

# THE VEIL AS NATIONAL ALLEGORY: CINEMA, VISUAL ARTS, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL TROPE OF FABRIC

Walid El Khachab

*York University*

For many decades, cinema has been the predominant modern medium for constructing national self-images, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (“Introduction” 9). One may assign this role, by extension, to other types of audiovisual culture. Since the Iranian revolution, the trope of the (Islamic) veil, particularly in cinema and on TV, has been considered a national allegory defining Middle Eastern cultures. Shohat, Hamid Naficy, and Faegheh Shirazi, among other scholars, have critiqued discourses on the cinematic veil, which they view as either exoticizing or patronizing Middle Eastern women. This criticism can be extended to representations of the veil in visual arts and in popular culture. This article will not engage with readings of the veil as a sign of male oppression and/or oversexualization. Rather, this essay discusses instances in which the agency of the veil is more complex than merely a propaganda icon to rally conservative Muslims or mobilize groups wary of the increasing presence of “non-Western” visual signs in the public sphere.

243

The veil is defined here as fabric used in conjunction with the human body in order to enhance or control its eroticism, to organize a social space, to produce a national self-image, or to metaphorically stimulate a particular experience of knowledge. Taking various examples from cinema and visual arts, I argue that the veil is not an exclusive Islamic paradigm, nor a female-only issue. It defines a specific experience of knowledge and hence specific “national” cultures. The first part of this article surveys several aspects of the cinematic agency of fabric as a major cultural-specific trope; in other words, as a veil in the broad sense outlined above. The second part focuses on the particular case of the trope of fabric in the cinematic manufacturing of Palestinian identity. The third part is centered on visual arts, specifically photography, exploring the motif of the veil as an epistemological metaphor, both as an interface with the Sacred and as a postcolonial marker of identity.

This article proposes two hypotheses about the cultural agency of the veil. First, I argue the existence of a repertoire of the functions and effects of the trope of the veil in cinema, in terms of its eroticism, and its roles as an organizer of cinematic space and as an icon of Middle Eastern national identities embodied in their respective national cinemas. Second, I propose that the veil is an epistemological metaphor that defines two opposed paradigms: the Greek and the Semitic. One represents the total unveiling and total exposure of truth, transcendence, and knowledge; the other represents the dialectic of covering/uncovering, in which knowledge is always defined by a positioning towards transcendence and the dialectics of veiling/unveiling are the complex play that leads to knowledge. The veil, therefore, is not only about uncovering, but also about covering in order to know better.

244 The veil refers here not only to the Islamic *hijab*, but more generally to fabric, or the visual effect of fabric, that is used to articulate either the modesty or the eroticism of the human body, of any gender. It is fabric that articulates space, filters light to produce various effects and affects, functions as meta-skin for erotic or anti-erotic purposes, and signifies social segregation or hierarchialization. In this broad understanding of the trope, the veil can be transparent muslin surrounding beds, fabric covering the female body, belly dancers' outfits revealing the thighs and the abdomen, or curtains separating the ruler from the rest of the court. What all of these veils have in common is the agency or the effect of fabric, not the particular use of fabric in one conservative understanding, among many others, in a particular culture. In fact, the argument of this paper is not a widening of the veil's semantic scope, but rather a restoration of the diversity originally expressed by the word *veil* in English and *voile* in French, as opposed to *hijab* in Arabic. Where the European words imply both hiding and revealing at the same time, the Arabic word stems from a semantic root meaning *covering* or *hiding from sight*.

## THE BODY AND THE VEIL

Up to the present, discussion of the veil in film and media studies has focused exclusively on the representation of the covered (female) body, condemning either the orientalist emphasis on the veil as an "othering" mechanism in North American and European visual representations of the Orient (see Shirazi; Shohat), or the repression implied by the imposition of the veil on the female body, as in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema (see Bailey and Tawadros). Political events at the dawn of the twenty-first century, such as the 9/11 attacks on the United States, have reinforced this double focus on the visual significance of the veil. I will address this trope in two directions that are not comprehensively covered by current scholarship on the cinematic veil or the veil as produced in visual arts, and will consider the veil as a cultural and social marker and organizer of the cinematic space, chiefly in Middle Eastern films as opposed to Western ones, and as a defining icon of some national

cultures, particularly those in the Middle East.

In her essay “The Cinematics of the Veil,” Faegheh Shirazi reviews the two main attitudes toward the veil in cinema and media studies: either as a condemnation of the orientalist construction of the veiled body, as an eroticized, exoticized Other, such as in Bertolucci’s *The Sheltering Sky*, or as a condemnation of the body politics underlying the covering, viewed as a repressive macho behaviour, such as in many Iranian films produced since the Islamic Revolution. Ella Shohat’s scholarship is an example of the first type (see “Gender and Culture”; *Unthinking Eurocentrism*). In her analysis of colonial cinema and cinema heavily marked by colonial culture, she deconstructs assumptions about the colonized, which are always feminized and often represented as radical subaltern others, through many visual strategies, chief among them the representation of the veiled woman. Together with postcolonial scholarship, feminist contributions tend to view the veil in audiovisual productions as part of the multicultural global society and/or the diasporic component of that society (see Macdonald; Weber).

