Baghdad in My Shadow (2019): a Political Thriller in a Multireligious Europe

Gender Emancipation and Fundamentalism in a Fictive Iraqi Diaspora Community in London

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Abstract

This article presents the Swiss-Iraqi director Samir Jamal Aldin and his thriller Baghdad in My Shadow (2019) and puts it into a context of the re-negotiation of identities in a culturally diverse Europe. The director’s intention is presented as a wish to deal with taboo issues related to gay rights, women’s emancipation, and religious fundamentalism within an Iraqi community in contemporary London.

The film is analysed with the help of (1) theories analysing tensions between liberal-secular and religious-fundamentalist standpoints, and (2) theories about film viewers’ engagement, amplifying audiences’ emotions and thoughts about complex societal issues.

The film could be said to advocate a standpoint of dynamic secularism promoting individual rights. The article argues, furthermore, that Samir as a Swiss-Iraqi filmmaker encourages thick viewing through his thriller format and invites the audience to a deeper emotional and intellectual understanding of liberal principles, honour culture, and hybrid identity positions in contemporary Europe.

Keywords

Introduction

A scene from Malmö Arab Film Festival, Friday, 9 October 2020. I am sitting in the fifth row in cinema Panora in Malmö, Sweden, listening to Samir Jamal Aldin, visiting director from Zürich. He is Iraqi-born and presents his new film Baghdad in My Shadow for a mainly Arabic-speaking audience. I see a few distinguished elderly men in their 60s and a rather large number of young urban people, both men and women around 30, some young women with hijabs and some without. Midway through the film we see an explicit sex scene between the male characters Sven and Muhanad. Two women in the row in front of me quickly put their hands before their eyes, start whispering and conferring with each other, and a moment later they leave their seats and walk out of the cinema.

The new millennium’s migration movements have created increasingly pluralistic European societies, displaying a high level of both religious and ethnic diversity (Castles et al., 2014; Pew Research Center, 2017; Furseth et al., 2019; Illman et al., 2018; Körs, 2018; Axelson & Stier, 2020). Scholars from different fields describe how tensions in culturally diverse societies are played out and how different groups with religious and secular world views are sometimes in dialogue, sometimes in conflict (Lundby, 2018; De Kadt, 2018; Pratt, 2018; Göndör, 2017).

Also, film directors engage in these issues and try to capture how life looks in the age of migration (Castles et al., 2014; Trifonova, 2020). One of the more recent films on this topic was made by a Swiss-Iraqi director, Samir Jamal Aldin. Samir, a director with a long career of short films, documentaries, TV series, and fiction films over the last 25 years, presented his new film Baghdad in My Shadow (2019) at the international film festival in Locarno, Switzerland.
in August 2019. In this fiction film, the director invites us to engage with a
group of people with a multicultural background, rooted in various geograph-
ical areas, and embodying a mixed cultural heritage, including religious tra-
ditions of different kinds. In a thriller format, he describes a family story with
roots in Saddam Hussain’s Iraq during the 1980s and the 1990s, loosely based
on his own Iraqi background.

The aim of this article is to analyse the fiction film Baghdad in My Shadow
(2019) through theoretical perspectives on the re-negotiation of identities
and migrant experiences in contemporary, multireligious Europe.

First, I will describe the film itself as a narration, presenting the story.
Second, I will present the intention as it is explained by director Samir through
interviews and communication with him. Third, I will analyse and interpret
the story through two selected theoretical perspectives. Even though the film is
a fiction, and the characters are fictive, the article aims to analyse real-life chal-
lenges for people dealing with migrant conditions in which individuals shape
and reshape their world, being more or less integrated in British society.

More specifically, I will analyse the film with the help of theories analysing
tensions between liberal-secular and religious-fundamentalist standpoints.
Furthermore, the article will discuss the filmic and mediated experience as
such, and how the spectator’s engagement in the film can be understood. This
will be done with a special focus on film theory and how film can be understood
as an important resource to engage with and amplify a spectator’s thoughts
and feelings about complex societal issues.

Finally, intertwined with the above perspectives, I will comment on the
film’s encounter with viewers and critics and the film’s capacity to stir up emotions in real-life dialogue between the director and the film’s audience, exem-
plified by situations taking place during the screening of the film at Malmö
Arab Film Festival (MAFF) on 9 October 2020.

The analysis, in other words, moves between the film itself as a piece of art,
theoretical implications derived from the topics dealt with in the film, and epi-
sodes of the audience’s reaction to the film.

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2 The author was part of the ecumenical jury that year in Locarno and happened to see this
film at its world premiere on location.

