* (Albert Hughes / Allen Hughes, US 2010), and *2012* (Roland Emmerich, US 2009). These films consistently depict an American savior and the survival of the United States. They portray a stark East-West dichotomy: the East is a symbol of decline and the West (specifically the United States) is the epitome of progress and salvation. The American savior combats “Eastern evil”, reinforcing a narrative of US global dominance. In these films, technology and technological wars play a pivotal role, evident in advanced weapons of mass destruction and death as well as modern tools for security and protection. Natural disasters also play an important role in the end of the world: in the film *2012* solar radiation heating the earth’s core causes earthquakes and tsunamis that threaten all life on earth. The role played by destructive technology and natural disasters, which make apocalyptic films resemble the

41 Ostwalt 2016, 2.

science fiction genre, provides a naturalized and secularized image of the apocalypse,⁴² exactly the opposite of the representation of the apocalypse in Illuminative Cinema.

According to Shi'i philosophy, the apocalypse is not a secular phenomenon, and it therefore cannot be simply associated with the materiality of weapons of mass destruction or with natural disasters. In Illuminative Cinema, the filmmaker must strive to represent the divine truth of the apocalypse, in other words, human beings who are deprived of or neglect the spiritual and are alienated from their own divine identity. In Shi'i philosophy, the most significant feature of the apocalypse is that humans now struggle to understand esoteric and spiritual truths; they have become selfish and have no genuine relationship with the sacred.⁴³ In apocalyptic times, the presence of the sacred in daily life diminishes, and religion is abused by religious and political officials who care only about their own power and wealth. Someone who recognizes the apocalyptic character of such a situation will not follow the mainstream state of affairs but will wait for the Promised Savior, who will help in overcoming this evil situation. This kind of Waiting is not passive. It actively rejects the status quo, but it does not require war and the destruction of the world. The Iranian films discussed here tell of heroes who while exposing the apocalyptic nature of their society, also offer a way of spiritual salvation to their fellow human beings, a way repeatedly expressed by Reza in *LIZARD*: "The ways towards God are as many as the people." All people should try to find the light of the divine truth within themselves by removing the evil veils and should seek to end the neglect of the Light of the lights, to keep alive the Waiting for the Promised Savior and the love for him in their hearts. They may not necessarily be warriors; they may, like Rahman, Qudrat, and Reza, want to establish peace in themselves in order to overcome the apocalyptic conditions. Illuminative Cinema seeks to introduce and nurture such a subject.

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42 Ākhundi 2012, 155–156.

43 Khandan 2013, 22–23.

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Gender, State, and Religion in Maysaloun Hamoud's *IN BETWEEN* (IL/FR 2016)

Abstract

BAR BAHR (*IN BETWEEN*, Maysaloun Hamoud, IL/FR 2016) is an Israeli-Palestinian feature film that follows the lives of three young Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv as they navigate the complexities of their religious, national, and gender identities. The film explores the conflicts for a new Palestinian generation living within a Jewish-majority society and balancing the demands of their Palestinian and/or Muslim tradition with the struggles of a modern and urban lifestyle in a secular environment. After a brief introduction to the postcolonial discourse on gender, state, and religion in the WANA region, the article discusses key elements of *IN BETWEEN* with regard to the protagonists' gender-state-religion arrangements. It becomes evident that the film's narrative neither caters to orientalist or anti-Muslim stereotypes nor aligns with the tradition of classic Palestinian cinema. I argue that the film's achievement lies in this very suspension of essentialist notions. Ultimately, the film is placed within the broader context of feminist cinema in WANA.

Keywords

Palestine, Israel, Gender and Religion, Postcolonialism, Feminist Cinema, WANA Cinema

Biography

Jakob Eißner, MA, received his academic training in the Study of Religion, History, and Israel Studies at the universities of Leipzig, Beersheba, and Jerusalem. His research concentrates on the intersections of religion and politics in modern societies, Middle Eastern discourses, and Israeli-Palestinian history. He currently works for the German Federal Foreign Office.

Introduction: Modern Feminist Cinema in WANA

There is a long and unknown history of female filmmakers in the WANA region,¹ and specifically in the so-called Arab world.² For example, it was the Egyptian screenwriter Aziza Amir (1901–1952) who co-produced Egypt's first feature-length movie in 1927, the silent film *LAYLĀ* (*LAILA*, Stephan Rosti, EG 1927). Famous actresses of the mid-20th century are often considered precursors of feminist cinema, having starred in movies with a strong emphasis on female agency and women's struggles. Among them are productions as diverse as *DU'Ā' AL-KARAWĀN* (*THE NIGHTINGALE'S PRAYER*, Henry Barakat, EG 1959) featuring Faten Hamama (1931–2015) and *SELVİ BOYLUM, AL YAZMALIM* (*THE GIRL WITH THE RED SCARF*, Atif Yılmaz, TR 1978) with Türikan Şoray (born 1945). For the Arab world in particular, one can trace the beginning of independent female filmmaking back to the Egyptian director Ateyyat El Abnoudy (1939–2018), who became well-known for her 1971 documentary debut *HIŞĀN AL-ṬĪN* (*HORSE OF MUD*, Ateyyat El Abnoudy, EG 1971), a 12-minute film in which she depicted the toils of women working in an Egyptian mud-brick factory.

Having said this, it was only in 1994 that Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli (1947–2021) introduced the modern, i. e. postcolonial and intersectional, feminist movie to WANA cinema.³ The question of what defines modern feminism and when feminist cinema can thus be said to have truly emerged is, of course, a subject of debate. However, Tlatli's directorial debut, *ŞAMT AL-QUŞŪR* (*THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE*, Moufida Tlatli, TN 1994), is certainly one of the earliest and most influential movies in WANA cinema with a distinctly feminist perspective. The movie tells the story of Alia, a Tunisian woman in her mid-twenties who spent her childhood in the 1950s in the royal palace of a Bey, where her mother worked as a servant. It explores themes of gender, class, and colonialism within the historical context of the late French "protectorate" in Tunisia. Herein, it delves into the oppression of lower-class women and the silence surrounding their abuse

1 I use the term "WANA" to describe a region that encompasses the south-western parts of Asia and the northern parts of Africa. By applying this term, I seek to overcome the Eurocentric or orientalist notions inherent in other common geographical concepts, such as the Orient, the Fertile Crescent, the Near/Middle East, or MENA. See Scheffler 2003; Busse 2021.

2 Hillauer 2005. For an introduction, see Armes 2007.

3 Eißner 2024.

in a patriarchal society. By addressing issues such as sexual exploitation, social injustice, and the fight for personal and national independence, *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE* also sparked academic reflections on the intersections of feminism, postcolonialism, and religiosity/secularism in WANA.⁴ On a more general note, Tlatli's work serves as an example of a broader trend in which debates about gender, state, and religion in WANA over the past decades have increasingly drawn on cinematic productions from that region.

One of those productions is the Israeli-Palestinian drama *BAR BAHR* (*IN BETWEEN*, IL/FR 2016), by Hungarian-born filmmaker Maysaloun Hamoud (born 1982), a Palestinian citizen of Israel.⁵ Released in 2016 as Hamoud's feature directorial debut, *IN BETWEEN* received positive reviews from film critics around the world and won several prizes at festivals such as the 2016 Toronto Film Festival, the 2016 San Sebastian Film Festival, the 2016 Haifa International Film Festival, and the 2017 Israeli Academy Awards.

The movie follows the lives of three Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv as they navigate the complexities of their religious, national, and gender identities. There is Laila, a secular Muslim, and lawyer; Salma, a Christian lesbian and DJ; and Nour, a devout Muslim who is engaged to the conservative Wissam. Throughout the movie, the audience follows the protagonists as they carve out their paths within a Jewish-majority society while balancing the demands of their Palestinian and/or Muslim tradition with the struggles of a modern and urban lifestyle in a secular environment. As I will show, *IN BETWEEN* offers a vibrant and unprecedented perspective on the milieu of young Palestinians in Israel's economic and subcultural capital, and in doing so, it breaks with many familiar clichés and common narratives surrounding Muslim or Arab women.

I begin my essay with a brief introduction to the postcolonial discourse on gender, state, and religion in WANA. Following a summary of *IN BETWEEN*, I then discuss some major aspects of the movie with regard to this triad – in-

4 Naaman 2000; Slawy-Sutton 2002; Ben Youssef Zayzafoon 2007; Salhi 2007; Rice 2007.

5 Israel's Arab minority, which composes about a fifth of the total population, can hardly be addressed without making a political statement. Terms that do not mention Palestinian ethnicity (like Arab Israelis) are as equally contested as terms leaving out their national affiliation to Israel (like Palestinian Arabs). In this article, I use the designation "Palestinians in Israel" or "Palestinian citizens of Israel", for we know that most of them self-identify with these terms. See Peleg/Waxman 2011, 26–32. The fate of the Palestinians outside Israel, who live under Israeli occupation or in another country, does not play a role in this text and is left aside.

cluding broader debates on “feminist longings and postcolonial conditions”, as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (born 1952) put it.⁶ Finally, I tie my findings to the initial thoughts on modern feminist cinema in WANA.

Gender, State, and Religion in WANA

Gender, here, refers to the social roles, behavioral patterns, identities, and expectations that society associates with individuals based on their perceived sex. It should be primarily understood as a heuristic tool “to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competencies, which are then assigned as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’”.⁷ Across time and space, religion has played and continues to play a significant role in shaping gender. The complex relationship between gender and religion has, in fact, become the focus of a growing field of research.⁸ German religious studies scholars Heller and Franke assert that “in terms of gender concepts, there is ample evidence that religions reproduce, legitimize, transmit, and perpetuate the respective social constructs of a society, but they also shape, modify, and sometimes question or transform them”.⁹

In 1978, Palestinian-American academic and activist Edward Said (1935–2003) famously coined the term “Orientalism”, referring to a patronizing intellectual framework invented by Western scholars and utilized to depict the “Orient” as exotic, inferior, and in need of Western domination and control.¹⁰ Part and parcel of this process was othering Islam as an inherently violent, oppressive, and backward religion.¹¹ Hence, there is a clear link between Orientalism, Islamophobia, Western notions of superiority, colonialism, and politics of empire.¹² Indeed, much of what postcolonial studies have aimed to achieve so far is to trace and deconstruct this link. It

6 Abu-Lughod 1998.

7 Pilcher/Whelehan 2004, 56. Also, Marchbank/Letherby 2014 and Disch/Hawkesworth 2016.

8 For example, Lövheim 2013; Gemzöe/Keinänen/Maddrell 2016; Martin/Schwaderer/Waldner 2023.

9 Heller/Franke 2024, 4. The translation from German to English is my own.

10 Said 1978.

11 Said 1981.

12 For example, Kumar 2012.

has become clear that to better understand these dynamics, the academic discourse on gender and religion must also take the state (colonialism, nationalism, etc.) as a third variable into account.

Already in 1975, Fatema Mernissi (1940–2015), Moroccan sociologist and feminist author, had published her groundbreaking study *Beyond the Veil*.¹³ By comparing the religious arguments for women's oppression in post-colonial Morocco to the more "scientific" arguments that were prevalent in Europe's gender discourse, she posited that Islam was by no means the cause of misogyny and gender inequality, but rather yet another expression of patriarchal power legitimization similar to the ones in Europe.¹⁴

In the 1980s, an increasing number of female Middle East scholars helped overcome the old orientalist stereotypes by critically researching gender dynamics in Islamic societies.¹⁵ One of them was the historian Margot Badran (born 1936), who focused on female agency and feminist activism in Muslim-majority countries.¹⁶ Subsequently, Leila Ahmed (born 1940) published her seminal study *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), arguing against the essentialist notion that Islam is inherently misogynistic.¹⁷ Instead, she contended that in most WANA societies, an androcentric and gender-hierarchical *interpretation* of Islam has prevailed and that it is now the task of Islamic feminism to address this historical contingency by advocating for female emancipation – not in secular but in religious terms.

When gender scholar Deniz Kandiyoti (born 1944) published her study *Women, Islam, and the State* in 1991, orientalist images began to crumble even further.¹⁸ She proposed that Islam is not the right lens at all through which the situation of women in WANA should be studied. Rather, the heuristic focus should be on the state's political culture, the ideological instrumentalization of Islam by specific regimes, and the history of colonialism. Although it might likewise be somewhat oversimplified to limit our understanding of women and queer people¹⁹ in WANA solely to this postcolonial

13 Mernissi 1975.

14 Winkel 2019.

15 Hafez 2023.

16 For example, Badran 1985; Badran 1996; Badran 2011.

17 Ahmed 1992.

18 Kandiyoti 1991a.

19 In this article, I use "queer" as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing all individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression deviates from heterosexual and cisgender norms.

framework, I very much embrace her argument that gender, state, and religion must be seen as interacting systems of power. Only by acknowledging this triad of power regimes can one understand the various manifestations of structural and intersectional²⁰ discrimination across axes such as nationality, race/ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, disability, sexual preference, and gender roles.

Within WANA, the whole discourse on *gender* (emancipation), *state* (nationalism), and *religion* (secularism) commenced after the encounter with Europe and its notions of modernity in the late 19th century. Kandiyoti has convincingly shown how gender debates in and about WANA are “part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and where women’s appropriate place and conduct may be made to serve as boundary markers”.²¹ This means that the role of women and queer people in (post-)colonial states often functions as a symbolic or even proxy discussion for both the self-image and outside perception of these states in general. As if seen through a magnifying glass, the issue of gender in the WANA discourse illustrates greater areas of conflict on the demarcation between tradition and modernity, authenticity and imitation, or religion and secularity.

In the context of WANA, many of those dichotomies were first discussed in comparison to Western societies. For example, cultural anthropologist Talal Asad (born 1932) rigorously dismissed the universal applicability of the “secular”, deconstructing it as a European concept imposed on WANA societies by cultural imperialism.²² Likewise, anthropologist Saba Mahmood (1961–2018) in her book *Politics of Piety* (2005) challenged Western feminist assumptions about women’s liberation and the secularity of emancipation.²³ When talking about religious conservatism, modern values, sexual freedom, and gender roles in WANA, one has to be aware of the “complex ways that the West and things associated with the West, embraced, repudiated, and translated, are implicated in contemporary gender politics”, as Abu-Lughod wrote in 1998.²⁴

20 Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the overlapping and interdependent nature of social categories (race, gender, class, etc.), which interact to shape individuals’ experiences of privilege or oppression. For gender and intersectionality, see for example Degele 2019.

21 Kandiyoti 1992, 246. Also, Kandiyoti 1991b.

22 Asad 2003.

23 Mahmood 2005.

24 Abu-Lughod 1998, 3.

Maysaloun Hamoud's *IN BETWEEN* (IL/FR 2016)

IN BETWEEN is a 2016 feature film written and directed by Maysaloun Hamoud and produced by Shlomi Elkabetz. It delves into the lives of three young Palestinian women sharing an apartment in the vibrant heart of “Medinat” Tel Aviv.²⁵ There is the secular Muslim lawyer Laila; the Christian DJ and bartender Salma; and the devout Muslim student Nour. Across their diverse religious backgrounds and lifestyles, they share the pursuit of emancipation from societal constraints and the quest for a redefined identity as Palestinian women within a Jewish-majority culture. Set against the backdrop of Tel Aviv’s bustling streets, nightclubs, and house parties, the movie accompanies the three women as they navigate through a society that imposes rigid expectations and norms upon them. Hence, their shared struggles and triumphs are the common ground on which they forge their bonds of friendship and solidarity.

Leila (Mouna Hawa) originally comes from Nazareth, the largest city in the Northern District of Israel. Her family is Muslim, but she does not adhere to a religious lifestyle. Living in the Yemenite Quarter of Tel Aviv, she works as a lawyer in the daytime and enjoys the city’s nightlife after work. In the movie’s opening scene, she is shown dancing, flirting, and sniffing cocaine with her friends. Time and again, Leila is portrayed as an independent and assertive young woman who does not conform to religious traditions or men’s expectations. Unlike Nour, she does not wear a headscarf, nor does she abstain from drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana. She displays a rather casual approach to sexual relationships, and she confidently stands up for herself and rejects advances by men who approach her without consent. Over the course of the movie, she engages in a more serious relationship with a man called Ziad, who at first seems to be as secular and cosmopolitan as she is. However, Leila slowly realizes that Ziad disapproves of her liberal lifestyle, patronizes her, and refuses to recognize their relationship in front of his family. Disappointed, Leila ends the relationship.

Salma (Sana Jammeli), Leila’s roommate, comes from the northern town of Ma’alot-Tarshiha, a so-called mixed city of Jewish and Arab resi-

25 In Hebrew, Tel Aviv is sometimes referred to as a “medina” (*state*). This expresses the idea of Tel Aviv as a sociocultural “bubble” (Hebrew: *buba*) that differs significantly from the rest of Israel in terms of lifestyle, religiosity, and political attitudes, and therefore feels like a “state within a state”.

dents. In Tel Aviv, she works in various jobs, first in a restaurant kitchen and later in a bar, while pursuing her passion for DJing. Salma's family is Christian and does not know about her homosexuality. They constantly try to find a suitable partner for her and arrange a marriage. When Salma's parents invite her to Tarshiha to meet a new prospective husband, she brings her girlfriend Dounia, without revealing the nature of their relationship at first. When her parents finally find out, they are outraged and put Salma under house arrest. In the end, Salma flees her parents' house and plans to move to Berlin.

After their third roommate, Rafif, gets married at the beginning of the movie, her cousin Nour (Shaden Kanboura) spontaneously moves in with Leila and Salma. Nour comes from Umm al-Fahm, an Arab city in the Haifa District of Israel and the centre of the so-called triangle area, widely known for its conservative religious residents. Being a committed computer science student and observant Muslim, she at first clashes with her irreligious cohabitants. They do not show much understanding, let alone approval, of her religious lifestyle, and their drug consumption as well as the constant presence of male visitors pose problems for Nour.

Furthermore, Nour is engaged to a possessive and controlling Muslim man called Wissam, who expects her to conform to traditional gender roles, such as preparing a proper meal every time he comes to visit her. He is unhappy with Nour living in the apartment with Salma and Leila, whom he deems "impure", and he urges Nour to move out of Tel Aviv to a more Muslim neighbourhood in Jaffa. Wissam also pressures her to marry him as soon as possible and does not want her to work after graduating. To support his patronizing arguments, he quotes passages from the Qur'an. But their relationship becomes increasingly strained as Nour, influenced by the liberal attitudes of her roommates, starts to question her fiancé's authority and asserts her independence. Wissam reacts by raping her. Eventually, the three women forge a plan to dissolve Nour's engagement without tarnishing her reputation and manage to take revenge on Wissam.

The movie ends on a hopeful note when Leila, Salma, and Nour confront their respective challenges head-on, be they sexism and paternalization (Leila), racism and homophobia (Salma), or sexual violence and religious traditionalism (Nour). They all have poignant experiences of courage, empowerment, and sisterhood as they refuse to be constrained by the hurtful demands of their families, partners, or bosses. *IN BETWEEN* offers a convincing portrayal of contemporary Palestinian life in Tel Aviv that challenges

common stereotypes through its nuanced storytelling and offers a glimpse into the lives of those caught between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, redefining what it means to be a Palestinian woman in contemporary Israeli society.

Gender, State, and Religion in IN BETWEEN

The movie's original title, "bar baḥr" (*land, earth*), is a metaphor that encapsulates the essence of Hamoud's storyline: Palestinian women in Israel find themselves trapped "In Between" (English title), in a place "Lo Sham Lo Po" (*neither here nor there*, Hebrew title), torn between their identities as women (*gender*) and Palestinians, i.e. members of both an ethnic minority (*state*) and an often-conservative religious society (*religion*).²⁶ This said, it is crucial to avoid the essentialism that underlies many interpretations of gender, state, and religion in the Palestinian context: the depiction of gender, state, and religion as inherently conflicting systems whose claims to self-realization cannot be reconciled often reproduces orientalist stereotypes. Conversely, representing these elements as a harmonious triad in a shared struggle for liberation does not correspond to reality and reinforces the paternalistic rhetoric often prevalent in Palestinian discourse. As I will demonstrate, IN BETWEEN applies nuanced storytelling and complex character development to avoid both these pitfalls.

In some respects, IN BETWEEN follows the classic motifs of Palestinian cinema: the central issues of home and belonging, agency and empowerment, as well as notions of *sumud*, the iconic steadfastness and resilience in the face of oppression and seemingly hopeless situations.²⁷ But unlike most traditional Palestinian movies, IN BETWEEN places a much greater emphasis on the protagonists' womanhood than on their Palestinian identity. Women are not primarily depicted as wives and mothers and, by that, as the heroic and self-sacrificing backbone of the Palestinian nation. Rather than mother-

26 Film scholar Nava Dushi suggests that Hamoud uses the uncommon term "bar" for "land" instead of the more common "arḍ" primarily for stylistic reasons (alliteration and rhyme). Furthermore, she notes that the title could also be a genitive construction (*Land of Sea*), thus "evoking the idea that the land itself is unsettled, unsteady, fluid". This could be interpreted as a metaphor for a "feminine space experienced as ephemeral and unconquerable ground". Dushi 2023, 238.

27 For example, Dabashi 2006; Gertz/Khleifi 2008.

hood, devotion, and collectivism, *IN BETWEEN* talks about self-fulfilment, rebellion, and individualism. The women's constant smoking becomes a leitmotif of the movie that symbolizes their striving for freedom and self-determination.

Cultural studies scholar Ariel Sheetrit has examined notions of marriage in *IN BETWEEN* and illustrates how Maysaloun Hamoud repeatedly prioritizes gender aspects over state aspects: according to Sheetrit, the movie rejects the “exclusively positive connotations of a wedding, whether as a celebration of the union of two individuals, or as a celebration of national desire that symbolizes union with the land, in which women are metonymical embodiments of the land”.²⁸ Rafif's wedding, Nour's engagement with Wissam, and Leila's relationship with Ziad introduce the issue of marriage as “an impending threat [rather] than a coveted objective”.²⁹ In line with what I noted above, Sheetrit goes on to say that *IN BETWEEN* exhibits a “departure from the symbolism and conventions of the national [Palestinian] narrative” by “addressing the internal problematics of Palestinian society in day-to-day Palestinian existence”.³⁰

In Palestinian cinema classics such as *'URS AL-KHALĪL* (WEDDING IN THE GALILEE, Michel Khleifi, PS 1987) or *'URS RANĀ* (RANA'S WEDDING, Hany Abu-Assad, PS 2002), female desire, marriage, and national liberation form a unity. Gender, state, and religion coexist in a harmonious, symbiotic relationship. In stark contrast, *IN BETWEEN*, in Sheetrit's words, “dissociates national belonging from defined gender roles and synchronous sexual identities delineated by the mandate for a family unit as the basis for national resistance”.³¹ As a result, there is tension within the triad of gender, state, and religion, and this new cinematic arrangement provokes the traditional Palestinian audience (see below). The provocation stems from the fact that in many conservative communities, depicting Palestinian society (*state*) and Islamic or Christian traditionalism (*religion*) as obstacles to female self-determination (*gender*) is very much taboo.

For example, after her rape, Nour cannot openly accuse Wissam of his crime and break off the engagement. Referring to his excellent reputation, Wissam states that nobody would believe Nour, and Nour would never find a new fiancé if her rape became public. Through this, Hamoud portrays Pal-

28 Sheetrit 2021, 369–370.

29 Sheetrit 2021, 368.

30 Sheetrit 2021, 369.

31 Sheetrit 2021, 370.

estinian society as one where victims of sexual abuse are disbelieved, with a reversal of the perpetrator-victim narrative (*victim blaming*). Ultimately, Leila, Salma, and Nour rely on a tricky scheme to dissolve Nour's engagement. They must seek revenge on Wissam within the confines of a patriarchal system; they cannot defeat or overcome the system itself. On a more theoretical note, gender here conflicts with religion and state.

There are many such examples of clashes between societal and religious norms and the women's longings. For instance, Leila's boyfriend, Ziad, attempts to make her give up smoking and adopt a more modest lifestyle, citing an Arab proverb: "Dress as people expect but eat as you wish." But Leila remains defiant: "What if I eat what I want and dress as I want, too?"³² In an interview, Hamoud explains that young Palestinian women such as Leila and Salma "have the label of sluts" whereas "men like Ziad can travel and live with women and later take another woman to marry and be accepted in society and by his wife's family".³³

Regarding its reception in Palestinian society, the movie has polarized opinions. As a consequence of disputing sensitive issues such as religious truths, sexuality, and family traditions, Hamoud received praise and recognition but also had to face criticism, verbal abuse, and death threats from within the Palestinian community.³⁴ Especially in Umm al-Fahm, where the character Nour is from, the city leaders and religious authorities were outraged by Hamoud's movie. Not only did they publicly call for a boycott of the film, but they issued a fatwa against it.³⁵ This made Hamoud the first Palestinian filmmaker – at least since 1948 – against whom a fatwa has been issued.

