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Visualizing Prophecy: The Impact of The Message on Islamic Identity Within the Moroccan Diaspora

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Abstract:
This article explores the complex relationship between religion and film-viewing practices among the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp, Belgium—an ethnically and linguistically diverse community that is predominantly Muslim. Through a media ethnographic approach, including in-depth interviews, a group discussion, and extensive fieldwork, the study reveals significant variations in film preferences and consumption patterns, shaped by socio-demographic and linguistic factors. A central focus of the study is the enduring popularity of the religious film ***Ar-Risalah*** *(****The Message****, 1976), a historical epic directed by Mustapha Akkad that portrays the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The film has achieved cult status within the community. The article examines the local distribution of the film and analyzes its reception among Moroccan diaspora audiences. By identifying three distinct orientations toward Islam within the community, the study uncovers varied modes of film reception—ranging from detached and analytical to deeply personal and immersive.* ***Ar-Risalah*** *is shown to play a significant role in intergenerational religious education, particularly within family settings and mosque environments. Furthermore, for individuals seeking to define the role of Islam in their personal lives, the film offers a source of spiritual inspiration and guidance.*

Keywords:
Film&diaspora, Moroccandiaspora, Islam, ArRisalah, Mediaethnography, TheMessage, MustaphaAkkad, Religionandmedia.

Introduction

The media practices of diasporic communities have attracted significant scholarly attention across various disciplines. Researchers have explored the complex roles that transnational media play in shaping diasporic connectedness—both internally among diasporic groups and externally with their countries of origin, whether these ties are real or imagined. This body of work also addresses how media facilitate identity negotiation and articulate socio-cultural belonging. While numerous studies have focused on satellite television and online media use (e.g., Mitra 2006; d'Haenens, Koeman & Saeys 2007; Sakr 2008), comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of film cultures, with the notable exception of the globally pervasive Bollywood cinema.

This article shifts focus to the nuanced engagement of diasporas with media through the lens of film consumption. It presents an ethnographically grounded analysis of film culture among the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp. Findings indicate that this community's engagement with Moroccan cinema is relatively limited, especially when compared to the more widespread consumption of Turkish and Bollywood films (Smets et al. 2012) or the pivotal role attributed

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to "homeland" films in other contexts (Cunningham 2001). Film preferences among the Moroccan diaspora tend to be diverse, shaped by socio-demographic factors and language proficiency.

However, one film stands out in its widespread appeal across generational and social lines: Ar Risalah (The Message: The Story of Islam), a historical epic about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, directed by Mustapha Akkad in 1976. Viewed through the lens of religious cinema (see Morgan 2005 on the concept of the "metagenre"), the popularity of Ar Risalah invites deeper inquiry into the intersections of religion and film reception within diasporic settings.

This article connects the case of Ar Risalah to broader literature on religion and film to explore two central questions: How is this film received across different groups and generations within the Moroccan community in Antwerp? And how can this case inform our understanding of the relationship between film and Islam in diasporic contexts?

The article begins by reviewing relevant literature on cinema and diasporic audiences to establish the methodological and theoretical framework of the research. It advocates for a critical, contextualized, and ethnographic approach to studying diasporic media consumption. It then focuses on Ar Risalah, analyzing both its textual features and the contexts of its reception. Finally, the discussion turns to the relationship between Islam and film culture among the Moroccan diaspora, arguing that Ar Risalah plays a significant role in facilitating intergenerational dialogue around religious identity and education.

Film, diaspora and the ethnographic turn in media studies

The ethnographic turn that reshaped the social sciences and cultural studies during the 1970s and 1980s has had a profound influence on mass media research, particularly what has come to be known as “new” audience studies (Corner 1991; Moores 1993; Spitulnik 1993; Drotner 1994: 333). This field encompasses a wide range of inquiries, including seminal studies on television viewing in family contexts (Morley 1986), ethnographic explorations of romance novel readers (Radway 1984), soap opera audiences (Ang 1985; Spence 2005), and virtual media ethnographies (Lindlof & Schatzer 1998).

