



SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SALADIN'S LEADERSHIP AND HUMANISM IN THE FILM KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

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Abstract

The representation of leadership in historical and war films generally emphasizes military strength, struggles for power, and the victory of particular groups. Consequently, the human dimension of leadership, especially in representations of Muslim figures such as Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi, has received relatively limited attention in communication and film studies. This study aims to analyze the representation of leadership and humanistic values embodied by Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). The study employs a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to examine denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. Data were collected through observations of scenes, dialogue, facial expressions, and visual settings in the Director's Cut version of the film, with particular attention to the characters of Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi and Balian of Ibelin. The findings demonstrate that leadership is represented through the ability to make prudent decisions, protect the community, and prioritize civilian safety amid warfare. Salahuddin's refusal to seek revenge, his respect for his opponents, and his granting of religious freedom to the inhabitants of Jerusalem reflect strong humanistic values. At the level of myth, the film constructs the idea that an ideal leader is measured not by military victory but by the ability to uphold justice, compassion, and human dignity regardless of religious or group affiliation. These findings indicate that *Kingdom of Heaven* functions not merely as historical entertainment but also as a medium for reflecting on humanistic leadership that remains relevant to contemporary humanitarian challenges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a medium of mass communication that not only conveys stories but also constructs public perceptions of identity, power, morality, and historical events. Meaning in film is produced through the interrelationship among narrative, dialogue, visual composition, costumes, facial expressions, music, and the positioning of characters within the story structure. Historical films, therefore, cannot be regarded as objective documentation of the past. Rather, they constitute cultural texts that select, organize, and reinterpret history according to particular narrative and ideological interests. This process of representation enables films to shape the public image of particular groups and figures, including determining who is positioned as a hero, an adversary, a victim, or a source of moral authority. Semiotic analysis is important in this context because it enables researchers to uncover how social and ideological meanings are naturalized through audiovisual signs and consequently appear to audiences as normal, reasonable, and acceptable representations (Azwar & Auliana, 2024; Harahap & Alfikri, 2024; Rahmawati et al., 2022).



The issue of representation becomes particularly significant in films depicting the Crusades because their narratives bring together religious identity, political interests, military power, and historical memories of relations between the Western and Islamic worlds. Characterization in such films not only determines the dramatic direction of the narrative but also influences how audiences understand the groups being represented. Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* occupies a distinctive position because it portrays Sultan Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi not merely as a military commander opposing the Christian forces but as a leader characterized by strategic competence, self-restraint, and moral judgment. The film positions Salahuddin as an active subject who possesses both political and ethical authority in determining the fate of Jerusalem's inhabitants. This representation warrants critical examination because the portrayal of historical figures in mainstream cinema is invariably constructed through selected perspectives, character oppositions, and the ideologies underlying narrative production rather than through a neutral reproduction of historical reality (Adiprasetyo & Annissa, 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2022).

Leadership and humanism in this study are understood as two interrelated dimensions. Leadership refers not only to the ability to command troops, make strategic decisions, and maintain authority but also to responsibility, exemplary conduct, justice, self-restraint, and the protection of those under one's leadership. Humanism, meanwhile, refers to respect for human dignity and safety, empathy toward others, tolerance, rejection of excessive violence, and fair treatment regardless of religious or group identity. From an Islamic perspective, power is understood as a trust whose legitimacy derives not only from formal authority but also from a leader's capacity to uphold justice and safeguard human welfare. Humanistic leadership, therefore, does not regard compassion as a weakness. Instead, compassion constitutes the capacity to restrain the exercise of power so that it does not become an instrument of domination or revenge (Arifin, 2023; Atanaya et al., 2025; Ubaidila & Maunah, 2022).

