Disengaging culturalism: Artistic strategies of young Muslims in the Netherlands

Termeer, B.M.H.

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This study has brought to light the dynamics by which the strategy of exit and the process of authorship interact. In practicing a strategy of exit, the young artists in this study attempt to opt out of the dominant discourse. In the process of authorship they instead develop artistic work that does not engage with religious or ethnic identity politics, but experiment with artworks that venture beyond the confines of classificatory dichotomies, such as ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘autochtoon’ versus ‘allochtoon’, ‘Western’ versus ‘non-Western’, ‘religious’ versus ‘secular’, etc. The concept of exit allows us to understand how young Muslims in the Netherlands position themselves in relation to the dominant discourse. However, this study not only shows that young Muslims want to leave this discourse, it furthermore examines the cultural open images and stories, and the alternative subjectivities that are generated by opting out. This asks for a different concept that allows us to understand the creative process, namely authorship.

The concept of authorship is understood as a process of self-definition and self-realization. It foregrounds the affordances and limitations of the process of making, and brings to light how in the process of making, marginalised subjects can experience a (limited) degree of agency to sketch themselves into being outside the confines of the dominant discourse in which they are situated (cf. Davies, 2004, p. 169). However, this study has shown that this agency is shared with other forces that embody different power relations and include both human and non-human actors.

Rancière argues that perception is structured by power, by a particular ‘distribution of the sensible’ (2004a, p.12). In this dissertation I have argued that the dominant discourse on migrants and integration forms a very powerful distribution of the sensible that structures the way in which young Muslims in the Netherlands and their art are generally perceived by various actors. However, as I have made clear, the dominant discourse does not form a totalising framework for perception; not everyone is influenced by it in the same measure and it is possible to exit it, to see and sense a different reality. As Rancière argues, art is particularly well-suited to break through the dominant distribution of the sensible, producing forms of dissensus and allowing us to perceive the world differently (2010, p. 139).

This ethnographic study has made clear however, that not all art that seeks to exit the dominant discourse is able to do so. It has shown that strategies of exit produce problems of legibility and are often not recognised as significant within the wider artistic arena. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, volatile forms of exit are particularly susceptible to being drawn back into the dominant discourse in attempts to be made legible within the dominant interpretative framework. When artworks present a stable exit that cannot be incorporated within the dominant discourse, they are often simply ignored or rejected by artistic institutions. One of the main predicaments that the young artists in this study are confronted with is how to turn noise into speech, to put it in Rancière’s words (2004b,
p. 225), and centres around the dilemma of (il)legibility within dominant interpretative frameworks. This study has made clear that artistic mediators often play a crucial role in translating art that seeks to exit the dominant discourse to artistic institutions. In their mediation practices they can transform the strategy of exit into a form of resistance, but this often requires a level of accommodation to the dominant discourse.

In this conclusion I elaborate further on two important themes that inform the dynamic between exit and authorship, namely power and its relationship to the socio-political context, and agency and the imagination. Finally, I examine the correspondences between the artistic strategies that I have analysed and the anthropological strategies that I have followed.

**Power and Context**

One of the most important findings of this study is the significance of uniting perspectives on creativity and materiality with an awareness of power relations. The development of the concept of authorship as an embedded practice has been my answer to this challenge. However, this has presented me with the dilemma of how to unite a theoretical perspective that treats context as emergent and in flux with one that starts from the idea of an already existing socio-political context in the form of a dominant discourse.

In this study I have examined artistic production as a generative process that decentres the agency of the maker and that can lead to unanticipated results. In the process of making, the artist and her work each come into being, in interaction with each other. This view is reminiscent of Ingold’s dwelling perspective and his ideas about creativity and making (2000, 2013). From this perspective context is understood as emergent, as arising out of the interactions between the maker and the environment in which she is situated. However, this study understands artistic production through the concept of authorship, which is a process that is embedded in larger relations of power. More specifically, this study envisages authorship as a practice that allows marginalized subjects to author their own images and stories of themselves to help them cope with their precarious position. Authorship is understood as part of an emancipating struggle vis-à-vis the dominant discourse. This formulation already presupposes certain relations of power that are felt as circumscribing the subject's agency. It starts from the idea that there exists such a thing like a culturalist discourse, which is dominant in Dutch mainstream media and politics, and which marginalizes Muslims who have a family migration history.