This shift encouraged communication and media scholars to contextualize media practices within what Radway (1986: 100) and Gibson (2000: 264) describe as the “informal logic of everyday life,” and to interrogate the role of media in everyday social structures and identity formation. Unlike early audience research, which emphasized media effects, this ethnographic perspective focused on the lived experiences of media consumption and the challenge of how researchers might authentically reconstruct those experiences. Influenced by cultural anthropology, the ethnographic turn is marked by a “healthy scepticism toward universalism and essentialism,” as Peterson (2003: 11) puts it. He suggests that scholars should adopt “bottom-up” approaches rooted in empirical observations of media use in daily life.

Despite its contributions, media reception research has at times been criticized for lacking coherence and relying heavily on anecdotal evidence (Barker 2006; Michelle 2007: 181). In response to such critiques, Michelle (2007) proposes a comprehensive analytical framework for examining media reception within specific social groups. Her model integrates key theoretical approaches—such as Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model and frameworks by Schrøder (1986) and Liebes and Katz (1990)—and grounds them in empirical data. The

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resulting framework identifies four key modes of reception: **transparent** (text as life), **referential** (text as like life), **mediated** (text as a production), and **discursive** (text as a message).

While the scope of this article does not permit an in-depth discussion of Michelle's model, I will draw on key elements of it to analyze engagement with **Ar Risalah** within the Moroccan community, linking audience interactions with the text to these various modes of reception.

Staiger (1992; 2000) has persuasively linked film studies with the ethnographically oriented turn in audience research, advancing a context-activated and audience-activated approach to cinema history. This shift from purely text-based or production-centered analyses has opened up new perspectives for understanding the cultural history of film. It has paved the way for studies on stardom and identification (Stacey 1993), spectatorship (Mayne 1998), the social experiences of cinema-going (Maltby, Stokes & Allen 2007), historical constructions of audiencehood (Stokes & Maltby 1999), and more recently, detailed historical inquiries into film audiences and exhibition spaces (Gomery 1992; Maltby, Biltereyst & Meers 2011; Biltereyst, Maltby & Meers 2011). These concerns were also reflected in the large-scale international audience study of **The Lord of the Rings** (Barker & Mathijs 2008).

The imperative for film scholars to turn their attention to audiences remains pressing. This is not a criticism, but rather a shared recognition—also noted by the scholars cited—that film studies have not yet fully embraced the ethnographic turn, despite earlier calls to do so (Meers 2001). Textual analyses and cognitive models still dominate the field, while ethnographic approaches to audience reception remain marginalized. Miller (2010: 137) even attributes this marginalization as a factor contributing to film studies' "near-irrelevancy in the public sphere of popular criticism."

Reception studies, particularly in their conceptual frameworks, have overwhelmingly focused on Hollywood or English-language cinema. This tendency reflects, and perhaps extends, the Eurocentric and neocolonial orientations of the global film industry (Shohat & Stam 1994: 185).

Studying film reception among diasporic communities offers an opportunity to explore new terrains of audience engagement—spaces where Western cultural norms interact with non-Western traditions. Yet, film culture within diasporas has largely been documented in a piecemeal fashion, and primarily with reference to prolific film production hubs outside Hollywood, such as India's Bollywood (Desai 2005; Punathambekar 2005; Banaji 2006; Dudrah 2006; Athique 2011), Nigeria's Nollywood (Okome 2007; Oluyinka 2008), New Zealand's Wellywood (Thornley 2009), and Turkey's booming film industry (Smets et al. 2012).

Studies of globally dispersed Bollywood audiences, in particular, have illuminated how film consumption intersects with identity construction, performativity, and imagined communal belonging in diasporic contexts. I argue that the study of diasporic film reception stands to benefit significantly from the ethnographic turn in media studies. These cultural practices are often invisible from a top-down perspective—difficult to grasp through box office figures, trade statistics, or even the implied audiences constructed by producers.

Diasporic film cultures are frequently informal or semi-legal in structure: films are exchanged through personal travel to countries of origin, and unauthorized DVDs are sold at local ethnic grocery stores (Athique 2006, 2008; Lobato 2007). Online streaming and digital downloading

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also play a major role. In this context, a materialist and empirically grounded approach is essential.

