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Connecting Islam and film culture: The reception of *The Message* (*Ar Risalah*) among the Moroccan diaspora

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Summary
This article reviews the complex relationship between religion and film-viewing among the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp (Belgium), an ethnically and linguistically diverse group that is largely Muslim. A media ethnographic study of film culture, including in-depth interviews, a group interview and elaborate fieldwork, indicates that film preferences and consumption vary greatly along socio-demographic and linguistic lines. One particular religious film, however, holds a cult status, *Ar Risalah* (*The Message*), a 1976 historical epic produced by Mustapha Akkad that deals with the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The film's local distribution is discussed, as well as its reception among the Moroccan diaspora. By identifying three positions towards Islam, different modes of reception were found, ranging from a distant and objective to a transparent and subjective mode. It was found that the film supports inter-generational religious instruction, in the context of families and mosques. Moreover, a specific inspirational message is drawn from the film by those who are in search of a well-defined space for Islam in their own lives.

Key words: Film and diaspora, media ethnography, Moroccan diaspora, Islam, *Ar Risalah*, *The Message*, Mustapha Akkad, religion and media

Introduction

The media use of diasporic communities has received significant attention from a variety of scholarly fields, uncovering the complex roles that transnational media play in the construction of diasporic connectedness (both 'internal' among diasporic communities as well as with countries of origin, whether or not 'imagined'), the negotiation of identity and the enunciation of socio-cultural belongings. Across different disciplines and regions, studies have been devoted to satellite television and online media use (Mitra 2006; d'Haenens, Koeman & Saeys 2007; Sakr 2008). The study of film cultures has been less considered, except for the ubiquitous 'global Bollywood'. This article looks at diasporas' complex

engagements with media from the angle of film consumption, reporting on an ethnographically-grounded analysis of film culture among the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp.

The overall engagement of this community with Moroccan films is rather limited, especially when compared with the more visible and elaborate circulation of Turkish and Bollywood films (Smets et al. 2012) and the central role of 'homeland' films described elsewhere (Cunningham 2001). As we will explain, film preferences stretch out in many different directions, mostly depending on socio-demographic factors and language skills. However, one particular film is popular among people of all backgrounds and ages: *Ar Risalah* (*The Message: The Story of Islam*), a historical epos about the life of Muhammad produced by Mustapha Akkad in 1976.[1] Considering *Ar Risalah* as a religious film (see Morgan 2005, for a discussion of the metagenre), this raises questions about the relation between religion and film reception in the diaspora. Connecting our case study to the existing work on religion and film, the main questions asked in this article are: How is this particular film received within different groups and among different generations of the Moroccan community in Antwerp? And how can this case shed light on the broader understanding of film and Islam in diasporic contexts?

I start with an overview of the relevant literature on cinema and diasporic audiences, in order to present and frame the methodological and theoretical agenda of my research, arguing for a study of diasporic audiences from a critical, contextualised and ethnographic point of view. Next, I focus on the particular case of *Ar Risalah*, discussing textual and contextual aspects. Finally, I elaborate on the relation between Islam and film culture in the Moroccan diaspora and the particular role that *Ar Risalah* plays in it. I suggest that this role is rather significant, as it contributes to the cross-generational negotiation of religiousness and religious education.

Film, diaspora and the ethnographic turn in media studies

The ethnographic turn that characterised the social sciences and cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s has deeply shaped mass media research and what has become known as 'new' audience research (Corner 1991; Moores 1993; Spitulnik 1993; Drotner 1994: 333). This area of study covers a wide array of topics, including notable studies on television-viewing in family contexts (Morley 1986); ethnographic approaches to romance readers (Radway 1984) and soap opera audiences (Ang 1985; Spence 2005) and virtual media ethnographies (Lindlof & Schatzer 1998). This shift has inspired communication and mass media scholars to contextualise media practices within the 'informal logic of everyday life' (Radway 1986: 100; Gibson 2000: 264) and question media's relation to everyday social structures and processes of identity-shaping. Discerning itself from early audience studies (focusing on effects), the emphasis came to lie on lived experiences of media consumption, and how researchers can recreate them. Drawing on cultural anthropology, the ethnographic turn is characterised by a 'healthy scepticism toward universalism and essentialism', as Peterson (2003: 11) puts it. He further argues that, as a result, media

scholars are invited to 'consider a bottom-up apparatus that uses models and metaphors grounded in empirical observations of media in everyday life.' As a field of investigation, media reception studies have been observed as lacking coherency and thriving on anecdotalism (Barker 2006; Michelle 2007: 181). In an attempt to go beyond this criticism, Michelle (2007) offers a consolidated, analytical framework for studying media reception among specific social groups. She connects a series of existing models (Hall's [1980] encoding/decoding model and analytical models offered by Schrøder [1986] and Liebes and Katz [1990] among others) and enhances them with empirical evidence, resulting in a frame that includes transparent, referential, mediated and discursive modes of reception (2007: 194). Hitherto unequalled in cohesion and its ability to offer a 'shared language for the (meta)analysis' (Ibid.: 193) of audience reactions to a media text, the different modes of reception are termed as follows: text *as* life (transparent), text as *like* life (referential), text as a *production* (mediated) and text as a *message* (discursive). While the scope of this article does not allow for a closer discussion of Michelle's model, I will draw on several of its aspects in my analysis of *Ar Risalah* in the Moroccan community below, linking people's engagement with *Ar Risalah* to various modes of reception.

Staiger (1992; 2000) has convincingly connected film studies with the ethnographic-oriented trend in audience research, presenting a context-activated and audience-activated approach to film and cinema history. This shift away from purely text and production-based analyses of films has disclosed new perspectives for a cultural history of cinema and film, including works on stardom and identification (Stacey 1993), spectatorship (Mayne 1998) social experiences of cinema-going (Maltby, Stokes & Allen 2007), historical constructs of audiencehood (Stokes & Maltby 1999) and, recently, detailed historical studies on film audiences and venues (Gomery 1992; Maltby, Biltereyst & Meers 2011; Biltereyst, Maltby & Meers 2011). Some of these concerns were also embraced in the large study of international *Lord of the Rings* audiences (Barker & Mathijs 2008). The necessity for film scholars to turn to audiences remains high on the agenda – and this is not so much a critique as it is an awareness shared with the authors cited, since it seems that film studies have not yet fully benefited from the ethnographic turn (although brought to the notice earlier, see Meers 2001). Textual analyses and cognitive audience studies still dominate the field while ethnographic reception study has been undervalued or marginalised – one of the reasons, according to Miller (2010: 137) for film studies' 'near-irrelevancy in the public sphere of popular criticism.' The bulk of reception studies, especially those determining its conceptual frameworks, stems from studies on Hollywood or English-language films. This may be seen as an extension of the global film industry's established Eurocentrism and 'cinematic neocolonialism' (Shohat & Stam 1994: 185).

