The urban veil: image politics in media culture and contemporary art
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Chapter 1

*The Image-As-Veil, the Image-As-Folds, and the Islamic Aesthetics of the Veil*

An image found on the website September11News.com presents a figure in a bright blue *burqa* set off against the rugged camouflage pattern of an army tank. The green, white, and black flag flying at the rear of the military vehicle communicates that it belongs to the Afghan Northern Alliance. The folds and pleats of the *burqa* create a sculptural blue mass in the center foreground of the image, calling to mind the tradition of drapery found in paintings and sculptures in the history of Western art. The woman’s awareness of being photographed is suggested by her turned head, which is directed towards the camera’s point of view. And yet, the act of returning the look is impeded. Here, the veiled woman finds herself bracketed off between the presence of the camera’s gaze that captures her, transforming her into a legible sign for foreign eyes, and the
patriarchal law of her immediate context, which enforces veiling and bestows the man on
the tank the power to look back.

This play of looks within and without the photograph drives the entanglement of
geopolitical and gender relations home with particular force. In one stroke, the
photographic gaze allows foreign eyes to penetrate a local context and see the visual
proof (the veiled woman) of the need for “benevolent” military intervention. This gaze
from the outside is met by its own physical presence on the inside, embodied by the
Northern Alliance, supported by international powers in the overthrow of the Taliban
regime.

Significant contributions in the fields of art history, feminism, and psychoanalysis
have critically addressed past and present representations of the Muslim veil.\(^\text{16}\) These
studies have been crucial for unpacking normative readings and the political projects
subtending the veil as sign. However, their arguments are specific to historical, cultural,
and geographic contexts. To transpose these theories to the contemporary specificities of
the Muslim veil outside Muslim majority countries would be to disable new
understandings of the urban veil as an integral component of these societies.

I am interested in examining why the image of the veiled woman continues to be
mobilized as the most politically charged symbol of the Middle East, Islam, and its
oppressive treatment of women. I contend that inherent to the image of the Muslim veil

\(^{16}\) See Griselda Pollock, \textit{Avant-Garde Gambits, 1883-1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History}
(New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), Joan Copjec, \textit{Read my Desire: Lacan Against the
Goodman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), Roger Benjamin, \textit{Art, Colonialism, and French
Gillane Tawadros ed., \textit{Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art} (London: Institute of
International Visual Arts, 2003), and Inge E. Boer, \textit{Disorienting Vision: Rereading Stereotypes in
French Orientalist Texts and Images} (Amsterdam: Rodopy, 2004).
are formal operations that resonate with particular cultural codes in a manner that hold Euro-American imaginaries in thrall. Even more important for this study is how the semantic channeling of these formal characteristics frustrates, and even disables, the possibility of new readings specific to the urban veil.

This chapter therefore begins with the operative side of images and develops two theoretical modalities: the image-as-veil and the image-as-folds. These two proposed models of imaging the Muslim veil diverge with regard to the notion of representation, and as a result, bring a set of different modes of looking, identification processes, and individual and collective identity formations into play. Both articulations of the image are crucial for understanding the image politics of the Muslim veil and for new readings of the urban veil. As a result, they are crucial theoretical tools throughout this dissertation.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I define the image-as-veil. An analysis of several images, ranging from colonial postcards to a video installation by contemporary artist Shirin Neshat, enables me to identify what I call the modus operandi of the image-as-veil: the suggestion of a beyond analogous to the workings of an architectural screen. Within Western regimes of visuality, this modality of the image-as-veil harbors a set of binary oppositions that are readily channeled into a politics of difference and discourses of othering: in terms of gender, culture, and geographic location. In this line of thought, I adopt Kaja Silverman’s notion of the cultural screen to highlight how the modus operandi of the image-as-veil moves beyond individual images to create a screen at the level of the cultural imaginary—which mediates our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us.
In the second section, the work of contemporary artist Zineb Sedira serves as a case in point for a different articulation of the image that builds upon Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the fold. This second model is dependent upon an alternate understanding of representation that emphasizes the image’s materiality, its relation to thought, and its capacity to effect change. The fold, as opposed to the architectural notion of the screen, avoids the pitfall of framing questions of the Muslim veil in terms of visuality, and by extension, negates the spatial operations that maintain the veil as a sign of cultural and geographic otherness. Instead, I will argue that the image-as-folds emphasizes a movement of connectivity with the specifications of the image’s immediate geographical and historical context.

The last section proposes that the image-as-folds corresponds, in part, to an Islamic aesthetics of the veil. The writings of Abdelkébir Khatibi, Oleg Grabar, and Dominique Clévenot help illustrate how the aesthetics underpinning many of the works of art discussed in this dissertation speak to the central role that the veil as metaphor plays in Islamic thought. To be sure, such an aesthetic does not always underpin the intentions behind the analyzed works. However, I maintain that the image-as-folds often frustrates the predominantly visual processes inherent to commonsense understandings of the Muslim veil, interpolating the viewer via the materiality of the image, for example, through ornamentation, textures, and a mode of perception more akin to reading. The aesthetics of the veil recuperates that which is lost in understandings of the veil when it is reduced to questions of visuality.
1.1 The Image-As-Veil

To map out the discussion of this first section, it is helpful to recount the infamous contest between the Roman painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius as told by Pliny the Elder in *Naturalis Historia*. The objective of the competition was to see who could paint in a manner that created the greatest illusion of reality. When Zeuxis completed his work, the image was so successful that birds tried to eat the berries on his painted trees. Certain that he had sealed his victory, Zeuxis walked over to Parrhasius’ painting and attempted to remove the veil to reveal his image, only to realize that he had been deceived. The veil itself was painted: it was one with the surface of representation.

