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# Pious protagonists: Using the screen to expand images of the Muslim faith beyond the dichotomy of “good” and “bad”

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**Słowa kluczowe:** religia, Muzułmanie, film, islamofobia, „gęste widzenie”, zmiana kulturowa

## Introduction

Research has lately displayed an ambivalence towards the phenomenon of religion (Jensdotter, 2021; Axelson and Deldén, 2021; Axelson and Stier, 2020; Lundby, 2018). Conflicts related to religion between progressive religious world views and repressive, even violent, world views are to be seen in scholarly discourses (Hashas, 2019; Pratt, 2018; De Kadt, 2018; Juergensmeyer, 2017). Moreover, movies and tv-series have been produced questioning different forms of religious convictions, including extremism (Axelson forthcoming). Mohammad Fazlhashemi, Professor of Islamic Theology at Uppsala University, made a point when analysing two Iranian films, *Jandar* (2019) and *Diapason* (2019), that they told stories criticising religious oppression but skillfully intertwined in the narrative and not easily stopped by censorship (2022). Movies can be tools to create *cultural change*, as Maytha Alhassen puts it (2018).

The aim of this article is to analyse how religious diversity is played out in fictional formats in movies. The starting point is to untangle how audiences have mainly been offered stereotypical images of Islam/Muslims. This means to give examples in some detail of the clichés used and the derogatory treatment of Islam and Muslims as part of culturally reproduced discourses in society.

As a second aim, the article seeks to analyse emotional engagement in film. Through empirical studies on movies and meaning-making, a model has been developed (Axelson, 2017; 2019). Certain processes of viewing habits can be illustrated by this model as a tool for the analysis of fiction as a vehicle for the

amplification of emotions in contemporary society (Hjarvard, 2012), connected to heated and charged discourses about religion (Richardson, 2010).

Third, the article has a didactic aim considering movies trying to break with the well-established dichotomy between Muslims as either conservative and rigid or secularised and non-religious, exploring examples of fiction with the ambition to create more nuanced imagery of Muslim identity positions directed to more multi-faceted storytelling. There is a gap here where more religious positions could be represented.

## 1. Mainstream Hollywood movies and stereotypical imagery

### 1.1. Hollywood's anti-Arabic tendency during the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The main line depicting Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood during the 20<sup>th</sup> century uses stereotypical and unfriendly imagery. This is outlined and captured by film scholar Jack Shaheen (2001; 2008)<sup>1</sup>. He is harsh about Hollywood's record of creating world views and hammering out stereotypes. Ordinary movie-goers are confronted with a long tradition of anti-Arab sentiments, expressed in the form of hostile notions of Islam and Muslims as perceived threats to modern society. The title of his book from 2001 is telling: *Reel Bad Arabs*<sup>2</sup>. Shaheen undertook the task of labelling more than 1,100 films and reached the conclusion that Hollywood magnifies and inflames xenophobia directed towards Arabs and Muslims (Shaheen, 2001; 2008).

Hollywood is a powerful global entertainment machine, reinforcing certain world views and not others. This is done especially efficiently when content of an ideological character is put in the background as part of the entertainment setting, for example, in the *Iron Man* series (2008, 2010, 2013) or in seemingly harmless family films like Disney's *Aladdin* from 1992 or *Hidalgo* from 2004. Kristian Petersen underlines this notion in a recent anthology from 2021, where some chapters are specifically interested in comedies and humorous representations as contributors to the picture. Petersen wraps the discussion up: "Muslims in the movies are often caricatures of life – sensational and incomplete – relying on worn representational formulas, which reproduces stereotypes about Muslims" (Petersen, 2021a, p. 1).

One of the more successful blockbuster movies in the 1990s is illustrative. In director James Cameron's film *True Lies* from 1994, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jamie Lee Curtis, the evil other is both scarily violent and ridiculously stupid. Being an American blockbuster comedy at the time, Shaheen's verdict is that this movie is filled with anti-Arab sentiments

<sup>1</sup> See also the report by Maytha Alhassen (2018). *Haqq & Hollywood. Illuminating 100 years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them*. Pop Culture Collaborative, [www.haqqandhollywood.org](http://www.haqqandhollywood.org).