Ethnographic methods allow for an understanding of reception within physical and social settings. As Peterson (2003: 131) puts it, these are "intertwined systems of constraints, systems of signification, and locations of activities" that deeply shape how people engage with media in their everyday lives. Prior research has already highlighted the spatial dimension of diasporic film reception—for example, in the case of Turkish film screenings creating semi-public diasporic spaces within urban environments (Smets et al. 2011).

Moreover, studying media in diasporic contexts inevitably raises questions about community formation, intergenerational dynamics, and audience composition. Ethnography is particularly well-suited for these inquiries, as it has challenged conventional approaches to mass media by reexamining its relationship to "reality" and the construction of social meaning (Spitulnik 1993: 298; see also Coleman 2010).

In the present article, I aim to explore several of these key concerns. First, I focus on a film located outside—or at least on the periphery—of mainstream Hollywood. This choice was inspired by a bottom-up, site-specific exploration of a community's film culture. Second, I examine how cultural practices and social structures intersect, using film reception as a lens to analyze broader socio-cultural and religious dynamics within the community.

Islam, media and diaspora

I have previously indicated my focus on *Ar Risalah* as a religious film, particularly examining the intersection between film reception and religion. While a singular, universally accepted definition of religion remains elusive (Durkheim 2001[1912]), I approach the concept in line with Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretation of religion as a complex system of myths, values, and rituals (see Dwyer 2006: 3–4). Religions, as dynamic socio-cultural systems, offer moral and ethical frameworks that operate on both micro (socialization) and macro (political) levels of society. In this context, I am especially interested in the interplay between religion, identity, and community.

The role of media within this dynamic is particularly fascinating. Historically, advances in media technologies have continuously shaped new forms of religiosity, as noted by Mandaville (2001: 176–177) and Fox (in press). The academic field exploring media and religion is now well-established, with dedicated journals, research centers, and a wide array of studies ranging from iconographic analysis to theological reflection. Among recent contributions, Hjarvard's (2008) framework is particularly noteworthy: he argues that contemporary (popular) media, in many cases, have assumed the roles once held by religious institutions—providing moral guidance, spiritual meaning, and a sense of community.

While studies focusing on Christianity and Western media have long dominated this field—particularly with regard to Hollywood films (Plate 2003: 9; Ortiz 2007)—recent decades have seen a growing body of scholarship on Islam and media, especially in the post-9/11 context. Islam's role has become central in emerging discourses on media in the Arab world, the pan-Arab public sphere, and the construction of transnational Muslim identities (Anderson 2005; Shavit 2009; Ayish 2008). Much of this research has concentrated on textual and discourse analyses (Hussain 2000; Poole 2002; Karim 2003; Marcotte 2010), as well as media production and ownership (Howard 2008; Anas 2009).

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A significant portion of this literature investigates the (mis)representation of Islam and Muslims in both Western and Middle Eastern media (Agha 2000; Ramji 2003; Silk 2003; Richardson & Poole 2006; Saeed 2007; Abu-Lughod 2005; Khatib 2006). These studies often explore how such representations are shaped by, and contribute to, political and ethnic tensions. The presence of Muslim diasporas in the West—and their frequent "othering" by mainstream media—has been a recurring and urgent subject in this discourse.

However, while these studies have effectively highlighted media bias and encouraged critical awareness, they have often overshadowed questions of audience reception and Muslims' own experiences of these media portrayals. Research has shown that the relationship between Islam and media reception is intricate and deeply layered. Audience studies—from orthodox Muslim communities in rural Asia (Caldarola 1990) to Muslim diasporas in industrialized Europe (Ahmad 2006; Harb & Bessaiso 2006; Gezudici & d'Haenens 2007)—demonstrate that religion and personal religiosity significantly influence the consumption and interpretation of transnational media. Islam, as a religious and cultural reference point, plays a key role in shaping media preferences and meaning-making practices.

