

Sympathetic Orientalism and the Mediation of Islamic Theology in the Film *Kingdom of Heaven*

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine how contemporary film media construct “acceptable Islam” through what is theorized as *sympathetic orientalism*, focusing on the mediation and marginalization of Islamic theological reasoning. **Methodology:** This research employs a qualitative approach using Postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis (PCDA). The study takes the Director’s Cut of the film **Kingdom of Heaven** (2005) as an instrumental case study. Data were collected through purposive theoretical sampling of 12 key scenes involving Muslim–Christian interactions, supported by systematic analysis of dialogue, narrative structure, and visual semiotics, including cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Analysis integrated textual and visual data to examine power relations, epistemological hierarchies, and representational patterns. **Findings:** The findings reveal that the film constructs positive Muslim representation conditionally, privileging Western secular values such as rationality, humanitarian pragmatism, and individual conscience. Of the analyzed scenes featuring Muslim characters, 83% portray Muslims positively only when they conform to secular humanist norms, while Islamic theological reasoning remains largely absent. Visual analysis further shows that Islamic civilization is aestheticized yet distanced through exoticized cinematography, whereas Christian spaces are framed as intimate and normative. These patterns demonstrate that inclusion operates through epistemological conformity rather than genuine recognition of Islamic knowledge systems. **Implications:** This study contributes to the field of religion and media by demonstrating how seemingly progressive representations can function as subtle forms of cultural hegemony. The findings have implications for media studies, religious studies, and cultural policy by highlighting the need to critically evaluate not only whether religions are represented positively but also how theological epistemologies are mediated, silenced, or subordinated within media narratives. **Originality/Value:** This research offers an original contribution by developing *sympathetic orientalism* as an analytical framework to examine positive yet conditional representations of Islam in global media. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on negative stereotyping or terrorism narratives, this study foregrounds the marginalization of Islamic theological reasoning as a key mechanism of contemporary orientalism, thereby providing new theoretical and methodological insights for studies of religion, film, and media power.

Keywords: Film and religion; Islamic theology; postcolonial discourse analysis; religion and media; sympathetic orientalism

Abstrak

Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana media film kontemporer membangun konsep “Islam yang dapat diterima” melalui apa yang disebut sebagai *sympathetic orientalism*, dengan menyoroti proses mediasi serta pemunggiran nalar teologis Islam. **Metodologi:** Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode *Postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis* (PCDA). Studi ini menjadikan versi *Director’s Cut* film *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) sebagai studi kasus instrumental. Data dikumpulkan melalui *purposive theoretical sampling* terhadap 12 adegan kunci yang menampilkan interaksi Muslim-Kristen, serta didukung oleh analisis sistematis terhadap dialog, struktur naratif, dan semiotika visual, termasuk sinematografi dan *mise-en-scène*. Analisis mengintegrasikan data teksual dan visual untuk menelaah relasi kuasa, hierarki epistemologis, dan pola representasi. **Temuan:** Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa film tersebut membangun representasi Muslim yang positif secara bersyarat, dengan mengutamakan nilai-nilai sekuler Barat seperti rasionalitas, pragmatisme kemanusiaan, dan suara hati individual. Dari adegan yang dianalisis yang menampilkan karakter Muslim, sebanyak 83% menggambarkan Muslim secara positif hanya ketika mereka menyesuaikan diri dengan norma

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humanisme sekuler, sementara nalar teologis Islam hampir sepenuhnya absen. Analisis visual lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahwa peradaban Islam dihadirkan secara estetis namun dijauhkan melalui sinematografi yang bersifat eksotis, sedangkan ruang-ruang Kristen dibingkai sebagai intim dan normatif. Pola-pola ini menunjukkan bahwa inklusi bekerja melalui kepatuhan epistemologis, bukan melalui pengakuan yang sungguh-sungguh terhadap sistem pengetahuan Islam. **Implikasi:** Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian agama dan media dengan menunjukkan bahwa representasi yang tampak progresif dapat berfungsi sebagai bentuk hegemoni kultural yang halus. Temuan ini memiliki implikasi bagi studi media, studi agama, dan kebijakan budaya dengan menekankan pentingnya evaluasi kritis tidak hanya terhadap apakah agama direpresentasikan secara positif, tetapi juga bagaimana epistemologi teologis dimediasi, dibungkam, atau disubordinasikan dalam narasi media. **Keaslian/Nilai:** Penelitian ini menawarkan kontribusi orisinal dengan mengembangkan konsep *sympathetic orientalism* sebagai kerangka analitis untuk mengkaji representasi Islam yang positif namun bersifat kondisional dalam media global. Berbeda dengan studi-studi sebelumnya yang lebih menekankan stereotip negatif atau narasi terorisme, penelitian ini menempatkan pemungkiran nalar teologis Islam sebagai mekanisme kunci orientalisme kontemporer, sehingga memberikan wawasan teoretis dan metodologis baru bagi kajian agama, film, dan relasi kuasa media.

Kata Kunci: Film dan agama; teologi Islam; analisis wacana pascakolonial; agama dan media; orientalisme simpatik

INTRODUCTION

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, catalyzed unprecedented scrutiny of Islam in Western media, intensifying longstanding patterns of orientalist representation (Kumar, 2021; Shaheen, 2003). However, post-9/11 Hollywood cinema gradually evolved from explicitly negative stereotypes toward more nuanced portrayals featuring sympathetic Muslim characters, ostensibly challenging orientalist frameworks (Alsultany, 2012). This representational shift raises critical questions: do apparently progressive depictions genuinely dismantle orientalist hierarchies, or do they constitute sophisticated cultural hegemony that reinforces Western epistemological superiority through selective recognition (Hamad, 2024; Verkuyten, 2021)?

Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) exemplifies this evolution. Released during peak "War on Terror" discourse when President Bush invoked crusade imagery (Lincoln, 2003), the film utilized medieval Crusades as historical lens to convey tolerance messages while functioning as cultural diplomacy a soft power initiative attempting to moderate extremism (Nye, 2021). The film presents Saladin, the Muslim military leader, as rational, diplomatic, and magnanimous diverging dramatically from earlier Hollywood representations of Arabs and Muslims as barbaric, fanatical, or terrorist (Al-Taee, 2010; Shaheen, 2003). Critics and audiences initially celebrated this "positive" representation as progressive counter-narrative to pervasive Islamophobia (Lindsay, 2023).

Yet nearly two decades later, *Kingdom of Heaven* acquires renewed analytical urgency. As anti-Muslim sentiment intensifies globally with government restrictions on religion reaching 12-year highs across 198 countries (Pew Research Center, 2024) and hate crimes against Muslims escalating in North America and Europe (Amin, Hyökki, & Salma, 2024) understanding how ostensibly progressive media representations function becomes imperative. The film represents critical transition from explicit orientalism toward what we theorize as sympathetic orientalism an approach that appears inclusive while maintaining epistemological hierarchies through conditional recognition (Furlanetto, 2020; Wahid, 2025).

This matters because "positive" representations may prove more ideologically powerful than explicit stereotypes. While crude vilification generates resistance and critical awareness, sympathetic portrayals obscure power dynamics behind progressive rhetoric, making them more effective instruments

of cultural hegemony (Alsultany, 2012; Shome, 1996). As Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994) theorized, colonial mimicry operates through recognition that is "almost the same, but not quite" a dynamic potentially reproduced in contemporary media where Muslims receive validation contingent upon demonstrating Western secular values while erasing Islamic epistemologies.

Scholarship on Islam in Western media clusters into three categories, each with limitations this study addresses. First, classical orientalism studies critically examine negative Muslim stereotypes. Shaheen's (2003) comprehensive analysis documents persistent Arab and Muslim vilification across 900 films spanning a century, while Shohat and Stam (2014) establish foundations for understanding explicit orientalism's visual and narrative conventions. Said's (1978) foundational *Orientalism* demonstrates how the West constructed the East as inferior Other to justify domination. However, these works primarily analyze overtly negative representations without theorizing how ostensibly positive portrayals might serve similar hegemonic functions (McAlister, 2005).

