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Elena Furlanetto

1. Introduction

- 1 In February 2020,¹ Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite* made history winning four Academy Awards, including best foreign picture and best picture, awarded for the first time to a non-Anglophone film. After *Parasite*'s game-changing success, the question of Orientalism in Hollywood has become more layered; perhaps, as Mubarak Altwaiji suggests, working toward the exclusion of countries from the map of the Orient and their inclusion in the imaginary perimeter of Western progress (see 313).² Yet, as South Korean cinema makes its grand entrance into the persistently white halls of the Academy, Muslim countries remain underrepresented and Muslim characters continue to be heavily stereotyped. Altwaiji goes as far as suggesting that neo-Orientalism of the post 9/11 kind has triggered a re-evaluation of the classic Orient with the "Arab world" and its stereotyping as its center (314). Although film audiences and professionals are more vigilant than in the past—consider, for example, Joaquin Phoenix's 2020 Oscar acceptance speech on whiteness in the Academy³—Orientalism, Islamophobia, and racist stereotyping continue to inform Hollywood's dominant imagination in less conspicuous but equally insidious and "more enlightened," meaning subtler, ways (Alsultany 15). In order to understand this phenomenon in detail, one needs to go back to the early 2000s as a previous "transformative moment" (Altwaiji 313) in the development of Hollywood Orientalism.
- 2 In his study on "Orientalism(s) after 9/11," Pavan Kumar Malreddy⁴ shows how engagements with Orientalism have defined post-9/11 popular culture. Some of these engagements feed off traditional stereotypes of the "Orient" as "terra incognita" defined by religious fanaticism; others appear more liberal but nevertheless obsess

over the Orient as “an external force” that unleashed tragedy and trauma on an innocent Western world; lastly, some nuanced critiques of Orientalism unveil the complicity of colonialism in the release of terrorist violence (see 237). My paper proposes to look at an additional category of Orientalist cultural productions that configure themselves as vehemently critical of Islamophobia but reverse their politics midway.⁵ I will present two films that “disagree with themselves” as indicative of a significantly more ambivalent Orientalism, in so far as they reveal intratextual, or more specifically, intermedial⁶ debates that generate significant ambiguities.

- 3 This paper regards multimedia texts, films in particular, through the lens of the Foucauldian *dispositif*: a formation of discursive or non-discursive, said or unsaid elements that may entertain contradictory relations among each other. The *dispositif* or apparatus, Foucault clarifies, “is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (194). This paper focuses on the nature of these relations and offers an analysis of films as structures composed of heterogeneous media—such as music, screenplay, editing, acting, etc.—in which one of these “enters into resonance or contradiction with the others” (Foucault 195), ambiguating the film’s politics. When the film’s different media pursue diverging politics, I speak of *multimedia dissensus*. While Foucault’s *dispositif* strives to level its discrepancies through “a re-adjustment or a re-working of the heterogeneous elements” via “a perpetual process of strategic elaboration” (195), the ambiguous politics of the films analyzed in this paper remain unresolved.
- 4 These considerations bear on the development of Orientalism after 9/11. Evelyn Alsultany⁷ notes that since 9/11 figures of Muslims in U.S. media have undergone a process of “rehabilitation” that slowly but steadily replaced negative images of Muslims with positive, sympathetic, and acceptable ones (14). The standardization of the “good Muslim” functions to “offset the stereotype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist” but also contributes to the illusion of a post-race society where racism is no longer tolerated (Alsultany 14-15). Arguably rid of the coarseness of twentieth-century Islamophobia, then, post 9/11 cinema begs us to modify Richard Dyer’s statement that “the effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus” (*The Matter* 12) to make room for a new wave of stereotypes that thrives on in-text dissensus. I propose that post-9/11 Orientalism has fragmented into more digestible, more complex micronarratives dispersed throughout a film’s multimedia structure. In doing so, I elaborate on Alsultany’s proposition that the post-9/11 era has seen the rise of cultural products that “[project] antiracism and multiculturalism on the surface but simultaneously [produce] the logics and affects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices” (16). In order to test my hypothesis, I focus on two films which explicitly aim to reverse the logics of Islamophobia by presenting tributes to Muslim culture or denunciations of Eurocentric discriminatory practices. A more detailed analysis of the films in their multimedial complexity, however—such as star personas, casting choices, and historical setting—shows that they do participate in the Islamophobic discourse that dominated Hollywood cinema after 9/11.
- 5 The two case studies, Alejandro Amenábar’s *Agora* (2009) and Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) offer at first glance non-Eurocentric narratives and “scathing attacks on fundamentalism of all stripes” (Elliott 11). They remind their audience that Christianity⁸ itself rests on a history of violence, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism. Both films dwell in the peripheries of Hollywood: Amenábar is a

Chilean-born Spanish director, Scott is British, and both worked on American as well as off-Hollywood productions. By way of speculation, it is perhaps the peripheral character of these films that allowed for a measure, superficial as it may be, of political ex-centricity and narrative unconventionality. *Kingdom of Heaven* openly challenges Islamophobic narratives that circulated in the post 9/11 global debate by presenting the horror of the Crusades as a counterpoint to contemporary Islamic terrorism. The film was so successful in its putative reversal of Islamophobic narratives that Crusade scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith labeled it “Osama bin Laden’s version of history” (Riley-Smith in Edwardes) and lamented the lack of references to the genuine idealism of the crusaders (see Richards 31). Some features, however, undermine the manifest rhetoric of the film and reveal its ultimate adherence to a Eurocentric vision. By the same token, Amenábar’s *Agora* proposes to destabilize the equation of terrorism and Islam by portraying a moment in history where Christians terrorized the peaceful hybrid spirituality of the city of Alexandria. Ultimately, a look into media interplay within the cinematic text (such as screenplay versus casting choices and star personas) ambiguates the film’s political orientation.