Studying film reception among diasporic communities invites to explore new terrains of audience engagements with films, as transcultural research sites where supposed Western cultural patterns interact with non-Western ones. Film culture among diasporas has been documented only fragmentarily and mainly in relation to production centres outside Hollywood that have been noted for high or booming productivity, such as India's

Bollywood (Desai 2005; Punathambekar 2005; Banaji 2006; Dudrah 2006; Athique 2011), Nigeria's Nollywood (Okome 2007; Oluyinka 2008), New Zealand's Wellywood (Thornley 2009) and Turkey's booming film industry (Smets et al. 2012). Especially studies on Bollywood's globally dispersed audiences have shed light on film's interaction with identity constructions, the performativity of film viewing in diasporic contexts and the belonging to (imagined) communities. I argue that the study of diasporic film reception can particularly benefit from the ethnographic turn in media studies since these film cultures are often (at least) partly imperceptible from 'above', for instance when consulting trade statistics, box office results or merely focusing on the producers' implied audiences. Diasporic film cultures are often structurally informal or illegal: films are for instance exchanged when travelling to the country of origin and un-authorised DVD copies are sold low-priced at local ethnic grocery stores (Athique 2006, 2008; Lobato 2007). Online streaming and downloading obviously plays a significant role as well. A materialist approach bearing local, empirically grounded evidence is needed. Moreover, an ethnographic approach situates audience reception into a physical and social context, considering that these settings, 'as intertwined systems of constraints, systems of signification, and locations of activities' (Peterson 2003: 131) are crucial to the way which people encounter media in their daily lives. In earlier research, the spatial dimension of diasporic film reception was emphasised, for instance in the concrete case of Turkish film screenings creating a semi-public diasporic space within the urban (Smets et al. 2011). In addition, the study of media in diasporic contexts inevitably generates questions regarding community, intergenerational processes and the social composition of audiences. The ethnographic approach is particularly fit for these concerns, as it has raised 'significant challenges for theorizing mass media's relation to 'reality' and the construction of social meaning,' as Spitulnik (1993: 298) put it (see also Coleman 2010). In the present article, I wish to address several of the matters that I have described here. First, I focus on a film that is to be situated outside (or at least at the very periphery) of mainstream Hollywood film. This focus, as I will explain in greater detail below, was inspired by a bottom-up, on-site exploration of a community's film culture. Second, my attention goes to the connection between cultural practices and the social structures of community, using film reception to engage in an in-depth discussion of socio-cultural and religious processes.

Islam, media and diaspora

I have already hinted at my focus on *Ar Risalah* as a religious film and the link between film reception and religion. While a singular definition of religion cannot be given (Durkheim 2001[1912]), I consider religion in the tradition of Clifford Geertz (1973) as a complex arrangement of myths, values and rituals (see Dwyer 2006: 3-4). Providing a more or less distinguished frame for morality and ethics, religions are powerful, dynamic socio-cultural systems working at both micro (the socialization dimension) and macro (political dimension) levels of society. Here I am particularly interested in the interplay between religion, identity and community. Media's role in this dynamic relation is a fascinating one, as, from a

historical perspective, new technological developments in media technologies continuously cause new forms of religiosity, as Mandaville (2001: 176-177) and Fox (in press) argue. The field of media and religion is elaborate, including specialised journals, research centres and in-depth studies ranging from representation analyses and iconography to theological and philosophical reflections. Among recent studies, I particularly mention Hjarvard's (2008) framework of media as a primary source of religious ideas. He argues that (popular) media, taking over the role of institutions, provide moral and spiritual guidance and senses of community.

Studies on Christianity and Western media certainly have the longest tradition. For instance when reviewing the literature on religion and film, it is hard not to notice the dominance of Christianity and Hollywood films (Plate 2003: 9; Ortiz 2007). Yet, last decades have seen a multiplication of scholarship dealing with Islam and media, especially post-9/11. Obviously, the role of Islam is crucial in emerging scholarship on media and the Arab world, the pan-Arab public sphere and media's role in constructing transnational Muslim identities (Anderson 2005; Shavit 2009; Ayish 2008). In relation to media, Islam in general and Muslim identity in particular have been dealt with especially in the realm of text and discourse analyses (Hussain 2000; Poole 2002; Karim 2003; Marcotte 2010) as well as production and media ownership (Howard 2008; Anas 2009). A great deal of studies has investigated the (mis)representations of Islam and Muslims, mostly in Western media (Agha 2000; Ramji 2003; Silk 2003; Richardson & Poole 2006; Saeed 2007), but also in media from the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 2005; Khatib 2006), and often in relation to political or ethnic conflicts (Marsden & Savigny 2009). Many of these studies are driven, or at least partly motivated, by the presence of diasporic Muslims living in the West, and the 'othering' of those communities is a recurrent subject.

While necessary to nourish social and political awareness vis-à-vis media biases, these studies have somehow outshined issues of reception and Muslims' own experiences of such representations. It has indeed been found that the relation between media reception and Islam is profound and multi-layered. Audience studies ranging from orthodox Muslims in rural Asia (Caldarola 1990) to Muslim diasporas in industrialised Europe (Ahmad 2006; Harb & Bessaiso 2006; Gezudici & d'Haenens 2007) have demonstrated this. Amongst other socio-cultural elements, religion and experiences of religiousness were found to deeply affect the use of transnational media. Having a significant interpretative dimension, Islam serves as a key factor in structuring media choices and interpretations. Other studies have emphasised the dynamic relationship between media reception and the development of Islam as an identity marker (Samad 1998). Sexuality and gender politics have been important themes in this regard. In the diasporic context, and particularly relevant for our own study, media reception in diasporic Muslim communities has been linked to issues of shame and embarrassment, particularly in intergenerational settings (Hargreaves & Mahdjoub 1997: 472; El Sghiar & d'Haenens 2011).

