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FEMALE FILMMAKERS AND MUSLIM WOMEN IN CINEMA

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'Women are always present, even if their presentation may not have any significance. Often, they are presented to be "seen." Very few films are about women "seeing"' (Dönmez-Colin, 2004: 187). This quote from film scholar Gönül Dönmez-Colin gestures at the key thematic divide in thinking about women, Islam, and cinema (the title of her essential book on the subject): Muslim women are represented on screen but these presentations are often not from their perspective (Dönmez-Colin, 2004). In the 15 years since the publication of *Women, Islam and Cinema*, men still dominate the cinematic gaze and most often occupy the director's chair. However, a number of women filmmakers are shepherding a new phase of film that gives sight to women protagonists with agency and vision. In laying out an analytical route for exploring the relationship between Muslim women and film, I modestly build upon Dönmez-Colin's approach in considering women as filmmakers and women as film subjects.[1] The chapter first delineates some methodological challenges and future possibilities for doing research on Muslim women and film. Then I outline thematic patterns in the cinematic lives of Muslim women. Next, I model an interpretive strategy that revolves around national and regional contexts, through a brief introduction to Muslim women, both in front of the camera and behind it, in Southeast Asian cinemas.[2] Finally, I offer a theoretical framework for approaching 'transnational' cinema that disrupts analysis of cinema in easily recognizable categories, such as national, regional, or ethnic. Altogether, the goal is not to be comprehensive in regional film analysis but rather chart a terrain and prompt further exploration in global cinema.

Studying Muslims in film

Scholarship on cinematic representations of Muslims generally occurs within two distinct disciplinary subfields: research on 'national cinema' and 'religion and film.' Scholars working on national cinema come from a variety of disciplinary training, such as area studies or media studies, but often focus on a single country (e.g. Indonesia, Pakistan, France, etc.), region (e.g. South Asia, North Africa, Central Asia, etc.), or ethnic group (e.g. Arab, Turkish, etc.). In many of these contexts, local interpretations of Islam and the deployment of religiously inflected social norms and practices shape cinematic production, thematic or genre audience preferences, and

narrative storylines. However, for many of these scholars Islam is of secondary concern within their analysis. That being said, knowledge of Muslim customs and discourses are necessary to comprehend cinematic production in local environments. In order to create a global portrait of the relationship between Muslims and film it will be necessary to rely on the work of experts within local, regional, and national domains while turning a perceptive eye to questions of religious practice, thought, and identity that may be unavailable as the primary concerns of current scholarly trajectories.

The other body of scholarship that focuses on Muslims in film extends from a subfield of religious studies referred to as 'religion and film.' Early scholarship through the 1970s and 1980s often focused on theological readings of European art films, and more popular Hollywood films in the 1990s (Lyden, 2003: 11–35; Plate, 2017: xiv–xvi; Wright, 2006: 11–32). As it developed some scholars utilized analytical tools from cultural and media studies in addition to theologically rooted viewing but across these approaches most research still primarily 'reads' film as 'text' with the primary objective being understanding what the film's narrative and images mean. This type of scholarship gained traction in the 1990s with the establishment of T*he Journal of Religion & Film* and has flourished since the 2000s, with numerous books and several handbooks focused on the subject (Blizek, 2013; Lyden, 2009; Mitchell and Plate, 2007). More recently, calls for integrating perspectives and issues from cinema studies into scholarship on religion and film demonstrate the value of considering medium-focused analysis, such as editing, sound, cinematography, camera angle, and *mise-en -scène* also affect the viewer's interpretation, and what we can learn through the tension of film script versus film form (Downing, 2016; Hamner, 2011; Watkins, 2009).

Scholarship on Muslims in film fits in between and across these disciplinary concerns and histories making for a broad but seemingly scattered body of literature. Since few focus on Muslims and film globally we must draw together the work of many scholars whose research is either primarily situated on one community that is largely made up of Muslims or in cinematic settings where Muslims are a minority. The difficulties in delineating a broad picture of Muslims in film are compounded by the fact that creators in both contexts construct the meaning of Islam in different ways. In national cinemas in Muslim majority contexts, films depicting social life will be steeped in Islamic traditions but filmmakers may not accentuate these features nor make their appearance central to the story's narrative or visuals; rather depictions of Muslims are included because they are part of an everyday lived religious ethos. Viewers also may not be arrested by religious components but simply interpret these as typical regional social behaviors, ways of speech, and environmental features. In film settings where Muslims are minorities their depiction takes a rather different course. Euro-American cinematic history generally reflects an orientalizing of Muslims that later intertwines with stereotypes of violence and extremism (Shaheen, 2001). There are disrupters who push back on these representations but access to resources and the limited voice minorities have traditionally been given in writing or producing mainstream films have largely required filmmakers to create independent films, which gain limited audiences leading to the restricted ability to dismantle popular depictions of Muslims.