- 6 In *The Return of the Epic Film*, Andrew B. R. Elliott eponymously argues that the first decade of the twenty-first century brought about a revival of the epic film, dragging out the genre from the niche it had occupied since the 1960s back into mainstream glory. “From *Gladiator* [(Scott 2000)] to *The Immortals* (Singh 2011), via *Troy* (Petersen 2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott 2005) and *Alexander* (Stone 2004),” but also *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001, 2002, 2003) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Verbinski 2003), “the decade came to be characterized by a slew of historically-themed, costly, spectacular, lavish—in a word, ‘epic’—films” (1). Bruce Holsinger complicates Elliott’s argument by bringing Hollywood’s new “cycle” (Elliott 5) of epic features in conversation with post 9/11 rhetoric. Holsinger argues that 9/11 revived a medievalist imaginary and “functioned as a prolific generator of new Manichaeic allegories, dualisms rooted in self-consciously medieval rhetorics of crusade, religious fundamentalism, and divine right” that inspired a “discursive recruitment of the medieval” (470) as well as its “ubiquitous deployments” in culture and discourse (473). I consider *Agora* and *Kingdom of Heaven* worth studying in combination not only because of their crypto-Islamophobia and because they are indicative of what I termed multimedia dissensus, but also because they are both epiphenomena of the 9/11 premodern, given their use of the medieval or, in the case of *Agora*, Hellenic past as a ‘typological’ antecedent of the Islamophobic present.⁹

2. Proto-Christian Terror in *Agora*¹⁰

- 7 *Agora* is the story of Hypatia of Alexandria, a neoplatonic philosopher and mathematician persecuted by Christian authorities for her ideas and probably killed by Christian vigilantes, the *parabolani*, in 415 A.D. Since the Enlightenment, Hypatia has been regarded as a symbol of freedom of thought, and a secular martyr to religious fanaticism. In line with the 9/11 premodern, Amenábar’s Hypatia (Rachel Weisz) is a surface that reflects the discursive struggle between analytical science and blind faith, as her life and death depend on the rupture of the delicate equilibrium between the two. *Agora* celebrates Hypatia’s work and thought but mostly zooms in on her everyday life as beloved teacher and daughter. *Agora* unconventionally resists the temptation of a

romantic subplot as Hypatia, unlike traditional female figures in Hollywood, remains unattached. Nevertheless, the film reaches peaks of intense tenderness and lyricism—for instance when the slave Davus (Max Minghella) caresses Hypatia's feet while she is asleep, or when Orestes (Oscar Isaac) plays the aulos and the music can be heard in space. In its doubtless complexity, *Agora* lends itself to multiple readings but does not exclude a post-9/11 one, which the director himself encourages as he speaks about the film's positioning vis á vis religious conflict. "You could interpret the film as anti-Christian, but I think it's actually 'Christian.' I explore the [good] side of Christianity, working with lepers and the poor – the humanity of it. But this movie is against fundamentalism, the idea that 'I will kill you for what you think'" (Amenábar in Brooks).

- 8 This view of *Agora* as a mirror of Christian values is easily confuted by looking at the overlay text before the end credits, which explains that, after mandating Hypatia's murder as well as violence against Alexandria's Jews, the early Christian pope Cyril of Alexandria was declared a saint and father of the church ("Posteriormente, Cirilo fue declarado santo y doctor de la Iglesia"). The film's unsympathetic portrayal of Cyril and the endnote on his role in Christian hagiography is meant to shock and outrage. Most importantly, the Christians whose "good side" Amenábar claims to show are the fundamentalists he critiques. This "little known religion," as the film describes it, represents Alexandria's lower classes, "the lepers and the poor," and is devoted to improving their condition, but is also a constant threat to the city's Hellenistic majority and its Jewish community. Thus, Amenábar's statement outlines the ambiguity at the core of the film and foreshadows its inner dissensus.
- 9 *Agora* is partial to Alexandria's Hellenistic culture, as demonstrated by the explicit celebration of its spiritual hybridity and sophistication in the opening onscreen texts: "Alejandría, en la provincia de Egipto, aún conservaba parte de su esplendor. Poseía una de las siete maravillas del mundo antiguo: el legendario Faro, y la biblioteca más grande conocida."¹¹ Christianity functions as a disruptive agent: being the religion of the enslaved and the dispossessed, it is imbued with thirst for social revenge that manifests itself through violence, for instance when Hypatia's convert slave Davus destroys the statues of the gods his mistress worships. At first reading, this is a projection and reversion of the way Islam has been represented as an atavistic force threatening Western democratic values: to put it with Edward Said in *Covering Islam*, "Islam represents... not only the threat of a return to the Middle Ages but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the western world" (Said 55). In a backward look to the premodern, Amenábar shows that Christianity bore the same destructive impetus. Christians also terrorize the local Jewish community, killing some of its members in an ambush, and limit women's freedom. Indicative, in this respect, is the sermon by Cyril, reading a passage from Paul's first letter to Timothy where the apostle commands women to dress modestly and be silent. This scene and its contents will receive more attention below, for now, suffice to say that these words emerging from a Biblical reading are a potential site of unrest for Western audiences concerned with the oppression of women in Muslim countries. The film—very much like Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*—reminds audiences that Christianity rests on a history of religious fundamentalism and that the configuration of Islam by post 9/11 Islamophobic rhetoric as "a violent, militant, and oppressive religious ideology" (Kalin 143) applied first and foremost to Christianity.¹²