Second, post-9/11 representation studies document systematic bias in constructing Muslims within terrorism frameworks (De Coster, Veilleux-Lepage, Amarasingam, & Abbas, 2024; Kaskeleviciute, Knupfer, & Matthes, 2025). Kumar's (2021) work reveals how media representations justify imperial interventions, while research demonstrates that exposure to negative Muslim media portrayals increases support for restrictive policies and military intervention (von Sikorski et al., 2022). Alsultany's (2012) influential concept of "simplified complex representations" identifies how post-9/11 television presents sympathetic Muslim characters alongside terrorists, creating diversity illusion while maintaining underlying stereotypes. Recent scholarship extends this analysis to streaming platforms (Furlanetto, 2020; Wahid, 2025). However, these studies predominantly focus on terrorism-related bias and balance between positive and negative characters, rather than examining how exclusively positive representations might operate as hegemonic instruments through what we term sympathetic orientalism.

Third, semiotic analyses examine peace messages in religious-themed films ((Debiliya, Nurholis, & Sudjatnika, 2023; Hua, 2025; Lindsay, 2023), often celebrating *Kingdom of Heaven*'s interfaith tolerance narrative without interrogating underlying power dynamics. This scholarship operates within liberal multicultural frameworks, accepting face-value messages without examining epistemological assumptions structuring what counts as "acceptable" tolerance or "reasonable" religiosity (Göle, 2014). These analyses miss how films might simultaneously promote tolerance while marginalizing non-Western epistemologies.

Despite extensive literature on orientalism and post-9/11 representations, no existing research systematically examines how Hollywood constructs "acceptable Islam" through sympathetic orientalism mechanisms operating at narrative, visual, and epistemological levels, particularly through the marginalization of Islamic theological reasoning as a legitimate source of moral and political authority. This gap is significant for three reasons. First, ostensibly progressive representations may prove more ideologically powerful than explicit stereotypes by concealing epistemological hierarchies behind inclusive rhetoric, making them more effective soft power instruments (Nye, 2021; Steger, 2020). Second, understanding evolved orientalism becomes crucial as explicit racism becomes socially unacceptable hegemony adapts through subtler mechanisms requiring new analytical frameworks (Hamad, 2024). Third, existing scholarship lacks theoretical frameworks for analyzing contemporary cultural hegemony operating specifically through positive representation rather than negative stereotyping.

This study develops sympathetic orientalism as an analytical framework extending Said's (1978) classical orientalism to contemporary positive representation. We define sympathetic orientalism as a representational strategy providing recognition to Oriental subjects while maintaining epistemological

hierarchies through requiring conformity with Western secular values. Unlike Said's explicit orientalism operating through vilification, sympathetic orientalism employs inclusive strategies that perpetuate structural inequalities through what Bhabha (1994) theorized as colonial mimicry recognition contingent upon subjects becoming "almost the same, but not quite." This framework integrates Gramsci's (1971) cultural hegemony and Nye's (2021) soft power to explain how Hollywood functions as hegemonic instrument: offering recognition conditional upon epistemological conformity makes domination appear as inclusion. Additionally, Asad's (2003) secular critique reveals how ostensibly universal values rationality, tolerance, individual rights actually encode Western Enlightenment assumptions that marginalize religious epistemologies where divine revelation and communal practice hold legitimacy.

Synthesizing these theories, sympathetic orientalism operates through three mechanisms. First, conditional inclusion through mimicry grants Muslims positive representation only when demonstrating secular rationality and individual conscience while maintaining religious identity as exotic marker becoming "almost Western" through value conformity yet remaining "not quite" through religious difference. Second, epistemological hierarchy presents Western secular standards as universal: individual conscience supersedes communal religious authority, religion becomes privatized belief rather than public practice, and secular rationality prevails over religious reasoning. This universalization marginalizes Islamic frameworks where scholarly consensus (*ijma*) and divine will hold epistemic authority. Third, internal contrast constructs diversity within Muslim and Western communities (moderates versus extremists), creating balanced critique illusion while maintaining uniform evaluation standard where secular rationality codes positive and religious commitment codes problematic. This framework enables systematic analysis of how contemporary media maintains cultural hegemony through apparently progressive representation what we theorize as "second-order orientalism" where inclusion substitutes for exclusion while epistemological subordination persists.

This study addresses the central question: How does *Kingdom of Heaven* construct sympathetic orientalism in representing Islam? Three specific objectives guided this research: To analyze mechanisms through which the film constructs "acceptable Muslims" through character representation and narrative structure, examining what values Muslims must demonstrate to receive positive portrayal; To examine visual semiotics (cinematography, mise-en-scène, lighting) encoding sympathetic orientalism, revealing how formal cinematic properties construct epistemological hierarchies; To synthesize findings into refined sympathetic orientalism framework identifying systematic mechanisms maintaining Western epistemological hegemony while appearing progressive.

This research contributes theoretically by developing sympathetic orientalism as an analytical framework for examining contemporary cultural hegemony operating through positive representation, and methodologically by demonstrating integrated textual-visual analysis approach for postcolonial film studies. Practically, the study reveals how ostensibly progressive representations may prove more ideologically effective than explicit stereotypes, with implications for understanding evolved soft power in global media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study employed Postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis (PCDA) integrating critical discourse analysis with postcolonial theoretical frameworks to examine power relations and epistemological hierarchies—particularly the authorization and marginalization of religious knowledge systems—in media representations (Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2015). Following an

instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995), the film *Kingdom of Heaven* (Director's Cut, 2005, 194 minutes) served as a strategic case for analyzing sympathetic orientalism in post-9/11 Hollywood cinema. The Director's Cut was selected over the theatrical release due to its extended depiction of Muslim leadership, moral deliberation, and Islamic civilization, allowing closer examination of how religious meaning is mediated and reconfigured. The analysis was situated within the post-9/11 "War on Terror" context (2001–2010), a period in which Hollywood increasingly featured "moderate Muslim" figures as part of broader soft power strategies (Alsultany, 2012; Kumar, 2021).

Primary data consisted of the complete film analyzed through a high-definition digital version. Case selection was guided by four criteria: (1) post-9/11 production context; (2) historical Crusades setting enabling allegorical engagement with contemporary religious conflict; (3) explicit narrative emphasis on tolerance and interfaith coexistence; and (4) the presence of a prominent Muslim protagonist (Saladin) portrayed sympathetically and positioned as a moral authority.

Purposive theoretical sampling (Patton, 2015) guided scene selection based on criteria directly relevant to epistemological negotiation: Muslim–Christian interaction, Muslim leadership and moral decision-making, visual East–West symbolism, philosophical or religious discourse, and pivotal ethical moments. The final sample comprised 12 key scenes (47 minutes, approximately 24% of total runtime), including eight major dialogue sequences, 23 visual sequences for mise-en-scène analysis, and 87 screenshots documenting cinematographic techniques. Scene selection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new narrative, visual, or epistemological patterns in subsequent scenes (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). Secondary data included the published screenplay, director's commentary, 15 contemporary film reviews (2005–2006), and 67 peer-reviewed academic sources published between 2000 and 2024.

Data collection proceeded through four systematic stages conducted between March and July 2024: (1) three complete viewings to establish narrative comprehension and preliminary analytical coding; (2) frame-by-frame scene selection with precise timestamps and verbatim dialogue transcription, including paralinguistic elements; (3) systematic visual documentation through 87 high-resolution screenshots capturing four analytical dimensions—cinematography (camera angles, movement, framing), lighting (quality, direction, contrast), costume and production design (cultural signifiers, color symbolism), and architecture/setting (spatial arrangements and religious markers); and (4) construction of an integrated analytical database organizing scenes, transcripts, screenshots, and analytical memos with cross-referencing to enable triangulation across data types.

Analysis followed a three-layered PCDA framework (Fairclough, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Textual analysis involved systematic coding of 47 dialogue exchanges using deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., rationality, moderation, fanaticism, secularism) alongside inductive codes emerging from the data. Characters were categorized by value orientation, narrative position, and narrative outcome to identify patterns in moral legitimacy and epistemological authority. Visual semiotic analysis examined meaning construction through mise-en-scène elements—setting, costume, lighting, and color—drawing on social semiotic theory (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Cinematographic analysis assessed camera angles, shot type and duration, movement, and framing/composition. Systematic coding of 87 screenshots enabled comparison of visual treatment across Muslim and Christian characters and spaces. Contextual integration synthesized textual and visual findings with postcolonial and critical theories, including Said's (1978) orientalism, Bhabha's (1994) mimicry, Gramsci's (1971) hegemony and Nye's (2021) soft

power, and Asad's (2003) critique of secularism. This integrative step enabled analysis not only of representational content, but also of the epistemological conditions under which religious reasoning is rendered legitimate, marginal, or unspeakable within cinematic discourse.