The veil in Parrhasius’s painting exemplifies a set of Western ideals about representation and how their disruption affects the viewing subject. Through mastery of technique, the two artists were asked to transform the surface of their canvases into that which denies itself and points to a beyond, becoming, in Albertian terms, a window onto the world. In an act that may be called self-reflexive, Parrhasius did not implement but rather represented this ideal, using the veil as a representation of “pointing beyond.” Furthermore, his representation of the veil successfully evoked a beyond and simultaneously denied revealing it to the anticipating viewer. This gesture clearly displaced the viewer in his capacity to see and know. In this case, Zeuxis was able to see, but the wish to know what was imagined to lay behind the veil’s materiality was not satisfied; he was ultimately fooled.

I recount this story as a way of engaging the culturally specific terrain in which the image of the Muslim veil circulates: a predominantly European and North American landscape embedded in a tradition of scopic regimes. Within this tradition, the imaged or
real veil is perceived first and foremost as a physical barrier that obstructs vision, and hence suggests a beyond: what I call the modus operandi of the image-as-veil. This operative mode of the veil, as exemplified in Parrhasius’ painting, articulates a front and a back, and correlating visible and invisible spaces within the painting. When the Muslim veil is depicted, such spatialization channels meaning into binaries, which have conceptual and geographic repercussions. In the next section I look at two such encounters that are contingent upon the tensions at the heart of modern life: first, the desire to see and to know underlying a colonial will to power, and its confluence with the scopic regime of modernity; and second, the anxieties surrounding the experience of modernity and the role that the visual plays in psychoanalytical theories of subject formation and articulations of difference.

_The Coextension of Colonial and Scopic Regimes of Modernity_

The geographer and theoretician David Harvey reminds us that modernity is marked by conjoining and even conflicting formulations. One facet of the experience of modern life, as elaborately theorized by Walter Benjamin, is characterized by continual fragmentation of time and space, and the perpetual play of possibilities, struggles, and contradictions. However, another facet of modernity is concerned with the scientific development of rational forms of social organization and thought, the aim of disciplining all spheres of human life: including economic structures, law, bureaucratic administration, and the arts.¹⁷

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In relation to the rational movement of modernity, the historian Martin Jay has further discussed how vision has played a hegemonic role in the modern era and how visual experience is intimately tied to psychological processes of the Western subject of representation (in this study this term refers to both the maker and the viewer of representation). Jay coined the term Cartesian perspectivalism, which combines the Enlightenment’s linking of subjective reason to notions of truth and progress along with a modern will to master, possess, and control the visual realm. This term emphasizes the epistemological project in which the disinterested gaze is considered a central agent in the acquisition of knowledge. In this section I discuss how the modus operandi of the image-as-veil, its suggestion of a beyond, is deeply entwined with the ideals and anxieties subtending the visual realm, which are foundational to the project of modernity.

A series of postcards reproduced in Malek Alloula’s *Le Harem colonial: images d’un sous-érotisme* of veiled and unveiled Algerian women during the first three decades of the twentieth century serves as a first case in point. The postcard is arguably one of the first uses of photography that was meant for the masses. The first few decades of the twentieth century are in fact often referred to as the golden age of the postcard, a period that corresponds to the height of French colonial presence in Indochina and North Africa. During this time, hundreds of “harem-postcards” were taken by European photographers and circulated through a landscape that bridged European elite and non-

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19 Ibid., 69.
The reproduced postcards in Alloula’s book reveal that the women in the photos have no names, merely classifications such as “Woman from the Maghreb,” “Woman from the South,” and “Woman from Algiers.” Even more debasing are those with captions, such as “Oh! Is it ever hot!” [Ah! qu’il fait donc chaud!].

Alloula’s book, which was written in 1981 in Paris, in which the author “collected, arranged, and annotated” picture postcards of Algerian women was meant to deliver a delayed response to the degradation that the images enact. Alloula’s argument suggests that a personal offense has been committed by these photographs. The disrespect inflicted on these women is described by him as an insult to Algerian society at large. Alloula reproduces ninety of the postcards of Algerian women which, in accordance with the unfolding of his argument, are arranged in order of increasing debasement. The proliferation of postcards of (un)veiled women at the turn of the century together with Alloula’s response highlights how the image of the veil exacerbates the conflicting formulations of modernity underlying the Cartesian perspectivalism.

First, the postcards demonstrate how the failure of the colonial subject of representation in his capacity to see and know the veiled woman directly evokes erotic desires to unveil and visually possess her through the photographic act. Second, once the visual barrier has been breached, the photographs are made to circulate for foreign eyes, concomitantly serving as a visual marker of the consuming public’s cultural and geographic outside. In this way, the image of the veiled woman performs a second

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register of suggesting a beyond, organizing what Edward Said refers to in his influential work *Orientalism* as an “imagined geography.”

The postcard images therefore extend the entanglements of sexual and cultural power relations underlying Orientalism. In *Colonial Fantasies: Toward a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues that the veiled Muslim woman becomes an “imaginary anchor” in a process that concerns above all the Western and masculine production of identity through difference. In Yeğenoğlu’s words, “in imagining this hidden Oriental/feminine essence behind the veil as the repository of truth, the subject turns the Orient into an object that confirms his identity and thereby satisfies his need to represent himself to himself as a subject of knowledge and reason.”

