

Shot as an Instrument of Visual Characterization in the Religious Biopic Muhammad: The Messenger of God

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
Religious biopics that withhold the face of their central figure place an unusual burden on cinematography, since the character must be constructed from everything except the face. Scholarship on shot and characterization has grown quickly, yet it has been drawn almost entirely from films whose protagonists can be shown in close-up, leaving the face-avoidant case unexamined. This article examines how shot functions as an instrument of visual characterization in the 2015 film directed by Majid Majidi, and evaluates how effectively it does so. The study is a qualitative textual analysis of a single-film corpus that combines the four shot elements of angle nature, level angle, shot size, and camera movement with a three-dimensional model of character and a criterion of narrative coherence. Shots bearing directly on the protagonist were sampled purposively from the full runtime and grouped into the three age ranges the film depicts: infancy, childhood, and pre-adolescence. Each shot was coded for its four elements, interpreted for its characterization meaning, and assessed against the narrative context of the scene in which it appears. Objective angle, high level angle, medium shot size, and follow movement form the dominant combination. Effectiveness is nevertheless uneven: repeated high angle flattens psychological characterization and in places contradicts the protagonist's social standing, one subjective-angle scene distorts his physical proportion, and a tilt-up misreads the emotional weight of the scene it closes. The article contributes an evaluative, rather than descriptive, framework for analysing cinematography produced under representational constraint.	camera angle Majid Majidi narrative coherence shot size visual representation  This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

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INTRODUCTION

Biographical films about historical and religious figures hold a durable appeal, and they have long been treated as a genre with conventions of its own rather than as a subset of historical drama (Custen, 1992; Bingham, 2010). In Indonesia the pattern is familiar from *Habibie & Ainun, Ir. Soekarno*, and *Sang Pencerah*, films that draw large audiences to audiovisual portraits of figures who shaped the nation's history. The same appetite operates at a global scale. *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* (2015), directed by the Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi, follows the childhood of the Prophet Muhammad from birth to the age of twelve, and exemplifies the internationally oriented, high-budget co-production that has come to characterize the globalizing era of Iranian cinema (Naficy, 2012). It won the awards for Best Director and Best Cinematography at the 2015 Camerimage International Film Festival, was nominated for Best Film at the 2016 Asia Pacific Screen Awards, and was submitted as Iran's entry for the Best Foreign Language Film award at the 88th Academy Awards.

The film's central artistic problem is a representational one. Islamic tradition places the likeness of the Prophet beyond direct depiction, and the production accepted that constraint from the outset: the face of the central character is never shown. What remains available to the director is everything else a camera can do. The boy is built out of the backs of shoulders, of hands, of the space adults leave around him, of the height from which the camera chooses to look. A film that constructs a protagonist this way is an unusually clear case for cinematographic analysis, because the work ordinarily distributed between face and frame is carried by the frame alone. The film's representational strategy has itself become an object of recent scholarship in religious studies (Pak-Shiraz, 2025), and sits within a long history in which visual engagement with the Prophet's person has been mediated indirectly rather than shown (Gruber, 2009).

Shot, the basic unit of cinematography, is conventionally analysed through four interrelated elements: angle nature, that is whether the camera observes from outside the story world, adopts a character's optical position, or occupies a point of view; level angle, the camera's vertical position relative to the subject; shot size, its distance from the subject; and camera movement. Research on how these elements build character has developed quickly within Indonesian cinematography scholarship. Negara, Eriswan, and Pradhono (2023) traced camera angle across protagonist, antagonist, and tritagonist roles in *Kaliya*, finding high angle used consistently to mark a character's subordinate position in conflict scenes. Sanjaya and Marian (2023) related the confidence of the protagonist of *Tár* to camera placement, showing that a camera set below the subject's eyeline affirms psychological dominance over an interlocutor. Nuramalina (2021) examined shooting technique in television news features and confirmed the weight that shot-size consistency carries in establishing the credibility of a depicted subject. Widiyatmika, Sulisty, and Nugroho (2019) read character-education values out of *Sang Kiai*, an Indonesian religious biopic, showing how scene and dialogue together construct eight such values.

