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## Religious Hegemony and "Muslim" Horror Movies

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## Religious Hegemony and "Muslim" Horror Movies

### Abstract

The present paper examines horror films originating in Muslim contexts and available on U.S. streaming services. Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the paper examines how such films negotiate and articulate with the dominant Hollywood mainstream horror genre with particular attention to the hegemonic power of the mainstream with its Christian iconography and assumptions.

### Keywords

Horror, Islam, Hegemony, Genre, Culture

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### Author Notes

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## **Introduction**

Despite many international film efforts and even the great commercial success of industries such as Bollywood,<sup>1</sup> no other production center rivals the global dominance of Hollywood as the most powerful influence on movies and the defining authority on many genres.<sup>2</sup> Digitization and liberalization of media laws and social attitudes in many parts of the world have, however, resulted in a diversification of movie production. Film production has seen increased prominence in previously unlikely centers such as Gulf Arab nations, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The growth of horror film production from Muslim-majority nations raises questions about the evolution of film in that culture and their articulation with dominant mainstream tropes and conventions.

The present paper investigated the emergence of films from Muslim-majority countries rooted in various Islamic traditions and cultures and available on US streaming platforms. Using a selection of films that have been available to broader audiences through platforms such as Netflix, the study examined supernatural or religious themes in these films in the context of the hegemonic dominance of Christian iconography and themes in mainstream films. The analysis is particularly concerned with the extent to which the films examined follow norms of mainstream horror and the films' techniques for articulation with external audiences.

## Literature Review

### Gramsci, Hegemony, Religion and Film

The notion of hegemonic power as a continuing struggle for meaning emerges out of the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's hegemony is useful in the present analysis for its focus on the power of meaning and the dynamic struggles in which less-dominant groups negotiate against entrenched institutional power to resist imposed systems of meanings. More specifically, Gramsci has characterized the negotiations of meanings between global Christian and Muslim discourses as being a site of contested hegemonies.<sup>3</sup> This notion is particularly relevant where horror films from Muslim-majority countries compete (at home and abroad) with the dominant Hollywood mainstream.

Italian authorities imprisoned Antonio Gramsci in 1926 when film was still a silent medium but already powerful as a source of social and cultural narrative. Gramsci, in 1916, noted that film was quickly eclipsing theater as a popular medium but did not fully endorse the moving pictures, writing that:

The reason for success of the cinema and its absorption of former theatre audiences is purely economic. The cinema offers exactly the same sensations as the popular theatre, but under better conditions, with the choreographic contrivances of a false intellectualism, without promising too much and delivering too little.<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of modern film into a major vehicle of discourse and ideology invites examination of film in the context of Gramsci's notions of cultural hegemony<sup>5</sup> including the power to spread ideas and beliefs through storytelling.

Despite ongoing debates about the evolution of the concept of hegemony,<sup>6</sup> the broader notion of cultural influences in a globalized and media-rich environment continues to be an important area of inquiry. Scholars have explored various aspects of Gramsci's notions of cultural hegemony in film in several geographical and historical contexts<sup>7</sup> and applied Gramsci's ideas to specific films (such as *Zombieland*<sup>8</sup>) to explore implications of social power and subdominant groups.<sup>9</sup>

Shin and Namkung<sup>10</sup> explored Gramscian "filmic hegemony" in which the historical dominance of United States film making combines with the dominance of modern United States popular culture. These influences manifest Gramscian consent when audiences acknowledge U.S. films and cultural tropes as *de facto* standards for judging other content. Audiences normalize this notion and willingly consume these materials even if the ideas and cultural norms contained in them are foreign.

Landy<sup>11</sup> suggested that by the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gramsci was already observing an international social dimension to cinema with some "sensitivity to the increasing dominance of Americanness." Schiller<sup>12</sup> and McPhail,<sup>13</sup> among others, argued in the 1970s and 80s that, through dominance in international media technologies and content, wealthy developed nations exercised hegemonic power over developing nations. The hegemonic power of American film has been a continuing theme in academic investigation.<sup>14</sup> Consider, for example, Shin and

Namkung's analysis of cultural hegemony in the *James Bond 007* films in which they argued that:

American values are diffused worldwide via the motion picture industry. The *007* series is a masterpiece that successfully adjusted to the Hollywood system where American capital and structure prevails. The films are controlled by U.S. funding and reflect American perspectives vividly. Between the lines in the scripts, filmgoers are urged to link the United States with positive—hence legitimate—values and accept American's dominant position.<sup>15</sup>

Other Hollywood blockbusters have similarly presented cultural and political ideas that privilege particular dominant groups including Caucasian males in Cameron's *Avatar*<sup>16</sup> and Western cultural ideas in the *Indiana Jones* series.<sup>17</sup> Weaver-Hightower described The *Indiana Jones* franchise as “allegorizing contemporary fantasies of US global domination,” and spreading “a vision of the US in a neo-imperial relationship to the rest of the world” that involved “revising history to insert US characters into a global imperial dynamic in which they were largely historically absent.”<sup>18</sup> Implicit in the neocolonial fantasies and hegemonic discourse of such films are undercurrents of Christian religion which, though central to the stories, often passed unnoticed. From the assumed supernatural power of the Ark of the Covenant to the use of the imagery of the Crusades and the portrayal of (non-Christian) Indians as savage consumers of monkey brains, religious assertions pervade the content. These often intertwine with implicit political claims. Weaver-Hightower noted, for example, that:

...(T)he American Jones's acquisition of the Ark is sanctioned by the Christian God, who burns the Nazi swastika from the crate containing the Ark, melting the Nazis and Belloq with supernatural fury while sparing Jones and his love interest, the plucky Marion. In this story US policy carries God's stamp of approval...<sup>19</sup>