By so doing, *Agora* turns Islamophobia on its head and highlights the transreligious nature of fundamentalism. But these premises, too, are easily confuted as the film's multiple media speak at cross purposes.

- 10 Richard Dyer notes that actors' bodies and personas function as media texts or as "a set of media signs" and carry social significance (*Heavenly Bodies* ix). Accordingly, casting choices represent the greatest source of ambiguity as well as a case of multimedia dissensus in *Agora* as they contradict the politics of the screenplay. As anticipated, the film is in awe of Alexandria's Hellenistic culture as the ante litteram repository of Western Enlightenment values; hence, it is also partial to its exponents, above all Hypatia and her father, the scholar Theon, played by Rachel Weisz and Michael Lonsdale, two white European actors.¹³ In *Agora*, class, religion, and color lines coincide: Hypatia's students and other representatives of the Alexandrian Hellenistic upper classes are white. To the contrary, most of the Christian characters—who, parallel to that, are lower class or enslaved characters—are played by actors of Muslim or Middle Eastern ancestry, such as Omar Mostafa (Isidorus), Oshri Cohen (Medorus), or Homayoun Ershadi (Hypatia's slave Aspasius). This is true, most prominently, for the two Christian archvillains, Ammonius and Pope Cyril. Cyril is played by Sammy Samir, an Egyptian actor who starred as one of the Palestinian terrorists in Spielberg's *Munich* (2006), while Ashraf Barhom, an Israeli actor of Arab origins, plays Ammonius, the leader of the parabolani, a particularly vicious proselytizer, and the brain behind the attack on the Jewish community of Alexandria. While *Agora*'s surface narrative offers a critique of the Islamophobic equation of fundamentalism and Islam, casting choices and star personas invalidate this explicit effort and implicitly reconnect fundamentalism with Muslim bodies and spaces. Malreddy concisely summarizes post-9/11 ("new") terrorism in the image of an "Oriental" killing Western civilians ("Introduction" 234)¹⁴: by centering on Christian terrorism, *Agora* tries to reverse this template, but ends up confirming it through its casting choices. Since both Samir and Barhom act in English with a perceptible accent, terrorism is relegated to a sphere that is exotic, alien, and Other to Western civilization (see Said 71-72). This reconnects *Agora* to the traditional Islamophobic discourses the film hoped to circumvent: specifically, those that "relegat[e] 'terror' to an alien domain" (Malreddy, "Introduction" 233). As the different aspects of a Foucauldian *dispositif*—the said and the unsaid, the intentional as well as the unintentional—may resonate with each other but also enter into collision, the liberal politics of *Agora*'s screenplay collide with the race bias of its casting choices.
- 11 Cyril's sermon best illustrates the film's perplexing crypto-Islamophobia. The sermon which I briefly mentioned earlier turns the city against philosopher Hypatia and prepares the stage for her murder. Cyril reads from Paul's first letter to Timothy: "I desire women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.... [I desire] that a woman learnt in quiet and full submission, I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man" (*Agora*). Although deeply critical of fundamentalisms in general, this passage is ferociously anti-Christian in particular. Evoking debates around Muslim women's rights in Europe and the US, the film shows that the same patriarchal rhetoric veiling women and relegating them to submission lies at the core of the Bible. Deepa Kumar argues that "most public discourse in the United States continues to uphold the myth that Muslim women are victims in need of rescue and that the West, an enlightened entity, can play a progressive role in such a context" (262). This polarizing narrative is uncritically mirrored, for example, by Bernard Lewis's definition of the condition of women as

“probably the most profound single difference between [Western and Muslim] civilizations” (Lewis 67).¹⁵ On a similar note, Laura and George W. Bush, but also Tony and Cherry Blair,¹⁶ have stigmatized Muslim cultures as oblivious of women’s rights. On one level, *Agora* vocally exposes the complicity of Christianity in the oppression of women, on another, by reconnecting fundamentalist rhetorics to non-white bodies, the film as *dispositif* hosts a collision of racist and antiracist epistemes that disarms its own productive self-reflection on Christianity’s legacy of terror (see Foucault 196).