3 Watch trailer: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6864088/?ref_=nm_ov_bio_lk1. Link to full
movie: see Filmography at the end of the article.

4 A Swedish version of this article is published in T. Axelson & T. Hylén, eds. (2022), Den nya
människan. Om människhetens ständiga strävan att omskapa sig själv. Möklinta: Gidlunds
förlag.
The Story Unfolds in *Baghdad in My Shadow* (2019)

**Synopsis**
The director has put together personal trajectories in tension with each other, dealing with conflicts in late modern Europe, all with a focal point in Abu Nawa’s Café, located somewhere in Greater London. At this locus, we meet two generations of the Iraqi community. In the older generation, we get to know some old Arabic and Kurdish comrades and communists, both male and female, who once fought together in the underground movement against the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. The older partisans, today in their 60s, were once first-generation immigrants to Great Britain thirty years ago. Now they try to find a way to get along with life in Britain, side by side with a younger generation in the community, people between 20 and 30, sons and daughters as well as friends in the next generation.

**A Spectrum of Identity Positions – from Communists to Salafists**
In the older generation, we meet Taufiq, a well-educated atheist as well as a committed communist. He supports a liberal and tolerant world view where progressive humanism and religious traditions can live together freely. Taufiq is well versed in the Qur’an and knows it almost by heart from his upbringing in Iraq. In the film, he uses Qur’anic wisdom to settle sensitive situations.

In the younger generation, we follow the struggle of Amal, a talented woman around 30 who is trying to develop an entry into British society through studies in architecture (Figure 2). Her friend Muhanad is an internet engineer, and gay (Figure 3). Here, we meet two young characters searching for a way to live freely, looking for an emancipated future in cosmopolitan Britain, breaking...
away from patriarchal structures within the Iraqi group. Amal's interest in architecture gets her in contact with Martin, a British engineer, who she dates. Muhanad as gay expands his space of movement in urban London and develops a relation with Sven, becoming his partner.

In the opposite part of the world view spectrum, we are presented with Nasseer, a person trying to find refuge in a conservative and strict way of living out his Muslim background. The convinced communist Taufiq is his uncle, and Taufiq tries to raise his young nephew to accept a secular British society and its pluralistic conviviality, with limited success. Here, we are confronted with different beliefs in sharp conflict, with young Nasseer instead becoming part of imam Sheikh Yassin's fundamentalist entourage. Sheikh Yassin is a charismatic Salafistic preacher who takes Nasseer under his wing and pushes Nasseer to question and abandon his older Iraqi relatives. From Yassin's point of view, as political activists they are clinging to a secular rebellion against religion.

We also meet Zeki and Samira, two old friends of Taufiq. Zeki is of Kurdish background and fought together with Taufiq and Samira as combatants in Kurdistan in the past. Zeki has some trouble accepting Muhanad's choice of living and looks very sceptically on Muhanad's gay life. Samira, on the other hand, is tolerant and warm-hearted and accepts love wherever it turns up. Hawk-eyed, she exposes her old male comrades' sexism and homophobic remarks. According to Samir, her portrait in the film is inspired by a beloved, charismatic, witty, and sharp-tongued aunt in his old Iraqi family.5

Finally, we get to know Ahmed, a former security officer in Saddam Hussein's secret police. He unexpectedly appears in the middle of the community,

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5 Personal communication with Samir during Malmo Arab Film Festival, 20 September 2010.
presenting himself as a cultural attaché sent by the government in Baghdad. But he has also personal links to our protagonist, Amal, as he was once briefly married to her. As part of the secret police, he was involved in the persecution of opponents to the Baath-regime and Amal left him when she realised that fact.

The cultural and intellectual context of this group of characters knits together culture, religion, and literature. The story is also anchored in ancient times and ancient poetry with associations to the cradle of human civilisation in former Mesopotamia and overt links to the heritage of Britain’s colonialism with its museums of Mesopotamian artefacts displayed in London.

The Director’s Intentions

In interviews, Samir has developed his ideas behind the film. He states that he wants to give different perspectives on individual trajectories in a nuanced way, contributing to mutual understandings across dividing cultural lines.

The thing that interested me most starting out was how I could create a film that is relevant for both sides and has the potential to create a bridge of sorts between the cultures. Ultimately, that is where my main interest lies: in mutual understanding, neither pandering to anyone nor making compromises with regards to content. (Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, 2019, p. 5)

Samir also considers the fiction film as an opportunity to create an understanding between people coming from different parts of the world geographically and thus inheriting different cultural traditions. He wants to show how migrants are influenced by their past and their longing to regain their sense of security. Samir did not have to do much research on the story since it was already inside him. He also wishes to address complex issues within the old Iraqi diaspora community, which to this day create tension between generations and between the sexes. He does not want to shy away from heated internal topics among Iraqis who have integrated and are well respected in urban cities but have problems with some aspects of emancipative liberal-secular lifestyles.