Gramsci saw both media and religion as vehicles of hegemony (and sites of hegemonic struggle) making specific reference to the struggle between Muslim-majority nations and the West. As Boothman has noted: "What Gramsci always has in mind in his line of thinking on Islam, on the Muslim world and on the analogies and comparisons with the Christian world, is the question of rival hegemonies."<sup>20</sup> We may also consider what scholars such as Engstrom and Valenzano as well as Lewis have characterized as the relatively powerful position and implicit acceptability and positive treatment of religion (predominantly Christianity) in US media over many years.<sup>21</sup>

Hegemony depends on the subject being a willing participant in the normalization of ideas. As Ghulam Hussain has noted "hegemony rests on the manufacture of 'consent'... sought through popular ideologies and narratives."<sup>22</sup> Dubois wrote of the "Gramscian sense of hegemony, in which the ideas, symbols, and categories of the powerful gain a universal currency, and are unknowingly but willingly adopted by the powerless."<sup>23</sup> This universal currency may present itself as broad narrative patterns resulting from the overwhelming force of global media with theistic assumptions and specifically Christian symbols. Thus, to read or interpret most horror films with religious themes, viewers must willingly (even if

temporarily) accept the power of the cross, holy water and Bible verses. Lash identified the use of such symbolic discourse as an instrument of hegemonic struggle, noting (after Laclau, Butler and Žižek<sup>24</sup> and Kristeva<sup>25</sup>) that the symbolic “carries out normalizing functions of domination.”<sup>26</sup>

This struggle over contested meanings is central, as well, to Hall’s (re)presentation which posits an interplay between the dominant discourse and resistive processes of deconstruction and countering.<sup>27</sup> Studies of such phenomena as fashion<sup>28</sup> and television viewing<sup>29</sup> in Muslim-majority nations have demonstrated that audiences mentally adapt foreign content to local norms and contexts—attesting to a struggle over contested meanings in the face of cultural hegemony.

Yet the struggle for meaning involves further complications in considering horror films from Islamic cultures against hegemonic Christian discourses, namely that of broad similarities in some aspects of religious beliefs between the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition of most film and the Islamic tradition. Belief in supernatural beings known as “angels” for example, exists in all three religions. The singular and omnipotent God and a singular Satan are also common features as are notions of divine judgement and an afterlife as well as acceptance of divine messages through various prophets. Even specific supernatural figures such as the Archangel Gabriel feature across the traditions.<sup>30</sup>



### **Movies in the Arab and Muslim Contexts**

Despite the historical importance of Egyptian cinema<sup>31</sup> and its popularity with Arab-speaking audiences, the notion of cinema in Muslim-majority countries has been problematic. Strict moral codes<sup>32</sup> and fears about movies having political and anti-religious social influence<sup>33</sup> continue to constrain social responses to filmic content. Religious hardliners often still hold to prohibitions against images of humans or other animated beings.<sup>34</sup>

Challenges facing film makers in, and about, Islamic environments were evident in Akkad's *The Message* (1976)<sup>35</sup> where the director (who earned degrees in theatre and cinema production in the United States)<sup>36</sup> told the story of the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Strong religious convention prevented the director from using any representation of Muhammad's voice or likeness.<sup>37</sup> This restriction extended to the Prophet's family and companions (*Sahaba*/الصحابه), leaving the film maker to articulate the story through one of the Prophet's uncles.<sup>38</sup>

Arab/Muslim governments funded the film in part<sup>39</sup> and initial guidance came from Islamic authorities such as Egypt's *Al-Azhar* University and Lebanon's *Shiite* Council. Akkad overcame the difficulties of visual portrayal through indirect dialogue (characters would often "repeat" the unheard words of the Prophet) and point-of-view shots to suggest what the Prophet was seeing.<sup>40</sup> Faruque has described this film as a "blockbuster in the Islamic world" and one which, with its English version, attempted to "make Islam's history and message accessible to a

global audience.”<sup>41</sup> The film’s initial and continuing popularity with audiences in Muslim-majority countries and internationally<sup>42</sup> raises questions about the absoluteness of Hollywood’s hegemonic dominance, particularly where audiences may seek out “authenticities” which Hollywood simply cannot produce. In this important example, we may observe something of the power struggle implicit in Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. The appeal of *The Message* for Muslim audiences suggests that subdominant narratives may resist, by their unique properties and cues, the established dominance of entrenched mainstream narratives.

Yet film exists in global contexts that Akkad could not escape. Beirut’s *Daily Star* has noted that “In its visual language, Akkad's film pays homage to the conventions of historical drama circulating in Hollywood in the 1970s with villains and heroes, oppression and vindication” while also emulating “the Hollywood epics that set out to dramatize stories from the Jewish and Christian tradition.”<sup>43</sup> Even in Akkad’s portrayal of Islamic history there also exists at least the suggestion that the commercial success of the preceding *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1973<sup>44</sup> influenced efforts to produce *The Message*. This observation points us squarely in the direction of the dominant Christian discourse and the hegemonic power of Christianity in the movies.