When concentrating on the particular connection between cinema and Islam, we enter a field of study that includes the same preoccupancy on representation and production

studies (Shaheen 2009; Dönmez-Colin 2004, 2007; Kozlovic 2007; Tartoussieh 2007; Hirji 2008; Allagui & Abeer 2011; Gugler 2011a, although Arab and Islam are often overlapping terms). The convergence between Islam and politics (including issues of censorship) and the relation between cinema and identity politics are central in most of these studies. Reception studies, on the other hand, are rather exceptional, in contrast to for instance the field of Indian media research, where contextualised reception studies of religious content have a longer history (Mankekar 1999; 2002). The relation of film-watching and Islam has been debated by a number of scholars in terms of general, ideological (or theological) discussions about Islam and the visual arts (Dwyer 2006: 97, also applicable to other religions, see Telford 1997; Bakker 2009), echoed in several studies (Shafik 1998: 47-55; Khalil 2002; Hassanvand 2004). In the specific case of *Ar Risalah*, such discussions have emerged as well (Bakker 2006: 78; Gugler 2011b: 22). From its pre-production phase to the present day, the film has been the object of scholarly and theological debate involving some of the world's leading Islamic institutions.

Methods and background

Despite the theoretical and conceptual rigour of many media ethnographies, scholars have been more ambivalent when it comes to their concrete methodological scaffolding. Algan (2009: 7) argues that ethnographic audience research must be the 'most criticized area in media studies scholarship'. Many studies indeed lack transparency about methodological procedures or reflection about the researcher's involvement and power status. Studies under the media ethnography umbrella usually do not include long periods of immersion in a community, nor do they necessarily draw on participant observation as the core method. However, it shares with the more classical ethnography a dedication to gather detailed on-site information about flesh and blood subjects and to 'record everyday life in as much of its complexity as the ethnographer can capture' (Peterson 2003: 8), and typically includes in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus group interviews or experiments.

This empirical study is set in the Moroccan diaspora of Antwerp. Today an estimated 50,000 Antwerp citizens have origins in Morocco, making it one of the largest minorities on a total urban population of over 470,000 people (Stad Antwerp 2008; Clycq 2011). The immigration of Moroccans started in the mid-1960s, when Belgium actively recruited labour forces, while, ever since the official migration stop in 1973, Moroccans have mainly migrated in the context of family reunification and marriage migration (Corijn 2009; Clycq 2011). The community is usually discussed in terms of socio-economic struggles and educational matters. The majority of the Moroccan diaspora originates from the northern region of Tangier and Tétouan and the eastern region Oriental (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal 2009: 33-34). Arabic, Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and different variants of the Amazigh, or Berber, language group are spoken as native languages (Ibid.: 44-46). Most people have Berber roots (often estimated half or two thirds of the community). The term Berber, although criticised by some for its derogatory connotation, is commonly used for and by people originating from the Rif, Middle and High Atlas regions. Hence, I use the term here as well.

The more neutral term Amazigh, meaning 'free people', is preferred by some authors but has not yet found solid ground in academia, nor among the populations themselves (Van Amersfoort & Van Heelsum 2007).

For this study I embraced a series of different approaches. Several friends of Moroccan origin and volunteers in socio-cultural organizations (e.g. a walk-in youth house) were helpful starting points to establish a network of respondents across different neighbourhoods. The snowball sample included 20 respondents, with whom in-depth interviews were held. The sample included 12 men and 8 women aged 15 to 71.[2] In order to reach respondents beyond these networks, I visited over 40 Moroccan shops, cafés, organizations and mosques in neighbourhoods that are known for their large Moroccan populations. Asking if I could leave or display a bilingual add looking for respondents for the research allowed me to start the conversation about film culture and my broad research questions. Although this generated only two respondents for an interview, I indirectly got the chance to speak with many people about the subject, resulting in a series of field notes. *Ar Risalah* regularly popped up at this stage, which co-informed my focus on this film. During this period, when it became clear to me that *Ar Risalah* occupied a distinctive position in the Moroccan film culture, I put a lot of effort in finding all the different shops that offered the film and talking with the local retailers about its circulation. Several of the places that were visited, appeared to welcome the research with an open attitude, and I kept returning. At one all-male tea house, I eventually conducted a focus group interview with 4 regular customers (aged 23, 28, 40 and 42). At one Moroccan mosque, I attended several social gathering after Friday prayers over a period of three months (November 2010 – January 2011), and joined a screening of *Ar Risalah* for young Muslims. I was also a guest at a youth organization on four evenings, where watching television, playing games and football were the main activities. The informal conversations with boys and girls during those evenings were very enlightening in terms of youth culture in the Moroccan community. Finally, I participated in three family gatherings, usually before or after an interview with one of the family members, where film was discussed in the wider family group. The transcripts from the interviews and the focus group were coded using NVivo software, applying a mixed set of multiple codes, including conceptual codes from the literature (e.g. 'ethnic identification'), thematic codes (e.g. 'family', 'leisure') as well as in-vivo codes that were introduced by respondents themselves (e.g. 'taboo themes'). Both the individual interviews as well as the focus group dealt with film consumption in general, opinions about Moroccan and Arab film, the specific film *Ar Risalah*, and more general themes such as the positioning towards Islam and national and ethnic identity.

A remark should be made about the interviewing process. While the method of the conversational interview has allowed me to collect on-site information about *Ar Risalah*'s position in the community, my role as an interviewer has possibly affected respondents' statements about religion. By most of the respondents, I was most likely immediately identified as a non-Muslim by appearance or name. Some bluntly asked about my own religious views and engaged in an open dialogue about cultural and religious differences.

Readers should be aware that this may have caused some interviewees to emphasise the particularity or otherness of Islam, or to emphasise the role of Islam in the interview in general. Also, in a possible attempt to approach the interviewer's seemingly 'European/Christian background', a surprising number of respondents started talking about 'Jesus and Moses films', underlining that 'Jesus also belongs to our religion [...]. We also watch that and know about their lives and what they have done' (Omar, 15). Such issues of power relations and self-disclosure are characteristic of interview research (Abell et al. 2006) and should be challenged by adopting an open, non-directive interviewing style as well as an analytical awareness of the interview context.

