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Across the Sea

Kristian Petersen
kjpetersen@unomaha.edu

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Abstract
This is a film review of *Across the Sea* (2015), directed by Nisan Dag and Esra Saydam.

Author Notes
Kristian Petersen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. His research and teaching interests include Islamic Studies, East Asian traditions, Media Studies, and Theory and Methodology in the Study of Religion. He hosts several academic podcasts at Marginalia Review of Books, Religious Studies News, New Books in Religion, and New Books in Islamic Studies.
Across the Sea
(2015)
Directed by Nisan Dağ and Esra Saydam

Through a cross-Atlantic love story we discover how the past, present, and future are always shaping our lives. The feature directorial debut of Turkish filmmakers Esra Saydam and Nisan Dag, Across the Sea, tells the story of a New York couple, Damla, a Turkish native, and her American husband, Kevin. Damla is recently pregnant and Kevin is eager to travel to Turkey to see where Damla grew up before their child is born. Such an occasion arises when Damla finds out her childhood residence is being sold. As they return to the beach town of her youth on the Aegean Sea, near Izmir, we discover that Damla’s long time partner, Burak, still lives nearby. As the characters’ habits and flaws unfold in this slow-paced emotional narrative, the audience can soak in daily life on the Turkish coast. As the story comes to a dramatic climax Damla is confronted by her past.
choices, she reconciles her relationship with Burak, and decides to move on with Kevin.

Religious themes were not explicitly drawn to the surface and many will wonder how it may be used in a context of the study of religion. For this viewer the subtle marks of Muslim identity make this a unique film for thinking about representations of Muslims in film. The repeated negative image of Muslims as voiceless, violent monsters is well documented but *Across the Sea* challenges this depiction by narrating the everyday story of everyday people, who also happen to be Muslim. We see characters having fun, drinking, eating, smoking, swimming, and enjoying their lives. That they are Muslims does not manifest in any material ways in the film and allows viewers to see Muslims in a manner that disrupts the mediated portrait we are presented within western cinema.

However, it is clear the *Across the Sea*’s landscape is one inhabited by Muslims. If you listen, you can hear the call to prayer in the background during a scene in downtown Izmir. Some viewers will know the name Burak as an allusion to al-Burāq, the steed that took Muhammad on his Night Journey and Ascension (*al-‘Isrā’ wal-Mi’rāj*). These types of small markers may make the audience aware that this is a Muslim society despite not aligning with many viewers’ presumptions about what that means. Others may miss the connection altogether because Damla, Burak, and their network of Turkish family, friends, and neighbors are simply presented as cosmopolitan inhabitants of their local environment. Within the classroom the religious vagueness of the films’ characters can be drawn to the surface as an example of the diversity of Muslim identities.

*Overall, Across the Sea* is a thoughtful and entertaining film. It won the Audience Award for Narrative Feature and the Jury Honorable Mention for Narrative Feature at Slamdance and promises to be well received upon wider circulation.