We may also observe the importance of the global context and more internecine hegemonic struggles in the case of Iranian director Majid Majidi’s 2015 film *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* (محمد رسول الله).<sup>45</sup> *Sunni and Shiite*

sensibilities (and hegemonies) clashed on the international stage when religious authorities in Saudi Arabia and Cairo denounced the film's portrayal of the Prophet (in childhood) on screen.<sup>46</sup> Several countries with *Sunni* majorities banned the film and a Muslim group in India issued a *fatwa* against the director.<sup>47</sup>

Portrayals of the Prophet aside, film has been a popular medium across Muslim-majority nations for many years. Despite widespread censorship, movie theaters are popular in many Muslim-majority countries and other later avenues of film consumption including physical video formats, satellite and streaming delivery have made film accessible to Muslim audiences in various degrees. The mix of available options has been diverse over many decades. Alongside popular Hollywood offerings, Egyptian cinema has been dominant in the Arab-speaking world since the 1930s, particularly with the advent of sound and the films' musical elements.<sup>48</sup> Bollywood films are also very popular in many Muslim-majority nations.<sup>49</sup>

Particularly since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, scholars have often focused on negative portrayals and stereotyping of Islam, Muslims, and Arabs in Hollywood film.<sup>50</sup> This aversion to all things Islamic in Hollywood was not always the case, as Calabria has chronicled with the case of Cecil B. DeMille's use of the *Qur'an* in his 1956 production of *The Ten Commandments*.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond Hollywood's widespread negative portrayals, film has also addressed issue of identity in Muslim-majority countries. Sayfo positioned this identity role as a hegemonic struggle against Western dominance, noting that:

(E)arly features of Egyptian film were part of a nationalist movement that was opposed to the West, yet at the same time admired it and accepted its supremacy. From the very beginning, some of the Egyptian directors favored historical topics and they often used analogies from the past as tools for anti-imperialist struggle.<sup>52</sup>

A focus on national identity was evident, also, in the ban on foreign films after the 1979 Iranian revolution<sup>53</sup> as much as in the subsequent development of film production in Iran in the 1990s. Other countries including Malaysia<sup>54</sup> and even Saudi Arabia<sup>55</sup> have more recently embarked on supporting film production in furtherance of their national identities. Digital production and distribution technologies have also enabled more widespread commercial production activity in both film and television.

### **Horror, Religion and Films**

Martin traced the term "horror" back to the Greek for shiver (as in fear or revulsion) and noted its use in Greek theatre.<sup>56</sup> Horror emerged as a film genre from early efforts such as Georges Méliès' *La Manoir Du Diable* in 1896<sup>57</sup> and has diversified into a broad range of content that aims to "frighten, shock, horrify, and disgust" audiences through references to elements such as the grotesque, the unknown and

the supernatural.<sup>58</sup> Even with horror that does not overtly pertain to religion, Detweiler has argued that, in the movies, “our fascination with monsters might just reflect an innate desire to experience the sacred.”<sup>59</sup>

Assumptions about the inherent truth and universal applicability of Christian ideas, values, and faith, (“pervasive Christianity”)<sup>60</sup> are evident in many genres of Hollywood film<sup>61</sup> but particularly instrumental in horror. Stone has remarked that “horror films frequently construct evil... even if unconsciously, within familiar religious coordinates—and in the West that has meant specifically Christian coordinates.”<sup>62</sup> Corbin and Campbell noted that in Coppola’s version of *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*:<sup>63</sup> “the film opens with Count Dracula going off to defend Christianity from the invading Turks.”<sup>64</sup>

Other famous horror films such as *Rosemary’s Baby*<sup>65</sup> and *Hellraiser*<sup>66</sup> feature elements such as Satan, demons and hell that are generally religious in nature but specifically Christian in detail and presentation. When Frank Cotton is torn apart in *Hellraiser*, for example, he speaks the biblical verse from John 11:35, “Jesus wept.”<sup>67</sup> Other films directly rooted in Christian ideas and theology include titles such as *The Omen*<sup>68</sup> and *The Exorcist*.<sup>69</sup>

Gjinali and Tunca questioned the presumed universality of responses to the global (Christian) horror mainstream, noting that for Muslim audiences, the horror exists only as a subjunctive premise without real-life relevance:

A person from the Muslim faith knows that such movies, where supernatural fantastic monsters/creatures are extensively used in foreign movies, will not appear in real life because this person does not believe in such monsters...<sup>70</sup>

Supernatural horror films from Muslim-majority countries face the challenges of articulating with the established global mainstream while expressing sometimes deeply local symbols and ideas. Partovi, for example, has noted that despite parallels with the global mainstream, the “horror” in an Iranian supernatural horror film is rooted “in Iranian popular (religious) culture, partly drawing inspiration from Islam.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Gjinali and Tunca, have noted an increase in horror offerings from Turkey since the 2000s that have focused on elements of local folklore and Islamic ideas for their source of horror.<sup>72</sup>

Among the most prominent supernatural antagonists in the emerging Muslim film universe are the beings collectively known as the *Jinn* (الجن) sometimes conventionally transliterated as *Djinn* (the latter form used here only when adopted in original works or citations). Though understood to refer to these supernatural beings, the term “*Jinn*” is also closely related to a broader notion of the unseen or hidden.<sup>73</sup> According to the *Qur’an*, God created the *Jinn* from smokeless fire<sup>74</sup> and, unlike angels, *Jinn* have free will. Belief in *Jinn* was common among pre-Islamic Arabs and other nearby cultures,<sup>75</sup> including *Jinn* worship among some groups.<sup>76</sup> The *Qur’an* and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*/أحاديث) contain numerous mentions of *Jinn*.<sup>77</sup> The term *Jinn* is often

problematic as it moves from general to specific usage and, among different groups, can reference several types and classes of supernatural being, including *Ghouls*, *Jann*, *Sheytans* (devils), *Efreets*, and *Marids*.<sup>78</sup> The term may also extend to other spirits such as ghosts with quite different properties.<sup>79</sup>

*Jinn* as a broad category of beings are not direct analogues to the Western demon, though parallels exist. In many Muslim cultures, for example, the *Jinn* are strongly associated with phenomena such as possession and are thought to influence human affairs through this and other techniques<sup>80</sup> which might include interfering with the meanings of messages<sup>81</sup> or even physical interventions such as abduction of children<sup>82</sup> or burning down houses.<sup>83</sup> As Khalifa and Hardie put it: "...according to Islamic belief, *Jinn* are real creatures that form a world other than that of mankind, capable of causing physical and mental harm to human beings."<sup>84</sup>