245

Hamid Naficy’s account of the metamorphosis of the veil in the recent history of Iranian cinema demonstrates the repressive significance of the veil, which, he argues, is part of a wider male strategy aimed at making the female presence invisible by covering the female body and banning the female gaze itself. Naficy explains that actresses could not gaze into the camera during the early years of the Islamic revolution in Iran and could not challenge the strict code of the veil. Yet, he identifies resistance strategies implemented by filmmakers to subvert the male control of both the female gaze and the female body in Iranian cinema, which include the choice of contexts in which some parts of the female body are not strictly covered, such as in some nomadic societies (Bailey and Tawadros). With this, he joins the broader understanding of “unveiling” in radical feminism as defiance of male oppression, a sentiment shared by Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Both Naficy’s and Shirazi’s discussions of the cultural significance of the cinematic veil emphasize its dynamic symbolic value in Iranian cinema. These analyses show that film represents this artefact at the crossroads of many negotiation processes in which women strive to carve their own spaces as filmmakers and as actresses/characters on the screen. Women do so either by accepting some rules of modesty that frame their bodies in exchange for more freedom to engage in employment and study, or by non-confrontationally resisting the strict dress code of the Islamic Republic. Naficy argues that although the veil in Iranian cinema was originally an ideological constraint, it can also be an erogenous agent, either when the actress wearing it challenges the rule of fabric covering the whole female body, or when she uses the fabric as a means of seduction. Shirazi further discusses various examples of this function of the veil in both Indian and Iranian cinemas. What neither of these authors addresses, however, is the fact that the veil exceeds the realm of covering the female body for the purpose of modesty, and that it is a transnational cinematic trope, not only Iranian (Bailey and Tawadros) and not only Muslim (Shirazi). Macdonald, in

turn, makes the connection between the Muslim woman's veil and Salome's, only to focus on the erotic unspoken underlying the Western obsession with the former. Yet, when the veil is mentioned, it is reminiscent not only of the female Muslim body, but also of Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils. This character has been the object of many studies in cinema and in theatre. However, no article has yet been centred on the agency of Salome's veils. In Mathew Bernstein's and Gaylyn Studlar's collection of essays on orientalism in cinema, Salome is addressed as an icon of female empowerment, and the erotic effect of the veiling/revealing function of her veils is barely mentioned. Both Saura's and Russell's cinematic accounts of Salome remind us that the erotic agency of the fabric lies in its rapport with the human body. Furthermore, these films show how the veil organizes space, not merely in terms of separating the court from the outer world, but also in terms of delineating the space of fiction from the space of "reality," the realm of fiction always marked spatially by the veil, as in Ken Russell's *Salomé's Last Dance*.

- 246** In postcolonial and feminist accounts of Middle Eastern national cinemas, the veil is mentioned as a prop referring to the exotic or subaltern status of the female or of colonized subjects (see Karriker; Khatib). There is still a need to address the veil, as fabric organizing space or as meta-skin for erotic or anti-erotic purposes, as an emblem of Middle Eastern national cinemas and, to a certain extent, Asian cinemas. The overwhelming presence of the veil is a factor defining the specificity of these national cinemas, as an element of female costuming, a gender barrier, and an architectural agent that organizes the cinematic space. As it is less obvious than the others, the veil as architectural agent of the cinematic space will be discussed further.

## CINEMA AND VEILS

The veil functions as a cultural and social marker of space. It is not only a material covering that eroticizes a body, but also also an agent that symbolically defines and hierarchicizes space. One such example is the transparent curtains that separate the emperor from commoners in historical epics such as Niazi Mustafa's *Bani Hamdan Cavalier*. In this Egyptian film, set in the Syrian Middle Ages, access to the king is always defined by the ability to cross the line of a muslin curtain. In Zhang Yemou's *The Curse of the Golden Flower*, the king's "transcendence" is similarly represented by the emperor's throne surrounded by muslin. In Muhsin Makhmalbaf's film *Gabbeh*, the covering of the female body is not the (only) major event involving textile and flesh. Instead, what is at stake is the constant presence of non-transparent cloth, rugs, and curtains that organize, orientalize, and eroticize the whole space through their interaction with the camera, mainly by acting as filters of light and of forms. By functioning as screens "within" the image projected on the cinema screen, veils are instrumental in the play of light and shadow, and help to underscore the erotic nature of certain cinematic images. However, their ultimate function is to define and

differentiate spaces, whether the space of royalty opposed to that of the commoners, or the space of intimacy contrasted with public or social spaces.

Paradoxically, Western cinemas use transparent veils for similar effects. In Joseph Menckiewicz's *Cleopatra*, for example, Antony is unable to reach Cleopatra before he "deflowers" the veil surrounding the Egyptian queen's bed. Beyond the orientalist sexual metaphor, the cinematic space is here constantly structured by veils, separating the private from the public and the dream from reality. The "veil effect" can also be produced in cinema with light, shadow, and smoke instead of actual fabric, as in the fortune teller scene in Richard Boleslavski's *The Garden of Allah*, in which the earthly world is veiled by smoke, so as to enable the camera to access the world of the unknown. As such, we may question whether the veil is, or is not, a defining element of "oriental" national cinemas such as that of Iran. In Muhsin Makhmalbaf's films, the use of fabric in space seems to define a national aesthetics. It seems legitimate to ask whether Middle Eastern cinemas, as in the case of the Iranian Makhmalbaf, are informed by the "textile mentality" that Lisa Golombek identifies in Islamic art and architecture (see Golombek and Subtelny). My argument is that in both Middle Eastern and Chinese cinemas, a textile mentality prevails, so that the relationship of fabric to décor and to the actors' bodies is present more than in Western and other cinematic traditions.