The relationship between authority and humanitarian values is represented in *Kingdom of Heaven* through various verbal and nonverbal signs, including Salahuddin's position before his army, his military attributes, his composed facial expressions, his negotiations with Balian of Ibelin, his protection of Jerusalem's inhabitants, his offer of medical assistance to King Baldwin IV, and his respect for the religious symbols of others. These signs cannot be interpreted solely through their literal or immediately visible meanings. They must also be examined through the cultural and ideological associations constructed by the film. Roland Barthes' semiotic framework provides a relevant analytical approach through three levels of signification: denotation, which explains the observable reality presented in a scene; connotation, which interprets the values and associations attached to the character's actions; and myth, which reveals the naturalized ideas surrounding the concept of an ideal leader. Through this framework, the study not only identifies Salahuddin's positive characteristics but also explains how the film constructs the myth that leadership gains legitimacy when military authority is combined with justice and respect for human dignity (Batubara & Pratomo, 2024; Harahap & Alfikri, 2024; Wati et al., 2023).

Previous studies have examined *Kingdom of Heaven* from several perspectives. Falah (2024) focused on educational values related to religious moderation, including human equality, tolerance, opposition to radicalism, and respect for differences. Istiqomah (2022) employed Roland Barthes' semiotics to identify the values of Islamic creed, Islamic law, and morality represented in the film, while Ikhsan (2022) analyzed Islamic values using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework. These studies demonstrate that the film contains messages related to Islamic teachings and tolerance. However, they have not specifically explained the dialectical relationship between leadership authority and humanistic action as constructed through a central character. The research gap lies in the limited analysis of how visual signs, dialogue, gestures, symbols of power, and the narrative relationship between Salahuddin and Balian collectively construct the myth of Muslim leadership whose legitimacy derives not only from military victory but also from the ability to restrain the use of power. Accordingly, the novelty of this study does not lie merely in applying Barthes' semiotics to the film, but in its integrated focus on the representation of Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi's leadership and humanism as an inseparable construction of meaning.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to analyze how the Director's Cut of *Kingdom of Heaven* represents the leadership and humanism of Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi through scenes, dialogue, facial expressions, gestures, costumes, and visual settings at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The study addresses how Salahuddin's authority is constructed, how humanistic values are attached to his exercise of power, and what ideology of ideal leadership is naturalized by the film through the relationship between these two dimensions. Balian of Ibelin is employed as a narrative comparison

to examine how humanistic values are constructed across different identities, while the analytical focus remains centered on Salahuddin as a Muslim leader. This study is not intended to assess the overall historical accuracy of the film or to directly equate its cinematic portrayal with the historical biography of Salahuddin. Rather, it seeks to explain how his representation is constructed within the filmic text. From this perspective, the study is expected to contribute to the development of film semiotics, Islamic communication and broadcasting studies, and scholarly discussions concerning the representation of Muslim leadership in global cinema.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to examine the construction of Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi's leadership and humanism in Ridley Scott's *Director's Cut of Kingdom of Heaven*. This approach was selected because the study does not aim to quantify the frequency of signs or assess the film's historical accuracy. Instead, it seeks to interpret how verbal and nonverbal signs construct a particular representation of a Muslim historical figure. *Kingdom of Heaven* serves as the contextual unit, while the units of analysis consist of individual scenes or sequences depicting Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi through his actions, dialogue, facial expressions, gestures, costumes, visual composition, setting, and narrative relationships with Balian of Ibelin and King Baldwin IV. Balian and Baldwin are not examined as independent analytical subjects but as relational characters who help clarify the construction of Salahuddin's authority, justice, empathy, and respect for individuals with different religious identities and political interests. The use of semiotic analysis is grounded in the view that film constitutes a cultural text that communicates ideology through interconnected audiovisual sign systems rather than merely recording reality directly (Azwar & Auliana, 2024; Harahap & Alfikri, 2024).