The *Jinn* in Islam challenge the Manichean distinction between heavenly angels and infernal demons of Western philosophy (*Jinn* having the choice of being good or evil and being accountable for their actions). Muslim communities often believe that the *Jinn* are so close to humans that they can even interbreed and at least one *Qur'anic* verse alludes to this possibility.<sup>85</sup>

Despite their very name suggesting that they are unseen, scripture, traditions, and folklore surrounding *Jinn* provide an array of descriptions. One *hadith* describes a crowd of *Jinn* as being like "thick masses of clouds."<sup>86</sup> Other sources describe them, when seen, as tall figures, often dark, and sometimes taking

animal forms.<sup>87</sup> Illustrations such as those in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian *Book of Wonders* (*Kitab-al-Bulhan*/كتاب البهان) present *Jinn* with hooves, horns, and fangs. Other descriptions suggest that *Jinn* are shapeshifting, taking on forms that mask their presence from human eyes, or attract humans to deception or harm.

The *Jinn* are also associated with the “evil eye” or *nazar* (نظر).<sup>88</sup> Both *Jinn* and humans are believed to be capable of casting the “evil eye”<sup>89</sup> even inadvertently. Muslims may say *Masha'Allah* (ما شاء الله) to avoid either casting or suffering the evil eye which can bring misfortune or even illness.<sup>90</sup> Protection also includes the use of charms and amulets and *Qur'anic* verses including the so-called “Verse of the Throne”<sup>91</sup> (*Ayatul Kursi*/آية الكرسي) as well as chapters *Al-Falaq* (الفلق) and *An-Nas* (الناس).

Gjinali and Tunca have described the *Jinn*'s deep association with religious life as a key element in the perception of supernatural horror among Muslim audiences and identification with the content:

When religious figures like a *jinn* is (*sic.*) used in the movie, because the viewer sees himself/herself as the main character in the movie, he or she will think that they will experience something similar and that the *jinn* will haunt them...<sup>92</sup>

### Research Focus

The present analysis addresses several concerns about the emergent horror film genre from Muslim-majority countries and its relationship to hegemonic dominance of Christian iconography and ideas in the broader film industry. The



present analysis is, therefore, concerned with what topics and emphases are evident and the extent to which the horror films under study follow formulae and traditions of mainstream horror films and, conversely, the extent to which they may challenge prevailing norms and expectations.

Gramsci's cultural hegemony suggests that hegemonic power manifests not just in the power to tell stories but also in the normalization of cultural assumptions to the point that they passively form part of discourse. From broader ideas such as demonic possession to specific practices such as the use of holy water in exorcisms, the dominant or hegemonic narrative requires little elucidation. For this reason, the present investigation also examined the extent to which horror movies from Muslim-majority countries utilized explanations or commentaries to negotiate their meanings with mainstream audiences.

The present study focused on films from Muslim-majority countries which have appeared on streaming services such as *Netflix*, *IMDb* and *Tubi*. For selection, a movie had to be available on a major U.S. streaming service, fall within the horror genre, produced in a Muslim-majority country and (at least in part) produced by locals of that country. The selection process took place over several months and identified several candidates including offerings from Kuwait, the UAE, Iran, Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt.

The methodological approach used in the present study may best be described as what Holsti has called latent content analysis.<sup>93</sup> This is an interpretive

approach focusing on not just describing content but also on elucidating the underlying meanings of the material in its social context.<sup>94</sup> The author viewed the selected films, taking note of (and marking timestamps for) religious or local traditional references in the dialog and in the visual content. This process resulted in a corpus of narrative extracts and visual descriptions as well as an emergent listing of relevant thematic elements that developed with each initial viewing and which the author refined on repeated viewings. This emergent thematic listing served as a cross-referencing tool across the various films, enabling comparisons and contrasts and creating a basis on which to evaluate commonalities.

## **Findings**

### **Western Tropes and Cultural Adaptation**

Horror films emerging from Muslim-majority nations and Muslim traditions examined in this paper included numerous elements of the established (predominantly Western/Christian) horror genre. As Koçer has noted, (in the case of Turkish horror films) past contributions have included a range of adaptive practices including simply excluding familiar Western/Christian motifs (such as crosses and holy water from vampire portrayals) or replacement with Islamic alternatives (*Qur'an* recitation instead of the Bible and rose water instead of holy water).<sup>95</sup> Koçer has invoked the words of Özkaracalar to suggest that these choices

are ideological ones in pursuit of “the reconfirmation of Islam’s power and validity.”<sup>96</sup>

The films examined here included several adaptations of popular Western and Hollywood tropes and included some offerings that made little effort to integrate local religious or folkloric elements. The 2019 Kuwaiti film *The End (Al-Nihaya/النهاية)*,<sup>97</sup> for example, relied on well-worn vampire motifs including a European (Caucasian) count in a castle. Some online commenters described *The End* as “hilariously ridiculously bad”<sup>98</sup> and found the mix of vampires with the Kuwaiti context to be confusing.

Al-Rawi has outlined the debates surrounding the emergence of the vampire mythologies as an evolution of the Arab ghoul (with embellishments from Antoine Galland who translated the Arabian Nights in the early 1700s), writing:

More than two thousand years have passed since the ghoul was first envisioned by a few Arab Bedouins in the heartland of Arabia, but it has refused to fade away from people’s memories. It eventually crossed the desert border to enter Asia and Africa. But it was Antoine Galland who made the ghoul travel further to reach Europe after giving it its new form.<sup>99</sup>

Featuring no attempt at cultural or historical integrations, *The End* attempted to justify using familiar vampire horror movie tropes in a Kuwaiti physical and linguistic context by explaining the vampires as arriving from Europe. The struggle with established genre conventions in this case was even broader than just articulating with dominant horror/vampire content. The film also attempted to

include elements of action movies featuring mismatched cop duos and even randomly included a Bollywood-styled song and dance number.