In my conceptualisation of authorship two different perspectives on context, one that sees it as emergent, the other which understands it as an already existing socio-political field, are thus in tension with each other. To use this tension in a productive way, I have adopted an approach that has room for the emergent view while not ignoring the structural
socio-political marginalization with which the subjects of this study are faced on a daily basis. Although my starting position assigns the dominant discourse the status of point of reference, this does not mean that this discourse itself is understood as monolithic or stable. On the contrary, throughout this dissertation I have examined how the dominant discourse appears in different guises at different moments. I have sought to localise the power of the dominant discourse in particular practices, in ways of speaking, framing and evaluation. These practices reveal that the dominant discourse is but one of the forces that shape artistic production by young Muslims in the Netherlands.

From the perspective of authorship, material forces and human and non-human actors interact with one another with the dominant discourse in ever-changing assemblages. The concept of authorship looks for ‘the distinctive kinds of effectivity that material objects and processes exert as a consequence of the positions they occupy within specifically configured networks of relations that always include human and non-human actors’ (Bennett & Joyce, 2010, p. 5). As such, my understanding of authorship is reminiscent of studies that have been developed around the perspective of actor-network theory (ANT) and the work of Bruno Latour (2005), although it diverges from this perspective in a fundamental way. I am aware of the fact that ANT has produced a vast and complex body of work that defies any brief overviews, however for the purpose of the point that I want to develop here, it is useful to look at the implications that applying an ANT perspective may have with regards to the role of socio-political context, something that has been commented upon by several authors.

According to Stephen Fox, ANT presents a perspective that holds that ‘theorizing should not presume the existence of either an objective socio-historical context nor the existence of macro-actors on that stage; rather their existence is what analysis should seek to explain by reference to nests of practices’ (2000, p. 858). The metaphysician Graham Harman has made clear that ‘one of ANT’s basic metaphysical premises holds that all actors fundamentally lack essences and achieve qualities through their constantly shifting material, relational contiguities, or “associations”’ (Watson, 2011, p. 65). As I have argued in Chapter Four, I have refrained from conceptualising the various actors, or actants as Latour calls them, that interact in the process of authorship as forming assemblages of equally undetermined forces. I have found that such a perspective produces significant limitations when one takes seriously the experience of socio-politically marginalized subjects. As Watson states in relation to Latour’s work and ANT:

1 Compare with Fox (2000), who in an article that discusses the theory of communities of practice highlights the difference between these two understandings of context. Fox draws upon the work of Jean Lave (1993), who discusses ‘the difference between context as pre-given (before practice commences) and as emergent (through practice)’ (Fox, 2000, p. 858). Fox states that Lave does not see these two views as mutually exclusive but as exemplifying ‘differences of theoretical emphasis’ (2000, p. 858). Fox argues that for Lave ‘context can even be treated as both pre-given and emergent simultaneously, but different forms of analysis select where to place the emphasis’ (ibid.).
In expanding the social beyond the human, and effectively revealing the errors of the social constructivism that characterized earlier approaches to the sociology of scientific knowledge … Latour has adopted a radical relationism that refuses the stability of any actor’s experience, apparently including experiences of structural violence and societal marginalization. (2011, p. 65)

While I show in this dissertation how the creative and socio-political contexts in which the respondents are situated develop and emerge differently in the several cases, at a higher level of analysis I maintain the stability of the existence of a dominant discourse that excludes and marginalizes Muslims in the Netherlands. This choice is as much political and ethical, as it is scientific. One of the goals that has informed this research from the start is to contribute to processes of socio-political emancipation of Muslims in the Netherlands in general and Muslims in the artistic domain in particular.

This study does not claim to present a purely objective account of reality for the simple reason that it does not operate from a scientific paradigm that holds that as an achievable goal. As a social scientist, one inevitably positions one’s research in larger societal debates. To claim that research is truly objective would be to conceal the fact that all researchers are part of the world that they study. In the place of an alleged objectivity comes reflexivity, which means that the researcher accounts for the fact that she herself is situated and therefore produces situated knowledge.

**Agency and the Imagination**

This study has examined a particular kind of emancipatory struggle by young Muslims in the Netherlands, one that does not proceed by way of an explicit oppositional politics but by practices of opting out of the polarising and stigmatising logic of the dominant discourse. The strategy of exit exemplifies a form of resistance by means of disengagement. Instead of viewing this merely as a form of escapism, this study has shown that exit can be a productive strategy. The significance of being able to imagine oneself outside dominant discourses that press upon one’s sense of self should not be dismissed. When processes of self-definition and self-representation are put under severe pressure, the imagination can allow the subject to experiment temporarily with alternative modes of being and experience a sense of agency. This study thus understands the imagination as a valuable resource. It does not debunk the imagination as merely a domain of self-deception, but takes seriously what it affords the subject, especially the marginalized subject. As Van de Port states in relation to the productiveness of fantasy in achieving sensations of immediacy:

> To declare the notion of immediacy a ‘mere fantasy’ and leave it at that, would be to miss out on the tremendous motivational power of fantasy in people’s lives …. Moreover,
it would be an underestimation of people’s ability to make possible the impossible in fantasy scripts. (2011a, p. 76)

Rancière argues that we need to reconceive the notion of ‘fiction’ as it pertains to art, and understand that it ‘means far more than the construction of an imaginary world’ (2010, p.141):

[Fiction] is not a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the ‘real’, or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales, and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective. (ibid.)

Through the concept of authorship, this study has investigated how socio-politically marginalized subjects become the authors of their subjectivity by making their own stories and images about their lives. At the same time, however, these subjects are being ‘written-by-the-world’ (Van de Port 2011b, p. 18). In this interaction of authoring and being authored they attempt to create meaningful stories about their lives. I thus conceptualise authorship as a practice in which the agency of the subject is decentred. However, I take seriously the affordances that come with authorship, the sometimes profoundly limited possibilities to sketch oneself into being under oppressing socio-political and economic circumstances.

Making visible marginalized subjects’ attempts at self-definition and self-creation in art is an ethical as well as a scholarly imperative for me, which is part of the struggle for ‘the right to narrate’, as Homi Bhabha argues:

No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations is established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate. You are part of a dialogue that may not, at first, be heard or heralded – you may be ignored – but your personhood cannot be denied. (2004, p. xxv)

Irrespective of how the art made by Muslims in the Netherlands is perceived and evaluated, their artistic work establishes subjectivities beyond the dominant discourse that cannot be disowned.

Finally, this study democratises the notion of the imagination in the sense that it strives to emphasize the fact that the faculty of self-expression by means of artistic production is not the privilege of white elites. It aims in this way to highlight forms of censorship that are not easily recognised and that revolve around questions of access to the arts, as the journalist and painter Margaret Spillane argued in the 1990s:

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2 The concept of authorship resonates with the idea of developing narratives about the self as a technique to cope with marginalization as analysed by Richard Sennett (1998). Sennett writes about the need for people to situate themselves in a meaningful story under the pressure of the fragmentation brought about by late capitalism (ibid.).
It is easy to identify censorship when someone stands up in Congress and says that the creation of artistic works by certain sectors of the population will not be funded by the government. But no liberal defender of arts funding has seized this excellent opportunity to ask the most jarring questions of all: who gets to make art; who even gets to imagine that they might become an artist? And who gets to have their story told through art? (Spillane quoted in Moore, 1998, p. 52, my emphasis)

**Disengaging Culturalism: Anthropological Strategies of this Study**

I have aimed in this study to write against culturalism (cf. Abu-Lughod, 1991). One of my goals has been to strengthen the often precarious position of the liminoid subjectivities that young Muslims in the Netherlands develop in their artistic production by making them more visible, more legitimate and more ordinary within the social scientific domain. Instead of seeing the strategy of exit as a marginal practice and an exemption to the supposedly more mainstream position of opposition by means of religious and ethnic identity politics, this study argues on the contrary that exit is actually to be understood as the dominant mode of dealing with the dominant discourse by young Muslims in the Netherlands. The culturalist interpretative frame however, structures our perception in such a way that attempts at exit are not easily recognised and often remain ignored, not only in the artistic domain but also in social science. The subjectivities of Muslims that are generated in exit strategies resist the form of legibility that is demanded from the dominant discourse. They do not fit within a binary logic that posits the religious against the secular, the allochtoon against the autochtoon, the modern against the backward, the West against the Rest, etc.

This study itself has attempted a strategy of exit from the dominant discourse, while at the same time aiming to make the exit strategies of the respondents more legible in the social scientific realm in order to critique culturalist discourse. To achieve this goal, it has had to accommodate itself to a certain extent to the dominant discourse. In that sense the strategies of this study reflect those of the artistic mediators that it features. This is a form of correspondence between art and anthropology that is not only based in an equal willingness to embrace open-endedness, as Ingold suggests (2013, p. 8), but one that is also deeply political.