The three taboos concern the relationship between the sexes, the handling of homosexuality and finally the attitude towards religion. (Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, 2019, p. 6)
Samir basically met the communist character of Taufiq within his own family – a man who knows the Qur’an backwards, is determined to beat the religious with their own weapons, and who quotes from the Qur’an, for example, about the meaning of personal freedom.

The role and position of women – embodied in the film by the character of Amal – is still precarious today, even in progressive circles in Iraq. For example, it remains a taboo for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian. The third taboo is that of sexual orientation. (Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, 2019, p. 6)

Samir himself has an interesting background that equips him with multi-layered lenses through which to look back on his roots. He was born in Iraq in 1955 and as a child moved with his parents to Europe and Switzerland in the early 1960s. Through his own experience, he can look upon immigrants’ life situations with a double view. He looks upon himself as a fully integrated immigrant child from a foreign culture in the majority society, living a peculiar life.

On the one hand, one gets to personally know all the details of everyday exclusion of migrants (including subtle racism), as well as the view of the “Leitkultur” (dominant culture) on the sometimes incomprehensible perception of the “foreigners” living here. On the other hand, even in one’s family – or in the “migrant community” in general – one is continually confronted with the prejudices of one’s own old traditions, which are also virulent in the modern Western world, such as discussions about abortion or same-sex marriage. (Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, 2019, p. 10)

On the one hand, Samir wants the film to facilitate bridging processes between people belonging to different cultural contexts in a pluralist Europe, enhancing a sense of understanding of people’s choices. On the other hand, he also wants the film to mirror European colonial history and to question post-colonial European arrogance, fear, and ignorance related to religious extremism.

The film should also show us the variety within this specific milieu and at the same time let us discover that the reasons for a development towards extremism are sometimes closer to us than we would wish and admit. (Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion, 2019, p. 13)
Samir thus clearly pronounces the ideas behind the film, and he is keen on sharing the contradictory experiences he has gone through, having lived almost his entire life in central Europe and yet carrying with him cultural roots from the nearby Middle East within his family.

What makes him interesting as a director is his critical outlook on prejudices and in-group thinking in different cultural directions, both stereotypical conceptions emanating from the majority culture – the “Leitkultur” – in the form of British characters in the film and preconceptions expressed by the minority group in the shape of the Iraqi diaspora community. In other words, the film comments on presumptions articulated by people in different directions and how this affects the boundaries and freedom of choice for individuals moving betwixt and between cultural belongings, conditions he himself as a Swiss-Iraqi director knows something about and believes are worth listening to.

**Interpreting the Film through Theoretical Lenses**

Analysis will be conducted through two selected theoretical perspectives: first, theories shedding light on the tension between liberal-secular and religious-fundamentalist standpoints, and second, theories about film as a resource to engage with and amplify the spectator’s thoughts and feelings about complex societal issues.

The film captures two important themes relevant to people from a MENA background, in which socio-centric cultural traits and traditions sometimes clash with individualistic liberal perspectives concerning freedom of personal choice in one’s love life and the tension between religious freedom as a private matter or instead subject to group control and conservative norms.

*Patriarchal Structures and Taboo Issues Regarding Women and Homosexuals*

The first theme problematises the tension between Western liberal, even libertarian, views on sexuality and freedom of choice in one’s private life and more patriarchal and controlling views on sexuality and the role of female freedom in honour, a context found in the MENA region (Sjögren, 1993; Weiner, 2013; Brinkemo, 2014). It is important to note that this is not exclusively related to conservative Islamic traditions; it is also upheld by Christian traditions and other religious groups in the MENA region (Sjögren, 1993; Lindqvist, 2021).

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6 MENA = Middle East and North Africa.
It can be viewed as a conflict between two legal systems, that is, legal rights based on principles for individuals as the main unit versus a group-based, socio-centric legal system with social and political obligations towards family and relatives as the most important unit. The benefit of the former is security and strong protection for human beings through legal structures in a well-functioning state. The law protects the individual. Downsides in this system include loneliness and a lack of belonging to collective contexts. The benefit of the latter is security and the protection offered to members of the collective who, through blood ties and lineages, are included in clan structures (Weiner, 2013, p. 9). The individual is part of a group structure and receives protection through the group’s collective status and cohesion, often through a patronage system under the leadership of a patriarch. Disadvantages in this system include a lack of individual freedom and high demands on loyalty and mutual obligations following the moral codes of the group.