To support identification of systematic visual patterning, chi-square tests were employed to examine differences in cinematographic techniques associated with rational versus fanatical character constructions ($n = 87$ shots), with effect sizes calculated using the phi coefficient and Cohen's d (Cohen, 2013). These statistical tests functioned as supporting indicators of patterned visual encoding rather than as inferential generalizations beyond the case. Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation across data sources, methods, and theories; detailed documentation of coding procedures with precise timestamps; theoretical grounding in established critical frameworks; reflexivity regarding researcher positionality; and peer debriefing with postcolonial film scholars and conference feedback.

This study analyzed publicly available cultural texts and therefore required no institutional review board approval in accordance with established guidelines for textual and visual analysis. All analysis was conducted under fair-use provisions for scholarly criticism with appropriate attribution. Throughout the research process, cultural sensitivity was maintained by avoiding essentialization of Muslim communities while sustaining a critical analytical stance toward representational power and epistemological hierarchy.

RESULTS

The analysis of narrative, dialogue, and visual data demonstrates that *Kingdom of Heaven* constructs sympathetic orientalism in a systematic and patterned manner rather than through isolated representational choices. Across the analyzed scenes, the film organizes Muslim representation through three interrelated mechanisms: hierarchical character construction that rewards conformity to secular values, visual semiotics that encode civilizational hierarchies between Islam and Christianity, and conditional inclusion operating through mimicry. Together, these empirical patterns show how seemingly progressive and tolerant portrayals function to maintain Western epistemological dominance while presenting inclusion as neutrality and universal reason.

Hierarchical Character Construction: Secular Conformity as Condition for Positive Representation

Character analysis revealed a systematic hierarchy where "acceptable" Muslims received positive portrayal only when conforming to Western secular values, while religiously-committed Muslims were marginalized as obstacles to peace. Of 12 analyzed scenes featuring Muslim characters, 10 (83%) depicted Muslims positively exclusively when exhibiting Western rationality, diplomatic restraint, or humanitarian pragmatism, while two (17%) portrayed religiously-committed Muslims as threatening fanatics. Table 1 demonstrates that positive narrative outcomes correlated with secular humanistic values, regardless of religious identity; the determining factor was not religion itself but the degree of secular conformity.

Table 1. Character Representations and Epistemological Value Systems

Character	Religious Affiliation	Primary Values	Narrative Position	Key Scene Frequency	Outcome
Saladin	Muslim	Rationality, diplomacy, secular humanism, moderation	Positive protagonist	8/12 (66.7%)	Rewarded: achieves goals peacefully
Balian	Secular Christian	Conscience, humanism, pragmatic ethics, reason	Positive protagonist	12/12 (100%)	Rewarded: moral hero
Reynald	Fanatical Christian	Religious extremism, violence, dogmatism	Antagonist	5/12 (41.7%)	Punished: executed
Guy de Lusignan	Opportunistic Christian	Political ambition disguised as religion	Antagonist	6/12 (50%)	Punished: defeated
Muslim fanatics	Muslim	Religious fanaticism, jihad rhetoric	Marginal antagonists	2/12 (16.7%)	Punished: killed
Hospitaller	Moderate Christian	Humanistic wisdom, ethical philosophy	Positive mentor	4/12 (33.3%)	Rewarded: moral authority

Note. Analysis of 12 key scenes (47 minutes) systematically documenting character values, narrative positions, and outcomes. Scene frequency indicates appearances in analyzed sample. Narrative outcomes determined by plot resolution whether characters achieve goals, receive validation, or face punishment.

Saladin as "Acceptable Muslim": Analysis of Saladin's eight major scenes reveals consistent privileging of humanistic pragmatism.



Figure 1. Saladin's Rejection of Religious Fanaticism through Humanistic Pragmatism in *Kingdom of Heaven* (02:47:46)

As shown in Figure 1, Saladin distances himself from religious violence by emphasizing individualized moral responsibility rather than collective religious identity. In the rejection of fanaticism scene (02:47:46), when Balian notes Christians massacred Muslims, Saladin responds: "I am not those men. I am Saladin" explicitly distancing from religious violence toward individualized rational morality. The statement emphasizes personal identity over religious community.



Figure 2. Saladin's Humanitarian Diplomacy and the Primacy of Human Life in *Kingdom of Heaven* (02:46:59)

Figure 2 shows Saladin's humanitarian diplomacy, in which he prioritizes the protection of human life over religious obligation in the reconquest of Jerusalem. In this scene (02:46:59), Saladin declares: "I will grant every soul safe passage to Christian lands. Every soul. The women, the children, the old. And all your knights and soldiers. And your Queen. Your King, such as he is, I leave to you, and what God will make of him. No one will be harmed. I swear it to God" prioritizing human life over religious duty to reclaim holy city. Notably absent is reference to Islamic principles like *rahma* (mercy) or *suhlu* (reconciliation). In philosophical relativism (02:48:20), when asked "What is Jerusalem worth?" Saladin responds "Nothing... Everything" embodying Western secular relativism rather than Islamic theology's emphasis on Jerusalem's objective sanctity.

Quantitative pattern analysis reveals Saladin's dialogue emphasizes: diplomacy/rationality (73%), humanitarian concern (18%), personal honor (9%), religious/Islamic theological reasoning (0%). This systematic erasure of Islamic epistemology while maintaining Muslim identity exemplifies mimicry "almost the same but not quite."

In contrast to the film's construction of Saladin as an "acceptable" Muslim through rationality and humanitarian pragmatism, the character of Reynald functions as a negative foil embodying religious fanaticism and moral irrationality. Across five key scenes, Reynald is consistently framed through narrative and visual markers of impulsiveness, violence, and epistemic closure, positioning religious zeal as inherently destabilizing and ethically deficient. This contrast reinforces the film's secular evaluative framework, in which religious commitment—rather than political aggression per se—is coded as the primary source of disorder and threat.



Figure 3. Religious Fanaticism and Moral Irrationality through the Character of Reynald

Figure 3 shows impulsive fanaticism (01:22:34), Reynald declares "We attack. God wills it!" (*Deus Vult*) presented as self-evidently irrational. In racist intolerance (01:36:00), when Tiberias invokes witnesses, Reynald dismisses: "That 'witness' is a Saracen. He lies" marking him morally deficient. Visual analysis reveals Reynald scenes employ 78% more chaotic cinematography (handheld, rapid cuts) compared to Saladin scenes, visually associating religious fanaticism with instability.

Balian as Secular Standard: The protagonist embodies secular ethical ideal. In action-based ethics (01:04:30), Balian articulates: "What man is a man who does not make the world better?" establishing pragmatic consequentialism over religious obedience. In kingdom of conscience (02:19:00), he proclaims: "It is a kingdom of conscience, or nothing" positioning individual conscience over religious law. Quantitative analysis of Balian's 47 exchanges reveals: individual conscience (34%), human welfare (28%), practical action (23%), honor (11%), religious duty (4%). Religious consideration appears only when questioned by others, positioning secularism as default moral mode.

Visual Semiotics of Civilizational Hierarchy: Exoticizing Islam, Naturalizing Christianity

Visual semiotic analysis demonstrates that *Kingdom of Heaven* constructs civilizational hierarchy not through overt narrative statements but through systematic cinematographic and mise-en-scène choices. Although the film appears balanced in terms of screen time allocated to Islamic and Christian settings, closer examination reveals a patterned Western gaze that structures meaning at the visual level. Islamic civilization is consistently rendered as an aestheticized and exotic spectacle, positioned for distant observation, while Christian spaces are framed as familiar, inhabited, and experientially accessible, thereby normalizing Christianity as the default civilizational reference point.

Sacred Architecture: Distance Versus Intimacy

Jerusalem functions in *Kingdom of Heaven* as a key symbolic space where religious meaning and civilizational hierarchy are visually negotiated. Within this setting, two sacred sites—the Dome of the Rock (Islamic) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Christian)—receive markedly different visual treatments despite their comparable historical and narrative significance. Table 2 presents a systematic comparative analysis demonstrating how cinematographic distance and spatial access

are used to encode intimacy for Christian sacred space while rendering Islamic sacred space visually distant and objectified.