Cinematically, the breaking of taboos in Palestinian society is executed unflinchingly. For instance, sexual violence – rather than being merely implied (as often done in mainstream cinema) – is depicted in an agonizingly long rape scene between Nour and Wissam of more than two minutes. Drug use, too, is shown directly, with Leila and her friends sniffing cocaine at the beginning of the movie. Similarly, the passionate kiss between Salma and Dounia is not hinted at or implied but rather occupies a central focus in the scene. Film scholar Abdel Karim comments, "Hamoud captures this moment using a wide angle and in proper daylight. The message behind having

32 The translation from Arabic to English is my own.

33 Garcia 2018, 33.

34 Macguire 2018.

35 Felsenthal 2018.

an intimate scene in broad daylight is to go against stereotyping that queer relationships should only happen in dark hidden places.”³⁶

In his monograph *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writings in the World* (2022), literary scholar Maurice Ebileeni comes to a similar conclusion: Hamoud’s movie is able to “challenge the masculine tone of the national script” in Palestinian public discourse.³⁷ *IN BETWEEN* emphasizes the gendered struggle for self-determination over the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. This creates a cinematic counterpoint to the prevailing Palestinian narrative, which adopts the idea of “prioritizing the call for national liberation at the expense of marginalizing other discourses of liberation, such as specific feminist discourses”.³⁸ In so doing, the protagonists occasionally resort to Western concepts when addressing their conflicts within the gender-state-religion arrangement. For instance, when talking to Dounia in Arabic, Salma uses the English word “lesbian” to refer to themselves, rather than the Arabic word *siḥāqiyya*, which has an insulting undertone.³⁹ Following Abdel Karim’s interpretation, Salma’s final decision to leave Israel for Germany can likewise be interpreted as “the best route to achieve [her] independence and freedom from a society that rejects [her] existence”.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the movie does not entertain notions of Western superiority either. Gender, state, and religion are not depicted as static categories that are permanently incompatible. First, the situation Leila faces with Ziad – his desire to be intimate with her while simultaneously feeling ashamed of her in front of his family – is mirrored in the situation Leila faces with her Jewish colleague (see below). Secondly, despite being inspired by Leila and Salma to become increasingly emancipated and liberal, Nour never gives up her religious beliefs. Illustrative of this is the closing scene, where Nour attends her first house party, witnessing alcohol consumption and drug use and openly dancing among both women and men, all the while retaining her headscarf and keeping a certain distance. What Hamoud cinematically expresses here is an insight shared by Leila Ahmed, Saba Mahmood, and many other postcolonial feminist thinkers: freedom and secularism are not synonymous; religious traditions and liberal lifestyles

36 Abdel Karim 2020, 81.

37 Ebileeni 2022, 114.

38 Ebileeni 2022, 105.

39 Abdel Karim 2020, 81.

40 Abdel Karim 2020, 81.

can indeed be reconciled; and Western interpretations of emancipation and religiosity do not necessarily apply to the WANA region. Gender, state, and religion are therefore not in an inherent state of conflict either.

Eschewing essentialist notions, *IN BETWEEN* focuses on the dynamics within which Palestinian women continuously navigate gender-state-religion arrangements. Literary scholar Anastasia Valassopoulos put it like this: “The in-between here may not entirely indicate the in-between space of ethnic and civic duties versus personal desires, but rather point to the living that must and does take place in between all of these dynamics.”⁴¹

Borrowing the movie’s title, Middle Eastern scholar Michael Milshtein published a book-length study in Hebrew that deals with Palestinian youth in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, both historically and contemporarily. In *Neither Here Nor There: A Portrait of the Young Palestinian Generation* (2022) he argues that it is not only young Palestinian women who weather a constant tension between traditionalism and modernity, Arab and Western culture, secular lifestyles and religious customs, but their generation as a whole. Milshtein convincingly shows how the young Palestinians’ struggle for freedom and social justice has always had a revolutionary impetus that sought to fight constraints not only in Israeli society and under Israeli occupation but also within a patriarchal and traditionalist Arab community.⁴² According to Milshtein, one of those rebellious upheavals has been the so-called “Knife Intifada”, or “Stabbing Intifada”⁴³ (which took place in 2015 during the shooting of *IN BETWEEN*). The Knife Intifada became a generation-defining event encapsulating the political *Zeitgeist* of the young Palestinian generation: the rebellion is not unidirectional but targets established structures of oppression in both Israeli and Palestinian society.

While occupation, Palestinian resistance, and terrorism are not mentioned in the movie, one can very clearly see the idea of this two-front battle that young Palestinians often have to fight: against prejudice and discrimination by Israelis on the one hand, and against paternalism and constriction by Palestinian traditionalism on the other. Even though the movie is focused on the

41 Valassopoulos 2023, 490.

42 Milshtein 2022.

43 The Knife Intifada refers to a surge of Palestinian attacks, primarily involving stabbings, on Israeli civilians and security forces, often committed by young individual assailants acting without centralized coordination (so-called “lone wolf attacks”). In late 2015, there were on average three such attacks per day. The centre of the upheaval became Jerusalem (hence the term *Jerusalem Intifada*).

latter, tensions with the Israeli environment are continually addressed: Salma responds to the unfriendly treatment by an employee in a Tel Avivian fashion store with “We don’t bite.” She then quits her job when her boss reprimands her for speaking Arabic in the restaurant kitchen. And despite Leila’s generally carefree attitude, she refuses to go on a date with her Jewish colleague because his mother would never accept a relationship with an Arab woman.

Palestinian women in Israel are a doubly marginalized group engaged in a dual struggle for equality and self-determination. Gender, state, and religion function not as three independent systems of power but rather as one intersectional mechanism of structural oppression. This becomes particularly evident when Nour’s fiancé, Wissam, strongly objects to her living as a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim and even “Western” environment, outside the social and religious control of her milieu of origin.

So, on the one hand, the movie intentionally does not focus on interactions with Israelis because “Palestinians can stand by themselves and speak among ourselves [*sic*]”, Hamoud said in an interview.⁴⁴ On the other hand, it is necessary to highlight the specific Palestinian element – being an Arab minority in a Jewish-majority society – to elucidate the double marginalization of Palestinian women and avoid accusations of engaging in an auto-orientalist criticism of Palestinian or Islamic culture. Much like Fatema Mernissi’s classical study *Beyond the Veil* (see above), in which she examines gender oppression in Morocco by comparing it to respective discourses in Europe, *IN BETWEEN* concentrates on the mechanisms of oppression within Arab-Islamic and Arab-Christian communities while addressing Western concepts of gender, state, and religion – to clarify that they are not being idealized.

Thus, the frequent allegations from conservative religious circles about Hamoud’s “defamation” of Palestinian society are unjustified. Rather, these allegations should be understood as reactions to the threat her movie poses to structural power relations and societal taboos. The anti-patriarchal impetus is neither anti-Muslim nor anti-nationalist. As Islamic feminist Margot Badran has put it: “A feminist who is also a nationalist in articulating a feminist critique is not [...] anti-nationalist but against specific patriarchal constructions of nationalism and the nation. In fact, it could be argued that she or he is more concerned and supportive of the nation – a sound nation in which gender inequalities are not operative.”⁴⁵

44 Garcia 2018, 33.

45 Badran 2001, 44.

Conclusion: IN BETWEEN and the Modern WANA Cinema

IN BETWEEN, Maysaloun Hamoud's 2016 debut film, vividly portrays the lives of three young Palestinian women living together in Tel Aviv. The movie's strength lies in the diversity and complexity of its characters, including liberal and conservative attitudes; secular and devout lifestyles; figures with Muslim as well as Christian family backgrounds, some of them with close family ties, some of them largely self-reliant; urban and rural environments; professionally successful as well as rather impoverished figures; diverse sexual orientations, experiences, and relationship arrangements. Within these multiple identity configurations, the dynamics that play a crucial role involve consistently negotiating conflicts between *gender* (being a woman), *state* (being Palestinian), and *religion* (being Muslim) with all their respective implications.

Hamoud employs gender aspects as "boundary markers", to raise "broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity" (Kandiyoti), too.⁴⁶ In doing so, she draws attention to the double marginalization of Palestinian women (*gender*) – as members of an ethnic minority (*state*), and as part of a conservative religious community (*religion*) – within the specific Israeli context. Simultaneously, she adeptly avoids common pitfalls of essentialism: neither is the triad of gender, state, and religion depicted in an orientalist sense as inherently contradictory and conflict-ridden, nor is the women's struggle for freedom used as an allegory for the Palestinians' struggle for freedom, a trope frequently seen in traditional Palestinian cinema. Instead, various forms of oppression intertwine, giving rise to intricate and historically unique dynamics of subjugation that, despite their contingency, bear similarities to feminist struggles in other contexts – and especially in the WANA region.

In cinematographic terms, Hamoud is an example of the new generation of female filmmakers from WANA who are shaping the Palestinian cinema of the 21st century.⁴⁷ IN BETWEEN has often been compared to other WANA movies that revolve around young Muslim women and their struggles in a patriarchal, heteronormative, and religious society: the Lebanese feature film SUKKAR BANĀT (CARMEL, Nadine Labaki, LB 2007), for example, or

46 Kandiyoti 1992, 246.

47 Most prominently seen in the founding of *Shashat* in 2005, a Palestinian NGO that wants to provide a platform for female Palestinian filmmakers. See Franco 2016.

the Iranian drama ŠARĀ'IT (CIRCUMSTANCES, Maryam Keshavarz, IR 2011).⁴⁸ There are also striking similarities with the Jordanian movie BANĀT 'ABD AL-RAḤMĀN (THE DAUGHTERS OF ABDUL-RAHMAN, Zaid Abu Hamdan, JO 2021), directed and produced by a male filmmaker. In an interview from 2018, Hamoud sees *IN BETWEEN* as part of a “new cinematic Arab wave which started after the Arab Spring”.⁴⁹ Her main intention was to render visible the “underground scene that I am part of”.⁵⁰ According to her, “talking about the taboos without fear, with a lot of courage and the feminine voice has started to be in the front more and more”, and this new Arab cinema is “shaking the system”.⁵¹

A lot has happened since Moufida Tlatli's *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE* (1994) and the beginning of modern feminist filmmaking in WANA. Nevertheless, *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE* and *IN BETWEEN* have a good number of similarities: First and foremost, they openly and drastically address paternalization, social control, and sexual violence through the triad of gender, state, and religion in a WANA country. While Tlatli's movie focuses on a harem in Tunisia under French colonial rule, Hamoud's movie centres on an apartment in the heart of Tel Aviv, Israel. In *THE SILENCES OF THE PALACE*, class issues play a significantly more important role, whereas notions of urbanity are especially prominent in *IN BETWEEN*. Yet, much like Hamoud, Tlatli managed to bypass essentialist interpretations of her work: despite her criticism of the Bey's palace and the sexist practice of exploiting female bodies, she does not glorify the situation of women in the anti-colonial movement either. Alia's boyfriend and former teacher, Lotfi, representing the then-new Tunisian generation and anti-colonial thought, pressures her to undergo an abortion. Thus, a common thread in the modern WANA cinema seems to be the realization that gender-based violence is universal and exists in every gender-state-religion arrangement, and it does not operate independently of those categories.

48 Asfour 2018; Abdel Karim 2020.

49 Macguire 2018.

50 Macguire 2018.

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- ‘URS RANĀ (RANA’S WEDDING, Hany Abu-Assad, PS 2002).

Escaping the Arrangement

Forced Marriages in European Muslim Diasporic Films

Abstract

While the issue of forced and arranged marriages is rarely explored by scholars of family sociology in Islamic contexts and seldom occupies a central position in the cinemas of Muslim-majority countries, it appears surprisingly often in European diasporic films portraying Muslim-background migrant characters. The first part of this article outlines key studies on the contested yet persistent practice of arranged marriages in Islam. It is followed by an examination of the recurring plot structure in films addressing the topic. Regardless of whether these films adopt a comedic or dramatic tone and whether they are produced exclusively in Europe or co-produced with countries outside Europe (such as Tunisia, Pakistan, or Turkey), young male and female protagonists consistently reject the notion of arranged marriage. Four films are subject to detailed narrative and genre analysis: *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS ...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), and *NOCES* (*A WEDDING*, Stephan Streker, BE 2016). Ultimately, all these films discredit the practice of arranged and forced marriages, often linking it to the collapse of paternal authority. They also highlight the unequal gender dynamics at play, showing that refusing an arranged marriage tends to carry far greater risks and consequences for women than for men.

Keywords

European Cinema, Islam and Culture, Muslims in Motion Pictures, Religion in Motion Pictures, *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS ...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), and *NOCES* (*A WEDDING*, Stephan Streker, BE 2016)

Biography

Adam Domalewski holds a PhD in Arts, is a graduate of film and theater studies, and is an Assistant Professor at the Film, Media and Audiovisual Arts Institute at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Poland). His research interests include the intersection of film and religion, film comedy, and twenty-first-century European cinema, especially works addressing issues of migration and diaspora. Domalewski is co-author (with Artur Skweres) of the book *Homo Viator in Contemporary European Comedy Movies* (2025).

Forced and arranged marriages serve as central themes, narrative turning points, and primary sources of intergenerational conflict in many European diasporic films, including *EAST IS EAST* (Damien O'Donnell, UK 1999), *AE FOND KISS...* (Ken Loach, UK 2004), *VINGAR AV GLAS* (*WINGS OF GLASS*, Reza Bagher, SE 2000), *JALLA! JALLA!* (*THE BEST MAN'S WEDDING*, Josef Fares, SE 2000),¹ *FARSAN* (Josef Fares, SE 2010), *HVA VIL FOLK SI* (*WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY*, Iram Haq, NO 2017), *SHOUF SHOUF HABIBI!* (*HUSH HUSH BABY*, Albert ter Heerdt, NL 2004), *TURQUAZE* (Kadir Balci, BE 2010), *NOCES* (*A WEDDING*, Stephan Streker, BE 2016), *POUR VIVRE HEUREUX* (*FOR A HAPPY LIFE*, Salima Glamine / Dimitri Linder, BE 2018), *MUSTANG* (Deniz Gamze Ergüven, FR/DE/TR 2015), and *INHEBBEK HEDI* (*HEDI*, Mohamed Ben Attia, TN/FR/BE 2016). I argue that in European feature films addressing issues related to Islam, one of the most frequently recurring motifs (at least since 1989) is the predicament of a young Muslim man or woman concerning marriage. A particularly significant aspect of this theme is the issue of arranged and forced marriages, which appears surprisingly often in European diasporic films. The first part of the article outlines key studies on the contested yet persistent practice of arranged and forced marriages within Islamic contexts. The second part then examines the recurring plot structure in films addressing the topic on the example of four movies from the above list. The analyzed films employ diverse generic frameworks to depict arranged marriages, ranging from family melodrama and coming-of-age dramedy to cinematic tragedy. Despite these variations in genre, their overall plot structure remains strikingly similar. My goal is to reconstruct this common structure and, in the conclusion, to reflect on what these structural patterns may reveal.

Sociological Perspectives on Arranged and Forced Marriages in Muslim Families

The issue of arranged marriages neither constitutes the primary focus of orientalist research on family sociology in Islam, nor – according to available film studies – has a prominent place in the cinemas of Muslim-majority countries. Scholars analyzing the intersection of Islamic religion, the Quran, women's status, and family law generally focus on three key issues: the

1 This migrant comedy film portrays an attempt to arrange a marriage within a Lebanese-Swedish family whose members are Christians.

legitimacy of divorce, the permissibility of polygamy, and gender equality. In a 1962 article entitled *The Reform in Family Laws in the Muslim World*, Muhammad Rashid Feroze examined mid-20th-century family law reforms in Pakistan, Egypt, and Tunisia that have adapted the law to Western models.² Feroze highlighted the progress made by legislators in expanding women's rights, such as enabling Muslim women to obtain judicial divorces³ and restricting polygamous marriages, particularly those entered into without the consent of the first wife.⁴ In Egypt, a minimum age for marriage was also established – fifteen for women and eighteen for men. During the same period, in the late 1950s, several Muslim-majority countries, including Egypt and Pakistan, granted women the right to vote.⁵ Moreover, these nations introduced detailed legal provisions concerning *mahr*, the mandatory financial gift from husband to wife that is an inseparable part of the institution of marriage in Islam. However, Feroze's study made only brief mention of forced marriages, specifically in the context of women in Pakistan being married off without their consent due to financial gains for their families, particularly their fathers.⁶ He cited a government commission report that unequivocally condemned the practice of selling daughters and called for strict legal action against those responsible.

In 2005 Asghar Ali Engineer presented a significantly different perspective on forced marriages, writing from an internal Muslim standpoint on women and family in Islam. His main objective in *The Quran, Women, and Modern Society* is a meticulous analysis of core practices and thought patterns deemed universally binding in Sharia law, re-examining them in light of their original Quranic formulation. Engineer asserts that while the source – the Quran – is divine, its interpretation remains human and “stands in need of change”.⁷ He argues that Sharia should not be considered a closed system, just as it was not perceived as such in the early days of Islam, including by the Prophet himself. Considering the socio-cultural context in which the Quran was

2 Feroze 2003, 1–21.

3 In Pakistan, under an act of 1939, women were granted the right to seek divorce in strictly specified cases of neglect and misconduct by their husbands, a groundbreaking development in the legislation of the Indian subcontinent. Feroze 2003, 2.

4 In Tunisia, however, polygamous marriage was banned and could be punished with imprisonment. Feroze 2003, 16.

5 Moghadam/Mitra 2014, 163–164.

6 Feroze 2003, 6.

7 Engineer 2005, 40.

revealed and subsequently interpreted,⁸ Engineer suggests re-evaluating its verses, particularly those concerning women. He advocates suspending long-standing interpretations that assert the supposed inferiority of women in the Quran, as many revolutionary Quranic passages granted both genders relatively comparable rights for their time, significantly elevating the status of women within the family and society.⁹ By referencing specific Quranic passages and analyzing them in their historical context, Engineer refutes various discriminatory interpretations purportedly derived from the Quran, such as the notion that a woman's testimony is worth only half that of a man. His work thus encourages a revision of dominant readings and representations of Quranic teachings.

Despite his theological approach, which prioritizes scriptural exegesis over sociological analysis, Engineer attributes the disadvantages faced by Muslim women primarily to pervasive patriarchy. A useful complement to his work is Wiebke Walther's article "*The Situation of Women in Islamic Countries*", published in 2010 in the comprehensive study *Islam in the World Today* by a team of German scholars.¹⁰ Walther addresses forced marriages twice, while also distinguishing them from arranged marriages. She identifies the former as a legacy of the custom known as *jabr*, which granted fathers or guardians the right to compel underage daughters into marriage. Walther notes that this practice was outlawed in Middle Eastern countries during the 1960s and 1970s, though cases of forced marriages have since been recorded in Europe, particularly among Turkish immigrant communities in Germany. According to Walther, such cases primarily occurred in impoverished urban families and rural communities and were driven by the desire to ensure the daughters' financial security and maintain "autochthonous traditions".¹¹

Similar factors – low social status and limited education – also seem to contribute to the practice of arranged marriages. Walther describes them as common in Muslim families, where parents with their daughter's consent seek out a "socially acceptable and amicable husband".¹² While women often play a crucial role in the matchmaking process, the negotiation phase

8 It was intended for pre-Islamic Arab communities, which were entirely dominated by men. Engineer 2005, 26–30.

9 Engineer 2005, 47, 181.

10 Walther 2010, 619–681.

11 Walther 2010, 653.

12 Walther 2010, 665.

is strictly a male domain – marriage contracts (often highly detailed) are arranged between the prospective groom, typically assisted by a cousin or friend, and the bride's male relatives. Financial stability remains a key criterion, to the extent that weddings are sometimes postponed for years while the groom attains the required economic status. The financial aspect is also closely linked to the common age gap between spouses, with grooms often significantly older than their brides.

These studies highlight that arranged and forced marriages in Islam are complex and ambiguous phenomena. On the one hand, they have been officially outlawed (in the case of forced marriages) or lack explicit legal sanction (in the case of arranged marriages), yet they remain present in Muslim cultural landscapes. Notably, they are somewhat marginalized within orientalist scholarship, even among those specializing in the sociology of the Muslim family, despite the significant influence of gender and feminist studies in this field. Furthermore, film studies suggest that similar neglect applies to cinematic representations of such marriages in Muslim-majority countries, as is indicated by research focusing on portrayals of Muslim women on screen.

Cinematic Portrayals of Arranged and Forced Marriages

Gönül Dönmez-Colin in *Women, Islam and Cinema* traces the evolution of female representation in the film industries of several Muslim-majority countries from their inception to the early 21st century. She examines the cinematic output of nations as diverse as Iran, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, yet concludes that similar stereotypes, narrative patterns, and recurring themes have dominated these national cinemas for decades.¹³ According to Dönmez-Colin, the most common depictions include, on the one hand, the trope of the “fallen woman” and her moral transgressions – often intertwined with sexual violence as a form of punishment for dishonoring her family. On the other hand, there is an idealized vision of the “family woman”, a silent and self-sacrificing figure devoid of autonomy who exists solely for the well-being of her relatives. These portrayals were especially prevalent in rural melodramas. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that Muslim-majority film

13 Dönmez-Colin 2004, 13.

industries began to expand the range of female characters, introducing career-driven women and rebellious figures who to some extent broke free from rigid social norms. While these films addressed a variety of pressing social issues, Dönmez-Colin does not mention arranged or forced marriages as a significant theme.

However, in recent years the subject of arranged and forced marriages has finally been tackled in the cinemas of Muslim-majority countries, often through co-productions with western European nations. The most notable example is Deniz Gamze Ergüven's critically acclaimed debut film *MUSTANG*, which was nominated for an Academy Award. Though set in contemporary Turkey, the film was co-produced by France, Germany, and Qatar. Other noteworthy titles include the Tunisian film *HEDI*, produced with French-Belgian support, and *THE SYRIAN BRIDE*, an Israeli-French-German production that explores matrimonial themes against the backdrop of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Even before these developments, however, several European cinemas had already addressed the issue of arranged and forced marriages within Muslim immigrant families.

In this article, four films are subjected to detailed narrative and genre analysis: *EAST IS EAST*, *AE FOND KISS ...*, *VINGAR AV GLAS*, and *NOCES*. In the analyses, I use the terms "arranged marriage" and "forced marriage" interchangeably, as in each case the arranged marriage evolves into a forced one. However, it is important to acknowledge the distinct boundary between these two concepts in both Islamic and non-Islamic traditions. Arranged marriages are considered theologically and legally legitimate, provided they have the consent of both parties (usually children). In contrast, forced marriages, in which the consent of the individuals involved is disregarded, are widely condemned and usually legally prohibited. Nevertheless, the protagonists in these films invariably perceive the attempt to arrange their marriages as a form of coercion, albeit to varying degrees. As the films suggest, the practice of arranging marriages – especially when combined with parental pressure – leads to deep conflicts within Muslim families against the backdrop of contemporary Europe.

As I will show, the general plot structure remains the same: (1) the protagonist's family presents plans to arrange his/her marriage; (2) the first meeting with the prospective spouse; (3) the protagonist's rebellion and distancing from home; (4) attempts through negotiation or intimidation to persuade the protagonist to comply; (5) final confrontation with the family, where the protagonist continues to refuse the arranged marriage. In all four

films, the main characters, without exception, try to escape the mandate to marry someone of the same origin and religion. Ultimately, all these films discredit the practice of arranged and forced marriages, often linking it to the collapse of paternal authority. They also highlight the unequal gender dynamics at play, showing that for women refusing an arranged marriage tends to carry far greater risks and consequences.

Melodramatic Escapes from Marriages in *EAST IS EAST* (UK 1999) and *AE FOND KISS ...* (UK 2004)

My overview of films dealing with the subject of arranged and forced marriages begins with the well-known and critically acclaimed *EAST IS EAST*. This impactful film can serve as a reference point for later films on similar topics. Drawing on Thomas Elsaesser's findings (originally formulated in relation to Hollywood cinema), I read *EAST IS EAST* as a family melodrama. The depiction of the struggles faced by a Pakistani family in England through a series of contrasts, the focus on the victims' perspective (the Khan siblings), and, finally, the "Freudian resolution" involving the crisis and loss of dominance by the father (George), all align with the family melodramas described by Elsaesser.¹⁴

The lives of George and his wife, Ella, along with their seven children – Nazir, Tariq, Abdul, Saleem, Maneer, Meenah, and Sajid – revolve around cultural identity. Born and raised in Europe, the young protagonists are brought up according to principles and customs rooted in their father's homeland – Pakistan – and the religion of Islam. The central events of the film are the failed attempts to arrange marriages for the family's three eldest sons: Nazir, Tariq, and Abdul. The first sequence of *EAST IS EAST* depicts Nazir's wedding day – or rather, his escape from the ceremony just before he is to take his vows with a woman he barely knows. This act enrages and devastates George. Furious, he declares his son dead, disowns him, and forbids the family from having any contact with him. The storyline gradually leads to a renewed attempt to arrange marriages for two other sons, Tariq and Abdul, with Pakistani girls. George Khan, intolerant of any dissent, arranges these marriages with a respected and wealthy compatriot, Mr. Shah. According to their father's plans, Tariq and Abdul are to marry Mr. Shah's

14 Elsaesser 1991, 68–91.

rather plain daughters, Nushaaba and Nigget. When the plan comes to light, a fierce conflict erupts within the family. Ella, the mother and a white British woman from Yorkshire, sides with her sons against George. To maintain his authority, George resorts not only to verbal arguments but also to yelling and physical violence. The victims of his rage are often the least deserving – his wife and Maneer, the only son who devoutly practices Islam and tries to obey his father's every command.

Writing about the techniques of film “melodramatization”, Elsaesser points to “pervasive psychological pressure on the characters” that is accompanied by “an acute sense of claustrophobia in decor and locale”.¹⁵ Indeed, despite many comedic micro-scenes, the atmosphere in the Khan household remains constantly tense. The siblings, regardless of their age, share a similar apprehension of their father's return to the house or the family-run fish-and-chip shop, as George's presence marks the end of any relaxed or spontaneous behavior. The scene depicting Nazir's failed return home, when the siblings and a crowd of neighbors gathered in front of the Khan house scatter at the sight of George approaching in the distance, perfectly illustrates another observation made by Elsaesser about the characters in family melodramas: “The dramatic configuration, the pattern of the plot makes them, regardless of attempts to break free, constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves.”¹⁶

The pressure George exerts on his children is closely tied to religious demands concerning various aspects of life – clothing, leisure activities, and diet. The planned engagements with two Pakistani girls are merely a continuation of the upbringing they have experienced so far. However, it is this event that triggers the rebellion of both sons. Their opposition is partly related to the significance of marriage itself, but it is also a result of the brothers' not identifying with the (national, religious, gender, etc.) patterns imposed by George. Moreover, Tariq is already in a relationship with an English girl, Stella, whom he hopes to marry in the future. Alongside gestures of helplessness, the film also contains moments of powerful release: direct confrontations between characters and their “hysterical outburst”.¹⁷ One such instance is Tariq's destruction of part of the traditional wedding paraphernalia hidden by his father in a special chest. Frustrated, Tariq finds

15 Elsaesser 1991, 76.

16 Elsaesser 1991, 79.

17 Elsaesser 1991, 79.

two identical watches there, which he correctly assumes are intended as wedding gifts for him and Abdul. Tariq smashes one of the watches before his act of desperation and fury is interrupted by his father's arrival. Tariq's dramatic confession that he does not feel Pakistani and wants to marry an English girl is met with no understanding from his father, who flies into a rage and threatens him with a knife.

