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## New Approaches to Islam in Film

Sophia Rose Arjana  
Western Kentucky University, [sophia.arjana@wku.edu](mailto:sophia.arjana@wku.edu)

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## New Approaches to Islam in Film

### Abstract

This is a book review of Kristian Petersen, ed., *New Approaches to Islam in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

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### Author Notes

Sophia Arjana is Associate Professor of Religious Studies in the Potter College of Arts and Letters at Western Kentucky University. She is the author of four books, including *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford, 2015) and her latest, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace* (Oneworld, 2020). Her current project, titled *The Mosque with the Thatched Roof*, explores the role of memory in religious traditions in Indonesia.

Petersen, Kristian, editor. *New Approaches to Islam in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

*New Approaches to Islam in Film*, part of the Routledge Series in Religion and Film, is a rich and diverse collection of studies that makes an important contribution to the study of Muslims in cinema. Expertly edited by Kristian Petersen, whose wide-ranging scholarship includes the important monograph *Interpreting Islam in China: Pilgrimage, Scripture, and Language in the Han Kitab* (Oxford, 2017) and work on the intersection between Islamophobia and race, this volume represents a wide field of disciplines and perspectives on Islam in film. The book's content is organized into five sections: New sources, New communities, New perspectives, New directions, and New understandings of conflict. Rather than using this volume to focus on one geographical area, topic, or genre of film, Petersen has put together a work that expands the conventional understanding of an academic source in film studies, incorporates often neglected Muslim communities such as Latino/Latina and LGBTQ voices, and offers an expansive view of Muslims in film that includes comedy, drama, and documentary film.

The representation of Muslims in popular culture is a topic that often focuses on the more negative and pernicious ways that Islam is portrayed—in some cases through Muslim bodies that are villainous, sinister, or monstrous. In this volume, the topic of representation goes far beyond these concerns to include issues such as nationalism, racial identity, hybrid masculinities, transnational feminism, and cultural coexistence. The first section of the book, titled “New sources,” opens with Mika'il A. Petin's study of race and torture porn in the film *Five Fingers*. As the author notes, this film offers a reflection of the War on Terror through a character who interrogates the moral position of the U.S. As Petin writes, “The torturer can almost never be the hero” (22). Petin's work demonstrates how torture porn is a part of post-9/11 film in ways that

both sustain Islamophobia and challenge the U.S.'s response to transnational political violence. Other chapters in this section include an analysis of an unproduced screenplay on Prophet Muhammad and the experience of Muslims in the Egyptian film industry.

In the next section, "New communities," Yamil Avivi gives us a much-needed reflection on the experiences of Latino Muslim men through two documentary films, *New Muslim Cool* (2009) and *A Son's Sacrifice* (2007). This chapter provides examples of the complexities of the Muslim American experience, often involving struggles with identity that are difficult to resolve. One example is voiced by Imran's struggle to be accepted as Muslim despite his lack of fluency in the Arabic language. In a point of conflict with his father, whose halal business is dependent on religious authenticity, Imran is told by his dad, "I built [my business] from nothing and my son could destroy [it] in one minute" (57). Like many of the contributions in this volume, Avivi's work is theoretically rich and includes the borderland theory of Gloria Anzaldua, which frames Latino and Latina experience as one marked by hybridization—and for women, as a space influenced by patriarchal and colonial forces (61).

Aman Agah's chapter on LGBTQ Muslims is another rich contribution that includes a segment of the Muslim community scholars often ignore. One of the important questions asked by Agah is: how do queer Muslims negotiate the norms of North American society? Using Butler's theory of gender as performance, Agah also examines how queer Muslims perform race and religion (75). In one instance, a character "steps away from performing whiteness and heteronormativity and embraces his brownness and queerness" (77). As Agah argues, the way that LGBTQ Muslims are represented in film is linked to the racial and cultural identities of these characters, for these are cases in which the "structures of identity" are limited by the Otherness of Muslims in American film (70).