I concur that these images must be seen as imaginary anchors for the European subject who attempts to secure a sense of self within the spatial and temporal maelstrom of the modern experience. It is important to stress here that the encounter with the colonial other via modes of technological reproduction only intensifies such spatial and temporal compressions. Furthermore, if the image of the Muslim veiled woman is meant to inscribe an imaginary cartography indexing the boundaries of a rational and orderly European self, then her fleshy mass and abounding folds represents the bodily, irrational, and disorderly nature of its defining other. Alloula’s attempt to classify the postcards through an argumentative logic suggests the uncomfortable position he is allocated via the spatializing operations of these images. Alloula finds himself aligned with that which

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25 This is a term that Yeğenoğlu borrows from Teresa Brennan, in “History after Lacan” *Economy and Society*, 19/3 (August 1990).
26 Ibid., 49.
lies beyond the veil: an ostensibly unruly female body that is representative of a debased Algerian culture. His response to these insults, consequently, says nothing of the subjecthood of these women, but instead indicates an attempt to reclaim them as property: that is, to reclaim them as the object of his knowledge and by extension, to regain a valid subject position within the conceptual and spatial mappings that the images inscribe.

Identification photos of Algerian women taken in 1960 by the conscript soldier Marc Garanger serve as a second case that further reflects how the operative mode of the image-as-veil engages the project of modernity and its dependency upon the supremacy of vision. Garanger’s photographs were part of a disciplinary endeavor by the French military that demanded that each Algerian be photographed, meaning made visible, classifiable, knowable, and controllable. The veiled woman proved to be a bone of contention in this endeavor. In Studies in a Dying Colonialism, Frantz Fanon was among the first to offer some insight into the central role the veil came to play as a site of the struggle for domination in French Algeria. The Algerian woman’s refusal to be looked at due to the veil’s capacity to block the gaze reverses the structure of modern institutional power outlined by Foucault and epitomized in the panoptic model. Fanon notes that the Algerian woman “who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer,” and as a result, the colonizer “reacts in an aggressive way before the limitation of his perception.”

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To this end, veiled Algerian women, most of whom were from the countryside and had never seen a camera before, were forced to remove their headscarves to be photographed. In Kaja Silverman’s words, such an undertaking can only be characterized as one of “violation and subjugation.”28 That said, the images taken by Garanger have been much discussed for how they disable their initial objectives. These women, in their singular acts of facing the camera and looking back, do not confirm the viewing subject’s position but rather trouble it in a powerful way. With this in mind, I will now turn to the productive insights psychoanalysis offers regarding the anxieties underpinning the visual realm in the modern era—and which are brought to the fore and exploited in the workings of the image-as-veil.

Anxiety and the Visual Realm, the Image-Screen, and the Cultural Screen

Turning back to Freud, we learn that the subject’s sexual identity is largely constructed in the field of vision, through various scenarios that involve seeing and the discriminatory function of the eye. However, the visual realm in Freudian analysis is complex and as Jacqueline Rose points out, perception often “founders.” She states, “The relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust.” 29 This distrust of the visual realm, and by extension representation, is central to Jacques Lacan’s work. According to Lacan, it is impossible to possess a picture visually, even when an object that is usually concealed is made completely visible and accessible, as is the case with Garanger’s photographs. Seminar XI outlines how not only the image, but also the visual realm always remains a source of anxiety. In his seminars he spends a significant amount of time debunking the ideals of the geometric tradition—what I have been referring to as Cartesian perspectivalism, which posits the possibility of the subject’s mastering position vis-à-vis representation. Lacan’s theories surrounding subjectivity in the realm of vision hinge on the severing of the mastering gaze from the human eye.

In the scopic field, according to Lacan, we always encounter a limit to our sense of commanding experience. This limit presents itself as a threat and is anchored in the fundamentally split nature of the subject: specifically, in the lack constituted through castration anxiety and the subject’s entrance into language. 30 The scopic field comes to symbolize this central lack, and in this landscape the subject loses the capacity to possess

the image visually, the “belong-to-me aspect of representation so reminiscent of property.”

This loss of a dominant position in the realm of vision is, in a sense, transforms the field of vision into an entity that stares back at the subject of representation. The Lacanian gaze is therefore not attributed to the dominating position of the viewing subject over the image; rather, the gaze, for Lacan, is that which is outside the image. This gaze is not seen but “imagined by me in the field of the Other” and the realization of this causes the image to turn into an image-screen and generate its own beyond.

This is what is at stake in the series of photographs by Garanger. Although the women are made “visible,” the subject of representation fails to secure a dominant stance. As Joan Copjec points out, while in the linguistic turn and specifically in Foucauldian theory, subjectivity is believed to be fully constructed in discourse (and representation), in Lacanian theory, the subject recognizes these walls as “trompe l’oeil” and at this point asks: ‘What is being concealed from me? What in the graphic space does not show, does not stop not writing itself?’ This point at which something appears to be invisible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. […] At the moment the gaze is discerned, the image, the entire visual field, takes on a terrifying alterity. It loses its ‘belong-to-me aspect’ and suddenly assumes the function of a screen.

The modern colonizing will to possess, discipline, and know, outlined above, is bound up with the subject’s desire for command of experience. The threat posed to subjectivity by the gaze in the field of vision, which I contend operates in full force in the image of the

31 Ibid., 81.
32 Ibid., 84.
33 Joan Copjec, Read My Desire, 35.
(un)veiled woman, embodies the gaze that looks back: the image-screen that suggests that there is always something more than what is seen.