Methodological challenges and possibilities

Since authorial intent, viewers' interpretation, regional production, and transnational circulation will be locally anchored we need to approach film within the ever-shifting constellations of creators and audiences. Because of this it is difficult to outline a single analytical framework for which we can delineate a global outline of Muslims and film. Much of the

previous scholarship has focused on textual readings of films, organized around themes, auteur directors, regions, or genres. Very little has focused on gender or women in general but several pieces of work explore specific filmic repertoires that are central to understanding Muslim women's role in film. Other directions in the study of Muslims in film explore the social context of filmmaking, including producers and funders, audience reception, the global circulation of film, film festivals, and Muslim movie stars; all areas that would be productive for future analysis. Other avenues of exploration could include the study of paratextual media-related practices, such as social media discourse, the remixing and afterlife of film images, transmedia storytelling, or emerging screen cultures, as well as the social contexts of participatory culture and fandom. Whatever investigatory route one ventures down, I maintain that we must account for the social worlds of the producers of film, the mediators of its production, and the audiences who it is intended for and beyond.[3]

In the social constellations of these various subjects the signifier 'Muslim' can take on many forms. Therefore, in approaching film in social contexts where Islam is the dominant tradition, I see 'Muslim' as a location of self-making that is both contradictory and harmonizing in the formation of Muslim subjectivity. The definitional boundary of 'Muslim' identity will always be contested and its cinematic image heterogeneous but its performance is rooted in experiential repertoires of the 'memories they encode' (Hall, 1992: 27), what we might think of as the mediation of local and global strands of 'tradition.' In Muslim-minority contexts, 'Muslim' identity most often follows formulaic stereotypes long developed within nationalistic myths and pictured in public culture. In this cinematic space, recognizing Muslimness is based on 'legibility,' where subjects are only 'read' as 'Muslim' if they meet certain audience expectations, such as have speaking accents, wear particular sartorial items, or are perceived as being part of specific racial groups (Petersen, 2017).[4] If subjects do not abide by these prerequisites they will be rendered illegible to the viewers.

The reverse phenomenon also happens, taking non-Muslims as Muslims, and can be seen in the cinematic conflation between Arabs and Muslims. The filmic subjectivity of 'Muslim women' is 'directly linked to social and political evolutions in which religion and religious customs play an important role' (Dönmez-Colin, 2004: 7) and is delineated through 'the contestations concerning women's roles in the public sphere' (Izharuddin, 2017: 86). Muslim women are most often signified through locally meaningful narrative conventions and across most cinematic domains the 'visual discourse is marked by a familiar article of clothing and metaphor: the veil' (Izharuddin, 2017: 86). Overall, when considering 'Muslim' subjects in film or behind the camera, I am not concerned with measuring fealty to an 'authentic' form of Islam but rather understand Muslimness as 'an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent' (Puar, 2007: 204).[5] Even complex cultural representations can be deficient, incomplete, or contested when they emerge in a diverse field of authorial creation, industrial production, audience consumption, and mediated circulation.

Principal themes in the representation of Muslim women and female filmmakers

The cinematic life of Muslims is rendered through social norms and privileges depending on the national context, historical time period, and ideological leanings of the filmmakers. Islam is variously depicted as an oppositional force that helps dominate and restrict women, a powerful discourse that shapes social norms and actions, a source of strength for liberation, or fount of inspiration for pious behavior and morals. Often we see women caught in between long-standing interpretations of Islam (i.e. 'tradition') and so-called 'modern'

conventions that seemingly contradict or displace these positions and behaviors. This dialectic may be constructed around intergenerational friction, class and social differences, religious adherence versus secular dispositions, or cultural clashes within émigré and diasporic experiences. Many films explore the role of women in society through familial relationships and their attending responsibilities. The family is often used to symbolize ethnic or national aspirations and articulates a vision of national identity or ethnic homogeneity. Representation of female dispositions are often defined by their association to male figures, as wife, mother, daughter, sister, etc., and accompanying practices of obedience, caregiving, or being dutiful, submissive, sexually available, etc. Women are sometimes depicted as being removed from these social contexts for the performance of pious practice but women's social duty to the family is most often prioritized as their primary obligation. By extension, films often offer a vision of what they see as an appropriate construction of femininity, including representing proper dress, male–female interactions, sexual expression, the regulation of space, and gendered responsibilities and expectations. The general sanctity given to women in the majority of cinematic culture is sometimes interrupted by representations of violence towards them. Sexual violence and its consequences, often murder or suicide of the victim, have also been a significant strand in narrative cinema. Associated with this, women have also been presented as sexual objects through both soft erotic film in the second half of the 20th century and more recently fetishized in explicit pornography, in Western contexts usually merging of exotic desire and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The depiction of Muslim women is also structured by local production restrictions and social boundaries. How do we shoot women? What is appropriate to reveal in terms of bodies or intimacies? Can we deal with non-binary gendered identities? What role does same-sex sexuality play in our social context? These questions have direct effects especially on women filmmakers, who are often the ones to challenge stereotypical or limited representations that exist in the archive and give voice to a broader range of women's stories. Of course, women often face more challenges in cultural production because of gender bias, whether due to material hurdles, social taboos not to be discussed, or conservative reactions that effect popular reception of films. It can be difficult for women to gain financial support for filmmaking in some societies. If funding is available it may be complicated to use male skilled workers and crew in intimate female-only settings. These types of challenges have urged some Muslim filmmakers to produce their films abroad and solicit foreign funding from established film industries or funding agencies, such as the American Sundance Institute, which can thereby affect the intended audience of the film.