A second and older body of work approaches the same question experimentally. Communication researchers have tested the effect of vertical camera position on perceived credibility, dominance, and trustworthiness over several decades (Tiemens, 1970; McCain et al., 1977; Kraft, 1987; Baranowski & Hecht, 2018), and recent neurocinematic work has shown that changes of shot scale and camera angle across a cut produce systematic differences in viewers' neural response (Sanz-Aznar et al., 2023). The direction and strength of the effect are not uniform across these studies, which is itself instructive: the meaning of an angle is conventionalized rather than fixed, and depends on what surrounds it. A third line of work, closer to the present object, examines how Indonesian religious biopics construct moderate religious authority and popular-heroic status through narrative and visual means (Nurmansyah, 2023; Ghufroon et al., 2025).

Taken together, this scholarship establishes that angle, distance, and movement are instruments of meaning rather than neutral recording choices, and it has mapped their use across a range of fiction and non-fiction material. It stops, however, at two points. First, almost every case analysed concerns a protagonist whose face is available to the camera, so that shot supplements facial performance rather than substituting for it; what happens to characterization when the face is withheld has not been tested. Second, these studies describe the patterns they find without asking whether the pattern was the right one for the scene. Description establishes what a filmmaker did; it does not establish whether it worked. The gap, then, is not an absence of publications on shot and characterization but an untested claim: that the conventional meanings of shot elements can carry characterization on their own, reliably, across a whole film.

This article is the first to evaluate, rather than merely describe, the effectiveness of shot as an instrument of characterization in a religious biopic that withholds its protagonist's face. Its contribution is threefold. Academically, it moves a descriptive literature toward an evaluative one by making the criterion of assessment explicit. Practically, it yields a framework that directors and cinematographers can apply when planning or reviewing technical choices for productions working under representational constraint. Socially, it offers a way of analysing religiously sensitive audiovisual material that attends to the mechanism of meaning-making rather than to the contested image itself.

The relevance of the case to local culture studies is practical rather than territorial. Indonesia, as the largest Muslim-majority society in the world, produces its own religious and biographical films that face comparable questions about what may be shown and how, and Indonesian audiences formed part of the global Muslim viewership this film addressed. A framework derived from a case in which representational constraint is at its most absolute transfers readily to the softer constraints that Indonesian filmmakers negotiate, and to local scholarly and public argument about how revered figures may appear on screen.

The study therefore pursues two aims: to describe the three-dimensional characterization of the protagonist across the three age groups the film depicts, on the evidence of four shot elements; and to evaluate how effectively those shot choices build characterization consistent with the narrative context of each scene.

METHOD

The study was designed as a qualitative textual analysis of a single-film corpus, and the account below sets out the framework, the corpus and its sampling, the instruments, the validation and analytical procedure, and the ethical position from which the analysis was conducted.

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative descriptive design was adopted, appropriate to research on a naturally occurring object in which the researcher serves as the key instrument and the findings turn on meaning rather than statistical generalization (Sugiyono, 2019). Three bodies of theory were brought to bear at distinct points in the analysis.

The first is the account of cinematography set out by Pratista (2017), on which a film is composed of narrative and cinematic elements, with cinematography standing alongside *mise-en-scène*, editing, and sound. Shot, the smallest cinematographic unit, is analysed through four components: angle nature, comprising objective, subjective, and point-of-view positions, which determines where the audience is placed in relation to the scene; level angle, comprising high angle, low angle, eye level, top angle, and dutch angle, which determines the camera's vertical viewpoint; shot size, running from extreme long shot to extreme close up, which determines distance and the degree of detail disclosed; and camera movement,

including track in, track out, pan, tilt, and follow, which determines the visual dynamics of a scene. This division is consistent with the foundational cinematography literature outside the Indonesian context, including Mascelli's (1965) treatment of angle, continuity, and composition, and Bordwell and Thompson's (2019) account of staging, shot scale, and camera movement as primary carriers of narrative meaning. Shot size in particular operationalizes the proxemic relation between viewer and character described by Hall (1966), in which intimate, personal, social, and public zones of physical closeness correspond to progressively wider camera distances. The broader introductory literature on film language and media aesthetics treats these choices as conventionalized in the same way (Monaco, 2009; Zettl, 2017). This framework governed the coding stage.