As could be expected, film consumption among the Moroccan diaspora is anything but homogeneous. Throughout the study, I encountered heavy fans of Egyptian melodramas, French films and American blockbusters, and of course people effortlessly combining a love for all those films. I have discussed the more general and preliminary findings of the audience research in greater detail elsewhere (Smets 2012). Beyond the individuality of each case, a certain pattern can be distinguished, mainly on the basis of socio-demographic and linguistic features. People from the first generation are often less familiar with current mainstream films. They recalled Westerns, karate films and Hindi musicals from their childhood in Morocco, or had memories of French-language films in those cases where people mastered that language. Their current film consumption was often limited to either those old films or contemporary Middle Eastern (mainly Egyptian) melodramas. Second and third generation respondents, then, have grown up in an environment that is much more ingrained with mainstream American and European film culture. In terms of youth culture among the diaspora, Hollywood seems to be the norm – which of course does not prevent them from criticizing aspects of its industry and representations.

Another finding was that Moroccan, 'homeland' film consumption is very limited. Respondents mainly explained this by the lack of (qualitative) production. Indeed the Moroccan film industry is one with many structural difficulties and challenges (Dwyer 2002; Carter 2009; Orlando 2011). Still, having been brought up in the satellite era, the younger generation is often very familiar with Moroccan and Arab television and films. Some respondents actively engaged with and searched for these films, but this was rather an exception. As was already hinted, the film that I discuss here, *Ar Risalah*, surpassed the diversity in film preferences among people of Moroccan origin, and was generally well received. In the following section, I concentrate on the film's storyline and context as well as its local circulation in Antwerp, in order to focus attention on Islam and film reception.

Ar Risalah: cinematic context and circulation

Although it holds a monumental position in popular culture in the Islamic world and beyond, *Ar Risalah* has rarely been discussed in academia, the only exceptions being Bakker's (2006) in-depth analysis of Muhammad's depiction in the film and shorter references in volumes on cinema in the Middle East and North Africa (notably Gugler 2011b: 22). In the aftermath of the successful film *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973), Syrian-born and

Hollywood-trained filmmaker Mustapha Akkad initiated a film about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The production was shot in Morocco and Libya, partially sponsored by its respective leaders, King Hassan II and Muammar Qaddafi. Using different lead actors, in a back-to-back working method that brings to mind the multi-language films made in the early days of sound film, Akkad filmed both an Arabic and an English version of the film. Avoiding the direct depiction of the Prophet, the film focuses on Muhammad's uncle, Hamza Ibn 'Abdul-Muttalib, played by Anthony Quinn (in the English version). When Mohammad is visited by a vision of archangel Gabriel, he speaks against the worship of the Kaaba idols and instead calls the people of Mecca to worship one true God. When it turns into a conflict with Mecca's corrupt leaders, Muhammad's uncle Hamza, nicknamed 'Lion of God', helps him to conquer the city in the name of God.[33] Next to Muhammad's prophecy in Mecca, the film shows decisive events in Islam's early history (exodus to Medina, battles of Badr and Uhud), seen through the eyes of peripheral characters (such as Hamza). The Prophet remains hidden and is never heard (his words and actions are repeated by others or evoked by stylistic effects). Several incidents marked the film's international release in 1976, such as a hostage of employees of the Jewish B'nai B'rith organization by Black Muslim militants in Washington DC (Bakker 2006: 78-79).

There is no complete overview of the film's screenings in Belgium or Antwerp, yet the English version of *Ar Risalah* was most probably screened in 1978. Older respondents recalled this as an extraordinary, previously unseen event. Rather than in theatres, the film has ever since circulated widely thanks to broadcastings on (satellite) television, often scheduled during the holy month of *Ramadan*, next to availability on video cassettes, DVDs and online. Our fieldwork in Antwerp proved that copies of the film are widespread, ranging from worn-out VHS tapes to freshly burnt DVDs. *Ar Risalah* is sold in Moroccan grocery stores, Islamic book shops and oriental music and film shops (Figure 1 & 2). No less than 14 shops were found where the film was on display. In some places, *Ar Risalah* was the only film sold among Arabic music and books, while in others it stood next to DVDs with Quran recitations, documentaries about Islam and copies of *Salahdin* (also known as *El Naser Salah el Dine*), another historical epos from the same region, by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine (1963). Where the film was not available, shopkeepers sometimes assured me that a copy could be made within a couple of minutes.

Having such an extensive pirated circulation, the cult film is a good example of what Lobato calls *subcinema*, 'films, which bypass the conventional releasing patterns' (2007: 117). He further adds that such pirated media constitute 'a dense network of markets, textual systems and (sub)cultures, one which is underground without being resistant' (Ibid.: 118). Although none of the respondents explicitly defended piracy, they implicitly considered *Ar Risalah* a common property for Muslims, a material sign of religious practice. Copying and exchanging films illegally seems a common issue, one that is hardly problematized. The film has indeed become one of the most widespread religious films in the Arab world and beyond. 'The whole of Morocco has seen this incredible film, the whole Arab world even, all believers. Everyone, even the King,' Hassan (46) says about *Ar Risalah*'s

popularity. Respondents often indicated that they had watched it several times. For instance Omar (15) says: 'I always watch it ... I watch it over and over again so that I don't forget it. It's such an important film.' The film is regarded as particularly suitable for joint family watching – contrasting the general habit of different generations and men and women often watching separately. Besides the family environment, some respondents recalled watching *Ar Risalah* for the first time during Islam lessons or at the mosque on the occasion of religious holidays such as the Festival of Sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*).

Images 1 & 2: *DVD copies of Ar Risalah at different Moroccan shops in Antwerp, among everyday goods such as cosmetics (right), remote controllers and an electric drill (left).*