Further research has linked media reception to the evolving role of Islam as an identity marker (Samad 1998), with issues of gender and sexuality playing a central role. In diasporic contexts, intergenerational differences often give rise to tensions around shame and modesty in media consumption (Hargreaves & Mahdjoub 1998: 442; El Sghiar & d'Haenens 2011).

Turning specifically to the relationship between cinema and Islam, we encounter a scholarly field similarly focused on representation and production. Key contributions include works by Shaheen (2009), Dönmez-Colin (2004, 2007), Kozlovic (2007), Tartoussieh (2007), Hirji (2008), Allagui & Abeer (2011), and Gugler (2011a), though in many cases, "Arab" and "Islam" are used interchangeably. These studies commonly address the convergence of Islam and politics, issues of censorship, and cinema's role in identity politics. However, reception studies in this area remain relatively rare—unlike the Indian context, where detailed and contextualized audience studies of religious media have a longer tradition (Mankekar 1999, 2002).

Scholars have also debated the permissibility of visual representation in Islam, reflecting broader ideological and theological discussions (Dwyer 2006: 97; see also Telford 1997; Bakker 2009 for similar concerns in other religious traditions). These debates are echoed in studies of Islamic cinema (Shafik 1998: 47–55; Khalil 2002; Hassanvand 2004). *Ar Risalah* (*The Message*) is a particularly illustrative case. From its pre-production phase to its contemporary circulation, the film has been subject to intense scholarly and theological scrutiny, involving some of the most prominent Islamic authorities (Bakker 2006: 78; Gugler 2011b: 22).

Methods and Background

Despite the conceptual and theoretical rigor evident in numerous media ethnographies, scholars have exhibited considerable ambivalence regarding their concrete methodological frameworks. Algan (2012: A3) contends that ethnographic audience research remains one of the most heavily critiqued domains within media studies scholarship. Indeed, many investigations suffer from a lack of transparency concerning methodological procedures, as well as insufficient reflexivity regarding the researcher's positionality and power dynamics. While studies categorized under the umbrella of media ethnography frequently do not involve

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prolonged immersion within a community, nor necessarily prioritize participant observation as their central method, they nonetheless share with classical ethnography a commitment to the meticulous collection of detailed, on-site data concerning embodied and contextualized subjects. This approach aspires to "record everyday life in as much of its complexity as the ethnographer can capture" (Peterson 2007: B4), often employing a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus groups, or experimental methods.

This empirical investigation is situated within the Moroccan diaspora community of Antwerp. Presently, approximately 50,000 residents of Antwerp trace their origins to Morocco, constituting one of the city's largest minority groups within an urban population exceeding 470,000 inhabitants (Stad Antwerp 2008; Clycq 2011). Moroccan migration to Belgium began in the mid-1960s, largely driven by Belgium's active recruitment of labor, while subsequent migration—following the official cessation of labor migration in 1973—has predominantly occurred through family reunification and marriage (Corijn 2009; Clycq 2011). Public discourse on this community often centers on socio-economic challenges and educational attainment. The majority of Antwerp's Moroccan diaspora hail from the northern regions of Tangier and Tétouan, as well as the eastern Oriental region (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal 2009: 33-34). Native languages include Arabic, Darija (Moroccan Arabic), and various dialects of the Amazigh (Berber) language group (ibid.: 44-46). Most community members have Berber ancestry—commonly estimated at between one half and two thirds of the population. Although the term "Berber" has faced criticism for its potentially pejorative connotations, it remains widely used both externally and internally to describe individuals originating from the Rif, Middle, and High Atlas regions. For the purposes of this study, I employ the term with this understanding.

The more neutral term **Amazigh**, meaning "free people," is favored by some scholars; however, it has yet to gain firm acceptance within academia or among the populations themselves (Van Amersfoort & Van Heelsum, 2007).