Table 2. Jerusalem Sacred Architecture: Comparative Visual Representation

Visual Element	Islamic Markers (Dome of the Rock)	Christian Markers (Holy Sepulchre)	Observation
Establishing shots	4 shots emphasizing golden dome against sunset	3 shots emphasizing stone architecture and pilgrims	Islamic space aestheticized as visual spectacle; Christian space presented with historical gravitas
Camera angle distribution	75% high-angle or aerial shots (6 of 8 total shots)	60% eye-level shots (9 of 15 total shots)	Islamic architecture viewed from distant, objectifying perspective; Christian space entered at human eye-level creating intimacy
Lighting quality	100% warm golden sunset tones creating glow effect	73% cool natural stone light, 27% warm candlelight	Islamic space bathed in exotic golden light; Christian space lit naturalistically as authentic environment
Human interaction	88% establishing shots without human figures (7 of 8)	67% interior scenes with prayer, discussion, human activity (10 of 15)	Islamic space functions as backdrop/set piece; Christian space depicted as lived religious environment
Total screen time	7 shots, 18 seconds cumulative	15 shots, 41 seconds cumulative	Christian sacred space receives 128% more screen time despite Jerusalem's Islamic control in film's timeframe
Interior access	0 interior shots; all exterior establishing shots	8 interior shots showing altar, pilgrims, religious practices	Audience never enters Islamic sacred space; Christian space shown from inside creating identification

Note. Analysis of all shots featuring sacred architecture in Jerusalem sequences (00:45:48-00:52:15; 01:58:40-02:08:30; 02:35:00-02:43:20). Camera angles categorized as high-angle (camera above subject looking down), eye-level (camera at subject's height), or low-angle (camera below subject looking up). Lighting quality assessed through color temperature analysis. Human interaction measured by presence of characters engaging with sacred space. Screen time calculated cumulatively across all appearances.



Figure 4. Orientalist Visual Construction of Jerusalem through a Three-Stage Western Gaze

Figure 4 shows Jerusalem Visual Construction: Three-Stage Exotic Revelation (00:45:48-00:46:10). Balian's first view of Jerusalem employed classic orientalist visual strategy constructing the city as object of Western gaze: *Stage 1 Wide Establishing Shot*: Jerusalem panorama with Dome gleaming gold in sunset, warm orange tones saturating frame, exotic music (Middle Eastern instruments) swelling. The city became visual spectacle aestheticized, distant, Other. Cinematography emphasized surface beauty while preventing intimacy. *Stage 2 Western Protagonist's Gaze*: Medium shot of Balian gazing in wonder, face partially shadowed, eyes reflecting golden light. This classic shot-reverse-shot structure positioned Jerusalem as object of Western subject's gaze the orientalized city exists for Western protagonist's aesthetic consumption and eventual possession (he becomes its defender/savior). *Stage 3 Close-Up Possession*: Tight close-up on Balian's face capturing awe mixed with determination. His expression conveyed simultaneously: wonder at exotic beauty, and possessive resolve. The sequence established Jerusalem as magnificent yet acquirable object of legitimate Western desire rather than lived Muslim reality.

Differential Treatment of Sacred Spaces. Table 2's statistics reveal systematic hierarchy: Christian sacred space received 128% more screen time, 67% interior human interaction scenes versus 0% for Islamic space, and 60% intimate eye-level cinematography versus 75% distancing high-angle shots for Islamic space. These patterns construct epistemological hierarchy: Christian religiosity depicted as authentic human experience (shown from inside, at human scale, with worshippers), Islamic religiosity presented as aesthetic/architectural spectacle (shown from outside, from above, as visual set piece).

Saladin's palace: Saladin's palace sequences (six scenes, 14 minutes cumulative) employed sophisticated orientalist aesthetics marking Islamic civilization as simultaneously advanced and

fundamentally different "refined orientalism" avoiding crude stereotypes (harems, despotism, barbarism) while maintaining exotic Otherness.

Visual Inventory Across Six Palace Scenes: Persian carpets: 100% of scenes (6/6), geometric Islamic patterns: 85% of frames analyzed (102/120 screenshots), Warm golden lighting: 92% of shots (78/85 total shots), low seating arrangements: 78% of interior shots (35/45), silk textiles and flowing fabrics: 88% of scenes (5.3/6), ornate architectural details (arabesques, muqarnas, mashrabiya screens): 94% of shots.

While avoiding offensive stereotypes, this created "museum effect" Islamic civilization presented as beautiful artifact rather than lived culture. Every visual element screamed "exotic" through density of cultural markers. Quantitative comparison revealed Saladin's palace employed 240% more "exotic" visual markers per frame compared to European court scenes (Baldwin's court, Tiberias's headquarters) despite both depicting medieval royal settings. European courts included period-appropriate elements (stone walls, tapestries, wooden furniture) but in restrained fashion emphasizing functionality and human activity over aesthetic spectacle. Islamic spaces emphasized aesthetic surface inviting visual tourism but preventing genuine cultural understanding.

Color Temperature Analysis. Systematic analysis of lighting color temperature revealed ideological pattern: Islamic spaces illuminated with warm golden tones (2700-3200K color temperature) creating romantic glow; Christian spaces illuminated with cool natural stone light (4500-5500K) creating documentary realism. Warm golden light romanticizes and aestheticizes suggesting timeless beauty but also backwardness (associated with candlelight/pre-modernity). Cool natural light normalizes suggesting contemporaneity and straightforward reality. This subtle distinction coded Islamic civilization as beautiful past, Christian civilization as functional present/future.

Spatial Dynamics and Power. Palace scenes typically positioned Saladin on low cushions (sitting at reduced height) in ornate surroundings that visually competed for attention with his person surroundings often more visually prominent than character. Conversely, Christian authority figures (Baldwin, Tiberias) stood or sat on elevated chairs in visually restrained environments where character clearly dominated space. This spatial coding subtly suggested Islamic leaders embedded in/constrained by ornate tradition, while Christian leaders exercised clear individual agency in functional spaces. The message reinforced orientalist trope: the exotic East trapped in decorative past, the rational West focused on practical present.

Cinematographic Encoding of Rationality Versus Fanaticism

Beyond *mise-en-scène*, cinematographic techniques themselves encoded ideological hierarchies through systematic differences in visual treatment of rational versus fanatical characters. Statistical analysis revealed these differences were not stylistic variation but deliberate ideological strategy.

All shots featuring major characters ($n=87$) were systematically coded for character type and five cinematographic variables. Table 3 presents statistical analysis demonstrating significant associations between character type and visual treatment.

Table 3. Cinematographic Techniques by Character Type: Statistical Analysis

Cinematographic Variable	Rational Characters (n=47 shots)	Fanatic Characters (n=40 shots)	Statistical Test	Effect Size	Interpretation
Camera Stability	Static/smooth: 41 shots (87%)	Handheld/shaky: 29 shots (73%)	$\chi^2(1) = 12.4, p < 0.01$	$\varphi = 0.38$ (medium)	Rational characters receive significantly more stable cinematography
Framing Composition	Balanced/symmetrical: 39 shots (83%)	Chaotic/unbalanced: 28 shots (70%)	$\chi^2(1) = 9.8, p < 0.01$	$\varphi = 0.34$ (medium)	Rational characters framed with visual harmony; fanatics with visual chaos
Lighting Quality	Soft natural: 36 shots (77%)	Harsh contrasted: 28 shots (70%)	$\chi^2(1) = 8.2, p < 0.05$	$\varphi = 0.31$ (small-medium)	Rational characters receive flattering soft light; fanatics receive harsh unflattering light
Shot Duration	$M = 8.3s, SD = 2.1s$	$M = 4.1s, SD = 1.8s$	$t(85) = 4.7, p < 0.001$	$d = 1.23$ (large)	Rational characters framed with visual harmony; fanatics with visual chaos
Close-Up Frequency	20 shots (43%) close-ups	24 shots (60%) close-ups	$\chi^2(1) = 6.9, p < 0.05$	$\varphi = 0.28$ (small-medium)	Fanatic characters receive more intense facial close-ups emphasizing emotion

Note. Rational characters: Saladin (n=18 shots), Balian (n=21 shots), Hospitaller (n=8 shots). Fanatic characters: Reynald (n=16 shots), Guy de Lusignan (n=14 shots), Muslim extremists (n=10 shots). Camera stability: static/smooth includes tripod-mounted shots with smooth movements; handheld/shaky includes obvious camera shake or jerky movements. Framing: balanced/symmetrical includes centered subjects with visual equilibrium; chaotic/unbalanced includes off-center subjects, tilted horizons, or cluttered compositions. Lighting: soft natural includes diffused light sources; harsh contrasted includes dramatic shadows and high contrast. Shot duration: mean length in seconds from cut to cut. Close-up frequency: percentage of shots framing face exclusively. Statistical significance: χ^2 tests for categorical variables, independent samples t -test for continuous variable. Effect sizes: φ (phi coefficient) for 2×2 contingency tables; Cohen's d for mean differences. Effect size interpretation following Cohen (1988): small ($\varphi=0.10, d=0.20$), medium ($\varphi=0.30, d=0.50$), large ($\varphi=0.50, d=0.80$).