In the film, this theme is touched upon as the female protagonist, Amal, moves between different positions in British society where individual-oriented moral codes clash with group-oriented codes for the characters involved. Amal, previously an architecture student in Baghdad, now works at Abu Nawa’s Café as a waitress. During her daily morning jogging trip in an early key scene, she comes across a large construction project, where she takes a break and looks at cranes and the construction that emerges. The construction workers across the street observe her and wonder, with some suspicion, who she might be. The construction manager, Martin, walks over and starts to talk with her. He manages, in a few sentences from the very start, to express clumsy stereotypes about her as an Iraqi woman. But, with charm and clever self-criticism, he quickly changes the mode of the meeting, and it ends positively with a promise of future meetings.

Slowly, Amal develops a relationship with Martin and begins to date him. Amal’s relationship with Martin, however, is difficult for the patriarch, Taufiq, to accept. He critically reproaches her, asking whether Iraqi men are not good enough for her. He implicitly reminds her of which group she belongs to and what authority she should keep to according to the patronage of honour culture (Sjögren, 1993, p. 97). The scene is open to several interpretations, though. Taufiq’s remark about Amal’s Iraqi identity can be psychologically understood on other levels, whether it is honour or a possible inferiority complex and the struggle for self-esteem by an injured male member of a minority group. But Taufiq’s comments about her sexual adventures are immediately turned against him by Amal.
Amal: So, your “Free Country” is just for men?

Although she boomerangs his honour-ringing words and defends her right as a woman to follow her own wishes, his words hit a vulnerable point in her. A moment later in the film, she fails to stand up for her relationship with Martin when he makes a surprise visit to Abu Nawa’s Café. Amal puts up an indifferent face and acts as though she does not know him in front of her Iraqi friends. It hurts Martin, who leaves the café upset. Amal realises that this important relationship is about to slip through her fingers. She runs after Martin, knocks on his door at home, and tries to explain to him.

Amal: I’m sorry! I am really, truly sorry!
Martin: I don’t understand you... I don’t.
Amal: You don’t understand our customs!
Martin: Oh, is that it? Okey. Your customs...
Amal: As an Iraqi woman I should not have an English boyfriend. Please! Can’t you see?
Martin: No, I can’t see. No! You’re your own woman. You’re a free person. You can do what you want!
Amal: I’m sorry!
Martin: Me too.

Martin closes the door. The scene allows us to see how indecisive Amal is and how she perceives herself as both a free woman and a woman with limited freedom of movement linked to cultural restrictions regarding sexual freedom (for women) within her Iraqi minority group. Here, she displays what the anthropologist Annick Sjögren (1993, pp. 58, 66) outlines regarding women’s sexuality: it constitutes a symbolic capital affecting the social and economic status of a whole family system. Because of that, women’s chastity must be monitored (see also Weiner, 2013, p. 34). The scene also shows Martin’s typical liberal viewpoint, anchored in hegemonic individualism without any deeper understanding of Amal’s background. The scene captures a woman’s difficulties in negotiating sexual freedoms and rights in British society, with her roots as part of an Iraqi minority group. At this moment, Amal stands on the threshold between two cultural systems. Should she take a step back and abide by the cultural restrictions of her background? Or should she take a step forward and follow her individual preferences? Her hybrid cultural identity as a woman and
the conflicts she struggles with and negotiates are brought to life. The scene thus invites the spectator to contemplate with empathy and reflect on complicated identity processes.

In the film, the issue of sexuality is charged on several levels. The elderly woman Samira, a committed communist who fought against repression in Iraq 30–40 years earlier, ridicules her old comrades Taufiq and Zeki and their sexist jokes and narrow-minded male chauvinism about homosexual love. Samira scorns them with her own outspokenness.

**Samira:** *Shame on you! Do I ask if you’re on top or under your wife?*

Samira warmly defends both Amal’s relationship with Martin, as well as Muhanad’s homosexual relationship with Sven. The sex-controlling side of honour culture thus receives considerable critical attention in the film.

However, at the film’s very end, we as spectators also get to see another side of the often harshly criticised honour culture, as a code of not only control but also care. In the final twist of the thriller, we see Taufiq’s willingness to carry the burden of responsibility, protecting people close to him and shielding family members from getting hurt, even at high personal costs. In the end, Taufiq makes a personal sacrifice, covering up for his nephew Nasseer. This is crucial to the closure of the story, to which I will return at the end of this article.