Across the films examined, emulation of the dominant mainstream horror films is evident in more subtle ways, including the use of techniques established in modern horror such as found-footage and surveillance footage depictions. The 2014 Egyptian movie *Warda* (وردة)<sup>100</sup> for example, uses a combination of visual content types in sometimes faux-documentary style including interviews with villagers, purported security camera footage and traditionally filmed content.

In addition to adopting filming techniques and tropes, the film *Warda* also conflates the notion of *Jinn* with the more Western notion of demons. When the character Yusuf says, “I’ll shoot the demon”<sup>101</sup> the original Arabic soundtrack uses the word *Jinn* so that the actual translation adds to the possible confusion of *Jinn* with demons. Further confusing is the notion of shooting a *Jinn*, suggesting that they are corporeal creatures whom physical bullets can harm.

*Warda* also shows characters viewing YouTube videos of demonic possession. Amna notes that “they’re all the same, even though they’re from different countries and religions”<sup>102</sup> including Christians from the United States, Egypt Coptic depictions and unspecified Indian clips. Perhaps in pursuit of this universality of possession as a driving element of the narrative, the film also finally presents the possessing force in *Warda* as being her dead sister, Faten. This portrayal appears to veer suddenly away from the traditional Islamic notion of *Jinn*

in favor of a kind of more mainstream/Western ghost-possession. A possible explanation may be found in the complexity of pre-Islamic Egyptian beliefs. Winkler observed that, in pre-Islam, spirits of dead relatives occupied parallel spaces with *Jinn* in the Egyptian imagination<sup>103</sup> while Rashed has noted that notions of *Jinn* in Egypt “exceed that available in the *Qur’an* and are a syncretism of Babylonian, Egyptian, Jewish and pre-Islamic Arabian influences.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Islamic/Cultural Traditions**

The films under analysis portrayed Islamic religious and cultural traditions to varying degrees. Among the most frequent depictions of religious and cultural practices in the films studied were daily observances such as the Islamic prayer ritual known as *salaah* (صلاة) as well as occasional practices to protect against supernatural threats. These practices included ritual fumigation, the use of charms, amulets and household decorations with *Qur’anic* verses, *Qur’an* recitations and even water over which someone recites *Qur’anic* verses.

Portrayals of *salaah* in the movies examined here served several functions. At times, the performance of prayer is an indicator of religiosity (or lack thereof). In the first instalment of the Emirati (*Mazraeat al-Jada*/مزرعة الجدة),<sup>105</sup> for example, the group of friends discuss the evening prayer, but the film depicts only one character, Saeed, performing the prayer. The scene included a close-up of his finger

raised in the *shahada* (الشهادة). This is a gesture familiar to Muslim audiences but would have little meaning to others.

The film portrays Saeed as being the one member of the group with some religious knowledge and the others playfully call him *Maulana* (مولانا) at times, a term denoting a learned religious person or scholar (more commonly in the Indian subcontinent and perhaps applied derogatively here).<sup>106</sup> Saeed, however, makes the point to his friends after evidence of the *Jinn*'s presence, that he is not “an exorcist priest” and that he does not know “how to deal with *Jinn*.”<sup>107</sup> It is unclear whether this distinction between everyday religious practice and specialized religious knowledge is one that a filmmaker would have to make for Muslim/Arab audiences. Thus, it may be meant as a clarification for external audiences who might confuse rituals such as *salaah* and fumigation with formal exorcism.

The lack of *salaah* is an equally important indicator which film makers used to reflect supernatural influence or vulnerability. In the Egyptian film *Warda*, we are told that the character Warda regularly performed her daily prayers but suddenly stopped after supposedly coming under the influence of the *Jinn*. In the 2013 film *Djinn*,<sup>108</sup> produced in the United Arab Emirates and directed by Hollywood horror veteran Tobe Hooper, we learn that the character Salama has not observed daily prayer in a long time. When she begins to fear supernatural influence, she attempts to perform the prayer ritual but encounters difficulty either remembering or reciting the words of Surah *An-Nas* (which makes specific reference to *Jinn*).

Protective charms and devices in the films take several forms with some variety from differing cultural traditions. In Anvari's 2016 "*Under the Shadow* (*Zeer-e-saye/ زیر سایه*)"<sup>109</sup> from Iran, a child, Medhi, gives the protagonist's daughter, Dorsa, a protective charm of cat's fur, which may be rooted in ancient Persian literature.<sup>110</sup> In Hooper's *Djinn*, Salama's mother gives her a wall hanging featuring the word "Allah" in Arabic alongside a *nazar* eye symbol, saying (in translation), "You never know who might visit" and noting, after a skeptical glance from her other daughter, that "It wards off envy."<sup>111</sup>

Despite being relatively common in the films, such symbols are not universally accepted even in the diegesis. When the *nazar* appears in the Turkish *Dabbe* series, for example, there is some divergence from the other films in terms of the accepted value of the symbol. The protagonist, Faruk, in *Dabbe 5* asks for permission to throw away all the evil eye beads from the house of a possessed person saying (in translation) that:

Evil eye beads are the elixir of strength for the devil and the *jinn*s... The eye on that bead is the eye of the devil. The single eye is the symbol of Satan even since Babylon. You seek the devil's help and take refuge in him by invoking the evil eye bead to help you.<sup>112</sup>

The films feature several practices to deter evil forces including utterance of *Qur'anic* verses, sprinkling water over which verses have been uttered<sup>113</sup> and ritual fumigation.<sup>114</sup> In *Grandmother's Farm*, Saeed recites *Sura An-Nas* over a bucket of water and later sprinkles the water throughout the farm buildings. The

films also present references to other orthodox ritual practices (other than *salaah*) invoking them in scripts for various purposes. In *Djinn*, Salama's mother tells her (in translation): "Well... Now that you're back, it wouldn't hurt to go for an *Umrah*... So God will bless your new life here."<sup>115</sup> This statement appears with no explanation and the subtitled translation uses the word "*Umrah*" (instead of an alternative such as "pilgrimage"), which would be confusing for non-Muslim audiences.