Finally, important for my discussion here is how according to this theory, the subject can only secure a sense of unity of self through fantasy. Lacanian psychoanalysis explains how the sense of lack evoked by the gaze must be displaced through fantasy onto an object of desire. Certainly, the ambivalent desire to see and know evoked by the veiled woman lends itself to this scenario. Crucially, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bernard Pontalis remind us that fantasy is a defensive process that involves negation and projection. It is a creative activity that belongs to the psychic realm of the perceiving subject and therefore it “cannot fail to evoke the distinction between imagination and reality.”34 Fantasy has nothing to do with the object of desire and everything to do with the subject of representation.

In the preceding pages, I have sketched out some features of the image-as-veil that serve as analytical tools, which will also be expanded upon throughout this dissertation. The project of modernity and ideals underpinning Cartesian perspectivalism, explain why the image of the Muslim veil immediately evokes a beyond, and triggers a correlating desire to see and know based on fantasies of what lies beyond. Moreover, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, distrust for the visual—and representation in general—turns the image itself into a screen that generates its own beyond. When the image is that of the Muslim veil, such anxieties operate in full force. In both scenarios, the ideal or the failure of a mastering position can be displaced, turning the (veiled) woman into the anchor that secures a sense of self and unity. The image-as-veil that

labors this politics of difference can moreover operate on a collective level, as is the case with the harem postcards, entertaining a collective body’s conceptual and geographic outside.

My argument is that the operations of the image-as-veil that I have examined in these historical images continue to form the subtext of the creation, circulation, and viewing processes of the image of the Muslim veil in the present, thereby re-inscribing what I maintain are outdated cartographies of the veil. The image of the *burqa* and tank with which this chapter opened is a prime illustration, whereby the veiled woman clearly serves as a marker for the viewing subject’s cultural and geographic outside. She reconfirms the subject of representation’s sense of self and presumed ethical and political commitments.

Even more important for my argument are the implications that arise when readings of the veiled woman in this image are conflated with the visibility of the veil in societies outside Muslim-majority countries. Such conflations are instrumentalized in present political rhetoric surrounding the question of the veil in Europe and North America, in which the terms *burqa* and *niqab* predominate. For instance, the French government has recently endorsed a ban against face-coverings in public spaces. In the bill’s seven articles, the words “woman,” “veil,” and “Muslim” are carefully omitted. However, the bill actually has its point of origin a year prior, when the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, proclaimed that the “*burqa* is not welcome” in France.35 Sarkozy’s use of the term is strategic, evoking the extreme case of enforced veiling specific to

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Afghanistan, so that his statement encourages the same legibility of the sign onto of the
very different forms of veiling practiced in French society.

In this manner, the operations of the image-as-veil extend beyond their immediate
reading to construct and maintain what Kaja Silverman calls a cultural screen. In Male
Subjectivity at the Margins, Silverman revisits Lacan’s theoretical concept of the image-
screen in order to invest his definition of the screen and the gaze with political
implications. For Lacan, as already mentioned, the gaze does not belong to the subject,
but is outside in the field of the other. The structure of Cartesian perspectivalism—in
which the image is understood to mediate the spectator and a referent in the real world
transparently—is replaced with a model in which the image mediates the perceiving
subject and the gaze.

This model attributes a central role to the visual field and images in the realm of
intersubjectivity, and is therefore useful for understanding certain visual processes tied to
the psychology of the viewing subject with regard to identity formation. Silverman is
cautious, however, regarding the potential epistemic violence of such transcultural and
atemporal assumptions.36 For Silverman, while the psychological processes underlying
this model might very well transcend different scopic regimes, the gaze and the screen
must be understood as culturally and historically constructed. Silverman consequently
redefines the screen as “the repertoire of representations by means of which our culture
figures all of those many varieties of ‘difference’ through which social identify is
inscribed.”37 This concept of a cultural screen, which is constructed through an image

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36 Silverman, The Threshold of the Visible, 133.
37 Kaja Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins, 150.
repertoire, affecting the way we perceive others and are perceived in turn, will remain a crucial theoretical concept in the present study.

I want to stress here that I am not arguing that present-day uses of the modus operandi of the image-as-veil are specific to mainstream media. The modalities of the image-as-veil are also found in contemporary art practices. Shirin Neshat (an Iranian artist based in New York) is certainly one of the most widely known contemporary artists dealing with women and Islam.

However, Shirin Neshat’s video pieces from the late nineties are a prime example of images that largely work through the logic of the image-as-veil outlined above. Neshat’s work is often characterized as a powerful expression of the experience of women in Iran. According to Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*, “Neshat’s elegant two-screen meditations on the culture of the chador in Islamic Iran emit an icy heat of suppressed passions; they are among the first undoubtable masterpieces of video installation.” Neshat claims that this body of work emerged from a simultaneous sympathy for radical Islam’s hostility toward Western hegemony and dismay with Iran’s treatment of women. However, this ambivalence is not immediately clear in the formal structure of the installations and their images.

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The skillful, cinematic use of the medium and the formal characteristics of her installations create a highly charged, affective experience. And yet, this emotional force is immediately channeled into the binary structure of the work, re-instantiating what is largely common knowledge about the status of women in Iran. To begin with, the image of the veiled woman is already the quintessential symbol representing Iran as a fundamentalist and oppressive regime, and the omnipresence of black *chadors* in Neshat’s work of this decade situates her installations directly within this trope. Moreover, the affective experience is made powerful in Neshat’s two-screen installations, such as *Turbulent* (1999) and *Fervor* (1999), by physically positioning the visitor in the middle of a black-and-white logic: literally amidst the play of binary oppositions.