The second is the three-dimensional model of character (Egri, 1946), which divides characterization into physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions. These dimensions served as the interpretive frame for translating a coded shot into a statement about character: a high level angle is conventionally associated with weakness or low standing in the psychological and sociological dimensions, while shot size bears most directly on the physiological. The distinction between a character's underlying traits and characterization as the process by which those traits are revealed through action (McKee, 1997) underlies the treatment of shot here as a vehicle for revealing character rather than for illustrating it. This framework governed the interpretive stage.

The third is the criterion by which effectiveness was judged, namely narrative coherence: a shot is effective when the conventional meaning of its constituent elements supports, rather than contradicts, the narrative information already established about the character and the situation in that scene. Where a film withholds the protagonist's face, the burden of conveying emotion and status shifts onto gesture, posture, and the spatial relation between figures, so the assessment also registered how a shot worked alongside those elements, while remaining focused on the four shot components themselves. This criterion governed the evaluative stage, and distinguishes the study from a purely descriptive analysis.

Several terms of art used below — follow, track in, tilt up, over-the-shoulder shot — originate in English-language cinematography literature and are carried untranslated into Indonesian film scholarship, including the thesis on which this article draws; they are retained here in their original form.

Corpus, Period, and Sampling

The corpus is a single feature film, *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* (2015), produced by Muhammad Mehdi Heidarian and Mohammad Reza Saberi and directed by Majid Majidi, viewed in the theatrical release version. It was selected purposively on three grounds: the international cinematographic recognition it received, which makes its technique worth examining on its own terms; its status as one of the few large-scale religious biopics that explicitly withholds its protagonist's face, which makes it a limiting case for visual characterization; and the breadth of attention it drew from Muslim audiences internationally, which gives the analysis a public as well as an academic bearing.

Within the corpus, sampling was purposive. The unit of analysis is the shot, and the inclusion criterion was direct bearing on the characterization of the protagonist. The full runtime was first screened for scenes meeting that criterion; qualifying scenes were then assigned to the three age ranges the film depicts — infancy, from birth to two years; childhood, from five to eight years; and pre-adolescence, at twelve years — a grouping that matters because the film moves between acts by ellipsis, so that shot patterns may differ across the ranges in step with the character's changing narrative role. Within each qualifying scene, a shot was isolated for coding whenever it changed at least one of the four elements relative to the shot immediately

preceding it, which kept static repetition out of the sample. Shots in which the protagonist is absent, and establishing shots carrying no characterizing information, were excluded.

Data Collection

The researcher served as the principal instrument, supported by a shot-analysis worksheet organized around the four elements. Each sampled shot was entered on the worksheet with its angle nature, level angle, shot size, and camera movement; with the characterization meaning that combination carries by cinematographic convention; and with an assessment of its fit to the narrative context of the scene in which it appears. Screen captures were taken to anchor each worksheet entry to the frame it described.

Reflective notes were kept throughout the observation period. They record the first author's interpretive reasoning and the outcome of discussion with the second author, who supervised the underlying thesis, on shots whose meaning was potentially ambiguous — combinations that could be read either as supporting or as contradicting the narrative context depending on the interpretive perspective taken. These notes form the record of how disputed cases were settled.

Data Validation and Analysis

Credibility was established in three ways. Scenes showing a potential misalignment between the conventional meaning of a shot and its narrative context were observed repeatedly, so that no effectiveness judgement rests on a single viewing impression. A consistency check was then run on a randomly selected fifteen per cent of the coded shots several weeks after the first coding pass: the first author re-coded that subset independently, without reference to the original sheet, and the two sets of entries were compared for agreement on angle nature, level angle, shot size, and camera movement. Discrepancies were discussed with the second author until a single agreed classification was reached. Finally, ambiguous cases were resolved through the discussion procedure recorded in the reflective notes. The check is modest in scale and does not amount to independent inter-coder agreement, but it does establish that the patterns reported below survive a second, blind pass over the material.

