Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csid20

Bans on Muslim facial veiling in Europe and Canada: a cultural history of vision perspective
Valerie Behiery
Independent Scholar
Published online: 16 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Valerie Behiery , Social Identities (2013): Bans on Muslim facial veiling in Europe and Canada: a cultural history of vision perspective, Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture, DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2013.842676

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2013.842676

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Bans on Muslim facial veiling in Europe and Canada: a cultural history of vision perspective

Valerie Behiery*

Independent Scholar

(Received 11 October 2012; accepted 2 September 2013)

The ‘burqa’ bans that have recently been put into effect in several Euro-Atlantic countries are a testament to how public space has been rendered into a terrain of increasing securitization and legal control. The new laws are complex in that they are entangled with entrenched historical attitudes, present-day geopolitics, political expediency, and the politics of race, immigration and national identity. However, they provoke a questioning of what it means when states legislate vision and visuality and of why the visual rather than another domain has become the privileged stage to both communicate the alleged conflict between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ and enact the former’s disciplining of the latter. In this paper, I examine the trope of the burqa from the perspective of the cultural history of vision, arguing that situating the garment as a visual text in contesting regimes of art and representation, shaped by their respective pre-modern religious narratives, will provide a critical, yet unacknowledged, perspective on facial veiling which, moreover, offers up the possibility of learning to read the sign across cultures.

Keywords: ‘burqa’ bans; cultural history of vision; crosscultural aesthetics; Islamic aesthetics; law and visual studies; religion and vision

Discourses and laws aimed at excluding Muslim facial veiling from public space(s) in Europe and Canada have multiplied since 9/11 and the ensuing ‘War on Terror’. The theoretical and legal grounds put forth in each country appear to differ (i.e. when, where and why the veil cannot be worn). However, the resultant bills, even those not naming Islam overtly, manifest the continuation and intensification of Orientalist attitudes which have consistently used images of Muslim female veiling practices as icons of otherness and Western cultural superiority. Framed by concepts and terminology compatible with national self-identities – for example, gender equality, public security, or interpersonal communication – the debates, bills and laws relating to facial veiling are all underwritten by and elucidate the shift in Europe and Canada from multiculturalism to assimilation in political, media and popular discourses on ‘immigrant’ communities (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008). The return to an outdated assimilationist model has allowed

*Email: vbehiery@yahoo.ca

© 2013 Taylor & Francis
anti-immigration and Islamophobic postures, once limited to the Far Right, to no longer be, as Liz Fekete notes, ‘on the political fringe’:

On the contrary, they mesh with the security agenda of the European Union (EU) and are braided into the policies of Conservative and Liberal governments throughout its member states. States’ national security agendas overlap with the immigration control programmes of xenophobic movements, and integration measures imposed by governments reinforce the Islamophobia of the extreme Right. Today, in Europe, xenophobia and Islamophobia are the warp and woof of the war on terror. (Fekete, 2006, p. 2)4

This study also situates the debates and conflicts staged through the trope of the facial veil in Euro-American countries and other polities self-identifying as Western liberal democracies in the larger context of increased national security and cultural fundamentalism in which Muslims have become the ‘new ethnicity’ (Wilson, 2007).5

The anti-face veil campaigns have been no less effective when they have not culminated in full or partial state regulation of female veiling practices. Their multiplication in a globalized mediascape secures the imagined borders between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ and the exclusion of Western Muslims from the collective imaginar of identity and citizenship (Razack, 2008). While sharing the same ideological underpinnings, the debates on the face veil and the representations through which they largely operate are nonetheless complex due to the multiple factors informing them. Their historical and thus colonial, religious, political, geopolitical, legal, racial, military, economic, and even philosophical and psychological dimensions permit analyzing the facial veil and the legal responses to it from many disciplinary perspectives, as evinced by the growing literature analyzing Western fixation on the veil through these myriad lenses.6

The present article, using a visual culture studies approach, aims to elucidate why these texts deconstructing the instrumentalization of the veil in Western discourse and history have not radically altered mainstream attitudes towards Muslim veiling practices or challenged them more generally: only a minority of Muslim women covers their hair and a minority of this minority, their face.7 The recognition, at least in academic circles, that the image plays a large role in the ‘social construction of reality’ and ‘the making of social identities’ (Lirola, 2010, p. 78) and that the analysis of an image requires its contextualization within ‘the institutional and social processes of cultural production and consumption’ (Wolff, 1998, p. 27) has neither undercut the iconicity of the facial veil nor prevented the proliferation of its image. I argue here that situating the sign of the face veil in the cultural history of vision will provide a critical yet unacknowledged insight into its ongoing communicative efficacy. The articulation of Enlightenment-based but also pre-modern religious discourses that continue to inform a dominant Euro-American contemporary scopic regime will illuminate, I propose, the facial veil’s capacity to symbolize cross-cultural untranslatability and provoke widespread ‘specular panic’.8

The article’s structure is straightforward. The first section broaches the relationship between the face veil and visual culture. The second, drawing particularly upon the work of Mondzain, examines a dominant Western scopic regime, emphasizing the pre-modern discourses that went into its making and the perception of facial veiling therein. The idea that religious narratives continue to inform those of modern secularism challenges the posited antinomy between the two. If scholars like Talal Asad have cogently disputed their antithetical relationship, my own views on the issue –as well as the general premise
of the study – are rooted in cross-cultural art historical research and, more precisely, in the practice and event of looking at art (Asad, 2003). Experiencing and trying to articulate the beauty and worldview expressed through a Piero della Francesca painting or, on the contrary, a decorative dome of the Sheikh Lutfallah mosque in Isfahan is grounded in aesthetic or phenomenological rather than theoretical knowledge, and it is this approach that I bring to the analysis of conflicting visions of facial veiling. Some Muslim women continue to choose to wear the facial veil and hence to adopt the regime of representation it establishes, substantiating the cultural nature of vision and, consequently, reception. That a single and same object can be and is perceived differently according to the ‘cultural optics’ of the viewer explains why the third and last section contextualizes the facial veil in a scopic regime informed by pre-modern Islamic discourses and aesthetics, which, interestingly, continues to structure the work of many contemporary – often secular – artists of Muslim descent.