3. ‘New World’ Encounters: *Kingdom of Heaven*

- 12 *Kingdom of Heaven* is a fitting representative of post 9/11 aesthetics as theorized by Holsinger and of the centrality of the crusade rhetoric for the 9/11 premodern, as “9/11 rendered visible a dualist medievalism of crusade and Samuel P. Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’” (Holsinger 472). Sharon Waxman of the *New York Times* summarizes the centrality of the crusade imaginary to post 9/11 discourse as follows:

President Bush initially called the war on terror a ‘crusade’ after the 9/11 attacks but was criticized by some for using a term that has long had anti-Muslim overtones. Meanwhile, some Islamic experts who analyzed Osama bin Laden’s motives after 9/11 suggested that he was trying to cast himself as a modern-day Saladin. And Saladin’s name was invoked by Saddam Hussein’s government to rally Muslims against the American-led invasion of Iraq. (Waxman)

- 13 The film came out in 2005, after the invasion of Iraq,¹⁷ and draws an arch between post 9/11 interreligious hostility and the crusades as a pivotal tragic event in Christian-Muslim relations. The story is set during a peaceful interlude between the warring sides (1180s) due to a truce negotiated by King Baldwin IV (Edward Norton), who ruled the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, and the Saracen general Saladin (Ghassan Massoud). The political resonance of the film is undeniable, although Scott, as Amenábar did for *Agora*, denies political involvement and laments—with tangible resentment and curious disengagement (see Dargis)—that his putatively coincidental interest in the crusades will be treated as a commentary on the post-9/11 era.

There is no escaping the parallels with our time.... We set out to tell a terrific story from a supremely dramatic age—not to make a documentary and propagandize. But since our subject is the clash of these two civilizations, and we are now living in the post-9/11 world, *Kingdom of Heaven* will invariably be looked at from that perspective. (Scott in Burt)

- 14 Scott was correct in anticipating that the crusade theme through the prism of 9/11 would inevitably be a dominant motif in commentaries and reviews. Many, however, did not see the parallel as coincidental. Some commented on the “odd timing” of this “big-budget Hollywood epic depicting the ferocious fight between Christians and Muslims” (Waxman).
- 15 On the same note, the spokesperson for the Washington American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Laila al-Qatami dismisses Scott’s naivety and calls attention exactly to “the concept of a movie about the Crusades, and what that means in the American discourse today” (al-Qatami in Waxman). Central to my argument, however, is another statement by Ridley Scott, where he claims that *Kingdom of Heaven* shows “events from the Muslims’ point of view as well, and the way to do that was to develop strong, multidimensional characters on that side. Especially Saladin, as played by Ghassan Massoud, a wonderful Syrian actor. I felt it was important to use Muslim actors

to play Muslim characters” (Scott, “When Worlds Collide”). The strategic decision of awarding complexity to Muslim characters through, for example, casting choices and star personas contributes to shaping the film’s aspiration towards non-Eurocentrism.¹⁸ By so doing, *Kingdom of Heaven* reverses *Agora*’s problematic use of Muslim actors in the roles of (Christian) terrorists. Scott explicitly addresses the choice of casting acclaimed Syrian actor Ghassan Massoud in the role of Saladin, whom the film constructs as a noble leader, intense and quietly commanding (see Dargis). It is widely known that Massoud turned down a role in Stephen Gaghan’s *Syriana* (2005), claiming he feared the film would be anti-Arab. To the contrary, he accepted the role of Saladin “only when he was satisfied the script would respect his own culture” (Fisk). “[Massoud’s] politics are as fierce as those of Saladin,” comments Robert Fisk in an interview with the actor, where he speaks very openly about his abhorrence of George W. Bush’s Middle East policies. In this light, the choice of casting Massoud strengthens the film’s alleged pro-Muslim gesture. As Dyer puts it, “stars are part of the way films are sold. The star’s presence in a film is a promise of a certain kind of thing that you would see if you went to see the film” (*Bodies* 5). In the case of *Kingdom of Heaven*, Massoud becomes the emblem of representative fairness.

- 16 The film’s non-stereotypical representation of Saladin did not go unnoticed and attracted a good deal of criticism. British crusade scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith described the film as “complete and utter nonsense..., the Muslims as sophisticated and civilized, and the Crusaders are all brutes and barbarians. It has nothing to do with reality” (in Edwardes). Riley-Smith’s unkind summary does justice to the film’s polarizations: like *Agora*, *Kingdom of Heaven* is unambiguously critical of Christianity in evoking a historical dimension in which the “jihadists” were Christian. In addition to that, Christendom is a corrupt universe: in the best-case scenario Christians are disillusioned, beaten, and father multiple illegitimate children they later abandon. In the worst, they are vulgar, capricious, power-hungry, and strategically incompetent. The templars, like the parabolani in *Agora*, are a terrorist religious militia gladly resorting to unjustified violence and gratuitous murder. “There is so much in Christendom,” says a laconic bishop, “of which Christ would be incapable” (*Kingdom*). To the contrary, Muslims are honorable, devout, decent, and peaceful. A generous Saladin offers Christians safe passage out of newly conquered Jerusalem and respectfully puts a fallen cross back to its place. These choices have generated clear responses by critics and scholars: Richards, for example, states that *Kingdom of Heaven* points to an “impeccably liberal” moral that prefers tolerance to war, reason to fanaticism, kindness to hate, integrity to profit (25).
- 17 The soundtrack to *Kingdom of Heaven* by Harry Gregson-Williams further underscores the film’s careful avoidance of stereotypical representations and its strive towards a balanced perspective. A BBC reviewer praises Gregson-Williams for his attention to “authenticity” and the balancing of diverse music traditions (Reavley). According to this review, the film captures the cultural tension between East and West by juxtaposing and awarding equal complexity to the two musical landscapes. Christian devotional music alternates with “gaudy Arab dances and searing laments” (Reavley). The use of little-known instruments to Western audiences, such as the kanoon or the kamancha, Arab soloist features, and musicians from Istanbul concur to create a “modicum of authenticity” (Reavley). “Authentic” is a word that recurs in another

British soundtrack reviewer, who, although being generally unimpressed, admits that the soundtrack is “nothing if not authentic” (Broxton).