**Challenging Fundamentalism and Exclusive Religious Traditions**

The second theme problematises the conflict between different forms of world views in combat in contemporary Europe, across conservative religious and liberal-secular positions. The film depicts a cultural Muslim, exemplified by the poet Taufiq, an atheist well versed in the Qur’an. We also meet Samira, with Persian and Arabic lyrics as her literary resources. This position seems to be difficult to map out in Europe and easily slips through the fingers of scholars trying to characterise these kinds of identity choices. In the film, we find protagonists *doing* identity through hybrid crossovers in a fluid globalised world (Lorentz & Bergstedt, 2016, p. 61). The secular Muslim identity of Taufiq, Zeki, and Samira seems to be obscured and easily melts into a background of insignificant character, a-typical. The very typical Muslim identity is often depicted as a pious – often conservative – Muslim, easily recognised. But, as Alen Musaenfendic (2020) put it in a recent essay, the cultural Muslim voice is not invited to the table. According to Musaenfendic, people like him – middle class, satisfied, quiet, cultural Muslims, well integrated in European societies – are not heard and do not speak up, either.
The Swedish case is interesting. Among 10 million inhabitants, around 800,000 people in Sweden (8%) have a Muslim background. But only 2% are members of Muslim associations (Willander, 2019). Where are the rest, the majority of citizens with a Muslim background? It looks like a large group with a Muslim background living in the West find themselves at home within a secular sphere with a down-played religious identity, better described as secular or cultural Muslims (Panjwani, 2017; Thurfjell, 2017). According to Panjwani, “discourse about Muslims continues to work with the binary of Muslims as religious and the West as secular” (2017, p. 1). If true, a majority with a Muslim background is actively moving towards a secular identity. According to Kim Knott, this also seems to be the case in Britain, adding specifically that in this group you may also find an explicit groups of atheists, labelling themselves as “ex-muslims” (Knott, 2018, p. 69).

At the same time, conservative Islamism is becoming stronger (Juergensmeyer, 2018; Roy, 2017; Kepel, 1991). The Swedish islamologist Jan Hjärpe points to an interesting double process. In line with an overall secularisation, where religions have less influence over societal functions on a macro level, he sees an ongoing sacralisation of the function of religion on a personal level (Hjärpe, 2003, p. 43). Religions lose their socio-cultural and economic function and become sacralised, relevant mainly in the private realm of a (heated) personal piety. In that light, one can interpret the emergence of a Muslim fundamentalist revival in the heart of Europe, which in the film is exemplified by Nasseer and Sheikh Yassin.

In both the film and real contexts, there is, on a deeper level, a tension between (religious) positions manifesting diverse levels of dialogical engagement ranging from exclusivism to inclusivism to pluralism (Axelson & Stier, 2020; De Kadt, 2018; Pratt, 2018; Hashas, 2019). A lot of scholarly concern tries to understand recent religious development in Europe where conservative and exclusive interpretations seem to be on the move, as well as violent Salafists (Juergensmeyer, 2018; Roy, 2017; Maher, 2016; Kepel, 1991). In parallel, there is an ongoing intra-mural discussion about liberal Islam and the recent development of this strand (Hashas, 2019; De Kadt, 2018).

The film captures these positions when making a focal point of conflict between Salafist preacher Sheikh Yassin, a convinced fundamentalist, and the poet Taufiq, with his deep knowledge of Qur’an and Arabic poetry, a convinced atheist. Taufiq claims the right to be a cultural Muslim and “to choose a secularised lifestyle without being exposed to pressure from his surroundings” (Karlsson, 2010, p. 141). With a different angle, the film also captures the conflict between Nasseer and his mother Maha. Nasseer, who is becoming a strict observant young Muslim, slowly develops a militant position. He looks upon
his mother’s Shi’a Muslim identity with disdain. He attacks her and uncle Taufiq, and the rest of the liberal relatives, offering threats and harsh comments on their compromised Muslim faith and labelling them as infidels.

These scenes illustrate to a high degree what French islamologist Olivier Roy pinpoints as a main theme in a generational dispute among Muslims in France today (2017). Young Muslim men scorn the bent necks of the older generation of Muslims and describe them as bearers of a colonial version of oppressed Islam, as opposed to the militant version they themselves embody in young, radical, proud Islam (Roy, 2017).

