

Seeing Difference, Seeing Differently

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Images of Islam in Europe are no longer confined to representations in the news media, academic discourse or museum displays of 'Islamic art'. Our ideas of Islam are increasingly influenced by representations in the field of public culture. Taking recent cinema films and photographic campaigns in Germany as my examples, I shall be discussing the specific way in which Muslims are depicted and, in conjunction with this, how Islam is addressed in the context of art. These depictions are characterized by a 'different' perspective that deliberately tries to avoid common clichés and stereotypes about Islam. The questions I want to ask about these images, which are informed by the imperative of seeing Muslims 'differently', address responses to Orientalist or Islamophobic stereotypes and, related to these, what makes this perspective 'new'.

I want to explore the hypothesis that this critical exploration of Orientalist clichés in artistic sites generates an imagery of Muslims that reconfigures Europe's relationship with Islam by addressing autonomy and agency. Instead of portraying Muslims simply as a foil to a liberal, western subject, images in public culture frequently target identification and empathy, humor and irony. More and more depictions of Islam convey the impression that Muslims themselves are speaking through the pictures and stories, providing their own perspectives on clichés – as if poking fun at stereotypes, exposing and re-interpreting them, or reformulating them in distinct idioms. Many works of art are inspired by an effort to break with the picture of Muslims as passive, unresisting husks susceptible to cultural and religious coercion, presenting instead specific forms of autonomy and agency within a context of culture and religion. These are images that depict Muslims as active subjects rather than naturalized bodies, where the category 'Islam' is not simply a projection screen for western fantasies and fears, but itself

constitutes a response to the challenges which Muslims are posing to contemporary forms of liberal freedoms.

The following examples will, I hope, demonstrate that autonomy in this sense is a central theme of the depiction, in which personal freedom of choice is not shown to be antagonistic to cultural and religious norms, but joins them in a relationship of tension. It is a hallmark of current depictions that they do not underscore incompatibility between Islam and liberal democracy but, on the contrary, emphasize options for mediating between tradition and self-determined behavior. Autonomy is not conceived in opposition to Islam, but treated as relational within a Muslim milieu. A dualistic scheme of perception thus becomes a relationship of tension where autonomy is contemplated as differentiated, conditional and incomplete. At the same time, Muslim agency becomes a field that needs to be understood and perhaps regulated by appropriate means. When autonomy is seen as differentiated, and its boundaries and 'correct' use are considered as a problem, concepts such as liberation and emancipation alter their meaning. Rather than a temporal, progressive approach to these concepts, emphasizing the tension between autonomy and subjugation generates a rather more locational perspective on forms for regulating and containing autonomous efforts to live Islam in Europe.

With that last point, I intended to indicate that depictions which offer a different perspective on Muslims – depicting Muslims as active, emancipated and self-contradictory individuals – pursue a political rationality that positions Muslims within Europe as a self-evident fact, and links this with certain questions about how – not whether – this localization is achieved. In this sense, the rationality associated with a new perspective on Muslims in artistic fields differs from colonial and Orientalist rationalizations, which aspired to liberate and civilize Muslims. Equally, it differs from a security discourse that constructs Muslims as political adversaries and a radical Other. This kind of aesthetic does not simply replace other modes of representation, but correlates with other rationalities behind the images.

The repertoire of motifs associated with the depiction of Muslims seems fairly limited, focusing on veils and prayers, the family and sexuality, although the same motifs can assume quite different meanings, functions and effects in the context of different rationalities. The image of a veiled woman can, for example, serve as a sexualized projection screen for western fantasies (e.g. Yeğenoğlu, 1998; Frübis, 2012), as an imperative for liberation in colonial, military and humanitarian projects (e.g. Mahmood/Hirschkind, 2002; Rygiel/Hunt, 2006; Wenk, 2012), or indeed as a representation of an individualized legal subject in debates about wearing headscarves and veils (e.g. Gaspard and Khosrokhavar, 1995; Venel,

2004; Moors, 2010). There is no single rationality for images of Muslims; rather, different ways of addressing Islam compose a “topology of power” (see Collier, 2009; Dornhof, 2012), or perhaps a field of political rationalities (see Peter in this volume; 2008; 2010) where images and discourses compete, contradicting or endorsing one another. This is why the same pictures can be perceived in different ways or can defy clear-cut attribution. Their rationalization is what makes them objects within visual culture, and positions them against other pictures and other ways of seeing.

‘Honor’ and autonomy in German cinema

The following examples are not initially about the veil, but about cinematic approaches to the Muslim family and the issue of cultural conflict. Since early this century, media representations and academic discourses have frequently linked the theme of the Muslim family to themes such as forced marriage, violence, sexual hypocrisy and honor killings. In literature of the same period, autobiographical accounts of these experiences have formed a genre of their own, endorsing a neo-conservative political discourse and drawing support from these quarters (Mahmood, 2008). These themes also occur in feature films, broadly linking the Muslim family to the oppression of women, although a little later and not across such a wide spectrum of movies.

By examining two German cinema productions – *Ayla* (2009) by Su Turhan and *Die Fremde* [When We Leave] (2010) by Feo Aladağ – I would like to demonstrate, however, that choosing the Muslim (Turkish) family as a theme serves less to illustrate the oppression of Muslim women than to convey to a broad audience the ambivalences and internal conflicts experienced by individual members of the family as a result of cultural tensions. These movies are about conflicts between different value systems, although they are not simply staged as a clash of cultures, but as a matter of attitudes, interventions or personal negotiations. The films differ in their specific presentation of normative conflicts, but what they have in common is that they offer an inside view of a Muslim family from various angles, conveyed through protagonists personifying variations on the conditioned agency of Muslims. Neither *Ayla* nor *When We Leave* draws on the model of a progressive narrative of emancipation and rescue. It would be more accurate to call them variations on dealing with the ambivalences and pressures faced by young Muslims – and especially young Muslim men – as they are torn to and fro by different emotions and social norms.

