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

A Productive Look at the Urban Veil

This dissertation has aimed to “look productively” at the image of the Muslim veil in order to create a theoretical space for incipient inscriptions of the urban veil, which is a placeholder for the heterogeneous subject position of Muslim women living in Europe and North America. According to Silverman, and as discussed in chapter three of this study, a productive look is at work in the act of perception when three interlocking displacements take place: in the first, the subject evades a prescribed position of viewing, allowing for the perception of alternate facets of the image, which normally remain latent, to emerge; the second displacement ensues with the dismantling of established signifying chains associated with the object of perception, opening up new paths of legibility; and finally and most crucially, a productive look necessitates the displacement of the subject of representation, and consequently a realignment of the self/other relationship. These crucial shifts reflect the principle preoccupations and arguments regarding the image politics surrounding the urban veil that this dissertation has addressed. As a result, they will be used to structure my concluding remarks.

Eschewing Prescribed Modes of Viewing Images

Firstly, Silverman’s concept of the cultural screen was a key concept throughout this thesis. The cultural screen is the image repertoire and web of associations that assigns the subject of representation a specific viewing position in relation to what is seen (here, the image of the Muslim veil in Europe and North America), and at the same time,
dictates how one ought to apprehend what is seen. Silverman refers to this configuration as the “given-to-be-seen” nature of normative representations. The first displacement of a productive look occurs when the viewing subject is able to perceive the object of perception in ways that were not prescribed in advance, allowing details of the image to initiate a dismantling of established associations.

Throughout this study I attempted to account for the content of the cultural screen pertaining to the Muslim veil, and how this screen is produced and reproduced, with the aim of revealing why the image of the Muslim veil remains key shorthand for a range of global socio-political issues today. A preliminary step in this inquiry consisted in the examination of the inherent features of images. I maintained that the presence of the veil in an image instigates a series of visual operations that intersect with conjoining formulations of the project of modernity. Cartesian perspectivalism, which is modernity’s scopic regime, aligns rationality and knowledge with the subject of representation’s domination of the visual realm. But Lacanian psychoanalysis also reminds us that this tradition obfuscates deep-seated apprehensions regarding the field of vision. The veil intervenes within these interlocking scenarios in a manner akin to an architectural screen, frustrating the viewing subject’s capacity to see and know, and concomitantly, attenuating anxieties in relation to the visual realm by becoming the surface onto which desire and fantasies are projected.

In this vein, I introduced two modes of image, beginning with the image-as-veil, which articulates the politics of representation, or the given-to-be-seen characteristics undergirding the urban veil. The image-as-veil harnesses the effects of the veil as screen, turning the image into a dividing surface that suggests that there is a beyond to what is
given-to-be-seen. These representational features have rendered the image of the Muslim veil a versatile symbol, readily instrumentalized for the inscription of imaginary conceptual and geographic cartographies in the service of colonial and imperial projects. These features continue to be used in contemporary discourses of othering, such as in the rhetoric of the War on Terror; and in right-wing political movements in Europe and North America that position the image as pivotal in politics of belonging and exclusion.

This versatile symbolism was further examined in chapter two through an analysis of the archive of the image in Western media, revealing the image’s polyvocal past and present. Following Silverman’s postulation that the cultural screen ascribes to the subject of representation a fixed position in relation to the object of perception, I argued that the mobilization of the image of the veil repeatedly functioned as a device for structuring self-sameness. As a result, the veil is ascribed an equally fixed position and legibility becomes an overarching, anonymous signifier for, among other things, women’s oppression, the backwardness of Islam, terrorism, the Orient, and fundamentalism.

Hence, the spatial operations, together with the archive of semantic associations that subtend the workings of the image-as-veil, construct and maintain the predominant cultural screen through which the Muslim veil is envisioned in the present. Most importantly for this study, I claim that these normative representations prevalent in global media culture operate through a form of decontextualization on two levels. Firstly, imaginaries surrounding the violence toward women in Muslim-majority countries—epitomized in evocations of the burqa—are conflated, often deliberately, with the experience of (veiled) Muslim women in Europe and North America, denigrating and disavowing the specifications of the experience and struggles of Muslim women within
these contexts. This decontextualization of imagery functions in a spatial and temporal manner, because such normative representations of the veil fail to account for how cultural traditions and practices change over time and from one geopolitical context to another.

Secondly, as the term suggests, the cultural screen is culturally and historically constructed, and hence, culturally specific. The image repertoire intervenes in the subject’s encounter with the image of the Muslim veil, subjecting what is apprehended to its own cultural terms and codes of representation. Chief within this second decontextualization, and in keeping with the workings of the image-as-veil, is the casting of the practice of veiling in terms of visuality, with the result that the alternate set of principles and cultural conventions—in which the pious practice the image refers to is ultimately grounded—is discredited.

Pertaining to the first displacement of the productive look and its capacity to eschew the given-to-be-seen nature of normative representations, I developed the image-as-folds, a second model of image. The image-as-folds builds upon a Deleuzian and materialist conception of images, bringing into focus alternate facets, modes of perception, and operations in relation to representation. By contrasting with the capitalization of visual processes and the distancing movement characteristic of the image-as-veil, the image-as-folds primarily interpellates modes of perception analogous to reading, which require moving forward tentatively, and also stresses the mediating and connective properties of images. By focusing on these features through close readings, my analysis of the artworks moved toward encountering the image in relation to the Islamic aesthetics of the veil: specifically, its depreciation of the transparent connection
between vision and knowledge, in favor of a mode of knowledge production dependent upon endless processes of decoding and interpretation.