The primary data consist of the *Director's Cut of Kingdom of Heaven*, selected scene excerpts, screenshots, dialogue, sound, and visual elements relevant to the research focus. Scenes were purposively selected according to four criteria: they portray Salahuddin as a decision-maker; demonstrate the exercise or restraint of power; contain values related to justice, responsibility, empathy, tolerance, or the protection of human life; and occupy an important position in the development of the narrative. Based on these criteria, the analysis focuses on four principal sequences: Salahuddin's position at the forefront of his army, the negotiations concerning the safety of Jerusalem's inhabitants, his respect for religious symbols, and his offer to send physicians to King Baldwin IV. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, studies on film semiotics, scholarship on Islamic leadership, and historical research concerning Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi. Data were collected through non-participant observation by repeatedly viewing the film, recording the timestamps of relevant scenes, transcribing dialogue, capturing screenshots, and identifying verbal and visual signs. All findings were subsequently documented in an analytical recording sheet containing the scene context, observed signs, leadership or humanism categories, and preliminary interpretations. This procedure enabled the data-selection process to be traced systematically (Alfatah et al., 2024).

Data analysis was conducted through Roland Barthes' three levels of signification. First, denotative analysis was used to describe what is directly visible and audible in each scene, including the characters' actions, dialogue, bodily positions, attributes, settings, and narrative situations. Second, connotative analysis connected these signs with social and cultural values, Islamic leadership principles, and humanistic concepts, including courage, justice, self-restraint, responsibility, compassion, and respect for human dignity. Third, myth analysis was employed to reveal the ideology naturalized by the film regarding the ideal leader, particularly the notion that leadership legitimacy derives not only from military strength but also from the capacity to restrain the use of power in order to protect human life. The findings from each scene were then compared to identify recurring patterns in the relationship between authority and humanism in the construction of Salahuddin's character. Interpretive validity was maintained through persistent observation, the documentation of an analytical audit trail, examination of the consistency between signs and their narrative contexts, and source triangulation. This triangulation involved comparing the findings with previous studies on Islamic values, religious moderation, film representation, and historical scholarship concerning Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi. It was employed to strengthen the interpretive arguments rather than to equate the film's representation directly with historical fact (Falah, 2024; Istiqomah, 2022; Jafrullah et al., 2023).

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Representation of Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi's Leadership

The findings demonstrate that Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi's leadership is constructed through the scene in which he stands at the forefront of the Muslim army shortly before the surrender of Jerusalem. Visually, Salahuddin is positioned alone at the front, while thousands of soldiers stand in orderly formations behind him carrying military banners. He wears armor, a helmet, and a cloak that signify his status as both a military commander and the highest authority within the army. This composition not only illustrates the hierarchical structure of the forces but also conveys the symbolic proximity between the leader and those under his command. Salahuddin is not portrayed as issuing orders from a secure location; instead, he is physically present at the point closest to danger and to the process of decision-making. This finding indicates that the film constructs leadership through three principal signs: his bodily position at the front line, military attributes as markers of legitimacy, and the orderly arrangement of the troops as an indication of his success in cultivating discipline and collective trust.



Figure 1. Screenshot from the film Kingdom of Heaven (Scott, 2005)

At the denotative level, the scene depicts Salahuddin as a commander leading his troops in a military situation. However, the meaning of leadership does not arise merely from the fact that he stands at the front, but from the visual relationship among the leader's body, the formation of the army, and the space of conflict. His placement at the center of the frame directs the audience's attention toward Salahuddin as the source of command, while the orderly formation of the troops indicates that his authority has been accepted and translated into organizational obedience. In this context, the film does not portray leadership as an isolated formal position, but as the capacity to create order amid uncertainty. Leadership is therefore represented as an observable form of action that can be experienced directly by followers. This interpretation is consistent with the view that leaders do not merely direct a group but are also responsible for the consequences of decisions made in the name of the collective interest (Saputra & Ningsih, 2023).

At the connotative level, Salahuddin's position at the front line signifies courage, exemplary conduct, responsibility, and a willingness to share the risks faced by his troops. This position creates a symbolic opposition to the type of leader who remains distant from followers and relies solely on structural authority. The film suggests that Salahuddin's legitimacy does not derive exclusively from royal attributes or his ability to issue commands, but also from his willingness to be present in the same space of struggle as his army. Interpretively, the leadership represented in the scene is relational: the troops demonstrate loyalty because the leader displays consistency among command, presence, and responsibility. The discipline of the army thus signifies not only military strength but also provides visual evidence that Salahuddin is capable of transforming personal authority into collective trust. From the perspective of Islamic transformational leadership, moral exemplarity and concrete action constitute stronger sources of influence than formal commands alone (Ubaidila & Maunah, 2022).