Cross-cultural readings require the recognition of cultural differences, not to further entrench these but to challenge and dismantle the binarism and existent power relations between cultures, in this case between ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’. The facial veil’s reification effectively produces and reproduces this binarism. However, examining the sign across cultures will open it up to the possibilities of visual polyglossia or, at least, cross-cultural translation. Such a framing will move the discussion beyond the garment’s charged politics and shift the focus from the purported tensions between the West and Islam or secularism and religion to the more intimate and complex ones among form, image, culture and self. The intent is neither to defend or condemn the facial veil nor to ascertain whether it is oppressive or not, but to make visible the usually unconscious operation of cultural narratives at work in vision, narratives through which we see and assess the world but to which we generally remain blind (Alcoff, 2001).

The intersecting levels of visuality at work in the burqa sign

Those whose faces do not fit with the majority collective perception of the ‘imagined community’ may find that they are excluded de facto from full participation in social life. Joe Painter (2002, p. 95)

There exist at least three intersecting levels of visuality at work in the Euro-American trope of the facial veil and concomitant affairs. One, they are essentially powered through the medium of the image. In the media where the debates are produced and circulated, print or web articles or television newscasts on topics buttressing an ‘Islam is the problem’ discourse continue to depend heavily on images of fully veiled Muslim women regardless of whether these are relevant to the story or not. Having played a critical role historically in propagating cultural ideologies, consolidating imperial control and producing collective self-identities, the image has become ever more primary in a post-literate world, forming the basic mainstay of the globalized flow of information and the principal battlefield of cultural contest. Its centrality is best understood as an effect of modernity’s ocularcentrism or, to use Martin Jay’s words, ‘the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era’ (Jay, 1988, p. 3). In addition, photography, which constitutes the preferred medium for media images of veiled Muslim women (although cartoons abound too), has retained its aura of authenticity and legitimacy, despite the prevalence of image altering methods; it thus obscures journalistic strategies like
decontextualization (i.e. pairing an image of veiled women in Iran with an article on immigration in Quebec). The objectivity of documentary photography has been refuted and the genre has been redefined as ‘culturally determined, politically biased and principally serving the Western, colonial, male gaze’ or instead as postmodern because the image refers ‘mainly to other images and no longer to a “reality” beyond them’ (Gierstberg, 2005, p. 125). However, the retheorization of the photographic image has not dampened the tendency of Western publics to view all works with ‘Muslim’ content sociologically and hence as documentary (Dakhlia, 2006, p. 39). Two, the burqa affairs revolve around a visible practice, which, moreover, pertains to the visibility of the body and face ideologically placed at the heart of Euro-American modern secular identity. The sexual politics inherent to this is evident, as evinced by the countless images contrasting fully veiled Muslim women with women donning more revealing modes of dress associated rightly or wrongly with Western modernity.12 Despite the critiques of the Muslim oppression/non-agency versus Western freedom/agency narrative underwriting these images, they continue to be reproduced, because, as Wendy Brown (2006) notes, recognizing ‘our own form of compulsory feminine dress would undercut this idea of [our] superiority’ (p. 189).13 In addition, the association of the face veil with religion is experienced as challenging the idea of secularization as a natural universal order and an inevitable process.14 Three, the bans all possess a spatial dimension targeting all or certain aspects or institutions of the public sphere. While the latter notion is rather abstract in that it defines not only a physical space but also a historical, philosophical and political one, I am here interested in its metaphorical role as the field of vision of the eye of the state seeking to construct a particular regime of visuality, manipulating the visual landscape legally by limiting or removing what it deems disturbing, intolerable or against its interests.15 While the nexus between the image – or visuality more generally – and power is intrinsic to all cultures, as is a self-definition established through distinction from others, modern technologies and means of image distribution have only strengthened exponentially the capacity of visual texts to shape the collective gaze and promulgate the views, interests and objectives of states, elites and well-financed interest groups. The amplification of the reification of the facial veil and of the attempts to restrict it constitute more generally part of the post-9/11 agenda that has enabled states to use the fear of terrorism to implement increased security measures and surveillance and sway citizens to waive their civil rights and liberties.16 The image has played a central role in constructing normative conceptualizations of national identity, citizenship and self-presentation as well as hierarchies of human worth.17 Judith Butler (2004) has written extensively on the ‘media’s evacuation of the human through the image’ and on how its ‘normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human’ (p. 146). The tremendous power of the image to grant or withhold subjecthood elucidates the expansion of what is called ‘the visual turn’ in scholarship into new fields, for instance, security studies just to name one example (Hansen, 2011). The continued geopolitical agency of the image is, however, best corroborated not textually but by numerous recent real events, the most flagrant being the Danish cartoons, the Qur’an burning and the ‘Innocence of Muslims’ film scandals circulated through the channels of global media to provoke and confirm – unfortunately sometimes successfully in these cases – the notion of Islam’s incompatibility with the West.18 The polemics and laws relating to the Muslim veil(s) also cast Islam and its followers, practices and identity markers as deviant and/or culturally unintelligible. Possessing a well documented, long colonial history as a symbol of Muslim cultural and
religious inferiority, the veil trope has often legitimized military aggression and/or occupation, most recently in the build up to the war against Afghanistan.\(^{19}\) The subsequent *burqa* affairs concern, however, the penetration of the ‘the other of Western secular modernity’ into the places and spaces of Euro-American societies (Casanova, 2008, p. 108). The new proximity explains the face veil’s transformation from a sign of victimization (or eroticization) to one of menace.\(^{20}\) Branding the garment a ‘walking prison’ in the name of liberation or gender equality camouflages its perception as threat – of religion, Islam and Islamization – to secular state authority and modernist self-identities and its role in placating the current crisis of Euro-American identity by creating a common enemy. The reductive name of *burqa* given to all forms of facial veiling is itself revelatory. As Khiabany and Williamson (2010) aptly remark, ‘Equating all forms of veiling with the repressive regime of the Taliban conflates veiling with tyranny and marks it out as part of “enemy” territory’ (p. 89).\(^{21}\)

