

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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