But nothing in the world governed by George can stop the matrimonial visit from the Shah family. The scene depicting this visit is brilliantly staged – the characters' forced politeness and the hosts' series of social blunders clearly reveal the lack of consensus on the marriages to be arranged. The explosion comes from the most unexpected cause: a vulgar genital "sculpture" brought into the house by Saleem, who is not directly involved in the engagements. Mrs. Shah, along with her daughters and husband, considers the Khans' behavior an insult and leaves the house in a huff. George must quickly come to terms with the fact that his plan for his sons will not materialize. In a symbolic gesture, he leaves his own house, abandoning his efforts in failure and resignation, which fits perfectly into the framework of Elsaesser's family melodrama.

George's desire for his children, raised in England, to remain like him – hence Pakistani – proves unattainable. In the case of *EAST IS EAST*, we can speak of "a 'Freudian' resolution of the father being eliminated at the very point when he has resigned himself to his loss of supremacy".¹⁸ One of the defining features of melodramas is that they focus on the victim's perspective, making it much easier to examine the issue of arranged marriages from Tariq's or Nazir's point of view than from George's. The idea of arranged marriages in *EAST IS EAST* turns out to be entirely incompatible with the desires of the young protagonists. Their dual Anglo-Pakistani identity in this regard completely diverges from the requirements of the collectivist culture in which marriage is a means to ensure the continuity and cohesion of the community. Nazir, Tariq, Abdul, and their other siblings each have their own plans for the future, plans they want to shape independently.

The original title of both Ayub Khan Din's play (1996) and the film (*EAST IS EAST*), borrowed from Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Ballad of East and West", appears deeply ironic. George's children are no longer merely immigrants or foreigners from the East – their cultural identity has undergone significant transformation under the influence of local English culture. The story is set

18 Elsaesser 1991, 85.

in the Manchester of the 1970s, a context in which arranged marriage had become largely obsolete.

Another prominent British film addressing the topic of arranged marriages in Muslim families is *AE FOND KISS...* by Ken Loach, with a screenplay by Paul Laverty, who has collaborated with the director since 1996. The film is set in Glasgow, where a family of Pakistani immigrants – coincidentally also named Khan – lives. The similarities between *AE FOND KISS...* and *EAST IS EAST* do not end with the families' name. The films also share a similar premise: family conflict arises as a result of double engagements (involving Casim, the son, and Rukhsana, the daughter). Furthermore, Tariq Khan, the father, runs a small shop in the neighborhood and appears to be just as hot-tempered and headstrong as George Khan. However, the tensions between the characters unfold differently in Loach's film, and the dramaturgical structure is also distinct. *AE FOND KISS...* is closer to a romantic melodrama and lacks the complex symbolism characteristic of a family melodrama.

The film opens with a school debate where Tahara – the youngest of the three Khan siblings – delivers a speech on the complicated cultural identities that form in the modern world. Tahara uses herself as an example: a British girl of Pakistani descent attending a Catholic school in Glasgow and supporting a football team from a Protestant neighborhood. The reaction to her speech leaves no doubt – universal tolerance at the school is out of the question. After class, a group of boys taunts her, mocking her skin color. Provoked, Tahara chases after them, and this chaotic situation leads her brother Casim to cross paths with Roisin Hanlon, a music teacher. A close relationship quickly develops between them. At Roisin's initiative, the couple travel to Spain for a three-day getaway. Their passionate romance is interrupted by Casim's confession that he is engaged and will marry his cousin Jasmine in nine weeks. Roisin, who is divorced, reacts with anger and disbelief. Casim manages to calm her down and convince her that he will cancel the marriage arranged by his parents after they return.

However, the protagonist's decision proves to be far more challenging to execute than he anticipated. He fears his parents' anger – breaking off the engagement would be seen as a betrayal of the family. Tariq Khan is already expanding the family home with the intention of accommodating Casim and his future wife. For Tariq, canceling the wedding would be a significant shock. Seeking advice, Casim turns to his cousin Hamid, who strongly discourages him from marrying a *goree*, a white woman. The conversation be-

tween Casim and Hamid offers a rare portrayal of the “Muslim” perspective on Casim’s dilemmas and, more broadly, on the issue of arranged marriages:

HAMID: There’s so many birds out there and you’ve went daft over one bird.

CASIM: I’ve no’ went daft over her.

HAMID: What, you’re gonna screw up your whole family?

CASIM: I’m just supposed to marry somebody I don’t know?

HAMID: Aye. Just do it. Who cares? You’ve got a family to think about.

You’ve got your religion to think about. [...] Would you rather lose your family or would you rather lose this bird? This bird is a nobody.

CASIM: She’s not a nobody.

HAMID: She is a nobody compared to your family, right? Your family back home. You’ve got a mosque right there. Listen, ...

This viewpoint is not unfamiliar to Casim. In his conversations with Roisin, he repeatedly expresses his attachment to religion and speaks respectfully about his parents. However, it seems Tahara is right when she accuses her brother of hypocrisy. Casim starts an affair with the teacher without mentioning he is already engaged. He deceives not only Roisin but also his entire immediate family. Casim wants his parents’ approval and a relaxation of the strict behavioral requirements associated with being a Muslim and the upbringing he has received. However, when Tahara openly demands the same leniency, Casim fails to support her. In her case, it is only about getting her parents’ permission to attend her dream studies in Edinburgh. In another scene, Casim finds his sister at a nightclub and immediately tells her to leave, considering it an unsuitable place for a young girl.

Constantly influenced by others, Casim wavers between planning a future with the new woman and retreating from the decision. From a narrative and character construction standpoint, Casim’s successive changes of heart in *AE FOND KISS*... are not entirely convincing. Thus, two of his sisters play pivotal roles in resolving the central conflict in the film. The older sister, Rukhsana, sets a trap for Roisin. The two women sit in a parked car observing the Khan house from a distance, watching a staged meeting between Casim and Jasmine. Rukhsana convinces Roisin that her brother wants to marry his cousin and would never risk family happiness for a foreign woman. When Roisin runs out of the car, it seems that the “traditional wing” of the Khan family has succeeded. However, Tahara intervenes and makes her brother

realize that he is part of a carefully planned scheme. Finally, Casim is forced to take a side – and he chooses his relationship with Roisin.

In *AE FOND KISS ...*, the problem of arranged marriages in Muslim families is presented from two perspectives, but very unevenly. In Rukhsana's case, the engagement is successful, and she apparently wants to marry according to her parents' wishes and the traditions of her community. However, it is hard to shake the impression that this plotline serves only as a counterpoint to Casim's struggles, which ultimately lead him to break with the practice of arranged marriages. The pressure felt by the protagonist, along with his father's outburst of anger, aligns Loach's film with *EAST IS EAST*, where arranged marriages are portrayed not as ambiguous but as unmistakably coercive and aggressive, pointing clearly toward forced marriages. Furthermore, the character of Tahara is particularly noteworthy – she is the youngest of the Khan siblings in Loach's film and the most conscious and determined in her fight to change how Muslim parents treat their children. This thread leads to films featuring young Muslim women as main characters.

WINGS OF GLASS (SE 2000) and A WEDDING (BE 2016): Daughters, Violence, and Arranged Marriages

The films analyzed so far primarily depict the struggles of boys living in the United Kingdom who fight for the right to marry partners of their own choice despite their Muslim fathers' opposition. The next two films focus on the fate of young daughters who are about to be married off. Reza Bagher's *WINGS OF GLASS* could easily serve as an example of a classic and somewhat predictable coming-of-age story about a teenage girl rebelling against her father, Abbas, and his principles. Once again, the turning point of the plot is the father's desire to quickly arrange marriages for both of his Europe-raised daughters.

The film portrays an Iranian immigrant family living in Sweden and grappling with its cultural and religious identity. The daughters in question are 18-year-old Nazli and her older sister, Mahin. The film's dramatic structure largely relies on contrasting these two characters. Nazli is a rebel – she strives for financial independence, uses the invented name Sara, and has no intention of getting married at such a young age, especially to her cousin Hamid, who has been chosen for her. In contrast, Mahin is excited about the prospect of marrying her chosen fiancé, Hassan, and leads a life devoid of many social activities (she is always seen indoors or in a car); their first

official date at a Greek restaurant leads to their engagement. Meanwhile, Nazli's relationship with Hamid develops quite differently. She rejects his romantic advances but accepts a job offer at his VHS rental shop. This further complicates their relationship, but it is clear from the start that Nazli will never reciprocate Hamid's feelings. Hamid's character is largely exaggerated – he is extremely unlikable, egocentric, and convinced of his attractiveness, mainly due to his wealth. As Sofia Sjö puts it,

Nazli's family does not come across as particularly religious. In a somewhat comic scene, Abbas takes out a religious wall decoration and dusts it off in preparation for the visit of Mahin's soon to be in-laws, who are devout Muslims. For the most part in the film, Islam is thus connected to a traditional life with marriage and children for young women and the family as central focus. Nazli is not comfortable with these ideals.¹⁹

This conflict also runs deep within the protagonist herself. Outside the home, she presents herself as Sara, but she quickly realizes that she will never stop being Nazli, the girl with Iranian roots.²⁰ The duality of Nazli's names is mirrored by other recurring motifs: two family parties, two visits to a tattoo parlor, two escapes from her apartment, and two heartfelt conversations with her father.

As in Loach's and O'Donnell's films, in *WINGS OF GLASS* the process of arranging marriages takes on a specific form. It is not the result of a voluntary agreement between Abbas and his daughters but rather a series of silent gestures and tensions among family members, with the two suitors also playing significant roles. Ultimately, realizing that his efforts are doomed, Hamid attempts to assault Nazli one evening in the back room of his shop. Terrified, Nazli manages to escape and confides in her sister that she was almost a victim of rape. Together, they decide that Hamid will never again set foot in their home, not even at Mahin's upcoming wedding. Meanwhile, Nazli strikes up a friendship with Johan, a 20-year-old Swede who is a regular customer at the video store. Like Nazli, Johan has lost his mother, a shared experience that brings them closer.

Nazli's conflict with her father gradually escalates, reaching its climax when Hamid appears at Mahin and Hassan's wedding party. Without offer-

19 Sjö 2021, 118.

20 Sjö 2021, 119.

ing any explanation, Nazli pours punch on him, an act that Abbas interprets as an irresponsible teenage prank. It is only then that Nazli attempts to explain the reason for her behavior – the sexual assault by her cousin. Abbas struggles to believe her accusations at first and reacts inadequately, with aggression and insults. The situation culminates in a family row and Nazli running away from home. Eventually, Abbas pays her a surprise visit at Johan's apartment. During an honest and emotional conversation, both father and daughter break down in tears, sealing their reconciliation.

The film ends with a montage sequence, including a scene in which Nazli receives her motorcycle license, congratulated by both her father and Johan. This is followed by a family meal, signaling that Abbas has ultimately accepted his daughter's choices – riding a motorcycle, dating a Swedish boy, and postponing marriage. Nazli's character undoubtedly shows that the film portrays the practice of arranged marriages in a critical light. Her would-be fiancé, Hamid, is not only grotesque but also dangerous. In fact, the film's narrative equates the attempt to force her into marriage with an act of sexual violence. This parallel starkly reveals the element of coercion inherent in a father's control over his daughters' matrimonial affairs. From this perspective, Abbas's transformation is as significant as Nazli's resilience and courage. Over the course of the film, Abbas begins to understand that forcing his younger daughter into marriage will not bring her happiness but will only alienate her – and perhaps cause him to lose her forever.

The film that portrays the most dramatic side of forced marriages in Muslim family is *A WEDDING*, by Belgian director Stephan Streker. The movie was inspired by true events that took place in Belgium in 2007. The film revolves around the Kazim family, Pakistani immigrants living in Belgium. Streker admitted in interviews that the 18-year-old protagonist, Zahira, is for him a modern-day Antigone.²¹ Indeed, he tried to shape his film in the style of a Greek tragedy. There is no doubt that *A WEDDING* presents the issue of forced marriages in Islam in the most drastic and categorical way this article has described so far, without any trace of comedic elements.

The structure of Streker's drama is similar to the narratives in the previously described films in many ways – the sudden pressure from Zahira's parents to arrange her marriage disrupts previously harmonious family relationships. Her rebellion is accompanied by attempts from her family to negotiate her behavior, while Zahira's defiance causes her relatives signifi-

21 Engelen 2017.

cant distress (her father, Mansoor, suffers serious heart attacks as a result of the stress). Meanwhile, Zahira becomes involved in an unacceptable relationship with Pierre, a non-Muslim boyfriend. The general plot follows the outline that is standard for films about arranged marriages, differing from other films mainly in the detail. The novelty in *A WEDDING* appears in three key features: the exposition, the turning point, and the resolution.

The exposition focuses on Zahira's plan to undergo an abortion. She schedules the procedure, expressing surprise at its low cost and clearly struggling with her situation. The most astonishing aspect, however, is that her brother Amir and the entire immediate family – parents included – are aware of her pregnancy and the planned abortion. Zahira experiences serious doubts about terminating her pregnancy, not least for reasons of her religion. After receiving no support from her boyfriend, Tariq, she breaks up with him (in line with her family's wishes) but decides at the last moment not to go through with the abortion, keeping this decision secret from her family. Her pregnancy is undoubtedly one of the reasons her parents want to marry her off quickly. In the context of their subsequent efforts to arrange Zahira's marriage to a Pakistani man in a traditional Muslim ceremony, the contradiction between encouraging her to have an abortion and their strict adherence to religious customs stands out. Their concern for family honor allows them to set aside religious requirements. This additional layer complicates the portrayal of arranged marriage, making it unique amongst the films discussed here.

The second distinguishing feature of *A WEDDING* is that the arranged marriage process is carried through to completion. In the other films analyzed in this article, the protagonists rebel and ultimately either break off the engagement or avoid it altogether. Zahira's experience is different. Emotionally shaken after the unperformed abortion and unsure of her feelings, she resigns herself to online conversations with potential suitors from Pakistan. None of them makes a significant impression on her, but one – Adnan – can at least speak French. Zahira's mother, Yelda, considers her daughter's mildly positive comment about Adnan decisive. Anticipating the inevitable engagement, Zahira runs away from home for the first time. She finds refuge with her friend Aurora and Aurora's father, André, who offer their support and help. After various attempts to pressure her, including a visit from her older sister Hina, who convinces her to accept the idea of an arranged marriage, Zahira returns home.

What follows is a bizarre wedding ceremony for Zahira and Adnan. The atmosphere at the bride's home is festive – everyone wears traditional attire,

and the ceremony is led by an imam. However, the marriage is conducted via an online video conference, as the groom is in Pakistan. Shortly afterward, Zahira learns that she is expected to travel to Pakistan, prompting her second escape, this time with Pierre. Zahira's departure with another man after being married is utterly incomprehensible and unacceptable to her family. The young couple flees on Pierre's motorcycle and finds refuge outside the city. Even in these moments of temporary relief, Streker maintains the film's tense formal style, particularly with close-ups and muted sound. The couple likely plan to leave the country. However, Zahira's parents have her passport. To retrieve it, Zahira contacts her younger sister and arrives at their home at an agreed time. Waiting for her there is not only Amara but also their brother, Amir. When Zahira takes back the passport and heads for the exit, Amir stops her and embraces her tightly. The two are standing motionless, filmed in a medium close-up, when two gunshots ring out. Subsequent shots reveal a pool of blood and tears in Amir's eyes. The film concludes with a photo montage reminiscent of police documentation that is accompanied by Zahira's voice-over reading a letter sent to her sister in Pakistan.

The Belgian director connects arranged marriages with "honor killings" within Muslim communities. It seems that both practices stem from the obscurantist concept of "family honor", distinct from both religion and religious tradition. Wiebke Walther explains:

Since the 1930s both male and female writers of modern Middle Eastern literature have addressed the issue of "honor killings" in short stories, novels, and poems. This practice cannot be traced back to Islam alone but derives from ancient principles of chastity. Women must adhere to them, though their close male relatives are the ones held responsible for their observance (often by women of the older generation). If these principles are violated, punishment of the woman is required.²²

In *A WEDDING*, Zahira's escape with a non-Muslim man after marrying Adnan is perceived by her relatives as a disgrace to the family's honor. Her betrayal lies not only in breaking her promise to her intended husband and his family but also in defying her father's and brother's authority, exposing their inability to control her actions. What is even more shocking is that her

22 Walther 2010, 656.

death is inflicted by her own brother – the very person who had previously been her advocate and closest support within the family. This devastating act underscores the underlying tragedy in Streker's film. The story thus evokes the structure of ancient tragedies, where betrayal and conflicts of loyalty lead to violence within the closest family circles.

Conclusion

The protagonists of all the films discussed in this article rebel against arranged marriages, which are portrayed more as coercive than as consensual, and strive to have freedom of choice and to expand their personal autonomy. In European cinema the issue of forced marriages affects men just as much as women – on screen, both sons and daughters from Muslim families face pressure to accept the spouse chosen for them. However, the consequences for women who refuse an arranged marriage tend to be more severe, as women are perceived as embodying the family's honor, while men are regarded as its guardians. Additionally, this pressure can be exerted by almost every close family member: not just fathers (most often, with a clearly dominant role) but also mothers, siblings (both brothers and sisters), and grandparents or cousins. Regardless of whether the films adopt a comedic or dramatic tone, their young male and female protagonists routinely reject the notion of arranged marriage and instead opt for individual choice. In all the analyzed films, the primary criterion for evaluating candidates for an arranged marriage is not their personal qualities but rather their specific origin and religious affiliation. As a result, traditional Muslim families, usually portrayed as otherwise harmonious, expose themselves to deep conflicts with the younger generation raised in Europe.

Two issues raised by this discussion are particularly striking. First, contradicting the evidence for forced marriages in Islam that was cited in the first part of this article, financial motives do not have a key role in matrimonial choices in any of the films discussed here. Economic benefits, often described by scholars and today condemned in many Muslim countries, do not feature in the cinematic representations of the phenomenon by the European film industry. The reasons for arranged marriages are presented as more profound – marriage in these circumstances is a matter of identity. Choosing a spouse from the same ethnic and religious group is intended to ensure the purity of a carefully preserved religious and cultural identity.

Second, the films' negotiation of masculine, especially paternal, conduct is noteworthy. While a patriarchal concept of manliness is criticized and disapproved of, fragile masculinity is embraced, for only the latter can admit weakness and accept failure. Thus, the endings of the more light-hearted films see a change in the attitude of the family patriarch, which is in line with migrant comedy conventions,²³ as one of the distinctive narrative and ideological tropes of this genre is the reaffirmation of the primary role of the family. In *WINGS OF GLASS* (and *HUSH HUSH BABY* as well) the ending takes on a comedic and conciliatory tone, whereas the conclusions in *EAST IS EAST*, *AE FOND KISS...* (and also similarly in *TURQUAZE*, *WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY*, *FOR A HAPPY LIFE*, *HEDI* and *MUSTANG*) lean toward melodrama. In contrast, *THE WEDDING* delivers an ending that is outright tragic.

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“I don’t know what kind of Muslim I am.”

RAMY (US 2019–2022), Mo (US 2022–2025), and the Reappropriation of the “American Muslim” in Contemporary Prestige TV

Abstract

This article examines evolving representations of Islam and Muslims in American television through case studies of the series RAMY (Hulu, US 2019–2022) and MO (Netflix, US 2022–2025). Drawing on a diachronic framework that traces portrayals of Muslim identities from the early 2000s to the present, the study situates these series within a broader historical and cultural context. Early depictions, as critiqued by scholars like Amir Hussain in 2009, often relegated Muslims to one-dimensional roles characterized by negativity and violence, reinforcing exclusionary narratives. In contrast, RAMY and its counterpart MO signal a significant shift toward more authentic and more complex representations. These series foreground intersections of race, religion, and cultural identity, offering narratives that are deeply personal and structurally aware.

Keywords

TV series, Prestige TV, American Muslim, RAMY (Hulu, US 2019–2022), MO (Netflix, US 2022–2025)

Biography

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Introduction

In 2009, theologian and Islamic studies scholar Amir Hussain observed that American television largely portrayed Muslims in one-dimensional, negative terms. Writing in Diane Winston's *Small Screen, Big Picture*, he noted that Muslims were rarely depicted as ordinary citizens but instead presented as “dangerous immigrants with a religion that is both alien and evil”. Their “lived religion”, he argued, was reduced almost entirely to acts of violence, leaving “no other substantive practice that embodies Islamic faith on television”.¹

A decade later, the landscape had begun to shift. In 2019, the pilot episode of *RAMY* (Hulu, US 2019–2022) opened with its titular character attending prayer at a mosque before heading out on a date, where he debates with the girl how much “Muslim” he is – or is not. This marked a striking departure from earlier representations, signaling a move toward more complex and introspective portrayals of Muslim identities on American television. Alongside its spiritual successor *MO* (Netflix, US 2022–2025), *RAMY* exemplifies a broader reappropriation of the “American Muslim” in contemporary TV seriality. These series not only introduce multidimensional characters but also engage with intersections of religion, race, and culture, challenging the once-monolithic representations of Muslim identity in American media.

This shift in television representation aligns with a broader historical reality: Islam in the United States is neither a recent phenomenon nor a monolithic tradition. From the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary immigrant communities, Islam has long been woven into the nation’s religious and cultural fabric. Yet, for much of television and entertainment history, this diversity was flattened or erased, reinforcing exclusionary narratives rather than reflecting the lived experiences of American Muslims.

In the past decade, the evolution of TV seriality has created new possibilities for representing these complexities. *RAMY* and *MO* challenge the reductive identity frameworks that have often shaped Muslim representation on screen, resisting both stereotypical tropes and the flattening effects of neoliberal multiculturalism. Instead, these series depict protagonists who navigate racialized identities, lived religiosity, and the tensions between communal expectations and personal self-definition. By centering Muslim narratives in ways that are at once deeply personal and structurally aware,

1 Hussain 2009, 154.

RAMY and MO disrupt longstanding televisual conventions, offering a more expansive and nuanced engagement with Muslim life in the United States.

American Muslims, Americans and Muslims

The evolving representation of Muslims in American media cannot be understood without situating it within the broader historical and sociopolitical landscape of Islam in the United States. While television has often flattened Muslim identities into monolithic or antagonistic tropes, lived Islam in America has always been plural, shaped by histories of forced displacement, voluntary migration, and the intersecting legacies of race and religion. From the presence of enslaved African Muslims in the transatlantic slave trade to successive waves of migration from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa in the 20th century, Islam has been an integral part of the United States' religious and cultural landscape for centuries.² The emergence of African American Islamic movements – most notably the Nation of Islam in the 1930s and the later expansion of Sunni and other Islamic traditions during the Civil Rights era – underscores the diverse genealogies of American Muslim identity. Figures such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali not only brought Islam into mainstream consciousness but also linked it to broader struggles for racial justice, disrupting dominant narratives that framed Muslims as perpetual outsiders. These histories complicate simplistic portrayals of Muslim identity in the United States, highlighting its heterogeneity and its inextricable ties to American social and political movements.

Today, American Muslims form one of the nation's most ethnically and racially diverse religious communities. The estimated 3.85 million Muslims in the United States comprise South Asians (33 %), Arabs (25 %), and African Americans (24 %), along with growing populations from Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.³ This diversity is mirrored in the geographic distribution of Muslim communities, with major urban centers like New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit hosting vibrant cultural and religious networks. Mosques, community centers, and Muslim-owned businesses function as spaces of belonging and negotiation, reflecting the ways in which Islam is continually reinterpreted within the American context. Immigration

2 Curtis 2009; GhaneaBassiri 2010; Al-Kuwari 2024.

3 Pew Research Center 2017.

remains a key factor in the demographic and cultural landscape of American Islam, with approximately 55 percent of American Muslims born outside the United States.⁴ However, second- and third-generation American-born Muslims are also pivotal in this evolving identity, as they navigate faith, race, and nationality in distinct ways.

Despite their long-standing presence and contributions to American society, Muslims have remained highly racialized subjects, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Islamophobia, surveillance, and discriminatory policies have reinforced their status as perpetual outsiders, subject to political and cultural anxieties that cast them as threats rather than citizens.⁵ However, in response to these structural exclusions, American Muslims have also mobilized strategies of reappropriation – asserting agency over their representations and carving out new spaces in civic, cultural, and political life. From increasing political representation to the flourishing of Muslim-authored literature, film, and television, these acts of reappropriation resist reductive narratives and redefine what it means to be both American and Muslim.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial for analyzing the shifting portrayals of Muslims in contemporary television. As series like *RAMY* and *MO* demonstrate, American Muslims are no longer simply subjects of representation but have become active agents in shaping how their identities are mediated. These productions move beyond tokenism or mere visibility, engaging with the complexities of religious, racial, and cultural hybridity in ways that challenge dominant framings. In this context, reappropriation is not just about reclaiming narrative space but about reconfiguring the very terms through which American Muslim identity is imagined, negotiated, and lived.

The representation of Islam in American culture has undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader social dynamics, political realities, and the evolving self-perception of Muslim communities. Central to this evolution is the concept of cultural reappropriation, which involves reclaiming and reframing identities, symbols, and narratives that have historically been imposed or distorted by dominant power structures. The process of cultural reappropriation has been central to the evolving representation of American Islam and the trope of the “American Muslim” or “Muslim in America”, particularly when contextualized within the fraught history of Muslim portrayals in the United States before and after 9/11. This sociopo-

4 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding 2020.

5 Ernst 2013; Love 2017; Beydoun 2018.

litical strategy enables marginalized groups to redefine terms, symbols, or representations that were previously imposed upon them in a derogatory or reductive manner. Reappropriation extends beyond linguistic reclamation to include strategies for social and political empowerment, fostering in-group cohesion and challenging hegemonic narratives by creating alternative ones.⁶

This concept is particularly relevant to media representations, which serve as a battleground for negotiating identity and authenticity. By reappropriating a term or representation, a group not only reclaims its identity but also challenges the dominant power structures that previously controlled the narrative.⁷ Internally, this shift fosters cohesion, self-esteem, and a sense of agency within the group, while externally, it reshapes societal perceptions, encouraging the public to reconsider preconceived notions. In this way, reappropriation has the potential to disrupt established ideological frameworks and offer a counter-narrative to dominant discourses. It serves as a powerful tool for marginalized communities to resist oppression, shift power dynamics, and catalyze broader social change.