Before fleshing out the *burqa* further, I want to acknowledge that counter-hegemonic visual texts of the marked Muslim female other, donning not only the *hijab* but also the *niqab*, have appeared in Euro-American contemporary visual culture in the last few years, confirming that expressions like ‘East and West’ or ‘Euro-America and the Muslim world’ are here part of a *strategically* essentialist taxonomy. While French President Nicolas Sarkozy, echoing numerous other prominent European political and social actors, declared the veiling of the face as ‘not welcome … because it runs contrary to our values and contrary to the idea we have of a woman’s dignity’ (Davies, 2010), large North American television stations like CNN or CBC have aired, admittedly very rarely, interviews with *niqab*-wearing women which, regardless of the Muslim veil’s ability to attract large audiences, have ‘allowed’ *munaqqaba* a voice – usually absent from the debates – and thus a status of subject and self.\(^{22}\) However, the idea that the veil is antithetical to selfhood has been most challenged by the images of crowds of veiled, sometimes facially veiled, women participating in last year’s uprisings across the Arab world elucidating, at least in part, the World Press Photo’s selection for the 2011 Photo of the Year.\(^{23}\) That Samuel Aranda’s winning image was shot in Yemen and not, for example, Bahrain, demonstrates how agency is more easily granted to veiled women who live in the Muslim world and who, moreover, partake in actions sanctioned by Euro-American governments, mainstream media and, consequently, public opinion.

The image captured by The *New York Times*’ photographer shows a facially veiled woman dressed in black caring for the young visibly injured man nestled in her lap and chest. The commentary around the winning image substantiates how place and politics inform the act of seeing. Contrary to the pronouncements of ministers, presidents and pundits on the *niqab* who, decrying the failures of multiculturalism, claim the necessity of facial visibility for human interaction and social cohesion, the authors of the *New York Times* photography blog describe the garment as an impediment to neither individual expression nor communication:

A thin man rests his head on the shoulder of a *burqa*-clad woman, the pair collapsed together against a wall. The expression on her face can’t be seen. But her body language – right arm wrapped tightly around his neck, left hand clinging to his arm – conveys everything her expression cannot. (Macdonald & Furst, 2012)

While realpolitik is obviously at work – several prizes in other categories also involved the ‘Arab Spring’ – Aranda’s photo underscores the cultural schizophrenia with regards to the face veil but also, and more significantly, the influence of history and culture on
image reception and hence production. The photographer’s image affords the cross-cultural translatability of a sign usually marking its impossibility because it evokes a powerful theme in Euro-American religious and visual culture: Mary’s mourning of her dead son Jesus, and more specifically, its most renowned visual and artistic enactment, Michelangelo’s fifteenth century Pieta, including the contrast between the mother’s veil and abundant clothing and the son’s naked and suffering body. If Aranda may not have captured the scene inside a Yemeni mosque turned makeshift hospital with this visual ‘speaking of tongues’ consciously in mind, the reference, unintended or not, must nonetheless be recognized as part of a collective repertoire of images or what Kaja Silverman calls the ‘cultural screen’ that construct his and our gaze.24 Several contemporary artists from minority communities living in Europe and North America have knowingly used their cultural and visual bilingualism as an aesthetic strategy to abet cross-cultural readability (see Behiery, 2012b). By so doing, they propose new models of identity which, because plural, unpack the ‘us and them’ or the majority–minority dimension implicit to both multicultural and assimilationist discourses.

Alternative visual texts of the burqa remain, however, exceptions and have been, at least thus far, unsuccessful in overturning dominant and media discourses. Moreover, as postcolonial media theorists argue, enabling the cultural shift towards creating an equitable pluralistic society and mediascape requires more than simply adding positive images of minoritized groups. The burqa sign oft reproduced in its monochrome blue or black variety usually resists translation because, embedded in the collective imaginary, it holds a constitutive role in modern Euro-American self-identity largely produced through contradistinction with the other/s, only further substantiating the enmeshment of culture, discourse and vision.25

The visual text of the Muslim facial veil intersects in myriad other ways with dominant Western modern and premodern vision. However, before turning to these, it is important to stress that Aranda’s photograph adduces that vision, although learned, is not static. It can be reconfigured. The woman has been made intelligible by rescripting the black ‘abaya and niqab. She has been granted subjection visibly through her referencing of Western visual culture and memory. And while this points to the productive power of double vision, everyday encounters with a munaqqaba will not all optically echo the great tradition of European art.26 Cross-cultural legibility of the facial veil requires probing deeper into the cultural histories of vision.

What’s in a face?: the Euro-American scopic regime

Letting the ‘other’ express himself/herself through culture means every time challenging our cultural position and asking ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Why am I so?’ (Gabriele Marranci, 2004, p. 115)

As Mitchell (2002) puts forth, there is no such thing as visual media because other senses and faculties are always involved in seeing. It thus follows that for an image to function as a culturally understood sign of the abject, the narratives shaping vision and the image’s visuality have to somehow intersect. Vision and visibility are central to modern culture, which is both anthropocentric and ocularcentric. The normative cultural gaze is structured with the expectation to see something or someone, thereby framing the facially veiled woman as an unintelligible blind spot. Equating vision, knowledge and being, it has
produced the perception and power of the ‘masked’ cum unseen figure within western visual vocabulary and history as a sign of malfeasance; visually analogous to the munaqqaba are the angst-provoking figures of death, the shadow, the double, the criminal and the terrorist. All metonymic signs are screens, but the seemingly faceless veiled Muslim woman especially so. She forms the perfect screen onto which to project collective anxieties because the dominant scopic regime, parsing between visibility and invisibility, neither encompasses invisibility nor provides referents to make it intelligible.