- 18 Despite all, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Islamic law scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl calls the screenplay offensive, insists that “the movie teaches people to hate Muslims,” and claims that it perpetuates classic Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as “stupid, retarded, backward, unable to think in complex forms” (Abou El Fadl in Waxman). Although *Kingdom of Heaven* does walk a road paved with good intentions, these points are legitimate. *Agora*’s Christian masses, ragged and disorderly, stand no chance against the elegance of the “pagan” upper classes, and the spectator’s sympathies are decidedly directed towards the latter. This is unsurprising, since Alexandria’s Christians are invariably the target of disparaging representations and the pagans of celebratory ones. *Kingdom of Heaven*, too, has its unruly Christians and Muslim peasants, but it abounds with celebratory representations of both cultures. In other words, what happens when *Kingdom of Heaven*’s noble Muslims are confronted with the film’s Christian hero, Balian?

- 19 When Balian (Orlando Bloom) is washed up on the Palestinian coast after a shipwreck, he stumbles through the desert in search of Jerusalem. As he pauses to drink from a spring, he chances upon Imad (Alexander Siddig), one of Saladin’s officers, and his servant. Being in a jocular mood, Imad claims Balian’s horse is his and fights him for it; Balian would rather keep his horse but is reticent to draw the sword. Imad, exchanging roles with his servant to trick Balian, pretends to translate his “master’s” Arabic:

[Imad] ‘He says this is his horse.’

[Balian] ‘Why would it be his horse?’

[Imad] ‘Because it’s on his land!’

[Balian] ‘I took this horse from the sea.’

....

[Imad] ‘He says you are a great liar. He will fight you because you are a liar.’

[Balian] ‘I have no desire to fight.’

[Imad] ‘Then you must give him the horse.’

(*Kingdom*)

- 20 Richards argues that “the desert encounter between Western hero and Saracen” yields “mutual respect” (29), but this reading can be significantly complicated. This scene is reminiscent—perhaps a quotation—of David Lean’s 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia*, when Omar Sharif’s character Ali is first introduced. Both characters tease their distressed white interlocutors, Orlando Bloom in *Kingdom of Heaven* and Peter O’Toole in *Lawrence*. Ali claims he owns the well, Imad the horse. Both scenes introduce prominent Muslim characters played by equally prominent actors of color: Imad is played by Alexander Siddig, a Sudanese-British actor well known to Western audiences due to his roles in *Syriana* (2005), *Reign of Fire* (2002), and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–1999). Yet, in *Kingdom of Heaven*, the Muslim lord is portrayed as capricious and cruel, forcing his servant to fight for his entertainment—and die in the process, although that was not part of Imad’s plan. When Balian wins the unnecessary duel Imad initiated, he shows mercy and refuses to make his defeated opponent a slave, as it would be customary in the Muslim universe he is entering. Balian’s choice to opt out of slavery places him on a higher moral ground than his opponent and sets the moral standard for Christianity. Balian’s flawless chivalry dilutes the potential for self-scrutiny found in *Kingdom of Heaven*’s depraved Christians, whom one easily dismisses as marginal representatives of their civilization. The same cannot be said for Imad, who, as likeable as he may become in the course of the film, is also the ambassador of dubious ethics and his first

appearance does little else but setting the stage for Balian's display of moral superiority.

- 21 Princess Sibylla (Eva Green) provides another example of the film's predilection for Christian ethics. Watching Muslims during their morning prayers, she tells Balian that "they try to be one. One heart. One morality. Their prophet says 'submit.' Jesus says 'decide'" (*Kingdom*). Sibylla didactically elaborates on how Christianity champions individual freedom, while Islam insists on abnegation and submission to a monolithic ("one") morality. Her statements remain uncontested. Under the guise of presenting a critique of Christianity as a cultural universe in crisis due to individuals who twist religious ideas to serve their own ends, the film actually redeems it via its noblest and most righteous exponents. Conversely, the premodern violence of noblest and most righteous Muslims remains unredeemed.
- 22 Most of the film's contradictory politics are concentrated in the figure of Saladin. By way of summary, Scott's choice of Ghassan Massoud as Saladin harkens back to the actor's personal engagement with and statements on fair representations of Muslims in Hollywood. Correspondingly, Saladin is generally represented as an intelligent and benign leader, but his morality is not spotless as, unlike his counterpart Balian, he is responsible for some of the film's whimsical blood shedding. When a newly crowned but incompetent Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas) marches towards Saladin's army in the desert with insufficient water supplies, Saladin shows mercy to the Christian king, offering him a cup of water. When the king hands it to his second in command Reynald de Chatillon (Brendan Gleeson), Saladin, offended, slices Reynald's throat.¹⁹ Saladin's choice could be read as retaliation against Reynald after he had killed Saladin's sister to provoke the Muslim leader into war. Yet, one can also posit that Saladin meets the Orientalist cliché of the cruel tyrant previously met by Imad in his desert confrontation with Balian, as well as displaying the same disregard for the life of a subordinate.
- 23 As Imad's violence is a reflection of his master's, so are his intelligence and nobility. Isolated accidents aside, Scott's Saladin is a practical, rational, and morally upright leader. What debilitates the film's pro-Muslim stance, however, is that Saladin remains the enlightened exception in an ocean of fanatics. The following dialogue, where an officer questions Saladin's military strategy, will clarify this point.