For this study, I adopted a multifaceted methodological approach. Initial access to respondents was facilitated through several acquaintances of Moroccan origin, as well as volunteers active in socio-cultural organizations, such as walk-in youth centers. Employing a snowball sampling technique, I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants, comprising 12 men and 8 women, aged between 15 and 71. To broaden the scope beyond these networks, I engaged with over 40 Moroccan-owned shops, cafés, organizations, and mosques located in neighborhoods with significant Moroccan populations. By requesting permission to leave or display bilingual advertisements seeking research participants, I initiated conversations about film culture and my overarching research questions. While this strategy yielded only two interviewees directly, it afforded numerous informal interactions, enriching my field notes. Notably, the film **Ar Risalah** frequently emerged in these discussions, subsequently informing my focus on this work.

As my fieldwork progressed, it became evident that **Ar Risalah** occupied a distinctive place within Moroccan film culture. I dedicated considerable effort to identifying all local retailers offering the film and engaged with shop owners regarding its circulation. Many establishments welcomed the research and allowed for repeated visits. For instance, at an all-male tea house, I conducted a focus group interview with four regular patrons aged 23, 28, 40, and 42. Additionally, I attended multiple social gatherings after Friday prayers at a

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Moroccan mosque over a three-month period (November 2010 – January 2011) and participated in a screening of **Ar Risalah** aimed at young Muslims. I was also invited to a youth organization on four occasions, where informal conversations during activities such as television viewing, gaming, and football provided valuable insights into youth culture within the Moroccan community. Lastly, I joined three family gatherings, typically held before or after interviews with individual family members, where film was discussed within a broader familial context.

The transcripts from individual interviews and the focus group were coded using NVivo software. I applied a mixed coding framework that included conceptual codes derived from the literature (e.g., "ethnic identification"), thematic codes (e.g., "family," "leisure"), as well as in-vivo codes introduced by respondents themselves (e.g., "taboo themes"). Both interview formats explored film consumption in general, perceptions of Moroccan and Arab cinema, responses to **Ar Risalah**, and broader topics such as orientations toward Islam and constructions of national and ethnic identity.

It is important to reflect on the interviewing process itself. The conversational interview method facilitated the collection of nuanced, on-site information about **Ar Risalah**'s role within the community; however, my identity as an interviewer likely influenced participants' discourse around religion. Most respondents probably identified me as a non-Muslim based on my appearance or name. Several openly inquired about my own religious beliefs, engaging in candid dialogues about cultural and religious differences.

Readers should be mindful that this dynamic may have led some interviewees to emphasize the distinctiveness or "otherness" of Islam, or to foreground its significance within the interview context. In what appeared to be an attempt to relate to the interviewer's presumed European/Christian background, a notable number of respondents referenced "Jesus and Moses films," underscoring that "Jesus also belongs to our religion [...]. We watch those and know about their lives and deeds" (Omar, 14). Such issues of power relations and self-disclosure are characteristic of qualitative interviewing (Abell et al., 2006) and necessitate an open, non-directive interviewing style coupled with critical reflexivity regarding the interview context.

As anticipated, film consumption patterns among the Moroccan diaspora proved heterogeneous. Throughout the study, I encountered avid enthusiasts of Egyptian melodramas, French cinema, and American blockbusters, as well as many who embraced a fluid affinity for all these genres. Preliminary findings from this audience research have been elaborated in detail elsewhere (Smets, 2012). Despite the diversity of individual experiences, discernible patterns emerged, primarily shaped by socio-demographic and linguistic factors. First-generation migrants tended to be less familiar with contemporary mainstream cinema, often recalling childhood favorites such as Westerns, martial arts films, and Hindi musicals from Morocco, or French-language films where language proficiency allowed. Their current viewing habits largely centered on these nostalgic films or contemporary Middle Eastern (predominantly Egyptian) melodramas. In contrast, second- and third-generation respondents grew up immersed in mainstream American and European film cultures. Among diaspora youth, Hollywood cinema appeared normative, although it was not immune to critique regarding industry practices and representational politics.

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Another finding was that Moroccan "homeland" film consumption is very limited. Respondents mainly attributed this to the lack of (qualitative) film production. Indeed, the Moroccan film industry faces many structural difficulties and challenges (Dwyer 2002; Carter 2009; Orlando 2011). Still, having grown up during the satellite era, the younger generation is often quite familiar with Moroccan and Arab television and films. Some respondents actively sought out and engaged with these films, but this was rather the exception. As already hinted, the film I discuss here, **Ar Risalah**, transcended the usual diversity in film preferences among people of Moroccan origin and was generally well received. In the following section, I focus on the film's storyline and context as well as its local circulation in Antwerp, to explore the relationship between Islam and film reception.