The dominant Euro-American scopic regime of modernity, often termed ‘Cartesian perspectivalism,’ is an individual-centered visual paradigm premised on a separation between self and world or, stated differently, on a spectatorial objectifying gaze. Rorty’s declaration that ‘in the Cartesian model, the intellect inspects entities modeled on retinal images’ (Rorty, 1979, p. 45) reveals how sight, because conflated with truth and empirical knowledge, is granted an epistemological status. This model of visuality compared with the camera obscura exposes the caveats of a technology-driven and hence positivist model of vision based on a singular disembodied point of view. The idea of the objective eye rooted in the posited ‘self-certainty of the thinking subject’ attributes scientific certainty to the Western individual and collective gaze and obscures the mediative process inherent to seeing (Jay, 1993b, p. 70). Professing detachment and neutrality also positions this particular viewing location as both superior, thus establishing a hierarchy of gazes, and normative. The problem with norms is that, as mentioned earlier, ‘they operate invisibly’ as the images and affairs related to facial veiling testify (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008, p. 63). Those individuals and institutions espousing mainstream opinions on the face veil do not stop to consider them in a self-reflective manner or from the perspective of the small minority of women who wear them. Locked into the logic of the Cartesian gaze, they ascribe truth and agency to the seer but not to the seen or, in this case, to those whom they think they cannot see in the body of vision.

Modernity’s ‘need to see’ has greatly shifted, amongst other things, sartorial norms and means of self-presentation as bodily visibility has become increasingly conflated with both embodiment and subjectivity. The subject is construed as being produced through its visibility, presentation, and performance in public space and apprehension by the gaze of others.27 Facial veiling inverts the modernist visual paradigm (Alloula, 1986; Mitchell, 1988). Hidden from physiological sight and subverting the (sometimes) objectifying effect of the other’s gaze, the facially veiled Muslim woman inhabits and appropriates for herself the viewing position, thus wielding control over the gaze/image.28 The need to open Muslim women up to visibility has been appositely linked to colonial, military, economic and sexual control, as well as to Foucauldian notions of state surveillance and disciplinary tactics exercised on the bodies of its citizens, particularly those perceived as resistant to the modernist ideology undergirding its sovereignty, including a phallocentric scopic economy (Motha, 2007). Stewart Motha (2007) ascribes it to ‘modes of politics which seek to produce an autonomous subject emancipated from ‘other laws’ (heteronomy)’ (p. 141), the idea that facially veiled women are not free agents would thus conceal the state’s struggle for power over their bodies so that they be subjects of only state and not religious law.29 Imposing cultural notions of female self-presentation will never, however, have the desired result. As Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial critics have suggested, minoritized subjects who adopt the ways of the majority, whether out of free will, internalized colonialism or legal prescription, will never become or be fully considered as part of the majority; uncovering the hair or face will neither prevent nor solve discrimination against Muslim women nor rid them of their Islamic heritage.
Subtler cultural factors transcending issues of state or majority power inform dominant discourses on facial veiling. Historically, the face in Western culture has constituted a particularly privileged locus of meaning and expression. Despite the accruing emphasis on the visibility of the body, the face continues to be deemed the most unique feature of the human body, the hallmark of individuality and a site necessary to intersubjective relationships and communication. The face occupies a central position in Western art, which likes to trace its tradition of portraiture back to the early first millennium portraits of Fayoum, as well as in philosophy. Emmanuel Lévinas (1969), whose notion of the ‘face-to-face’ encounter constitutes the very basis of his thought, devoted to an ethics of the other, is the most cited in this respect. In Totality and Infinity, he devotes much discussion to the face that he describes as ‘a source from which all meaning appears,’ ‘a living presence; … expression,’ or still yet, quite poetically, as ‘already discourse’ (p. 297 and p. 66). Contemporary philosopher, Marie-José Mondzain (2010), also expounds on the significance of the face. Because the subject can never see his or her own image unmediated by the other’s or the mirror’s gaze, she characterizes the face as ‘the subject’s inevitable gift to someone else’ (pp. 311–312), from which standpoint covering the face would signify the withholding of a gift.

The face here, particularly in the case of Lévinas, cannot be reduced to physiognomy alone, but nonetheless it is the face that provides the culturally understood sign of individuality, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. If Lévinas’ philosophy is indebted to Husserl, Talmudic teachings and modern European Jewish history, Mondzain, in her work articulating the early Christian roots of contemporary attitudes towards the image, has more obscure, albeit intriguing, referents like ninth-century Saint Nicephorous, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who, refuting the iconoclasts, defended the image as a means of accessing the invisible (Mondzain, 2000). The present-day significance of the face is indebted in no small way to these early image wars and to the resultant art of the icon which simultaneously foregrounds the face and makes it sacred. Both the iconophiles and the iconoclasts recognized the constitutive power of the image; the struggle was between those who wanted to keep the image invisible and those who wanted to make it manifest. Mondzain cogently observes the parallels between the iconophilic arguments and the doctrine of the Incarnation. Iconophilia was victorious, she claims, because of the analogous materiality and mystery of icon-making and the religious narrative of God made flesh. It was Paul, she claims, who, ‘by designating the Son as the visible image of the Father, makes the person of Christ, and more specifically his face, the place where the image and the visible are united’ (Mondzain, 2010, p. 310).

The concepts of face and image rooted in the theology of the Divine becoming image/visible continue to inform the modern dominant scopic regime in its definitions and expectations of visibility and its privileging of the face. The human image, because of its historical and theological relationship to God, still inhabits the innermost core of the collective eye even if present-day materialism and humanism no longer conceive of it as the mediator between different realms but rather as the center itself. The disappearance of overt religious references in modern discussions on the image or human body should not obfuscate the historical dimension of vision and the continued interdependence between the religious and the secular. That a prophet, that is a human being (regardless of the theological debates over the nature of Christ), literally embodies the central tenet of a religion, effectively explains the development over the course of centuries of an individual-centered civil society based on human rights. Stated differently, the Christian narrative worldview premised on events having occurred in the space and time of vision...
provided the necessary philosophical basis for Western modernity and modern secularism. It equally explicates the assumed link between face and polity and the constitutive nature granted to the embodied subjectivity and gaze of our human rather than Divine other (the face of Jesus became that of every individual). Even the sacrosanct status of contemporary art bears out the lasting effects of religious narratives on modern and contemporary culture. In the twentieth century, Max Weber, who once described viewing a religious icon as ‘the profoundest aesthetic experience that provides an answer to one’s seeking self,’ also recognized that modern art was ‘taking over the functions of a this-worldly salvation’ (Weber, 1957, p. 17; Weber, 1958/2009, p. 342).