247

The overwhelming presence of the veil makes it a defining specificity in Middle Eastern national cinemas, in much the same way that the perspective of fourteenth-century Italian painting defines the aesthetics of the frame's depth in Western national cinemas. The presence of the veil in Iranian films exceeds by far Hollywood's representations of the Orient that focus on the veiled body and on the presence of the veil in space, such as *The Thief of Baghdad*, *Sinbad*, and most of the *Arabian Nights* movies. However, the transnational nature of world cinemas today (Durovicova and Newman) is also underscored by certain usages of the veil that are simultaneously embedded in a national culture and reaching out to a universal significance. This is the case in Sherin Neshat's films, for example, in which the veil is viewed both as an Iranian/Islamic prop and a universal visual metaphor (Ebrahimian; Gagnon et al.; Moore).

Beyond national allegories, the metaphor of "veiled world/revealed by film" is present in many film theories, but has not yet been discussed in a comprehensive manner that places the trope of the veil at the centre of theory. The veil as a trope defines not only the specificity of certain national cinemas, but also helps to reflect on film theory in general. Synthesizing and discussing theorists' use of the epistemological trope of the veil in film theory is a new direction in scholarship, though it is beyond the purview of this article. We may note here, however, that the viewer's/camera's agency as revelation is part of the backbone of Western thought, stretching from Greek philosophy to the age of the Enlightenment, understanding nature and the world as a veiled arena, a realm covered by the veil of Isis, that is unveiled by philosophy in ancient times, or by reason in the modern era, in order to reach the

truth (see Hadot).

Cinema, through the agency of the camera, can be understood as a process of revelation, of unveiling reality. The metaphor of revelation is omnipresent in the works of film theorists preoccupied both with the materiality of cinema and with its magical or metaphysical properties (see e.g. Balazs; Faure; Kracauer). This paradox of a materialist approach to cinema founded on the mystical metaphor of removing the veil is exemplified by Kracauer's contention that, thanks to the agency of film, the "redemption of physical reality" is reachable via the camera's revelation of the surface of things. Indeed, the discussion of the veil metaphor in film theory needs engagement with recent scholarship challenging the assumption that the world is "hidden" by a veil only removed by the camera's eye, or by the agency of the celluloid transparent veil of film. Deleuzian theory based on the assumption of the quasi-immediacy of the viewer's perception of film can be helpful for such an endeavour. The veil, as a national allegory, is an epistemological metaphor that defines two opposed paradigms: the Greek and the Semitic. The former is based on unveiling as exposure of truth; the latter on the dialectic of covering and uncovering as the complex play that leads to knowledge.

## TEXTILE PALESTINE: THE POLITICS OF FABRIC AND THE IMAGINED NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Traditional Palestinian dress is undoubtedly one of the significant images and icons confirming the materiality of Palestine as a nation in many areas of knowledge production such as anthropology and history, and in cultural production such as artifact exhibitions and film. Virtually every cultural event celebrating Palestinian heritage includes a fashion show featuring distinct traditional Palestinian dress, part of a tradition that is at minimum 150 years old. Fabric artifacts, such as rugs and dresses, are an important feature of cinematic Palestine, at least since Costa Gavras's *Hanna K*, a French production, and Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee*, a Belgian production, up to Tahani Rashed's *Sourayda: A Woman from Palestine*, a National Film Board of Canada production. These serve as metonymies of what it means to be Palestinian, reminiscent of paradise lost and reminders of a Palestinian cultural identity struggling against oblivion and imperialist cultural erasure. I use the term *cinematic Palestine* and not *Palestinian cinema*, because I am referring to images and representations of Palestine in films from different national cinemas. In these films, the motifs of "national dress" act as metaphors of homeland, as icons of national and cultural identity, and as magic meta-skin, in all cases feminizing Palestine. The following section discusses several strategies framing the agency of fabric that fill in for the absence of nationhood and statehood. The major poetic process at stake is the magic transformation of textile into an ersatz skin, which places homeland in the province of the female body, not in abstract representations such as maps, or ideas

of identity.

The literature from the broader field of national cinemas and specifically from the scholarship on Palestinian cinema pays little to no attention to the metaphor of fabric or to the agency of dresses (see e.g. Dabashi; Khatib). National cinema studies seem to focus on the interaction between the film and the sociopolitical context, treating the film more as a historical document than as a poetic object. Contrarily, I adopt an approach to film that deals with poetics—the poetics of fabric and dresses—while confirming that poetics and politics are not separate realms. My hypothesis is that Palestinian dress in cinema is not simply an allegory or an embodiment of the nation, but functions as a magic skin that gives life to the nation, once it is “incarnated” by the female body that wears it. Like spirits that come to life once their particular dresses are worn by a worshipper, the spiritual Palestinian nation comes to life once the Palestinian female body is covered by its traditional dress. It is this transfiguration, this “resurrection” of the nation through fabric, that makes it a living threat to the forces of colonialism in the Middle East.