At the level of myth, the film naturalizes the idea that an ideal leader is a figure who has the courage to stand at the forefront, maintain control over the situation, and provide followers with a sense of security. This myth operates by transforming particular visual choices—bodily position, military attire, composed facial expressions, and troop formation—into an apparently natural image of a leader worthy of respect. Through this construction, power is not represented as synonymous with domination, but as the ability to bear a greater burden than others. Nevertheless, semiotic interpretation must distinguish between cinematic representation and historical reality. The scene is a cinematic construction designed to generate a particular impression of Salahuddin rather than direct evidence of the totality of his historical leadership practices. Precisely because of its constructed nature, the scene

is important for revealing the ideology promoted by the film concerning the relationship among authority, courage, and moral legitimacy (Azwar & Auliana, 2024; Harahap & Alfikri, 2024).

This representation is closely related to the Islamic conception of leadership, which regards power as a trust rather than a privilege that may be exercised arbitrarily. A leader is expected to demonstrate justice, courage, honesty, self-restraint, and responsibility for the welfare of those under their authority (Arifin, 2023; Atanaya et al., 2025). In this scene, military attributes signify Salahuddin's strength and strategic capacity, while his composed demeanor prevents the representation from becoming an image of aggressive power. The film combines firmness with self-control, thereby framing leadership as more than the ability to conquer an opponent. This finding is also consistent with historical studies portraying Salahuddin as a figure who combined military competence, political consolidation, and moral legitimacy in establishing governmental stability (Al Ayyubi et al., 2024; Jafrullah et al., 2023). Such correspondence does not imply that the film is entirely historically accurate, but it does indicate that its cinematic construction draws upon elements embedded in the collective memory of Salahuddin.

The scene depicting Salahuddin at the front of his army constructs a representation of leadership that combines authority, courage, exemplary conduct, discipline, and responsibility. The principal contribution of this finding lies not merely in demonstrating that Salahuddin is portrayed as a strong leader, but in explaining how that strength is legitimized through moral signs. The film does not locate leadership solely in the size of the army or in royal symbols, but in the leader's capacity to transform power into trust and order. Consequently, the representation of Salahuddin's leadership provides the foundation for the construction of his humanism in subsequent scenes. His military authority is first firmly established so that his decisions to restrain violence, protect civilians, and respect his opponents can be understood as moral choices made by someone who genuinely possesses power. Within Barthes' framework, this relationship constructs the myth that an ideal leader is not merely someone capable of winning a conflict, but a figure who possesses the moral legitimacy to restrain power in the service of humanity.

Salahuddin's Humanism through Dialogue and Symbolic Action

The findings demonstrate that Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi's humanism is strongly represented in the scene depicting the negotiation over the surrender of Jerusalem with Balian of Ibelin. After the Muslim forces have secured victory, Salahuddin possesses the authority to determine the fate of the city's inhabitants. Nevertheless, he chooses to guarantee their safety by declaring that all residents may travel safely to Christian territories. The emphasis conveyed through the phrase "everyone" indicates that protection is not restricted by religion, social status, or political involvement. This decision is reinforced by nonverbal signs, including a calm tone of voice, a focused gaze, restrained facial expressions, and a bodily posture that conveys no aggression. These observations demonstrate that Salahuddin's humanism is constructed not only through the content of his dialogue but also through the coherence among language, gesture, facial expression, and the position of power he occupies at that moment.



Figure 2. Screenshot of the negotiation scene between Salahuddin and Balian in the film *Kingdom of Heaven* (Scott, 2005).