Here, both the film and scholars touch on a painful nerve, analysing multi-religious Europe, that requires a lot of thought. The American psychologist of religion, James Jones, tries to understand the attractiveness of religious fanaticism. He concludes that the encounter with American and Western arrogance is a recurring element for many Muslims around the world, as well as a bitter experience of cultural humiliation. Jan Hjärpe also highlights the risk of humiliation attached to a Muslim identity that not only young Muslims but also a larger “declassed middle class” feel in the face of the Western sphere of power (Hjärpe, 2003, p. 156). Experiences of shame and disgrace are in themselves violent processes, and sometimes violent religious expressions offer a perfect way to channel a suppressed rage of dishonour (Jones, 2008).

The scene in the mosque when Sheikh Yassin gives a speech to the male audience is, in this light, charged with meaning. Sheikh Yassin criticises women’s freedom in the West and advocates the men to use force to discipline Amal’s emancipatory (disgraceful) actions. Nasseer and other men listen devoutly and prepare for an attack on Abu Nawa’s Café and Amal. Here, Sheikh Yassin offers young men a hypermasculine conservative identity and a possible path to violent recovery after experiences of impotence and male inferiority in the feminist festung Europa. A stirring parallel is that in this respect the same path is also offered to young men by a growing right-wing extremism in Europe.

In other words, Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism meet in a shared homophobic and anti-feminist hatred (Billinger & Jonsson, 2016).

As outlined above, it is possible to interpret Baghdad in My Shadow from several theoretical angles and on different levels, analysing floating identity positions with values in tension about women’s rights, homosexuality, and religious extremism within contemporary multireligious society. What happens, then, when these ideas about multicultural Europe are channelled through a thriller and a murder story? The short answer is emotional engagement and thick viewing, a concept to be defined shortly.
Storytelling and Complex Meaning-Making in Audio-Visual Format

Storytelling in fiction format has the capacity to bring about emotional engagement. According to media theorist Stig Hjarvard, who coined the term *mediatisation*, it is a concept that tries to capture the long-term and double-sided process of cultural change in a media-saturated society, whereby “social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media’s influence” (Hjarvard, 2012, p. 26). This implies that a discussion about complex topics in society is affected by media logic and more and more takes route through the genres of popular culture (Hjarvard & Lundby 2018). Samir’s film is an engaging example of bringing heated topics into the dramaturgy of a fiction film, through which Samir comments on what is happening in contemporary Europe. With a well-told feature film in a thriller format, the tensions dealt with in *Baghdad in My Shadow* are not only communicated or “mediated” but also emotionally amplified. Moreover, Samir offers the audience multiple meaning-making possibilities as “sense-making processes that involves discursive struggles between competing frames” (Hjarvard & Lundby, 2018, p. 56).

For example, in scenes where Naseer has a fight with his mother, he is frustrated by his family’s conformity with a Western liberal lifestyle, while he is leaning towards a prouder and purist version of Islam. His mother yells back, angry with him and his criticism of her life. She does not want to be taught by this young male fundamentalist what “real” Islam should look like. Another important example is a scene when Zeki is encouraging Maha to find a decent man to marry.

**Zeki:** But first, take off your veil! No one forces you to wear it.

**Maha:** Don’t worry! Firstly: I don’t need a man to look after me. Secondly: Why are men always telling us what to wear?

She is tired of male dominance in all forms, including Zeki’s so-called liberal agenda, which ends up forcing a woman to accept men’s views on her outfit.⁷

All in all, several negotiated Muslim identities are in conflict on the screen, confronting each other in engaging ways.

⁷ In communication with Samir on 18 February 2021, he told the author that this scene is important, even more so in 2021, since he had become worried listening to his liberal friends today in Switzerland, who are making repressive claims about hijab-wearing in Europe and failing to defend key liberal principles of freedom in lifestyle choices. He himself as a liberal has to stand up and defend conservative religious people’s rights against narrowminded laïcité principles expressed in a secularistic doctrinal way.
**Thick Viewing and Emotional Evaluation of Content**

The confrontation is mediatised and amplified by the narrative code of storytelling. A feature film makes the viewer see, hear, think, and feel (Axelson, 2014). A well-told story, manufactured with a high standard of filmic handiwork, has sometimes the capacity to create emotional condensation through the dramatic plot, inviting the audience into multi-layered meaning-making processes. In a thrilling movie, the viewer sometimes experiences a suture process, which “glue[s] the viewer to the screen” (Axelson, 2017, p. 9). In these moments of immersion, high cognition and affect are at hand simultaneously as moments of *thick viewing* (Axelson, 2017).