249

### WEDDING IN GALILEE

Cinema showcases a powerful correspondence between the trope of the national folkloric dress and the landscape. Both are material traces of the national self, and each in its own right is a face of Palestine. The production of the imagined nation of Palestine in film is often associated with idyllic landscapes and a profusion of fabric artifacts, such as dresses. Films that celebrate being Palestinian almost always pay homage to an idyllic Palestinian landscape through establishment or long shots, often using the dolly, particularly in travelling shots, in glorious fields or gardens.

The moment at which the magnificent Arabian horse ventures alone into a superb field plagued with land mines in Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee* is an iconic sequence that exemplifies this function. The old mayor of the Palestinian village “whispers” to his horse and guides it from a distance to safety. This scene in which the man “speaks” to the animal and displays an ancient knowledge of the landscape is an allegory of the age-old roots of Palestine and Palestinians, connecting the human to nature in that part of the world. What is more, the film frames the field as a large surface of unified colors, as if it were fabric. One could easily draw parallels between the color and ornamentation patterns in the images of the field and in traditional Palestinian dress. The allegory of the mystical communion between human and nature invites a political reinterpretation as proof of the legitimacy of the Palestinians' claim over the land of Palestine they have inhabited for centuries, to the point that they can speak the tongue of animals and know its landscape by heart. This allegory is doubled with a metaphor: the landscape is fabric, and it looks like a traditional Palestinian dress. As such, it also invites a political interpretation: the landscape and the traditional motifs of fabric are additional historical and anthro-

pological proof of the Palestinians' claim to their land and a confirmation of their cultural identity.

Nationalist, anti-colonial, or pro-Palestinian romantic films produce this Palestinian landscape according to the aesthetics of traditional fabric and decorative handicrafts. These films reinforce the trope of the (female) body wrapped in fabric as a metaphor of the "authentic" nation, and that of the nation's landscape as a textile-like surface bearing both "authentic" distinctive decorations and marks that represent history. I have argued elsewhere that the production of Israel-Palestine in cinema, structured around the motif of landscape, falls into two categories: territorial nationalist films and aterritorial or non-territorial films. The first category of films pays homage to landscape as a postcard, beautifying a national territory; the second explores the metaphysical and transcendental dimensions of landscape through the camera, without embracing a national ideology. The landscape in non-territorial films is comparable to a cinematic textile, as a subject produced following the patterns of production, ornamentation, and social circulation of fabric artifacts.

250

The most significant effect of the Palestinian dress is incarnating the nation. But this incarnation becomes effectively threatening when the body of the nation, through its fabric-extension, swallows the Other. One of the most powerful scenes in Khleifi's *Wedding* is one in which the Israeli female officer who attends the Palestinian wedding feels dizzy from the heat and the joyful clamour of the guests. She is invited to rest inside a Palestinian house, in which the Arab women help her remove her tight military gear and give her a traditional Palestinian dress, which is comfortable and ample. The scene is structured and filmed in a way that conveys a sort of trance into which the soldier enters, particularly when she wears the Palestinian dress. When she looks at herself wearing the dress, she seems enchanted by the experience and comfortable with the greeting she receives from the Arab women. The latter seem to be happy to see her dressed "like one of theirs." The Israeli commanding officer searches the Arab house until he finds the female officer, about whom he is worried. When he sees her in a Palestinian dress, he angrily orders her to take it off and get back into her uniform.

Discussing instances in which a camera can be politically subversive and supportive of radical feminist politics, Mary Ann Doane observes, "The simple gesture of directing a camera toward a woman has become equivalent to a terrorist act" ("Woman's Stake" 216). Likewise, in Khleifi's film, showing a Palestinian dress has become, in a way, a terrorist act in that its symbolic power is perceived by the commanding officer as "political violence," which is the technical and most commonly accepted definition of terrorism. One can interpret the fabric in the scene as a magical skin that is the equivalent to the surface of the land. The Israeli female officer wearing the dress/"ersatz Palestinian land" is, in a way, becoming Palestinian, entering into the Other's skin, as the French expression has it. However, this scene can also be interpreted as the dress/magical skin swallowing the Israeli Other, thus the commanding Israeli officer's anger at the scene.

The powerful symbolism of Palestinian fabric/dresses/skin/landscape is politically potent in both literal and metaphorical senses. The “hysteria” surrounding the agency of fabric and national attires is not gendered, because the *keffiyia*, a traditional male headgear in Palestine, is also subject to censorship. The *keffiyia* is worn by women, usually as scarves or shawls, but originally was a piece of men’s clothing worn as headgear or as a scarf. More than once in the early years of the twenty-first century, controversies arose when this mainly male Palestinian scarf became visible in the Western public sphere. When actor Colin Farrell wore it and several photos of him in *keffiyia* surfaced online, he was the subject of a vicious campaign whose rationale was that wearing this traditional Palestinian accessory equated to aiding Palestinian extremist organizations, even though the accessory is an identity icon rather than the emblem of a particular organization. A Dunkin Donuts ad in which the pitchwoman, Rachael Ray, was shown wearing a *keffiyia* received similar opposition.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AS A POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD

In *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, Edward Said discusses a casual incident that serves as a reminder of the symbolic power of fabric artifacts. He comments on an account in the *New York Magazine* “on a national costume show of forty nations put on by UNESCO at its Paris headquarters. Included was a display of Palestinian embroidered dresses, the kind that have always been made and worn by Palestinian women” (72). Said was dismayed that the title of the piece was “‘Terrorist Couture,’ presumably because as a member of UNESCO, the PLO was responsible for supplying the exhibit of Palestinian dresses” (72). He proceeds to analyze the journalist’s discourse as follows:

First of all, we are led to believe that the Palestinians never had folk, popular, or authentic native costumes; the dresses exhibited are only the Sunday dress-ups of the upper middle class. [...] Finally, the small picture of one of these costumes is not allowed to speak for itself. It is described as “upper middle class” by an unnamed “expert,” and just in case the point of the PLO—UNESCO deceit is missed, the whole discussion is herded under the rubric of “terrorist couture.” (72)

Said’s critique of the journalist’s bias unmasks the stakes of the latter’s comments on a national costume show. The journalist attempts to deny the dresses their folkloric character by falsely attributing them to upper middle class and not to the *Volk*, and pointing to the political potency of the fabric by associating it with terrorism. Said’s conclusion is that the journalist’s strategy attempts to claim, “There are no Arab Palestinians” (72). His further assertion that “the picture is indeed of a Palestinian woman’s dress, that it is a kind made and used by all classes, and that there exists an extensive anthropological and folkloric literature on such dresses, almost any item of which would have confirmed the PLO’s fulfillment of UNESCO’s charge that costumes should be national, popular, genuine” (73-75) points to the debate shaping

on the battlefield of anthropology: a political battle in which each side uses anthropological arguments to support their claim. Palestinians use their centuries-old fashion tradition to prove that they have a textile/clothing culture with an established folklore that materializes a specific national identity and *Volksgeist*, predating the establishment of the state of Israel on their own land. Forces hostile to Palestinian national claims deny the long history and the widespread nature of that fashion tradition as a means to question the existence of Palestine and Palestinians as a nation with their own traditions. Discussion of the folkloric nature of Palestinian dresses is not an arcane debate among amateur anthropologists, but a battle for symbolism and for authenticity as materialized in fashion, since authenticity in this case is also a political argument justifying the right of Palestinians to statehood. Edward Said's reflections also point to the agency of visibility, of the dress, and of visual media contributing to the face off with the colonial cultural erasure of the signs of Palestinian identity. In his keynote address to the Palestinian Film Festival, *Dreams of a Nation*, reproduced as a preface in Hamid Dabashi's book of the same title, Said says, "the whole history of the Palestinian struggle has to do with the desire to be visible" (2); he then refers to an article in Haartz by Amira Haas: "You can drive along and never see an Arab" (2). Said further links the Palestinian effort to reclaim visibility through cinema to an "attempt to articulate a national narrative" (5). The trope of the dress is an original effort to produce Palestinianness, not by weaving a narrative as per the traditional Arabic expression, but by way of a monad. Palestinian dresses have a story that is not told, but given in a glance.

### *SORAIDA: A WOMAN OF PALESTINE*

The Canadian film *Soraida: A Woman of Palestine*, directed by Tahani Rached, provides an illustration of the monadic nature of Palestinian traditional dresses and of the agency of their visuality. A production of the National Film Board of Canada, *Soraida* is a complex example of the play of nationalism, the political poetics of landscape, and the aesthetics of fabric. It places the nostalgic aesthetics of traditional fabric in opposition to the harshness of modern urban landscapes of cities under siege. The film depicts the experience of siege from a Palestinian woman's point of view, by documenting the daily life of Palestinian social activist Soraida in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank during a period of blockade imposed on the area by Israeli forces of occupation in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Even as it promotes a discourse of peaceful resistance to the occupation, as articulated in Soraida's testimony, the film deconstructs the romantic assumptions of a Palestinian Golden Age. Closeups and real-time shots of Soraida narrating her experiences are juxtaposed with long shots of claustrophobic rooms and packed houses, with the presence of Israeli forces established by the sounds of their armoured vehicles and of shots fired in the night. These frames shatter the nostalgia produced by

idyllic long shots of the Palestinian landscape in the early twentieth century that appear in films such as Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee*.

In an important scene in the film, we see Soraida standing in front of her mirror in a long shot. She wears a traditional gown that belonged to her grandmother and she says, as though whispering to herself, that she feels her Palestinian heritage coming to life when she wears her family dress. Here, wearing the dress gives life to history, and the scene could be understood as an illustration of the concept of "revival." The idea of Palestine comes to life and takes on a living body, that of Soraida, and becomes incarnated in the dress that bears the colours of Palestine. The metaphor becomes evident when we remember the earlier metaphor of the Palestinian landscape/surface of the earth represented in Palestinian traditional dress. At first, this folkloric gown segment suggests an agency that deromanticizes and secularizes identity through a critique of the aesthetics of the fabric. Rached's film would seem, then, to introduce a new treatment of a cinematic motif and a radical political vision. This vision appears to be turned towards the urgency of the moment (the blockade and curfew imposed by occupation forces) and to a dystopian hope, free from the conservative aesthetics of a lost past; only the dress, present in the moment, bears a fragment of the metaphysics of identity and of hope in survival, rather than in idealistic models of wholesome nationhood. However, a careful consideration of the traditional gown sequence in *Soraida* shows an obvious irony, but not one that is intended as dystopian. The irony here stems from the discrepancy between a genuinely romantic contemplation of a folkloric dress and the sense of loss introduced by the very gown that is displayed. While the dress "brings Palestine to life" in Soraida's body, it also confirms the loss of the homeland, since the only trace of that homeland seen on the screen is a mere artifact of fabric: a gown.