[Mullah] 'Why did we retire? Why? God did not favor him, God alone determines the result of battles.'

[Saladin] 'The results of battles are determined by God, but also by preparation, numbers, the absence of disease, the availability of water. One cannot maintain a siege with the enemy behind. How many battles did God win for the Muslims before I came. That is, before God determined that I should come.'

[Mullah] 'Few enough. That's because we were sinful.'

[Saladin] 'It is because you were unprepared.'

[Mullah] 'If you think like that, you shall not be king for long.'

(*Kingdom*)
- 24 The scene exposes the dichotomy between Saladin's enlightened rationalism and his officer's faith in divine providence. Saladin's argument fits comfortably in an American discourse of self-reliance—which is an important point and will be returned to later—that does not encounter the officer's favor, and he predicts that, holding such views, Saladin "shall not be king for long." This implies that Saladin stands alone in his rationalism and is not representative of his culture. If Saladin is an exception, one may argue, so is Balian on the Christian side: they are both celebrated as remarkable leaders

ahead of their time. Yet, their exceptionality leads into opposite directions and contradictory conclusions. If Balian is Christianity's chance for redemption, this is not true for Saladin and Islam. If the former is allowed to multiply and transform, we leave the latter to the ominous threats of his officers.

- 25 This leads to questioning, once more and from a different vantage point, the Muslim point of view the film claims to pursue and the validity of its critical premises. Saladin's pragmatism and self-reliance resonate with the same foundational American mythology one finds in the proliferation of New World imaginary in dialogues between Christian characters, in Balian's disruption of patterns of enslavement, and in Sibylla's nod to freedom and individualism.²⁰ If the Brown bodies and accented English of *Agora*'s proto-Christians relegated fundamentalism outside the boundaries of the Western world, Massoud's voice is a vessel for American foundational myths such as self-reliance and the promised land. Balian's refusal to enslave the man he overcame in battle shows that he incarnates the (missed) chance for an alternative course of history, redeeming not only Christianity but also, by virtue of the argument I will be making in short, the United States. By way of conclusion, I'd like to show that *Kingdom of Heaven* offers a repository of prototypical American stories, and thus vanquishes its investment in the crusades as a trope of Western guilt and shame. This collision of imperial and anti-imperial epistemes ambiguates the film's politics, creating a deep-seated dissensus between the "coordinates of knowledge which issue from it but, to an equal degree, condition it" (Foucault 196). In *Kingdom of Heaven*, incursion into Muslim lands is both a fitting metaphor for the dubious morality of the forces driving post-9/11 intervention in Muslim countries, but also an appraisal of the American journey to the promised land and errand into the wilderness. The film's indebtedness to American imperializing myths is specifically lodged in the representation of Jerusalem and the narratives of redemption and conquest that drive Balian.
- 26 After returning from Jerusalem, Godfrey of Ibelin (Liam Neeson), is travelling through the French winter when he finds his illegitimate son Balian, a blacksmith in a village where the land is frozen and blueish. Godfrey invites Balian to leave behind the memory of his aborted infant and suicide wife and follow him to "a New World," where one becomes "not what you are born but what you have in yourself to be... a better world that has ever been seen. A kingdom of conscience. A kingdom of heaven," where, he also adds, "there is peace between Christian and Muslim. We can live together" (*Kingdom*). Godfrey's words resonate with Thomas Paine's "The Rights of Man," describing America as a place where "all the parts are brought into cordial unison. There the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged. Industry is not mortified by the splendid extravagance of a court rioting at its expense." The Holy Land as "New World" captures an array of American foundational stories: from New Canaan and New Jerusalem to the rags to riches trope, the rise of the moral and hard-working, the desire to found a purified community, and, most importantly for the purposes of this study, the narrative of multiculturalism or religious coexistence, in line with the interreligious impetus of the film. Both "New Worlds" are geopolitical spaces as much as imagined geographies: The Baron of Ibelin's Jerusalem is, as Richards puts it, "an idealised version of the USA" (Richards 26), a reverse projection of Islamophobic America with the possibility of interreligious tolerance at its core. This coalescence of "New Worlds" is remarkable in so far as it is also reminiscent of the mechanism at the

basis of Orientalism, where the East is “imagined and constructed by the West relationally to its own identity” (Lau & Mendes 80).