Before the events of September 11, 2001, American popular culture largely portrayed Islam through the lens of Orientalism, presenting Muslims as exoticized “others” or homogenized stereotypes. Films and TV shows often placed Muslims within a binary of mysticism and menace, reducing their cultural complexity to simplistic tropes.⁸ These depictions, influenced by geopolitical events like the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf War, cast Muslims as symbols of foreignness, violence, and religious fanaticism, aligning with externally imposed derogatory labels designed to marginalize the group and reinforce existing power structures. This portrayal reinforced the perception of Islam as a monolithic tradition.

The events of 9/11 further entrenched these portrayals, embedding the Muslim figure as an existential threat in the American imaginary. Muslims became hyper-visible, often cast as potential threats to security. This securitization was mirrored in cultural productions that framed Islam in oppositional terms, reinforcing the “clash of civilizations” narrative.⁹ TV series like *24* (Fox, US 2001–2010; 2014) and *HOMELAND* (Showtime, US 2011–2020)

6 Romano 2022.

7 Galinsky/Wang/Whitson/Anicich/Hugenberg/Bodenhausen 2013.

8 Shaheen 2015.

9 Bleich/van der Veen 2021; Qamar/Sadaf/Raza 2024.

constructed Muslims almost exclusively as antagonistic figures, a phenomenon Hussain critiques as a form of cultural violence perpetuated by the entertainment industry.¹⁰ Even when attempts were made to move beyond negative stereotypes, these narratives often merely camouflaged discriminatory tropes, reinforcing ideological frameworks that equated Islam with danger and justified policies of surveillance and exclusion.¹¹

However, in the past decade, the emergence of Muslim creators in American media has begun to shift this narrative. In response to reductive portrayals, American Muslim communities have actively engaged in cultural reappropriation, redefining their identities with a focus on authenticity and agency.¹² Figures like Hasan Minhaj, Riz Ahmed, and later Ramy Youssef and Mo Amer have leveraged their roles as creators to contest and reframe dominant narratives.

This shift coincided with a broader societal recontextualization. As explored by Galonnier, American Muslims have increasingly contested external definitions of Islamic authenticity, whether cultural or religious, by reframing these definitions within the complexities of American racial and social hierarchies. The discourse surrounding authenticity reveals strategies such as acculturation, exculturation, and inculturation, which navigate the interplay of cultural and religious fidelity within the American context. These strategies, Galonnier notes, highlight the tension between being “truly Islamic” and “truly American”, while challenging hierarchical structures that impose singular definitions of identity.¹³

The rise of Muslim-authored media marks a critical juncture in the reappropriation of American Islam. Unlike earlier portrayals, which imposed narrow perspectives, these creators draw on their lived experiences to depict the diversity and contradictions within Muslim communities. This shift signals a broader cultural and discursive change, where Muslims in America are no longer passive subjects of representation and have become active participants in its creation. As these narratives gain visibility, they challenge existing cognitive frames, reshape societal perceptions, and foster a more nuanced understanding of Islam in the American context.

10 Hussain 2009.

11 Guarinos/Berciano-Garrido 2022, 125.

12 Pennington 2024.

13 Galonnier 2023.

Religion and Islam in TV Seriality

The evolution of television over the past few decades has been shaped by major shifts in production, narrative complexity, and thematic ambition. One of the most pivotal transformations was the rise of the Second Golden Age of Television¹⁴, characterized by a move away from formulaic storytelling toward more intricate, serialized narratives. In the mid-1990s, Thompson coined the term “Quality TV” to describe shows distinguished by layered storytelling, morally complex characters, and engagement with socially and politically charged themes.¹⁵ This trajectory of TV development continued into what is now referred to as “Peak TV” (or “Prestige TV” or “TVIV”), which began in the 2010s with an explosion of high-quality scripted content fueled by streaming services and audience fragmentation.¹⁶ Unlike earlier network television, which sought broad appeal, Peak TV targeted niche viewerships, embraced cinematic production values, and often featured morally ambiguous or deeply flawed protagonists.

These phases of TV development also led to significant changes in the representation of religion within serialized narratives. Historically, television was either indifferent or resistant to religious themes, often rendering faith as “a rather invisible institution” and rarely depicting it as central to characters’ lives.¹⁷ When religious elements appeared in the 1990s, they were often generalized and noncontroversial, avoiding complexities.¹⁸ In the 2000s, television began embracing more morally complex storytelling, engaging more directly with religious themes, influenced by the post-9/11 cultural landscape, which intensified discussions around faith in the public sphere. This shift led to more varied and at times provocative religious representations, moving beyond the sanitized portrayals of earlier decades.¹⁹ Winston’s *Small Screen, Big Picture* (2009) highlights how television in the early 21st century began to reflect lived religion, integrating characters’ ethical dilemmas and spiritual struggles in ways that resonated with individual and communal identities.

14 *The Second Golden Age of Television* refers to the subsequent exploration of Thompson’s concept of Quality TV in the 1980s and 1990s.

15 Thompson 1996; McCabe/Akass 2007.

16 Schlütz 2016; Friedman/Keeler 2023.

17 Skill/Robinson/Lyons/Larson 1994, 265.

18 Clarke 2005; Roof 1997.

19 Howell 2020, 9.

By the 2010s, Peak TV was further reshaping how religious and spiritual themes were woven into narratives. Three developments were key. First, some shows delved deeper into lived religion, focusing on themes of identity, authenticity, and personal faith journeys, particularly within the comedy and dramedy genres – that is the case for the shows considered here.²⁰ Second, a growing number of series spotlighted nonreligious characters and narratives, reflecting broader cultural shifts around secularism and spirituality.²¹ Third, the rise of what can be termed postsecular television introduced a new dimension to storytelling, blurring the lines between religious and secular worldviews and incorporating elements of science, mysticism, and existential inquiry into storytelling.²²

While television's engagement with religion has evolved significantly, the representation of Muslims in American media, particularly post-9/11, has followed a distinct trajectory shaped by socio-political events. In the early 2000s, portrayals of Muslims in television primarily cast them as threats to American society. As already noted, series like *24* and *HOMELAND* often propagated Islamophobic stereotypes, portraying Muslims as terrorists or cultural outsiders and relegating them to roles that reinforced fear and suspicion. These narratives typically framed Muslim characters in binary terms, either as villains to be defeated or as allies aiding counterterrorism efforts. Even when attempting to provide more balanced portrayals – such as showing “good” Muslim characters opposing terrorism – the narrative structure often positioned Muslims primarily in relation to national security concerns.²³ Similar patterns emerged in crime procedurals like *NCIS* (CBS, US 2003–present) and *LAW & ORDER: SVU* (NBC, US 1999–present), which often depicted Muslim characters as potential threats, reinforcing the dichotomy between moderate and extremist Islam. These portrayals contributed to a limited and problematic understanding of Muslim identity in the American cultural imagination. Even shows like *SLEEPER CELL* (Showtime, US 2005–2006), which sought to nuance these portrayals by exploring Muslim diversity, remained entrenched in a counterterrorism framework. *SLEEPER CELL* was one of the earliest shows to center a Muslim protagonist, in this instance an undercover FBI agent infiltrating terrorist networks.

20 Bianco forthcoming.

21 Bianco 2023.

22 Hodkinson 2020; Bianco 2024.

23 Nurullah 2010; Hake 2015.

While it attempted to humanize Muslim characters and critique both terrorism and Islamophobia, it still adhered to the broader discourse of security.

It was not until the late 2010s that more diverse and nuanced representations of Muslims began to emerge, largely driven by Muslim creators. The rise of Prestige TV allowed greater diversity in storytelling, with more Muslim writers, directors, and showrunners contributing to the narratives. This shift enabled more complex portrayals of Muslim identity, moving beyond the confines of terrorism and national security concerns. The emergence of Muslim creators like Ramy Youssef and Mo Amer marked a turning point in representation. These creators use their platforms to explore the complexities of Muslim identities, addressing themes of faith, culture, race, and belonging in ways that challenge traditional stereotypes. This transformation is not just about greater visibility; it also embraces agency and authorship.

The Spiritual Journey of RAMY (US 2019–2022)

Ramy Youssef's *RAMY* offers a groundbreaking exploration of the American Muslim experience through its eponymous protagonist, Ramy Hassan, an Egyptian-American millennial navigating faith, identity, and desire. Across its three seasons, the series delves deeply into the tensions between personal spirituality, communal expectations, and the secular realities of contemporary American life. The show explores spiritual uncertainty, cultural in-betweenness, and the search for self-definition, presenting Muslim religiosity as a lived and dynamic process and exploring the contradictions, questions, and struggles inherent in balancing personal faith with societal pressures and familial expectations.

The show's opening episode vividly illustrates these tensions. Ramy's mother encourages him to find a girlfriend at the mosque, juxtaposing familial and cultural expectations with religious practice. In another scene, Ramy's visible discomfort during ablution at the mosque reflects generational divides and cultural tensions within his own community. These moments underscore his ongoing negotiation between the desire to honor his heritage, the need for a spiritual dimension, and his immersion in the secular millennial culture of contemporary America. The first season revolves around Ramy's inner conflict: his yearning for a deeper connection to Islam exists alongside his struggles with sexual relationships, partying, and self-discipline. A pivotal episode, "Do the Ramadan" (S1E5), portrays Ramy's

attempt to fast during Ramadan as he simultaneously pursues a romantic relationship. The narrative juxtaposes his physical deprivation with his moral lapses, culminating in a night out that ends in guilt and confusion. This episode employs close framing to capture Ramy's vulnerability, such as lingering shots on his face during moments of spiritual reflection and indulgence. Through this tension, the series highlights the complexities of practicing Islam in a secular environment, where personal desires and societal pressures often conflict with religious ideals.

The second season deepens its exploration of the intersection of faith and race by situating Ramy's spiritual journey within broader racial and cultural dynamics in the United States. The introduction of Sheikh Ali (Mahershala Ali), a Black Muslim Sufi leader who becomes Ramy's spiritual mentor, complicates Ramy's understanding of Islam, forcing him to confront not only his own personal and moral failings but also his implicit biases as an Arab-American Muslim. The season critiques Ramy's often self-centered approach to faith, exposing how his spiritual aspirations are entangled with unexamined racial hierarchies within the Muslim community. Through this, *RAMY* interrogates the racialized landscape of American Islam, highlighting the ways in which different Muslim communities experience faith, marginalization, and belonging. In season three, Ramy's existential crisis and his growing estrangement from both faith and family reach their peak. The season's opening episode, "Harry Potter" (S3E1), reveals the collapse of his spiritual aspirations following his failed attempt to embrace Sufism. Instead, he immerses himself in material pursuits, including launching a questionable business venture with Israeli diamond dealers.

Beyond Ramy himself, the series widens its lens to include the perspectives of other characters, such as his sister Dena, who grapples with misogyny within both Muslim and secular spaces. Additionally, the narrative of his mother, Maysa, highlights the alienation experienced by first-generation immigrants as she navigates her role as a Lyft driver in a society that often dehumanizes her. These storylines enrich the series by showcasing a diversity of Muslim experiences, complicating monolithic representations of Islam and offering nuanced depictions of identity, gender, and belonging within contemporary American society.

Youssef has described the show as a reflection of his "internal dialogue" about reconciling heritage, religious values, and youth in America. As Youssef explains, "I actually want to hold on to where I came from, and also I want to

be at this bar in Brooklyn, even if I'm not drinking at all.”²⁴ This nuanced depiction challenges earlier media trends that often portrayed young Muslims as either wholly rejecting their faith or entirely submitting to it. Instead, *RAMY* occupies a middle ground, portraying religion as an evolving, personal journey. The show's willingness to delve into Ramy's missteps, contradictions, and moral quandaries enriches its portrayal, presenting faith as an integral but non-monolithic aspect of identity. The show's humor, often oscillating between satire and anguish, reflects the disjointed realities of navigating faith in a pluralistic society. By situating its characters within these liminal spaces, *RAMY* not only redefines Muslim representation in American television but also invites audiences to grapple with universal questions about belonging, morality, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world.

Mo (US 2022–2025): Bridging Cultures and Identities

In *Mo Amer's Mo*, the titular character, Mo Najjar, a Palestinian refugee in Houston, navigates the challenges of life in Texas while awaiting asylum. The series blends humor and poignancy to explore themes of displacement, systemic injustice, and cultural hybridity, centering on the lived realities of an undocumented Muslim protagonist in a contemporary American setting. While *RAMY* delves into spiritual introspection, *Mo* emphasizes the socio-political aspects of Muslim identity. Mo's struggles with the labyrinthine immigration system and his attempts to find belonging in an often-hostile environment shed light on the broader challenges faced in America by Muslim immigrants – as both an individual negotiating his own identity and a member of a transnational diasporic community.

The series draws from the personal experiences of creator and lead actor Mo Amer, himself a Palestinian refugee, infusing the narrative with autobiographical elements, resulting in a story that is both deeply personal and widely resonant. *Mo* offers a nuanced exploration of immigration, identity, and resilience. Like *RAMY*, the series uses comedy not just for entertainment but as a tool for tackling difficult topics. As Amer has noted, humor fosters connection and empathy, allowing the series to balance moments of profound vulnerability with levity.²⁵ This tonal fluidity captures the absurdities

24 Sperling 2019.

25 Vognar 2022; Fadel/Harrell 2022.

and heartbreaks of life as a refugee in America while resisting the reductive tropes that often characterize mainstream representations of Muslims on U.S. television.

The pilot episode introduces Mo as a quick-witted hustler who takes on a series of odd jobs while struggling with his undocumented status. When legal barriers prevent him from securing stable employment, he resorts to selling counterfeit designer goods in a parking lot. The show also explores intergenerational and diasporic tensions, particularly through Mo's relationship with his devout mother, Yusra, whose allegiance to Palestinian customs contrasts with Mo's hybrid identity, shaped by his American experience. While Yusra remains committed to traditional religious practices, Mo's approach to faith is more pragmatic, often interwoven with humor and self-reflection. Beyond his family, Mo's interactions with non-Muslim communities further highlight the transnational dimensions of his identity. Mo's relationship with his Catholic Mexican-American girlfriend Maria becomes a site of cultural negotiation, highlighting how Muslim Americans navigate religious boundaries while maintaining cultural authenticity. Episode six, "Holy Matrimony", encapsulates this tension through Mo's attendance at a family friend's wedding. The event becomes a microcosm of the diasporic experience, oscillating between moments of cultural continuity – such as the traditional *dabke* dance – and cultural dissonance, as Mo attempts to reconcile familial expectations with his Americanized sensibilities. These scenes reinforce the series' depiction of identity as dynamic and relational, shaped by both local and global influences.

The second season deepens the engagement with the complexities of Muslim American identity, displacement, and the precarious status of asylum seekers in the United States. Mo's undocumented status leaves him stranded in Mexico, drawing parallels between Palestinian refugees and Latin American migrants. While Mo's predicament is unique – rooted in the statelessness that defines the Palestinian diaspora – the series frames his experiences within a shared global condition of displacement. Upon his return to Texas, the show shifts focus to the internal conflicts within immigrant and Muslim communities, concentrating on cultural authenticity, assimilation, and the commodification of identity. The show complicates these dynamics through Mo's relationship with his now ex-girlfriend Maria and her new relationship with an Israeli-American chef, Guy, highlighting not only the personal pain of loss but also the fraught intersections of food, culture, and colonial histories. The show plays with this tension through humor –

most notably in the misheard exchange where Mo's anger over "hummus" is mistaken for "Hamas", a moment that underscores the ever-present misperceptions and racialized anxieties surrounding Muslim identity in America.

The season culminates with the family's visit to the West Bank, their first visit since displacement. Here, MO juxtaposes the lived reality of occupation with the diasporic longing for home, refusing to romanticize either. The show resists the binarity of suffering and resistance that often defines representations of Palestinian identity, emphasizing instead the right to joy, community, and self-definition. As Yusra's daughter, Mo's sister, poignantly asserts, "We owe it to them to live, too", pushing against the expectation that Palestinian narratives must be defined solely by trauma.

Through its sharp cultural commentary and its insistence on multidimensional Muslim and Palestinian American characters, the series challenges reductive narratives that often flatten immigrant and refugee identities. It ultimately presents a vision of Muslim American life that is neither idealized nor victimized but shaped by everyday negotiations of faith, family, and survival. The show's blend of comedic and dramatic elements reflects the liminal space occupied by Mo as a refugee, a Muslim, and "an American", offering a reimagined narrative of the Muslim experience that is as deeply personal as it is politically resonant. Ultimately, MO reclaims Muslim representation in U.S. television by presenting a protagonist who defies easy categorization, thereby challenging audiences to grapple with the complexities of faith, identity, and belonging in an interconnected world.

Reappropriation to Representation

While RAMY and MO both contribute to the reappropriation of Muslim representation in American television, their methods and focal points reveal distinct approaches that underscore the multifaceted nature of the Muslim American experience. RAMY probes the introspective and personal, charting the protagonist's spiritual journey as he grapples with faith, morality, and identity in a secularized context. This internal exploration reflects a universal struggle with self-definition even as it remains rooted in the specificities of a young Egyptian-American Muslim navigating generational and cultural expectations. By contrast, MO takes a more outward-facing perspective. The series uses a wide lens to view systemic issues such as immigration, cultural displacement, and economic precarity. By weaving humor and

pathos into a narrative of resilience, *MO* highlights the intersections of personal identity with structural inequalities, emphasizing the wider societal challenges faced by displaced and diasporic communities. Together, these approaches reflect the rich diversity of the American Muslim community, encompassing a wide range of racial, cultural, and religious experiences, each shaped by unique histories and contexts.

By offering narratives that are at once specific and universal, these series challenge Islamophobic stereotypes and expand the boundaries of contemporary TV storytelling. Their success not only highlights the power of authentic representation but also signals a growing appetite for stories that reflect the richness and complexity of Muslim identities in America. This nuanced portrayal sharply contrasts with earlier representations of Muslim identities in American media, which often homogenized and flattened the complexities of these experiences. Even critically acclaimed works like *MASTER OF NONE* (Netflix, US 2015–2021) and *THE BIG SICK* (Michael Showalter, US 2017), authored by Muslim creators, offered depictions of Muslim characters who distanced themselves from their faith or cultural heritage, implicitly framing these elements as barriers to self-realization or inclusion.²⁶ By comparison, *RAMY* and *MO* reclaim faith, culture, and heritage as integral and dynamic aspects of their characters' identities. Rather than positioning these dimensions as obstacles, the series celebrate their potential to enrich the characters' lives and deepen their connection to community and belonging.

Crucially, this shift is not merely about “positive representation”: it is about authenticity and complexity. *RAMY* and *MO* eschew the simplistic binary of “good Muslim” versus “bad Muslim” that often framed earlier depictions and instead present characters who are flawed, nuanced, and profoundly human. In doing so, they humanize a long-misunderstood community, bridging gaps of understanding while resisting the reduction of Muslim identities to static, monolithic categories. As Hussain has argued, the negative portrayals of Muslims on television have far-reaching implications for how these communities are perceived and treated in broader society.²⁷ The success of *RAMY* and *MO* underscores the power of nuanced, authentic storytelling to disrupt these prejudices. By offering richly textured depictions of Muslim lives, these series foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and

26 Sheikh 2019.

27 Hussain 2009, 169–170.

contribute to a broader reimagining of what representation can achieve in contemporary television. Beyond their immediate impact, *RAMY* and *MO* set a precedent for future narratives, opening the door to even greater diversity in the stories told and the communities represented.

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Disorienting “Western” Viewers with Nacer Khemir’s *Desert Trilogy*

Abstract

In this essay, I explore tensions that arise when creating alternative cinematic visions of Muslim life, specifically frictions emerging from the goal of shifting public perception of the community and patterns of self-orientalization. Here, I complicate assumptions about the representation of Islam by looking at a self-articulated presentation of Muslims through the narrative feature series the *Desert Trilogy*, by Tunisian director Nacer Khemir (born 1948). I argue that Khemir is ensnared by ahistorical Islamic nostalgia and largely reinforces romantic orientalist aesthetics in his films. While his portrait of Muslims is much more “positive” than those in the broader archive, it is just as skewed and incomplete as stereotypical images of Muslims as violent terrorists. Ultimately, it seems that he fails to offer a coherent and stable locus for Islam that can dispel misconceptions and mitigate the heavy liability of the “Hollywood Muslim” in Western social consciousness. Khemir’s desire to submit an alternative portrait of Muslims rooted in esoteric Sufi traditions of Islam in combination with his allegorical and anti-realist film style leaves the viewer with a synthetic and saccharine impression of Muslim experience.

Keywords

Islam, Sufism, Orientalism, Tunisia, Morocco, Nacer Khemir, *Desert Trilogy*, WANDERERS OF THE DESERT (Nacer Khemir, TN/FR 1984), THE DOVE’S LOST NECKLACE (Nacer Khemir, TN/FR 1991), BAB’AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL (Nacer Khemir, TN/IR/FR/CH 2005)

Biography

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Introduction

The uneven and distorted representation of Muslims in Western cinema is well documented.¹ The effect is that Muslims are largely understood in stereotypical ways by many Euro-American audiences, who go on to support policies and practices that harm Muslim communities and individuals.² Unfortunately, the majority of these representations do not reflect the issues or concerns of average Muslims. However, while, as Hussain notes, “there has been a clear and lengthy history of misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam in film”, we should not assume that non-Muslims have been the only culprits.³ In this essay, I explore tensions that arise from creating alternative cinematic visions of Muslim life, specifically frictions that emerge from the goal of shifting public perception of the community and from patterns of self-orientalization. Here I complicate assumptions about the representation of Islam by looking at a self-articulated presentation of Muslims through the narrative feature series the *Desert Trilogy*, by Tunisian director Nacer Khemir. I argue that the distortion of Muslim social experience in film is possible on both sides of the representational spectrum. Khemir is ensnared by an ahistorical repertoire of Islamic nostalgia and largely reinforces romantic orientalist aesthetics in his films. While his portrait of Muslims is much more “positive” than those in the broader archive, it is just as skewed and incomplete as stereotypical images that depict Muslims as violent terrorists. At the same time, I acknowledge, Khemir’s attempt to disrupt dominant Western representational patterns is both logical and admirable. The undue burden of representation falls on anyone who takes on the task of smashing harmful constructions of themselves or their community. However, Khemir’s desire to submit an alternative portrait of Muslims that is rooted in esoteric Sufi traditions of Islam and in his allegorical and anti-realist film style leaves the viewer with a synthetic and saccharine impression of Muslim experience.

More specifically, here I explore the ability of Nacer Khemir’s *Desert Trilogy* and its self-orientalizing portrait of Muslims to interrupt Western stereotypical tropes, a stated goal of the filmmaker. Khemir claims that his work provides a real image of a living Islamic tradition and is needed to

1 Shaheen 2009.

2 Alsultany 2012.

3 Hussain 2009.

challenge the global representation of Muslims in the media. I focus on the three narrative feature films that compose his *Desert Trilogy*: *LES BALISEURS DU DÉSERT* (WANDERERS OF THE DESERT, TN/FR 1984), *LE COLLIER PERDU DE LA COLOMBE* (THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE, TN/FR 1991), and *BAB'AZIZ: LE PRINCE QUI CONTEMPLAIT SON ÂME* (BAB'AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL, TN/IR/FR/CH 2005).⁴

The films act as a self-assertion of the Islamic tradition in the contemporary world, even as Western media renders Muslims silent in their own representation. Khemir's films are beautiful expressions of how many Muslims view and understand their tradition, and they muddle the public-media persona of Muslims. However, we must ask if Khemir's imaging of the symbols, themes, and practices of Islam are similarly constructed. Ultimately, he fails to offer a coherent and stable locus for Islam that can dispel misconceptions and mitigate the heavy liability of the "Hollywood Muslim" in Western social consciousness.⁵ His attempt to dismantle negative stereotypes simultaneously constructs an essentialized formulation of Islam and Muslims, or more succinctly, Khemir's anti-stereotyping is still stereotyping.⁶

Nacer Khemir and the *Desert Trilogy*

Nacer Khemir was born in 1948 in a small village outside Tunis, Tunisia, but he was French educated and has resided in Paris for many years. Khemir is an artist, author, director, and storyteller. He has explained, "I consider myself a *hakawati*, a storyteller, not only of stories and narratives but also that

4 Suzanne Gauch (Gauch 2016) offers a more granular analysis of the narrative and formal aspects of these films. Roy Armes (Armes 2010) contextualizes Khemir's narrative films within his overall cultural production and political vision.

5 I do not hold an essentialized understanding of Islam as a static and stable tradition. I support Shahab Ahmed's (Ahmed 2015) contention that Islam is both coherent and contradictory and employ Caner Dagli's (Dagli 2024) theoretical rubric for understanding Islam as a "metaphysical institution". My own interpretation of Islam as a dialogical exchange can be found in my study of Chinese language Islamic scholarship (Petersen 2017). We might think of Khemir's own configuration of an idealized Islamic past as more mythological, as it forms a pastiche of an ahistorical and decontextualized tradition rather than a historical and/or sociologically rooted heritage that is easily delineated, recognizable, or graspable by the viewer.

6 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this phrasing of a key argument of the essay.

of a culture.”⁷ His films reflect this narrative quality and are reminiscent of classical tales, such as those from *1,001 Nights*. However, Khemir pushes at the boundaries of fantasy and reality in his stories. His use of symbolism is evident from his employment of images, architecture, and landscapes throughout all of his films.⁸ He utilizes these to evoke what he understands to be the true or inner meanings behind concepts of love, myth, and tradition. Many intertwined tales challenge the viewer to reevaluate their understanding of these themes. A recurring objective of Khemir’s work is to examine the relationship between modernity and the golden era of Islamic culture. This partnership is never fully resolved in his films but its exploration provides a continuing rumination on the modern condition and the role of cultural memory in defining identity.

In the *Desert Trilogy* Khemir reveals how love, knowledge, and contemplation have been highly valued throughout Muslim history and continue to be revered today. Khemir’s depiction of common Muslim practices and beliefs is situated primarily in the introspective and transcendental Sufi tradition and exhibits some of the diversity and multiplicity of Muslim populations, countering common extremist characterizations of Muslims. However, the potential of Khemir’s films is offset by obfuscating cinematic choices. Being an unhurried storyteller could be Khemir’s most substantial shortcoming. The lack of contextualization and the intentional mystique of his tales may leave those not well acquainted with the symbols or references confused at best and irritated at worst. Khemir’s work is therefore most productive for a Western audience when the substance of these allusions can be teased out for the viewer. Before exploring such obstacles in greater detail, I briefly recount the main narratives of the three films that make up the *Desert Trilogy*.