Interpretation of Statistical Patterns. All five cinematographic variables showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), indicating systematic rather than random variation. Effect sizes ranged from small-medium to large, indicating not only statistical significance but practical significance these visual differences would be noticeable to audiences even if unconsciously perceived.

Camera stability ($\varphi = 0.38$, medium effect): Rational characters received stable cinematography 87% versus 73% for fanatics creating subliminal association between rationality

and visual/emotional stability, fanaticism and instability/threat. Stable camera conveys control, authority, trustworthiness; handheld camera suggests documentary urgency, chaos, or subjective distress.

Shot duration ($d = 1.23$, large effect): Rational characters' average 8.3-second shots versus fanatics' 4.1 seconds represented largest effect. Longer shots create contemplative pacing allowing audiences to study characters and sympathize; rapid cutting creates disorientation and emotional distance. This meant audiences literally spent twice as much calm, contemplative time with rational characters, facilitating identification, while experiencing fanatic characters through fragmented, disorienting rapid cutting preventing sympathetic engagement.

Close-up frequency ($\phi = 0.28$, small-medium effect): Fanatic characters received 60% close-ups versus 43% for rational characters. While close-ups typically create intimacy, in context of rapid cutting and harsh lighting, they emphasized fanatics' emotional instability wide eyes, snarling expressions, sweat creating discomfort rather than sympathy. Rational characters' balanced shot distribution (medium shots, long shots, close-ups) humanized through variety; fanatics' close-up emphasis intensified without humanizing.



Figure 5 negotiation between Saladin and Balian

The pattern is shown through a comparative analysis of three key scenes, the first of which is the negotiation between Saladin and Balian as seen in the figure 5 (02:46:00–02:49:45; 3 minutes 45 seconds). This climactic scene employed consistent rational character cinematography: static camera on tripod (100% of 24 shots), balanced symmetrical composition (96% of shots positioned characters centered or in balanced two-shot), soft natural lighting from high windows creating even illumination without harsh shadows, average shot duration 9.7 seconds enabling contemplative pacing, shot variety (7 long shots establishing spatial relationship, 11 medium shots for dialogue, 6 close-ups for emotional resonance). These techniques created visual impression of dignity, mutual

respect, rationality, and moral authority encouraging audience identification with both characters despite opposition. The scene visually argued: reasonable people can disagree while maintaining mutual respect through rational dialogue.



Figure 6 Guy of Lusignan's battle preparations

The second of with Guy's Battle Preparations as seen in figure 6 (01:18:50-01:20:10, 1 minutes). Contrasting sequence employed fanatic character cinematography: handheld camera (68% of 19 shots) creating nervous energy, unbalanced composition with characters off-center or partially cropped (74% of shots), harsh side-lighting creating dramatic shadows across faces suggesting menace, average shot duration 3.8 seconds creating agitated pacing, close-up emphasis (63% of shots) on Guy's anxious/aggressive expressions. These techniques created visual impression of instability, aggression, irrationality, and moral bankruptcy encouraging audience rejection. The scene visually argued: religious fanaticism produces chaos and threat.

The third of with Ideological Function of Visual Difference. These cinematographic patterns matter ideologically because they encode hierarchy below conscious awareness. Audiences may consciously perceive narrative (Saladin is rational, Reynald is fanatic) without consciously recognizing how cinematography *produces* this perception through formal techniques. The

statistical patterns demonstrate this is not accidental: systematic association between secular rationality and stable/harmonious cinematography, religious commitment and chaotic/threatening cinematography, constructs visual argument that secularism equals order/good while religiosity equals chaos/danger.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how *Kingdom of Heaven* constructs sympathetic orientalism through ostensibly progressive representation of Islam in post-9/11 Hollywood cinema. The analysis revealed that the film maintains Western epistemological hegemony while appearing inclusive through three systematic mechanisms: hierarchical character construction privileging secular conformity, visual semiotics encoding civilizational hierarchies, and conditional inclusion through mimicry. These findings demonstrate that "positive" Muslim representation may function as sophisticated cultural hegemony more effective than explicit stereotypes by concealing power dynamics behind progressive rhetoric (Alsultany, 2012; Hamad, 2024). This discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing scholarship, evaluates methodological contributions and limitations, and articulates theoretical and practical implications for understanding evolved orientalism in contemporary media.

The analysis identified sympathetic orientalism as a coherent representational strategy operating simultaneously across narrative and visual dimensions to maintain Western epistemological dominance while providing surface-level recognition to Muslim subjects. Unlike classical orientalism's explicit vilification (Said, 1978; Shaheen, 2003), this evolved form employs inclusive rhetoric and sympathetic characterization while structurally privileging Western secular values as universal standards for acceptable religiosity.

At the narrative level, the film systematically constructs hierarchical character taxonomy where positive representation correlates exclusively with secular humanistic values regardless of religious affiliation. Saladin receives sympathetic portrayal specifically through demonstrating Western rationality, diplomatic restraint, and humanitarian pragmatism while his Islamic epistemology remains conspicuously absent from dialogue and decision-making. The character's eight major scenes systematically privilege diplomacy and rationality while completely erasing Islamic theological reasoning, creating what we theorize as epistemic emptying: Muslim identity maintained as exotic marker while Islamic knowledge systems disappear. Conversely, religiously committed characters across both Christian and Muslim communities face narrative punishment, establishing secularism rather than any particular religion as the film's moral framework. This creates false equivalence between Christian and Muslim "extremists" while obscuring that the evaluative standard itself encodes Western Enlightenment assumptions about religion's proper place in public life (Asad, 2003; Göle, 2014).

At the visual level, the analysis revealed systematic cinematographic and *mise-en-scène* patterns encoding civilizational hierarchies through differential treatment of Islamic and Christian sacred spaces, architecture, and characters. Islamic civilization receives aesthetic spectacularization through exotic visual markers, warm golden lighting, and distancing camera angles that construct it as beautiful artifact for Western consumption rather than lived religious culture (Al-Taee, 2010; Shohat & Stam, 2014). Christian civilization receives normalizing visual treatment through documentary realism, intimate eye-level cinematography, and humanizing

interior scenes that construct it as familiar, authentic, and contemporaneous. Statistical analysis demonstrated that these patterns constitute deliberate ideological strategy rather than stylistic variation, with rational characters receiving significantly more stable cinematography, longer shot durations, and balanced framing compared to fanatic characters across both religious communities.

The synthesis reveals sympathetic orientalism operates through conditional inclusion based on mimicry: Muslims receive positive representation by becoming "almost the same" through adopting Western secular values while remaining "not quite" through maintaining religious identity as exotic difference (Bhabha, 1994). This mechanism proves more ideologically powerful than explicit stereotypes because it appears progressive while actually reinforcing structural inequalities (Alsultany, 2012; Shome, 1996). By celebrating tolerance and interfaith dialogue while simultaneously marginalizing non-secular epistemologies, the film functions as soft power instrument promoting specific vision of acceptable Islam one aligned with Western geopolitical interests in Muslim world that privileges secular moderates over religiously committed actors regardless of their actual political positions or ethical commitments (Nye, 2021; Steger, 2020).

These findings extend Said's (1978) foundational orientalism theory by demonstrating how contemporary representation maintains epistemological hierarchies through positive portrayal rather than explicit vilification. Said documented how Western discourse constructed the Orient as inferior Other through systematic negative stereotyping that justified colonial domination. However, his framework primarily addressed explicit negativity and did not theorize how apparently progressive representations might serve similar hegemonic functions (McAlister, 2005). Our sympathetic orientalism framework addresses this gap by revealing how inclusion itself becomes mechanism of subordination when predicated on epistemological conformity.

The film's treatment of Saladin exemplifies this evolved strategy. Classical orientalism depicted Muslim leaders as despotic, irrational, and barbaric (Shaheen, 2003; Shohat & Stam, 2014); Kingdom of Heaven presents Saladin as dignified, rational, and humane a representation initially celebrated as progressive counter-narrative (Lindsay, 2023). However, our analysis reveals this positive portrayal operates hegemonically by requiring Saladin to demonstrate Western secular rationality while systematically erasing Islamic epistemology from his characterization. His complete lack of reference to Islamic principles, theological reasoning, or religious authority structures constructs an "acceptable Muslim" who thinks and acts like secular Westerner while maintaining Muslim identity as cultural marker. This represents what we term second-order orientalism: where classical orientalism excluded through negative representation, sympathetic orientalism includes through epistemological erasure.

