The urban veil: image politics in media culture and contemporary art

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Summary

This project investigates the particular purchase the image of the Muslim veil has on collective imaginaries outside Muslim-majority countries, by looking at how the image operates in media culture and contemporary art. The main objective of this thesis is to carve out a space of articulation for the “urban veil,” a term I use to refer to a contested site where the politics of representation meet articulations of the heterogeneous subject position of Muslim women living in metropolises in Europe and North America. By image politics I signal sociopolitical forces that subtend readings of the image of the Muslim veil as sign. Image politics moreover implies a site of singularities, struggle, negotiation, and transformation that speak to emergent imaginaries of the veil in specific geopolitical contexts.

The arguments of this study are developed through the course of five chapters, moving from an analysis of existing conceptual and geographic mappings of the image of the Muslim veil toward a rerouting of the sign and micro-political articulations of its semantic legibility as an integral thread of its urban contexts in Western Europe and North America.

The first chapter, The Image-as-Veil, the Images-as-Folds, and the Islamic Aesthetics of the Veil, outlines the methodological framework of this project and develops two models of image and articulates an Islamic aesthetics of the veil that I use as theoretical tools of analysis throughout. Kaja Silverman’s theorization of the cultural screen and Deleuze’s notion of the fold articulate the key characteristics of two different operative modes of the image: “the image-as-veil” and the “image-as-folds.” I maintain
that both models are critical for addressing the complex issues and questions surrounding the image of the Muslim veil in the present. They also highlight the alternative individual and collective identification processes enfolded in the urban veil. Drawing on the writings of Dominique Clévenot, Oleg Grabar, and Abdelkébir Khatibi, I claim that the image-as-folds conjoins with an “Islamic aesthetics of the veil” that foregrounds the textures, lines, and ornamentation of surfaces, evoking a mode of perception that is more analogous to reading than to viewing.

The second chapter, The Archival Image of the Muslim Veil, I expand on the semantic readings of the veil by exploring the media archive of the image. This chapter takes as a starting point the socio-political landscape of the Netherlands, to demonstrate how the current political use of the image of the Muslim veil in that context depends on a tension between inherited and borrowed historical meanings of the veil as sign. This chapter is divided into two main parts. In the first, I investigate the role the image of the Muslim veil plays in Fitna (2008), the controversial short film composed of appropriated media images by Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Freedom Party. In the second part of this chapter, Linda Wallace’s Living Tomorrow is shown to engage with the experience of a time out of joint in contemporary Dutch society. I argue that Living Tomorrow operates through an expanded format that partially relinquishes the role of the archivist to the visitor, asking her to reevaluate the past and stipulate how the future of the diverse social, cultural, and economic strands of Dutch society will play out.

In the third chapter, The Urban Veil: A Politics of (Dis)Identification, the video installation (un) covering, by the Canadian artist Farheen Haq, provides a subjective iteration that raises questions of interpellation and identification vis-à-vis the cultural
screen. I maintain that Haq performs a politics of dis-identification on two levels via interconnected tactics of repetition, notions of drawing, and a specific orchestration of the look. First, (un)convering reflects and dismantles the politics of representation of surrounding the War on Terror in Canadian print media. Second, I contend that Haq engages with the tenuous relationship between feminism and religion, which is pronounced in discussions of Islam.

The fourth chapter, *The Intersubjective Inscriptions of the Urban Veil: Toward a New Politics of Difference*, takes the image as a site of intersubjective encounters and asks what new forms of intersubjectivity the image of the urban veil inscribes. At the heart of this inquiry is a desire to explore alternate forms of individual and collective identity formation that do not perpetuate division nor dissolve difference. Two artworks serve as case studies in this chapter, proposing provisional answers to this question. The first is an identity-sharing, online interface by artist Martine Neddam. I argue that hayet.djelali.org indexes and subverts the workings of the term *laïcité* in France. In particular it reveals a double bind imposed on the Muslim woman’s body by the principle of *laïcité*. The second case study, Haq’s *Endless Tether*, is a large-scale video installation that continues Neddam’s investigation, working through the bodies in, and in front of, the screen. By plunging the viewing subject into a dynamic field of relations—which offers multiple sites of (dis) identification— *Endless Tether* proposes an alternate to the politics of difference underscoring the term *laïcité* in France, offering a more complex way of thinking the self/other relation.

The final chapter, *Reflections on the Image of the Muslim Veil in Fashion*, investigates how the Muslim veil participates, if at all, in what Gilles Lipovetsky has
called the era of consummate fashion. This chapter brings the investigation of the image of the urban veil to the level of everyday practice, and asks how the mechanisms of the fashion system, in which the female body and femininity are spectacularized and commodified, can co-exist with the beliefs undergirding the Muslim daily practice of veiling. The concept of the mirror serves to articulate the precarious distinction between what I identify as a double movement of the subject in consummate fashion: a process of being made, or fashioned into a certain model by the system, and that of fashioning oneself, or creating a self-image through the system.

The image of the Muslim veil is impregnated with colonial and neo-imperial histories in which it predominantly stands as a sign of otherness. While keeping these histories in check, this dissertation explores how the Muslim veil is coming into being in a historical moment and at geographic locations in which it must also be aligned with a number of alternate genealogies. Motivating this study is a desire to explore the image of the urban veil as a site of connectivity: occasioning surprising effects, for example, as it is read alongside discourses of feminism, articulations of difference, and the system of consummate fashion. This project attends to the performative side of images and the potential of art to transform normative representations. Following Deleuze, if a work of art has the capacity to press on what is known and generate an idea, then this thesis delves into what the works under study have to offer in terms of new understandings of the urban veil in all its singularities and manifolds.