In terms of the narrative and visual priorities, women filmmakers are often understood to produce counter cinema, which goes against dominant ideological and formal film strategies (Johnston, 1973). Their features shift the dominant representational strategy, which primarily has women playing a supporting role within the social fabric of films, as an object of desire or disdain, or of no significance to the main plot. Centering women's stories requires the negotiation of national, religious, and gender identities. For example, globally we witness a spectrum of interpretations of the goals and results of female liberation. Elsewhere directors and screenwriters challenge the legacies of colonial injustice or post-independence despondency by tackling the dichotomy between former colonizer and colonized subjects. Postcolonial narratives must also parse out the gendered social roles and subjective agency of women in societies in constant flux. These questions are captured in a variety of forms. Some filmmakers produce period dramas revisiting historical narratives to understand the present in new ways. Others rely on genre conventions, such as horror or comedy, to defuse prickly social commentary. Some use the affective wrenching of melodrama to sway audience

opinion about certain subjects. Overall, many Muslim women filmmakers directly deal with the power of subjugation inherent to patriarchal structures, either in their imaging of film subjects, the creation of narrative details, or in the material concerns of cinematic production itself.

Women, Islam, and Southeast Asia cinema

Southeast Asia has a rich cinematic history that explores many of the themes above, which are shaped by various local historical contexts and diverse religious communities in which Muslims exist. Indonesia's dense Muslim population, for example, has distinct viewing expectations about what can be screened in terms of actors' dress, social interactions, demeanor, etc. There are also social constraints, shaped by public discourses about the proper nature of Islam, through which 'Islamic' films (*film Islami*) have been viewed as a useful means for contemporary proselytization (*dakwah*) and producing a model of ideal Muslim subjectivity (Izharuddin, 2017). Several Indonesian women have been able to produce films between these social and religious constraints (Hughes-Freeland, 2011; Michalik, 2015). Malaysian cinema is reflective of internal debates about national identity but is also structured by the country's multicultural population. While Islam is the dominant tradition there are significant populations of Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus. There is also a history of ethnic tensions between Malays and Malaysian Chinese. Local filmmakers have both skirted around these issues and taken them head on. On the other end of the spectrum, Muslims in the Philippines make up only a small percentage of the population (under 10 percent), and live primarily in the southern part of the country, so their representation in film has generally been framed as minoritized 'other.' Recent independent Filipino filmmakers have broadened this portrait through narratives about how Islam shapes social life, both for the good and bad.

Since the mid-20th century Islam has been a central feature of much of Indonesian cinema but it was not until the late 1970s to early 1980s that it began to gain a wider viewing audience (Sasono, 2013).[6] Mainstream success for films presenting Islamic values as a primary theme wouldn't arrive until the 2000s, after the collapse of the New Order regime of President Suharto (1966–1998). This was prompted by the record-breaking box office sales of Hanung Bramantyo's 2008 feature *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*The Love Verses*), which sparked a surge of *film Islami*. New commercial success for films with Islamic content led to several big budget features being produced in the following years (Izharuddin, 2017). These types of films generate a model performance of a desirable Muslim public self that is rooted in piety and the consumer culture of an Indonesian middle class (Paramaditha, 2010). Of course, many Indonesian Muslims did not find these films to be representative of an authentic practice of the tradition (Heryanto, 2011).