When film scholars try to understand meaning-making processes, a standard way to treat different layers of meaning-making is to differentiate between four aspects. The most basic meaning-making is called referential, when audiences can refer to actual places and where in the world the story takes place (Bordwell, 1989). The second is labelled explicit meaning, when a director creates an explicit statement within the film, like a straightforward moral conclusion to the story. The third level of meaning-making – and here things are getting more interesting – is called implicit meaning-making. The story points in certain directions, but the final construction of the implied possibilities is made by the viewer, creating meaning. David Bordwell has labelled the fourth level of meaning-making symptomatic meaning-making, where sometimes viewers or film critics reveal typically culturally charged stereotypes unintentionally, leaving marks in the story, dependent on the zeitgeist of the time.

**Discussion**

The key point of interest in this article is how a fiction film like *Baghdad in My Shadow* could mirror and capture real-life processes related to identity in culturally diverse Europe. In religious studies, there are empirically oriented scholars who analyse how viewers relate fiction to real-life situations (Balstrup, 2020; Knauss, 2020; Axelson, 2017; Axelson, 2008). Also, historians try to understand how films are used for comprehending historical events (Deldén, 2017; Hammar & Zander, 2015; Dahl, 2013; Zander, 2006). For both of these fields, meaning-making is understood as a process whereby viewers create a connection from the fictional text to the real-life context. Recent research about complex meaning-making, where reality is depicted in skilful ways, shows that viewers are sometimes extremely emotionally engaged, expressing high cognition combined with deep emotional involvement (Balstrup, 2020; Axelson, 2019; Axelson, 2018; Grodal, 2009).
When *Baghdad in My Shadow* depicts the conflict between the aged poet Taufiq and the increasingly militant Nasseer who chooses to follow the preacher Sheikh Yassin, the plot intensifies both emotionally and cognitively. Empirical research has shown how cinematic narrative stimulates high cognition, mental processes in which filmgoers create elaborated associations between fictional narration and real life, “testing the fiction for a greater significance” (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997, p. 73). Complex meaning-making is at hand when the spectator is deeply engaged with emotions and thoughts (Grodal, 2009; Balstrup, 2020; Axelson, 2017; Deldén & Törnegren 2020).

Using a subjective introspective method (Hart et al., 2016), the film activates my own thoughts and feelings about real-life people and their relation to religion and extremism. The film makes me contemplate background factors and underlying causes of extremism as well as the dimensions of a contemporary politics of oppression and discrimination of vulnerable groups in Europe. It also makes me ponder the legacy of European colonialism as a possible breeding ground for revenge against the West among various groups of Muslim descent. The film is captivating, intellectually and emotionally. Samir’s use of extreme close-ups on faces and sombre music adds to the intensity of the drama.

One explicit conflict is between radicalised Nasseer and his mother, Maha. Samir cues the spectator to feel concern for violent oppression in the form of militant Islamism, threatening liberal ethics and the right for people to choose life paths on their own. Other scenes in this vein include Amal fighting for her space to live freely as an Iraqi woman in London. Here, the film deals with tension between minority and majority positions in multicultural society and individuals’ movement between different cultural affiliations. The personal construction of identity is formed in an ongoing process of dialogue with “expectation narratives” and the normative implications that these have (Deldén & Törnegren, 2020, p. 68). Amal struggles with these external expectations about what she can and cannot do as an Iraqi-British woman. This dilemma forces the spectator to take an emotional and moral stance. The film poses an open question to the viewer that enables further reflections on the space for the character “to decide his or her own identity” (Deldén & Törnegren, 2020, p. 79).

The film also touches on the principles of religious freedom where liberal attitudes are set against religious exclusivism. The director can be said to propagate a nuanced form of inclusivism, what British scholar Lynn Davies calls “dynamic secularism” (2016, p. 10). This attitude defends religious traditions as part of a multiverse landscape of faiths and beliefs. Religion has a profound value for certain people, but also important is the right to leave your religion.
Dynamic secularism defends plurality, the right to adhere to religious traditions as well as the right to cut the bonds to your tradition or to reshape your understanding of your tradition. *Baghdad in My Shadow* (2019) expresses this attitude through its collection of characters. Nasseer’s mother, Maha, has the right to her Shia tradition and Taufiq and Amal the right to re-define their beliefs, with a warning about the risk of militant extremists trying to force people to submit through threats and the use of violence, as Nasseer and Sheikh Yassin do.