Analysis proceeded in five stages. First, the film was observed in full to identify scenes bearing on the protagonist's characterization. Second, each sampled shot was coded for its four elements. Third, the combination of elements in each shot was interpreted for characterization meaning against cinematographic convention. Fourth, the accumulated interpretations for each age group were consolidated into a statement of the protagonist's physiological, psychological, and sociological characterization in that group. Fifth, each shot was assessed for effectiveness by testing the conventional meaning of its elements against the narrative context of its scene, and classified as effective, less effective, or ineffective.

Research Ethics and Positionality

The study involves no human participants, and no institutional ethical approval was therefore required. Its material is a commercially released feature film; frame captures were used for analysis within the limits of fair dealing for criticism and review, and no still reproducing the protagonist is published with this article.

Two aspects of position require declaration. The observation, the construction of the analysis tables, and the initial interpretation were carried out by the first author as an undergraduate thesis at the institution named above, supervised by the second author; the present article reworks that material with a sharper evaluative criterion. Both authors write as students and teachers of cinematography rather than as scholars of Islamic visual tradition. Accordingly, the analysis deliberately does not catalogue or foreground the physical attributes of the depicted figure, even where these became a matter of public controversy. The academic question is not what is shown but how a cinematic instrument constructs character under a

constraint the filmmakers accepted from the outset, and the restraint observed here follows the principle that analysis of religiously sensitive audiovisual work should address the mechanism of meaning production rather than reproduce the element that constitutes the sensitivity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Dominant Combination and Its Distribution Across Age Groups

Across the sample as a whole, one combination recurs more than any other: objective angle, high level angle, medium shot size, and follow movement. Its distribution is not even, however, and the differences between the three age groups are the first substantive finding. Table 1 summarizes the dominant pattern in each group and the characterization it carries in the three dimensions.

Table 1. Dominant shot patterns and the resulting characterization, by age group

Age group	Dominant shot pattern	Characterization carried
Infancy (0–2 years)	Objective angle; high angle; medium long shot	Physiological: body proportion appropriate to the age. Psychological: calm, dependent. Sociological: held within a family of standing
Childhood (5–8 years)	Objective and point-of-view angle; high angle; long to medium shot; follow	Physiological: slight build, curly hair. Psychological: marked curiosity, composure. Sociological: treated with deference
Pre-adolescence (12 years)	Subjective angle and over-the-shoulder shot; eye level; medium shot	Physiological: approaching adult height. Psychological: courageous, protective. Sociological: respected, of middling means

Read down the table, the pattern is one of widening technical range as the character ages. The infancy group draws on a narrow repertoire; the pre-adolescence group draws on the widest. The sections that follow establish the finding for each group on the evidence of particular scenes, before the evaluation is drawn together.

Weakness and Standing: The Infancy Group (0–2 Years)

Shots of the protagonist in infancy are dominated by objective angle combined with high level angle and medium long shot. The combination works on the physiological dimension first: the wider framing registers the infant's size against the adults and the architecture around him, and the proportion reads as appropriate to the age. The high angle then supplies a psychological reading of dependency that is consistent with what an infant is, and for the birth sequence and the scenes immediately following it the choice is coherent.

The difficulty appears when the same angle persists into scenes whose narrative business is the standing of the family into which the child has been born. Those scenes establish lineage, custodianship of the sanctuary, and the deference of visitors; the camera nevertheless continues to look down. The conventional meaning of the level angle and the narrative information of the scene pull in opposite directions, and the sociological dimension is weakened as a result. The finding is consistent with Negara et al. (2023), who found high angle used systematically in *Kaliya* to mark a character's subordinate position in conflict; the difference is that in *Kaliya* the marking was deliberate and local to the conflict, whereas here it is carried into scenes where no subordination is at issue. What functions as a signal in one film operates as a default in the other.

Curiosity and Distortion: The Childhood Group (5–8 Years)

In the childhood range the film widens its repertoire. Objective and point-of-view angles are combined within single scenes, shot sizes graduate from long to medium, and a gentle follow movement accompanies the boy through unfamiliar space. The arrival in Yathrib is the clearest instance: the alternation between what the boy sees and how he is seen builds curiosity as a psychological attribute without a line of dialogue, and the unhurried follow keeps the atmosphere calm rather than anxious. In one further scene a subjective angle places the audience at the boy's height among adults who nonetheless address him with deference, and the sociological dimension is carried efficiently by the geometry alone.