One salient issue for several filmmakers has been questioning the merit and suitability of polygamy as a way of organizing domestic life through their films. The 2006 *Berbagi Suami* (*Love for Share*), by female director Nia Dinata, exposes how women are victimized by polygamous marriages and narratively affirms the moral superiority of monogamy (Imanjaya, 2009; Schmidt, 2017). *The Love Verses* itself revolved around a melodramatic love-triangle where an Indonesian student in Egypt is depicted as being 'forced' to have more than one wife due to their desperate social circumstances. Other films, such as the more recent 2015 *Surga yang Tak Dirindukan* (*The Heaven that is Not Longed For*), continued to narrate the debate about polygamy in Indonesian society with nuance and ambiguity (Barker, 2020). The 2016 *Athirah* (*Mother (Emma)*), by well-known Miles Films

collaborators, director Riri Riza and producer Mira Lesmana, offers a historical take on the issue, emphasizing polygamy's disruption of domestic space and family unity, and the resistance to it by upending localized social norms in the home. Through these features we see a spectrum of positions on the issue. *Love for Share* and *Athirah* are staunchly anti-polygamy and present activist perspectives that are rooted in the liberation of women's suffering caused by polygamous relationships, whereas *The Love Verses* and *The Heaven that is Not Longed For* rely on romantic love as the affective impetus behind anxiety toward polygamy rather than some inherent deficiency in the arrangement. While polygamy is only practiced by a small percentage of Indonesians today (less than 10 percent), cinema enables local filmmakers to weigh in on the subject and give audiences a narrative field in which to couch their debates.

Malaysia cinema has a long history of film production and exhibition but the industry has been growing significantly since the 1990s, moving from releasing around ten films or less a year to dozens each year (Khoo, 2005; van der Heide, 2002).[7] Due to its multiethnic population the local film industry produces multilingual films (Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, English), and the feature's primary language usually reflects the intended audience or social vantage point. Audience preferences also shape the types of films directors produce, who often chose popular genres such as comedy and action. The most commercially successful Malaysian films in recent years are in the horror genre. Many local horror films revolve around the *pontianak* figure, a powerful undead evil female entity. These monstrous figures are often seeking revenge for a wrongful or untimely death, usually the death of a mother and/or an unborn child. While the *pontianak* has long been a part of traditional Southeast Asian folklore, media representations have incorporated Euro-American conventions of the portrayal of vampires in its imaging (Lee, 2016).[8] Muslim women in Malaysia films are frequently depicted as passive and weak so the *pontianak* disrupts the local social renderings of female power. These monstrous figures can be read as an embodiment of female agency when it's not performed through prescribed patriarchal norms. *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (*Pontianak of the Tuber Rose*, 2004)[9] and *Chermin* (*The Mirror*, 2007), by female directors Shuhaimi Baba and Zarina Abdullah respectively, draw the tensions around the socially and politically governed female body by showing 'women in Malaysian horror can resist their fetishization through their direct alignment with the grotesque, the supernatural foreclosure of patriarchal dominance, and strong mother–daughter bonds' (Izharuddin, 2015: 149).

However, what we see over and over in *pontianak* features is that the supernatural empowerment of women requires suppressions or extinction in order to maintain an ordered society. The most popular horror films are *Munafik* (*Hypocrite*, 2016) and its sequel *Munafik 2* (*Hypocrite 2*, 2016), which was the highest grossing Malaysian film of all time (Zainal, 2018). The films could be understood as having an underlying theological message, deriving its title from the Qurʾanic designation for people who outwardly practice Islam but privately reject or secretly go against the tradition. The film's characters are discursively and visual marked as Muslim and the narrative is filled with spirit possession, recitations from the Qurʾan, and calls to defend Islam. Women in the *Munafik* series parallel the *pontianak* theme in that they are victims (of *jinn* occupation, of evil attacks, of their own weakness, etc.) or their powers as aggressors are to be subdued in order to gain harmony. It may be that part of why Malaysian horror is so popular is because it regulates gender boundaries through supernatural means, and therefore allows publics to address it indirectly. The genre destabilizes women's transgressive power in society by classifying femininity as monstrous and evil in nature.

Female directors have also used cinema to probe Malaysian society, the role of Islam, and Muslims' place within the multicultural environment. The most widely known is independent filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad (1958–2009) who confronted social norms, especially those directed at women, in her films. Ahmad's films generally tackled contentious social issues that reflected a spectrum of lived experiences of Malaysia's cultural diversity, and therefore were often controversial among Muslim viewers and leadership. In general, her *oeuvre* unsettles Malay nationalist visions of social homogeneity that are undergirded by Islamic piety. Her narratives and characters push the boundaries of quotidian conventions, communal interactions, religious hypocrisy, or sexual appropriateness and permissibility (Omar, 2011). Her characters are multiracial and multilingual (Bahasa Melayu, English, and Mandarin) and deal with tensions arising from racial stereotypes, especially about ethnic Chinese Malays. She is most widely known for her trilogy of films revolving around the young Malay girl, Orked (Hee and Heinrich, 2014; Sim, 2009, 2018). In *Sepet* (*Chinese Eyes*, 2004), Orked falls for Jason, a Chinese boy from a working-class family, very different from her affluent parents. The film probes the tricky social differences that arise between class, ethnic, and religious differences. Altogether, Ahmad reveals the social logic of stereotypes of racialized communities by showing their inconsistencies (Koh and Ekotto, 2011). The sequel, *Gubra* (*Anxiety*, 2006), is set several years later with very different circumstances. Orked, now married to an unfaithful older man, reminisces about her love with Jason. In a parallel story, two young women, Temah and Kiah, work as sex workers and try to navigate Muslim life. Overall, the film interrogates the complexity of leading an ethical life guided by love and compassion, where what seems right does not always align with what is assumed to be outlined by the tradition (Khoo, 2010). The final film in the trilogy, *Mukhsin*, 2006), is a prequel where the young Orked innocently discovers what love can be. It is a nostalgic take on the cross-cultural connections that shape the girl's local Malaysian life (Bernards, 2017). Yasmin Ahmad's legacy shines through all her films, also including *Rabun* (*My Failing Eyesight*, 2003), *Muallaf* (*The Convert*, 2008) and *Talentime* (2009), which challenge limited notions of Islam and a narrow sense of Muslim identity that exist in Malaysian popular culture.