Mondzain (2010) makes a convincing case for the pre-modern roots and historical continuity of western iconophilia. However, the author also relates the early logic of the image and vision or ‘scopic economy’ to the constitution of the (modern) subject. Basing herself on the fact of the subject’s impossibility to see him or herself in an unmediated manner and that the human being and God resemble each other through their image-producing capacity, she proposes that becoming an image through the other’s gaze inscribes the individual in the world:

If the question of identity is an inherent part of intersubjective operations, then it is thanks to the effects of an image-producing operation that subjects gain access to their visibility in the very same movement that designates this image of self as an image of, and for, the other. The image opens the field of our visibility up to us; the image is the gift of the other’s gaze on me at the moment I mourn autonomy and my power to constitute myself alone. The image is not an object and this is why I am a subject (Mondzain, 2010, p. 311).

That the seeing and being seen of the face and vision more generally are historically enmeshed with subjecthood recasts mainstream perceptions and legal bans of facial veiling. Transcending racism and xenophobia, the covering of the face touches something much deeper at the heart of identity, the cultural belief that ‘we need vision in order to be able to speak’ (Mondzain, 2010, p. 308). If seeing the other’s face constitutes a prerequisite for the subjectivity of both the seer and the seen, then it follows that a covered face could seemingly unstitch the foundational narratives of the Euro-American imaginary and its structuring of self.

The culturally and historically constituted Islamic scopic regime

Similarly, the Islamic view of the world contains no assumption that the world itself is fixed or stable. In Islamic aesthetics, no definitive final state of an artwork or of an utterance (as in criticism) is pursued as a value. (Jale Nejdet Erzen, 2007, p. 70)

Muslim female facial covering, regardless of discussions on its possible pre-Islamic origin, evidently relates to an Islam-inflected scopic regime. Positioning the former within the latter will suggest, by charting a culturally different conception of the relationship between vision and the world, alternative perceptions the face veil. In Islamic culture, meaning is considered to have been mediated largely through aurality rather than visuality because text – the Qur’an – and not a sacred prophetic body, forms its paradigmatic mystery and core. Although Muslims revere and deeply love the Prophet Muhammad, it is the text of the Revelation that, because considered to be the very words of God, has shaped the Muslim imaginary to a greater extent. This explains the centrality
of calligraphy to Islamic visual culture and the reason that calligraphy has often been compared with the icon in Christian art. Their conceptualization and function are similar. Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s (1987) description of calligraphy as ‘the external dress for the Word of God in the visible world’ but one ‘wedded to the world of the spirit’ (p. 18) is equally applicable to the Christian icon. Nonetheless, the different manifest emphases, textual and pictorial, are instructive. While text certainly becomes image in the art of calligraphy, and like the icon, constitutes a possible means to communicate with the Divine, the visual enactment of text is simultaneously more of an intellecction and an embodied experience. In looking at text as art, textuality and visuality are intertwined. This, along with the obvious integration of sound into the act of seeing, plots vision as kinaesthetic. Unlike Mondzain (2010), I do not consider that, in the largely aniconic religions like Islam and Judaism, ‘the visible is reduced to the authority of its legibility’ (p. 309). On the contrary, the recognition of the limitations of human sight (only God can see) and by extension cognition, even when framed in religious legal terms, can widen in some ways the scope and possibilities of sight and vision. The idea that ‘the relationships of humans to the world and human perceptions of it are not fixed, not codifiable, and cannot be captured using language that expresses generalized concepts’ plots sight as uncertain but also as multimodal and polysemous (Erzen, 2007, p. 70). It also recasts expectations of visibility including the physical visibility of others.

Text as visual object in some ways affords more room for subjective mediation than does a figurative image, even a non-mimetic, highly stylized, sacred one like a Byzantine icon because text, unlike image, is a visual acknowledgement of the very process of mediation. Stated differently, the regime of representation associated with traditional Islamic art and culture underlines rather than masks the interpretative processes producing sight. Vision is culturally defined as mediation and is thus, echoing modern reception theory, understood as being produced by the spectator. This cultural mapping of vision elucidates the largely aniconic nature of Islamic art. Certainly, Islamic art includes an important figurative dimension in all media, most notably in the long tradition of miniature painting but even here, it is subsumed as part of the arts of the book and, at least in the classical Persian tradition, the emphasis is on rendering the imaginal rather than the natural world. The figurative and sometimes even narrative imagery found in the Islamic decorative arts is usually integral to a larger decorative scheme and is, moreover, usually typified and non-realistic. In short, while the aniconic dimension of Islamic art might sometimes be exaggerated, aniconism nonetheless best defines Islamic art in that ornamental abstraction (structure) is privileged over figuration (narrative) and text rather than image holds iconic status.

The meaning of Islamic aniconism has been an object of contention in Islamic art historical scholarship. There emerged in the Islamic world, no textual scholarship equivalent to that of European art history and the European origin of the discipline of Islamic art history meant that art historians employed art historical methods that had been devised for culturally specific definitions of art, the image and representation, characterized by the synonymy of figuration and meaning, the notion of the objective eye and, more importantly, the idea of representation as a static image showing something recognizable. Art has been historically so conflated with the idea of figuration and narrativity that pre-modern non-western abstract system of signs have faced and continue to face misinterpretation (i.e. there is no meaning). For instance, Graham Howes who, advising that ‘in scrutinising religious art in any culture we have to take great care with our assumptions concerning the iconicity of religious symbols’, nonetheless confidently
asserts that ‘non-representational art has yet to project through its iconography, any universally intelligible symbolism’ (Howes, 2007, pp. 152–153). This incognizance of the cultural rather than universal production of vision and visual meaning – and in this case of its clear theological inflections – also clarifies why the preference for text and abstraction over image in Islamic culture is often framed as legal constraint rather than aesthetic choice: How else can a face-based culture explain a predilection for the ‘faceless’ image? Ascribing the dominant Islamic regime of representation solely to the admittedly ambiguous relationship of Islam to the image and the popular consensus amongst Muslims on the non-permissibility of representation ignores the more profound connections between a worldview and the system of vision, representation and aesthetic experience it begets.40