WANDERERS OF THE DESERT (TN/FR 1984) – A Synopsis

WANDERERS OF THE DESERT begins with the story of a young man, Mr. Abd al-Salam, who is assigned to be the new schoolteacher in a forgotten village on a Tunisian desert road. As he enters the isolated village, its inhabitants welcome him and he begins to realize it has a unique aura. One of the strange features of the village is that it has no young men. We find out that

7 Khemir/Khayati/Awadalla 1995, 255.

8 See Barzegar/Gholami 2024.

the villagers believe that they are cursed, because all their young men are lured into the desert to become the wanderers of the title. This piques Abd al-Salam's curiosity, and he seeks out the local religious leader, Hajj, for answers. Bits and pieces of the curse are revealed throughout the film, and eventually Hajj solicits the teacher's help in trying to bring the wanderers back to the village. The teacher is given a book about the curse, reads a short passage that warns him that a woman, pictured in a miniature painting, will arrive and escort him to the garden of his beloved in three days. While the villagers perform a local pilgrimage, an old woman enters the courtyard and leads the teacher into the desert, never to be seen again. Concurrent with this main story are other mysterious events and curious characters, none of which are fully explained in the narrative. There is the mischievous orphan Hussein, who leads the other boys in building a garden of mirrors and takes his direction from a *jinn* named Mr. Hassan who lives in a well; an elderly man, Assam, who is searching for buried treasure and digs in the desert; an officer and his scribe who come to investigate the teacher's disappearance; the Sheikh's silent daughter; Sinbad's ship; and the angel of death. The personalities, soliloquies, conversations, architecture, and landscapes are at the forefront of the movie, rather than a linear narrative with a clear conclusion. Khemir's poeticism is reminiscent of classic Arab literary culture but will likely struggle to appeal to the average Western viewer. Much of his imagery is steeped in symbolism from Arab and Islamic culture, with little to no contextualization to explain Khemir's intended meaning or message.

THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE (TN/FR 1991) – A Synopsis

In his second film, *THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE*, Khemir is able to maintain much of the mystique of his message while creating a more developed storyline. It begins with Hassan, a young man studying calligraphy with a local master, who is consumed with his quest to find all the words for love. He believes that once he knows all the words for love, he will understand its true nature. This obsession is galvanized when Hassan obtains a fragment of a book that was saved from being burned for its poisonous or inappropriate content. The snippet contains an image of the Princess of Samarkand and a bit of poetry which reads: "The beginning of love is light, but its ending is hard. One night I had this vision; two women are throwing water in an empty field as if trying to quench the field's thirst. And at the edge of

the empty field sat the Princess of Samarkand staring with her big eyes at a red pomegranate.” We find out that this poem records the dream of an unknown man who asked a local named Jafar to burn his books so no one would learn of his vision. Hassan becomes infatuated with the Princess and sets out to find her and the remainder of the book, both of which, Hassan is convinced, will reveal love’s true meaning. While trying to locate the original text, Hassan starts a fire in the bookshop and is forced out of his village. During his quest, an unknown traveler named Aziz appears and reappears and ultimately joins Hassan in his journey. Hassan suspects that Aziz is actually the Princess of Samarkand in disguise, but they are torn apart before he can discover Aziz’s true identity. Ultimately, Hassan never finds the Princess, the book, or the true meaning of love and returns to his war-torn village to find it ravaged. Again, Khemir incorporates various peripheral stories and peculiar characters and twists, such as Prince Harun, the monkey; Zein, whose father is a *jinn*; a tailor who makes a cloak of death for the Prince; and an ecstatic dervish. The moral and the various messages are neither fully developed nor explained, and viewers are left to decipher Khemir’s meanings on their own. Overall, however, *THE DOVE’S LOST NECKLACE* seems more coherent and satisfying to the viewer.

BAB’AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL (TN/IR/FR/CH 2005) – A Synopsis

In Khemir’s third film, *BAB’AZIZ: THE PRINCE WHO CONTEMPLATED HIS SOUL*, we follow an elderly blind dervish named Bab’Aziz and his granddaughter, Ishtar. Together they travel through the desert in search of a reunion of Sufis that occurs only once every thirty years. To entertain his granddaughter, Bab’Aziz relates the tale of a prince who became captivated by the inner contemplation of his soul as he stared at his own reflection in a pool of water. Khemir’s enthusiasm for storytelling is conspicuous throughout the film as the audience learns what has drawn successive characters to this journey. Osman is searching for a beautiful woman he encountered in a palace when he fell down a well, which some of his companions believe to be an event unveiling God’s divine power. Zaid is in search of a woman whose father drew him to her through his mystical poetry. A young man searches out a red-headed dervish who killed his brother, one of the twins Hassan and Hussein, who are diametrical opposites. All those traveling along the path ultimately

reach their goal and are confronted with the ways in which they experience the divine: Bab'Aziz welcomes death and his return to God; Ishtar is embraced by various Sufis who inspire love in her heart; Zaid finds his beloved; and the brother cares for Bab'Aziz in his final moments of life. The numerous characters' travels are better integrated than in Khemir's other films, and each personality is related to the others in some way. However, as in the case of the first two films in the *Desert Trilogy*, the audience is simply along for the ride, unaware of where they are going. The interweaving storylines add depth to the narrative but often leave the viewer bewildered about the intended messages of Khemir's frequent symbolism. BAB'AZIZ is Khemir's most obvious attempt to reveal the practices and beliefs of Islam's mystical tradition, and it often seems he is trying to display Sufi customs and traditions for an audience familiar with only stereotypical images of Muslims.

Representing Sufism to Rectify Media Representation of Muslims

Khemir's counter-imaging is a noble goal in and of itself and could undo harm if embraced and reproduced by more Muslim artists. Showing another face of Islam may eliminate preconceived notions about Muslims that are based on inaccurate or incomplete knowledge. Khemir believes cinema can shift public perceptions of Muslims: "We are required to create a new image and show this not to just one country but to the whole world."⁹ He holds Sufism to be the antithesis of radical fundamentalism and the heart of the Islamic tradition. In his opinion, "Sufism is the Islam of the mystics; it is the tenderness of Islam. [...] One could also say that Sufism is the pulsating heart of Islam. Far from being a marginal phenomenon, it is the esoteric dimension of the Islamic message."¹⁰ He has therefore made Sufism the crux of his presentation, most notably in BAB'AZIZ. The storyteller Khemir explains his motivation by explaining that Islam is like his father and has fallen and landed in the mud. His goal with his films is to help Islam get back up, find its footing, and clean off its face. While his filmmaking is firmly rooted in non-Western aesthetic and philosophical traditions, he recognizes that his cinema has greater impact in shaping Western sentiments: "I believe I have

9 Agency 2017.

10 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

more influence on the Occidental side of the world than the Oriental side of the world.”¹¹ Khemir attempts to speak for his tradition and rectify what he sees as numerous biased depictions that have rendered Muslims mute.¹² This strategy has been taken up by other filmmakers who, like Khemir, portray alternative Muslim modalities where “Sufism is also employed as a political corrective”.¹³

Khemir reconstitutes the Islamic tradition by providing an alternative view of what is important for Muslims. He does this through his rich use of allusion, metaphor, and symbolism. Roy Armes explains, “This world is created through precise camerawork, sumptuous colour imagery, a multitude of expressive faces and exquisite costumes.”¹⁴ Each image or line of dialogue that Khemir includes is used to evoke certain emotions related to idealized concepts such as love, tradition, or the written word. Thus Emily O’Dell describes BAB’AZIZ as “an audiovisual tapestry of Sufi cultural heritage from around the world” and records that the “screenplay is a palimpsest of verses from the Qur’an, and Sufi poems by Rumi, Attar, Ibn Arabi, and Ibn Farid”.¹⁵ Khemir explains, “[n]arrative, for me, is transcendent. It becomes transcendent through abstraction. It’s a kind of Islamic thought, too. When I point to something, I am indicating 10 times that thing, but nine out of 10 parts of the whole remain invisible.”¹⁶ What Khemir is pointing to exists in parallel spaces in the great Islamic past and in modern Muslim societies, which enables the viewer to reexamine the signaletic material from multiple registers. The ambiguity of his iconic imaging requires viewers to generate meaning based on their own understanding and position in the world. Khemir tells us:

As for characterization, it exceeds its social frame to become a sign of various significations both within and outside the film. The viewer, who relates to and is sensitive towards this Arab-Islamic culture, can reread the film several times, each time in a different manner; since each viewing will be a renewed discovery of the film’s specificities. The object is static in its essence, but transformative in its signification.¹⁷

11 Arsiya 2017.

12 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 11–12.

13 O’Dell 2023, 98.

14 Armes 2006, 129.

15 O’Dell 2023, 99.

16 Rakha 2006, 2.

17 Khemir/Khayati/Awadalla 1995, 256.

Khemir's powerful imagery and stark dialogue are intended to take the viewer through various levels of understanding and thought. Khemir serves as our guide and leads us, like novice Sufis, to unveilings of his imagination. He advises us, "concerning the structure of this movie [BAB'AZIZ], I think it helps the spectator to forget about his own ego and to put it aside in order to open up to the reality of the world. It borrows the structure of the 'visions' usually narrated by dervishes, and the structure of their spiraling and whirling dances."¹⁸ Overall, each film revolves around aspects of the Sufi path, including poetry, calligraphy, music, dance, and illumination.¹⁹ Since Khemir models his cinematic journeys on the mystical tradition, his presentation of Sufism merits closer examination.

Self-Orientalizing Images of Islam and the Problem of Interpretation

Through the *Desert Trilogy* Khemir attempts to naturalize a version of Islam that resonates with his political commitments. One of the limitations of Khemir's work is that, just like the work of the many Western image-makers who present a distorted portrayal of Muslims, his films fail to provide a full picture of Muslims: in this instance we get only a partial glimpse of the Islamic mystical tradition and the practices that accompany it.²⁰ We could even go as far as to say that Khemir presents a self-orientalizing image of Muslims in that he paints a fabricated image of Islamic culture based on nostalgic reflections of an utopian past. Like many early Western scholars of Islam (and especially Sufism), Khemir dehistoricizes his characters, landscapes, and themes, removing them from any specific time and place. History determines what a particular concept meant at a given time, on the basis on the individual circumstances that created the understanding of that idea. The romantic orientalism of European linguists saw the essence of Islam's universal truths captured in the literary products of its spiritual authorities. Social expressions of Sufism were seen as exotic and supersti-

18 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

19 Syed Haider (Haider 2021) has shown how some Bollywood films similarly deploy a set of established visual and sonic traits that make up a particular "Sufi aesthetic".

20 Lloyd Ridgeon stresses the diversity of the medieval Sufi tradition and highlights "the heterogeneous nature of Sufi ontological and mystical beliefs" to critique the notion of a single Sufi tradition (Ridgeon 2014, 126).

tious by orientalist Christian missionaries and colonial administrators. Orientalists understood both the intellectual teachings and material exercise of Sufism as anti-modern and as enabling Muslims to tap into some ultimate truth that “modern” Europeans had lost as a result of their disenchantment. This peculiar combination props up the essentialized interpretation of Islam through Sufi thought and practice as spiritually authoritative but obtuse to outside interpretation.

Through his films’ conjuring of symbolic hidden meanings of an inner truth, Khemir upholds orientalist logics and mimics their static signifiers in his self-representation. Unfortunately, the instrumentalization of ahistorical and transhistorical visions of modern Muslim life, a dominant position in orientalist thought, reinforces Western assumptions about Muslims that place them in a subservient primitivism compared to their Euro-American peers. For example, Khemir explains that in *BAB’AZIZ*, “I did not want to address the different [Sufi] brotherhoods, but I wanted to give an idea of what seems alive in the Islamic-Arab culture: this endless quest for the Absolute and the Infinite.”²¹ The problem is that Khemir does not provide any of the details on how this quest is performed. Trekking through the desert, dancing to *qawwali* music, or spinning in a circle with one’s eyes toward the sky does not necessarily lead to illumination and the unveiling of the mysteries of the universe. Khemir extracts the meaningful signifiers of various historical Sufi contexts (calligraphy, poetic recitation, musical ecstasy, etc.) from the referents that imbibe them with particular signification (i.e. society, culture, community, etc.). The orientalist tendency to focus on perceived essences of the tradition is mirrored by Khemir, and we are therefore given only a shell of this mystical aspect of Islam. The details of this spiritual quest depend on locale, historical time, and the spiritual status of the individual. Khemir goes on to tell us, “[o]ne cannot understand the aesthetics of Islamic Culture without studying Sufi texts”.²² This attitude is incorporated into Khemir’s dialogue, which often emulates the writings of several great Sufis. But relying on texts alone detaches this tradition from the people that drove and developed it. Texts are also in constant dialogue, and the themes that run through them are historically based and not universal.

While beautiful and engaging, Khemir’s films do not fully demonstrate the diversity or complexity of the Sufi tradition. Overall, as Viola Shafik

21 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

22 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

notes, “the fairy tale-like images are neither related to the present nor to the specific historical period that can be recognized from the details of the costume and the setting. Thus, cultural history is reduced to a diffuse, remote, though highly aesthetic, formula.”²³ Further, the viewer is presented with a depiction of Muslim life that is just as partial as the “Hollywood Muslim”. Wandering Sufis or scholar calligraphers are as small in number as modern jihadists. While Khemir’s illustration of Muslim life is much more appealing for a responsive Western viewer, these imagings need to be historically grounded and supplemented with other source materials in order to make the mystical life of Muslims that he presents comprehensible.

One challenge is that Khemir takes up the dominant representational forms, both intellectual and visual, of traditional Western takes on Sufism, as opposed to sociologically informed or realist approaches to Tunisian society. Khemir’s “trans-Islamic spiritualism”, as Kamran Rastegar dubs it, detaches his film’s subjects from the circumstances that shape and give localized meaning to their ideas and routines.²⁴ Robert Lang excludes Khemir from his study of “new Tunisian cinema” because the filmmaker does not address his national context in any direct or clear manner. While Khemir is certainly a product of the influences of his local industry, he does not tackle questions of the nation head on. Lang notes, “more obviously than most, his films are allegories. But what are they allegories of?”²⁵ Films produced in Muslim majority industries are often rooted in the interpretive framework of the given nation state. Muslim norms and values represented in films are usually implicit in national cinemas, and the everyday experiences and socio-political circumstances that shape the narrative and characters are often left to be known by the local film spectator. It is difficult to view Khemir’s films in terms of a national cinema model, because he strives to produce an ahistorical essentialized portrait of a perceived Islamic essence. His films do not account for or speak directly to a Tunisian social or political context. It is only through allegory that Khemir alludes to the centering of mystical and esoteric interpretations of Islam as a remedy for the ills of the current world. But the metaphorical narratives and contemplative visuality that point to the unseen realm of mystical truth are both impenetrable for the uninitiated viewer and require complex commentary and

23 Shafik 2017, 196.

24 Rastegar 2015, 398.

25 Lang 2014, 13.

explanation.²⁶ This dynamic may make these pictures less able to generate a diverse portrait of Muslims for non-Muslim Western viewers.

While Khemir's films are not located in a specific social context, history and tradition are integral to his artistry and expressivity. His engagement with tradition and modernity and their own relationship are significant throughout his films. He imitates or replicates traditional narrative structures while also creating totally new arrangements that evoke nostalgia and challenge notions about the present. While the elaborate costumes and scenery suggest his films are traditional, the formulation of his various tales flouts traditional forms, in which conflicts arise and are resolved. Instead, Khemir intertwines linear journeys of searching that generally remain unresolved at the end of his films, reminiscent of modern literature and cinema.²⁷ As in his depiction of the Sufi tradition, Khemir picks and chooses what he wants from his Islamic tradition more generally. For example, he tells us, "The idea of the 'Prince' came to me from a beautiful plate that was painted in Iran in the 12th century."²⁸ *THE DOVE'S LOST NECKLACE* was inspired by classic texts on love, such as Ibn Hazm's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāmah* (*The Dove's Necklace*) and Ibn al-Jazzar's *Zād al-Musāfir* (*Provisions for the Traveler*). These phantom presences haunt the films' narratives.²⁹ The ancient city of Bam, today in Iran, plays a significant role in *BAB'AZIZ*, as the destination and location of the Sufi gathering. Repeatedly, Khemir is influenced by classic Islamic culture but reinvents it for a contemporary interpretation of its meaning and role by modern individuals. He explains,

what I am trying to do today is to tell a new story, one of authentic components but used in a new and different manner, making the introduction to the culture simpler and more accessible to us than it is now, closer to both the Eastern and the Western audience, making it become a mirror that reflects both inwards and outwards, at the same time.³⁰

His films are inspired by classical ideas, but they challenge traditional concepts with the filmmaker's own ideas about traditional concepts and how one should embrace them.

26 See, for example, Khan 2025; Öztürk 2019; Papan-Matin 2012; de Souza/Alves 2023.

27 Shafik 2017, 97.

28 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005, 12.

29 Mahamdi 2014.

30 Khemir/Khayati/Awadalla 1995, 255.

A counter example to Khemir's viscous and dream-like cinematic portrait can help illuminate how his film diverges from a more metered and proportional production that is invested in using Sufi experiences as a means of understanding Muslims communities. Farida Benlyazid's film *BĀB AL-SAMĀ' MAFTŪH* (A DOOR TO THE SKY, MA 1988) places the idealized mystical arts and values within postcolonial subjectivity and the social and historical context of late 20th-century Morocco. The film is focused on a young Moroccan, Nadia, who has spent many years in France but returns to Fez before her father's death. The dichotomy between "traditional" life in Morocco and the "Western" modernity of European life is communicated to the viewer via Nadia's siblings and divergences in clothing, eating habits, language use, and values. After her father's death, Nadia decides to dedicate the family home as a *zāwiyah*, a Sufi settlement and refuge, in this case created specifically as a shelter for Muslim women. Nadia eschews the seeming chasm between her own and her kin's experiences and pursues a spiritual path. The film, like Khemir's productions, infuses the narrative, dialogue, and visuals with texts or images from prominent Sufi figures, such as Ibn Arabi.³¹ By contrast with the *Desert Trilogy*, Nadia's reflections on womanhood, family, secularity, and religion throughout her journey are tethered to the postcolonial dichotomies that emerge from the clash of modernity and tradition. Nadia's ritual practices, communal discussions, and social interactions in the *zāwiyah* are embedded in the pressures and problems of local life, including employment, marital life, and domestic violence. These types of inquiries arise from Benlyazid's own spiritual and social life.³² While Khemir's vision of life bubbles with Sufi intoxication from the divine, Benlyazid shows meditative solace and mystical fortitude arising out of communal practice and spiritual accountability. Where Khemir's simulated universal Sufism exists beyond time and space, Benlyazid's subjects experience doubt, strife, and challenges that are rooted within the contemporary subjectivity of Moroccan communalism, transnational identities, and cosmopolitan social pressures. Released during a moment of significant reconceptualization of women's place and social role, both in Morocco and around the globe, Benlyazid's film does not shy away from exploring a rooted social world.³³ She reveals how the construction of social space enables women's practice that may not be pos-

31 Martin 2007; Martin 2011, 81–84.

32 Martin 2011, 64; Martin 2024, 27–52.

33 Moody 2021.

sible in the broader patriarchal society but still has boundaries, as shown when the women of the shelter do not want someone who does not fear God to enter. In contradistinction, Khemir's idealized Sufi experience is not limited or burdened by class, gender, or racial or ethnic identity. Altogether, instead of presenting practices and values that are plucked from an ahistorical essence, *A DOOR TO THE SKY* shows them being contested, debated, and negotiated within communities of people. The film reveals how the magnitude of one's religiosity is often related to social structures or pressures that limit and shape the possibilities within a given time and space. And while Benlyazid has stated that she did not intend her film to transform global non-Muslim perceptions of Muslims, it illustrates the diversity of Muslim experience.³⁴ Its more realistic blending of traditional Maghrebi storytelling, Sufi customs and beliefs, and creative reimaginings of classical Islamic aesthetics has the potential to disrupt Western stereotypes about Muslims and expand on-screen possibilities.

Conclusion

Each film in Nacer Khemir's *Desert Trilogy* presents an idealized Islamic society that celebrates the intellectual or spiritual history of a Muslim golden age but laments its loss and the disconnect between this high culture and modern society. Khemir's self-orientalizing depiction of Sufism tries to provide the contemporary viewer with a path back to the essence of what made the past excel. However, it shows only an essentialized version of what Sufism developed into, based solely on an ahistorical understanding of texts, music, and dance. Khemir's version of this mystical aspect of Islam may eliminate Western misconceptions of Muslims, but his illustration is still disorienting, just like stereotypical media more generally. Certainly, we should acknowledge Khemir's stated goal that "it is a duty nowadays to show to the world another aspect of Islam, otherwise, each one of us will be stifled by his own ignorance of 'the other'",³⁵ and from a purely artistic standpoint, the *Desert Trilogy* is a gorgeous and stimulating creative accomplishment of contemplative cinema. But his films require their audience to create meaning to a much greater degree than most Euro-American audi-

34 Gauch 2016, 16.

35 Khemir/Omarbacha 2005.

ences are able, which makes it harder to disrupt the viewer's established and preconceived notions. In order for his films to be effective in displaying another face of Islam, they must be thoroughly contextualized and clarified, which undermines his overall objectives. Even after a Western audience has viewed his films, Muslims will likely remain an abstract and unfamiliar presence in their Western imagination.

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Open Section

The Transcendental Style in the Films of Paul Schrader

Grace and Redemption in **FIRST REFORMED** (US 2017), **THE CARD COUNTER** (US 2021) and **MASTER GARDENER** (US 2022)

Abstract

The career of Paul Schrader is an unusual case in the often-pragmatic US film industry. Schrader coined the term “transcendental style in film” as a theorist in the early 1970s, and when he became a filmmaker shortly thereafter, he tended to create redemptive stories of a distinctly spiritual nature, evidently influenced by his strict Calvinist upbringing. This article examines Schrader’s filmography several decades later, offering a film analysis of the trilogy known as *Man in a Room*, which consists of **FIRST REFORMED** (US 2017), **THE CARD COUNTER** (US 2021), and **MASTER GARDENER** (US 2022). The study first established the qualities of the transcendental style, to provide a basis for determining whether the aesthetics and narratives of Schrader’s later films reveal a concern for the transcendent. We determine that the trilogy explores the internal conflicts of middle-aged men who are burdened with a strong sense of guilt and who end up accepting the grace that arrives through (romantic) love. Furthermore, all three films contain defining elements of the transcendental style, although the filmmaker’s desire to reach a mass audiences causes him to use filters typical of commercial cinema and to draw significantly on the sociopolitical circumstances in which the protagonists live.

Keywords

Paul Schrader, Transcendental Style, *Man in a Room* Trilogy, Grace, Redemption, Disparity, Stasis, **FIRST REFORMED** (Paul Schrader, US 2017), **THE CARD COUNTER** (Paul Schrader, US 2021), **MASTER GARDENER** (Paul Schrader, US 2022)

Biographies

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Introduction

The final scenes of *AMERICAN GIGOLO* (Paul Schrader, US 1980) and *LIGHT SLEEPER* (Paul Schrader, US 1992) epitomise many of the qualities that have made Paul Schrader unique in US filmmaking: at the end of both films, the protagonists find redemption. The Calvinist understanding of grace had been firmly embedded in Schrader during his strict upbringing. These personal experiences permeated his approach as a film critic and analyst, notably in his approach to other filmmakers' work – thus the final minutes of these films clearly pay tribute to French director Robert Bresson.¹ Indeed, it is impossible to think of Paul Schrader without considering the “transcendental style”, a term he coined in the thesis he wrote for his Master of Arts in Film Studies, which he completed at UCLA in 1970. His book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* was published in 1972 and has served as a foundation for interpretation of Schrader's works in the many studies that have focused on his filmography. Among his most emblematic films are *AMERICAN GIGOLO*, *LIGHT SLEEPER*, *MISHIMA: A LIFE IN FOUR CHAPTERS* (US 1985), and *AFFLICTION* (US 1997).

This article is a product of our interest in knowing whether Schrader's spiritual inclinations were still alive two decades later, in an age when a technological revolution had brought about the digitisation of the processes of creation and production. Specifically, we sought to answer this question through analysis of the *Man in a Room* film trilogy, comprising Schrader's *FIRST REFORMED* (US 2017), *THE CARD COUNTER* (US 2021), and *MASTER GARDENER* (US 2022). Our goal was to determine whether the presence of the aesthetic and narrative qualities of transcendental style reveal a continuing interest in the transcendent.

An Atypical Personality: The Universe of Paul Schrader

Paul Schrader's use of film to explore the spiritual was shaped in part by his childhood. Born on 22 July 1946 in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Schrader was raised with the orthodox principles of the Christian Reformed Church, a branch of Dutch Calvinism, of which his parents were members. As a result, he faced years of physical punishment. He was also prohibited from

1 Schrader 1969.

going to the cinema.² Schrader studied at Calvin College, where he trained to become a pastor and developed a fascination with the figure of Saint Paul.³

After he left Grand Rapids, Schrader developed a strong interest in the world of cinema. Before becoming one of the most important screenwriters and directors of the generation that saved Hollywood in the 1970s, he developed a theoretical corpus influenced by a religious perspective. Among the multitude of articles he published as a critic and analyst was one, a treatise on the Western films shot by Budd Boetticher for the production company Ranown, that is especially relevant for this study. Throughout the text, Schrader connects the mythology of the Western genre with principles of Calvinism. He proposed that the characters played by actor Randolph Scott were guided by the theological concept of Grace, which is accessed not through actions, but through decisions.⁴ In his search for utopian cinema, Schrader was more drawn to idealism than to redemption earned by good deeds, a Catholic teaching.

Schrader's work as a screenwriter and director also evinces strong spiritual influences. His script for *TAXI DRIVER* (Martin Scorsese, US 1976) demonstrates a fascination with lonely male protagonists burdened with existential emptiness who end up completely or partially redeemed. This interest became something of an obsession, as can be seen in two films that define his film universe, *AMERICAN GIGOLO* and *LIGHT SLEEPER*. The endings of these two films are an homage to *PICKPOCKET* (Robert Bresson, FR 1959), a production by French director Robert Bresson, undoubtedly one of Schrader's film heroes. However, the cinephilia that characterises many of his creative works has been fed by cultural paradigms not so far removed from the Hollywood tradition; he may challenge these models, but he never severs himself from them.