The instrumentality of the *Qur'an* in various forms (termed *Ruqya* [رقية] when used for protection or healing) appears at several points in the films. In *Grandmother's Farm*, for example, we see the grandmother reading the *Qur'an* opened to Surah Al-Baqarah and a verse that references the activity of *Jinn* during King Solomon's reign. This provides a visual reference to the presence of material about *Jinn* in the *Qur'an* and plays on Muslim belief that Surah *Al-Baqarah* is protective against supernatural forces.<sup>116</sup> Many of the films examined also feature some reference to Suras *Al-Falaq* and *An-Nas* being used in various contexts including exorcisms. One early scene in the 2018 Malaysian film *Munafik 2*<sup>117</sup> suggests the importance of the *Qur'an* in a shot that frames the lead character Adam carrying a *Qur'an* while standing before a *Qur'anic* verse plaque on the wall with *Qur'an* playing on a stereo.

In addition to recitation of *Qur'anic* verses and sprinkling of water over which verses have been recited, the words of the *Qur'an* also act as supernatural



talismans. Wall hangings, ornaments and sculptures with inscriptions are visible in the films. In *Djinn*, Salama's ornament inscribed with *Ayatul Kursi* glows and falls off a table when an evil presence enters the apartment. One of the first indicators of an evil presence in *Warda* is the *Qur'an* mysteriously disappearing from Warda's room. In *Grandmother's Farm II*, *Warda*, and the *Dabbe* series, there are varying portrayals of the use of the Muslim Holy Book in "Qur'anic Healing" rituals.<sup>118</sup>

### **Folk and Religious Lore**

While the boundaries between folklore and religious lore can be difficult to ascertain, the movies under analysis contained ample depictions specific to the Muslim religious and cultural experience and sometimes even specific to single communities. Hooper's *Djinn*, for example, focuses on a folktale from a particular region of the Emirates. The story of *Um Al-Duwais* may be well-known among Emiratis but perhaps needs retelling to audiences outside its borders (achieved by an expository flashback early in the film). More generally, these movies present several culture-bound depictions of *Jinn* that would be clear to Arab and Muslim audiences, but less obvious to non-Muslim Western audiences such as the *Jinn* being shown as dark figures, being able to transform into black cats, being instrumental in creating discord among humans<sup>119</sup> and being capable of possession.<sup>120</sup>

Islamic lore is also evident in what turns out to be the inciting incident early in *Grandmother's Farm* when the friends' vehicle drives over some bones on a desert dune. While there is no explanation of the significance of this event in the first movie, the film makers highlight it with a close-up of the bones under the wheel and ominous music. Close-ups also suggest that at least one character, Khalid, experiences unexplained discomfort at that moment. In *Grandmother's Farm II*, the farm caretaker brings bones as food (in keeping with both folklore and *hadith*)<sup>121</sup> for the *Jinn* who mentions the incident, suggesting that the protagonists killed the *Jinn*'s family who were eating the bones. In the second instalment, the *Jinn* is visible to the viewer (though not the characters) as a dark humanoid figure with catlike eyes who lurks unseen close to the possessed person. This dark figure transforms into a black cat at times and accompanies another cloaked and hooded figure whom the characters can see. We see the dark *Jinn* and his companion overlooking a fight among the humans which destroys their friendship with the implication that the *Jinn* are responsible for sowing the discord and rancor.

In some of the films, there is even awareness of pre-Islamic folklore. In *Dabbe, the Possession*, for example, the exorcist creates a system of mirrors to communicate with *Jinn*. He explains that it has been the best way to communicate with *Jinn* since Babylonian times. In *Munafik 2*, the influence of local folklore is sometimes implicit. Several of the visuals of supernatural beings, for example,

feature long dark fingers and fingernails, which may draw on the Malaysian folkloric demon, *Kuntilanak*.

Some events in the films reference culturally entrenched notions of *Jinn* that are presented without elaboration, such as when the *Jinn* remove personal objects (e.g., Dorsa's doll in *Under the Shadow*) or mimic the voice or appearance of a loved-one (e.g., Shideh's husband in *Under the Shadow* and Salama's mother in *Djinn*). Usually, these involve portrayals that we may find in the dominant horror paradigm which is replete with depictions of poltergeists and apparitions. The presence of spirits being manifest in loud banging sounds, for example, is common to many of the films examined here, including those from the Middle East as well as the Malaysian film.

Visual depictions of creatures and forces that are, often by definition, unseen present a problem for filmmakers. In *Under the Shadow*, the "people of the air" manifest in various approximations such as shadows at the windows, figures rising under sheets or clothing, and unseen characters with which Dorsa has conversations. The rare glimpse of the creatures portrays them with oversized teeth, often embodied under fabric or other material. The supernatural creatures in *Djinn* are variously manifest as presenting themselves in human form such as the neighbor Sarah and her friends. The film suggests the creatures' true nature to the audience when the protagonist sees their food to be covered in worms (perhaps an adaptation for external audiences who might be confused by depiction of *Jinn* food: bones and

urine). At other times, the creature resembled a wrinkled woman with sharp teeth and claw-like hands.