In Islamic aesthetics, mediation and movement trump mimesis and fixity. Vision is mapped as subjective and relative rather than as objective and universal. Recognizing Divine alterity as the single absolute viewing position acknowledges the multiplicity of possible viewing positions. Contemporary Muslim scholars continue to articulate this religiously-informed view of the visual. For example, Nabil Safwat (1996) discussing the hilya – a calligraphic portrait of the Prophet Muhammad – writes, ‘These images are, as it were, tailored to fit individual perceptions’ (p. 47). This conception of vision, however, finds its most apt visual metaphor in the sign of the veil, explaining the veil’s prevalence in Islamic culture, philosophy, poetry and art. As William Chittick (2008) notes, ‘vision is through the veil’ because reality is ultimately unknowable (p. 191). Only God sees without the veil of subjective and hence relative mediation and, unlike in the Christian theological narrative, it is impossible from an Islamic perspective to see God. Chittick (2008) explains: ‘To see God as He is in Himself would be to see God exactly as God sees God, and this is impossible for absolutely everything other than God’ (p. 190). Even the sole physical object necessary to the practice of Islam the Ka’aba evinces a visual system of meaning other than that inherent to the dominant Euro-American scopic regime. An empty cube-shaped structure veiled in black cloth, it can certainly not be characterized as monumental in the usual sense of term. The kiswa, the Ka’aba’s massive veil, monochrome except for Qur’anic verses embroidered in gold adorning its upper register, hides the large humble brick structure beneath. Apart from the relatively small amount of script, the metaphors of veiling, the absence of a recognizable object of vision and what might be called visual emptiness serve to mark as sacred the site which Islam considers to be the center of the earth and the spot in which the direct experience and presence of the Divine can be experienced. All three visual elements – veil, void and verse – are visually manifest but their seeming foreclosure of visibility does not evidently signify a foreclosure of meaning or meaningful aesthetic experience.

Because in Islam the Divine is not historical and did not take on a human form or face, it is imagined or experienced as beyond not only visibility but also representability. The void and its visual enactments including the veil can therefore carry a positive signification. Expressing the unknowability and unrepresentability of God, the (visual enactment of the) unseen points to rather than obscures the face of the Divine (metaphorically) imaged differently by each viewer. Akin to how the doctrine of the Incarnation still resonates in the collective gaze of a largely secular Euro-America, the core Islamic doctrine of tawhid – the indivisible oneness and distinctiveness of God – both shaped and continues to shape an Islam-inflected scopic regime. And much like the visibility and mystery of the face of Jesus was transferred unto that of each individual, structuring the modern Euro-American scopic regime and stringing image, art and being
into a particular relationship, the invisibility constituting the paradigmatic ‘image’ of Islam has also been ‘personalized,’ able to communicate not only the impossibility of representing the Divine, but also the limitations of representation, the separation of image and being (the one perceived as not able to contain the other), and the unknowability of the human self or other as can be seen in much contemporary art produced by Muslims.\textsuperscript{42}

The facially veiled Muslim woman carries a different set of evocations when she is positioned within a scopic regime premised on the very fact that ‘appearances are not realities … only part of them’ (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 41). If the face functions as a sign of constitutive alterity in a Christianity-inflected scopic regime, it is, on the contrary an alterity beyond representation that is key to the production of subjectivity in its Islamic counterpart.\textsuperscript{43} The willed occlusion from vision is not plotted as absence (of image) or lack but as a manner of calling attention to the different registers of being and image.

Conclusion: envisioning veiling across cultures

The image and the visible constantly designate one another as the locus of tension between what is shown too much and what is not seen enough. (Marie-José Mondzain, 2010, p. 309)

In this paper, I have argued that qualifying facial covering as ‘an obstacle or barrier to vision is already to assume a particular way of looking as norm’ (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 886). The intent, however, was not to engage in cultural criticism for its own sake but to articulate beyond polemics the deeper motives at work in mainstream Euro-American discourses on facially veiled Muslim women in order to activate the possibilities of seeing them from another and, as of yet, unexplored angle. Examining the sign of the facial veil cross-culturally in different scopic regimes demonstrated how embedded pre-modern religious master narratives continue to underwrite contemporary ways of seeing and how they clarify contrasting views on the face and face veil. Cultures map the relationship among vision, the world and (inter)subjectivity into a unique configuration, and the sight of a covered face is received differently according to whether a culture’s scopic regime lays claim to the (human) image or its impossibility as the ultimate signifier and defines seeing as a mostly internal or external event. Probing the ways in which history and culture have shaped vision has also uncovered the constitutive role vision plays in the formation of subjectivities, providing insight into how and why the debates around facial veiling are framed, in many contexts, in the urgent terms of the preservation of identity.

As stated in the introduction, the aim here has not been to promote or demote the veil but to abet its translation across regimes of visuality. The notion of translation does not mean equivalence between two things because something is always lost in the process. As Mieke Bal (2007) notes, it is ‘the translation, not the “original”’ that promises translatability, while adding that it is the intranslatable which enables the “translation to “work” at all’ (p. 110). This remainder – for which the niqab constitutes a most apt symbol – is at the heart of any act of communication. The translation of the facial veil offered here has been a cross-cultural articulation of the histories of vision and art focusing on the critical distance between dominant historically configured Euro-American and Islamic scopic regimes. However, future studies unpacking the facial veil’s mistranslation or untranslatability could pursue the act of translation by fleshing out how these cultural regimes of vision also intersect. Because both recognize at their root the co-existence and co-dependence of the seen and the unseen and because vision is
always ‘a product of the tensions between external images or objects, and internal thought processes,’ the differences in conceptions of visibility – bodily and facial visibility in particular – and of its relationship to subjects could be framed as ones of emphasis (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Again to quote Mieke Bal (2007) on vision, ‘the choice is not to see either fully shaped forms or to see nothing, but to “train” … a “visual habitus” … that enables us to learn to see what, by lack of recognizable form, seems invisible’ (p. 117). The veil’s seeming visual faceless silence could effectively be made visible – or rather intelligible – through Lévinas when he speaks of ‘the unknowable integrity of the Other’ or Mondzain when she puts forth that ‘seeing the image is equivalent to detecting, in the visible, the presence of an absence.’ The real question is therefore whether this unknowability and absence are bearable and whether they are experienced as lack or incommensurability of being. The veil may just be an aside.