From another theoretical point of view, media and film theory have clarified how a fiction film can deal with these issues in amplified ways, creating emotional engagement and thick viewing. Moreover, real-life encounters between film and cinemagoers add to the bigger picture. That these questions can prove to be charged in a multireligious contemporary context became clear during the Malmö Arab Film Festival (MAFF) and the screening of *Baghdad in My Shadow* at cinema Panora, on 9 October 2020. When the homosexual act of love was displayed on the screen, some young women left the salon. In the discussion with the director on site in Malmö, critical questions were asked from a mainly Arabic-speaking audience. Samir was questioned about the value of showing these problematic aspects of honour culture in such a critical way. It was argued that a director with roots in Iraq should portray the Iraqi community in Europe in a more favourable way. Samir defended his film politely and argued for the legitimate value and need to discuss these issues with controversial and problematic elements in place.

The film has been invited to several film festivals and won the audience award at Washington DC’s Filmfest 2019. The film has also provoked various groups: on the one hand, the audience category Samir met at Panora in Malmö who did not like the handling of problematic taboos within their own Arab culture, and on the other hand, a category of film critics with a left-wing profile in Switzerland who, in discussions with Samir, indicated that he has constructed a stereotypical image of fundamentalist Islamism. Confronted with this criticism, Samir posed a counter-question to one critic.

Q: How many Salafist imams have you met in your life?
A: No one.

Q: How then do you know my portrait is a stereotype?8

Samir was puzzled by this criticism from progressive film critics from the heart of Europe. I am not that surprised. Samir, with his engaging fiction film and

8 Communication with Samir at the Malmö Arab Film Festival on 20 October 2010.
an interesting insider’s perspective, has entered a minefield of today’s heated discourse landscape, where his critical look at the Iraqi diaspora can be framed as creating a binary opposition between the religious Muslim “others” and the secular West with its emphasis on individual rights (Panjwani, 2017). In my view, this dismisses a more ambiguous reality to be analysed and comprehended with the help of a film director such as Samir, with his insider perspective and multicultural roots.

When we see the very end of the film, the perspective is twisted once again in a way that characterises good film narration. Taufiq protects his family by obscuring the details about the attack on Amal. This activates the honour culture’s group protection mechanisms as Mark S. Weiner describes. Crimes and violations of the law are regulated within the (minority) group, keeping the (majority) authorities’ involvement short. Taufiq refuses to cooperate with the police, thus protecting the radicalised nephew Nasseer, but also Sheikh Yassin, who Taufiq himself detests. At the same time, he settles moral guilt from the past that has shadowed his life all these years in Britain. As the patriarch in the family, he takes care of everybody. He tries at all costs to save both Amal and Nasseer. Doing so, he also undermines the British police’s ability to put the Salafist preacher Sheikh Yassin on trial. The film leaves the moral issue to be contemplated by the audience.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to analyse the fiction film Baghdad in My Shadow (2019) and to put it into a context of the re-negotiation of identities related to religion and migrant experiences in contemporary Europe. How can we summarise the film’s imprint and its contribution as a piece of art, dealing with such questions?

From a theoretical point of view, the story Baghdad in My Shadow by Samir has tapped into ongoing theoretical discussions about coming to term with multicultural, multireligious Europa. In line with the director’s intention, the film has dealt with charged issues in contemporary society. Through the narration, the audience has been invited to reflect on themes such as homosexuality and women’s equality and emancipative values within socio-centric communities and the question of religion and conflicts between liberal-secular and religious exceptionalism. The film invites reflection on processes of change where re-negotiations take place by people in conflict with each other. The film problematises competing world views. Gay rights and women’s individual autonomy are mirrored, and emancipative expressions of individual rights are promoted.
The new citizen in a contemporary plural Europe is stretched between diverse cultural systems where moral dilemmas must be solved by choices that subscribe to certain cultural principles but not to others. We see individuals and groups who struggle with norms and value systems in conflict with each other and we see characters act in paradoxical and incoherent ways. Samir, as a Swiss-Iraqi filmmaker, invites us to a deeper emotional and intellectual understanding of different identity positions, solving complex moral issues.

*The Final Closure: a Timeless Place of Transcendence*

*Baghdad in My Shadow* ends with a drone-shot where the camera rises from Abu Nawa’s Café. The battered café has been rebuilt, and everyone is there: Taufiq, Samira, Zeki, Maha, Muhanad, Sven, and all the others. It has been restored to a place with room for everybody in a cross-ethnic community. As the camera rises further, we are no longer in London. Abu Nawa’s Café is mysteriously and geographically reborn in central Baghdad, the city forever associated with the human cradle of civilisation on the shores of the Euphrates. London and Baghdad merge into a timeless place, a place for longing and belonging, for everyone dreaming of multiple and transcendent place identities.

**Unpublished**

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**Filmography**

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