<sup>2</sup> As a play on the word 'show-reel', on which a film is rolled up.

in a typical way. It did not stop the movie from being hailed by film critics and an enthusiastic audience<sup>3</sup>. Shaheen is surprised at how easily director James Cameron disavowed accusations of vilifying Arabs. Cameron said he just needed some convenient villains for the story, and he happened to pick these Palestinian Arabs. Likewise, renowned actress Jamie Lee Curtis was reluctant to think deeper about the matter. In a discussion about how objectionably the movie could be perceived, she just stated that it was only for fun, a very funny movie (Shaheen, 2001, p. 539).

Neither Cameron nor Curtis wanted to take responsibility for the comedy's underlying string of laughter through insulting preconceptions, playing upon a pond of shared prejudices. The film *True Lies* draws heavily on this, using established derogatory stereotypes. Commenting on this particular feature, journalist and media scholar Maytha Alhassen sums it up: "Not only are the terrorists genocidal barbarians, but they're also inept fools who accidentally blow themselves up" (Alhassen, 2018, p. 16). *True Lies* plays the game of ridiculing and humiliating Arabs for an American domestic movie market.

Cameron's film is interesting since it was produced early in the 1990s, many years before the 9/11 events in 2001, which is often regarded as a transitional point in history, building up hatred and violence in the world, real and discursive. It is important to notice, though, that in this context, it is more like an unbroken chain of belittling imagery. Art historian Nance Demerdash-Fatemi summarises: "In the pre- and post-9/11 United States, the conflation of Muslim with Islamic extremists as well as the racialisation of Arabs and Muslims abound in Hollywood and mainstream media representations of Middle Eastern peoples" (Demerdash-Fatemi, 2021, p. 96, emphasis is added). It is this trope Jack Shaheen fights in the action film genre, the frequent use of Muslims as bearers of evil impulses, a genre always in need of clearly identified villains and antagonists. "Constant in their malevolency, reel bad Arabs have not been static, but have mutated over time, like a contaminated virus. In conjunction with current events, filmmakers have mixed and embellished new and polluted stereotypes with old, familiar ones" (Shaheen, 2008, p. xv). According to Shaheen, the old villains, desert nomads or oily sheiks, have over the last decades changed into a new main attraction, militant religious fundamentalists: "Arabs as crazed Islamic fundamentalists bent on destruction" (Shaheen, 2008, p. xvi). This trope is also seen in numerous action movies after 9/11, for example, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Traitor* (2008) or *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) or the *Homeland* tv-series (2011–2020).

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<sup>3</sup> *True Lies* reached a 7.3 ranking on IMDb, earning more than 378 million dollars gross worldwide since its premiere, more than three times its production budget; <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111503/> [22.09.2020].

## 1.2. A cultural divide – reinforcing the clash between the West and the rest

It is, for Muslims, a sad story to be put in the box of being the main antagonist. Another part of the symbolic dichotomy in American popular culture is its craving for a saviour protagonist. Theologian Robert Jewett and philosopher John Shelton Lawrence (2002; 2007) describe an established idea of a hero who takes shape as a messianic figure with deep roots in American (Judeo-Christian) popular culture. This vigilante ideal is problematic, according to Jewett and Lawrence, since it entails a heroic right to execute the villains without remorse, often in sinister control and selfless restraint, but sometimes accompanied with a laugh, such as is done by director James Cameron in the movie *True Lies*.

This vigilante ideal is potentially dangerous, according to Jewett and Lawrence. It underscores the idea that a superior and confident hero dissolves conflicts without a need for a legislative system. This individual needs no law; he executes quick justice, being judge and executioner at the same time (Jewett and Lawrence, 2002, p. 41, see also Axelson, 2005). This type of hero is a disguised messianic redeemer figure engaged in a violent crusade against evil, violent but inherently benevolent, restoring order in society. The problem for Muslims is that this hero has an evil counterpart, an ultimate antagonist, and in the popular culture context, he is often an Arab or a Muslim caricature – such as in *True Lies*. Aimed at an American audience, these films resonate well with a spectator's mindset, culturally familiar and wired with pro-American storytelling, creating a symbolic divide between the Judeo-Christian “us” against a loosely defined alien “them” as the Other. Shaheen and many co-fellow Arabs with him are sadly often reminded of this<sup>4</sup>.