Acknowledgments
I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canada, for supporting this research and thank Valérie Amiraux and Pascale Fournier for their useful comments and suggestions.

Notes
1. For the role played by the facial veil in the War on Terror, see footnote 18.
2. This study is based on a larger project examining images of facial veiling in the media which revealed not only a sameness to the images but that the same images are sometimes recycled at different intervals in the same publication and are found in publications from other countries and/or with different political affiliation. A good example of this recycling is the 2010 French National Front Party’s ‘Non à l’islamisme’ poster copying the Swiss People’s Party 2009 anti-minaret poster. Both show a dark-skinned woman in black niqab and ‘abaya beside a map of the respective country out of which emerge missile-like minarets. This being said, there is evidently much to be gleaned from studying the specificities of the laws and their national contexts. For a discussion and comparison between the laws, see the works of Hewitt and Koch (2011) and of van der Schyff and Overbeeke (2011).
3. Khiabany and Williamson (2008), drawing upon the work of Fekete, discuss how the trend of assimilation has also been couched in terms tailored to each context, for example, ‘standards and values’ in the Netherlands, the ‘cultural barrier’ in Sweden and France, ‘Leitkultur’ in Germany, and ‘community cohesion’ in the UK, and so on.
4. See also Gündüz (2010). Multiculturalism also has vocal critics because of the ghettoization it produces and the maintenance of asymmetrical power relations between the majority and the minority communities.
5. Others frame Islamophobia through the lens of racialization and religious racism.
6. It is impossible to list all the works here but I can note that the veil has been broached by sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, as well by researchers working in the area of cultural, postcolonial, feminist, Islamic and even fashion studies.
7. Its instrumentalization in Islamic communities and/or polities, while an important topic, is not broached here for reasons of length.
8. The expression ‘specular panic’ (and not the idea on the veil) is from Silverman (1995).
9. For the relationship between religion and law, see Fitzpatrick (2007). My argument is that Christian religious narratives in fact enabled and informed the Enlightenment. Islamophobia has made the covert Christianity of modernity more overt. As Marranci (2004) writes: ‘The idea of Islam that challenges and threatens the Western values and life-styles facilitates the misrepresentation of Europe as a Christian monolithic entity’ elucidating ‘the increasing pressure, coming from different socio-political actors of Europe, to acknowledge the Christian values and heritage of Europe’ (p. 110).
10. As I have mentioned elsewhere, this approach can be called ‘aesthetic phenomenology’, an expression used by Gonzalez (2001). On the subject, see also Behiery (2012a).
11. Cultures are plural and complex communities composed of contradictory and competing discourses as are the scopic regimes they beget. ‘Western’ versus ‘Islamic’ ways of seeing thus evidently refers to dominant or central cultural visual practices. To emphasize that I am discussing dominant scopic regimes, I can cite Jay (1993a) who has convincingly articulated the important tradition of anti-ocularcentric postures in French philosophy, pointing to a shared ambivalence towards vision – and hence representation – and the possibility of visual heteroglossia it suggests.

12. The best recent visual example of the burqa’s role in this is no doubt the poster issued by the Belgian extreme right Vlaams Belang party as part of their ‘Women against Islamization’ campaign. The photograph shows An-Sofie Dewinter, the party leader’s daughter, wearing a face veil, her black ‘abaya opened up to reveal her bikini-clad body. The inscription running across her chest reads ‘Freedom or Islam’ while that situated on the bikini bottom states ‘You choose!’ See Rick Dewsbury (2012).

13. Brown, discussing the positioning of ‘near-nakedness’ as choice and ‘compulsory veiling’ as oppressive, writes ‘what makes choices freer when they are constrained by secular and market organization of femininity and fashion rather than by state or religious law?’ In short, assuming that women informed by the secular narratives of Western modernity are necessarily freer agents than those functioning within different cultural paradigms is to reaffirm the blindness at work in the burqa bans, namely that western culture is normative and universal. See also, for example, Yegenoglu (1998, p. 115) and Hirschmann (1998).

14. As Habermas has underlined in his talks and articles on post-secularism, secularism has been the exception and as such a minoritarian phenomenon globally-speaking (Habermas, 2006).

15. This can equally be applied to the bodily and/or facial visibility of Muslim women in Muslim-majority contexts which is not addressed here. Seeking control over vision and the image is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Mondzain (2010) discusses the visible as a site of an important historical power struggle in Europe in which ‘ecclesiastic power was struggling to defeat imperial power,’ adding that the Church ‘sought to maintain … a monopoly over the visible and a monopoly over the invisible’ (p. 309). Sumptuary laws also possess a long history and were not limited to the West. See Robert Ross (2008).

16. Gündüz (2010) discusses the process and purpose of securitization, ‘Securitization entails the construction of a threat that requires quick change. By securitizing an issue, public authorities present it as a danger to the very existence, which necessitates emergent responses and actions that go way beyond the normal political procedures’ (p. 41).


18. The framing of these images and events and of the sometimes violent reactions to them depend on the metonymy of the image whereby an individual or a group signify a whole world community. For texts on the Danish cartoons, see Collins and Douglass (2013) and Klausen (2009).


20. As vision is habitual, the visionscape of where one lives can also shift seeing habits and hence the discourses informing them. This could explain in part why the hijab, now fairly prevalent in Western cities, is no longer as effective as a sign of Muslim otherness and backwardness. This has changed the media’s focus to the more minority practice of facial covering.