The same device misfires elsewhere in the group. Used a second time, the subjective angle exaggerates the height relation between the boy and the adults around him past what the narrative has established about his age, so that the physiological dimension is distorted in the service of the sociological one. The status reading survives; the credibility of the body does not. This is where the present findings qualify Sanjaya and Marian (2023), who found camera position relative to the eyeline a reliable affirmation of psychological dominance in *Tár*. Their case concerns adults of comparable stature, where vertical displacement reads as relational. With a child among adults the same displacement also reads as anatomical, and the two readings compete. The device is not scale-independent, and the qualification matters for any film placing a child at its centre.

Moral Agency at Eye Level: The Pre-Adolescence Group (12 Years)

At twelve the film gives the character scenes of moral consequence: purchasing a slave's freedom on credit, and intervening when soldiers in Syam set upon a beggar. Shots in these scenes are dominated by subjective angle and over-the-shoulder framing at eye level. The choice is apt. Eye level asserts equality between the character and his interlocutor, which is precisely the disposition the scenes attribute to him: a boy of a respected house who meets a slave and a beggar on level terms. Here the characterization is carried by the elements working together rather than by any one of them.

One scene in the group runs against its own material. As the boy witnesses the violence done to the beggar, the camera executes a tilt up. The conventional association of the movement is with elevation, relief, or arrival at something greater; what the scene requires is the registration of concern and moral anger. The movement supplies the wrong emotional vector at the moment of highest narrative weight. That a film capable of the eye-level framing in the adjacent scene should reach for this movement here indicates that the problem lies in the pairing of technique to scene, not in the repertoire available.

Three Patterns of Misalignment

Consolidated across the three groups, the effectiveness assessment finds shot application in the film suboptimal, and the shortfall falls into three recurrent patterns rather than being distributed at random. Table 2 sets them out with their consequences for characterization.

Table 2. Recurrent patterns of misalignment between shot and narrative context

Pattern	Description	Consequence for characterization
Dominance of high angle	High angle recurs across scenes and across all three age groups, including scenes where no subordination is at issue	Flattens the psychological dimension into a single register and contradicts the protagonist's social standing in several scenes
Undifferentiated medium shot	Medium shot is used across many scenes without variation keyed to the demands of the scene	Fails to register the physiological change that the narrative ellipses between age groups require

Pattern	Description	Consequence for characterization
Movement against atmosphere	Curved follow movements and a tilt up are applied in emotionally weighted scenes	Supplies an emotional vector contrary to the one the scene has established

Against these, the film also produces shots of marked effectiveness. The dutch angle deployed in one scene of upheaval conveys the disorder of the situation and the agitation of the character in a single gesture, and does so without any recourse to the face. The presence of such shots is analytically important: it shows that the ineffectiveness identified here is not a consequence of a limited technical repertoire, and not an inherent limitation of face-avoidant characterization, but a failure of consistency in matching an available technique to the scene at hand.

Sample of the Coded Material

Table 3 reproduces eight representative entries from the worksheet, drawn across the three age groups, to show how the coding and the effectiveness judgement were applied to individual shots.

Table 3. Sample of coded shots across the three age groups

No.	Scene	Angle nature	Level angle	Shot size	Movement	Effectiveness
1	Birth (age 0)	Objective	High angle	Medium long shot	Track in, pan right	Effective
2	Seeing the Ka'bah (age 2)	Subjective	Eye level	Beauty shot	Swing left	Effective
3	Being bathed (age 2)	Objective	High angle	Full shot	—	Less effective
4	Grandfather's banquet (age 6)	Subjective	Eye level	Medium long shot	Follow (slow)	Effective
5	Playing in Yathrib (age 6)	Objective, POV	High angle	Long to medium shot	Track in, follow	Partly less effective
6	Cleaning the Ka'bah (age 8)	Objective	Top and low angle	Close up to full shot	Track out	Effective
7	Buying Suwaibah's freedom (age 12)	Subjective, POV	Eye level	Medium shot, OSS	Follow	Effective
8	Protecting a beggar (age 12)	Objective	Eye level	Medium shot	Tilt up	Ineffective

The sample makes a point that the aggregate figures obscure. Effectiveness does not track the complexity of the element combination. Entry 4 combines three elements in a wholly conventional way and works; entry 5 combines five and works only in part. What separates them is fit to context, not technical ambition. The observation bears directly on Nuramalina's (2021) finding that shot-size consistency underwrites the credibility of a depicted subject: consistency is necessary here too, but the present material shows it is not sufficient, since a consistently applied element can be consistently wrong for the scenes it is applied to.