253

## THE EPISTEMIC VEIL IN MODERN ART: EMAN HARAM'S *SALOME*

The trope of the veil has increasingly gained attention in the world of modern art, at least since the 2003 exhibition at the New Art Gallery Walsall curated by David Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, who also edited one of the earliest academic collections devoted to the veil. Here, the sacred is intimately related to the secularization of sacred emblems. The veil is assumed to be originally a symbol of a divine provenance; as a cloth, it indexes the Divine and its mysteries, and *a contrario*, it represents the sacralization of the mundane. In that sense, this discussion is not about the representation of Muslim women wearing the headgear known as the veil, but is about the veiling/unveiling effects of fabric in its interface with the human body.

Departing from Bailey's and Tawadros's line in *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art*, I argue here that the veil is not only a postcolonial identitarian prop or an item of female clothing, but a metaphor informing the cultural epistemol-

ogy of predominantly Muslim societies, and as such is more often explored in the works of modern artists of Middle Eastern descent. Dominique Clévenot's contention that classic Islamic art is informed by *Une Esthétique du voile* provides a thesis for the pervasiveness of the veil, both in contemporary societies and in modern artifacts. However, the veil is not just an icon at the heart of a debate over the sacred and the secular, but also a trope that functions as a "pantheistic" interface, at which the seemingly clear boundaries between the realms of sacred and profane are blurred. It is noteworthy that the trope of the veil is not specifically Arab-Islamic. The prominence of fabric in several key works of Gustav Klimt, for instance, is a reminder that the veil is also part of the Western cultural paradigm. Its origins can be traced back to Greek antiquity, in which nature, as associated with the goddess Isis, was conceived as partly undecipherable, partly hidden by the *Veil of Isis*. As Hadot reminds us, Isis began as an Egyptian goddess, but then became a Mediterranean deity who was very much a part of classical Greek and, later, Roman religious culture. An important characteristic of her divine agency was her association with the veiled truth, or nature whose secrets are veiled (VIII).

254

Of the numerous artists who have explored the veil, three female visual artists stand out: Sherin Neshat, Mona Hatoum, and Eman Haram, all of whom have investigated the trope of the veil in their works. All three artists are of Middle Eastern descent, and they come from different cultural backgrounds: Shia, Oriental Christian, and Sunni, respectively. Despite their diversity and their different uses of the veil, these artists share common approaches to art that bring the everyday world and the sacred world together. Sherin Neshat introduces the dialectics of the veiled and the revealed as an aesthetic principle that exceeds the discussion of female repression and that presents the veil as an index of the feminine divine. Eman Haram introduces the metaphor of the veil-shroud as a political trope reflecting on power struggles as expressed in the dialectics of visibility vs. invisibility and as a metaphysical metaphor of death as invisible. Mona Hatoum does not *insist on* fabric as much as she explores the act of veiling, particularly through calligraphy covering the body, as a metaphor of memory and history, both being instances of transcendence overwhelming the individual.

## MEDIA IRONY

The Montreal-based Canadian Palestinian photographer Eman Haram's use of the veil deserves special attention because of its explicit political implications. Eman Haram first displayed her photo series *Salome* as part of the collective exhibition *Désinstallations du voile* in October and November 2008 at La Maison de la culture Cote des Neiges. A series of paradoxes and ironies frame Eman Haram's exploration of the veil in general and her work on it in the *Salome* series in particular. The first irony unfolds on the level of technique and results in a paradox, or rather a "para-

praxis,” a contradiction inherent to the practice of the medium, in the investment of the *techne* in photography. Eman works with veiling/unveiling or veiling/revealing in photography, using a digital camera and performing computerized manipulations of photos, mainly with the help of software programs such as Photoshop. In an email, she describes the technical aspect of her practice as follows: “For some images in this exposition I worked with a composite technique more possible to achieve with the digital software, layering images, texts, textiles to create final images that could be situated aesthetically between the tradition of photography & painting so I can draw on some historical reference from the latter which is laden with religious iconography.”

A fundamental irony lies in the use of photography, the medium historically associated with revelation, and of techniques of digitization. Since its establishment as an analog medium, photography was the ideal interface for a technique of veiling/revealing. Light and flash helped to “capture” an impression on celluloid, which required a veil—a shutter—in order to achieve the take. The take can be defined as the result of a shutter opening and closing, or as a veil covering and uncovering the lens. The materialization of the take into paper support, into light engraved on paper, required the printing of the negative, known in French as the impression of the photo (on paper). That stage requires another procedure of revelation, with the help of chemicals, in order for the negative to reveal the photo, or the positive, in the case of cinematic film.

255

However, Eman does not situate her work in the paradigmatic practice of veiling-unveiling that defines analog photography. She addresses the topic of the veil through her digital practices, encoding and decoding visual data. The appropriate metaphor of the medium’s agency here seems to be photosynthesis, capturing light and synthesizing it, or trans-form-ation, rather than as a progress from veiling to unveiling. Photoshop is about transformation, moving and rearranging the pixels to introduce changes in the form. The most important transformation Eman uses in her images is the introduction of multiple layers of fabric effects—of veils—to cover or filter the bodies she originally photographed or sampled from previously existing visual materials. The script, the words as a metaphorical veil, as a magic skin-curtain filtering the world or wrapping the body, create an original veil effect, though the focus here is on the veil as fabric.