## 1.3. Not only Hollywood – also the European entertainment film industry

Not only the American film industry could be criticised for using stereotypical imagery of Muslims, but some of the larger film production countries in Europe are also inclined towards clichés when depicting Muslim characters. Media scholar Michaela Ardizzoni describes how several contemporary Italian comedies have used negative stereotypes of Muslims in Italian blockbusters lately. “Regardless of their debatable artistic value, these films cannot be easily dismissed in studies on contemporary Italian cinema because they contribute to a myopic discourse on Islam that is also reflected in the news media” (Ardizzoni, 2021, p. 104). She is concerned about how these popular films thrive

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Shaheen describes a trip to Prague with his family when before preparing to go to church, a reprisal of the film *Ashanti* (1979) was beaming from the tv-set. “Before I could turn off the TV, our granddaughters had already witnessed deranged desert Arabs raping and whipping chained African youths” (Shaheen, 2008, p. xviii).

on hostile sentiments. These comedies are filled with insulting imagery, making use of crude humour – “laughing at the Other” as she phrases it (Ardizzoni, 2021, p. 101). French films have another twist, according to art historian Nancy Demerdash-Fatemi (2021). With its constitution, France upholds strong secular principles which affect the way Muslims are portrayed. She is critical of how popular mainstream films in France seemingly give input to processes of tolerance, but in fact, they give room for the secular Muslim only – “*musulman laïc*” – in problematic ways, produced as they are within the ideological frame of strong secularism, *laïcité* (Demerdash-Fatemi, 2021, p. 85).

Many scholars have been engaged in this dilemma (Riley, 2009; Axner, 2015; Echchaibi, 2018). American sociologist Nabil Echchaibi describes this as a representational double trap for Muslims. If you, as a pious Muslim, try to establish a positive alternative, you do so against a dominant media discourse, identifying Muslims as aggressive and conservative. Efforts to create progressive anti-images of Muslims are done in relation to an all-pervasive negative image, leading to a confirmation of the negative stereotype. The “good Muslim” is an exception, verifying the idea of how ordinary Muslims actually are “violent, unmodern, extremists and suppressors of women” (Lövheim et al., 2015, p. 149). Religious scholar Kristian Petersen underlines that many global film industries fail to expand these two roles. “Too often they produce a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims, limiting the narrative domain to issues of national security, war, and terrorism” (Petersen, 2021b, p. i).

Maytha Alhassen, a researcher engaged in social justice and media, further describes these binary positions of Good Muslim vs Bad Muslim, adding that the good Muslim has to sign up for a loyal identity with the West. “Good Muslims are often secular assimilationists, defenders of U.S. imperialism, or submissive Muslim women in need of being ‘saved’ by the West from ‘evil, oppressive’ Muslim men” (Alhassen, 2018, p. 25). What is key in Alhassen’s quote above is the notion of secular affinity. The good Muslim has to play down or even denounce his faith in order to be perceived as acceptable by the Hollywood (Western) audience.

## 2. Emotional thinking through film – cognition and affect

### 2.1. A model for emotional film interpretation

Using the screen to deal with complex societal issues requires critical skills and careful consideration, especially when dealing with emotionally charged issues. Movies work with emotions, and one needs to understand the interplay between the cognitive interpretation of the content and affect (Axelson, 2017; 2019). What has been underestimated in previous research on movies’ impact on their audience is what I have elsewhere referred to as *thick viewing*, adding personal worldview concepts into the equation, a concept which creates a broader