Historically Filipino Muslims, often dubbed 'Moros' following Spanish colonizers, have been viewed as a disruptive threat by American occupiers and later the Philippine governments, which is reflected in early (sometimes American-produced) film (Angeles, 2016). The colonial legacies of the Moro image, especially from 20th century American administrative reports and print media, shape much of their cinematic screen presence where Muslims are presented as villainous heathens (Angeles, 2010). More recently, ethnic Filipino Muslims, reappropriating the term Moro, sought to reconstruct Muslim representation through film. Filmmakers today contend with issues of Christian–Muslim relations, radicalization of the Muslim community, and Muslims discrimination in the country. Once only depicted as secondary filmic characters needing protection and guidance, Muslim women have more recently been framed as revolutionary subjects who lead their families and communities (Angeles, 2020). Teng Mangansakan's *Limbunan* (*Bridal Quarters*, 2010) deals with patriarchal social norms related to marriage, polygamy, family, and gendered roles, through women who both conform or resist but always do so through their own agency. Arnel Mardoquio's *Sheika* (2010) centres female narratives dealing with social inequality and being a minority within heated Christian–Muslim tensions (Angeles, 2020). Mardoquio's *Ang Paglalakbay ng Mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim* (*The Journey of the Stars in the Dark Night*, 2012) provides a localized Muslim perspective of the political nature of social unease by putting women at the forefront of a Muslim secessionist movement (Tan, 2017). *Bagong Buwan* (*New Moon*,

2001), directed by Marilou Diaz-Abaya, points to the domestic effects of military resistance on women in the context of the destruction and displacement caused by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Nubla, 2011). Mangansakan's *Mga Bai Nu Sambolayang Mawalaw* (*Daughters of the Three-Tailed Banner*, 2016) tackles many of these issues by producing a complex social world inhabited by strong women, including transgendered women, from the village to the city (Angeles, 2020).

What is gained through an investigation of national and regional cinema of Southeast Asia is a portrait of popular audience preferences, the reoccurrence of industry support, and important local themes that influence film culture. Through this type of analysis narrative and aesthetic contours start to emerge that can be further examined in relation to broader social and cultural circumstances (domestic life, politics, athletics, legal systems, fashion, etc.) in those social settings. But filmic patterns of national life can be reflective of both the realistic and aspirational contexts of life. Therefore, we must remember that often it depends on who is in power to produce images. There will likely be at least two different vantage points, and likely more, which produce a variety of cinematic subjectivities. Women frequently offer a counter narrative to mainstream representation but, in addition to gender, resistance to homogenous film images may also be reflected in social dichotomies of race, religion, citizenship, and national belonging. Filmmakers in diaspora, émigré, and transnational contexts also muddle the seemingly clear picture gained through exploration of a regional and national cinematic context.

Transnational and accented cinema in industry and aesthetics

A further complication in producing a comprehensive portrait of the cinematic lives of Muslims is the growing nature of transnational flows of people, capital, and religious customs and habits. We should consider this from two perspectives because it unsettles terminological assumptions in both disciplinary domains outlined above. Scholarship on transnational religious communities emphasizes modes of circulation and movement between two geographies that shapes how traditions are understood, reproduced, and practiced.[10] These studies reveal the diversity of cultural narratives and disrupt monolithic presentations of communities or traditions through the discourse of 'transnationalism.' In this line of examination, considering film as a cultural product emerging from within transnational practices and organizations points to how the specificity of a particular local experience of a global tradition shapes the cinematic poetics and narrative forms of that work of art. Religious studies scholarship helps us understand cultural products as first being detached from their host context, organized and classified for movement, then carefully redefined and married to both the new context and place of origin, and finally established as authentic within the assumptive interpretive matrix of the receiving audience.[11]