## IMPERIAL GAZE

The first photo in the *Salome* series is a scene of the imperial male gaze, a hegemonic gaze aimed at a woman’s body that is “othered” by the veil, set on the other side of an imaginary gendered and ethnicized border. In this photo, however, the primary function of the veil is not to orientalize and essentialize the female body by wrapping it in the cloak of radical otherness. Eman is instead unmasking this imperial-Western-

male strategy that constructs the oriental body and marks it, by masking the female body with the veil in order to unveil it later, through the power of the imperial gaze, and to violate that body through unwarranted voyeurism. Eman's tactic to counter such a strategy is to assume the veil as the trope, the topos, and the topography of the radical Other, in order to subvert this rhetorical strategy and uncover the violence of the gaze, simply by maintaining her female subject always in an ambiguous position: seen, but only through the filter of gauze or muslinlike fabric. The obvious reference to Italian Renaissance men gazing at a woman clad in transparent veils is a literal metaphor of the imperial modern male gaze, which objectifies and violates a feminized and orientalized other, since the Renaissance is the mythicized locus of Western modernity.

256 Eman seems to be recalling Frantz Fanon's work on the Algerian Revolution, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*, which features a discussion of the first modern instance of "flagging" the veil as an icon in the struggle against colonialism. Malek Alloula's seminal work *The Colonial Harem* furthers this discussion of the epistemic metaphor of the veil. The body of the female colonized subject appears here as the scene of a battle between the imperial power, which imposes its hegemony through the gaze and which attempts to extend its control of the colonized from the public sphere to the private by controlling the female body through unveiling.

In *Salome*, the motif of the veiled/unveiled plays out in a different way from the politics of eroticism associated with the myth of Salome, who removed seven layers of veils in order to expose her naked body. In this photo, as in several others, the veil is a shroud, reminiscent of mummies, or of gauze/muslin, the shroud of Muslims. This investment of the trope associates the veil with death, since it metaphorically wraps corpses in the photos. In the first photo, the female body displays an ambiguous head on which is superimposed the head of a pharaonic statue, which enforces the theme of death and of a non-Western cultural reference.

The motif of the veil is also the scene of confrontation between, on the one hand, a gaze obsessed with seeing everything, including the flesh of dead bodies, attempting to control the past and history, through the practice of historiography and the invention of archaeology, and on the other, a postcolonial body that resists this violence with the help of effects cast by the artist on the surface of the photo. The ambiguity of the veil's agency in connection with the naked body makes it difficult to associate Eman's use of the trope with maintaining the body unseen. Her work is not about showing or barring the display of skin, but about the subject's agency: the right of her female subjects to determine their bodies by and for themselves, not by yielding to an exterior gaze or a set of rules imposed from the outside.

## THE IRONY OF MYTH

The series features a seemingly paradoxical Salome character, identifying the Hebrew princess with the postcolonial subject. Traditionally, Salome is associated with an aspect of Jewishness and Israeliness in the sense of a connection to the Hebrew polities under Roman authority. This is why the rebirth of Salome in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in art, theatre, and literature was informed by her accumulation of many attributes of otherness in Western modernity. In the paintings of Moreau and Klimt, in the films of Charles Bryant and Ken Russell, in the play by Oscar Wilde, and in the modern opera by Richard Strauss, Salome is the woman, the queer, the Jewish, the oriental. However, she is always associated with a powerful sexuality threatening male dominance, in part because she was the female who removes the veil, who performs the revelation of her naked/bare body. Eman reclaims Salome as she who wears the veils. She makes her an archetypal subject, the postcolonial, non-Western feminized subject marked by the icon of the worn veil, who is nonetheless resisting an imperial phallocratic attempt to unveil/undress/violate her. Salome here becomes a universal resistant subaltern and not a character specifically belonging to a particular cultural tradition.

257

Salome's strongest presence is in the central photo in the series, the only one in black and white. In this image, a woman is replicated into seven figures, not as seven veils, but as seven veiled women. The counterpoint to Salome as object of the predatory male gaze is a woman who crystallizes the gaze as hers. She is the one who gazes. She cannot be gazed at because her body cannot be seen. The only visible parts of her body are her eyes looking toward the Other, toward infinity, maybe toward God. In *Du Désir*, Malek Chebel insists on such a reversal of the strategic positions of the gaze in the tradition of classical Islam, which sexually empowers the female subject. However, the function of this photo in the Salome series is to maintain a sense of paradox between the overwhelming majority of the photos, in which muslin is used to filter a naked body exposed to a male gaze, and one photo that does the opposite by underscoring the intensity of the female gaze while shutting the body out from any viewer. In this photo, Eman's Salome appears to be an opposition to the clichéd Salome. She is completely covered. Her core is not a body sexualized by overexposure and extreme nudity, but by over-veiling and extreme modesty. One cannot help but notice the phallic shape of her body, produced through digital manipulation, which adds to her sexual ambiguity. She thus joins a series of Salomes who were lesbians, transsexuals, or vamps.