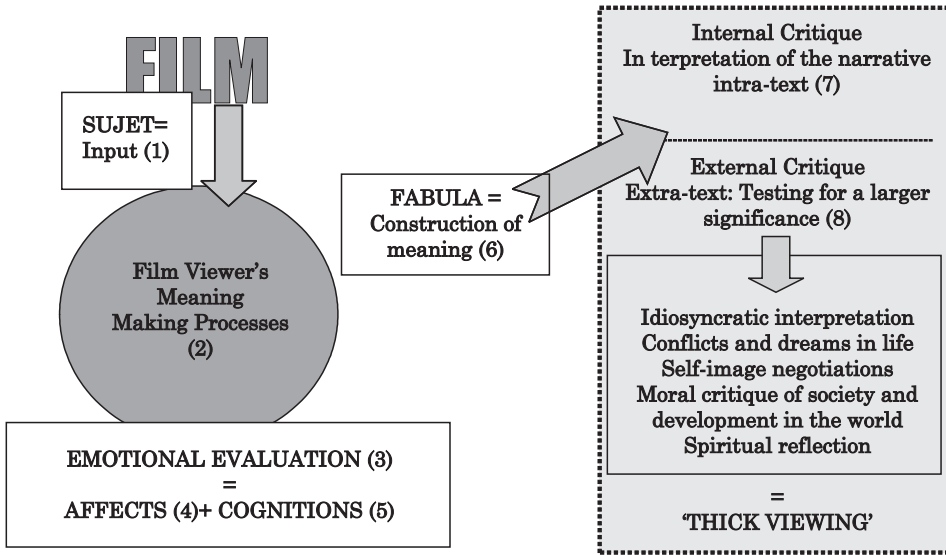


Fig. 1. A schematic figure of meaning-making processes while watching films, underlining the combination of affect and cognition as well as a combination of intra-text and extra-text critique  
*Source: the author's own model.*

range of included mental processes, from basic emotions to high cognition, including normative-critical views on ongoing discourses in culture and society.

The film gives an input (1) as 'sujet'<sup>5</sup> and a meaning-making process gets started in the viewer (2). An emotional evaluation (3) builds up, consisting of affects (4) and cognitions (5) in combination. A fabula (6) is constructed by the viewer<sup>6</sup>. Practically all movie-goers are occupied with the next step, an interpretation of the intra-text-narrative (7), what is actually happening in the film. Finally, not all, but some viewers, are simultaneously engaged in extra-text references as external critique, testing the narrative for a larger significance (8). The case studies empirical contribution to film theory is that this is done in profoundly personal and idiosyncratic ways, dealing with an individual spectator's own conflicts and moral aspirations in life (Axelson, 2017; 2019).

Emotionally engaging scenes are processed through a network of private associations and previous experiences, creating a personally relevant response in the individual, in which basic emotions and abstract thoughts are intertwined, generating depth in interpretation. It can be described as an ongoing movement from the narrative – intra-text – to viewers' own real-life issues outside the film – extra-text, and an evaluation of what is going on in the world 'out there'.

<sup>5</sup> What is actually seen and heard on the screen, as bits and pieces of an ongoing story being unfolded.

<sup>6</sup> The intended 'story' that lies behind the presented selection of events on the screen.

Sometimes these evaluations take place in multi-layered ways, especially when sensitive topics like culture, religion or identity are mocked in action movies.

## 2.2. A reaction of anger – when Hollywood hits a young Arab audience

Commercial Hollywood films are shown widely abroad. Muslim countries make up a substantial share of the overseas box office. “Thus, Arab viewers are regularly exposed to reel demeaning stereotypes about themselves and their culture” (Shaheen, 2008, p. xvii). But what happens then when young Arab film buffs view a typical cliché-burdened film portraying Muslims as bent on destruction only? An interesting case study of emotional responses among young Arabs was conducted by Mohamed El Marzouki, analysing how young Moroccan audiences reacted to Hollywood narratives of terrorism (El Marzouki, 2011) with the help of the film *The Kingdom* from 2007. Asking what meanings were constructed when young Arabs watched Hollywood action movies full of anti-Arab prejudices, he outlined a complex and critical response. The answer was a double emotional reaction. One reaction was along the line of the intended affective distaste for the terrorist’s action in the story. As viewers, they were horrified and filled with emotional reactions against the gruesome violence conducted by terrorists, tearing innocent people apart. At the same time, on another level, they experienced another emotional reaction against the film and its provocative view of themselves as a cultural group, an anger against a commonly repeated American view typically “associating Islam with the horror of terrorism” (El Marzouki, 2011, p. 255).

The Moroccan audience reacted strongly to the film’s intent to defame their own culture and their own religion. In this case of interpreting the film, they are engaged in extra-text references, testing the narrative for a larger significance in culturally personal ways, dealing with their own moral critique of anti-Muslim sentiments in the global society and the manifestation of a typical American worldview in which Muslims and Arabs are demonised.

In paragraphs 1 and 2, the first two aims of the article have been fulfilled. First, I have analysed how audiences in a global movie culture are mainly offered images of Islam/Muslims in a stereotypical manner. Second, a model is presented of how emotional engagement in audio-visual storytelling can be understood, especially for the analysis of fiction as a vehicle for emotional evaluations of ongoing discourses in contemporary society. The next step is to present examples that could be described as respectful, offering the audience something other than stereotypical imagery, directed to more subtle and thought-provoking storytelling.