The role of religion: notions of Islam and religiousness

In 2009, an elaborate report was published about Belgian Moroccans, based on surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews with hundreds of Belgian citizens having Moroccan roots (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal 2009). Religious identity and conviction were two of the many topics explored in the study. In terms of identifications, it was found that respondents identified more with Islam than with a specific region or country: they foremost described themselves as Muslims (Ibid.: 107-108), although a recent study on Muslims in Antwerp also pointed out that the importance of religion for identity does not exclude identification as a Belgian (Clycq 2011: 47). Only 0.2% of the respondents in the 2009 study said they were not religious, while 98.6% state to be religious, albeit in different degrees.[4] The report further indicates that religiousness increases with age and is less substantial among the younger generation (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal 2009: 110). All these figures indicate that religion indeed plays an important role for the Moroccan diaspora, but that the socio-demographic context should not be overlooked in this regard (see Amara & Schnell 2007; Ramaji 2007 on Islamic

religiousness and social change). Revealing the same substantial differences in terms of negotiating religiousness according to age and generation, the interview data from my own study confirm these findings. However, it is not as simple as saying that religiousness increases proportionally with age, as earlier studies (Timmerman, Vanderwaeren & Crul 2003) also found that, while a growing number of second-generation youngsters opt for a more secularised or less religious way of life, a substantial group chooses for more ideological or conscious forms of Islam too. Being concerned with Muslims' own self-understandings rather than with imperative, scientific categorizations, the respondents in my study were probed about their own views on Islam and the significance in their lives, as Bectovic (2011: 1122) suggests. In an attempt to somehow structure the diverse discursive positions vis-à-vis Islam, I distinguish three, partly overlapping, positions: (1) Islam as self-evident; (2) Islam as a relative notion; and (3) Islam as a dissolving notion. This categorization is not meant to oversimplify individual religious positions, but I regard them as useful to interpret various modes of reception. The group endorsing the first position represents the discourse that being a Muslim is an essential part of one's life. Mohammed (30) for instance says that 'it is part of my history and culture', while Naima (26) states that 'religion is just part of life. If you take that away, what else do we have?' They tend to not problematize religiosity.

For the second group, usually younger people that have grown up in Belgium, religious traditions and beliefs are an inherent and indisputable part of their background, but of relative importance today, having little concrete impact on their lives. They experience struggles giving it a precise place in their lives. In short, their position can be seen as an advanced stage of critical religious identity 'negotiation'. 'Religions are so theoretical', Meryem (20) explains. 'There is theory, but it needs to be put into practice and that's quite hard'. Boudichat (51) likewise expresses that 'I have understood I am a Muslim. But I cannot say I understand the Quran because understanding it is not for ordinary people.' This connects with the results from the aforementioned 2009 survey, in which 68.3% of the respondents stated that they '*try* to follow the principles' (my emphasis) instead of simply 'following' them (18%) or 'practicing the belief' (12.2%) (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal 2009: 109). Furthermore, a number of studies have dealt with the transnational negotiation of Islamic practices (e.g. Khan 2002; Tietze 2002; Jeldtof 2011). The third group represents only two people from our sample, both describing themselves as atheists. Both were grown-ups born in a mixed Belgian-Moroccan family, saying that they had little or no affinity with Islam as a religion (which might mean something different than Islam as a culture, they recognise).

Across the different groups, two issues regarding religiousness were recurrently mentioned. First, religiousness is conceived as something that often grows during one's lifetime. Respondents noticed a 'religious revival' among older people and said that 'religious consciousness' came with age. Omar (15) for instance tells that there is a symbolic balance deciding whether you go to heaven or not. You gain coins for the 'good side' by doing good things, an understanding that usually comes when you grow older, he says. Older respondents, such as Abderrahim (60), a retired labourer, admitted that 'the older

you get, the more you begin to think about things... I might have debts [with God] before I die...' Second, there is a strong belief that Islam should be transmitted and encouraged from parents to children (also mentioned in other diasporic contexts such as Protestant Korean immigrants, see Min & Kim [2005] and effectively tested among Belgian Muslims by Güngör, Fleischmann & Phalet [2011]). Parents, like Abderrahim (60), prefer seeing their children 'being good Muslims, for their own future', while children, like Omar (15) argue that 'it is important for children to learn the religion from their parents.' Those who have turned away from Islam, like Sarah (31), admit that the fact that she is not a Muslim herself is difficult for her father. Similarly, Riad (36) proudly identifies as an atheist and self-acclaimed sinner, even though he knows it might hurt or disappoint his father. These claims should of course also be interpreted in terms of patriarchal family structures. In line with the focus on transmitting or instructing Islam, the role of socio-cultural organizations and especially mosques should also be noted. Next to sacral spaces, mosques have a significant function in terms of social work, education and the maintaining of social coherence among Muslim communities (see Manço & Kanmaz 2005; van Walle 2011).

In sum, respondents make a clear link between Islam and age: older people (mostly the first generation that was born and raised in Morocco) feel that religion is more important in their lives than younger people (born and raised in Belgium), which is not to say that youngsters do not use Islam as a frame for talking about values and traditions. Although being brought up with Islamic values, younger people tend to believe that religious awareness will increase with life experiences, or they at least consider older people to be generally *more* religious than themselves. Next to the rather individual negotiations of religiosity, Islam has a crucial social and intergenerational dimension, being something that is essentially transferred and acquired (rather than actively chosen, except in those cases where respondents declared to be atheists). Respondents repeatedly connected Islam with tradition and values, usually in a sense that suggested a conflict with the dominant, Western environment.

Film, Islam and the diaspora: Islam's normative power

Having discussed some general aspects of religiosity among the Moroccan diaspora, I now turn to the relation with film. In the interviews and fieldwork conversations, I set out with open-ended questions about a possible relationship between religion and film. Rather than focussing on interpretative aspects or the direct link with national cinemas, respondents tended to emphasise the normative forces that arise from Islam. Although the relation between film as an art in relation to Islam has been debated by a number of scholars, as I explained, this topic did not turn out to be the most relevant question for contemporary Muslims in the diaspora. Few respondents talked about a supposed strict prohibition of visual arts. Some are aware that 'out there' such rules might exist, but in the light of people's media-immersed lives those seem to be absurd. Meryem (20) for instance says that 'in Islam, images are actually forbidden, like pictures and films and so on. That shouldn't go together [with Islam]. But somehow it does [laughs]. Others firmly opposed to the idea of a

total prohibition of visual depictions, like Said (40): 'There are extremists everywhere, maybe saying: 'Religion is against film.' But I don't think so because I read the Quran and there is nothing against films in the Quran. It is for relaxation; and films can also learn us something.' Only in the case of Abderrahim (60) film-watching and Islam could not be matched: 'The moment a film starts, I stop watching. [...] It's a waste of time. You know that a Muslim has to pray five times a day. And a film, it... influences our religion. Because a film says: you shouldn't pray, you should watch the film.' For him the problem is not merely a matter of ideology, but mostly of potential effects and consequences. 'Films take things away from us', he says. They are, in other words, dangerous because they might lead people away from religious commitment. Later on in the conversation, it became clear that he was not necessarily referring to films in general, but to 'vulgar, dirty and extreme' films. In that sense his view reflects the general response to my question about film-watching and religion: from a moral point of view, a Muslim cannot watch films with explicit content, described variously as sex, nudity, eroticism or 'bad things'. Hassan (46) tells that 'Islam forbids a lot of things such as love on TV, sex, cursing...'. Some respondents prefer to remain vague and say for example that 'there are films where you have a lot of ... stuff, you know, that our religion is against' (Omar, 15). This illustrates how Islam is perceived as a set of rules. The contrast that is often made with non-Muslims should clarify this as for instance Imane (18) argues that her Moroccan friends are aware of 'safe films' while 'it doesn't matter for Belgians'.