Whereas autobiographical books, such as those by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2006; 2007) and Fadela Amara (2003), draw wider conclusions from a personal story of

emancipation about conditions for women who have been coerced by a predominantly Muslim environment, movies like *Ayla* and *When We Leave* take the structural conflicts as a familiar backdrop against which they can develop dramatic stories. This does not banish the old tales of violence and oppression, but these are secondary and create the framework for a different approach to autonomy. In the feature films, the oppression of Muslim women, which has accumulated such recognizable concepts, imagery and categories from sociological and media perspectives, becomes the stuff of drama, and is thus ineluctably absorbed into the ebb and flow of suspense, the twists and turns of plot, dialogue and emotional states.

Both *Ayla* and *When We Leave* went on release in Germany in the spring of 2010¹. Both stories focus on the conflict between a father and daughter and on a family conflict around the concept of honor. In both movies, the driving force behind the plot is a strong, attractive, young woman who resists her family's traditional rules (Sibel Kikelli in *When We Leave* and Pegah Ferydoni in *Ayla*). In each case, the drama is spun out around a narrative familiar from media and sociological accounts of honor killings²: a young woman, who has grown up in Germany and been sent to Turkey to be married at a young age, takes her child, leaves her husband and tries to build an independent life back in Germany. She and her family in Germany find themselves at odds with different normative expectations and the social pressure of their Turkish milieu. In both films, the conflict escalates when her two brothers attempt to kill the young woman.

In both films, however, the structural causes of honor killings tend to play a secondary role. Nor is 'honor' presented as a central reason for a cultural conflict. Instead the focus is on the moral implications of honor and autonomy, which are a challenge to every individual character within the scheme of tension. Both movies also shift the drama to a Turkish family network in a German city, and as a result the conflict about honor interfaces with the many options for agency presented by this setting. *When We Leave*, in the first ten minutes, at least sets up an impression of the suffering young Umay has experienced at the hands of her violent husband in a desolate suburb of Istanbul, before the drama proper begins

1 *When We Leave* was written and directed by Feo Aladağ, a writer, actor and director born in Austria married to a director and writer of Turkish origin, Züli Aladağ. The film received maximum federal funding and won a number of prizes at the Deutscher Filmpreis and Deutsche Filmkritik awards, being nominated as the German contender for the foreign film Oscar. *Ayla*, by Turkish-born German director Su Turhan, attracted considerably less attention.

2 The murder of Hatun Sürücü in Berlin in 2005, which triggered a prolonged debate about honour killings and forced marriage, bears particular parallels to the lives of the women in the two films, especially to Umay in *When We Leave*.

with the family conflict in Berlin. *Ayla* relegates the honor killing narrative to a subplot that cuts across the central drama of the film, which is the love story between Ayla and Ayhan.

Ayla and Ayhan live in a Turkish neighborhood of Munich, but they find it easy to move between the German and Turkish 'worlds'. Ayla leads a regular double life: by day she is the nice Turkish woman in the children's nursery; in the evening she dons sexier attire and a blond wig to work in a night-club cloakroom. Ayla's father has had his problems with this double life for some time, so he disowns her. This existing conflict about his daughter's honor is compounded by another honor conflict in Ayhan's family: his sister leaves her husband in Turkey, wanting to live in Germany as a single mother. Ayhan, as the older brother, has a duty to resolve this family conflict. He unwillingly comes under growing pressure from his younger brother to threaten their sister. When she runs away, it is with Ayla that she and her child find refuge, and Ayla then helps her escape to Holland.

The plot is quite rudimentary in its construction, but what is more interesting is the representation of the idea – personified by the two central characters, Ayla and Ayhan – of mediating between two worlds and managing to reconcile opposites. This potential to mediate or reconcile two worlds – German and Turkish – is the film's central theme. To that end, the opposites are initially exaggerated, and so we find a purely Turkish milieu at the heart of a big German city, characters talking either German or Turkish, and who hold either modern views – like Ayla and Ayhan – or traditional, religious ones – like Ayla's sister, who wears a headscarf, and Ayhan's fanatical brother, who from the outset plans the honor killing with their father. The only two German characters in the film are similarly one-sided. Ayla's colleague at the nursery, big, blonde and Bavarian, is an amiable, simple soul, lacking in confidence, without a regular boyfriend, and full of prejudices about Turks. Ayla's boss in the night club is an understanding young man, portrayed as pale, gentle, and not at all pushy about his liking for Ayla. Ayla and Ayhan flit with ease between all these clear opposites, until suddenly Ayhan's sister appears, plunging them both into a dramatic conflict.

This conflict, which sets love against duty, clearly indicates the boundaries of mediation. Ayla does not hesitate for a moment in sacrificing her love and turning against Ayhan in order to protect his sister from him and his family. Ayhan, still attracted to this pugnacious, independent Ayla, is drawn further and further into the eddy of violence unleashed by his family on his sister. When the crisis strikes, he comes across as weak, governed by others with no will of his own. His free will is not restored until he has aimed a pistol at his sister and probably only fails to pull the trigger because Ayla steps between them. Only now does he find the resolve to stop his brother going for his sister with a knife. The ending suggests

that Ayhan and Ayla can make up, now that a fortuitous resolution of the conflict has demonstrated where mediation fails and a clear stance is needed, even if it means turning against one's partner and one's family. Ayla's father, on the other hand, is mollified at the end of the film. Even if he does not approve of his daughter's lifestyle – this conciliatory conclusion suggests – a daughter living her own life in Germany is something a Turkish father can ultimately accept.