Moreover, the contradictions in the idea of a young man on the way to becoming a minister subsequently cultivating a passion for firearms, alcohol and cocaine help explain the stylistic heterogeneity of Schrader's films. Although his early works fitted within in the studio environment of their time, studios that included Universal, Columbia, Paramount, and RKO/Universal, by the end of the century he was already aware that he was on the fringes of Hollywood.⁵

2 Biskind 1998, 287–288.

3 Jackson 2004a, 3.

4 Schrader 1970, 28.

5 Navarro 1998, 40.

His film writing was powered by a range of factors: the combination of apparently antagonistic opportunities; the repetition of formal strategies; the ritualisation of the protagonists' actions; the symbolism of the settings; the proliferation of characters tortured by existential conflicts; the subversion of tradition; and the persistence of topics such as guilt, loneliness, problematic sexuality, redemption, and unhealthy family relations.⁶ He has continually intertwined and blended such potentially incompatible elements. Thus his films hold space for sudden endings that without warning refer to the transcendental style of Ozu and Bresson.⁷

Schrader recognised the paradoxical nature of his work when he talked about his mission, vision, and values as a filmmaker:

I have the evangelical impulse, which is the need to go out and preach to as many people as possible, and to reach all of them. I also know that the true way to reach them is via a method that is uncommercial. But when you are working in a mass medium you have to accept the restrictions of a mass audience, which means millions of people, because to make a movie you need to deal with a minimum of two or three million units.⁸

The Transcendental Style in Film: Key Features

With his discussion of “transcendental style”, Schrader joined the exclusive club of creative filmmakers who have produced influential texts that address film theory. Here we refer to this particular style in order to establish whether spiritual awareness was a factor during the most recent period of his filmmaking career.

In the first pages of *Transcendental Style in Film*,⁹ Schrader proposed the following ideas: (1) artists from different cultures use a common style to reveal the sacred, (2) this style is a product of the desire to have their art express the metaphysical, (3) this universal style can only be identified by the knowledgeable viewer, as it can involve timeframes and be related

6 Huerta Floriano 2008, 49.

7 Bachman 2020, 28.

8 Jackson 2004b, 29.

9 We have worked with the reprint published in 2018, which contains a new introduction entitled “Rethinking Transcendental Style”.

to camera angles, dialogue and editing, deployed to transcendental aims; analysis of films, sequences, and shots is necessary in order to extract the universal from the specific, (4) the transcendental style should not be mistaken for religious cinema, which is much smaller in scope.¹⁰

For Schrader, “the Transcendent is beyond normal sense experience, and that which it transcends is, by definition, the immanent”.¹¹ Thus, writing of Heinrich Wölfflin, Schrader recorded that style is “a general representative form” and that as Wölfflin’s use of style is “concerned with what is universal rather than particular in the various means of expression ... it is ideally suited to describe a style which seeks to express the Wholly Other through divergent cultures and personalities”.¹² Schrader noted that while Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu cultivated the transcendental style in his films, in his case “the transcendental style had to be extricated from the culture”; in Bresson’s films, by contrast, “this had already happened to a large degree: Bresson is alienated from his contemporary culture”.¹³ In his in-depth study of the French director’s work, Schrader identified a number of components of the transcendental style: “the everyday”, which is seen as cinematic attention to detail in a kind of “surface-aesthetics”, or “quasi-documentary approach”;¹⁴ “disparity”, which “injects a human density into the unfeeling everyday, an unnatural density that grows and grows until, at the moment of decisive action, it reveals itself to be a spiritual density”,¹⁵ and finally, “stasis”, which is “the quiescent, frozen, or hieratic scene which succeeds the decisive action and closes the film”.¹⁶

The transcendental style in Bresson’s films is defined, Schrader proposes, by the aesthetic of elimination that opposes dramatised events, neutralises the storyline impact of the film, and negates the influence of the audience’s feelings on the final result. The style can be applied via the rather inexpressive and automatic performance of the actors, as well as the reduction of the expressive power of the camera, use of basic compositions and single angles, non-didactic editing that avoids emotional climaxes, and mostly natural sounds that reinforce the coldness of reality.

10 Schrader 2018, 35–36.

11 Schrader 2018, 37.

12 Schrader 2018, 40.

13 Schrader 2018, 87.

14 Schrader 2018, 88.

15 Schrader 2018, 97–98.

16 Schrader 2018, 108.

Furthermore, the filmmaker duplicates events and employs pleonastic dialogue and also interior narration, a technique in which the characters describe the action that is being seen, or has already been seen on screen, with restrained expressiveness. The principal characters become estranged as they inhabit a cold, objective world, yet their conflicts are related to spiritual passion. Thus, “they do not respond to the environment, but instead to that sense of the Other which seems much more immediate”.¹⁷

In a culmination of the disparity process, the stories lead the audience to “the decisive action”, an event that departs from restraint and breaks the rules of the ordinary: “There is a blast of music, an overt symbol, and an open call for emotion”.¹⁸ The decisive action has been preceded by “decisive moments”, which foretell the final act. Generally accompanied by music, these resolute moments lead the protagonist to his or her passion, perhaps culminating in a miraculous event that propitiates the decisive action, “which can effect a ‘transformation’ in the spectator’s mind”.¹⁹

At the end of the journey, the transcendental style includes a stasis that “represents the ‘new’ world in which the spiritual and the physical can co-exist” as part of “a larger scheme in which all phenomena are more or less expressive of a larger reality – the Transcendent”.²⁰ While Schrader recognises that Bresson’s stasis might be overvalued as something that evokes transcendence, Bresson himself expressed a desire to make the audience a participant in something greater, something that “transcends immanent experience and may be called, if only for practical purposes, the Transcendent”.²¹

Paul Schrader’s *Man in a Room* Trilogy and the Transcendental Style

At the start of the 21st century, Paul Schrader acknowledged his longstanding interest in the idea of a man adrift, a man who observes others from the fringes of urban society. He would like to have a life, but does not know how to get one: “I have written about him when he was in his twenties, angry,

17 Schrader 2018, 102.

18 Schrader 2018, 105.

19 Schrader 2018, 108.

20 Schrader 2018, 108.

21 Schrader 2018, 109.

and a taxi driver; when he was in his thirties, narcissistic, and a gigolo; and when he was in his forties, anxious, and a drug dealer”.²² This acknowledgment was made by Schrader in reference to the protagonists of *TAXI DRIVER*, *AMERICAN GIGOLO*, and *LIGHT SLEEPER*. He adds that he eventually stopped writing about that type of man, given the increasing difficulty of obtaining financing for films about protagonists with existential conflicts.

Between 2017 and 2022, three films written and directed by Schrader were released as the *Man in a Room Trilogy*. Although the characters are not all urban dwellers, the protagonists of *FIRST REFORMED*, *THE CARD COUNTER*, and *MASTER GARDENER* are once again “solitary characters grappling with sin and redemption”.²³

In the documentary *PAUL SCHRADER: MAN IN A ROOM* (Alex Ross Perry, US 2020), the filmmaker examines his career and highlights *FIRST REFORMED* as one of the four films that he considers his best work. This film delves into the world of religion through its protagonist, Reverend Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), who serves as the pastor of a small church in Snowbridge, in the state of New York. Toller is a former army chaplain whose son died in the Iraq war. The pastor is preparing for the reconsecration of the church on its 250th anniversary, along with the members of its small congregation, who include Michael (Philip Ettinger) and his wife, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), who is pregnant. Michael, an environmentalist who wants Mary to have an abortion, ends up committing suicide. After this devastating event, Toller embraces the environmentalist cause and decides to carry out an attack during the reconsecration ceremony using an explosive vest that belonged to Michael. He aims to eliminate the political, religious, and economic leaders of the region, whom he considers accomplices in climate change. However, Mary’s sudden appearance at the last moment compels Toller to suspend the attack.

In the second film of the *Man in a Room Trilogy*, *THE CARD COUNTER*, William Tell (Oscar Isaac) is a professional gambler. He has taken up this new occupation after spending more than eight years in a military prison for participating in the torture of inmates at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, where he served as a soldier under the name Tillich. Tell travels to various casinos where he wins small amounts of money through card counting. His life changes when he accepts a proposal made by La Linda (Tiffany Haddish),

22 Schrader 2002, vii.

23 Zuckerman 2023.

who represents a group of investors who finance poker players. He agrees to help young Cirk (Tye Sheridan), the son of an army comrade who committed suicide after being made a scapegoat in the Abu Ghraib scandal. Cirk is killed during a raid on the home of Gordo (Willem Dafoe), an Iraq War contractor who is subsequently tortured by Tell. In prison once again, the protagonist is visited by La Linda.

MASTER GARDENER closes the *Man in a Room* Trilogy. Its protagonist, Narvel Roth (Joel Edgerton), is the head gardener at Gracewood, the huge estate of Norma Haverhill (Sigourney Weaver). Norma has given Narvel a second chance after he collaborated with the authorities by testifying against the other members of a white supremacist organisation to which he belonged. Norma tasks Narvel with teaching gardening to her mixed-race grandniece, Maya Core (Quintessa Swindell), who has a drug problem. Norma eventually sacks both Narvel and Maya, believing they are in a sexual relationship, which becomes a reality only after they have left Gracewood and after Maya overcomes the trauma of seeing the Nazi tattoos all over Narvel's body. The pair return to Gracewood to rebuild the vandalised gardens and start a new life together.

Austerity and Emptiness as an Expression of the Everyday

The plots of all three films are driven by lonely, middle-aged men who feel guilty about past events and live their ordinary lives without much emotion. The relevance of everyday life is expressed in the occupations of the main characters, which in two instances are specified in the title of the relevant movie: card counter and master gardener. In this aspect these two movies follow in the footsteps of TAXI DRIVER and AMERICAN GIGOLO, the films from Schrader's oeuvre that were most heavily influenced by Bresson's transcendental style. The title FIRST REFORMED does not make similar reference to the protagonist's occupation, although it has similar impact, for, in Schrader's own words, the "occupational metaphor" is significant in his most symbolic films in expressing personal problems that are a reflection of a "social malaise".²⁴

To create the universes of a pastor, a gambler, and a gardener, Schrader uses three gradually wider formats, namely 1.37:1, 1.66:1, and 2.39:1 respectively. As a result, it seems as if the spatial limits of the trilogy become larger,

24 Balsom 2023.

a progressive enlargement to which we will return. The film that uses almost square proportions is also the one that most closely adheres to the transcendental style described by Schrader in 1972. The aesthetic austerity of the format extends to other parameters for much of the footage of *FIRST REFORMED*, which in style and substance is reminiscent of both *JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE* (*DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*, Robert Bresson, FR 1951) and, most of all, *NATTVARDSGÄSTERNA* (*WINTER LIGHT*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963).²⁵

The beginning of *FIRST REFORMED* is a statement of intent, with the credits projected in white typography on a black background and the silence suddenly giving way to the ambient sounds of a barking dog, squawking birds, the gentle chirping of songbirds, and the creaking of wood. The opening shots of a church facade continue beyond the point of being purely informative, and the slow-moving editing invites contemplation by the viewer. In short, the aim is to recreate the everyday life of Reverend Toller, whose voice-over narrates what he writes in his diary, where he intends “to set down all my thoughts and the simple events of my day factually, and without hiding anything” (00:03:30).

The film contains an abundance of static shots, framed through basic compositions that tend to constrain and unbalance the main character. Schrader also forgoes the rhetorical power of staging and often resorts to long takes that begin and end with empty scenes. On more than one occasion the camera relies on an image of closed doors, which serve as a symbol of Toller’s existential drama. The silence, along with the spaces that are progressively more devoid of decorative elements, require the audience to be attentive, as the plot unfolds with little formal emphasis to provide direction (fig. 1). As Sobczynski astutely observes, “Films like this do not do that—they go the other way. When you get kind of interested in them, they start leaning back by withholding stuff. They withhold an editing pace that you expect, courage that you expect, music that you expect”.²⁶

The restrained performance by actor Ethan Hawke contributes to the sobriety of the film. His inexpressive gestures and slow movements ensure that his particular *via crucis* transcends realistic physical action to delve into the territory of internal conflict.

Inexpressive acting is one of the formal aspects shared by *THE CARD COUNTER*, *MASTER GARDENER*, and *FIRST REFORMED*. Oscar Isaac and Joel

25 Lorenz 2019, 139–143.

26 Sobczynski 2018.



Fig. 1: Toller appears to be constricted by the compositional setting on an empty stage. Film still, *FIRST REFORMED* (Paul Schrader, US 2017), 01:17:41.

Edgerton also work with minimalism in their portrayals of William Tell and Narvel Roth respectively, equally wounded by guilt about the past that is heightened by the present circumstances. Like the pastor, the professional gambler and master gardener take refuge in an ascetic existence, whether in transient homes such as the series of motel rooms whose furniture Tell ritually covers with cloth, or in humble shelters like the simple cabin with hardly any furniture where Narvel lives at Gracewood.

The three characters all lure themselves into sacrifice, whether an attempted suicide bombing, a duel to the death by torture, or a return to violence in response to conflict. The narration of everyday life in *THE CARD COUNTER* and *MASTER GARDENER* is highly significant, especially in the detailed descriptions of card games and horticulture as occupations with ritual components. In these two films, however, Schrader's evangelical desire to reach out to a mass audience leads him to a rather less sombre stage setting than in *FIRST REFORMED*. The filters of commercial cinema become more frequent, and the austerity of the transcendental style is dropped in a

good number of scenes. In a way, the first film of the trilogy leans towards a style that aligns more closely with Deleuze's concept of *l'image-temps*²⁷ whereas several parts of the other two films correspond more to his notion of *l'image-mouvement*,²⁸ with the camera moving in complex choreography, the editing becoming more expressive, and the angles growing slightly more forced, according to the dramatic demands of each scene. The cinematic effects are particularly radical during the Abu Ghraib flashbacks in *THE CARD COUNTER*, which are filmed with a fisheye lens that distorts perception and, combined with long takes recorded with a Steadicam, generate an immersive subjectivity of great intensity.

Furthermore, the use of sound also contains notable stylistic differences, particularly in relation to music. In *FIRST REFORMED*, music is mostly sourced from the diegesis of the two churches depicted in the film, with Lustmord's score for the levitation scene an exception. In contrast, a more mysterious tone accompanies *THE CARD COUNTER* and *MASTER GARDENER*, shaped by the intricate and highly crafted use of synthesisers and sound effects by composers Robert Levon Been and Devonté Hynes.

Overall, the filmmaker often draws on specific styles that evoke the transcendent sense of Bresson's master staging. One such example is provided by the frequent appearance of half-empty frames with minimal decoration in *THE CARD COUNTER*, especially in the prison environment, or the shots in both films that last for a long time, during which the space is abandoned by the characters, taking the audience away from the tension of the plot and inviting them to engage in self-reflection.

Restrained Disparity: From the Socio-Political Context to Decisive Moments

The transcendental style is evident when the main characters are not responsive to their environment but instead are driven by spiritual passion. Thus Bresson's films are defined by a distancing from his contemporary culture, which gives his style universal and paradigmatic value.

On that count the *Man in a Room* Trilogy is less transcendental as it is driven by responses to the social and political circumstances in which Schrader

27 Deleuze 1985.

28 Deleuze 1983.

lives. *FIRST REFORMED* is about growing awareness of the catastrophe of climate change, to the point where the protagonist becomes obsessed with the question, “Will God forgive us?”, in reference to the damage done to creation. *THE CARD COUNTER* makes the Abu Ghraib abuses explicit in its flashbacks, and it uses footage from the archives of government officials such as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in reinforcing the idea that Tell “has taken upon himself to bear the weight of the entire nation’s sins through his self-imposed suffering”.²⁹ As for *MASTER GARDENER*, it re-enacts the racial tension that continues to plague the United States, and Narvel’s flashbacks and tattoos reinforce the idea of a past trauma that is alive in the present. Adams has written of *FIRST REFORMED* as portraying “the escalating reality of contemptuous distrust expressed throughout American life in the aftermath of 9-11, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession of 2008 and 2009”,³⁰ a judgement that could be extended to the other works in the trilogy too.

However, fundamental aspects of disparity are restated by Schrader in all three films. One of them is interior narration, a technique also used by Bresson, particularly in the form of a kind of “doubling”,³¹ which emphasises everyday life in order to give it a density that will reveal itself as spiritual. As in Bresson’s *JOURNAL D’UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE*, the main characters in Schrader’s trilogy keep diaries that can account for the audience’s access to their interior narration. At times, the voice-over duplicates what can be seen in the handwriting; more commonly, the utterances provide an explanation of the actions viewed on screen. Such is especially the case, both audibly and visually, during the scenes that describe card games or gardening work, placing a strong emphasis on the characters’ everyday lives.

Moreover, the stories contain segments that accord with what Schrader described as “decisive moments” and “decisive actions”, inherent components of disparity. Thus a sequence in the last act of *FIRST REFORMED* breaks the formal austerity of the film: dreamlike tone occurs when Mary lies down on top of Toller to share one of the “magical mystery tours” she used to do with Michael. The communion of the two bodies gives way to levitation and flight through a star-filled sky, snow-capped mountains, a lush forest, and crystal-clear waters, all accompanied by a moving camera and mysterious music (fig.2). However, this religious man is not yet ready to fully accept the

29 Slaymaker 2021.

30 Adams 2020.

31 Schrader 2018, 98. The author has used the term as coined by Susan Sontag.

grace that Mary represents, so the idyllic landscapes suddenly give way to images of traffic jams, tire graveyards, factories billowing smoke, and other environmental calamities.

The symbolism that predisposes the protagonists to later accept their fate also presides over the decisive moments of *THE CARD COUNTER* and *MASTER GARDENER*. In the former film, La Linda takes Tell for a walk through a “city all lit up at night” (fig.3). In a garden embellished with millions of coloured lights, namely the Garden Glow at the Missouri Botanical Garden, they share secrets and hold hands. In the latter film, Narvel and Maya cross a road surrounded by flowers that expand to take over the asphalt while they stick their heads out of the car and scream with ecstatic happiness (fig. 4). The colourful and idealised romanticism of these three moments is a refuge of peace for the characters and a prelude to the final acts.

The decisive moments foretell the decisive actions that close the three films. Schrader noted that the ending of *PICKPOCKET* “concerns the progression of a soul from confinement to freedom” and concludes “with an inexplicably spiritual act... an unpremeditated act of love”.³² The endings of the films that make up the *Man in a Room* Trilogy have very similar attributes.³³

Bresson’s influence is clearest in *THE CARD COUNTER*, thanks to La Linda’s visit to the prison where Tell is confined. He has brought physical confinement upon himself, which La Linda’s unconditional love counteracts as she moves her finger across the glass that separates the two lovers in an attempt to make contact (fig. 5). The saving visit is even more explicit in *FIRST REFORMED*, when Mary’s sudden appearance averts Toller’s suicide. The pastor then embraces Mary and kisses her desperately while the camera envelops them in a circular tracking shot (fig. 6). *MASTER GARDENER* takes a similar approach: the main character in this film bursts into the last scene and heads towards the porch of his cabin to engage in a loving dance with Maya, while the camera slowly moves back and observes them from a distance (fig. 7).

With the exception of *FIRST REFORMED*, Schrader has not created here the extremely cold and distant worlds more typical of the transcendental style. But the outcomes of the three films each provide a “miraculous event”: the miracle lies in the romantic expression of men who seem to have no feelings. The audience is confronted by an act with spiritual overtones: the characters have accepted grace through love, which leads them to redemption.

32 Schrader 1969, 35.

33 Balsom 2023.



Fig. 2: Toller and Mary soaring over a dreamlike landscape. Film still, *FIRST REFORMED* (Paul Schrader, US 2017), 01:23:24.



Fig. 3: Tell and La Linda take a walk, enveloped in lights, in a decisive moment. Film still, *THE CARD COUNTER* (Paul Schrader, US 2021), 01:15:22.

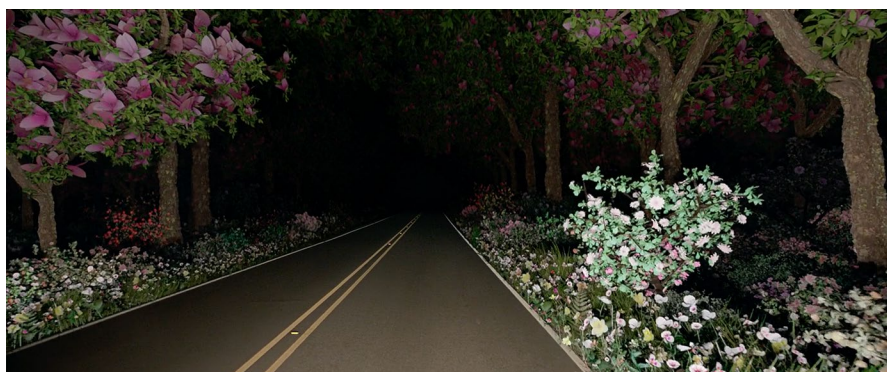


Fig. 4: A road surrounded by flowers is the scene of Narvel's decisive moment. Film still, *MASTER GARDENER* (Paul Schrader, US 2022), 01:28:08.

Fig. 5: Tell and La Linda's prison encounter is reminiscent of Bresson's decisive actions. Film still, *THE CARD COUNTER* (Paul Schrader, US 2021), 01:47:08.



Fig. 6: Toller accepts Mary's love in a decisive action. Film still, *FIRST REFORMED* (Paul Schrader, US 2017), 01:48:30.



Fig. 7: Narvel and Maya are engaged in a loving dance in the last scene. Film still, *MASTER GARDENER* (Paul Schrader, US 2022), 01:45:30.



Stasis as an Expression of the Transcendent

Stasis is the culmination of the viewer's journey, who according to the transcendental style must move from empathy to understanding. *FIRST REFORMED* interrupts the long embrace of Toller and Mary, the circular tracking shot, and the background music with a song, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*, which is being played inside the church, and then suddenly cuts to black. An emptiness with neither visual aspects nor sound takes over the screen for a considerable number of seconds; only then do the credits start to scroll. Here, then, is unmistakably the stasis of the film.³⁴ Schrader's gesture encourages the viewer to move from feeling emotion to contemplating the profound meaning of the film, whose ending offers the possibility of the coexistence of the physical and spiritual worlds.

The filmmaker uses similar resources with the same intention in the final scenes of the other two films of the trilogy. The last scene of *THE CARD COUNTER*, which has fingers reaching for contact with the glass (see fig. 5), remains motionless for a full minute before the credits start to roll. It continues in the same way for another three minutes, right up to the final chords of *Mercy of Man*, the title song with its theme of redemption, performed by Robert Levon Been.

The solemnity of stasis as a way of allowing the transcendent to arise is repeated at the end of *MASTER GARDENER*, which nearly leaves the two protagonists suspended in time and space, as they dance at the entrance to the cabin for a considerable period of time before the film fades to black. Mereba's *Space and Time* was chosen with good reason as the title song, and in observing the lovers from afar, the audience is invited to reflect on the shot's extended duration and, by extension, on temporality and space.

Conclusion

More than half a century after he coined the term "transcendental style", Paul Schrader is evidently still fervent about the concept. His interest is not purely theoretical, for this fascination has influenced his most personal films: the *Man in a Room* Trilogy, shares aspects with the most emblematic films of this director-screenwriter. Examples such as *TAXI DRIVER*, *AMERICAN*

34 Verstraten 2021, 79.

GIGOLO, and LIGHT SLEEPER share this style with works such as JOURNAL D'UN CURÉ DE CAMPAGNE and PICKPOCKET, directed by Robert Bresson, the exemplary practitioner of the transcendental style.

Over his long career, Schrader has adapted to the changing times and taken advantage of digital technology, primarily to gain a certain degree of independence.³⁵ In terms of the deeper intentions of his works, however, he has continued to explore the inner conflicts of middle-aged men who carry a strong sense of guilt and in the end fully accept the grace through romantic love, as is seen in particular in recent final shots that explicitly reference his most personal films of earlier decades.

Nevertheless, there is an evolution in the trilogy: redemption is the consequence of accepting the unexpected appearance of two women, one in FIRST REFORMED and another in THE CARD COUNTER, while in MASTER GARDENER the woman's arrival is a result of actions taken by the main character. We have good reason to assume that here lies the reason the filmmaker has gradually expanded the format in his films, starting from square and moving to more panoramic, a symbol of the liberating evolution of three distinct characters who appear to be the same type of person.

We must also note, however, that the trilogy is characterised only by the qualities of the transcendental style. Yes, we see a focus on the importance of everyday life as displayed through rather inexpressive performances, interior narration, and ritualised gestures that emanate from the "occupational metaphor". And decisive moments and decisive actions are significant to the structure of the stories, while the solemn endings, in accordance with the guidelines of stasis, force the viewer to move from emotional empathy to an understanding of the profound meaning generated by this type of film with spiritual overtones. But additionally, Schrader's well-known talent for reaching a mass audience, together with his respect, although nuanced, for the limitations inherent in the commercial nature of the US film industry have led him to use some of the filters from commercial cinema, especially in THE CARD COUNTER and MASTER GARDENER. Such techniques include camera movements, extradiegetic sound, rhetorical and emotional editing, and stylised lighting, with the aim of adding certain aesthetic features rather than eliminating them altogether as is characteristic of Bresson's films.

Unlike Bresson, the Calvinist director does not shun the social and political circumstances of his time. Although the ecological crisis in FIRST

35 Hammond 2023.

REFORMED could possibly be read as a MacGuffin,³⁶ the narrative places emphasis on the scientific data that obsesses first Michael and later Toller, highlighting its significance in the dramatic construction.³⁷ A similar argument can be made for THE CARD COUNTER and MASTER GARDENER, as the traumas experienced by the protagonists, whether caused by the Iraq War or by involvement in a white supremacist organisation, are not merely a backdrop to their stories – the frequent flashbacks explicitly reveal the impact of past experiences on the characters' present lives.