In *Turbulent*, I find myself in a dark room between two screens facing each other on opposing walls. Fierce, wailing chants resonate from black-and-white images of a woman on one screen and a man on the other. The woman and the man appear to respond to each other, and yet there is no immediate connection between them; their temporal occupation of the same space is visibly out of joint. The woman sings and the man listens in a cold, detached manner. He waits until she is done before breaking into song.
and vice versa. I follow their melodic utterances as my attention shifts from one screen to
the next. The woman, eyes closed, belts out a song, and her powerful interiority resonates
deep within me. And yet, her strength and voice are seen in the image as having no
audience; she is not heard in her immediate location, and this denial of a voice and by
extension, presence, becomes the spectacle for foreign eyes. The man, on the other side,
looks outwards and sings. He, like the veiled woman in the image of the burqa and tank,
is bracketed on both sides by me (the viewer) and an audience of men gathered behind
him in the photograph. Unlike the woman in the burqa he can look back, and the image
clearly communicates that his voice has an audience. Therefore, the image communicates
his presence and position of dominance in Iran.

By positioning the visitor in the precise center of the affective forces of sound and
image that are readily channeled into binary semantic structures of man/woman,
heard/silenced, domination/subjugation, exteriority/interiority, and presence/absence, the
visitor can be seen to occupy the position of the cultural screen. This body of Neshat’s
work circulated mainly through prominent museum spaces in North America and Europe.
Consequently, the images of chadors once again serve as an indexical screen pointing to
the cultural and ideological outside of these Western liberal democratic societies; and
more importantly, they reinforce the idea that the veil belongs to the cultural values and
religious ideologies specific to that geographic outside. These works, once again,
become potent sites for reducing the struggles specific to the heterogeneous experiences
and practices of the urban veil to such simplifying representations.

In this section I have outlined the modus operandi and correlating spatializations
of the image-as-veil, and introduced the notion of the cultural screen through which the
Muslim veil is often perceived in Europe and North America. In subsequent chapters I will investigate the historical “tropology” of the Muslim veil, as well as the politics of (dis)identification that the cultural screen enables. I will now turn to a second model of the image: the image-as-folds.

1.2 Image-as-Folds

La Maison de ma Mère (2002) is a series of twelve photographs presented in a grid by artist Zineb Sedira. Sedira was born in France of Algerian parents active in the resistance against the French occupation. Sedira now works and resides in London, where she moved for her studies in the mid nineteen eighties. Her work often takes references
to her autobiography, cultural heritage, and family history as starting points. The images in *La Maison de ma Mère*, as the title suggests, are details of the interior spaces of the artist’s mother’s home, as well as intimate photos of parts of her mother’s body. Ubiquitous in the photos, in which veils, curtains and a veiled woman figure, are different patterns of lace, textures of cloth, and folds. And yet, *La Maison de ma Mère* completely disables the spatializing operations of the image-as-veil outlined above. In this work, the central modality of suggesting a beyond is rerouted by images that evoke a different kind of looking. Confronted with this mosaic, my look is immediately entangled in textures and folds, actively sliding across, upwards, and downwards over the surface of the various fragments. Generally the images appear too close, too intimate, to entertain a mastering position over what they depict. These images emphasize a thickness, whereby veils and curtains do not operate as partitioning structures, but rather suggest another layer of folds in front or in back, of other surfaces such as skin, doors, and windows. Layers, folds, textures, and repetition replace binary structures and their visual operations.

Consequently, the cultural, gender, and geographic implications of the image-as-veil cannot resonate within the highly subjective and intimate setting of these photos. First, there is nothing threatening or erotic about the veiled woman. Rather, both her aged appearance as well as the objects that surround her—such as the imprints and creases on the sheets of a bed from which someone’s body has just emerged—speak of traces of her personal history (and by extension that of the artist). History here means first and foremost the many personal, familial, and cultural stories that make up a person’s sense of self. The work reminds us that within North African cultures, which have strong
traditions of oral history and storytelling, women are the principle mediators of history. The artist’s exploration of her mother’s home and body is, in this light, an exploration of her Muslim heritage and her Algerian family history. And yet, despite the highly personal starting point, when looking at this assemblage of photos, a strange sense of familiarity arises. I find myself conjuring images of my own grandmother’s home: a crocheted lace placed under a large bowl in the center of the dining room table, the white lace curtains above the kitchen sink, the gold chain and cross that she wore around her neck. Instead of providing a springboard for identification processes that operate through difference, the images induce points of entrance into the viewer’s personal histories.

I have presented Sedira’s La Maison de ma Mère as a way of introducing the image-as-folds, which I develop as an alternate understanding of the image, and which I distinguish from the image-as-veil primarily through a set of different perceptual operations that it calls into play. The image-as-folds is chiefly indebted to the Deleuzian notion of the fold, most predominantly found in the philosopher’s works on the thought of Leibniz and Foucault. In this section, I discuss how the image-as-folds successfully reroutes the cartography of the Muslim veil primarily by working through the synaesthetic side of experience, thereby disabling the visual operations that support the image-as-veil. I demonstrate how the image-as-folds also contributes to the production of subjectivity; but unlike the image-as-veil, it does not co-opt normativity. Rather, it stresses singularity, variation, and transformation, and hence affirms real difference.

Finally, I argue that the image-as-folds tends to emphasize its operations and means of production, and hence, its status as mediation.