Stylistically the film operates with elements that reinforce the mediation of opposites on which the narrative rests. Ayla does not fall far short of a comic-strip Superwoman. She is slender and tough, with wild hair and large eyes. She can do karate, she walks and runs about town with a purposeful gait, and she is sketched with dynamic movements and sharp contours. Besides, she can change appearance: in the evening she conceals the friendly, modern Turkish woman under a blond wig, doubles her eye size with make-up, and wears high heels and a mini-skirt for her job as a cloakroom attendant in a night club. With the same agility she slips on the red wedding dress designed by her sister, who is putting together a Turkish wedding collection for her first fashion show. For Ayhan she is a seductive femme fatale and at the same time a natural beauty captured on his camera. For her father she is a German whore and yet somehow his daughter. To combine so many opposites without imploding, the character needs the exaggeration of the comic-strip Superwoman, and this lends the film a light touch.

The characterization of Ayhan builds on another stylistic device that likewise facilitates mediation between powerful opposites. Ayhan is a photographer, and his studio specializes in Turkish wedding photos. Mediated by the camera, the oriental cliché finds its place in this contemporary Munich interior in the form of photographic images and backdrops. Moreover, as a photographer Ayhan can distance himself from things and look at them objectively, adopting an aesthetic perspective and only intervening on formal grounds. As a photographer, he is not bothered whether a marriage is happy or not; all he wants is a good snap of the bride and groom. Of course, this attitude causes him problems when he stops being a detached observer and his own family and feelings come into play. At this juncture he cannot observe from a distance and mediate, but is compelled to make a clear choice and act on it.

Ayla is a film about the compatibility of opposites, about living in two worlds, about young Turks in Germany. In this respect, the idea of a clash of cultures is absorbed into the harmonious reconciliation of differences. This reconciliation is also about seeing: under the layer of prejudice, what seems alien conceals a familiar face. The options for mediating between differences are provided in the film by the stylistic devices of a comic-strip heroine and the detached, indifferent contemplation of artificial arrangements by a studio photographer. The mediation

of opposites stumbles across its limits when it is no longer a matter of aesthetics and perspective but an existential issue. Honor and shame – this film conveys – are not categories that lend themselves to different views, like the categories Turks and Germans. Honor is a matter of life and death. Agency is not confined to seeing or mediating between different positions, but demands a clear yes or no.

The movie *When We Leave* looks at the themes of cultural conflict and Muslim agency from a different perspective. Unlike in *Ayla*, the honor killing is not a marker of differentiation in relation to agency and autonomy, but an extreme example at the focus of the protagonists' ambivalent emotional states. The conflict is less a matter of cultural clash, but unfolds inside individuals as a fundamental ambivalence, so that every character carries this conflict within.

The drama unfolds through a growing estrangement between the central character Umay and her family. After fleeing Turkey, Umay returns to her family in Berlin. Her Turkish husband does not want the “German whore” back, but their son must be returned to Turkey to live with his father. To protect her son, Umay takes refuge in a women's shelter. Her younger sister blames her for the threatened cancellation of her own marriage. Her brothers are involved in a punch-up after disparaging remarks are made about her, and when they find out where she is staying they threaten and insult her. Umay's husband tries, with her parents' support, to abduct the child. Meanwhile, Umay repeatedly attempts to restore links with her family, but she is rejected every time. In despair she turns up at her sister's wedding, but she and her son are thrown out. In narrative terms, the tension steadily builds up, escalating with an attempt on Umay's life and the death of her child, but this plot primarily provides the background for portraying the characters with their emotional make-up and personal ambivalences.

This movie is not about mediating between antagonistic cultures or between traditional and modern views. It sets out instead to portray the tension between individuals and the social norms that frame them. The opposites in the film are not sited primarily between the cultures or even between the genders, but within each individual character. In an interview, director Feo Aladağ described her principal aim as addressing the “universal need for unconditional love”, the need to be loved and respected for what we are. The work does not set out to stigmatize anything in particular:

All the characters in my film are caught up in serious conflicts. The men, too. That results in an inability to speak, futile acts, violence and a lot of tears. I was determined to get away from stigmatizing a gender or an ethnic group. Instead I wanted to show how even the father suffers from the pressure for ‘honor’. What it basically demands is: Kill your kids for my sake. (Kappert, 2010)

Although it is not apparent why the “universal need for unconditional love” is played out around such an extreme and conceptually problematic issue as honor killing, the movie *When We Leave* is quite clearly about the feelings of its characters and the development of internal conflict. In stylistic terms, this inner tension is achieved by aestheticizing bodies and physical expression. There is little dialogue. A great deal is conveyed by eye contact, by protracted shots of faces, by atmospheric views of urban landscapes, by light and shade, color, reflections, rear views, music. Even when the characters do speak and act, the looks exchanged, the tear-filled eyes and the silent faces usually undermine the accompanying words and deeds. This creates the impression, especially with the men but also with the mother, that they are talking and acting against the grain and consequently coercing their own selves.

It is not only the male characters who are trapped within the normative pressures of the code of honor and the inner turmoil this unleashes. The men do, however, appear to be overtaxed by their inner conflicts and hence tend towards violence or self-destruction. The character of the father, who shows understanding when his daughter runs away and displays love and tenderness towards her, becomes increasingly unhappy and mute in the course of the dramatic events that he himself has provoked. Finally he suffers a heart attack, after giving his sons – entirely through eye contact – the order to kill their sister.