Islam's normative dynamism is not only expressed in terms of allowing or not allowing certain content, but also with regards to viewing in a family context (see the abovementioned study of Hargreaves & Mahdjoub 1997). The films that are described as unsuitable for Muslims are to be avoided especially when watching together with family. Such social norms about explicit content and film/television co-viewing have been found elsewhere, in various cultural settings (Leibman 1995; Gillespie 2003[1995]: 96-98; Brosius 2005; Banaji 2006). While usually such household viewing patterns are explained in terms of cultural traditions and family values, our respondents made a clear link with religion. Showing respect and timidity were key concepts in that sense. Boudichat (51), a volunteering teacher at a social organisation for Muslim youngsters, says that 'being shy is something Islamic... I respect my parents, my older people and so on' and that 'if we are watching a film together and there is a short moment [of nudity], we don't watch it because of such respect.' The normative influence of Islam is especially relevant for cross-generational watching. Imane (18) says that 'you don't see us watching a romantic film together with our parents.' Others made similar comments and agree that in fact many films were unsuitable for family consumption, including American, English (meant here rather as a linguistic category), European and Belgian films. Such films are hard to trust because 'you never know what is in a [American] film,' as Yassine (30) says. Therefore, joint family viewing is limited to 'safe' films such as Moroccan, (older) Indian and religious-themed films. In this context respondents repeatedly mentioned *Ar Risalah* as an 'appropriate' film.

From instruction to inspiration: the message of *Ar Risalah*

Taking these views on Islam as a normative frame for reception as a context, let us now focus on *Ar Risalah.* What makes this 1976 feature film so particular, and what is its relevance for diasporic Muslims today? To start with, the film is appreciated from a visual, aesthetic perspective by the different groups that I identified above. 'It is just a very impressive film', Naima (26) says, while others specifically recalled the imposing landscapes, costumes and battles, the abundance of actors and horses and the fascinating play of shadows and light, in some scenes representing the Prophet. Along with the buzz and controversy that accompanied the film's release, this has resulted in a reputation rarely seen for a non-Western film. Respondents' memories of the film also suggested a comparison with Western action films, and from a technical point of view, *Ar Risalah* was indeed quite spectacular in its release period. This aspect seems relative according to one's standards. This became clear to me during the fieldwork, when I joined three generations of a Moroccan family for a Sunday afternoon around the television. The grandfather kept emphasising how spectacular some of the scenes were, while his teenage granddaughter, who grew up viewing American films, thought they were completely outmoded. Also the respondents identifying themselves as atheists enjoyed the film up to this level, as it reminded them of the impressive adventure films they had watched as a child. As discussed in the method section, the Moroccan community in Antwerp is characterised by a distinction between Berber and Arab Moroccans. This division is a vital one for Moroccan diasporas in general (Van Amersoort & Van Heelsum 2007) and for their media use in particular (Merolla 2002). Respondents recognised the impact of ethnic and linguistic differences with regards to cultural values and traditions, and their general engagement with transnational media (for instance many few people of Berber origin watch Arab satellite broadcasts because of the linguistic barrier), also stressing the different backgrounds (Arab Moroccans coming from more urban regions, while Berbers have a more rural background). However, this did not seem to play a large role in the reception of *Ar Risalah*. While harder to find, synchronised Amazigh version of the Arabic film are available (Gugler 2011b: 22) so that the film's status seems to have developed more or less similarly among both groups. Also, again referring to the 2009 survey, diasporic Moroccans identified foremost as Muslims, and only to a lesser degree as Moroccans or Berbers (Saaf, Hida & Aghbal 2009: 108).[5] This might help explain a parallel discourse among both Berber and Arab Muslims. Yet the lack of additional research on Berber Muslim identity in the diaspora makes it difficult to verify this at this point.

To bring a certain structure to my reception analysis, let me return to Michelle's (2007: 194) model of modes of reception and the three different positions towards Islam and religiosity described above. As said, the categories are partly overlapping, especially the reception among the 'Islam as self-evident' and 'Islam as a relative notion' groups is rather comparable. Those identified as alienated from Islam ('Islam as a dissolving notion') come closest to the mediated mode of reception, as described by Michelle (2007: 203-206) and in accordance with Dalghren's (1988) media awareness/demystification discourse. Adopting a

rather distant and objective position towards the film, they are in a sense able to assess the film as separated from a religious context and to emphasise aesthetic and narrative features. Among those who identify as atheists, this happens mostly in ironic or critical ways. Sarah (18) for instance questioned the happy-end effect caused by Muhammad's interventions. Less attached to *Ar Risalah* as a religious film, they rather seemed to conceive it is an example of an historical epos or an adventure film. At an evaluative level, their reading of *Ar Risalah* appears counter-hegemonic (also literally, representing a smaller portion of the sample). The main meaning Riad (36) derived from it were bad memories, associating the film with patriarchal pressure because he was 'forced to watch it'. In his case, it could be argued that the film rather reminds him of the ideological choices he has made in life and the ancestral traditions he has turned away from. What distinguishes this group from the other two? According to some respondents, knowledge about Islam is necessary to identify with the film, i.e. to adopt a subjective reception mode. During the group interview, Yusef (40), especially addressing me as the interviewer, emphasised the difference in reception that knowledge about the background of Islam adds to such a religious film: 'There are many films that Muslims watch and that others don't watch, many films about Islamic history that Westerners can't follow... It's a culture from 1,000 years ago, it is so difficult to follow.' His friend Khalid (28) agreed and added that 'there are many famous people in our religion. If you don't know them it is difficult to understand. A Westerner sees things happening in the film but he doesn't have a clue.'