21. I have opted to sometimes reproduce the reductive and hyperbolic term of ‘burqa’ because it is the term often employed for the niqab and facial veiling more generally in Euro-American media. More significantly, it only further corroborates my argument of an overarching Neo-Orientalism underwriting the bans on facial veils.


23. These images also fed into the view of Muslims as fanatical masses of religious extremists.

24. The idea of knowing without deliberation is also found in the sociological notion of ‘ordinary knowledge.’ I thank Valérie Amiraux who, drawing upon the ideas of Alfred Schutz, explains that ‘ordinary knowledge makes us able to make sense of the surrounding world, to decode-code-encode it’, adding specifically with regards to the producer or viewer of the Photo of the
Year that ‘the ability to see or sense this bridge between two visual cultures is embedded in the set of competences that ordinary people carry with them’ (V. Amiraux, Personal communication, 1 July 2012).

25. As Bill Ashcroft (2001) notes, it was Edward Said who best established how Orientalist discourse informed the production of knowledge in Euro-America and succeeded in othering the orient ‘whose very difference from the Occident helps establish that binary opposition by which Europe’s own identity and cultural dominance can be shaped’ (p. 38).

26. Several interesting studies are devoted to the analysis of a single image. For one treating a charity’s use of the image of the Afghan burqa and its removal to convey the West as saviour, see Edwards (2007).

27. If seeing is plotted as knowing in western modernity, one can suggest that there can exist within the necessitous desire to see others, a sincere willingness to know the other. This could explain why in some instances the visions of the Muslim world articulated by colonialists or, on the contrary, by Muslims sometimes intersect. The question of how to know and position oneself with regards to the other remains a central unanswered question at the heart of postcolonial theory.

28. Who controls the gaze matters as it secures the power to shape the production of knowledge, historical narratives and the consensual ‘point of view’ on things and events. This explains why it has been central to both feminist and postcolonial studies. Ashcroft (2001) has effectively defined postcolonialism as the ‘struggle over representation’ and the contestation of ‘the representation of the dominated by the dominant’ (pp. 5, 40).

29. The desired or enforced compulsory visibility of Muslim female bodies has only increased with the growing securitization since 9/11 and the Euro-American sense of a loss of identity due to a whole host of factors: changing demographics, the challenge plural and deterritorialized identities pose to nation states, economic woes, the weakening of the middle classes and the growing power of political and financial elites as well as the unstoppable rise of non-western superpowers. Identitarian insecurity makes the inferior racialized other all the more constitutive of identity, explaining further the entrenchment and proliferation of a system of signs – including that of the burqa – marking otherness as well as the reactive reflex of banning these markers.

30. Some bans have been sought using this premise oblivious to the irony of the growing proclivity for non-visual based and thus non-face-to-face human interactions.

31. Lévinas acknowledged the expressivity of other individual features such as speech, gesture, action and embodied presence but considered the face the most expressive and vulnerable aspect of the other’s presence.

32. Saint John of Damascus also considered icons as containing ‘a mystery’ and as ‘vessels of Divine energy and grace,’ claiming their mediative role between heaven and earth as their justification. See John of Damascus (1980, p. 84).

33. Howes (2007), in his work on art and the sacred, agrees, stating that for the iconophiles ‘the practice of painting Christ … was the obvious way of taking the Incarnation seriously,’ adding that the latter ‘legitimated Early Christian art, making possible the visualization of God’ (p. 8).

34. That this possesses a contemporary resonance is adduced by the phenomenal success of the exhibition, Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ, organized by London’s National Gallery in 2000. The show, underscoring the centrality of the face and its continued association with meaning and knowledge, was visited by hundreds of thousands of people, breaking box-office records in an age defined as secular.

35. See footnote 8 for references.

36. The image in the guise of art has actually come to replace religion as a coded system of signification and self-knowledge.

37. Akin to the discussion on the Euro-American modern scopic economy, I am here discussing the dominant Islamic or Islam-inflected regime of vision to the extent that it has survived or remained sought after in an age of satellite television and hence constant bombardment of figurative and narrative driven modes of visibility and visibility. That it still exists is witnessed by the fact that many contemporary artists produce work that, consciously or not, employs what could only be termed an Islamic aesthetic despite the arguments of authors such as Oliver Leaman (2004) who refute the existence of such a phenomenon.
38. This has a Western counterpart in the ideas of and attitudes towards images of the Protestant Reformation.

39. Here I part ways with Mondzain who positions the aniconism of both Judaism and Islam as solely negative: ‘It was in the name of this degradation of a subject who undermined his own divinity that the orders to prohibit and destroy images were pronounced,’ adding that such traditions chose ‘binary logics whose terms exclude one another (the visible cannot be invisible).’

40. So while there exists a degree of intersection between the views of early medieval European iconoclasts and Muslim clergy and laymen on the image, this should not mask the fact that an alternative model of visuality and art emerged in Islam that need not be perceived as denying the visible world but rather as a system of visual signs in its own right.

41. He also writes: ‘Calligraphy presents the thought as the source of the image not the image as the source of the thought.’

42. The same concept of vision is at work in historical representations of the Prophet Muhammad, at least in Sunni contexts. If there exist some pictorial representations of the Prophet in illuminated Muslim manuscripts, post-1500 there develops a reticence towards fully depicting the Prophet, the images show in lieu of the Prophet’s face, his name, a flaming aureole or a white veil. These luxury books, veritable works of art, circulated in insular court and other elite milieus in which scholars propose that theological attitudes towards images would have had little effect, the ‘visual veiling’ of Muhammad thus also evinces the indissociability among religious discourse, vision, and representation and points to the existence of non-Euro-American concepts of the human face (Gruber, 2009).

43. From another perspective, this commerce of gazes is not experienced as constitutive. To the contrary, it is deemed as taking from rather than adding to the self. Women who wear the face veil limit intersubjective scopic interactions in the public sphere. If alterity is indeed constitutive, for these women it consists of one found within God, themselves or their immediate family. Even when the niqab is worn out of custom rather than religion, it relates to the regime of visuality that emerged in Islamic culture. The semi-withdrawal from visibility, the freedom from the other’s gaze (or from her own reflected image) and the images intrinsic to it are thus construed as constitutive.

References