Alongside this stylization of internal conflict for the Turkish characters, the portrayal of the German characters feels somewhat shallow. Umay’s old friend, and the new colleague she falls in love with, are presented as helpful, friendly people, sympathetic and reliable, but also cautious and passive compared with Umay’s swift resolve. The new boyfriend in particular – himself quite exotic with his East German moped – is shy and hardly dares to ask questions. In encounters with German characters – as generally in the film – little is conveyed through the spoken word and a great deal through looks and atmosphere, but whereas the camera dwells for a long time on the faces of the Turkish family, the expressions of the Germans convey little tension and conflict. Their eyes seem to reflect precisely what they are saying and doing at the time. Their looks do not express inner resistance to their actions, but can be read as words and actions in themselves.

If we consider the vehemence of inner conflict with regard to the gender order, we find that in both films – *Ayla* and *When We Leave* – it is above all the men who suffer under the clash of values and are ill placed to resolve it rationally. Like the fathers, the brothers find it hard to extract themselves from rigid sexual morals and the pressures of family honor, which take possession of them like some higher power. The young women are evidently pained by the conflict between wishing

to determine their own lives and nevertheless regarding themselves as part of the family. They do, however, succeed at decisive moments in this conflict in taking quick, courageous decisions and bearing the consequences with strength. Meanwhile the sensitively drawn male characters – the younger brother in *When We Leave* and the lover and the older brother in *Ayla* – are sucked into the violence until ultimately, as if guided by a will other than their own, they turn their weapons on a sister they love. By contrast, the other brothers come across as fairly crude and wooden. But these are the ones – the older brother in *When We Leave* and the younger brother in *Ayla* as antagonists to the female characters – who drive the dramatic plot. Like the women, they have also reached clear decisions and are capable of resolute action. They are, of course, taking bad decisions by obtaining the weapons, planning the murders and ultimately being prepared to kill, or indeed killing. But they are hardly plagued by doubt and they do not hesitate long in choosing violence as a way of reinstating violated norms and possibly resolving their own inner conflicts. The fathers in both films, on the other hand, are torn hither and thither and portrayed as vulnerable. They suffer in silence and are physically crushed by the weight of their decisions to harm the daughters they love.

Islam is present in both movies but it plays a subordinate role in relation to the conflict about family honor. Both films explicitly stress that Islam can be a self-evident aspect to the life of Turks in Germany, but that it has nothing to do with honor. In *When We Leave* it is Umay's Turkish employer who says as much to the parents when visiting them in an attempt to mediate. In *Ayla* it is the pious, warm-hearted sister who seeks to mediate and reacts with horror and a lack of comprehension when she hears about the dramatic defense of family honor. The movies also portray aspects of Muslim life in an undramatic and relatively positive way: women with headscarves, men of different generations praying together at the mosque, family gatherings to celebrate circumcision or break the fast. On the other hand, no imams appear to intervene in the family conflict, nor are the brothers shown in anything like an Islamist milieu. This is how both movies highlight how Islam is a self-evident part of Turkish family life in Germany without necessarily being a cause of conflict and certainly without providing a justification for violence.

Each in its own way, the films *Ayla* and *When We Leave* shift the idea of a cultural conflict between Islam and modern western life towards a tug-of-war between social pressures and the potential for individual agency. As a story of mediation in one case and via the state of inner turmoil in the other, both movies address the tensions between a Turkish family and personal life choices without assuming that these are per se incompatible. They are not so much about

fundamental opposites as about the potential to act against that background of tension, about mediation and the existence of ambivalences. This establishes a limited framework for autonomous action and free choice, distinct both from a paradigm of oppression and liberation and from a liberal model of personal free will and reason.

I maintain that this framework, autonomy limited by family ties and differentiated by gender, constitutes a specific scheme for perceiving Muslims. This scheme relates to a rationality that privileges a subjective, artistically mediated perspective on Muslims and generates, from this standpoint, new ways of portraying and new formats of knowledge about family constellations and gender differences in Muslim milieus. To what extent this mode of representation, with its differentiated take on autonomy as a function of position within the family and of gender, contributes to maintaining a category of ‘Muslims’ in a hierarchical relationship to non-Muslims becomes apparent when we consider the mechanisms of Orientalism and Islamophobia. An aesthetic view of subjects who act and speak may be able to undermine the hierarchical positioning of the category ‘Muslims’, but it is important in this context to bear in mind the social and gender framing of the subject’s scope for action, because it could counter the subversion and preserve ideas of Muslims in a subordinate relationship to non-Muslim Europe.

Orientalism and public culture

Rather than distinguishing clearly between two separately conceived unities – Islam and the West – this perspective on conditional and differentiated forms of agency hones in on a continuation of Orientalism that must not be conceived as a binary order but as an authoritative knowledge. In his review of Said’s work *Orientalism* (1978), Talal Asad (1980) was quick to point out that the book’s principal achievement was to identify the “authoritative structure of Orientalist discourse” (p. 648). This structure, he observed, not merely reflected European fantasies about the Orient, but constituted a still burgeoning complex of theories and practices, like a screen filtering our every perception of culture (Asad, 1980, p. 649). Orientalism therefore serves as a structural condition for representations of Islam rather than as an epithet for those representations.