The subsequent findings reveal Salahuddin's humanism through the protection of civilians and respect for the religious symbols of others after Jerusalem comes under Muslim control. The film depicts women, children, and civilians who did not participate in the conflict as being spared from acts of retaliation. This representation is reinforced by the scene in which Salahuddin notices a fallen cross and carefully restores it to its original position. Although seemingly simple, this action carries significant narrative meaning because it occurs after Salahuddin has emerged as the victor and is no longer under pressure to construct a favorable image before his opponents. The film also maintains his composed

facial expression and measured bodily movements, presenting his respect for the religious symbol as a deliberate act rather than an impulsive response. These findings indicate that the film connects political victory with a moral obligation to preserve the dignity, safety, and religious beliefs of the people who have come under the authority of the victorious power.



Figure 3: Screenshot of Salahuddin showing respect for a religious symbol in Kingdom of Heaven (Scott, 2005).

Salahuddin's humanism is also portrayed before the capture of Jerusalem through his interaction with King Baldwin IV. Upon learning of the opposing leader's health condition, Salahuddin offers assistance by stating, "I will send you my physicians." This brief dialogue demonstrates that the relationship between the two figures is not constructed entirely through a binary opposition between ally and enemy. Salahuddin is able to distinguish political and military rivalry from an individual's humanitarian needs. The offer does not eliminate the conflict of interest between the two sides, but it indicates that recognition of an opponent's humanity can be maintained even in a context of hostility. The film therefore constructs a consistent pattern of humanism across three different situations: before Salahuddin has secured victory, while he is negotiating from a position of advantage, and after he has taken control of Jerusalem. This consistency across varying circumstances enables humanism to be represented as an integral characteristic of his leadership rather than as a pragmatic action undertaken merely to gain political advantage.



Figure3. Screenshot of the scene in which Salahuddin offers to send physicians to King Baldwin IV in Kingdom of Heaven (Scott, 2005).

At the denotative level, the three sequences present concrete actions: guaranteeing safety, respecting a religious symbol, protecting civilians, and offering medical assistance to an opponent. However, the meaning of humanism does not arise solely from the actions themselves, but also from Salahuddin's position as the holder of power when those actions are performed. Protection offered by someone without authority may be interpreted as solidarity, whereas protection granted by a victor constitutes a political decision that determines the survival of many people. Humanism in the film is therefore embodied in the use of authority to reduce suffering rather than merely in expressions of personal compassion. The film positions political decisions as a measure of moral leadership because humanitarian values acquire tangible consequences only when translated into guarantees of safety, restrictions on violence, and the protection of religious freedom. This interpretation demonstrates that leadership and humanism operate within a functional relationship: power provides the capacity to act, while humanism determines the direction in which that capacity is exercised (Atanaya et al., 2025; Saputra & Ningsih, 2023).

At the connotative level, the combination of military attributes and courteous language produces a more complex meaning than the simple portrayal of a gentle leader. Salahuddin's armor, troops, and position as a conqueror signify strength, while his calm tone, protection of the population, and respect for the cross signify self-restraint. The film does not remove military power in order to emphasize humanity; instead, it brings both dimensions together within a single figure. Interpretively, Salahuddin's humanism acquires greater significance precisely because he possesses the capacity to retaliate but consciously restrains the exercise of that power. The repeated use of the phrase "everyone" also shifts the inhabitants of Jerusalem from political categories—such as enemies, captives, or defeated subjects—into human subjects entitled to safety. Humanism is thus represented as the capacity to resist reducing human identity solely to religious affiliation or political position within a conflict. The film constructs true strength not merely as the ability to defeat an opponent, but as the ability to control the desire to humiliate and destroy those who have already been defeated (Falah, 2024; Istiqomah, 2022).