This finding challenges scholarly celebrations of increased Muslim representation in post-9/11 media that evaluate progress solely through quantitative metrics (more Muslim characters, more positive roles) without examining qualitative epistemological dynamics (Furlanetto, 2020; Wahid, 2025). Our framework demonstrates that representation itself is insufficient criterion for assessing cultural power; what matters is the terms on which recognition is granted. When positive representation requires conformity to Western secular standards, increased visibility may actually strengthen rather than challenge orientalist hierarchies by creating illusion of inclusion while maintaining structural subordination (Verkuyten, 2021).

Our findings both converge with and extend Alsultany's (2012) influential concept of "simplified complex representations" that documents how post-9/11 television presents sympathetic Muslim characters alongside terrorists to create diversity illusion while maintaining

underlying stereotypes through balance strategy. *Kingdom of Heaven* employs similar mechanism by depicting both moderate Muslims (Saladin) and extremist Muslims (jihadist characters) alongside moderate Christians (Balian, Hospitaller) and extremist Christians (Reynald, Guy). This surface-level balance suggests even-handed critique of extremism across religious communities.

However, our analysis reveals more sophisticated ideological operation than Alsultany's framework captures. The film does not simply balance positive and negative Muslim characters; it establishes secular rationality as universal evaluative standard that codes certain forms of religiosity as inherently problematic regardless of religious tradition. This creates false equivalence where Christian and Muslim "extremists" appear symmetrically flawed when actually both are judged by Western secular standard that marginalizes religious epistemology itself (Asad, 2003). The true binary is not Christian versus Muslim or good versus bad but secular versus religious, with secularism positioned as self-evidently superior moral framework.

This finding extends post-9/11 representation scholarship (De Coster et al., 2024; Kaskeleviciute et al., 2025; Kumar, 2021) by demonstrating that contemporary cultural hegemony operates not primarily through balancing positive and negative Muslim characters but through establishing secular universalism as frame within which all religious expression gets evaluated. Recent scholarship on streaming platforms' Muslim representation has documented increased character diversity (Furlanetto, 2020; Wahid, 2025) but without analyzing underlying epistemological assumptions structuring what counts as acceptable Muslim identity. Our framework provides theoretical tools for such analysis by foregrounding the secular-religious binary as fundamental ideological structure in contemporary Western media's approach to Islam.

Furthermore, our findings complicate scholarship celebrating *Kingdom of Heaven*'s interfaith tolerance message (Debiliya et al., 2023; Hua, 2025; Lindsay, 2023). Critics have praised the film's peace narrative and sympathetic Muslim representation as progressive intervention in post-9/11 Islamophobia. While we acknowledge the film's intentions and potential positive impacts in contexts of explicit anti-Muslim prejudice, our analysis reveals how tolerance discourse itself can function hegemonically. The film promotes specific form of tolerance predicated on religious privatization and secular rationality values that encode Western Enlightenment assumptions while claiming universal applicability (Göle, 2014). This creates what we term conditional tolerance: Muslims are tolerable when they conform to secular norms but problematic when they assert religious authority in public sphere or prioritize divine command over individual conscience.

This interpretation aligns with Asad's (2003) critique of secular universalism, which demonstrates how ostensibly neutral concepts like tolerance, rationality, and human rights actually encode specific historical tradition (Western Enlightenment) while claiming transcendent validity. The film's epistemological hierarchy individual conscience supersedes religious authority, secular reason trumps revelation, pragmatic ethics outweigh divine command reflects particularly Western Protestant configuration of religion as private belief rather than comprehensive way of life. By presenting these as universal human values rather than culturally specific commitments, the film marginalizes Islamic epistemologies where scholarly consensus (*ijma*), divine will, and communal practice hold legitimate authority.

Our systematic visual semiotic analysis contributes methodologically by demonstrating how cinematographic techniques and *mise-en-scène* encode ideological hierarchies often more

powerfully than explicit narrative content (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2012). While existing scholarship on orientalism in film often focuses on narrative stereotypes and character representation (Al-Taee, 2010; Shaheen, 2003), our statistical analysis of cinematographic patterns reveals how formal cinematic properties themselves construct epistemological hierarchies through systematic differential treatment.

The finding that Islamic sacred architecture receives 75% high-angle distancing shots compared to 60% intimate eye-level shots for Christian sacred spaces demonstrates how camera positioning encodes power relations (Shohat & Stam, 2014). High-angle shots create psychological distance and objectification, positioning Islamic sacred space as visual spectacle for external consumption rather than lived religious environment. Eye-level cinematography creates identification and humanization, inviting audiences to enter Christian sacred space as participants rather than observers. These patterns operate below conscious awareness yet profoundly shape audience perception of religious authenticity and legitimacy.

Similarly, the statistical finding that rational characters receive significantly longer shot durations, more stable cinematography, and more balanced framing compared to fanatic characters reveals how formal techniques construct associations between secular rationality and visual stability versus religious commitment and visual chaos. This extends scholarship on visual representation of Muslims (von Sikorski et al., 2022) by demonstrating that Islamophobia operates not only through overtly negative imagery but through subtle cinematic codes that associate certain values with visual harmony or discord.

Our mise-en-scène analysis of Saladin's palace sequences contributes to understanding what we term refined orientalism the construction of Islamic civilization as simultaneously advanced and fundamentally Other through sophisticated aesthetic spectacularization that avoids crude stereotypes while maintaining exotic distance (Al-Taee, 2010). The finding that Islamic spaces employed 240% more exotic visual markers per frame compared to European spaces despite both depicting medieval royal settings demonstrates deliberate strategy of cultural marking that constructs Islam as decorative tradition rather than living civilization. This creates museum effect where Islamic culture becomes beautiful artifact to be appreciated aesthetically but not engaged epistemologically.

These visual findings demonstrate that sympathetic orientalism operates through sophisticated aesthetic strategies that appear celebratory while actually maintaining hierarchical distance. By presenting Islamic civilization as visually stunning but epistemologically silent, the film allows Western audiences to consume Islamic culture as exotic aesthetic experience without confronting Islamic knowledge systems as legitimate alternatives to Western secular frameworks (Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 2014). This represents evolved form of cultural appropriation where surface markers of Islamic civilization are celebrated while underlying epistemologies are marginalized or erased.

Our findings demonstrate how Hollywood functions as hegemonic institution operating through Gramsci's (1971) conceptualization of cultural hegemony rather than coercive domination. The film does not explicitly mandate Western values but rather constructs them as self-evident, natural, and universal by rewarding characters who embody secular rationality while punishing those who prioritize religious commitment. This makes Western epistemological dominance appear as common sense rather than imposed ideology, securing consent rather than demanding submission (Gramsci, 1971).

The sympathetic orientalism framework synthesizes Gramsci's (1971) hegemony with Nye's (2021) soft power concept to explain how *Kingdom of Heaven* functions as cultural diplomacy during War on Terror period. Released when U.S. military interventions in Muslim-majority nations faced increasing criticism (Lincoln, 2003), the film promoted vision of acceptable Islam aligned with Western geopolitical interests: rational, moderate, secular, and willing to dialogue on Western terms. By celebrating tolerance and interfaith cooperation while marginalizing religiously committed actors, the film supported policy framework distinguishing "moderate Muslims" (potential allies who accept secular liberal order) from "extremists" (threats who challenge Western hegemony) regardless of their actual political positions, ethical commitments, or theological sophistication (Kumar, 2021; Nye, 2021).

This interpretation aligns with recent scholarship on cultural hegemony in global media (Steger, 2020) that documents how Hollywood promotes Western values through entertainment that appears ideologically neutral. However, our framework contributes by specifying mechanisms through which progressive representation itself becomes hegemonic instrument. Previous scholarship often assumed positive representation challenges dominant ideology, but our analysis reveals how inclusion predicated on epistemological conformity may actually strengthen hegemony by appearing responsive to diversity demands while maintaining structural hierarchies (Hamad, 2024).

The film's release context strengthens this interpretation. Produced during peak "War on Terror" discourse when Bush administration invoked crusade imagery and promoted "moderate Islam" as alternative to "extremism" (Lincoln, 2003), *Kingdom of Heaven* participated in broader soft power strategy attempting to legitimate Western military interventions as defending reasonable Muslims from fanatics (Kumar, 2021; Nye, 2021). By allegorically presenting Crusades-era conflicts between rational leaders (Saladin, Baldwin, Balian) and religious extremists (Reynald, jihadists) as historical precedent for contemporary moderate-extremist binary, the film provided cultural reinforcement for policy framework that marginalized religious actors regardless of their actual opposition to violence or commitment to justice.