In short, Schrader continues to display an eclectic flexibility that has helped him survive in a pragmatic and highly demanding industry. While keeping in mind the reality of the current situation, he is also able to attend to the spiritual dimension that underlies the transcendental style. And a final thought: by having fully developed some of his most characteristic traits, Schrader has remained an atypical director who continues to pursue a cinematic style that pays heed to the transcendent.

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36 Tupitsyn 2023.

37 Houser 2020, 2–5.

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Media Reviews

Film Review

THE ZONE OF INTEREST

(Jonathan Glazer, US/UK/PL 2023)

Auschwitz, like perhaps no other place, exists in Western collective memory as the ultimate evil. This assessment is justified by the testimonies of inmates of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau who survived that hell. But is it possible to represent this historical place through cultural artefacts, and if so, how? Survivors and academics have considered the ethics and limits of Holocaust representation for as long as such cultural representations have existed. Who should be represented: victims, perpetrators, those somewhere in between? Holocaust “classics” such as Steven Spielberg’s *SCHINDLER’S LIST* (US 1993) rely on clear-cut characterizations of victims, evil perpetrators, and heroes. With *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* (US/UK/PL 2023), Jonathan Glazer took up a much harder challenge. His film, which is loosely based on Martin Amis’s novel of the same name, centres its narrative on the daily life of camp commander Rudolf Höss and his family. It is certainly legitimate to question the purpose of this perpetrator representation and to consider whether it has a higher moral goal that transcends any voyeuristic pleasure a viewer might gain. We can usefully explore these questions in light of religious undercurrents within the film’s aesthetic and narrative choices.

THE ZONE OF INTEREST evokes Christian motifs alongside the image of Auschwitz as hell on earth, but it uses those themes for a subversive purpose. Consciously utilizing the unique possibilities of the medium of film, it contains two clearly demarcated planes for two separate realities: David Fear comments, “There is the movie you see here – and there is the movie you *hear*.¹” We see innocent people playing in the garden of Eden, but we hear the agony of

1 Fear 2024.

the deepest circle of hell. While this contrasting duality is readily noted by the viewer, some contextual knowledge may be required to understand that the soundscape depicts the (historically accurate) auralty of Auschwitz, with industrial grinding, bellowed incomprehensible orders, shooting and screaming. Opting for a purely sonic representation of the camp atrocities was Glazer's response to the issue of ethical representation: "I don't think [the atrocities] should be represented... I don't think they can be represented", he has stated.²

Supposed innocence, by contrast, is rendered ad absurdum: the purity of Höss's white suit stands in contrast to his affectless bureaucratic planning of the most efficient way to commit genocide; the inherent purity of his children is tainted when their father realizes that human ashes, the product of his murderous activity, are floating in the river Sola and abruptly orders them out of the water.

In the context of the Auschwitz world, purity takes on another sinister meaning: "The paradise she [Höss's wife] is building stakes a claim on the land that will soon be 'purified', a shining model of Nazi futurity", notes Amy Herzog.³ The gendered dimension of this "racially pure" National Socialist utopia is apparent: it is, after all, the commander's wife, Hedwig Höss, whose task it is to create a paradise on earth for the family. The actual work within the domestic sphere is done by female forced labourers, whom Hedwig Höss controls in a manner that parallels her husband's treatment of his underlings. The self-proclaimed "Queen of Auschwitz", who under no circumstances wants to abandon her home, figuratively takes on the role of the temptress Eve: in this case, the apple of sin is her inciting her husband to procure the belongings of the murdered. This practice was forbidden by National Socialist and SS legislation, leading to a grotesque contradiction: while genocide as organized by Höss was bureaucratically normalized, the "sin" of petty theft committed by Hedwig Höss was criminalized. Sandra Hüller's portrayal of Hedwig Höss, self-absorbed and blindly content, radiates the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt identified.⁴ After the war, the general public tended to be fascinated with female National Socialist perpetrators, judging them more harshly than men, as in the example of Ilse Koch, termed the "Bitch of Buchenwald" in media discourse.⁵ The film steers

2 Harvey 2023.

3 Herzog 2024, 15.

4 Arendt 1963.

5 Przyrembel 2023; Jardim 2023.

clear of gendered judgement by focussing in the second half on Rudolf Höss, who figuratively descends to hell as he makes his way down an endless staircase in the final scene.

Other female characters are depicted more favourably. Hedwig's mother's visit to the family home in Auschwitz veers from pride and happiness about her daughter's new bourgeois lifestyle to sincere horror when she realizes the origins of the flames illuminating the night sky and the putrid smell. She chooses to leave, aware that the paradisiac surface of the idyllic home only thinly veils the depths of hell being experienced by others. Most of the forced domestic labourers are women: Herzog has noted that "one of the most significant contributions of *THE ZONE OF INTEREST* is its high-lighting of the gendered labor of the fascist regime".⁶ Within this gendered dimension,⁷ both female perpetrators and female victims are depicted from a detached, "big-brother" camera angle that thwarts the viewer's easy identification with the characters on-screen. The representation of a female resistance figure stands out, however, in both cinematic and narrative terms: the scenes with the righteous Polish girl who risks everything by breaking into the camp at night and leaving food for the prisoners are jarringly interspersed throughout the main narrative and shot in night vision, evoking a surreal parallel world in a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Such selfless actions are an anomaly in the world depicted in this film. Glazer subverts Nazi moral codes: acts of compassion occur under cover of darkness, while atrocities unfold in broad daylight, reflecting an inversion of normative associations of light with good and darkness with evil.

The final minutes interrogate normality again, cutting between the contemporary Auschwitz museum and Höss's descent down the staircase. The cleaners polishing the cases containing the infamous mountains of shoes, hair, and suitcases are all female. The daily grind of their job is concerned with the products of evil, as was the case for the men under Höss who wielded god-like power over life and death while overwhelmed, thoroughly banal bureaucrats. This juxtaposition does not equate the two activities, but rather underscores the banality of routine: both involve repetitive tasks tied to the material remnants of atrocities, albeit in radically different ethical contexts. This scene closes the historical arc of gendered labor under the Nazi regime, contrasting it with today's preservation of memory, rather

6 Herzog 2024, 17.

7 Lewis 2017.

than implying direct continuity. At the same time this contemporary depiction somewhat de-sacralises the symbolically charged and over-represented space of Auschwitz within the collective imaginary.

Glazer summed up his intention with this movie thus: “I think that if we keep thinking of us as victims, and we look at the others as perpetrators, that is going to get us nowhere.”⁸ If films like *SCHINDLER’S LIST* are a product of what philosopher Gillian Rose termed “Holocaust piety”, serving as a bulwark against exploring “what we are – human, all too human”,⁹ then *ZONE OF INTEREST* is an impressive feat of “Holocaust impiety”. Matthew Boswell defined this concept as utilizing “aesthetic shock as a formal mechanism to induce a deeper ethical engagement with [the] subject matter”.¹⁰ The ultimate goal of such a representation is to bring viewers to ask themselves, “What would I have done?”¹¹ This film draws attention to the gender dimension, showing how one woman’s paradise can be another woman’s hell. Informed by Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil, it explores the coexistence of ordinariness and evil, not least by inverting the traditional Western association of moral goodness and beauty.

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8 Ercolani 2024.

9 Rose 1996, 43.

10 Boswell 2012, 6.

11 Boswell 2012, 10–15.

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Song Review

Lady Gaga, “Abracadabra”

Interscope Records, US 2025

On 3 February 2025, the American singer-songwriter Lady Gaga released her single “Abracadabra”, which is part of the album *Mayhem* (Interscope, release 7 March 2025).¹ It had premiered one day earlier during the 67th Annual Grammy Awards, accompanied by a music video. Lady Gaga has stated that the song and the music video are about facing your inner critic and self-doubts and persevering – or, “finding the magic in it all”.² And indeed, the song itself, with its references to magic and spell-like qualities, takes after magical incantations.

Incantations are defined as illocutionary and perlocutionary acts intended to change the current situation.³ Their use can be traced back to antiquity, and they have long been a subject of philological analysis.

The song “Abracadabra” and its accompanying music video reference both Christian and occult symbols and practices. I use the term “occult” here to describe a religious-historical phenomenon that allots people a power of their own in relation to transcendence, for example in magic or oracles. Occult practices are interwoven with various religious traditions, including Christian ones. The references to Christian and occult symbols in “Abracadabra” are strongly reminiscent of Old High German incantations and blessings dating from the Early Middle Ages. In these texts, magic is effected by invoking Christian and other powers. Lady Gaga’s song, while it is far removed from Old High German incantations, seems to build a similar relation between Christian and occult symbols.

1 ABRACADABRA (Lady Gaga, Parris Goebel, Bethany Vargas, US 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBynw9Isr28> [accessed 16 April 2025].

2 Jeffs 2025.

3 Beck 2009, 1483.

It is therefore an unconventional but nevertheless fruitful thought experiment to look at Lady Gaga's song "Abracadabra" through the lens of Old High German incantations. The goal is to highlight the song's structure, the stylistic devices used, and, not least of all, the Christian and occult references in the lyrics and music video. Viewing the song from this perspective should be understood as an attempt to find the magic in it all.

Old High German incantations generally consist of two parts: the *historiola*, a short narrative detailing the effect of the incantation, followed by the *incantatio*, the spell proper.⁴ The latter often has a metrical form, indicating that it may have been sung or chanted.⁵ It can be argued that "Abracadabra" follows the same structure. The song has two verses, each of which is followed by the same eight lines (the pre-chorus).⁶ The verses have a more narrative quality and therefore resemble a *historiola*, even more so in contrast to the chorus (and post-chorus).⁷ The choruses can be regarded as an *incantatio*, a magical formula, because they each contain six iterations of the magically connotated word *abracadabra* and because they are performed rather like a chant and with a distinct rhythm that stands out from the rest of the song.

The chorus and post-chorus of "Abracadabra" exhibit two more characteristics of an *incantatio*. First, they repeat a magical word, *abracadabra*, a stylistic device intended to strengthen the effect of the *incantatio*. Secondly, the word is varied in the chorus:

Abracadabra, amor-oo-na-na
Abracadabra, morta-oo-h-ga-ga
Abracadabra, abra-oo-na-na
In her tongue she said, "Death or love tonight"

An *incantatio* is often formulated not with everyday language but with words that are incomprehensible and possibly magical. An example containing such vocabulary is the "Züricher Hausbesegnung", a blessing that ends with the untranslatable word "chnospinci",⁸ whose apotropaic effect is in-

4 Beck 2009, 1483–1484.

5 Beck 2009, 1483.

6 The lyrics are quoted from Genius Lyrics 2025. This website formats the pre-chorus as two parts (refrain and pre-chorus). For better understanding, I will use the term "pre-chorus" for both parts.

7 Following the structure given by Genius Lyrics 2025.

8 Müller 2007, 282–283.

tended to ward off the devil. Likewise, the variations of *abracadabra* in the chorus of Lady Gaga's song seem nonsensical and possibly magical words.

Besides being structurally significant, the chorus, especially the juxtaposition of death and love at its end, highlights one of the central themes of "Abracadabra": the coming together of Christian and occult symbols and practices. As stated in the introduction, "Abracadabra" is reminiscent of early medieval incantations in that both Christian and occult symbols can be found and appear to be a necessary component of the effect, be it magical or otherwise. This is most visible in regard to the figures appearing in the song and in the early medieval incantations. Thus, the differing ways Lady Gaga appears in the video are closely connected to the lyrics and literally visualise the figures mentioned.⁹

Lady Gaga plays two characters in the video, distinguished from each other by the colour of their costumes: red and white. Only the former character is mentioned in the lyrics, in the pre-chorus – "Like a poem said by a lady in red / You hear the last few words of your life" – which establishes her as a sort of counterpart to the listener. As the "lady in red" she wears two costumes in the "Abracadabra" music video: first, a red latex cloak with slits on the front in the shape of a cross and nails through the fabric, paired with a very broad red hat with thorn-like protrusions on the top and black latex gloves; and second, a short red dress that is deliberately torn.¹⁰ The white-dressed character also wears two different costumes: first, a white lace coat with a large train over a white catsuit, with lace panels and hook-and-eye embellishments in the front that are arranged in the shape of a cross; and second, a corset dress with a long ribbon skirt.

Their costumes, which mirror each other in their general shape and design, as well as their alternating appearances in the music video suggest that the two characters Lady Gaga plays are opponents. A similar constellation can be found in the "Trierer Teufelsspruch", which invokes Christ as adversary of the devil in order to banish him: "Nu vuillih bidan den rihchan Crist, the mannelihches chenist ist / ther den divvel gibant".¹¹ Whether Lady

9 Several statements by Lady Gaga make connections between the lyrics and the music video; see Jeffs 2025.

10 See also Darius 2025.

11 Müller 2007, 282–283. "Now I pray to the magnificent Christ, who is the salvation of mankind, who constrained the devil." (Paraphrased according to the translation by Müller.)

Gaga's red and white characters can be aligned with the devil and Christ, however, would have to be the subject of further analysis.

More importantly, there is another aspect of the costumes akin to a principle followed by another Old High German incantation: Incorporating Christian symbols or prayers but modifying them for magical purposes. An incantation known under the *incipit* "Contra caducum morbum" (literally: against the falling sickness, meaning against epilepsy) requires the utterance of untranslatable and possibly magical words – "Donerdiutiger. dietewigo."¹² – as well as the Lord's Prayer – "et dic pater noster".¹³ In the music video of "Abracadabra", this relation to Christian symbols is on a visual level. The costumes, for example, feature different crosses. These Christian references are closely incorporated into a visual performance that could be understood as a magic ritual.

In summary, viewing Lady Gaga's song as an incantation accentuates three aspects. First, on a structural level, the more narrative parts of "Abracadabra" can be contrasted with the chorus and post-chorus, which are repetitive and sometimes chanted and therefore emulate an *incantatio*. Secondly, "Abracadabra" contains invented language; the *incantatio* contains magically connotated words that are not part of the everyday language. Thirdly, "Abracadabra" visualises references to transcendence: although the two characters in red and white costumes appear in opposition to each other, they are both portrayed by Lady Gaga, giving the impression that they are her alter-egos, and their costume design is influenced by Christian and occult symbols.

Whether "Abracadabra" is indeed an incantation or not, Lady Gaga is at its centre. The song and music video, she has said herself, represent her inner conflict, the struggle between her more negative side and her more positive side.¹⁴ In light of the incantation-like qualities of the lyrics and the visual references to Christian symbols as well as occult or magical ones, one might say that perhaps she has crafted a new spell.

12 Müller 2007, 276–277.

13 Müller 2007, 278–279. This incantation requires certain movements, or choreography, for it to take effect. The person who recites the incantation and prayer is to stand in a certain way while speaking, touch the earth, and, finally, jump over the patient.

14 Jeffs 2025; Lady Gaga: Inside "Abracadabra" Presented by Mastercard! (Exclusive), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEo4QTjn-N8>, 00:00:45–00:00:53.

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Film Review

MOANA 2

(David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024)

MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024) is the sequel to the highly successful Disney Animation Studio film MOANA (Ron Clements / Jon Musker, US 2016). In the original film, Moana, the young daughter of a chief of a coastal village in ancient Polynesia, attempts to save her home island of Motonui with the help of the demigod Maui. During the adventure the protagonist steps into her own role as a tribal chief whilst following new and dangerous paths beyond her home island and its familiar surroundings. The mission succeeds, and she is given the title “Wayfinder”. Her new task is not only to take care of her island but also to find further civilization, for only then will the population be able to survive in the long term.

This is where the sequel comes in. Moana has been searching for other inhabited islands in the ocean for three years. She has not found any people, but she did come across a shard of clay engraved with a constellation of stars and an island called Motofitu. Together with her crew of three and Maui, she sails to the area where Motofitu is located. They manage to find a way to the sunken island, which is guarded by sea monsters and a huge storm, but Maui loses his powers, and Moana dies in the attempt to break the curse of Motofitu. With a mourning song Maui summons Moana’s ancestors, who breathe new life into her and restore Maui’s powers so that he can raise the island. People from other islands immediately come to Motofitu and a new era is ushered in.

The commercial success of the sequel has been close to that of the original movie, which is not a given for Disney sequels. Both movies place great emphasis on Polynesian culture, with that research then supplemented by

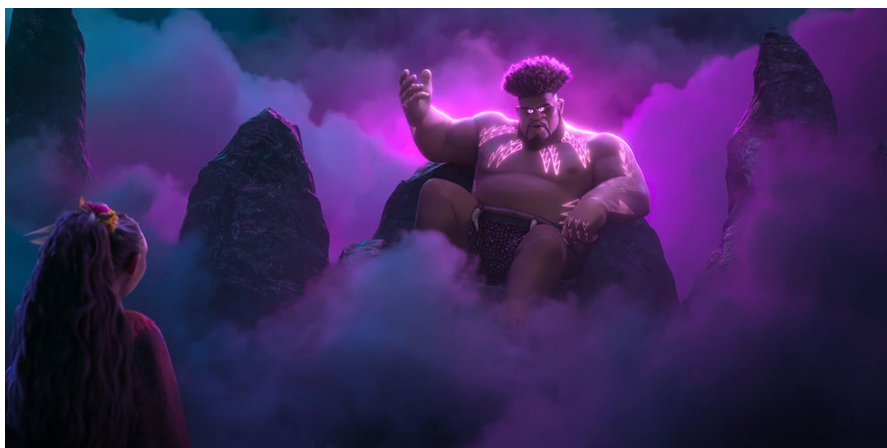


Fig. 1: Nalo confronts Matangi. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 01:28:12.

new ideas. In this review, I focus on two aspects: the fictional world of gods and demigods, and the connection to the ancestors.

As the viewer will likely already know from MOANA, the fictional world is governed by deities connected to nature. In the first movie the goddess Te Fiti is depicted as a life-giving island whose heart was stolen by the demigod Maui. As a result, she becomes a destructive fury, which causes the crops on the islands to die. Moana turns for help to Maui, who has superhuman powers like shapeshifting and pulling islands out of the sea with his hook. He also introduces Moana to a space beyond the known world where strange creatures are located, which can be accessed via portals, like the Realm of Monsters.

MOANA 2 introduces the god Nalo. Nalo controls the weather – he is based on the Polynesian weather god Tawhirimatea¹ – and hates humanity, which is why he cursed Motofitu and wants to end humanity. In a demonstration of his power, Nalo sends monsters and creates a huge thunderstorm to protect Motofitu. He also manages to deprive Maui of his powers by hitting him with a bolt of lightning. Not until the end, in a mid-credit scene, is Nalo shown for the first time, depicted on a stone throne in purple clouds (fig. 1). The rage of the god evidently continues, a hint that there may be a third movie about Moana.

1 Keane 2022.



Fig. 2: The giant clam that leads to the portal of the gods. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 00:35:12.



Fig. 3: The portal of the gods. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 00:51:11.

Another supernatural figure introduced in the sequel is Matangi. She defends the portal to Motofitu, which is located in a giant clam (fig. 2) populated with monsters, bat-like creatures, and mudskippers. Shattered ships and bones cover the ground, evidence that many people before Moana have failed in their attempt to gain access to the portal. Matangi helps Moana and leads her to the portal of the gods, made of engraved stones that depict the god Nalo and his powers (fig. 3). The portal resembles a huge mouth covered in purple dust and can only be opened with a spell. It is distinct

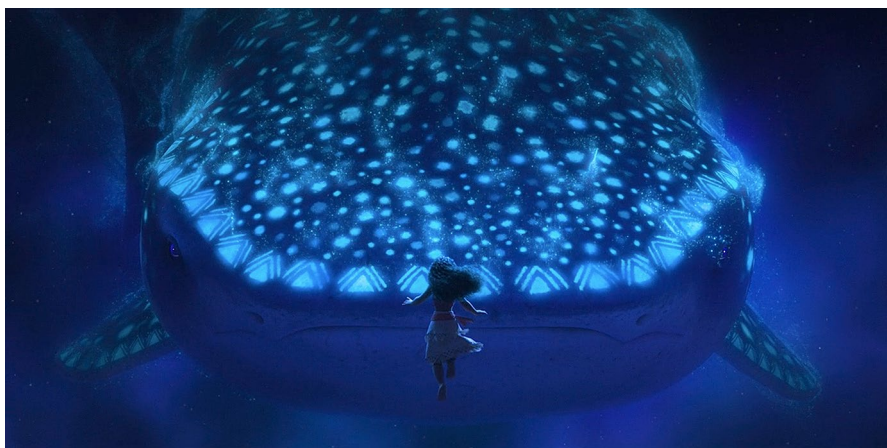


Fig. 4: The depiction of the tribe's last Wayfinder as a giant whale shark. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 00:14:25.

from the human world not only on account of its location but also because of its material and color: stone is not common for buildings in Moana's village, and the color purple is not found on her island. These differences underline the spatial separation of the human and divine worlds.

To Maui's surprise, Moana is able to open the portal, which immediately absorbs the whole crew and carries them through a purple and glittering stream. When they return to the surface they are facing Motufitu and the dangers that lurk in the waters around it. As the use of the color purple makes evident, this area is ruled by Nalo, so it is even more astonishing that a human can break the curse by touching the island. Even though there is a loophole in Nalo's curse, Moana falls victim to his anger and dies. Only the connection to her ancestors can save her.

The importance of ties to ancestors is indicated in the first movie and expanded upon in the sequel. Moana's deceased grandmother played a significant role in Moana's finding her true self and in her decision to find Maui, and now, in the sequel, she continues to guide her granddaughter and help her with difficult decisions. In both movies recurring visions of the last known Wayfinder emphasize Moana's extraordinary connection to the ancestors. During a ritual in front of the assembled island community, Moana and her father drink from the bowl of the ancestors with immediate result: the last known Wayfinder appears and tells her where she should sail to.



Fig. 5: The ancestors bring Moana back to life. Film still, MOANA 2 (David G. Derrick Jr. / Jason Hand / Dana Ledoux Miller, US 2024), 01:17:00.

The last-known Wayfinder is portrayed as a glowing whale shark (fig. 4) that transforms into the Wayfinder. The depiction of ancestors as sea creatures was introduced in the first movie, when Moana's grandmother appeared to her as a manta ray. Her appearance seems to corroborate the bonding power of water, which can connect not only islands and people but also the living and the dead. This connection has immense consequences for Moana when she is struck by Nalo's lightning and lies lifeless on the seabed. The demigod Maui, now without powers, mourns her at the bottom of the sea and sings a song that causes the ancestors to appear gradually, led by her grandmother. They turn from water creatures to semi-transparent and luminous humans. Together, arranged in a spiral, they bring her back to life (fig. 5). And she is given new attributes: a tattoo and a paddle with inscriptions. Precisely how her rebirth has changed her is not clearly stated, but only implied by her grandmother and Maui. A director's interview has confirmed, however, that Moana is now a demigoddess.²

MOANA 2 thus creates a dual idea of religion. The film suggests that nature is ruled by deities who possess various powers and to whose will humans are subject. This stands alongside the experience of humans, for whom the afterlife and this world are not strictly separated. The living can contact the deceased, who can in turn aid the living; this interaction is so

² Gomez 2024.

powerful it can break divine conditions. The connecting element is water, which makes transcendent encounters possible, as is evident from the ritual undertaken by the community leaders and the depiction of the deceased as water beings – to emphasize the transcendental character cinematically, these figures are transparent and luminous and are able to transform back into their human form.

To depict religion, the filmmakers of *MOANA 2* draw on Polynesian mythology and well-known religious narratives. Echoes of the American Dream are also present here, for Moana, who has been chosen, must work hard to bring about change for the better. The film suggests that religion dictates certain situations, but humans can change these circumstances. Humans can become divine in acting according to values and norms that strive for the greater good.

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Book Review

Christina Behler, Religion in der digitalen Gesellschaft

Wenn der Papst twittert ...

**Bielefeld: transcript 2024, 354 pages,
ISBN: 978-3-8376-7413-2 (Print), 978-3-8394-7413-6
(e-book)**

One of the most abiding images of Pope Francis is likely to be of the pope wearing a bold white puffer coat. When the unusual but puzzlingly real picture proved to have been artificially generated, this launched a discussion about the rapid growth of AI and its potential for manipulation and fraud. It also caused disappointment among those fascinated by the pope's unusual fashion sense. "The Pope Francis Puffer Photo Was Real in Our Hearts", read a heading in the men's fashion magazine GQ.¹ Some people evidently wanted the pope to have "drip", as the creator of the AI image had put it.² Other deepfake images appeared, of Pope Francis kissing the pop singer Madonna, for example, or wrapped in a pride flag.³ Francis had become, in Christina Behler's words, a viral "pop(e) icon"⁴ (p. 20).

Pope Francis became an involuntary meme, but he was also an active religious influencer. On the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, the account @Pontifex shared statements by Francis with millions of followers in various languages. Sociologist and Catholic theologian Christina Behler

1 Cartter 2023.

2 Xavier 2023.

3 Milmo 2024.

4 "Pop(e)-Ikone". All translations of text from Behler's book are my own.

made this account the focus of her dissertation, which was published in German with Transcript in 2024. The book, titled *Religion in der digitalen Gesellschaft. Wenn der Papst twittert ...*, is a case study of what happens when a traditional authority figure becomes a social media influencer. Behler shows how the Catholic Church, or, more precisely, the Holy See, seeks to translate traditional authority into the digital sphere and how social media users interact with the papal online persona.

While the majority of works on digital religion focus on the characteristics of digital religious communication, Behler's research, which is rooted in Luhmannian systems theory and uses "functional analysis", is interested in digital religion's societal function. Her research question reads, "What problem does digital religious communication solve?" (p. 26).⁵ In chapters two and three, Behler explores how systems theorists have explained the societal function of communication and religion, respectively. Following Luhmann, she sees communication, given its high contingency, as improbable (p. 31), but social media, such as Twitter, increase the chance of successful communication, as they transcend spatial and temporal distance (p. 86). In systems theory, religion is one of many societal systems and follows the defining binary code of transcendence and immanence (pp. 93–94). For Behler's functional analysis of @Pontifex's activities, two aspects of this systems-theoretical understanding of religion are particularly important. First, religion, according to Luhmann, works to "double reality" (p. 95). Anything that can be grasped as communication in the societal system of religion happens immanently, and the religious system then takes these immanent communications and gives them transcendental meaning. Second, in order for religious communication to be successful, it needs only to trigger some kind of reaction; it does not have to be believed (p. 113). From a systems theory perspective, religious communication is successful if it leads to more communication. For the Catholic Church, success depends on its ability to attract attention and reach an audience.