Moving away from the idea of the screen toward the movement of the fold immediately calls upon a set of different operations. Whereas the screen entails a dividing structure that blocks vision and creates binary dynamics derivative of a front and back, as discussed above, the idea of the fold suggests layers that fall back on one another and in which no clear front or back is identifiable. The fold conveys the idea of surfaces that touch each other and create in-betweens. Deleuze reminds us that “the fold, as Foucault constantly says, is what constitutes a ‘thickness’ as well as a ‘hollow.’”41 Central to my concern with the image-as-folds is a desire to avoid all illusions to the modality of the veil as a surface that points to a beyond, which suggest that the veil hides and hence threatens or delineates an outside. I take up Luce Irigaray’s metaphysical contention for the need to resist differentiating between the veil and what lies beneath its folds, arguing that it is imperative for this study to stress that “beneath the veil subsists only veil.”42

This shift therefore strategically moves away from all the visual processes and correlating spatial mappings supported by the image-as-veil. *La Maison de ma Mère* exemplifies images that invoke a different form of looking, which privileges a more synaesthetic experience. The intimate close-ups of the skin of the mother’s fleshy arm, the saturated light that hits the back of her veil, making the distinction between figure and background untenable, the range of materials and textures presented in the different fabrics and lace, all speak of relief, texture, and materiality. This work consequently

evokes the sense of touch, and thus a haptic mode of looking. Furthermore, the grid-like sequence of the photos, together with the reference to the history of storytelling in North African cultures, ascribes a form of orality to the images.

Laura Marks has demonstrated how the synaesthetic image “extends the surface area of experience,” while undermining the disembodied understanding of vision that has been equated with knowledge in European post-Enlightenment rationality. What is important here is not a complete negation of the sense of vision. Vision still plays a role in this form of perception, but it does not take the mastering position required by the perceiving subject in the Foucauldian model of power; nor does it occupy the central role played by vision in the psychoanalytical understanding of the construction of subjectivity in the realm of vision. The image-as-folds promotes a form of perception that is multisensory and therefore does not immediately master, but rather progresses in an exploratory and tentative manner. This form of perception does not reaffirm what is already known, but rather attends to the singularity of that which it encounters, and as a result, tends to problematize knowledge.

This implies that the image-as-folds entertains a very different connection to processes of identity formation and subjectivity. In *La Maison de ma Mère*, the image-as-folds tends to transform normative, commonplace assumptions. It is impossible to read into Sedira’s images the tropes of the victimized or threatening veiled woman. Nor is the veil in the series of photos read as visible proof of the woman’s subjugation to her culture and religion. Rather, the veil contributes to the communication of the important role the woman plays in transmitting her cultural, religious, and familial histories. Moreover, the

44 Ibid., xiii.
strange familiarity and warmth that the images transmit succeed in opening onto my own familial stories and memories. I am not capable of conceiving these images as representing an imagined cultural outside. The fold, as Deleuze says, implies “changes of direction.” Here, the highly singular presentation of the artist’s mother and home succeeds in creating a real difference that does not reconfirm sameness, but instead creates a new fold in my consciousness, a variation.

The fold is in many ways Deleuze’s articulation of subjectivity, or what he, following Foucault, calls subjectivation. In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, the fold is not presented as a specific characteristic of that period. Rather, it is theorized as a set of operations that can be traced across different historical periods, geographic locations, and forms of knowledge, as well as in the expression of subjectivities, such as an artist’s personal style. In this conception of subjectivity, there is no clear distinction between self and outside: that is, between interiority and exteriority. Subjectivation is a continuous operation that involves self-production through folding in the outside’s forces and relations of power. In fact, the outside is articulated as always already inside: it is the un-thought within thought. The fold consists in its actualization: in the folding, unfolding, and refolding of the un-thought/outside, which results in new forms of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. Each fold occurs through perception and involves a singularity that brings about a modulation or a variation that problematizes

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48 Ibid., 111-112.
what is known. In this manner, the modulation induces the crossing of a threshold in consciousness and thereby creates a new fold.\textsuperscript{49}

I am developing the image-as-folds here largely by contrasting its workings to that of the image-as-veil. However, the two modalities of image should not be understood in opposition to one another. Rather, the relation between them is more a question of emphasis: that is to say, primarily which facets of the images and which alternate modes of perception come into play in particular instances. For example, Kaja Silverman has convincingly argued that the distinction between interiority and exteriority in psychoanalysis is also not so clear-cut. Although the visual realm and the discriminating functions of the eye are key, the subject’s relation to the cultural screen is far less ocular-centric or purely psychic as it may first appear. Silverman demonstrates how processes of identification and idealization with the cultural screen involve a bodily ego first and foremost; and secondly, the process of subject formation entails a continuous dialog between the interiorization and projection of the exterior cultural screen. I want to stress here that throughout my study, both models—the image-as-veil and the image-as-folds—are useful for understanding the various problematics and questions specific to the urban veil.

That said, I maintain that the two models of image do operate in significantly different ways. The image-as-veil, with its fundamental modus operandi, visual operations, and correlating identificatory processes based on difference, maintains normativity and consequently shares an intimate link with the cultural screen. The emphasis on textures, the materiality of images, and the expression of singularities in the image-as-folds invokes a primarily haptic (and a correlated, exploratory) mode of

\textsuperscript{49} Deleuze, \textit{The Fold}, 88-89.
perception that works transformatively upon the cultural screen, as is exemplified in Sedira’s *La Maison de ma Mère*. Most importantly, the shunning of spatializing metaphors by the image-as-folds has the capacity to inscribe new geographies and re-signify the veil as sign, both of which are crucial for new understandings and articulations of the urban veil.