### 3. Moviemaking trying to avoid disrespectful content

#### 3.1. An epic blockbuster with a sense of religious inclusion

Looking back at the glorious days of the Hollywood epic blockbuster era in the 1950s, Michael D. Calabria, a scholar in Arab and Islamic Studies, describes how the production team behind one of the greatest biblical epics of all time, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), tried to look for not only biblical sources when creating the story. Calabria clarifies how determined director Cecil B. DeMille was to find a way to tell a story that could be archeologically and historically illuminating and inspiring for all three Abrahamic religious traditions: Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths. Together with his researcher, Henry S. Noerdlinger (1905–1985), they both tried to anchor details in the story with the help of Muslim sources such as the Qur'an in order to make the film non-offensive to Muslims. They tried to achieve the opposite, creating profiles of the characters that were appealing to Muslim believers. When the story gets to Moses' (Musa in the Muslim tradition) encounter with Midian priest Jethro, DeMille and Noerdlinger were particularly careful. They anchored Jethro's character, not only in Biblical sources but also in Qur'anic tradition, and made his character into a monotheistic descendent of Ishmael. "DeMille and his screenwriters *Arabized* and *Islamized* Jethro by calling him 'the *sheikh* of Midian'. Instead of using the biblical references to Jethro, DeMille and his writers deferred to the Qur'an, representing Jethro as a *monotheistic* Bedouin Arab rather than a pagan priest, which Muslims would have found offensive" (Calabria, 2015, p. 14). Calabria concludes: "In the minds of Cecil B. DeMille and Henry Noerdlinger, there was no doubt of the Abrahamic and Mosaic ancestry shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Qur'an told them so" (Calabria, 2015, p. 21). Sympathetic as it may be, this inclusive interfaith ambition in the middle of the 1950s described above was soon overruled by the deepening conflicts on the geopolitical scene where a growing enmity between the West and the Arab states reached increased tension during the following decades during the 1960s and 1970s, reaching a climax of mutual hostility in the 9/11 events in 2001 and its aftermath.

#### 3.2. Looking for alternative sources - creating a positive emotional impact

Jack Shaheen, Maytha Alhassen, and others are interested in recognising films creating portraits of Muslim leaders more favourable and even adorable for a mainstream (Muslim) audience. One example is the film *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), in which the military leader of the Muslims, Salah ad-Din (Saladin), was portrayed with the help of Arab historical archives.



The film was appreciated by young moviegoers in the Middle East, with examples of emotional praise in the audience about the portrait of Salah ad-Din<sup>7</sup>. British journalist Robert Fisk happened to be in Beirut when the film premiered in 2005, and he watched it together with a young Lebanese audience. A specific scene in the film filled the audience with strong positive sentiments.

[A]t the end of the film, after Balian has surrendered Jerusalem, Saladin enters the city and finds a crucifix lying on the floor of a church, knocked off the altar during the three-day siege. And he carefully picks up the cross and places it reverently back on the altar. And at this point, the audience rose to their feet and clapped and shouted their appreciation. They loved that gesture of honour. They wanted Islam to be merciful as well as strong. And they roared their approval above the soundtrack of the film (Fisk, 2005).

The portrait of Salah ad-Din inspired the audience. In this sequence, we can also adopt the model of emotional evaluation described above. The viewers were attracted to details in the sujet, sparking meaning-making processes in the fabula construction, relating events on the screen to their worldview and values, reinforcing a moral appraisal of the character Salah ad-Din, and strengthening their admiration of him as a Muslim commander. At this moment, high cognition and their ideas of morality and generosity were combined with basic affect, creating a powerful emotional evaluation manifested as euphoria in the cinema.

### 3.3. Treating religious positions with respect – a critic’s favourite

Things are changing regarding depicting pious Muslims on the screen from various parts of the world (Petersen, 2021a; 2021b). Efforts are made to change and challenge the “good” and “bad” dichotomy, moving beyond it. In 2014, Mauritian director Abderrahmane Sissakou made a global impact on film festivals around the world with his film *Timbuktu* from 2014<sup>8</sup>. The film is a solemn and poetic story dealing with the peaceful life of a cattle herder, Kidane living with his family in the desert landscape outside Timbuktu. Their life changes through the advent of a militant ISIS jihadist group taking control of mundane aspects of life, such as soccer, music, and dancing. Resistance in different forms is presented, from the old imam in the mosque at the centre of the village, as well as from women on the streets, resisting with courage and stamina.