Even for Said, Orientalism is not a uniform, consistent concept. Apart from an academic discipline, Orientalism designates forms of knowledge that circulate through Western discourse in literature, scholarship and diplomacy about the East. Orientalism is “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (...) ‘the Occident’” (Said, 1978, p. 2). At the same time, Said describes Orientalism as a “corporate institution for dealing

with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3). There are also passages in the book where Said distinguishes between manifest and latent Orientalism (pp. 206-225), drawing attention to the psychological dimension of the desire which forms the basis for the observations of many post-colonial theoreticians, first and foremost Homi Bhabha.

If we follow Asad’s emphasis on Orientalism as a practice of representation and a form of power through which Europe’s cultural hegemony is maintained, we can then analyze images of Islam in terms of how they participate in a hierarchical positioning of Muslims – not so much by contrasting them sharply with non-Muslims, but rather by means of a differential determination of central concepts crucial to the West’s self-perception and identity. Autonomy is one of these concepts, and I tried to illustrate above how the representation of Muslims in cinema does not convey autonomy simply as an essential characterization of a liberal subject – something you either have or you don’t – but as something embedded within different applications, ideas and conflicts which must therefore be evaluated severally and in context.

In considering the concept of Islamophobia, which has widely replaced the concept of Orientalism, Salman Sayyid (2009) similarly points to the preservation of a hegemonic interpretation of the West as it is today, arguing that Islamophobia does more than denote an erroneous view of Islam, upholding a scheme of perception whereby ideas of Islam are subordinate to ideas of the West. Islamophobia, he reasons, serves the restoration of that very same hierarchical distinction between Islam and the West that is currently challenged by articulations of postcolonialism and Islamism – articulations which undermine the hegemonic narrative of Western history as a history of the modern era (pp. 16-17).

“Islamophobia emerges in contexts where being Muslim has a significance which is political. What Islamophobia seeks to discipline is the possibility of Muslim autonomy, that is, an affirmation of Muslim political identity as a legitimate historical subject”. (Sayyid, 2009, p. 17)

In this sense, Islamophobia can be seen as a contemporary version of Orientalism, but one which clings far more vigorously than Orientalist imagery – where deprecatory clichés blend with colonial desires – to a purely defensive image of Western superiority, already crumbling in many places. In this respect, Islamophobia denotes those derogatory representations of Islam which depict Muslims as a threat to an idea of the West still predicated on clear definitions of

cultural and state identity and on clear-cut distinctions between freedom and oppression, between the West and Islam. Islamophobia rejects postcolonial representations, seeking to deprive them of legitimacy by means of imagery laden with fear.

However, in this sense Islamophobia is a critique of representation which, in the final analysis, upholds the antagonism between Islam and the West by setting culturalist against postcolonial representations. Rather than the 'West', it posits a Europe that still believes it can mark itself out wholesale against Muslims and postcolonial subjects, and which therefore feels existentially threatened by the porosity and blurring of this demarcation. In this respect, Islamophobia denotes the discourse of right-wing populism, but it is easily rebutted because this view of a culturally homogenous Europe is so evidently an illusion. Rather than replacing a dualist juxtaposition of Islam and the West with a no less dualist juxtaposition of postcolonial critique and Islamophobic representation, I believe it is far more important to analyze the concrete power effects of images and discourses by looking at them in terms of their visual rationalities.

Depictions of Muslims in the field of public culture often do not convey a blanket criticism or rejection, but rather an effort to combine different narratives and perspectives and to make these productive in a regulated manner. As we have seen, today we can examine depictions of Islam to see how they let Muslims speak, how Muslims are portrayed as individual agents with their own personified stories, memories and desires. As a rule these 'other' stories are neither inevitably threatening, negative or ridiculous, nor simply critical or subversive. Rather than reading such depictions either as a defensive strategy for devaluing Muslims or as a form of post-colonial resistance to hegemonic aspirations, we should develop an eye for how these images are embedded within productive power mechanisms which generate their own exclusions and clichés, and also their own potential for resistance.

From the imperative of visibility to the imperative of 'another' way of seeing

Since the 1990s, visibility has been a central topos in research into Islam in Europe. It signaled the new visibility that can be associated with the self-assured appearance of Muslims in European public life and with their criticism of the culture of modernity (e.g. Göle and Ammann, 2004; Jonker and Amiraux, 2006). At the same time, visibility is addressed as a power mechanism of the dominant culture, paradigmatically expressed in the unveiling of Muslim women. This places visibility in the context of the Enlightenment project for emancipation, used

in both colonial and feminist discourse to equate unveiling with liberation (e.g. Yeğenoğlu, 1998; von Braun and Mathes, 2007; Dennerlein, Frietsch and Steffen, 2012). In the research, visibility is understood critically as the regulated visibility of the female body pivotal to a modern Western ethos. Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues in this respect:

“... that the colonial feminist discourse to unveil Muslim women in the name of liberation was linked not only to the discourse of Enlightenment but also to the scopic regime of modernity which is characterized by a desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible.” (Yeğenoğlu, 1998, p. 12)

If, however, we look at these two approaches to visibility together – the new, self-assured presence of Muslims, especially young Muslim women, in the European public sphere, and the visibility imperative that links the unveiling motif to the idea of the emancipated, free, autonomous subject – we arrive in turn at a complex, high-friction representation of autonomy. On the one hand, the new visibility of pious young Muslims subverts Western views of coercion and subjugation as opposites to freedom. Few would now deny that the headscarf and veil may be worn as a result of personal free choice. On the other hand, there are many examples of discourse and imagery that see this kind of free choice as a problem: not only as an expression of false consciousness, but as a problem of communication, identification, self-exclusion, proselytizing, or health and child welfare. The equation between unveiling and liberation gives way to new requirements for the identification and regulation of complex spaces and practices, making the veil not a symbol, but a center of behavior options, liberties, acts of resistance and forms of coercion.