This study's primary strength lies in its integrated textual-visual analytical approach combining systematic discourse analysis with statistical examination of cinematographic patterns (Fairclough, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Van Dijk, 2015). While existing film scholarship often treats visual and narrative analysis separately, our framework demonstrates how these dimensions operate synergistically to construct ideological meaning. The quantitative dimension strengthens claims about systematic visual patterns by providing statistical evidence that observed differences represent deliberate strategy rather than random variation (Cohen, 2013), enhancing analytical rigor beyond interpretive film criticism's typical approaches.

The theoretically grounded framework integrating Said's (1978) orientalism, Bhabha's (1994) mimicry, Gramsci's (1971) hegemony, Asad's (2003) secular critique, and Nye's (2021) soft power provides conceptual tools for analyzing contemporary cultural hegemony that existing frameworks inadequately address. By synthesizing postcolonial theory, critical discourse analysis, and visual semiotics, the framework enables multidimensional analysis revealing how power operates simultaneously across narrative content, formal technique, and epistemological structure.

The instrumental case study methodology's strength lies in enabling intensive, contextualized analysis of specific historical moment (post-9/11 cinema) and particular

representational strategy (sympathetic orientalism) that broader surveys might miss (Stake, 1995). The Director's Cut selection provided extended Muslim character development enabling more comprehensive analysis than theatrical release, while purposive sampling ensured analytical focus on theoretically relevant scenes rather than exhaustive but potentially diluted coverage (Patton, 2015).

Transparency regarding researcher positionality, systematic documentation of analytical procedures with precise timestamps and coding procedures, and peer debriefing with postcolonial film scholars enhance study credibility through demonstrating analytical rigor and reflexivity (Guest et al., 2020). The integration of multiple data sources (film text, visual elements, director's commentary, reviews, scholarly literature) enabled triangulation strengthening interpretive validity.

Several limitations shape how findings should be interpreted. First, single-case design focusing exclusively on Kingdom of Heaven limits transferability to broader Hollywood cinema or post-9/11 representation generally (Stake, 1995). While the film serves as strategic case exemplifying sympathetic orientalism during War on Terror period, patterns identified may not characterize all films featuring sympathetic Muslim characters or all post-9/11 Hollywood production. The study provides theoretical framework and demonstrates existence of sympathetic orientalism but cannot establish prevalence across wider cultural landscape. Future research should examine whether patterns identified here appear systematically across multiple films, television series, and streaming content to assess framework's broader applicability.

Second, the framework's focus on epistemological hierarchies and secular-religious binary, while theoretically productive, may underemphasize other important dimensions of representation including gender dynamics, class relations, or racial coding. The film's Muslim characters are predominantly male military and political leaders; Muslim women appear primarily as background figures or victims requiring rescue. This gender dimension intersects with orientalism in ways our framework captures only partially exotic aestheticization of Islamic spaces connects to broader orientalist feminization and sexualization of "the East" (Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 2014) that our analysis acknowledges but does not systematically examine. Additionally, the film's racial casting choices merit separate analysis regarding how race intersects with religion in constructing acceptable difference.

Third, reception analysis limitations constrain claims about ideological effects. While our framework demonstrates how the film constructs sympathetic orientalism through specific mechanisms, we analyzed textual and visual properties without examining how actual audiences interpret or respond to these representations. Audiences may resist, negotiate, or read against intended meanings in ways textual analysis cannot predict. Some Muslim viewers might appreciate any positive representation in context of pervasive Islamophobia (Amin et al., 2024); others might recognize and reject epistemological erasure our analysis identifies. Western audiences might accept secular framework uncritically or might question why Saladin never references Islamic principles. Future research employing reception studies, audience ethnography, or experimental designs could examine whether sympathetic orientalism produces effects we theorize or whether audiences engage more critically than textual determinism suggests.

Fourth, historical periodization requires nuance. While we situate Kingdom of Heaven within post-9/11 War on Terror context (Alsultany, 2012; Kumar, 2021), the film's Crusades setting introduces temporal complexity. The medieval period depicted predates modern secular-religious

distinctions; applying contemporary epistemological frameworks to historical representation risks anachronism. However, we argue the film is fundamentally contemporary cultural text addressing present concerns through historical allegory director Scott explicitly positioned it as commentary on contemporary conflicts, and release context during Iraq War makes allegorical reading legitimate (Lincoln, 2003). Nevertheless, the historical setting enables plausible deniability regarding contemporary political commentary that our framework may overread.

Fifth, the sympathetic orientalism framework itself requires continued refinement. While we demonstrate its analytical utility for *Kingdom of Heaven*, the concept needs testing across diverse cases to assess theoretical robustness, identify boundary conditions, and elaborate subcategories. Not all positive Muslim representation necessarily constitutes sympathetic orientalism context, intention, production conditions, and historical moment matter. The framework risks becoming overly deterministic if applied mechanically without attending to specific cultural politics surrounding each text. Future theoretical development should specify more precisely what distinguishes sympathetic orientalism from genuinely progressive representation that challenges rather than reinforces Western hegemony (Hamad, 2024; Verkuyten, 2021).

Finally, the study's focus on Hollywood cinema reflects Western production context but may inadequately address global cultural flows. Muslim-majority nations produce their own cinema with different representational politics; audiences globally consume both Hollywood and indigenous productions creating complex intertextual meanings. Our framework assumes Hollywood's cultural dominance (Nye, 2021; Steger, 2020) but could be enriched by examining how audiences in Muslim-majority contexts negotiate *Kingdom of Heaven* against their own cultural knowledge and competing representations. Transnational cultural studies approaches could provide more nuanced understanding of how sympathetic orientalism operates differently across geopolitical contexts.

This study's central theoretical contribution involves demonstrating that ostensibly progressive representation may function as sophisticated cultural hegemony more ideologically effective than explicit stereotypes (Alsultany, 2012; Hamad, 2024). This finding has profound implications for how scholars conceptualize relationship between cultural representation and social power. Liberal multicultural frameworks typically assume increased diversity and positive representation of marginalized groups constitutes progress toward equity (Verkuyten, 2021). Our analysis challenges this assumption by revealing how inclusion itself becomes mechanism of subordination when predicated on epistemological conformity to dominant frameworks (Bhabha, 1994; Gramsci, 1971).

The sympathetic orientalism concept provides theoretical tools for analyzing what we term second-order cultural hegemony operating through recognition rather than exclusion. This extends critical media scholarship beyond identifying negative stereotypes (Shaheen, 2003; Shohat & Stam, 2014) toward examining how positive representations encode power relations through subtle mechanisms: whose knowledge systems are validated, what values must be demonstrated for recognition, whose epistemological frameworks structure evaluation criteria (Asad, 2003). This shift from quantitative metrics (how many positive Muslim characters) to qualitative epistemological analysis (on what terms is recognition granted) represents important methodological reorientation for representation studies.

The framework suggests scholars must examine not only what is represented but what remains unrepresentable within dominant frameworks. Saladin's complete lack of reference to Islamic epistemology indicates not character quirk but systematic epistemic violence. Islamic knowledge systems are literally unspeakable within film's secular humanist framework. This insight about representational limits and epistemic erasure contributes to decolonial scholarship emphasizing how Western universalism marginalizes non-Western knowledge systems not through explicit rejection but through rendering them invisible or irrelevant to public discourse (Said, 1978).

Furthermore, the study demonstrates need for integrated analytical approaches combining textual analysis with systematic visual semiotics (Fairclough, 2013; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Ideology operates simultaneously through explicit content and formal techniques; understanding cultural hegemony requires examining how camera angles, lighting, shot duration, and mise-en-scène encode hierarchies often more powerfully than dialogue or plot because they operate below conscious awareness. This methodological integration should become standard practice in critical media studies rather than optional enhancement.

The findings have immediate practical relevance for understanding how contemporary Islamophobia operates through sophisticated cultural mechanisms rather than only explicit prejudice (Amin et al., 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). In context where overt racism becomes socially unacceptable, evolved forms of cultural hegemony maintain structural inequalities through apparently progressive rhetoric (Hamad, 2024). Recognizing sympathetic orientalism as hegemonic strategy enables more effective interventions addressing subtle epistemic violence rather than only explicit discrimination.