This study examines Ar Risalah within its Cinematic context and explores how the film circulates among audiences

Although **Ar Risalah** holds a monumental place in popular culture within the Islamic world and beyond, it has been rarely discussed in academic circles. The notable exceptions include Bakker's (2006) in-depth analysis of Muhammad's portrayal in the film, as well as shorter references found in volumes on Middle Eastern and North African cinema (notably Gugler 2011b: 22). Following the success of the film **Jesus Christ Superstar** (Norman Jewison, 1973), Syrian-born and Hollywood-trained filmmaker Mustapha Akkad embarked on creating a film about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The production took place in Morocco and Libya, with partial sponsorship from their respective leaders, King Hassan II and Muammar Qaddafi.

Employing a back-to-back shooting method reminiscent of early multilingual sound films, Akkad filmed both Arabic and English versions of **Ar Risalah** using different lead actors. The film deliberately avoids the direct depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, it focuses on his uncle, Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib, portrayed by Anthony Quinn in the English version. When Muhammad receives a vision of the Archangel Gabriel, he denounces the worship of the Kaaba's idols and calls the people of Mecca to worship the one true God. As this leads to conflict with Mecca's corrupt leaders, Hamza — nicknamed the "Lion of God" — aids Muhammad in conquering the city in the name of God.

Alongside Muhammad's prophetic mission in Mecca, the film highlights key early events in Islamic history, such as the migration to Medina and the Battles of Badr and Uhud, as seen through the eyes of peripheral characters like Hamza. The Prophet himself remains unseen and unheard; his words and actions are conveyed through other characters or suggested through stylistic effects. Several incidents marked the film's international release in 1976, including a hostage situation involving employees of the Jewish B'nai B'rith organization by Black Muslim militants in Washington, DC (Bakker 2006: 78-79).

Although there is no comprehensive record of the film's screenings in Belgium or Antwerp, it is likely that the English version was shown there in 1978. Older respondents remembered this as a remarkable and unprecedented event. Rather than being primarily distributed through theaters, **Ar Risalah** has since circulated widely via broadcast on satellite television—often during Ramadan—and through video cassettes, DVDs, and online platforms. Fieldwork conducted in Antwerp revealed that copies of the film are ubiquitous,

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ranging from worn VHS tapes to newly burned DVDs. It is sold in Moroccan grocery stores, Islamic bookstores, and shops specializing in oriental music and films (Figures 1 & 2). At least 14 shops were found displaying the film. In some, **Ar Risalah** was the sole film among Arabic music and books, while in others it was displayed alongside DVDs of Quran recitations, documentaries about Islam, and the historical epic **Salahdin** (also known as **El Naser Salah el Dine**), directed by Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine (1963). Where the film was not in stock, shopkeepers assured that a copy could be made within minutes.

Given its extensive pirated circulation, **Ar Risalah** exemplifies what Lobato (2010: 114) terms "subcinema"—films that bypass conventional distribution channels. Lobato further describes pirated media as constituting "a dense network of markets, textual systems and (sub)cultures, one which is underground without being resistant" (ibid.: 118). Although none of the respondents openly condoned piracy, they implicitly regarded **Ar Risalah** as common property among Muslims—a tangible sign of religious devotion. Copying and exchanging films illegally appears to be a normalized practice that is seldom questioned.

Indeed, **Ar Risalah** has become one of the most widely viewed religious films in the Arab world and beyond. "The whole of Morocco has seen this incredible film, the whole Arab world even—all believers, everyone, even the King," says Hassan (60) of the film's popularity. Respondents often reported having watched it multiple times. For example, Omar (15) explained, "I always watch it… I watch it over and over again so that I don't forget it. It's such an important film." The film is particularly suited for family viewing, offering a rare occasion for different generations and genders to watch together, unlike the usual habit where men and women watch separately. Outside the family setting, some respondents recalled first seeing **Ar Risalah** during Islamic lessons or at the mosque on religious holidays such as Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice).