Complexity Without Consistency: Comparison Across the Age Groups

Table 4 compares the three groups on technical variation, consistency of angle, and relative effectiveness. The effectiveness level was assigned qualitatively, from the number of misalignment cases identified in each group and the narrative weight of the scenes in which they occur, rather than by any numerical scoring: a group with no identified misalignment, or with a minor one only, was ranked above a group containing a misalignment that materially contradicts the established context of its scene.

Table 4. Technical variation, angle consistency, and relative effectiveness by age group

Age group	Technical variation	Angle consistency	Relative effectiveness
Infancy (0–2 years)	Low; high angle and medium long shot predominate	High, but undifferentiated	Moderate
Childhood (5–8 years)	Moderate; point-of-view and subjective combinations appear	Moderate; one case of physiological distortion	Moderate to low
Pre-adolescence (12 years)	High; the widest range of angle and shot size	High in the morally weighted scenes, with one case misaligned with atmosphere	Moderate to high

The trend is clear and slightly counter-intuitive. Technical range widens as the character ages, in step with a narrative role that becomes more complex and more morally charged. Effectiveness does not widen with it. The pre-adolescence group commands the richest repertoire in the film and still contains its single most consequential misalignment, in the beggar scene. The relation between the range of techniques a production can execute and the accuracy with which it deploys them is therefore weak, and planning that concentrates on expanding the former will not by itself secure the latter.

Shot Under Representational Constraint

These findings are best read against the particular demand a religious biopic of this kind makes on its cinematography. Where the face is withheld, shot carries a heavier narrative load than in a conventional biopic, since physiology, psychology, and social position must all be communicated through posture, gesture, viewpoint, and the disposition of figures in space. The misalignments identified here — the monotony of high angle above all — can be understood as a consequence of that load: an element that would pass unnoticed as one signal among several becomes conspicuous when it is doing the work alone. The dutch-angle scene discussed above cuts the other way, and is the more informative for it. It demonstrates that the load can be carried, which is what makes the inconsistent scenes read as avoidable error rather than as the price of working without a face.

The point generalizes beyond Islamic contexts to any production whose central figure may not be shown directly, for religious, legal, or ethical reasons. Three implications follow for practice. Level angle needs planning from pre-production as a through-line across the whole film, since repeating a single angle without reference to the social and emotional content of each scene produces either monotony or contradiction. Subjective angle used to assert status needs to be checked against physiological proportion, particularly where a child is placed among adults, or the assertion is bought at the cost of the body's credibility. And camera movement should be chosen from an explicit reading of the emotional register of the scene rather than from general technical habit, most of all in the morally weighted scenes that are characteristic of the genre.

The Study in Relation to Prior Cinematography Research

Table 5 places the study alongside the prior research reviewed in the introduction, by object, analytical focus, and principal finding.

Table 5. The present study in relation to prior characterization cinematography research

Study	Object and focus	Principal finding
Widiyatmika et al. (2019)	<i>Sang Kiai</i> ; character-education values	Scene and dialogue jointly construct eight religious character values
Nuramalina (2021)	Television news feature; shot size	Shot-size consistency underwrites the credibility of the depicted subject
Negara et al. (2023)	<i>Kaliya</i> ; camera angle by character role	High angle marks a character's subordinate position in conflict scenes
Sanjaya & Marian (2023)	<i>Tár</i> ; camera placement and confidence	Relative camera position affirms psychological dominance
The present study (2025)	A face-avoidant religious biopic; shot effectiveness across three age groups	High angle dominance and contextual inconsistency reduce effectiveness under representational constraint

The comparison locates the contribution precisely. The four prior studies establish what filmmakers do with angle, distance, and shot size, and their findings are confirmed here at the descriptive level. None asks whether the pattern identified was appropriate to the scene that produced it. The shift from describing a usage pattern to assessing its contextual fit is what this study adds, and it is a shift with practical consequences, since only an evaluative account can be turned into guidance for production.