The third section, “New perspectives,” includes a number of compelling chapters. Among these is Bilal Yorulmaz’s study of the ways that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is portrayed in modern film. He begins with an explanation of how Prophet Muhammad is described through hadith that detail his virtues, manners, clothing, and other details (124). This is followed by a discussion of *shama’il* books, volumes that described the Prophet’s appearance, which influenced artistic depictions (124-127). Yorulmaz notes, for instance, that the influence of Nur Muhammad (“the light of Muhammad”) resulted in depictions of the Prophet with a halo, or his face covered with a veil, popular in Shi’i and Sufi communities (127). Much like the diversity of representations of Muhammad in painting and other artistic genres, film is a space that offers different perspectives on how the Prophet should be portrayed. In *The Message* (1976), he is never shown, but his presence is suggested, through his gaze, showing a detail such as “Muhammad’s camel’s head, his stick, and the crowd around him” (131). In contrast, the film *Muhammad: Messenger of God* (2015) uses artistic conventions also found in Persian miniature paintings that show the body, but not the face, of the Prophet (131). As Yorulmaz explains, these two films use established artistic conventions to portray the Prophet. In *The Message*, the *hilye* tradition which gives the Prophet’s point of view is adopted; and in *Muhammad: The Messenger of God*, the face is kept hidden through the use of “a veil, light, curtain, hand, or hair” (133). In a sense, film serves as a space for the continuation of well-established Islamic art genres, which are translated to the screen. The other two contributions in this section also offer compelling studies on Islam in film, one on the place of Sufism in cinema, and the other on Orientalism in Cecil D. DeMille’s 1935 movie *The Crusades*.

“New directions” begins with Megan Goodwin’s gender analysis of Amirpour’s 2018 vampire film, *A Girl Walks Home Alone* (*Dokhtari dar shab tanhā be khāne miravad*). Goodwin

points out that in this film, Islam is “elusive, at once everywhere and nowhere” (139). The Girl (a vampire) wears a chador, but it is more a disguise than a religious commitment, although it likely makes her more “conspicuous” than invisible (140). The way this film represents the Muslim woman is, despite the lack of the Girl’s pronounced Muslim identity, revolutionary. As Petersen notes in an earlier chapter, “Goodwin uses the film to consider the constructed graphic image of Muslim women in American imagination, which designates her as weak and lacking agency. While historically Muslims have been formulated as monstrous in popular culture, Amirpour employs a visual Muslim monster as a means for demolishing patriarchy and misogyny” (6). The Girl rejects both the visions of Muslim femininity offered by popular culture and by patriarchy both within and outside of Islam.

A strength of this volume is the diversity of Muslim communities represented here. Another chapter in this section, Janmeh Moradiyan-Rizi’s chapter, explores the themes of female bodies and nationhood through the experiences of Afghans living in Iran. In the documentary *Sonita*, the position of Afghan refugees as a stateless community is clear; as individuals, they are treated in a paradoxical way. Moradivan-Rizi describes the Iranian state’s approach as “welcoming but marginalizing” (150). The film also explores the ethics of intervention in women’s issues, when the filmmaker supports Sonita’s music career and pays \$2,000 to her mother to keep her in Iran, preventing her from being sent to Afghanistan to be married (152). The film bridges the gap between art and activism, demonstrating the real ways in which Muslims are involved in “cross-cultural and transnational women’s solidarity and alliance” (157). In addition to these two chapters, there is Milja Radovic’s analysis of film as “a scene of rupture,” in which movies are used to depict realities envisioning a “society that is meant to be” (161). Like many of the chapters in this volume,

theory is used to demonstrate how film is a transformative medium that has the potential to offer the viewer new experiences and ideas.

The last section of the volume (“New understandings of conflict”) includes contributions about the impact of terrorism on Arab populations, Muslim immigrants in Germany, and Muslim and Christian experiences in Lebanon. The first chapter by Clarissa Burt provides an important shift in the discourse about terrorism’s impact. Instead of focusing on its effect on American or European populations, the focus here is on the experiences of Arabs, both those engaged in political violence and those who suffer its consequences. As Burt writes, “There are no happy endings” (194). Through the analysis of four films, *Terrorism and Kebab* (1992), *The Terrorist* (1994), *The Closed Door* (1999), and *The Yacoubian Building* (2006), the author shows how Egyptian cinema looks at the problem of terrorism, both its justification through religious arguments and the communal responses of the majority of Muslims, who reject terrorism as a political tactic. Burt suggests that the existence of two modes of authority, repressive governments and Islamist organizations, “begs the question of what solution might be found for such extremist violence” (194).

Burt’s question is a significant one, and is in excellent company in this volume, which offers a rich collection of scholarship that is not only about Islam in film, but about the experiences, hopes, and dreams of Muslims in places ranging from the U.S. to Egypt. Much credit goes to Petersen, who has put together a volume that is not only useful for understanding the current state of Islam in film but also for introducing topics important in the study of Islam, including gender, conflict, race, colonialism, representation, and sexuality. I recommend this book for a wide number of courses, from film studies to Islamic Studies, where it offers a wonderful resource for both professors and students.