This means that it is too simple to criticize a Western scopic regime based on the opposites visibility and non-visibility, veiling and unveiling, freedom and force. A critical perspective of depictions of Islam needs to distinguish between scopic regimes and modes of representation and recognize the correlations between them in order to explain how the category ‘Muslims’ is made visible in specific contexts by specific means.

In the context of public culture, depictions of Muslims are characterized less by the visibility imperative than by the imperative of ‘another’ way of seeing. Unlike in academic discourse, travel literature or media reports, depictions of Muslims in public culture do not necessarily arouse functional expectations to do with the representation and explanation of an alien reality. They may equally be accepted as experimental configurations of a utopian, forgotten, dreamed or otherwise invented fiction. However, expectations of the representation of Muslim

reality cannot always be isolated from the artistic exploration of a fictional setting. However much the subjective view is stressed, works and artists often also convey an intimate knowledge of what they are depicting. The director of *Ayla*, for example, himself came to Germany from Turkey and probably knows the milieu he describes in his film from first-hand experience. The director of *When We Leave*, Feo Aladağ, emphasizes how meticulously she researched the film and how important it was for her to choose and work with performers (amateurs and professional actors) who would give the film as authentic a feel as possible.

Familiar insights into what is depicted and an authentic presentation combine, however, with a personal artistic idiom and form of expression. It is here, at the level of artistic expression, that I detect the imperative to see Muslims differently and to see otherness in Islam. I speak of an imperative because this way of seeing is not just about an individual artist exploring a subject-matter, as the representation of Islam combines with a political task and urgency which inscribes every artistic articulation from the outset in historical, sociological and political discourses. Art, especially art in the realm of public culture, can hardly shirk from the task of depicting Muslims beyond those Orientalist and traditional, religious schemes of perception and presenting Islam in its diverse potential manifestations.

Intimate insights into the inner contradictions and potential agency of the characters tend to mean that Islam is not necessarily seen as an obvious, unchanging reality, but understood as a construct and a changing experience of discursive and intersubjective relations. Seeing Islam differently, then, also means historicizing, criticizing and creatively appropriating conventional representations. If Islam appears as a changeable construct, then Muslims can no longer be seen as passive victims, but must inevitably participate in changes that occur in their religion and in other perspectives on Islam. Whether the connotations are positive or negative, the imperative of seeing differently is linked to attributing responsibility for manifestations of Islam to the decisions, ideas and actions of Muslims, and to the observation skills of every viewer.

This idea of seeing Muslims differently and recognizing that as a political necessity – an opportunity and duty for Europe – was illustrated by a banner strung across the front of a building during the 7th Berlin Biennale (late April to July 2012). It showed a young, dark-haired man in a leather jacket with his face and hands turned upwards in prayer. Over his head, in large letters, we see a phrase used by Chancellor Angela Merkel in the fall of 2010: “Multiculturalism has failed, completely failed.” At the bottom of the picture it says “Re-Branding European Muslims”, and in slightly smaller print attention is drawn to an event at the Steirischer Herbst art festival in Graz in September 2012 and the corresponding website. The website explains that this banner is the prelude to a

campaign by the art collective ‘Public Movement’, to be continued in the form of a gala during the festival in Graz. What the artists hope to achieve with their Re-Branding European Muslims campaign, according to the short text on the website, is to seize the failure of multiculturalism as an opportunity to reach a new understanding of Europe through a different perspective on Muslims.

This call to give Muslims in Europe a new image with the aid of marketing techniques and to see them, after the failure of multiculturalism, not as a problem but as a hallmark for Europe, is just one pregnant example of the trend in public culture to try to see Muslims differently, beyond the familiar clichés and stereotypes. The focus is not on representations of an objective reality, but on subjective perspectives which can open up other potential spaces and visions. The imperative for ‘another’ way of seeing cannot, therefore, be understood in isolation from opening up those new spaces which bring with them other thematic approaches to Islam in its relationship with Europe, deconstructing and reconfiguring the category ‘Muslims’.

Zenith Photographic Competition “Islam in Deutschland?”

The quest for artistically mediated perspectives on Muslim life in Germany, combined with the imperative of seeing Islam and Muslims differently, recently acquired an explicit formulation with a photography competition launched by the Eastern affairs journal *Zenith - die Zeitschrift für den Orient*. Together with the foundation Mercator, and under the patronage of Christian Wulff³ when he was still President of Germany, the journal announced this nationwide competition in the summer of 2011. The theme was “Islam in Germany?” Editor Daniel Gerlach’s aim was to invite perspectives that “reach beyond the big buzzwords and red rags in this debate” (Gerlach, 2012), and that do not show the same old motifs, like women in headscarves and local greengrocers, thereby countering the monopoly on interpretation held by the mass media (Erdmann, 2011). The jury included picture editors from major magazines like *Geo* and *Stern*. Readers were also encouraged by Zenith’s website to give their opinions on the entries.

3 Wulff, in his first major address to mark the 20th anniversary of German unification, had just referred to Islam as part of Germany, a remark that provoked great controversy. Zenith editor Gerlach traced the idea to devote a photo competition to “Islam in Germany?” to this controversy.