- 27 The historical Balian was a prominent aristocrat,²¹ but the fictive Balian’s humble origins are central to the film’s “significant democratisation of the story” (Richards 27) and of its obvious investment in American mythology: They enable his “rags to riches” trajectory and ground the appeal of a world where one becomes “not what you are born but what you have in yourself to be” (*Kingdom*). Balian’s cursus honorum from blacksmith to almost-king of Jerusalem and his romance with princess Sibylla would not have been credible if he had not been at least part nobleman—but he starts off as an underdog. The hiatus between nobility of lineage and of morals *Kingdom of Heaven*’s characters recurrently address underlines that the aristocratic origins of the protagonist do not count as much as his technical abilities and morality. Once in Jerusalem, Balian is given the land of his late father, who does not survive the journey, “a poor and dusty land with 100 families of Christians, Jews, and Muslims” (*Kingdom*). The film does not tackle the topic of dispossession, as the Islamic architecture of the mansion Balian obtains, as his father did before him, makes one wonder whose land it was before the crusaders’ arrival. The land’s poor conditions evoke the bewilderment of the “cold, depressed, and disappointed” Pilgrim Fathers when confronted with the winters of Massachusetts (Boschman 39); but like constructions of early America, the Holy Land enables the rapid ascension of the morally upright and hard-working. Balian turns the land of the late baron into an oasis through a miracle of hydraulic engineering, and Sibylla seals the transformation of Balian’s “patch of dirt” into “a new Jerusalem” (*Kingdom*), animating the New Jerusalem vocabulary of the Puritan imagination.²² *Kingdom of Heaven* revives the discursive power of typology: like in a hall of mirrors, the geographical Holy Land serves as a refraction of the metaphorical Promised Land that was America, and at the same time projects the possibility of a “New World” of interreligious coexistence onto the lived reality of Western audiences. It is perhaps most significant that Balian’s land hosts families of “Christians, Jews, and Muslims,” as his success is based on interreligious coexistence and cooperation. The film’s ode to tolerance, however, is delivered within the violent framework of the crusade, and the very corrupt institution the film aims to critique allows the rise of Balian and the formation of his utopia. Balian’s project of renewal is therefore an all-too-familiar trajectory of “regeneration through violence” (in the sense of Richard Slotkin)²³ and erased land-grabbing practices. The long siege of Jerusalem and Balian’s dedication to protecting it suggest that this promised land, which is Jerusalem and also the United States, is in need of protection against those whose point of view the film claims to be carrying.

4. Conclusion

- 28 As my analysis tried to show, the multimedial dissensus at the heart of these two films makes them reluctantly complicit in upholding Islamophobic discourses. This argument works with the assumption that a film is a *dispositif* constituted of different media, in which two or more of these may enter into contradiction with one another (see Foucault), generating multimedia dissensus and ambiguity. Contrary to *Agora*, where the critical potential of the screenplay was diluted by casting choices, *Kingdom of Heaven*’s casting choices and music tend towards fairness but are ambiguated by

conservative moments in the screenplay. I recognize that branding these films as Islamophobic may appear dismissive of their conspicuous attempts to offer nuanced readings of cultural conflicts and educated historical parallels. As the film and television industry strives to move away from explicit stereotyping as a consequence of awareness movements such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Oscars So White, racism and Orientalism have unavoidably reformulated themselves into “more enlightened form[s]” (Alsultany 15). The return to premodern societies, with their premodern class and race hierarchies, may offer a pretext to unravel normative scenarios of female subservience and culture clashes under the illusory premises of “safe distance.” Even in these cases, however, films and television embrace Orientalist, racist, and chauvinist tropes with an ancillary *reluctance* that needs to be thoroughly investigated. In these pages I exposed in-text dissensus—a coalescence of contradictory politics carried by different media—as one of the forms this reluctance may take.

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NOTES

1. Many thanks are due to the peer-reviewers for their accurate reading of my drafts; this essay draws on their inspiring thoughts in many ways. One reviewer understandably wondered about the relevance of *Parasite's* Oscar to the general argument of this paper. I take responsibility for leaving this reference in as my own personal way to honor this historical moment.
2. I recommend looking at Mubarak Altwaiji's definition of Neo-Orientalism in "Neo-Orientalism and the Neo-Imperialism Thesis" (2014) and Hamid Dabashi's *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Times of Terror* (2017).
3. Phoenix won the 2020 Oscar for best actor in Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019). He used his acceptance speech as a platform to speak up against "the belief that one nation, one people, one race, one gender or one species has the right to dominate, control and use and exploit another with impunity" (Phoenix in Piña).
4. See also Michael C. Frank and Pavan Kumar Malreddy's "Global Responses to the 'War on Terror'" (2018).
5. I will focus on film but I imagine my findings to be generalizable.
6. My understanding of intermediality draws from the work of: Lars Elleström's *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (2010), Wolfgang Hallet, "A Methodology of Intermediality in Literary Studies," Michael Meyer, "Intermedial Framing," both in *Handbook of Intermediality. Literature-Image-Sound-Music* (2015); Dick Higgins, *Horizons: The Poetics of Intermedia*. (1998), and

Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality."

7. See also Brigitte Georgi-Findlay's and Mahmoud Arghavan's use of Alsultany's "simplified complex representations" in their articles in this special issue.

8. This essay tries not to coalesce Christianity with the West nor treat them as interchangeable, as I am aware of the religious diversity of "the West" as well as of the fact that "the West" is an imagined geography. This equation, however, is present in many of the sources I work with.