This capacity highlights the last feature that I define as specific to the image-as-folds. By emphasizing its thickness, materiality, and textures, the image-as-folds emphasizes its status as mediation. Mediation is not understood here as a dividing device, as it was in the case of the idea of a screen. In this instance, the image becomes connective tissue. Laura Marks remarks that what is interesting in quantum physics’ theorization of the universe as an extended surface that has infinitely been folded together is the idea that “points that were unfathomably distant in space-time come to touch each other.” Consequently, there is a significant rerouting of the image from that of a dividing agent to that of an agent working through connectivity. I will return to this characteristic in the remaining chapters. For now, to close this chapter, I will address how the image-as-folds can, in certain instances, sustain an aesthetics of the Muslim veil.

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50 Marks, *Touch*, x.
1.3 The Islamic Aesthetics of the Veil

With regard to Garanger’s policing photographs of Algerian women discussed above, Silverman speaks of the photograph’s aspect of mortification. When a picture of a subject is taken, his or her being fades and is replaced by an image. The cultural screen intervenes between the gaze and the existential body, conferring an identity upon that body at the expense of its subjecthood. Silverman explains how this occurrence has significant cross-cultural implications, noting that in Garanger’s photos, one cultural screen intervenes and substitutes for another:

With the “clicking” of Garanger’s camera shutter, the Algerian screen “fades” away and is replaced by one connoting “exoticism,” “primitivism,” “subordinate race,” and a European notion of femininity (“woman as spectacle”). The one image, emblematized by the veil, must “die” in order for the other to prevail.51

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So far I have discussed the notion of a cultural screen through which the image of the Muslim veil is predominantly perceived and ascribed meaning in Europe and North America. However, I have not accounted for the cultural screens out of which the religious practices of veiling have emerged. It is far beyond the scope of my study to intervene in the debates surrounding the practice of veiling based on various interpretations of the Qur’an and hadiths.52 What I am interested in, rather, is how alternative cultural traditions, sensibilities, and (collective) memories inevitably enter the fabric of the work for many of the artists I consider here, as they are largely first- and second-generation secular or practicing Muslims who now live and work in metropolises throughout Europe and North America.

A second piece by Sedira will enable me to address briefly some of the understandings of the image in Islam, which continue to invest some of the work discussed in the present study. Significantly, the understanding of representation in Islam is entangled with metaphors of the veil. I propose that the preoccupation in Islamic forms of art with ornamentation, bi-dimensionality, and the solicitation of a deciphering look can be aligned with the operations of the image-as-folds. It is perhaps not surprising that many of the works in this study that help us to step back from the politics of representations surrounding the Muslim veil, thus enabling new understandings of the urban veil, are invested with the weight of a distinct cultural tradition that operates transformatively in a new context.

Sedira’s Quatre Générations de Femmes (1997) is an installation piece consisting of silk-screened, digitally generated patterns on ceramic tiles. When it was presented at

52 Hadiths are reports of the sayings or actions of Muhammad or his companions, together with the tradition of its chain of transmission.
the Venice Biennale in 2001, the white, black, blue, yellow, and red geometric patterned tiles covered the four walls of the small installation room.

The effect was an almost dizzying repetition of geometric forms that overwhelms the look. Closer up, the viewer is confronted in the upper half of the walls with miniature portraits of Sedira, her grandmother, mother, and daughter. Between the geometric interstices in the bottom half are autobiographical writings in the three languages she uses to communicate with the different members of her family: Arabic, French, and English. The work therefore rehearses the continuities and discontinuities of the artist’s matrilineal genealogy. Whereas her mother, for instance, speaks Arabic and French, her daughter only speaks English. Also, the miniatures depict the grandmother and mother as veiled, while Sedira and her daughter are unveiled. On an aesthetic level, the work embodies several characteristics specific to Islamic art and hence continues that tradition, while significantly revisiting many of its tenets.

In her book *Une Esthétique du Voile: Essai sur l’art arabo-islamique*, Dominique Clévenot observes the central role the religious and philosophical concept of the veil
plays in Islamic aesthetics.\textsuperscript{53} It should be stressed here that many assumptions regarding
the iconoclastic approach and strict refusal of figuration in Islamic art can be
problematized through the various interpretations of religious texts and examples of art-
making that span the histories, cultures, and geographical locations of the Muslim world.
That said, Clévenot maintains that while interpretations regarding the practice of art
embody variations and divisions—as is the case with the practice of veiling—Islam as a
religion is also a strong, unifying force that imposes certain hegemonic characteristics.
Within the wide-ranging manifestations of Islamic art is a preponderance of
ornamentation, a strong sense of bi-dimensionality and the presence of vegetal
arabesques, geometric patterns, and calligraphy, all of which contributes to the logic of
the blocked gaze (le schéma du regard barré).\textsuperscript{54}

These characteristics of Islamic art are underpinned by the belief that only God
has the capacity to create life, and therefore, artists should not attempt to give the illusion
of sharing in this capacity through their art. In this logic, representational devices such as
figuration and perspectival space are considered as deceptively seductive of the gaze:
they assert a presence of life where in fact there is none. More importantly, in the
Christian tradition, God is ascribed an anthropomorphic form, for it is believed that he
created Adam in his own image and further reproduced himself in the figure of Jesus. In
Islam, God does not have an ascribed form (\textit{sûra}); he is unknowable and therefore
unrepresentable, his face always concealed behind a veil (\textit{hijab}).