Cinema scholarship, on the other hand, focuses on transnational as an expression of filmmakers' social position within narrative and aesthetic repertoires. On the other hand, several scholars have deployed useful terminology and alternative frameworks that help move towards a more comprehensive understanding of artistic projects. Hamid Naficy examines media expressions that are created and/or consumed by diasporic, exilic, or postcolonial subjects, which shape their production as 'accented.' Accented cinema

> derives its accent from its artisanal and collective production modes and from the filmmakers' and audiences' deterritorialized locations. Consequently, not all accented films are exilic and diasporic, but all exilic and diasporic films are accented. If in linguistics

accent pertains only to pronunciation, leaving grammar and vocabulary intact, exilic and diasporic accent permeates the film's deep structure: its narrative, visual style, characters, subject matter, theme, and plot.

(Naficy, 2001: 23)

Cultural productions also lie outside national discourses and may rather be framed within cultural or religious contexts. For Laura Marks 'intercultural'

indicates a context that cannot be confined to a single culture. It also suggests movement between one culture and another, thus implying diachrony and the possibility of transformation. 'Intercultural' means that a work is not the property of any single culture, but mediates in at least two directions. It accounts for the encounter between different cultural organizations of knowledge, which is one of the sources of intercultural cinema's synthesis of new forms of expression and new kinds of knowledge … The difference [with Naficy's model] is that many intercultural filmmakers, though they identify with more than one cultural background, live in the country in which they were born.

(Marks, 2000: 6–7)

Geographies, according to Randall Halle, can therefore be understood as an 'interzone' of numerous possibilities in cultural formation, rather than a limiting structure of nationalistic identity. For contemporary postcolonial or diasporic filmmakers 'interzonal possibilities expand because of the withdrawal of the nation-state from the singular privileged organizing position it had acquired over especially geopolitical definitions of space' (Halle, 2014: 9). With the decreasing value of fossilized national identities, our approach to Muslim cinemas would benefit from a move 'from cartographies to chronotopes,' as Ayça Tunç Cox suggests (Cox, 2014). Cultural products extending from these types of communities reflect what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2003) call 'multichronotopic links' – the spatial and temporal relations that disrupt the erection of borders implicit in transnational framing (Shohat and Stam, 2003). Parallel to Halle's interzone, this approach centers intercultural affiliations rather than clear classification of space. Artistic expressions can extend from individuals who are invested in regions but do not necessarily inhabit them in practice or reflect their dominant articulation. Rather they place cultural elements (real or imagined) in dialogue. In this imaginative cultural terrain we might look at transnational film as a 'cinema of transvergence.' Will Higbee suggests a filmmaker's identity is in a continuous process of fluid negotiation in relation to their social context and their proximity to centers and margins (i.e. geographies, cultures, film forms, production norms, etc.). Therefore, cinema of transvergence

proposes a clear understanding of the discontinuity, difference and imbalances of power that exist between various filmmakers, film cultures and film industries as well as the elements of interconnectedness that may bind a filmmaker to a given film culture or national identity at a given time.

(Higbee, 2007: 87)

Due to the growing reliance of filmmakers on funding from various international constituents and training in dominant cinematic industries, they often create multinational productions that are aimed at international festivals and audiences. The detaching or affixing to particular social, religious, or national identities of a filmmaker will fluctuate across time,

making the character of a given cultural product reflective of the mediation of these elements inherent in the process of transvergence. Altogether these classifications are complimentary and point to new notions of belonging and registers of identification within the material contexts of filmmaking in contemporary cinematic industries. In our analysis, attending to the multichronotopic relationships in accented or intercultural cinema emerging from interzonal possibilities witnesses the reimagining of global pasts and futures, which thus reorients the present for artistic producers and consumers.

Films produced within the creative promise of these intercultural interzones are exciting because they interrupt and suspend various audience expectations about the role of Islam within the emergence of a filmmaker's authorial voice, visual style, or directorial intentions. Religion is often central to identity within postcolonial contexts (both through the hardening of personal fidelity or the shunning of its influence) and cinematic histories reveal this tension because Islam can serve as an alternative signifier as opposed to a national consciousness rooted in territory, intricately connected to empire and colonization. Many 'transvergent' filmmakers are both reckoning with the traumatic colonial legacies of their ancestral homes and navigating inclusion as émigré subjects (even still as second-, third-, or forthgeneration citizens) in multicultural imperial centers.