The films also depict the unseen by referring to habits of the unseen ones and their nature as the characters understand them. In *Under the Shadow*, for example, Mrs. Ebrahim tells Shideh that the *Jinn* travel on the wind seeking people to possess and that the taking of a personal object means that the *Jinn* have marked you and can always find you. Similarly, in *Grandmother's Farm II*<sup>122</sup> and *Warda*, characters attribute the onset of mysterious illness to *Jinn* activity.

The depiction of specific, localized beliefs and folklores is particularly explicit in *Under the Shadow* when Shideh encounters a copy of Saedi's *Ahl-Al-Hava*<sup>123</sup> at a neighbor's apartment. This real-life text written by an Iranian psychiatrist in the 1960s details the religious and supernatural beliefs of people in coastal areas of Iran with some emphasis on a set of local beliefs surrounding wind-borne spirits who are capable of intervention in human affairs.

The audience learns that the book is an anthropological study of the folklore of, as one character notes, "people down south."<sup>124</sup> As Shideh reads the text for the first time, we discover that the winds are magical forces which may be anywhere and which focus on places where there is fear and anxiety. The dominant thinking regarding *Jinn* and free will extends to these creatures of the wind, described as being capable of either good or evil.<sup>125</sup>

### **Explanations and (External) Audiences**

The films articulate local and traditional background information for viewers in general but often with a focus on external audiences who may not be familiar with underlying cultural assumptions. At the start of Hooper's *Djinn*, for example, an off-screen narrator paraphrases verses from Sura 15 of the *Qur'an* (*Al-Hijr/الحجر*) describing the creation of *Jinn*. Earlier, the filmmakers contrive a conversation between locals and an outsider (Bobby/Paul Luebke): Westerner, Caucasian and English-speaking. The locals mention that the site of their camp was a former fishing village from which the *Jinn* drove all the people, providing opportunity for exposition referencing Islamic teachings and local folklore. They explain that the *Qur'an* mentions *Jinn* who have free will, are invisible and can shape-shift— all well-known to Muslim audiences. This exposition leads to a comparison between *Jinn* and Western conception of demons, with the locals asserting to Bobby that while *Jinns* are not demons, they can possess humans.

The protagonist in *Munafik 2*, Adam, explains the mechanism of possession to another (Malay Muslim) character, saying that *Jinn* enter through the blood vessels. Such an explanation, while perhaps superfluous, may be useful in distinguishing the approach of the film from other available traditions in the local audience and may also highlight the specific set of beliefs for non-Muslim audiences.

In *Under the Shadow*, Shideh (who has been a medical student, and is secular in her outlook) argues with Mrs. Ebrahim that *Jinn* are not real. This debate continues throughout the movie when supernatural/religious events defy explanation. In this initial argument over whether *Jinn* are real, Mrs. Ebrahim argues (in translation): “they are very real, it’s even in the *Qur’an*.”<sup>126</sup> This particular statement raises several questions that relate to the film’s articulation with the mainstream. Is the audience expected to assume that an educated Iranian woman does not know that the *Qur’an* mentions *Jinn*? If not, then it becomes possible that the statement in the context of its own narrative might be a rhetorical device to win an argument by referencing the authority of the holy book. It may also, however, be a director’s ploy to indicate this fact to external audiences.

### **Discussion**

The films examined here, developed and produced outside of the dominant (hegemonic) Hollywood horror mainstream, demonstrated some of the challenges of articulating local culturally specific material with established (global) tropes, genre formulae and audience expectations. A user at IMDb.com addressed these dynamic tensions, opining that the Emirati production of *Djinn* was “an old-fashioned haunted house tale” that followed “a fairly well-worn horror formula” with the “twist of being set in the United Arab Emirates.”<sup>127</sup> That reviewer perceived the “twist” of a “Middle Eastern setting” as bringing “interesting cultural

elements” to the film but saw the film’s storyline as derivative of more established works in the genre such as “*Rosemary’s Baby*” and “*The Others*.”<sup>128</sup> Such a review strongly suggests that in the shadow of the hegemonic horror mainstream, traditions, folklore and religious practices may be reduced to window dressing for established genre conventions.

If this criticism of *Djinn* is valid, with a director entrenched in (and even iconic of) the horror mainstream, then what of Kuwait’s *The End* with its Eurocentric vampires and *Warda* and *Dabbe* with their security footage and found-footage storytelling? Scholars including Kristeva<sup>129</sup> and Bakhtin<sup>130</sup> have emphasized the importance of different narratives being interdependent and the extent to which existing texts influence later ones. The balance between intertextuality and imitation thus becomes problematic when articulating with the mainstream. Here Gramsci’s notion of consent is relevant as deliberate choices of form (e.g., found-footage), content (e.g. vampires) and motifs (e.g. coffins and mirrors) may well reflect acquiescence to the dominance of the Western mainstream. In this regard we may note the observation on hegemony from Artz and Murphy who noted that: “subordinate groups... willingly participate in practices that are not necessarily in their best interests because they perceive some tangible benefit.”<sup>131</sup>

Intertextuality, however, is not a process free of power relationships. Indeed, it is the very dominance of some forms that allow them to be successfully

borrowed or reused. Gramsci has distinguished between entrenched or “fixed” cultural elements and less-dominant elements that attempt to challenge or “interfere” with the established and “common sense” hegemonic norms.<sup>132</sup> Genre conventions from mainstream films therefore set expectations. Thus, even as the *Jinn* dominate supernatural and horror content in Muslim-origin movies, they face the pressure of external depictions. In the *Wishmaster*<sup>133</sup> franchise, for example, a wish-granting *Jinn* attempts to unleash the legions of other *Jinn* (who are all evil) into the human dimension. Such depictions may well also coalesce with negative perceptions of *Jinn* prevalent in Islamic communities which some scholars associate with processes of “infernalization” as these mythical creatures were assimilated from Arab folklore into Islamic culture.<sup>134</sup>