At the level of myth, these interconnected signs naturalize the idea that an ideal leader derives moral legitimacy from the ability to restrain violence precisely when the opportunity to exercise it is greatest. The film constructs an opposition between victory as domination and victory as responsibility. Within the first logic, the victor is entitled to retaliate and determine the fate of the defeated arbitrarily. Within the second logic, which is associated with Salahuddin, victory becomes a moral test because the leader must demonstrate justice when no longer constrained by the opposing force. This myth of humanistic leadership operates by presenting Salahuddin's actions as natural conduct for an ideal leader, although these actions are in fact part of a deliberate value construction produced by the film's narrative. In this way, *Kingdom of Heaven* shifts the measure of a leader's greatness from the successful conquest of territory to the capacity to restrain power and preserve human life. Barthes' semiotics enables these actions to be read not merely as character behavior but as a means of naturalizing an ideology of just and morally grounded authority (Azwar & Auliana, 2024; Harahap & Alfikri, 2024).

This representation is closely related to the Islamic conception of leadership, which views power as a trust and requires leaders to act justly, including toward groups that are different or opposed to them. However, the relationship between the findings and Islamic concepts should not be understood merely as a direct correspondence between cinematic scenes and theoretical principles. The film rearticulates the values of justice, responsibility, compassion, and self-restraint through a cinematic language accessible to audiences across cultural boundaries. Salahuddin's restoration of the fallen cross, for example, does not merely portray individual tolerance but also communicates that Muslim authority in the film is not constructed through the erasure of another group's religious identity. His offer to send physicians to Baldwin similarly constructs empathy as an action that transcends political boundaries. In this context, the values of 'adl, amanah, and compassion function not only as Salahuddin's personal qualities but also as sources of legitimacy that distinguish moral leadership from repressive power. These findings extend the studies of Istiqomah (2022) and Falah (2024) by demonstrating that Islamic values and religious moderation in the film do not operate as isolated moral messages but are embedded in the manner in which a leader exercises authority.

The findings demonstrate that humanism in *Kingdom of Heaven* is not positioned as a supplementary feature of Salahuddin's leadership, but as the foundation that determines the quality and legitimacy of his authority. The three sequences form a consistent pattern: opponents continue to be recognized as human beings, civilians are not made objects of retaliation, the religious symbols of others remain respected, and victory is not used to justify unlimited violence. Balian and Baldwin function as relational elements through which Salahuddin's humanism becomes visible in the way he treats individuals who differ from him politically and religiously. At the level of representation, the film also offers a counter-image to portrayals of Muslim figures as aggressive or antagonistic characters within narratives of Western-Islamic conflict. Nevertheless, this representation remains a cinematic construction and cannot be treated directly as a fully objective historical reconstruction. The contribution of this finding lies in explaining how the film constructs the myth of the ideal Muslim leader through the integration of strategic competence, political authority, self-restraint, and commitment to human dignity (Al Ayyubi et al., 2024; Jafrullah et al., 2023; Rahmawati et al., 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Kingdom of Heaven* represents Salahuddin Al-Ayyubi as a leader who integrates strategic authority with humanitarian responsibility through a series of verbal and visual signs. At the denotative level, leadership is portrayed through Salahuddin's position at the front of his

army, his decision-making capacity, the negotiation over the surrender of Jerusalem, the protection of civilians, respect for the religious symbols of others, and the offer of medical assistance to an opponent. At the connotative level, these actions signify courage, exemplary conduct, justice, empathy, tolerance, self-restraint, and the responsible exercise of power. At the level of myth, the film naturalizes the idea that an ideal leader is judged not only by military victory but, more importantly, by the capacity to restrain power, reject revenge, and preserve human dignity when occupying the strongest position of authority. Leadership and humanism are therefore not represented as separate characteristics, but as an integrated foundation of Salahuddin's moral legitimacy. The film also presents a counter-representation to the stereotype of Muslim figures as aggressive characters in cinematic narratives of Western-Islamic conflict. Nevertheless, the findings should be understood as an interpretation of a cinematic construction rather than as direct proof of the historical accuracy of the film's entire portrayal of Salahuddin. This study is limited to a single film and a selected number of scenes. Future research could compare representations of Salahuddin or other Muslim leaders across multiple films, production versions, and cultural contexts in order to develop a broader understanding of how Muslim leadership is constructed in global cinema.

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