The significance of the strategy of exit and practices of authorship thus travels much further than the arts alone and includes the social sciences. However, the insights that this study offers could also be implemented on a very practical level in various other domains to allow Muslims and people who are designated as ethnic minorities to feel more included and respected as an equal part of the Dutch nation. Let me give an example to illustrate my point. When parents in the Netherlands apply for a place for their child at a primary school, they are confronted with questionnaires that seek to establish the ethnic background of the
prospective pupil. This means that already from the age of three, children who are born in the Netherlands are allocated a specific category in the educational system based on the country where one or both of their parents were born, thereby establishing their ethnic and cultural alterity. When these questionnaires are used in an unreflective and uncritical way, parents can feel excluded and stigmatized.

What then can we learn from the stories of the young Muslims in this study? Firstly, they testify to the need to become more aware of the exclusionary effects that ethnic and religious categorisations have on the people they target; how they create and maintain the category of Other in everyday life, politics, media, art and social science. This also means that cultural diversity policies whether in the arts, in education, or in the workplace more general, even if they are implemented with the intention to improve equality, should be treated with caution. This awareness depends on the development of a greater sense of reflexivity about how dominant interpretative frameworks structure our perception. A greater reflexivity would allow us to recognize whenever we make common sense assumptions about the relationship between ethnicity, religion and identity and to subsequently critically investigate how this common sense has come about and what relations of power inform its logic.

Every time we draw upon ethnic background and religion as the main variables to explain the thoughts, emotions and behaviours of European citizens who are born and bred in Western Europe but who may have a darker skin tone than that of the majority population, or darker hair and eyes, who might wear a veil, or who just might have a foreign sounding name, we should take a step back and ask ourselves ‘what is it that we expect these variables to make clear?’, ‘what agency do these variables have when we employ them in a social scientific study?’, ‘how does our own situatedness as researchers impact upon this agency?’. We need only to look back at the first pages of this study to see how these apparently abstract questions have very concrete and real significance for the people we study who are designated as ethnic minorities. We are then in a position to understand the significance of alternative stories. Opening ourselves up for these alternative stories entails a willingness to replace dominant categories with those that are relevant to the people themselves.

The second main point that we can learn from the stories of the young artists in this study therefore is the significance of taking seriously people's attempts at self-definition, especially when these self-definitions are threatened to be overruled by stigmatizing
stereotypes. Through its focus on the concept of authorship, this dissertation offers an alternative route into understanding the lives of marginalised subjects. Authorship has eye for the creativity with which subjects negotiate the tension between ascribed identity and self-identity; it focuses on the improvisational character of the creation of alternative modes of being, while not neglecting the structural constraints that this process is faced with.

Through authorship people can make visible (to themselves and to others) the directions into which they aim to venture, even when the current moment holds few opportunities for actually realising these desires. In authorship the subject positions that marginalised subjects aspire to, or strive to obtain, can be given concrete expression; authorship therefore embodies a process that has an intrinsic value, irrespective of whether it is able to effect social change on the short term.4

In the artistic domain, at the present moment, only individual gatekeepers such as artistic mediators recognise the relevance of art that performs the strategy of exit and read it for the aesthetic and political merits that it has, without making it subservient to the dominant discourse. An interpretative community5 that would be able to achieve this on a more structural level is still lacking. In this dissertation I have contributed to the development of such an interpretative community within the social scientific arena, doing so by advancing the fields of study that investigate creativity and materiality and bringing them into relation with power. I have opened up the study into the role of creativity and materiality in processes of self-definition by marginalized subjects. I believe that this field offers multiple other avenues for further research, such as work on the experience of agency and its relationship to processes of making and on other material and creative practices that seek to destabilize dominant interpretative frameworks.

In this dissertation I have appealed for a greater sense of responsibility for and reflexivity about the way we turn people into representatives of their perceived ethnicity and religion, and have cautioned against the use of top-down categories that are intimately linked to the dominant discourse. In a time when funding opportunities for social scientific research are becoming ever more closely aligned to the dominant debates that drive mainstream politics, there is much more work to be done in developing studies that remain wary of their own place within the socio-political environment but do not shy away from the responsibilities of social scientific research.

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4 Cf. Tonkens (2016). In her analysis of how passion (bezieling), trust and citizenship in the public sector could be restored after neo-liberalism, Tonkens asks what type of values could be held as sacred in the public sector; ‘What notions of the good are not instrumental for something else, such as efficiency, customer satisfaction, transparency or profit?’ (2016, p. 24, my translation). To answer this question Tonkens draws upon Albert Hirschman to underscore the value that people attribute to striving after important and difficult goals, irrespective of their chances of reaching these goals (ibid.).

5 The term interpretative community originally derives from literary theory and denotes ‘a collectivity of people who share strategies for interpreting, using, and engaging in communication about a media text or technology’ (Lindlof, 2002, p. 64).