9. For a discussion on the pitfalls of presentism in Hollywood, especially in the epic films of the early 2000s, see Elliott, esp. page 10 and following. Elliott, via Martin Winkler, suggests that the controversy on presentism can be mediated by reading historical films "as in part a reflection of the present, but which does not preclude an earnest attempt to retell historical events" (Elliott 11). The author himself, however, decidedly sides with the presentists, who "believe that historical films can tell us far more about the period in which they are made than about the period in which they are set" (20). So does this article.

10. I begin with the analysis of the most recent film because I believe it is a more straightforward example of the dynamics I address than *Kingdom*. Bearing in mind *Agora*'s blatantly contradictory politics, one can better appreciate how similar phenomena resurface in *Kingdom*.

11. "Alexandria, in the province of Egypt, still retained much of its splendor. It boasted one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the legendary lighthouse. It was also proud of the greatest library on earth." Translation by the author.

12. Islam first arose in the eight century (Kalin 144), Hypatia died in 415 AD, hence the events in the film predate the birth of Islam.

13. Hence, *Agora* conspicuously adheres to Hollywood's established tradition of whitewashing classic Egypt.

14. As opposed to a Westerner killing his fellow civilians (a "crazy loner" as in the coverage of the Breivik case in Norway) and an "Oriental" killing his fellow civilians (the "good old terrorist," Malreddy 234). See Arghavan's essay in this volume for an extensive reflection on new terrorism.

15. I quote from Bernard Lewis to give a sense of the kind of cultural simplifications *Agora* engages. I agree with Altwaiji that Lewis is one of "the best example[s] of American neo-Orientalism" (318); with this argument on the status of women "Lewis highlights the deterioration of Islamic values and... asserts the superiority of the Western civilization" (Altwaiji 318).

16. If George Bush was invested in crusade symbolism, his wife, Laura Bush, insisted on fighting the oppression of women: in 2001 she described the fight against terrorism as "also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Bush in Altwaiji 316). On the "taken-for-granted frame" (Kumar 254) of Islam as a uniquely sexist religion see also Deepa Kumar's "Framing Islam," esp. pages 261 and following.

17. Scott's film *Black Hawk Down*, released in 2001, constitutes an even more immediate reaction to 9/11. Its interventionist narrative was sharpened after the attacks as the film was rushed to completion, in a way that leaves "no room for questioning US foreign policy" (Chapman in LoBrutto 137). *Kingdom of Heaven* seems to embody a more reflected and nuanced approach to American interventionism.

18. There would be volumes to speak about Hollywood's habit of miscasting non-white actors by ignoring their nationality, creed, and country of provenance. Far from indicating that we live in a post-national world, interchangeable cultural backgrounds when it comes to actors of color or from non-Anglophone contexts replicate Orientalist modes by confusing non-white, non-Anglophone, and non-Christian cultures and showing they are equivalent. This tendency is bringing back disturbing new forms of blackfacing, e.g. in Ridley Scott's later blockbuster *Exodus*.

19. The cup scene is based on archival records. See Fisk, "Why Ridley Scott's Story of the Crusades Struck such a Chord in a Lebanese Cinema."

20. Sibylla's costumes would deserve a separate paper in terms of cultural appropriation and "ethnomasquerade" (see Konuk).

21. "The real Balian of Ibelin was the greatest feudatory in the Kingdom of Jerusalem after Raymond of Tripoli. He... spent his entire life in the Levant, dying there in 1193, and was married to Maria Comnena, widow of King Amalric of Jerusalem and stepmother of King Baldwin IV" (Richards 27).

22. See Berkovitch, *The American Jeremiad* 214 and passim.

23. Slotkin writes that "Puritans were inclined to a Manichean conception of universal war between Good and Evil; in their frontier situation facing the Indians they found a correlative of that archetypal confrontation.... Logically enough, the Puritan-Indian relationship finally resolved itself into one of overt race war" (41). In order to reach his full potential, regain his identity erased by dispossession, and rise as the virtuous hero of this tale, Balian has to undergo an ordeal by violence that takes the form of a culture war.

ABSTRACTS

This paper contributes to the theorization of how Orientalism has evolved after 9/11 and in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. I specifically address the multimediality of films and propose that post-9/11 Orientalism has fragmented into more digestible, more complex micronarratives dispersed throughout the interplay of different media which constitute the film experience. I recur to Foucault's concept of *dispositif* to illustrate how any of these media—such as music, screenplay, editing, acting, etc.—may "[enter] into resonance or contradiction with the others" (Foucault 195), ambiguate the film's politics. When the film's different media pursue diverging politics, I speak of multimedia dissensus. In order to test this hypothesis, I focus on two films which explicitly champion diversity and aim to reverse the logics of Islamophobia by presenting tributes to Muslim culture or denunciations of Eurocentric discriminatory practices: Alejandro Amenábar's *Agora* (2009) and Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). A more detailed analysis of the films' multimedial complexity, however, shows that they do participate in the Islamophobic discourses that have dominated Hollywood cinema after 9/11.

INDEX

Keywords: Orientalism, Multimedia, Islamophobia, Hollywood Premodern, Dispositif

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