Behler conducted a qualitative content analysis of more than 2,000 @Pontifex tweets published over a four-year period and a sample of comments on the German-language account @Pontifex_de. The pope's online persona inhabits several accounts, each in a different language but all posting the same text at the same time. The tweets themselves are therefore identical across all accounts, but the comments are divided by account, and, as

5 "Für welches Problem ist digitale religiöse Kommunikation die Lösung?"

Behler shows, are regionally specific. Behler has sorted the tweets into five main categories: “spirituality”, “ethical communication”, “sympathy/expression of solidarity”, “personal concern”, and “(spiritual) aphorism” (p. 158).⁶ She uses these categories for both qualitative and frequency analysis.

Behler’s first observation is that the tweets often spiritually frame statements that could be interpreted as ethical or political. For example, when tweeting about the consequences of wars, forced migration, or the climate crisis, the @Pontifex account often adds the hashtag #praytogether, thus placing the response within a transcendental realm. In Behler’s words, the tweets “verify, so to speak, expressions on things that are actually non-religious through their own, religious means”⁷ (p. 251). @Pontifex’s tweets are thus an example of reproduction by the system of religion, which takes non-religious content and integrates it into a religious framework. In framing global crises and current topics religiously, the pope’s Twitter persona can bring religious meaning to these subjects, thereby securing the continued relevance of the Catholic Church (pp. 251–252, 262).

Behler finds that almost none of the tweets she analyzed were created solely for social media. Instead, @Pontifex tweeted excerpts of speeches, sermons, or prayers by Pope Francis (p. 224), creating a “digital duplication”⁸ of his communication (p. 230). Behler finds here a strategy for gaining recognition in the digital sphere (p. 235) and argues that the Holy See’s tweets vary little from traditional forms of communication (p. 232). While Behler recognizes that the excerpting of Pope Francis’s speeches or prayers removes them from their original context, she fails to acknowledge that having to choose a suitable excerpt (short enough to fit Twitter’s character limit, comprehensible when out of context, and relevant) is in and of itself profoundly different from traditional forms of communication. The nature of the platform ensures that the tweets cannot be merely a “duplication” of what Pope Francis has said elsewhere.

The most interesting part of *Religion in der digitalen Gesellschaft* is Behler’s exploration of the comment section. Using a Twitter account means exposing oneself to a critical public, and Twitter users are indeed critical of the pope and what he stands for. Commenters thematize child abuse in

6 “Spiritualität”, “ethische Kommunikation”, “persönliche Anteilnahme / Solidaritätsbekundung”, “persönliches Anliegen”, “(spiritueller) Aphorismus”.

7 „Die Tweets des Papstes verifizieren sozusagen Aussagen über eigentlich nicht-religiöse Dinge mit Hilfe eigener, religiöser Mittel.“

8 “digitale Verdopplung”.

Catholic churches, gender and diversity issues, and the finances of the Holy See, among other “trigger topics” (p. 288).⁹ On Twitter, Behler observes, “not only does the pope turn his moralizing gaze on the world, but society also morally judges the pope” (p. 287).¹⁰ @Pontifex thus indirectly tackles the problem of papal accessibility. Everyone with a Twitter account can praise, criticize, or share their thoughts with the pope. They will, however, not receive a reply. The papal Twitter persona does not react at all, leaving rude and insulting comments undeleted. This non-response is, according to Behler, a “familiar and long-rehearsed pattern of communication”, as a “pluralism of interpretations is generally not intended” by the Holy See (p. 243).¹¹ Behler argues that the lack of any consequences for critical or even offensive responses incentivizes users to comment. @Pontifex’s unresponsiveness leads to even more interaction, as users respond to other users’ questions or speculations, turning the comment section into a discussion space (p. 281). As in systems theory, successful communication is defined by the elicitation of more communication, the Twitter account can be judged successful. By exposing the pope to criticism, it gains visibility and makes the Catholic Church relevant (p. 300).

Behler’s book is interesting as a thorough case study of the @Pontifex account and as an exploration of Catholic media practices. She expands in depth on the history and specifics of media use by Catholic authorities and shows that while the papal Twitter communication can be seen as continuing traditional forms of communication, it also departs from them in telling ways. Scholars of religion or media who are unfamiliar with systems theory might, however, struggle with Behler’s approach and desire a more critical examination of existing concepts. For example, following systems theory’s binary codes, Behler differentiates between religious issues, on the one hand, and political or societal issues, on the other, without allowing for overlap (p. 252). For scholars whose approach to the “religious” or “political” is more nuanced, this absolute distinction might be unsatisfactory. Similarly, Behler sorts commenters into “religious and non-religious people” (p. 278)¹² rather than taking account of the diverse ways in which people

9 “Reizthemen”.

10 “[...] dass nicht nur der Papst mit einem moralisierenden Blick die Welt beobachtet, sondern dass auch die Gesellschaft den Papst moralisch bewertet.”

11 “ein gewohntes und lange eingeübtes Kommunikationsmuster”, “Ein Pluralismus von Lesarten ist in der katholischen Tradition grundsätzlich nicht vorgesehen.”

12 “religiöse und nicht religiöse Personen”.

relate to and engage with the pope. Bar those hesitations, Behler's unusual theoretical approach to digital religion provides a new perspective within digital religion research and builds an innovative bridge between sociology and theology.

One further concern, though: Behler hardly engages with the vast body of literature on religious authority in the digital realm and misses opportunities for further examination of the topic of authority. The subtitle of the book, *When the Pope Tweets ...*, suggests that it was Pope Francis himself who drafted the @Pontifex tweets. Throughout the book, Behler repeats this personification and often writes that "the pope" posted a particular tweet. The "tweeting pope" (p. 26), however, did not actually tweet. Indeed, he stated that he was not only unfamiliar with but critical of social media (p. 218). Behler notes that commenters ascribe the tweets to Pope Francis and hold him responsible for anything that happens on the account, including an accidental "like" given to a bikini model in 2020 (p. 219). Yet Behler herself seems to have fallen into the same trap. Even though her research is focused on the societal consequences of the @Pontifex account, not the inner workings of how tweets are generated, her analysis would have benefited from grasping @Pontifex as an artificial persona and exploring how this digital personification relates to the Catholic Church's communication strategy.

At the time of writing this review, shortly after the death of Pope Francis, his name and photos had already been removed from the @Pontifex account. The Holy See will likely soon delete all tweets to make space for a new pope, as it did in 2013 after Benedict XVI's resignation. Behler's book is therefore not only a timely case study and an innovative theoretical take on digital religious communication, but it will also serve as a valuable archive of tweets during the pontificate of Pope Francis that can be compared with the digital communication of his successors.

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Game Review

A Bohemian Rhapsody in Red – KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II

Warhorse Studios, 2025

After years of meticulous work, Warhorse Studios has returned with KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II (henceforth: KCD II), a faithful and vivid portrayal of 15th-century Bohemia, released in spring 2025. Known already for their commitment to historical authenticity, Warhorse now offers a sequel to KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE (2018, henceforth: KCD 2018) that deepens the religious, theological, and liturgical textures of the world it created.

As the descendant of Bohemians, a researcher of games since 1995, and a theologian by profession, I saw playing this game as not merely recommended but a scholarly and personal imperative. Yet, is it really a game? Is it perhaps more of an interactive movie? The distinction is hard to make here, because the embedded film sequences are voluminous and mostly of impressive quality.

From the outset, I was struck by how “real” religion feels in KCD II, serving not simply as ornamentation but as an ever-present fabric of life. The game immerses players in the brutal realities of medieval politics and warfare but also in a world shaped by faith, through the presence of prayers, blessings, devotions, a pervasive moral framework rooted in Christianity, and, most obviously perhaps, architecture (fig. 1).¹

The very title “Kingdome Come – Deliverance” will immediately ring a bell for the religiously literate. In the Lord’s Prayer, which is central to Christian-

1 The following text is influenced by my decision to pursue the path of the warrior, with a particular emphasis on diplomacy and alchemy. Furthermore, my individual ethical preferences had a significant impact on the course of the game.



Fig. 1: The Church dominates Kutenberg (Screenshot from the walkthrough by theRadBrad@ Youtube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0cbQdrxIXk).



Fig. 2: As he dies, Markvard von Aulitz recites lines from the Lord's Prayer (in-game screenshot: Wessely).

ity, two of the eight petitions are "Thy kingdom come" (fig. 2) and "Deliver us from evil". This prayer is part of the European cultural memory. With the game situated, however, in a time and place overshadowed by the Western Schism and the Bohemian succession dispute, its title has dual significance. On the one hand, the people depicted in the story are either intertwined with the conspiracies to place one of two candidates (the brothers Sigis-

mund and Wenceslas) on the Bohemian throne, or they belong to the vast majority of the inhabitants of the region who try but barely manage to survive.² On the other hand, the main task of the protagonists is to deliver a message that might alter the situation profoundly and could bring peace to the war-torn country. Both meanings are implied by the game title.

As in KCD 2018, the protagonist is Henry, a young man in his twenties and a blacksmith by profession. He is an orphan – his parents were killed in Skalitz when the village was raided; he escaped at the last second. How he managed to become a squire for Hans Capon, a young nobleman, is told in the earlier game. For gender-sensitive players (of whom I am definitely not one), it must be said that the player's character is definitely that of a European Caucasian male. Where other games have options to choose gender, race, skin color, or more for one's avatar, KCD II offers nothing of the like. Even Henry's sexual orientation is obvious: although his friendship with Hans Capon is not without tension, he has a clear preference for female NPCs throughout the game – in a romantic or physical way, depending on the choices the player makes.

Although several women play a role in this game, and some of the quests cannot be solved without their support as skilled archers, experienced healers, or clever scouts, the game focuses on masculinity (and not always its best version).

By default – and without taking side quests into account – the simplest form of the game's structure follows the concept of Campbell's Hero's Journey.³ The game's narrative arc is not, however, simply extended by these side quests. They are complete missions, including their own formal "mythological cycles",⁴ that contribute to the main quests but could be analyzed as separate rites of passage.

The first moments of KCD II already evoke a sacral subtext. Amidst a bloody siege the priest Father Godwin is asked, "Have you come to anoint us before we die?" The unconventional priest (who can be played in some of the quests) comforts Henry before the battle commences. The player (Henry)

2 The game is set around the year 1400. Alongside dynastic disputes, the incompetence of King Wenceslas, and widespread famine and plague, this was also the era of fierce conflict surrounding the reformer Jan Hus and the Western Schism – an age as catastrophic as the Thirty Years' War and even comparable to our own, given today's global threats.

3 Campbell 2008.

4 See Wessely 1995.



Fig. 3: Father Godwin saying prayers for the dead (in-game screenshot: Wessely, markup by the author).

has to defend the battlements against an overwhelming force (at which point the new player discovers that the fight controls are a pain when using only keyboard and mouse). Amidst the battle a flashback sets in, and the story begins 14 days earlier, with a cinemascope sequence in which Henry and Hans ride through a beautiful landscape accompanied by a small escort. In this sequence, the reason for the journey is outlined: they have to deliver a message to Otto von Bergow concerning a possible armistice between the supporters of the rival kings, Sigismund and Wenceslas. At this point, the player can select his special abilities and skills – does the way of a swordsman, an advisor, or a scout seem more promising? However, soon the little party is attacked by robbers, who kill everyone but Henry and Hans, who are both severely wounded. The self-confident, somewhat cocky heroes have fallen. They will need to work their way back up the ladder, step by step, and will find themselves involuntarily involved in political developments.

Daily life is as interwoven with religion as are the quests. Talking to the herbwoman Bozhena? Cross oneself. Make a promise? Cross oneself. Lucky to have won a tough fight? Cross oneself. During the quest “Divine Messenger”, Henry has to bury the victims of a raid, and Godwin (correctly) reads the Latin prayer for the dead, *Requiem aeternam* (fig. 3).

About to be hanged, Adder confesses his sins, and to free Janosh Uher, Henry prays for a gravely wounded man (in “Devils pack”); in the silver



Fig. 4: Samuel tells of frequent pogroms in Kuttenberg (in-game screenshot: Wessely).

mines of Kuttenberg, Henry prays for the victim of a mining disaster (in “Via argentum”). The examples are numerous. Whether Henry’s devotion changes the course of the game is not clear, but it does at least increase Henry’s reputation and might improve his chances of success. Yet these details are likely only decorations on the game’s clothing, which is made of carefully woven cloth.

The darker dimensions of the dominant religion are not left unexamined. Through the character of Samuel, a Jewish resident of Kuttenberg, the game exposes the recurring pogroms faced by the local Jewish community, along with the irrational and often grotesque justifications offered for them (fig. 4). Samuel’s initial encounter with Henry is marked by deep mistrust. Unaware of Henry’s true intentions and shaped by bitter memory of betrayal and persecution, Samuel even sends two men to ambush and kill him. Only after Henry survives the attack and returns in peace does Samuel begin to reassess his assumptions. It emerges that Samuel is in fact a loyal supporter of those opposed to Sigismund’s oppressive regime. Once the two men realize that they are fighting for the same cause, a tentative trust forms, and it will evolve into a meaningful alliance. Their friendship becomes a subtle yet powerful testimony to the possibility of reconciliation, even across boundaries determined by fear, religion, and violence.⁵

5 On the sidelines of a meeting of those opposed to Sigismund, Godwin meets and comes to respect Jehuda, the rabbi of Kuttenberg.



Fig. 5: Godwin blesses Henry and Samuel (who is jewish!) (in-game screenshot: Wessely).

The soundtrack fits the game perfectly, both the sound design and the music, which, as far as I can judge, is honed to support the game experience as best as possible. Even though I can assume that the vast majority of players do not understand Latin and/or do not care about the lyrics, the emotional setting is well supported by music that hits the spot. And even more so if we attend to the details: when Adder – an NPC whose rescue was part of a quest by Henry and is now a reckless, cunning member of the party – dies, a choir chants *Agnus Dei* and *dona eis requiem* – not quite liturgically correct, but especially touching since the dying scoundrel, all alone because the other members of the party have fled, starts confessing his sins (in part referring to the Ten Commandments), asking God for forgiveness.⁶ When Henry and his new found half-brother Sam depart in a desperate attempt to bring in relief forces, Father Godwin blesses them and a *Kyrie eleison* is intoned (fig. 5).

When Henry encounters his parents' murderer, the *Dies irae* can be heard, the sequence about the wrath of God on the Day of Judgement. Diegetic music is also heard in some sequences, carefully crafted to fit with the medieval atmosphere, but the aforementioned pieces show that the composer is as skilled in his craft as he is familiar with his great predecessors, specifically Bach and Mozart.

6 This evokes associations with the parable of the lost sheep at Luke 15:3–7: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7, King James Version).

Warhorse Studios is said to have invested around €40 million to get the game running,⁷ and between 2018 and 2024 up to 200 persons worked on the project.⁸ The realism of the game atmosphere and the movie sequences is stunning. The player also reaps the benefits of input from professionals: the historical setting is accurate, and most of the locations and many of the main characters are historic persons, including the feuding brothers Wenceslas and Sigismund, Otto von Bergow, and Radzig Koblya.

On my i7-10750 with 32GB and an Nvidia Quadro RTX 3000 connected to a 5K screen, the gameplay and the movie scenes are just about smooth *if* – and that is quite an *if* – the framerate is reduced to 30.

Yet the game is technically not perfect. Even though the character animation is excellent, sometimes the spoken words and the body language do not fit together. The collision detection has some flaws (I encountered NPCs able to walk through solid tables and dead/wounded persons who seem to sink into the ground). There are some minor issues with the character design (Peter of Pisek seems to have LED illumination under his brim, and the teeth of Rosa Ruthard or Anna of Waldstein are at time just white stains). And sometimes the audio and video do not match up – for example, when a character takes a drink, the sound effects are spot on, but the figure does not move – which disrupts the player’s immersion. But these are mere moments within hours and hours of fascinating gameplay.

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE II is not a “religious game”. It neither evangelizes nor preaches. Rather, it depicts a world in which Christianity is the air everyone breathes – natural, imperfect, vital. It offers a rare opportunity for theological reflection in gaming: on sin and redemption, on grace and justice, on death and hope. It invites players to consider not only the cost of their actions but also the eternal destinies of their souls.

However, the ability to make nuanced ethical and moral decisions is by no means a prerequisite for playing the game successfully. Hundreds of videos on YouTube are now dedicated to KCD II⁹ – testimony to the game’s popularity but also an opportunity for interesting observations. For instance, walk-throughs that favor a path of almost splatter-like violence attract high view

7 <https://t1p.de/5nbx1> [accessed 22 May 2025].

8 <https://t1p.de/mmaqj> [accessed 22 May 2025].

9 <https://t1p.de/wxspe> [accessed 21 May 2025].

counts; many players are evidently willing to take the option of escalating individual quests into radical overkill.¹⁰

With its beauty, moral seriousness, and occasional tragic grandeur, KCD II stands as a digital cathedral: a monument to what it means to live, sin, pray, and die for a greater cause and *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Biography

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¹⁰ <https://t1p.de/vyub6> [accessed 21 May 2025].

Fandom

Labubu! If you have not come across the “cute, ugly or just plain weird” monster toy doll based on Hong Kong illustrator Kasing Lung’s characters and sold by China based Pop Mart, you have clearly missed the latest fandom craze that, by 2025, has managed to build a global fanbase: from celebrities and social media influencers to regular Joe Blog on the streets and children around the globe. The frenzy and fan community that Labubu has built has also made it clear in public discourses that fandom can be risky, dangerous even, and linked to overt or more hidden political agendas. The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, published a report suggesting that Labubu, along with other increasingly popular Chinese brands such as BYD, may be part of a broader Chinese strategy to exert soft power in the West (ORF 2025). The link between fandom and politics is, of course, nothing new and one can find numerous examples of encounters, clashes, and overlaps between fandom and politics, such as Taylor Swift’s endorsement of Kamala Harris and her being reprimanded for it.

Both the increasing politicization of fandom and the visibility of such politicization also needs a closer examination from a religious studies and media studies perspective. Previous discussions explored “nationalism and religion as forms of fan-based identities” (Dittmer and Bos 2019). More recent studies conceptualize fandom as a form of play and discuss to what extent fandom and religion are distinct or overlap (Davidsen 2013). To a large extent, these discussions depend on one’s definition of religion (Wolff 2023). Of interest is also the phenomenon of how politics normalizes toxic fan practices (Le Clue 2024) or how “normies” are radicalized, e.g. in the context of conspiracy theories (Reinhard et al. 2022) and the polarization in politics (Barnes 2022).

This forthcoming issue of JRFM aims to build in the existing scholarship and explore the complex and complicated entanglement between religion,

media, fandom, politics, economic interests in greater detail. With this issue, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of how religious ideas might fuel fandom practices, while avoiding (simplistic) discussions to what extent fandom might be religion or religion might be a form of fandom. We are interested in how the different forces that might drive fandom practices, e.g. economic interests, vested power interests, political agendas, might be fueled by or expressed through religious language or iconography.

In particular, we are interested in the following questions:

- How can fandom be approached from a religious studies and media studies perspective? Which concepts are helpful to understand the complex interrelation between fandom, religion and media?
- Which methodological approaches to fandom, media and religion are useful? What are their potential and limitations?
- What interrelations can be observed between fandom, religion, media and other areas of society such as art, economics, popular culture?
- How does fandom change over time? What does it mean to address these transformations from a religious studies and media studies perspective? How are religious practices affected by such transformation processes?
- What processes of politicization of fandom can be observed, and what role do media and religion play in the politization – and economic exploitation – of fandom?

Article Length

JRFM is committed to providing a space and platform to encourage discussion, but also experiment with and test out novel ideas, concepts, and theoretical frameworks. Discussion inputs and encouragements benefit from short and concise presentations of arguments and relevant data. As such, we are looking for articles of ca. 3.000 words in length. To facilitate discussions, we would ask you to include a strong thesis statement and overview of argument in the introduction. Please also include a discussion on the relevance of your argument in the conclusion.

Relevance of Argument

As Open Access journal, JRFM is committed to demonstrating to the broader scholarly community and the broader public the importance of the study of religion in what is often still perceived as an increasingly secular

society. We are therefore asking you to include a brief reflection or discussion about the relevance and importance of your argument/case study in the conclusion. In other words: we are interested in a brief discussion/statement on what it is that we can learn from looking at your topic (or fandom more generally) from a religious/media studies perspective that we might not learn otherwise. What is it that religious/media studies brings to the table to help us better understand today's increasingly fractured (and ruptured) societies and cultures.

Use of Images

JRFM encourages the use of visual material in submissions. For this issue, we particularly encourage the use of photographs as visual source and ethnographic material. Images should not serve mere illustration purposes but should be a crucial element of the argument.

Due to space constraints, we would ask authors to limit the number of photographs to a maximum of five. Photographs should ideally have been taken by the authors themselves. If they are sourced externally, authors must have permission for reproduction. As Open Access journal, JRFM does not have the financial resources to reimburse authors for any copyright fees incurred.

Deadline

The deadline for all submissions is **10 February 2026**. The publication is scheduled for 15 November 2026.

For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Anna-Katharina Höpflinger (a.hoepflinger@lmu.de) and Alexander D. Ornella (alexander@ornella.at).

To Believe or Not to Believe

Atheism and Nonreligion in Media and Popular Culture

Research has clearly and repeatedly illustrated that media and popular culture can be an important resource for religious individuals and religious institutions, and for identifying contemporary attitudes to religion. These days, many learn about religion from media and popular culture, not via religious institutions, which is why the latter invest a lot of money and time in their social media presence and or support different cultural sectors. Media and popular culture can provide important insights about faith, religious traditions, and innovations in today's world and function as resources and as a space of resonance for religious meaning making.

However, media and popular culture can also be an area for presenting critique of religion and provide spaces for the reflection and expression of atheistic and nonreligious worldviews. Scholarly work has illustrated the important role social media can play for nonreligious individuals looking for a community of likeminded people. Particularly YouTube-atheists have been explored in multiple studies highlighting their focal points and areas of conflict. Some studies have also investigated how atheists have been treated and presented in popular culture, particularly in American television series. Yet this is still an area in need of much more research.

In this upcoming thematic section of the Journal of Religion, Film and Media we wish to further explore what atheism and nonreligion looks like in media and popular culture today and in the past. How are atheist characters portrayed in film and television and how have these representations possibly changed over time? In what ways are nonreligious views expressed in popular music and music videos? What kinds of debates about religion are prevalent on YouTube or platforms like Instagram or TikTok? What kind

of atheist-communities can we find online and what questions are essential for those active in these communities? How is atheism discussed in contemporary journalist outputs and represented in new media?

Suggested topics:

- Atheist characters in films or televisions series
- Atheism and/in documentary films
- Nonreligious themes in popular music
- Atheism/nonreligion in video games
- Atheist YouTubers
- Deconversion narratives online
- Nonreligious communities online
- Debating or critiquing religion online
- Lived atheism online
- Atheism in the news
- Journalism on atheism or nonreligion
- Atheist media campaigns

We invite scholars from a range of relevant fields, such as literature, film and media studies, theology, and the study of religion, as well as of sociology or political sciences, to contribute to this issue. The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics in keeping with the profile of JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is **1 May 2026**. The publication is scheduled for 15 May 2027. Contributions of 5,000 to 6,000 words (including notes) should be submitted for double-blind peer review through the journal website at www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register and to follow the instructions for submitting contributions, especially taking note of the [style guide](#).

For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Natalie Fritz (natalie.fritz@evtheol.uni-muenchen.de), Sofia Sjö (sofia.sjo@abo.fi) and Teemu Taira (teemu.taira@helsinki.fi).

Urbanity and Religion in Film

Iconic urban settings shape cinematic narration in unique ways. Landmarks like the Coliseum, the Forbidden City, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, or Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus in Mumbai serve not just as background to a film's plot, but play their own part as expressions of cultural values, technical achievements, cultural exchanges and conflicts, or historical constellations. From drama to science fiction, from comedy to animation, from film noir to documentary, and also in productions that challenge any genre categorisation, urban centres are landscapes in which all ki

Cities appear in films and TV series as formations in which multiple places, cultural meanings, and social functions are interlaced, and people and groups interact in manifold ways. They assume symbolic values as a representation of the innermost world of characters, of power relationships, of hopes, desires, or disappointments. They foster cultural and technological progress, destruction and war, fragility of life and the end of the world.

Cinematic cities may refer to existing urban settings, highlighting concrete socio-political formations and dynamics. However, films can also unfold new imaginations of urban formation: utopias as well as dystopias are often developed as cities and explore the question of how urban formation may contribute to the ideal of the good life, or, vice versa, how cities can be transformed into hellish places of destruction and violence. Film depicts cities in dreams and nightmares, in otherworldly travels, as nostalgic reenactments of past communities or projections of futuristic high-tech cityscapes.

These manifold representations of urban phenomena in film are closely entangled with religious communities, institutions, traditions, practices, worldviews, or places. Cities provide the concrete material spaces in which religious institutions may be constructed and practices unfold, which on their part serve to symbolically and affectively enrich the filmic narratives.

In this JRFM issue, we explore the multilayered interactions between urbanity and religion in mainstream films, arthouse productions, TV series, or short films. Contributions may focus (among others) on the following topics:

- the role of religious communities and traditions in shaping filmic cities,
- the interrelation of urban and religious places and their functions in film,
- the cinematic representation of the entanglement of urban formations and ritual practices in diverse genres,
- processes of sacralisation of urban places in films, including natural elements within the city (vegetation, animals, water etc.),
- the representation of the tension between transcendent and immanent dimensions in urban practices,
- utopian and dystopian imaginations of urban formation in film in response to human and environmental existential needs and desires,
- the development of new cities and new religious practices in films.

The issue also includes an open section for articles on other topics related to the profile of the JRFM. The deadline for all submissions is **1 October 2026**. Contributions should be between 5,000–6,000 words (including notes and references) and be submitted for double-blind peer-review through the journal homepage, www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register and follow the instructions for submitting contributions. Manuscripts have to be formatted according to the JRFM's [style guide](#). Publication of this issue is scheduled for 15 November 2027. For any questions about the issue or possible contributions, please contact the issue editors: Prof. Dr. Stefanie Knauss (stefanie.knauss@gmail.com) and Prof. Dr. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiaiti (pezzoli@lmu.de).