### **Wrestling with visual culture**

Visual media from Muslim societies face problems especially against hardline approaches prohibiting depiction of humans or animals based on oft-cited *hadith*<sup>135</sup> and religious edicts.<sup>136</sup> Together with various other conservative ideas about what is permissible on a screen,<sup>137</sup> such concerns have often hampered the development of visual media expression or steered them towards creation of religious works.<sup>138</sup> Despite such limitations, artistic and visual expression have continued to develop with practitioners negotiating the sacred and the secular as well as the boundaries of culture and religion.<sup>139</sup>



In the movies analyzed here, the filmmakers sometimes conformed to hegemonic norms, adopting dominant imagery and iconography such as in *The End* from Kuwait where coffins, Western garments and oversized incisors defined their vampire characters. In contrast, some films challenged hegemonic norms by using native oral traditions to guide their visual representations. The Emirates' production *Djinn*, for example, used and adapted traditional stories of *Um-Al-Duwais* to depict both her actual and illusive appearances.

In other cases, films exercised creativity in depicting creatures of which there are few depictions or even descriptions. This while facing implicit competition from hegemonic portrayals such as US television's *I Dream of Jeannie*<sup>140</sup> and film "Genies" such as Disney's *Aladdin* or the *Wishmaster*. How, then, to portray a mythical figure whose form Islamic tradition only hints at? *Grandmother's Farm* opted in the first instalment for an actress who portrayed being *Jinn*-possessed with dark makeup and unnaturally dark eyes. In the second instalment, however, a dark male figure represents the *Jinn*.

Additionally, the *Grandmother's Farm* films also used visuals traditionally associated with *Jinn* manifestation such as that of a black cat. Another such depiction exists in *Munafik 2* when a snake<sup>141</sup> appears to Adam during his battle with a *Jinn* and he uses verses from the *Qur'an* telling the story of Moses and Pharaoh's magicians to repel the creature. These depictions sometimes merged with local traditions of fearsome creatures with sharp teeth, dark shrouds and long,

menacing fingers combined with common visual motifs from Western horror such as decaying corpses, worms, and blood.

In these choices and strategies, the filmmakers demonstrate one of the key elements of resistance to the dominant Western Christian horror mainstream, namely the use of authentic local or native tropes. In this regard, the films studied here responded to or contested the hegemonic power of the mainstream and demonstrated something of the cultural negotiations implicit in negotiating hegemonies. Filmmakers from Muslim-majority countries enjoy a rare position of privilege to relate their own stories. This privilege runs counter to the hegemonic dominance of Hollywood's narratives and directly evoke Gramsci's notion of counterhegemonic narratives.

### **Other Hegemonic Concerns**

Hegemonic influences do not exist in isolation. The films' references to Islamic beliefs and practices often demonstrate hegemonic influences within and among Islamic societies. In *Munafik 2*, for example, the Malaysian characters strongly reflect dominant currents of *Wahabi* Islamic dogma originating in Saudi Arabia. They debate, for example, the outlawed practice of religious innovation (*bid'ah*/بدعة), a favorite target of *Wahabiism*.

At the same time, the portrayals of Islamic ideas and motifs were associated with traditional sites, villages, or other rural settings. In *Djinn*, for example, the

couple returns to their home country from the United States and moves into a tower built on the site of a traditional village while in *Warda*, *Dabbe* and *Munafik 2*, the films' supernatural events occur in traditional villages. This association of Islamic ideas with ancient traditions invokes folklore and history to validate supernatural storylines. However, it is important to note that Gramsci saw "modernity" as a tendency of dominant ideas to "expand, develop, and become universal in... political, ideological and cultural forms."<sup>142</sup> The observed general trend towards the rural and traditional may thus also suggest a relegation of the non-dominant Islamic folklores to the past or to the village in the context of a broader dominant, hegemonic modernity.

One of the privileges of hegemonic power is the ability to label or define the terms of reference of subdominant narratives. Bearing in mind that the term *Jinn* involves a broad reference to not just specific mythical beings but also to the general notion of the unseen or supernatural, the prevalence of *Jinn* references in films originating in Muslim contexts provides opportunities for external labeling. Specifically, these films find themselves categorized in Western popular review and criticism as "*Jinn* movies" which misrepresents their diversity of content and form.

In the films examined, we find dynamic tensions between acquiescence to the dominant horror mainstream and exposition of Islamic religion and folklores. This hegemonic struggle reflects attempts to negotiate an increasingly global

market for horror films while utilizing Islamic concepts that appeal to local audiences and their deeply felt and relatable fears. The evolution of such films, should they continue, may map important developments in the negotiated hegemonies of cultural and filmic expressions over time.

For all their weaknesses and their borrowings from the mainstream, these films provide an alternative locally authentic narrative against the dominant (Western Christian) horror mainstream. In doing so, they challenge entrenched (often fanciful) Western notions of Muslim ideas, faith, and cultures. Perhaps most importantly, they give voice to these otherwise subaltern narratives and legitimize, through filmic portrayal, Muslim horrors and fears as lived experiences rooted in deeply-held belief systems rather than as mere fairy tales.

Whether these portrayals will do anything to change overall perceptions of Muslims and Islam globally remains to be seen. In the specific context of horror films, however, these narratives provide a voice for cultural ideas hitherto marginalized and subject to external (mis)representations. These ideas make for more powerful experiences for locals but also provide the basis for emerging challenges to dominant external mainstream perceptions or “kernels of counterhegemony.”<sup>143</sup>

### Notes

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