Images1&2:*DVD copies of ArRisalh at different Moroccan shops In Antwerp,among everyday goods such as cosmetics(right) ,remote controllers and an electric drill(left).*

The Role of Religion: Understanding Islam and Religious Devotion

In 2009, a comprehensive report was published on Belgian Moroccans, based on surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with hundreds of Belgian citizens of Moroccan descent

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(Saaf, Hida & Aghbal, 2009). Among the many topics explored, religious identity and conviction featured prominently. The study found that respondents identified more strongly with Islam than with any specific region or country, primarily describing themselves as Muslims (Ibid.: 107–108). Similarly, a more recent study on Muslims in Antwerp highlighted that the importance of religion for identity does not exclude identification as Belgian (Clycq, 2011: 47). Only 0.2% of respondents in the 2009 study identified as non-religious, while 98.6% considered themselves religious to varying degrees. The report further noted that religiosity tends to increase with age and is generally less pronounced among younger generations (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal, 2009: 110).

These figures underscore that religion plays a significant role within the Moroccan diaspora, but the socio-demographic context should not be overlooked (see Amara & Schnell, 2007; Ramaji, 2007 on Islamic religiosity and social change). Confirming this, interview data from my own study reveal similar substantial differences in how religiousness is negotiated across age and generations. However, it is not simply a linear increase of religiosity with age. Earlier studies (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul, 2003) showed that while many second-generation youths tend toward a more secular or less religious lifestyle, a considerable group actively embraces more ideological or conscious forms of Islam.

Focusing on Muslims' own self-understandings rather than external scientific categorizations—as suggested by Bectovic (2011: 1122)—respondents were asked about their personal views on Islam and its significance in their lives. To structure the diverse discursive positions toward Islam, I distinguish three partly overlapping categories: (1) Islam as self-evident; (2) Islam as a relative notion; and (3) Islam as a dissolving notion. This typology is not intended to oversimplify individual religious positions but serves as a useful interpretive framework for understanding different modes of reception.

The first group sees being Muslim as an essential part of life. For example, Mohammed (21) says, "It is part of my history and culture," while Naima (26) states, "Religion is just part of life. If you take that away, what else do we have?" Members of this group tend not to problematize their religiosity.

The second group, generally younger individuals raised in Belgium, regard religious traditions and beliefs as an inherent but relatively less influential part of their lives. They struggle to pinpoint Islam's exact role, representing an advanced stage of critical religious identity negotiation. Meryem (20) explains, "Religions are so theoretical. There is theory, but it needs to be put into practice, and that's quite hard." Similarly, Boudichat (51) shares, "I understand I am a Muslim. But I cannot say I understand the Quran because understanding it is not for ordinary people." This aligns with the 2009 survey results, in which 68.3% of respondents said they "try to follow the principles" (my emphasis) rather than simply "following" (18%) or "practicing the belief" (12.2%) (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal, 2009: 110). Furthermore, other studies have explored the transnational negotiation of Islamic practices (e.g., Khan, 2002; Tietze, 2002; Jeldtof, 2011).

The third group comprises only two people in the sample, both atheists born into mixed Belgian-Moroccan families. They expressed little or no affinity with Islam as a religion, though they acknowledged that Islam as a cultural identity might be a different matter.

Across all groups, two recurrent themes about religiosity emerged. First, religiousness is often seen as something that grows over a lifetime. Respondents noted a "religious revival"

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among older individuals and said that "religious consciousness" tends to develop with age. For instance, Omar (16) described a symbolic balance where "you gain coins for the 'good side' by doing good deeds," an understanding that typically comes with maturity. Older respondents, such as Abderrahim (60), a retired laborer, admitted, "The older you get, the more you begin to think about things… I might have debts [with God] before I die."