Figure 1: Re-Branding European Muslims, 7th Berlin Biennale 2012, Auguststrasse 10
(photo: Sarah Dornhof)

Apart from the theme “Islam in Deutschland?” there were no further stipulations about the form or content. The competition brief urged photographers and amateurs to explore the idea of belonging to Islam visually and without resorting

to familiar images. The 84 entries, 50 of which were judged and can still be found on the website, do, indeed, compose a mosaic of (mostly documentary) perspectives on how Muslims and Germans live together. They portray daily routines and curiosities, the trivial and the surprising, the sad and the humorous, rather than the usual fear-inspiring images of fundamentalism, a social underclass and the oppression of women. The photographs thus redefine the real themes and motifs associated with the idea of “Islam in Deutschland?” Their message often centered on where people are at home and what it means to be alien, on family and neighborhood, the contrast between modern and traditional, the search for identity (see, for example, “Gropiusstadt” by Lukas Fischer (Readers’ Prize), “Alien Homeland” by Kai Löffelbein (1st Prize) and “In Search” by Agata Szymanska-Medina (2nd Prize)). The theme of conversion also plays a role (see “Made in Germany” by Laurent Quint; “Converting” by Lia Darjes), as does the confident Muslim woman (“Neo-Muslima” by Sybille Baier, “Quite Normally Different” by Ann-Kathrin Kampmeyer).

This photography competition is thus a place where a new form of knowledge about Islam emerges, authorized by a kind of subjective and experimental seeing. This is not about a sociological perspective which explains things, but an aesthetic perspective, which discovers things and casts a personal eye, taking nothing for granted, on the object of contemplation. The competition entrants know the districts, the parks and the festive halls; they visited homes, families, friends, and took their pictures there. There is no need to leave it exclusively to experts or Muslims to determine the perspective on Islam in Germany. For the competition it is enough to know places of encounter and above all to develop an eye for them and to be able to see for oneself how – not whether – Islam and Muslims belong to Germany.

One work, which took third prize, stands out among the predominantly documentary submissions. It is a series of staged self-portraits reflecting different ways Muslims can be seen. The entry is called “We, they and I” and it is by Feriel Bendjama, who has put together three rows of colorful variations on the theme of the headscarf taken from three different perspectives. On her own website, Bendjama explains the series as follows:

“The 12 self-portraits show different perspectives on the Islamic headdress. In the photographs you can see a woman with the Islamic headscarf. Sometimes you see the headscarf from the perspective and wishful stance of Muslims. Sometimes from the clichéd perspective of non-Muslims, and the woman with the red headscarf shows facets of a Muslim woman that do not normally conform to conventional ideas. In my work I reflect my personal observations and encounters with the headscarf.” (Feriel Bendjama, 2012)

In a style that is both pointed and humorous, the images convey ideas that might be associated with religious Muslims, prejudiced non-Muslims and a personal experience with veiled women. Muslims might overhastily see the woman in the headscarf as pious, pure, morally supreme and well educated. Viewers who harbor prejudices about Muslims will see the woman in the headscarf as oppressed, unable to speak for herself, a prisoner, condemned to silence. The last row, meanwhile, is intended to illustrate that the woman behind the headscarf is a woman like any other rather than a reflection of idealized or stereotyped ideas, playing different social roles, often with ambivalence. A woman in a headscarf can have her secrets and unexpected sides, she can be threatening and challenging, intellectual and seductive, she can cater to social gender images and wish for others. 'We, they and I' works with the tools of caricature by using stereotypical symbols to reduce complexity.