Limitations of the Study

Five limitations qualify these findings. The first is interpretive. Assessing effectiveness by the criterion of narrative coherence rests on a judgement about the conventional meaning of each element, and researchers trained in different cinematographic traditions might weigh those conventions differently. Repeated observation and discussion between the authors mitigate the risk without eliminating it; an independent panel of expert judges would strengthen the procedure, particularly in any study covering several films.

The second concerns measurement. The categories used here — effective, less effective, ineffective — are qualitative interpretations of the fit between conventional meaning and narrative context, not the output of a standardized instrument, and no inferential testing was performed. The third concerns scope: a single film cannot establish that the patterns found here generalize to other religious biopics. The fourth concerns reception. The analysis is textual, so it establishes what the shots conventionally signify, not how audiences actually responded to them. The fifth bears on the framing of the study rather than on its conduct: because the object is an international production rather than an Indonesian one, the claim to relevance for local culture studies rests on the transferability of the framework to local production practice and discourse, and not on the analysis of local cultural material, which comparative work on Indonesian religious biopics would be needed to supply.

CONCLUSION

Across the three age ranges it depicts, *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* builds its protagonist predominantly through objective angle, high level angle, medium shot size, and follow

movement. The three dimensions of character are carried unevenly by that combination. The sociological dimension remains stable from infancy to pre-adolescence, the psychological dimension develops as the character ages, and the physiological dimension is the least reliably served, since shot size varies little across ellipses that require the body to have changed.

Judged against the narrative context of the scenes in which they appear, the film's shot choices are suboptimal overall. High angle recurs so widely that it flattens psychological characterization into a single register and, in the scenes concerned with the standing of the protagonist's family, contradicts the information the scene is there to establish; medium shot is applied without the variation the age transitions require; and several camera movements, the tilt up in the beggar scene above all, supply an emotional vector contrary to the one their scene has built. Yet the film also produces shots of real precision, and that combination is the substantive finding: the shortfall is one of consistency, not of capability. Shot can carry characterization without a face, and in this film it repeatedly does; what it does not do is carry it reliably from scene to scene.

The study's contribution is to make the standard of judgement explicit. Cinematography scholarship on characterization has been largely descriptive, cataloguing what filmmakers do with angle, distance, and movement; an evaluative criterion turns that catalogue into something a production can use, because it identifies not merely the pattern but its fit to the scene. For practitioners working under representational constraint, whether religious, legal, or ethical, the framework offers a way of reviewing a film's visual consistency before release, so that misalignments between narrative intent and visual delivery can be found while they are still cheap to correct. For the study of local culture, it offers Indonesian filmmakers and scholars a vocabulary drawn from an extreme case that applies to the milder constraints they negotiate.

The limits of the study indicate what should follow. Because the effectiveness judgement rests on interpretation, a comparative study across several religious biopics, both those bound by representational constraint and those free of it, would test whether the patterns found here hold; because the analysis is textual, audience reception work through interview or structured survey would establish whether the misalignments identified on the page are perceived on the screen; and because the categories used here are qualitative, a rating instrument with replicable indicators would make evaluative cinematography research comparable across objects. Work on Indonesian religious biopics along these lines would close the gap between the framework proposed here and the local material it is meant to serve.

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Ethical approval and informed consent. Not applicable. The study involves no human participants and no personal data; its material is a commercially released feature film, analysed within the limits of fair dealing for criticism and review. No frame reproducing the protagonist is published with this article.

Data availability. The complete shot-analysis worksheet underlying the findings, comprising the coded entries for every shot sampled and the accompanying reflective notes, is held by the authors and is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The tables presented in this article summarise that material; the full worksheet is not reproduced here on grounds of length.

Use of generative artificial intelligence. The authors used a generative AI assistant for language editing and for formatting the manuscript to the journal template. No part of the analysis, interpretation, or findings was generated by an AI tool. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article.

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