This brings us to the other two groups, for whom Islam is either a self-evident or a relative, negotiated notion. Both groups relate to the film in a more close or subjective way, and are more 'textually bound', as Michelle (2007: 195) describes it. At the denotative level, I argue that both groups (thus in fact all those who identify as Muslims) fit into the transparent mode of viewing (see also Richardson & Corner 1986) as there seems a strong involvement with the film. The division between fictional and nonfictional media texts (Michelle 2007: 196) is not very helpful in our case, as we are dealing with a historical film that complicates categorisations of fiction and nonfiction. Moreover, not once did respondents mention *Ar Risalah* having a fictional character. Rather, the reception of the film resembles that of nonfiction media texts, being perceived as a 'mirror' of reality – religio-historical reality in this particular case. In that respect, respondents found that a number of things are to be learned from watching *Ar Risalah*, notably the historical contextualization of Islam: 'The dates, and where it all started. How and where, who was involved, who was the Prophet's mother, who were his best friends, stuff like that', and more generally 'how the first Muslims lived' (Mustapha, 21). In the focus group, Khalid (28) similarly told that he

> read in books about the Prophet, when the Islamic calendar started , who was his first wife, his second wife, his third wife, important battles to spread the faith... But you don't have an image, you cannot imagine [visualise] it. And then *Risalah* ... Everything you have read, you suddenly see.

This element, I believe, tells a great deal about the film's role as an educational tool and echoes results from other studies on the reception of religious epics, like Mankekar's (2002) and Mishra's (2002) findings on the reception of the Indian television epic *Ramayan* (although rather linked to political notions of nationalism). Hence the film about the life of the Prophet is occasionally shown as an additional teaching material in Quran lessons, for instance. Also in other contexts, *Ar Risalah* was mentioned as a film fit for teaching purposes (Gugler 2003). More generally, Kozlovic (2003: 8) found that the dialogue between film and religion can offer 'a spiritual aide to religious education, personal development and the cause of innovative pedagogy.' The use of films for the purpose of teaching theology has indeed been well considered (Mercadante 2007). In my conversations with instructors and parents at the Moroccan mosque, *Ar Risalah* was usually mentioned as a tool for visualisation, enhancing realism and historical background. Considering that the film was primarily meant as a biography of the Prophet (Bakker 2006), this reception of the film is to be seen as a hegemonic, or even preferred position (Michelle 2007: 211-213).

It is worthwhile to recall the earlier comments on Islam as needing to be transmitted across generations. Very much in line with Gillespie's (2003[1995]: 87) finding that, among South Asian families in London, films are used by elders to 'impart religious knowledge' upon their children, *Ar Risalah* also works as a tool for cross-generational religious instruction. It is sometimes shown in order to instruct children, a practice that I witnessed during the fieldwork when parents and children watched the film together, accompanied by parents' comments on the role of Islam. Souad (32) for instance recalls watching it together with her parents: 'It was a film that I liked watching as a child, the whole battle between believers and nonbelievers... And then my parents said: 'This is how it goes in Islam.' I sometimes found that annoying, I loved the film, but always that raised finger...' During the group interview then, Yousef (40) mentioned that he intended to do the same with his 5-year-old son: 'I already talk with him about the religion. Now he only watches Piet Piraat [a popular Dutch-language children's programme], but in a couple of years, I will show him *Ar Risalah*.'

However, the film's construing reaches beyond the transmission of factual knowledge or the ability to literally imagine and visualise Islam's early development. Religious films like *Ar Risalah* seem to bear meaning about today's reality as much as they do about religious history. To illustrate this, I address the discursive mode of reception, which is particularly present among Muslims that conceive 'Islam as a relative notion'. This mode of reception, Michelle (2007: 206) clarifies, specifically addresses 'the text's propositional or "message" content – i.e. its ideological connotations.' This particular group of the sample particularly experiences that the numerous ways in which one can cope with Islam and Islamic traditions are difficult to interpret in daily life. Their search for guidance and help in this process of interpretation, leads them towards various directions. People (especially youngsters) receive guidance from their parents, religious authorities like imams, children's books about Islam or 'old, wise men on the square' (Omar, 15). But also 'films like *Ar Risalah* can help Muslims with their faith,' as Yassine (31) puts it. This recalls Hjarvard's (2008) point about

media providing guidance for the understanding and development of religiosity. Again reflecting on film's educational capacities, but this time in a more analytical discursive mode, Hassan (46) said that 'cinema shows things. It instructs people. Cinema gives us targets: what should you do, what should you not do. [...] A film is like a teacher, it directs people and communities.' Parallels can be drawn with the messages established in films as modern parables, sometimes read in literature on (mainly Christian) theology and cinema (Johnston 2006[2000]: 88-91), i.e. the idea of films turning abstract theology into everyday and usable guidelines for believers. Gillespie (2003[1995]: 95) found that diasporic South Asians in London refined their religious ideas by watching *The Mahabharata* (a 1989 television film version of one of the two major Sanskrit epics), with viewers being in full awe and wonderment, 'like *nirvana* on TV'. Rather than admiration or devotion, I argue that the Muslims who conceive Islam as a relative, negotiable notion, draw concrete *messages* from *Ar Risalah*. Abderrahim (60), who had earlier stated that he did not watch any films because of his religion, admitted that he did watch religious films like *Ar Risalah*: 'Those are also films, but they are about *reality*,' he stresses. Yassine (30) clarifies that religious-themed films 'are meant for people that do not love to read books or listen to the imam's preach. In those films you receive messages about how to live as a Muslim. He specifies that such films 'show us how we should live together'. Respect and justice are key values to be learned from the film, supposedly symbolised by the film's end, which 'shows how they all live in peace', according to Yassine, 'with rich and poor together.'

The film indeed carries out an important message about equality (Bakker 2006: 82). Omar (15) actively interprets the film's message, which 'shows how Jews, Christians and Muslims share a common history', as a moral inspiration. Moreover, *Ar Risalah* portrays the first Muslims as exceptionally moral and devote, generating an ethical identification: 'You get the feeling that you want to be like those people and have a life just like those first Muslims,' Fatiha (71) says, although she is rather to be positioned in the group that conceives Islam as an evident and unproblematic given. Thus, at the connotative level of meaning, *Ar Risalah* not only shows how Muhammad carried out God's message. It equally allows to extract a personal, inspiring message from it, as if Allah speaks directly to the viewer via the medium of the film.