While we might think of this cinema as part of a transnational genre that embodies shared artistic practices and cultural narratives, we must also think of films transnationally in terms of their production. Transnational films also challenge the character of a national cinematic heritage because of the multinational nature of modern filmmaking, which relies on well-established cinematic industries, skilled institutional production, screenings in international festivals, and global distribution. Filmmakers often receive training abroad, use experienced crews, and obtain funding from multiple philanthropic resources. The artistic products are marked by both local and global influences and interests, and echo dominant film patterns, whether it be a model from Britain, France, Bollywood, or Hollywood. Filmmakers must also be conscious of the relationship between industry distribution and viewer reception in order to make films available to audiences, which may influence how writers and directors frame their films past the immediate local context as they hope to offer a universally resonate story for international viewership.

Accented, transvergent, or transnational filmmakers speak to questions of cosmopolitan visions of the contemporary world that are simultaneously rooted in local and global symbols, sounds, ideals, and problems. Often these types of films expand the definitional boundaries of being Muslim by depicting a vast expanse of religious, cultural, or ethnic expressions. While ethnicity does not correlate to religious fidelity (Gueneli, 2014), it often does correspond with structured responses from public and state entities that read certain ethnic signifiers as 'Muslim.' So for some audiences, film characters may be understood as Muslim even if they may be depicted as non-Muslim. We might witness this through the confluence between categories of Arab and Muslim in America, Turkish and Muslim in Germany, (South) Asian and Muslim in Britain, or Maghrebi and Muslim in France. This is a product of the racialization of Muslim identity (Morgenstein Fuerst, 2017). One example of this dynamic is the debut film of director Cherien Dabis, *Amreeka* (2009). In the film a Palestinian Christian family who emigrated to America after the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq are seen as Muslim to their new neighbors (and maybe even the audience for the first half of the film) and illegible as Christian. Eventually the viewer discovers that they are in fact Christian, however, they face the same social challenges as Muslim Americans. Alternatively, in British screenwriter Ayub Khan-Din's award winning film *East Is East* (1999) and its sequel *West Is West* (2010), characters' Muslimness is assumed by both family

members and the public but often deemed either too religious or Islamically unsophisticated depending on the insider or outsider vantage point (Nobil, 1999; Chambers, 2020; Trech, 2017). In *Ali's Wedding* (2017), written by lead actor Osamah Sami, we witness the tensions that arise from both intracommunal tensions while also navigating the consequences of broader Australian stereotypes about Muslims. While the film is centred on the male protagonist, *Ali's Wedding* portrays a variety of women's experiences, young and old, immigrant and first-generation Australian, domestic and academic. While it does rely on some limiting romantic comedy genre conventions, Muslim women are shown to be dynamic, diverse, and independent (Krayem, 2020).

Wadjda (2012) is an interesting example of transvergent cinema because without any knowledge of the film's background it is seemingly part of a national cinema and obscures its transnational construction. The film is the story of a young girl trying to get a bicycle. A simple story that also subversively critiques gender politics, women's rights, and religious hypocrisy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Bazzano, 2020). While the film was the first to be shot exclusively in Saudi Arabia with local actors, the film's development was international: Saudi Arabian writer and director Haifaa al-Mansour went to film school in Australia, now lives in Bahrain, was selected for a Sundance Institute writer's lab in Jordan. *Wadjda* received funding from Italy and Dubai, was produced by Saudi and German companies, and has international distributors in France, the UK, Netherlands, and Sony Pictures Classics in North America. Since at the time of production Saudi Arabia had no movie theaters, *Wadjda* was certainly aimed at international audiences, being screened at several film festivals. Al-Mansour's 2019 film *The Perfect Candidate* follows the same path of international support and distribution while also securing the first official support from the government's new Saudi Film Council (Vivarelli, 2018). The films again center's women's role in Saudi society and how they can navigate patriarchal structures obstructing their success.

Similarly, *À mon âge je me cache encore pour fumer* (*I Still Hide to Smoke*, 2017) is in all respects an Algerian story. But France-based, Algerian writer and director Rayhana Obermeyer is certainly a transvergent filmmaker. Her debut feature takes place in mid-1990s Algiers after ultra-conservative Muslim political leaders have taken over governing the community. The picture is a series of conversations, often explicit and frank, among women of all ages, body types, and dispositions at a female only *hammam* (public bath). The film stars Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass, one of the most internationally recognized Muslim actresses (who is also featured in *Amreeka*). Obermeyer's film critiques her home country but also Islamic maximalism more generally, and patriarchal social dominance more specifically. She does this both through the dialogue and by having an all-female cast, many of whom reveal their naked body in a non-sexual manner, thus disrupting the normative displays of cinematic femininity framed for the male gaze. Her critique seeks female liberation from male supremacy and domination, as she states 'my movie, its for women, but especially for men. And then men can see themselves. What they do with us' (Obermeyer, 2017). *I Still Hide to Smoke*'s narrative and visual disruption also required it to be filmed abroad (primarily in Greece), use a female crew, and be screened primarily at film festivals and through international distribution. Overall, one of the film's main messages, succinctly put by one actresses: 'Your Islam is not our Islam,' is seen as revolutionary in many respects and, thereby, prohibited the film from screening in Algeria.