\textit{Hijab} in Arabic means curtain. Generally \textit{hijab} designates a device that separates
two subjects, rendering all visual appropriation of one by the other impossible. For

\textsuperscript{53} Dominique Clévenot, \textit{Une Esthétique du Voile: Essai sur l’art arabo-islamique} (Paris:
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 14.
example, the *hijab* is used in a passage of the Qur’an that speaks of the need to address the wives of the prophet from behind a curtain: a passage that often serves as a reference for the practice of veiling. *Hijab* is also constantly used to refer to the veiled God and the believer’s endless search for God’s face. The *hijab* blocks vision, which is immediate and illusory, while allowing the word (*parole*) to be uttered. Hence, hijab embodies a double movement of veiling and unveiling. God is not knowable through vision, but rather reveals himself through the word that must be endlessly decoded and interpreted. Central to Islamic thought, then, is a very different status of the gaze and the realm of vision. Concerning the former, there is always the danger of an objectifying gaze (for instance, of one subject by another) or an idolizing gaze (as with the adoration of images that create the illusion of representing God or his presence). The very realm of vision is often referred to as an opaque veil that conceals rather than reveals knowledge about God.55

In stark contrast to the equation of seeing and transparency with knowledge that is made in the European Enlightenment tradition, the primary modality of Islamic art is to block or distance the gaze precisely because it is easily seduced and deceived, and hence, incapable of bringing the believer closer to the face of God. As a result, Islamic art strives to solicit a very particular kind of gaze, which is more readily associated with reading and interpreting the written word. In the Qur’an, āyāt, which means signs, refers to “images” or “symbols” to be interpreted.56 Abdelkébir Khatibi continually reminds us in his writings of the precarious distinction between the sign and the image in the Islamic tradition because both form an intertextual tissue that involves the double movement of

55 Ibid., 87.
veiling and unveiling through decoding and interpretation. Consequently, there is an inextricable relation in this tradition between art and thought.

The pervasive use of ornamentation, geometric patterns, and bi-dimensionality in Islamic art are all devices that stress the idea that the visual realm is a veil; it is opaque, never transparent, and constantly needs to be decoded. The predominance of the line in all of these forms of art stresses their intimate link with the written word and the interpellation of a very specific kind of looking, which is not objectifying or idolizing but engaged in the deciphering of meaning. Oleg Grabar has discussed at length the difference between mimetic forms of representation and Islamic art in which ornamentation plays a key role. First, there is a shift from a heightened visual experience to a more sensorial experience; and second, whereas mimetic art is believed to point transparently to a referent, rendering meaning immediately accessible, ornamentation always affirms itself as an intermediary between meaning (the word of God) and its reader and interpreter (the believer).

To return to *Quatre Générations de Femmes*, Sedira clearly mobilizes what I have articulated here as an aesthetics of the veil. The walls of the room are impenetrable to the gaze. They are pure opacity, creating a visual screen that surrounds the viewer. A second glance brings the visitor closer, interpellating an engagement with the various fragments of texts and the small faces that peer back. The visitor is thus induced to read and make sense of these autobiographical references that consist of the artist’s story. While Sedira utilizes the line and geometric patterns specific to the aesthetics of the veil, she further revisits the main tenets of the Islamic tradition of art. This tradition, like that of the West,

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was predominantly reserved for the practice of men. Here, she creates a space dedicated to femininity and once again gestures to the key role women play in her culture in the transmission of culture. Grabar remarks that historically, geometry in Islamic art has been used by minority groups such as women:

Geometry appeared as a true mediator, rarely significant on its own as an object of visual expression (except for esoteric purposes like magic), but precisely because of its lack of consistent associations, favored and exploited by the historically marginalized, such as women, frontiers, poverty, and other deprived patrons, makers, and users of art and artifacts.\footnote{Oleg Grabar, \textit{The Mediation of Ornament} (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) 227-228.}

Finally, through the inclusion of the small portraits, Sedira incorporates figuration within her work. I am not suggesting that these features are in themselves radical. However, what is significant is how \textit{Quatre Générations de Femmes} on the one hand renegotiates the operations of the image-as-veil, through the aesthetics of the veil and specifically the invocation of a deciphering look. On the other hand, Sedira revisits the position of women from within her cultural heritage and the tenets of Islamic art, through the incorporation of “foreign” elements, such as the photographic portrait.

I want to call attention to the resonances of the image-as-folds with this articulation of an aesthetics of the Muslim veil. Most prominent is a shared depreciation of the visual in aesthetic experience. Both affirm an explorative, deciphering look with regard to the image, a look that does not confirm meaning or what is already known, but which takes part in a process of (un)folding or unveiling new meanings and knowledge. Therefore, both attend to the inseparable relationship between the materiality of form and thought. Finally, both the image-as-folds and the aesthetics of the veil emphasize the
mediating nature of the image. The veil as surface is what separates the believer from the face of God, but it is also the medium through which God’s word is transmitted and deciphered. Like the image-as-folds, the aesthetics of the veil manifests connectivity.

*Theoretical Specificity and the Subject of the ‘Urban Veil’*

In the remaining chapters, the concepts of the image-as-veil, the image-as-folds, and Islamic aesthetics of the veil remain central theoretical tools that operate in relation to, and at times are renegotiation by, the images through which I develop my main arguments. These concepts are by no means the exclusive categories through which image politics surrounding the representation of the Muslim veil in the media can be discussed. I have developed these terms in relation to the primary objectives of this specific study: the disentangling of the urban veil from the stereotypes undergirding the current, widespread use of the image of the Muslim veil. While these categories are not ends in themselves, they do highlight how images operate in different ways in specific historical and cultural contexts. To be sure, the cultural screen is always being reconstructed and maintained in accordance with the power relations of a specific historical moment and geographic location. The fold, as Foucault reminds us, is the endless process of enfolding and unfolding that constitutes subjectivation in relation to the specificity of historical struggles, which implies that new political struggles create new subjectivities.

The following chapters will continue to build upon, and negotiate the operative side of representations at work in the image politics of the urban veil.