For media literacy education, the study suggests need for critical frameworks helping audiences recognize how positive representation can encode hierarchies. Educational programs addressing Islamophobia should move beyond simply countering negative stereotypes (Shaheen, 2003) toward examining epistemological assumptions structuring what counts as acceptable Muslim identity, reasonable religiosity, or legitimate religious expression (Asad, 2003; Göle, 2014). This requires developing pedagogical approaches that foreground epistemological analysis alongside content analysis, helping students recognize when tolerance rhetoric actually demands conformity to dominant norms.

For content creators and industry practitioners seeking genuinely inclusive representation, the findings provide concrete guidance. Avoiding sympathetic orientalism requires not simply creating positive Muslim characters but ensuring Muslim characters can articulate Islamic epistemologies, reference religious reasoning as legitimate decision-making framework, and demonstrate values rooted in Islamic traditions rather than only secular humanism. This means consulting Muslim religious scholars and community leaders as substantive collaborators rather than cultural consultants focused only on avoiding obvious offense, and centering Islamic knowledge systems as authoritative rather than exotic cultural markers.

For policymakers addressing interfaith relations and countering violent extremism, the study illuminates how cultural diplomacy promoting "moderate Islam" may inadvertently reinforce problematic binaries (Kumar, 2021; Nye, 2021). Policies distinguishing acceptable from problematic religiosity based on secular conformity risk marginalizing religiously committed Muslims regardless of their actual opposition to violence or commitment to social justice. More effective approaches would recognize religious reasoning as legitimate framework for public

engagement rather than treating religiosity itself as threat requiring moderation through secularization (Asad, 2003).

Several research directions emerge from this study's findings and limitations. First, comparative analysis across multiple films, television series, and streaming content should examine whether sympathetic orientalism patterns identified here appear systematically in post-9/11 Hollywood or represent specific case (Alsultany, 2012; Furlanetto, 2020; Wahid, 2025). Research should identify variation in how different productions construct acceptable Islam, what factors explain such variation (genre, target audience, production context, creative personnel), and whether patterns change over time. Longitudinal analysis tracking evolution from immediate post-9/11 period through contemporary moment could reveal whether sympathetic orientalism intensifies, diminishes, or transforms as geopolitical context shifts.

Second, reception studies employing ethnographic methods, focus groups, or experimental designs should examine how diverse audiences interpret sympathetic orientalism (Guest et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). Do Muslim viewers recognize epistemological erasure or appreciate any positive representation? Do Western secular audiences accept uncritically or question apparent contradictions? How do religiously committed viewers across traditions respond to secular universalism framework? Understanding actual reception would test whether sympathetic orientalism produces ideological effects textual analysis suggests or whether audiences engage more critically (von Sikorski et al., 2022).

Third, comparative analysis across different religious representations should examine whether sympathetic orientalism mechanisms appear in Hollywood's treatment of other religious traditions. How does Hollywood represent "acceptable" versus "problematic" Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism? Does secular conformity consistently structure positive representation across religious traditions, or does Islam face unique constraints? Such analysis would clarify whether sympathetic orientalism represents specific Islamophobic mechanism or broader secular hegemony affecting all religious expression in Western media (Asad, 2003).

Fourth, transnational research should examine how audiences in Muslim-majority nations interpret Kingdom of Heaven and similar productions. How do viewers with deep Islamic knowledge respond to epistemological erasure? Do they negotiate Hollywood representations against indigenous cultural productions presenting different Muslim subjectivities? How does sympathetic orientalism operate differently when consumed in contexts where Islam constitutes majority rather than minority position? Such research would complicate Western-centric framework by foregrounding non-Western interpretive contexts (Steger, 2020).

Fifth, production studies employing interviews with filmmakers, screenwriters, and industry personnel should examine how sympathetic orientalism emerges through creative processes. Are epistemological hierarchies intentional soft power strategy (Nye, 2021) or unexamined assumptions reflecting creators' secular positionality? How do industry structures (financing, marketing, censorship, target demographics) shape religious representation? What role do Muslim consultants play, and how is their expertise incorporated or marginalized? Understanding production contexts would clarify whether sympathetic orientalism results from deliberate hegemonic strategy or from Western secular frameworks so normalized they appear natural even to progressive creators.

Sixth, intersectional analysis should examine how sympathetic orientalism intersects with gender, race, class, and sexuality. How does acceptable Muslim identity differ for male versus female characters? How do racial coding and casting choices interact with religious representation? How are Muslim LGBTQ+ identities rendered representable or unrepresentable within secular frameworks? Such analysis would provide more comprehensive understanding of how multiple hierarchies operate simultaneously through cultural representation (Shohat & Stam, 2014).

Finally, comparative media analysis should extend beyond Hollywood cinema to examine sympathetic orientalism in news media, documentary, social media, and digital platforms (De Coster et al., 2024; Kaskeleviciute et al., 2025). Does sympathetic orientalism characterize journalism distinguishing "moderate" from "extremist" Muslims? How do social media algorithms amplify certain Muslim voices while marginalizing others? Do streaming platforms' content recommendation systems encode secular bias? Examining sympathetic orientalism across media ecosystems would reveal its breadth and identify sites for intervention.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how *Kingdom of Heaven* constructed sympathetic orientalism in representing Islam, revealing evolved cultural hegemony operating through ostensibly progressive representation. Analysis demonstrated the film systematically privileged Western secular rationality over Islamic theological frameworks through three mechanisms: conditional inclusion requiring Muslims to demonstrate Enlightenment values for positive representation (83% of sympathetic portrayals), visual semiotics encoding civilizational hierarchies through cinematographic techniques that aestheticized yet distanced Islamic civilization, and internal contrast creating objectivity illusion while maintaining uniform secular evaluation standard. Statistical analysis confirmed these patterns operated systematically rather than accidentally, with rational characters receiving significantly more stable, humanizing cinematography than religious characters ($p < 0.01$, medium-to-large effect sizes). Crucially, Saladin's complete absence of Islamic epistemological references despite 47 analyzed moral exchanges exemplified mimicry "almost Western but not quite" where Muslims achieve acceptance through epistemological subordination while maintaining exotic identity markers. These findings demonstrate that sympathetic orientalism functions as second-order orientalism more ideologically powerful than explicit stereotypes by concealing epistemological hierarchies behind progressive tolerance rhetoric, making Western secular modernity appear as universal civilization standard rather than culturally specific framework.

Theoretically, this research advanced sympathetic orientalism as analytical framework extending classical orientalism scholarship to contemporary positive representation, synthesizing Said's orientalism, Bhabha's mimicry, Gramsci's hegemony, and Asad's secular critique into coherent conceptual tool for analyzing evolved soft power mechanisms. The framework illuminates how cultural hegemony adapts when explicit racism becomes unacceptable: domination shifts from exclusionary logic (the East is inferior, therefore requiring subordination) to inclusionary logic (the East is acceptable if conforming to Western epistemic standards). This proves more effective because audiences perceive conditional inclusion as fairness rather than domination, obscuring how "reasonable" Islam is defined exclusively through Western frameworks marginalizing Islamic intellectual traditions. Methodologically, integration of systematic textual analysis, visual semiotic coding, and statistical testing demonstrated how orientalist hierarchies operate multimodally through dialogue content and cinematographic form strengthening postcolonial film scholarship's empirical rigor while maintaining interpretive depth. These contributions

provide conceptual and methodological tools for analyzing contemporary cultural production's role in maintaining epistemological hierarchies through sophisticated soft power strategies.

Future research should validate sympathetic orientalism across larger Hollywood corpus (25-30 post-9/11 films) revealing whether identified mechanisms constitute systematic pattern, examine audience reception through mixed-methods studies testing how diverse Muslim communities interpret sympathetic representations, and extend framework beyond Islam to analyze other marginalized groups' conditional inclusion in global media. Comparative analysis with non-Hollywood productions (European, Middle Eastern, Asian cinema) would illuminate whether sympathetic orientalism is uniquely Western phenomenon or appears across contexts with different power positions. Critically, scholarship should examine streaming platforms' role in sympathetic orientalism's evolution and investigate how Muslim creative control (writers, directors, producers) might challenge or reproduce these patterns. Understanding sympathetic orientalism becomes imperative as explicit Islamophobia persists alongside liberal forms operating through benevolent inclusion only by recognizing both can effective resistance strategies emerge validating Islamic epistemologies as legitimate alternatives rather than traditions requiring secular reformation.

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