Finally, in the context of Hinduism and Indian films, Dwyer (2006: 164) writes that 'cinema creates a group identity for people who believe in the congregation [...].' It could be argued that Islamic religious films like *Ar Risalah* have a unifying strength, supporting the advance of a transnational religious community, or *umma*. Scholars have indeed considered the development of Islam as a space for transnational connectedness (Bowen 2004; Schmidt 2005) and the role played by media therein (Mandaville 2001; Sreberny 2002; Allievi 2003; Volčič 2006). Especially in the age of increased Islamic broadcasting, online Islamic activism and the globalisation of Islam (Roy 2004), the idea that media play a major part in forming Islamic imagination (Dwyer 2006: 166) seems fitting. Circulating easily across borders and diverse media formats, *Ar Risalah* can be seen within the wider range of media supporting a transnational Islamic *religioscape*, a term introduced by McAlister (2005) and inspired by

Appadurai's *ethnoscapes* (1997). The respondents in this study certainly suggested that viewing *Ar Risalah* was part of being a Muslim: 'everyone' – meaning all Muslims – had watched it and could understand it. Claims about the film supporting a transnational Muslim community cannot be made based on this local case study and would require more comparative research.

Conclusions

'The life of any popular or praised text is a passage across space and time, a life remade again and again by institutions, discourses and practices of distribution and reception,' Miller (2010: 141) writes. *Ar Risalah* provides an excellent example of a film's multifaceted life. Released in the 1970s, the film still holds a key position in the Moroccan diaspora, and presumably among Muslim communities elsewhere.[6] The film has passed through different stages of formal distribution and exhibition as well as, increasingly, circulating illegally and informally. Institutions like mosques, Islam teachers and television stations continuous broadcasting of the film during periods like *Ramadan* have contributed to the film's spread and status. Nonetheless, the film could easily escape the media scholar's attention when only looking at macro-level data like DVD sales or box office results. Instead, inspired by the ethnographic turn in media and film studies, I adopted a bottom-up approach to the film culture of the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp, finding a rich and complex engagement with religious films like *Ar Risalah*.

The respondents of this study experienced a strong link between Islam and media (film) consumption, which is particularly described in normative terms, defining which explicit content is not allowed in which company. Intergenerational respect, as said to be typifying Islamic culture according to the respondents, was crucial to this normative frame, as was found in earlier reception studies too. Religious films and especially *Ar Risalah* came to the fore as suitable for joint family viewing. Having identified three major positions towards Islam – the self-evident, the relative/negotiated and the alienated position – I found that the film is engaged with in various ways, although I recognise that these categories are fluid and that people's reception of the film is subject to shifts (recalling the notion of 'commuting' between different modes of reception, Schrøder 1986; Michelle 2007: 213-215). People that dissociated with Islam adopted a distance/objective mode of reception, appreciating it for nostalgic or aesthetic reasons at most. The other two groups, recognising the essential role of Islam is their lives, welcomed the film as a source of religious history and instruction. This connects with the idea that religion is supposed to be transmitted from older to younger generations, and explains why *Ar Risalah* is still used by parents instructing their children as well as in the context of Quran lessons for youngsters. I connected this with Michelle's (2007) transparent and subjective modes of reception, arguing that *Ar Risalah* is conceived as a particular (and spectacular) mirror of reality. At a connotative and discursive level then, respondents who recognised a certain struggle to incorporate Islamic tradition in their own lives, were more likely to feel touched by the film's *message*. Basically perceived as a message of unity, equality and moral purity, the film

thus also functions as a source of religious inspiration and guidance. With a growing group of younger people experiencing difficulties in practicing, expressing or identifying their faith in the context of diaspora and migration, *Ar Risalah* is not likely to lose its major cultural status.

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Notes:

[1] In Arabic: الرسالة. Common alternative spellings and transcriptions include *El Risalah*, *Al Risalah*, *Al Resalah* and *Al-Risāla*. Also the English title *Muhammad, Messenger of God* is sometimes used. Several English sources, including the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) indicate that the film was released in 1977, while others, including Bakker (2006) refer to 1976 as the official release date based on film reviews from that period.

[2] The interviews were conducted November 2010 and April 2011. All respondents were of Moroccan origin and living in Antwerp at the time of the interview. At the time, 4 respondents were younger than 20; 5 were aged between 21 and 30; 6 between 31 and 40; 2 between 41 and 50; 1 between 51 and 60; 1 between 61 and 70 and 1 respondent older than 70. About half of the respondents originated from the Berber Rif region, others were born or had roots in the southern Berber region or Arab cities (mostly Tangier). The interviews were conducted in Dutch, French or occasionally mixed with Arab, with a family member interpreting. All translations are by the author. Fictitious names are used to protect respondents' privacy.

[3] Due to the limited space of this article, we cannot go into details about the historical and theological background and only give a brief summary of the film's plot. For more information I recommend the works of Esposito (1999), Sonn (2004) and Chittick & Murata (2006).

[4] The remaining 1.2% did not answer the question. We might add that the number of believers is possibly exaggerated because of the social desirability to answer that one is a Muslim, especially in a study that was conducted by researchers with a Moroccan background.

[5] This is a broader phenomenon also seen in, e.g. the UK where British Muslims identify as Muslims rather than Pakistani or Indians (Dwyer 2006: 164).

[6] Although my fieldwork concentrated on Antwerp, I encountered a similar distribution pattern of DVD copies in Moroccan neighbourhoods in Brussels. A look at a few web forums indicate that the film is discussed and demanded by Muslims elsewhere, e.g. in Germany (http://film.the-fan.net/?titel=6967), the Netherlands (http://comments.wordpress.com/2007/03/03/video-risalah-nederlandse-ondertiteling/) and Turkey (http://ilahi.wordpress.com/2008/02/28/islamiyetin-

dogusu-cagri-film/) (all pages accessed 4 April 2012). Furthermore, it appears widely available for online streaming.

Connecting Islam and film culture: The reception of â€œThe Messageâ€ (â€œAr Risalahâ€) among the Moroccan diaspora. Article. Full-text available. Jan 2012. Kevin Smets. This article reviews the complex relationship between religion and film-viewing among the Moroccan diaspora in Antwerp (Belgium), an ethnically and linguistically diverse group that is largely Muslim.Â This is linked to and further exemplified by the discussion of a media ethnographic study of film reception among the Turkish and Moroccan communities in Antwerp, Belgium. It is demonstrated how the â€˜diasporic turnâ€™ reformulates traditional boundaries in audience research, proposing banal yet meaningful engagements with media texts.