Second, there is a strong belief that Islam should be transmitted from parents to children—an observation consistent with other diasporic communities, such as Protestant Korean immigrants (Min & Kim, 2005), and confirmed among Belgian Muslims (Güngör, Fleischmann & Phalet, 2011). Parents like Abderrahim hope to see their children "being good Muslims for their own future," while children like Omar emphasize the importance of learning religion from their parents. Those who have distanced themselves from Islam, like Sarah (31), recognize that this is difficult for their families. Similarly, Riad (36), who proudly identifies as an atheist and self-acclaimed sinner, understands that his stance might hurt or disappoint his father. These dynamics should also be understood in the context of patriarchal family structures.

In addition to family influence, socio-cultural organizations and especially mosques play a crucial role. Beyond serving as sacred spaces, mosques contribute significantly to social work, education, and maintaining social cohesion within Muslim communities (Manço & Kanmaz, 2005; van Walle, 2011).

Respondents clearly link Islam with age: older individuals—primarily first-generation Moroccans born and raised in Morocco—tend to view religion as more central to their lives compared to younger generations born and raised in Belgium. This is not to say that younger people do not engage with Islam; they often use it as a framework to discuss values and traditions. However, despite being raised with Islamic values, younger respondents generally believe that religious awareness grows with life experience, or at least perceive older generations as more religious than themselves.

Beyond these personal negotiations of faith, Islam holds a significant social and intergenerational role. It is largely seen as something inherited and passed down rather than actively chosen—except in cases where individuals identify as atheists. Respondents frequently associate Islam with tradition and core values, often implying a tension or conflict with the prevailing Western cultural environment.

Conclusions

Miller (2010: 141) writes that the life of any popular or celebrated text is a journey across space and time—a life continuously remade through institutions, discourses, and practices of distribution and reception. *Ar Risalah* provides an excellent example of a film's multifaceted existence. Released in the 1970s, the film still holds a significant place within the Moroccan diaspora and presumably among Muslim communities beyond. Over time, it has passed through various stages of formal distribution and exhibition while increasingly circulating through informal and even illicit channels. Institutions such as mosques, Islamic educators, and television stations, particularly during periods like Ramadan, have played a crucial role in promoting the film's reach and reinforcing its status.

However, the film's cultural life could easily be overlooked by media scholars focusing solely on macro-level metrics like DVD sales or box office figures. Inspired by the

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ethnographic turn in media and film studies, I adopted a bottom-up approach to exploring the film culture within the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp, uncovering a rich and complex engagement with religious cinema such as *Ar Risalah*.

Respondents in this study reported a strong connection between Islam and media consumption, especially film, framed by normative guidelines that specify which content is permissible depending on the company present. Intergenerational respect, a key value identified by respondents as characteristic of Islamic culture, was central to this normative framework—echoing findings from previous reception studies. Religious films, and *Ar Risalah* in particular, emerged as ideal for family viewing across generations.

Through analysis, I identified three major attitudes towards Islam: the self-evident, the relative/negotiated, and the alienated positions. These categories are fluid, reflecting people's shifting relationships with the film, recalling Schrøder's (2003) and Michelle's (2007: 213-215) notion of "commuting" between different modes of reception. Individuals who distanced themselves from Islam tended to engage with the film in a detached or objective manner, appreciating it mainly for nostalgic or aesthetic reasons. Conversely, the other two groups—who recognized Islam's central role in their lives—embraced the film as a valuable source of religious history and instruction.

This aligns with the idea that religion is traditionally transmitted from older to younger generations, explaining why *Ar Risalah* remains a tool for parents teaching their children and is often used in Quranic lessons. Drawing on Michelle's (2004) concepts of transparent and subjective modes of reception, I argue that *Ar Risalah* is perceived as a vivid, almost spectacular mirror of reality. On a connotative and discursive level, respondents who experienced tension in integrating Islamic tradition into their lives were more profoundly moved by the film's message.

Fundamentally viewed as a message of unity, equality, and moral purity, *Ar Risalah* serves not only as entertainment but also as a source of religious inspiration and guidance. With a growing number of younger individuals struggling to practice, express, or identify with their faith amid the challenges of diaspora and migration, the film's cultural significance is unlikely to diminish.

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