Several scenes in the film are of interest where we see Muslims engaged in everyday life in the Mali community. Town people are gathered in moments

<sup>7</sup> Played by Syrian actor Ghassan Massoud.

<sup>8</sup> It was the winner of African American Film Critics Association (AAFCA) award in 2014 and it was a nominee for Palme D’Or at the Cannes festival and a nominee for best Arabic film in 2014. It received the ecumenical award at Cannes. Next it was a nominee for the Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscar Academy Award. It received 7 Cesar awards in France 2015. It was the winner of the Cinema for Peace Award 2015 as the most valuable film of the year.

of contemplation in the mosque or singing in the evening, enjoying being together. Early in the film, a group of ISIS soldiers, with their leader, enter the local mosque with machine guns in their hands, walking through a line of silent worshippers. The local imam reproaches them.

Local imam: Why are you coming here?

ISIS-leader: We have a message.

Local imam: And you enter just like that? You don't go into the house of God with shoes and a weapon. This is not the proper way.

ISIS-leader: We can do it. We are doing jihad.

Local imam: You are doing jihad? And you want to do it here? In the house of God? Here in Timbuktu, a person engaged in religion uses his head and not his weapon. Now, it is prayer time, and we wish to pray peacefully. Please leave.

[00:06:04 – 00:07:30]

Later, a dispute about maintaining jihad takes place between the local Mali imam and the ISIS newcomers.

ISIS-leader: Do you want to convince me not to do jihad?

Local Imam: Me? I am not saying: give up jihad. I am not interested in others' jihad. I am doing my own jihad. I have no time for others' jihad. If I were not so concerned with improving my own morality, I would be the first to follow you. I pray to God Almighty, hoping that He will forgive you and me. That he will remove pride and arrogance. Stop. You harm Islam and Muslims [...] Where's leniency? Where's forgiveness? Where's piety? Where is God in all this?

[00:15:03 – 00:17:01]

These scenes take to the fore a conflict in the interpretation of how to live a proper Islamic life and about mercy and generosity. The director Abderrahmane Sissakou here gives space for an articulation of gentle Muslim wisdom in clear opposition to the violent ISIS leader and his armed comrades. Different forms of faith are aired. Diversity of piety is expressed, and for the purpose of this article, especially faith beyond the „good” and „bad” stereotype. Here, we find a compelling voice of pious Muslim wisdom upheld by women and men with integrity and dignity.

### 3.4. Heated discourses

What is at stake when the Muslim faith has also become such a heated issue on the screen? British scholar Robin Richardson outlines underlying discourses or “big pictures”, which he argues are established as lines of thought in contemporary society (Richardson, 2010, p. 25). A first discourse is a present critical stand against religion in *general*, which is looked upon as ignorance and superstition. A second discourse is a present critical stand against one *specific* religion, Islam, which is looked upon as backward and intolerant. A third discourse is a critical stand on specific *interpretations* of Islam in the form of Islamism, taking Islam into a political, militant, and extremist ideology.

In the film *Timbuktu*, the third standpoint is visible. Neither religion nor Islam, in general, is problematic. Pious men and women are portrayed as showing compelling spiritual strength with the help of their religious faith. The problem derives from extremist interpretations imposed by force on citizens in their everyday life.

Through the film *Timbuktu*, the audience is invited to grapple emotionally with discursive conflicts and tensions. In my view – and according to critics around the world – it is skillfully done by the director Abderrahmane Sissako with a fascinating sense of nuances in his storytelling. The film invites the viewer to engage with multi-layered meaning-making according to the concept outlined in the model above, *thick viewing*, letting the audience think and feel beyond stereotypical imagery, directed to more complex and thought-provoking meaning-making of high significance in contemporary society.

#### 4. The future – pious protagonists

The film landscape is changing for everyone interested in looking in new directions. Scholars such as Maytha Alhassen struggle to transform the clichéd tropes, making room for alternative storytelling (Alhassen, 2018). She describes independent creative film- and tv-artists who are meeting a growing curiosity about what the Muslim faith means in the world today. Interviewing Ramy Youssef, she hints at what is possible for young creative artists.

I entered Hollywood with the spiritual backbone of being a practicing Muslim. [...] I'm really fortunate to live and work in an era where being Muslim is something Hollywood wants to talk about and engage in. Hollywood wants to be on the right side of issues, and I've felt that people are very receptive to hearing about my experience as a Muslim and curious about how I practice my faith (Alhassen, 2018, p. 34).