Films like these underline both the transnational aspect of modern filmmaking, in terms of international development, production, and distribution, and the accented perspective of many Muslim filmmakers, who examine Islam in their own cultural or national context from a global perspective that is informed by the religious variety they have experienced in

new social contexts where Muslims embody the tradition in alternative ways. There is also a rich tradition of accented cinema by filmmakers of Muslim background in Europe and North America, which has been gaining broader support and audiences in recent years. For example, Turkish-French writer-director Deniz Gamze Ergüven's *Mustang* (2015) and Moroccan-French writer-director Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (2016) were even nominated and won several of France's César Awards, as well as numerous international recognitions, and center women's experiences through depiction of the varieties of Islam in diasporic communities (Handyside, 2019). European and North American filmmakers depict a full range of Muslim identities, from those traditionally centred on piety, ritual, and dominant symbols of religiosity, through embodiment of Muslimness as a form of cultural recognition, family heritage, or publicly recognized persona. Accented cinema in these contexts enables us to witness the diverse ways Muslim filmmakers outline how to engage the tradition, including both sharing in local familial practices and being expressed through global discourses and materialities.

Conclusion

An examination of the cinematic lives of Muslim women, as both images and image-makers, requires combined efforts of scholars of film and scholars of Muslim communities. From various sites of analysis a broad portrait can begin to take shape through the combination of research on national contexts in conversation with the consideration of transvergent filmmakers who break out of the territorial hold of regional domains. Issues of representation will continue to be central to this type of study but in order to get a holistic understanding of the relationship between Muslims and cinema, greater emphasis needs to be put on investigations of film production, industry operations, global distribution, and audience reception.

Notes

1 Dönmez-Colin employs this framework in her most recent book (2019). Eylem Atakav proposes a useful analytical structure that explores film history, film genres, and film reception, which also centers women filmmakers. See Atakav, 2016.
2 I focus on Southeast Asian film industries because it is comparatively underrepresented in scholarship related to the study of Islam and film (for example compare with research on North African, Iranian, Turkish, the Levant, or South Asian cinema). The great diversity in Southeast Asian national contexts also allows us to explore the utility and limitations of drawing out regional trends versus more local movements and preferences.
3 Staiger offers a popular approach in film scholarship, what she calls context-activated reception, which examines the intent of production, context of viewing, audience expectations. Staiger, 1992.
4 On the role of race and gender in producing the 'legibility' of American Muslims see also Abdul Khabeer, 2017.
5 I rely on Puar's understanding of Queerness here, which she sees as neither an identity nor an anti-identity, and extend it for thinking about the category 'Muslim.'
6 For overviews of the history of Indonesian cinema see Barker, 2019; Hanan, 2017; Heeren, 2013; Heider, 1991; Heryanto, 2014; Sen, 1994.
7 For background on earlier periods of cinematic history see, Khoo, 2005; van der Heide, 2002.
8 The *pontianak*, or *kuntilanak* in Indonesian, figure is found throughout Southeast Asia and its local film productions. One of the earliest Malaysian films is *Pontianak* (1957). Lee, 2016.
9 *Pontianak of the Tuber Rose* was the first Malay horror film produced after a 30 year ban. Ng, 2009.
10 Key works include Beliso-De Jesús, 2015; Csordas, 2009; Foxen, 2017; Lucia, 2014; Mitchell, 2016; Palmer and Siegler, 2017; Urban, 2016.
11 The most useful theoretical model for understanding transnational religious communities is Srinivas, 2010.

Further reading

Atakav, Eylem. (2014) *Women and Turkish Cinema: Gender Politics, Cultural Identity and Representation*. New York: Routledge. This book explores the shifting social and political contexts of Turkey since the 1980s and how that affects the representation of women in Turkish cinema.

Dönmez-Colin, Gönül. (2004) *Women, Islam and Cinema*. London: Reaktion Books. The first book to focus on the subject of Muslim women in film. It provides a strong framework for exploring women as both filmmakers and through representation. Examples are primarily from Iran, Turkey, Central and South Asia.

Ghorbankarimi, Maryam. (2015) *A Colourful Presence: The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. This book outlines the changing representations of Iranian women from the 1960s through the contemporary period.

Hillauer, Rebecca. (2006) *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. This resource briefly introduces numerous filmmakers from West Asia and North Africa, which could serve as the basis for further in depth exploration.

Kealhofer-Kemp, Leslie. (2016) *Muslim Women in French Cinema: Voices of Maghrebi Migrants in France*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. This book explores the representation of first-generation Muslim women from the Maghreb in contemporary French screens cultures.

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