Moving Forward from Here

A second displacement occurs when the productive look, which is imbricated in memory, is blocked in its capacity to enter into existing signifying chains and as a result, is displaced its capacity to know. According to Silverman, when the backward path of memory is blocked, “we have no choice but to move forward.”260

Through the accentuation of the features of image-as-folds, expressions of the urban veil significantly hampered preexisting semantic associations with the Muslim veil, allowing new meanings and theoretical trajectories to materialize. In this way, two reterritorializations of the image were able to take place. With respect to the first, I stressed the potential of certain images to communicate the experiences and struggles of Muslim women living outside Muslim-majority countries, including their continual struggle with how they are represented and perceived in the image-world. At the same time, I highlighted the discrepancies between these articulations and normative representations of the Muslim veil. Therefore, the image of the urban veil was reterritorialized to a specified socio-political situations and a set of distinct conditions of possibility. Living Tomorrow exemplified the new meanings that surface when the image-as-veil is replaced with the modalities of the image-as-fold, repositioning the urban veil as integral to, for example, Dutch society’s make-up.

260 Silverman, Threshold of the Visible, 181.
In addressing the second reterritorialization, by focusing on the modalities of the image-as-folds, I was able to move toward a theoretical encounter with the image of the Muslim veil that was more consistent with a set of cultural terms in which Islamic practice is invested. The result was a reterritorialization of the discussion to an alternate set of questions, and at times, vocabulary. The third chapter, for example, asked not how the practice of veiling can be aligned with the terms and goals of Western liberal feminism, but instead, how practices related to Islamic ideals of modesty could be envisioned as a feminist project unto itself.

Therefore, by reading images through a specific mode of perception and in line with an alternate set of cultural conventions, meaning is severed from pre-existing associations and gains an independent momentum that keeps step with how religious commitments, in the words of Leila Ahmed, “can evolve as they cross frontiers and take root in environments where new social and political conditions open up new possibilities of belief, practice, and interpretation for the rising generation.”

New Configurations of Self/Other Relations

Finally, according to Silverman a look is productive if, and only if, in displacing the subject in relation to what is given to be apprehended—and by displacing the remembering look’s predisposition to return to what is already known—the subject is displaced in relation to the object of perception. In terms more appropriate to this study, the final displacement must provoke a realignment of the self/other relation.

262 Silverman, Threshold of the Visible, 183.
Certainly, a central preoccupation throughout this study has been the identification processes in relation to images that underscore individual and collective subject formation. This dissertation demonstrated that the image of the Muslim veil functions primarily in this register in mainstream media culture. The analysis consequently traced how aspects of images, together with the conventions of media platforms, produce or reroute fixed identificatory constructs; especially us/them, friend/enemy configurations easily accommodated by the modalities of the image-as-veil.

On several occasions in this study, the dismantling of normative readings of the Muslim veil was accompanied by a disruption of self/other alignments. When the fixed position required by the image of the Muslim veil to secure a sense of self is shown to be no longer tenable, the subject of representation is at the same instant displaced in her capacity to know: an occurrence that ultimately affects her sense of self. The result is not only a transformed image of the Muslim veil, but also an exacerbation of the untenable position of the perceiving subject. Most importantly, this displacement of the subject happens in tandem with a problematization of the main terms and tenets belonging to the subject of representation, through which the initial self/other construct depended.

To illustrate this point, articulations of the urban veil in the above artworks problematized the main precepts of liberal feminism, imploded the ideals underlying the principle of laïcité in France, and suggested that the consummate era of fashion and the beliefs underscoring the practice of veiling open onto each other, bringing about transformations in key characteristics of the fashion system (namely, a devaluation of fashion’s commodification of the female body), and at the same time, styles of Muslim dress.
Conspicuously, these disruptions occasioned by the characteristics of the urban veil upon normative representations and modes of identification demonstrated the pitfalls of current models of articulating sameness and difference. Following Mouffe, the urban veil posits a need for an alternate politics of difference that has the capacity to accommodate increasingly intricate webs of (dis)identifications of citizens in pluralist, liberal democracies. Neddam’s hayetdjelali.org and Haq’s Endless Tether proposed models in this regard, pointing to the crucial recognition of cultural difference that such a politics must develop.

More broadly speaking, this study attests to the pervasive role images continue to play in forging imaginary and lived relations between others and ourselves. For this reason, images stand as powerful sites for addressing and displacing deep-seated presuppositions such as those through which the Muslim veil continues to be reproduced. In keeping with the Islamic aesthetics of the veil, art images have the potential to provide a platform for an endless process of decoding and interpretation, with disruptive and inevitably creative effects on knowledge production. Most importantly, such a method as instrumentalized throughout this study via the close readings of the above works, never promises a clear, resolute image. Instead, a productive look into the enfolding layers of an image, as demonstrated by the multiple perspectives proposed in this study of the urban veil, provokes an encounter that resonates with the words of philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers: “We know knowledge there is, [but the piece] demands that we slow
down, that we don’t consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know.”263