Parallel to the prevailing hostile imagery of Muslims and Arabs, there is also a growing interest in nuanced examples of the Muslim faith. Maytha Alhassen underlines how this interest, using films and storytelling, can be part of a *cultural change*, to challenge hegemonic cultural narratives and hopefully also change behaviour (Alhassen, 2018, p. 45). Petersen's recent two anthologies about Muslims in the movies further map out possible new perspectives, new directions, and new understandings of this development (Petersen, 2021a; 2021b).

##### 4.1. Conclusion

To conclude, first, storytelling in mainstream movie culture is still indebted to stereotypical images of Islam/Muslims. Second, with the model of emotional engagement – being moved by movies – both anger and euphoria related to heated discourses on the Muslim faith on film can be understood. Third,

things are changing. More nuanced and thought-provoking storytelling, taking the audience beyond stereotypical imagery of the “good” and “bad” dichotomy, gives room for new Muslim faith positions, including compelling examples of integrity, wisdom, and spiritual grandness. Looking outside Hollywood and European mainstream films, new voices are heard, making way for a larger spectrum of religious and Muslim identities.

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### Filmography:

- Aladdin* (1992). Director: Ron Clements & John Musker
- Ashanti* (1979). Director: Richard Fleischer
- Baghdad in my Shadow* (2019). Director: Samir
- Diapason* (2019). Director: Hamed Tehrani
- Hidalgo* (2004). Director: Joe Johnston
- Homeland* tv-series (2011–2020). Creators: Alex Gansa & Howard Gordon
- Iron Man*-series (2008, 2010, 2013). Directors: Jon Favreau, Shane Black
- Jandar* (2019). Directors: Hosein Amiri Doumari, Pedram Amiri
- Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). Director: Ridley Scott
- The Hurt Locker* (2008). Director: Kathryn Bigelow
- The Kingdom* (2007). Director: Peter Berg
- The Ten Commandments* (1956). Director: Cecille B. DeMille
- Timbuktu* (2014). Director: Abderrahmane Sissako
- Traitor* (2008). Director: Jeffrey Nachmanoff
- True Lies* (1994). Director: James Cameron
- Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Director: Kathryn Bigelow

### Summary

This article analyses how movies have been reproducing pejorative and stereotypical storytelling regarding Muslims and Arabs for more than a century, mainly along a narrow-minded dichotomy between “bad” fanatic religious extremists or “good” non-religious secularized Muslims. The article explores alternative storytelling combined with using a model to discuss emotional engagement among moviegoers. The conclusion is that mainstream movie culture is still indebted to stereotypical images of Islam/Muslims. However, things are changing. More nuanced storytelling has been taking place lately, giving room for a broader spectrum of Muslim religious identity positions, including examples of religious wisdom and spiritual integrity, offering the audience imagery beyond the stereotypical “good” and “bad” dichotomy. Looking outside Hollywood and European mainstream films, new voices are being heard, making way for a wider spectrum of views.

### **Pobożni bohaterowie: wykorzystanie ekranu do poszerzenia ujęcia wiary muzułmańskiej poza dychotomią „dobrego” i „złego”**

#### Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule analizie poddano sposób, w jaki kinematografia od ponad wieku przedstawia pejoratywny i stereotypowy obraz o muzułmanach i Arabach, głównie w ramach dychotomii między „złymi” fanatycznymi religijnymi ekstremistami a „dobrymi” niereligijnymi, zsekularyzowanymi muzułmanami. Ponadto celem opracowania było zbadanie różnych sposobów narracji z zastosowaniem modelu opisującego zaangażowanie emocjonalne widzów. W konkluzji autor stwierdza, że choć główny nurt filmowy nadal obciążony jest stereotypowymi obrazami islamu/muzułmanów, to sytuacja się zmienia. W ostatnim czasie pojawiają się opowieści, które pokazują szersze spektrum muzułmańskich tożsamości religijnych, obejmujące przykłady religijnej mądrości i duchowej integralności, oferując odbiorcom obrazy wykraczające poza dychotomię „dobrego” i „złego”. Poza głównym nurtem kinematografii hollywoodzkiej i europejskiej pojawiają się nowe głosy, dzięki którym możliwe jest ukazanie szerszego wachlarza postaw.