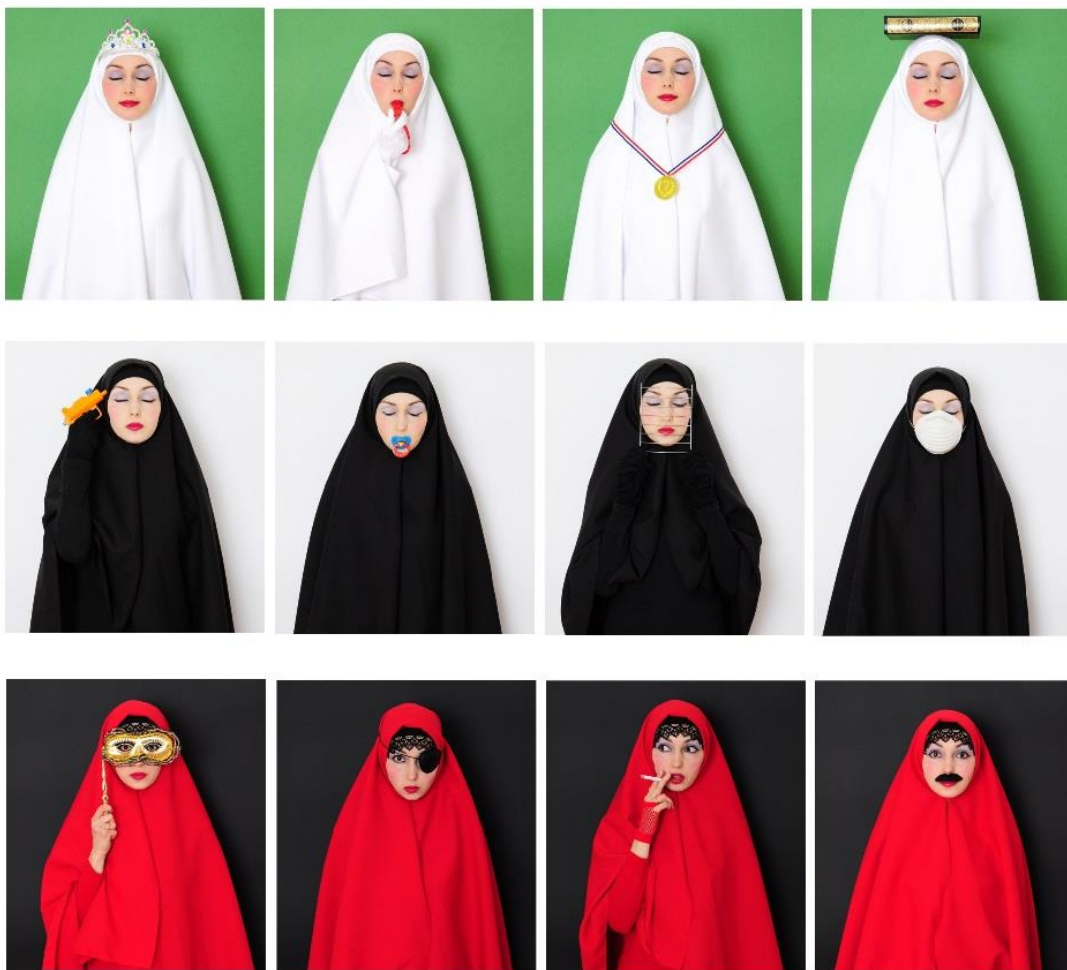


Figure 2: We, they and I © Feriel Bendjama, 2012. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

At the same time, the work is a metapicture (see Mitchell, 1994) in the sense that it makes seeing and images its own theme. Ferial Bendjama is not, however, simply addressing one stereotyped take on Muslim woman, but three different perspectives on the same object, through which the object – the veiled woman – acquires a different tone and connotations each time. Common to all the perspectives is the dissection of one view of the veiled woman into a series of images, symbols and motifs. ‘We’, ‘they’ and ‘I’ do not fundamentally differ in the way we make pictures, but in what we see in the pictures and how the pictures convey truth and knowledge. As a metapicture – a picture about how pictures are seen – the work does distinguish, however, between the group perspectives ‘we’ and ‘they’ on the one hand and the subjective perspective of the ‘I’ on the other. Only in the bottom row does Bendjama pose with open eyes; in the other two rows her eyes are shut. Here we recognize two distinct scopic regimes, one where the Muslim woman is shown as the object of a collective gaze, or a screen for projecting collective fantasies, and another where the object of view is simultaneously a subject that returns the gaze, looking at the viewer in a manner that is unsettling, disturbing or not quite easy to read. This uncertainty at the moment of seeing, prompted because our knowledge about the object of view is confronted with potentially different meanings induced by the subject of the gaze, enables us to perceive ambivalences, multiple significations and shifts in meaning. The challenge of seeing Muslims in Germany and Europe differently cannot, it seems, be resolved simply through subjective documentary work, but needs moments when looks are exchanged, when commentary is reciprocal, and when ambivalence and multiple meaning emerge.

Conclusions

I have tried with these examples to cast light on the political implications of a perspective on Muslims in the field of public culture that focuses on the scope for agency and autonomy within a framework of Muslim normativity. In these depictions, the category ‘Muslims’ is not so much a projection screen or an empty husk for western fantasies and fears, but the reflection of a representation that lends itself through artistic form to historicization, criticism and other kinds of appropriation. The continuity of themes such as the veil, family, sexuality and prayer occurs because the imperative of this ‘other’ take implies a critical response to Orientalist and Islamophobic stereotypes. The other take can be seen here as a take which cannot be equated with a critical stance that exposes, unmasks, and produces ‘true’ images. This other take does not necessarily reject clichés and stereotypes. It offers, rather, a private, subjective perspective on the ambivalences

and the scope for agency that can be discerned in stereotyped images when they are not regarded as projections by a Western viewer but as images of talking, acting subjects. Like the photographs in the last row of Bendjama's work, images can return the gaze and tell their own private, ambivalent stories, even if they are simultaneously stereotypical projections, or hard to distinguish from them on first sight.

Bendjama's work, like some of the stylistic devices I discussed in relation to the movies *Ayla* and *When We Leave*, convey this view of clichéd, nowadays unquestioned images of Muslims, which can also be staged, reflected back and reconfigured. The category 'Muslims' is reconfigured by a gaze that penetrates into the depths or the inner realm of the representation, so that, rather than the category being rejected, something else can be seen in it, something different, something complex, ambivalent and changeable. I have linked this perspective to a political rationality which makes it necessary to see Muslims as autonomous subjects in order to influence the specific use and limits of autonomy. This is not about inclusion or exclusion, but about spaces where individual action can be regulated. In that sense, depictions that focus on the autonomy of Muslims generate specific knowledge about those spaces for agency where free choices and options for action can be managed. The two movies I described here take a differentiated view of their characters' autonomy as a function of their position within the Muslim family, their gender and their religious views. This places violence and autonomy within a gender order that in turn is embedded in an order within the family and within a Muslim milieu. This differentiation rapidly shows where the potential for action and its boundaries lie. Honor is then not simply a problem for Islam or the Turkish family, but presents daughters, fathers, brothers, mothers and friends with quite dissimilar moral challenges and options.

This rationality of addressing Islam in a manner that above all contemplates the responsibility, autonomy and moral entanglement of the individual cannot be isolated from a mode of representation which, as described above, does not simply reject stereotypes, but prefers to see them in another way. The imperative of seeing differently mediates to some extent between the political need to identify the potential for action and intervention generated by Muslim lives in Europe and the tendency to disseminate an artistic, intimate and reflective perspective on Muslims in Europe. In that sense, artistic works offer a possible response to the crisis of European identity by inviting people – like the campaign 'Re-Branding European Muslims' – to learn to see Europe through fresh eyes by looking at Muslims in a fresh light.

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