## REVELATION IRONY

Two types of revelations have been theorized in the twentieth century. The first is the spiritual revelation in which the subject engages in an event of metaphysical nature

that allows him/her to connect with the divine or transcendent. The second is the enlightened revelation in which the agency of technique or technology reveals new possibilities to the world and unlocks the potential lying within nature. The first type of revelation is mystical in nature and is best described by Martin Buber in his seminal book on mystical encounters, *I and Thou*, as a “moment of meeting” between the human and the divine (109). The second type of revelation is primarily associated with Martin Heidegger’s theory of technology. Heidegger unequivocally states in *The Question Concerning Technology* that “[t]echnology is a way of revealing” (5). He further clarifies his concept of “revealing” as characterized by the challenging forth: “That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unconcealed” (7). On the one hand, Eman works against the predominant Western narrative of the enlightenment as revelation of truth, as removal of the veil or of clothing in search of the naked truth, as unveiling nature in order to acquire knowledge of the world, or in order to unconceal its exploitable, even monetizable potential. Within this narrative, the equivalent paradigm of representation in fine arts is Greco-Roman nude statuary in which the body is emphatically revealed. It could also be the reification of artworks, transformed into commodities whose monetary value is unlocked by the joint action of the artist’s techniques and the art dealer’s practice. Eman embraces a different narrative, in which the veil is not an obstacle to be removed in search of the truth, or in pursuit of potential wealth, but is instead an epistemological and structural figure that refers to the divine, the wisdom, and the erotic. On the other, her photos articulate another form of revelation, reminiscent of Buber’s theory of the spiritual event that he calls a “moment of meeting” at which something “happens [...] where we receive what we did not hitherto have” (109-10): a presence as power of mutual action, an inexpressible confirmation of meaning, which is of this life rather than of “another life” (110). Buber’s description of revelation is valid both for the mystical experience of the Divine and for the mystical encounter with art. It also accounts for the ambiguity of Eman’s series, anchored both in the politics of postcolonialism and in the experience of the metaphysical world, the world behind the veil of nature, the afterlife. Eman’s series thus appears as art in the sense described by Žižek, in which the materiality of the visible object functions as a veil. In *Organs without Bodies*, Žižek opposes the abstraction of scientific representations to the materiality of art, exemplified by Duchamp’s urinal: “by displaying a urinal as an object of art, it ‘transubstantiated’ its materiality into the mode of appearance of the Thing. Science and art thus relate to the Thing in a totally different way: art directly evokes it (i.e., artistic beauty is the last veil that conceals/announces the dimension of the Thing) [...] So the point is that art manifests what resists the grasp of knowledge: the artistic ‘Beautiful’ is the mask in the guise of which the abyss of Real Thing, The Thing resisting symbolization, appears” (Žižek 149-50).

The veil is a multilayered trope crossing media, cultural practices, and genres, particularly in visual culture. Its polysemy transcends its multifaceted agency. Visual artists and filmmakers, particularly from the Middle East, both men and

women, have constantly explored the veil as a trope. In so doing, they have proven that, beyond the gender politics with which these works engage, the veil and fabric associated with the body in general can be allegories of national identities, iconic arguments in postcolonial critiques of Western-centric worldviews, or even agents in mystical experiences. Above all, these artists create cultural artifacts that are both provocative and aesthetically compelling.

## WORKS CITED

- Alloula, Malek. *The Colonial Harem*. Manchester UP, 1987.
- Armes, Roy. *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film*. Indiana UP, 2005.
- Balazs, Bela. *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. Arno P and New York Times, 1972.
- Bailey, David, and Gilane Tawadros, editors. *Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art*. MIT P, 2004.
- Bernstein, Mathew, and Gaylyn Studlar, editors. *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*. Rutgers UP, 1997.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Scribner Library P, 1952.
- Buisine, Alain. *L'orient voilé*. Calmann-Lévy and Zulma, 1993.
- Cinar, Alev. "Clothing the National Body: Islamic Veiling and Secular Unveiling." *Modernity, Islam and Secularism in Turkey*. U of Minnesota P, 2005, pp. 53-98.
- Chapman, James. *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present*. Reaktion, 2003.
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and South Asia*. Edinburgh UP, 2005.
- Chebel, Malek. *Du Désir*. Rivages, 2000.
- Clevenot, Dominique. *Une Esthétique du voile. Essai sur l'art arabo-islamique*. L'Harmattan, 1994.
- Dabashi, Hamid, editor. *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*. Preface by Edward Said, Verso, 2006.
- Didi-Huberman, George. *Ninfa Moderna: Essai sur le drapé tombé*. Seuil, 2002.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film, Theory, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1991.
- . "Veiling Over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman." *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof, Cornell UP, 1989, pp. 105-41.
- . "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body." *Feminism and Film Theory*, edited

by Constance Penley, Routledge, 1988, pp. 216-28.

Donmez-Colin, Gonul. *The Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East*. Wallflower P, 2007.

---. *Women, Islam and Cinema*. Reaktion, 2004.

Durovicova, Natasa, and Kathleen Newman, editors. *World Cinemas: Transnational Perspectives*. Routledge, 2007.

Ebrahimian, Babak. "Framing Diaspora: Solidarity and the Individual in the Works of Shirin Neshat." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 85-99.

Fanon, Franz. *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*. Maspero, 1959.

Faure, Élie. *Fonction du cinema : De la cinéplastique à son destin social*. Plon, 1953.

Flaxman, Gregory, editor. *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*. U of Minnesota P, 2000.

**260** Gagnon, Paulette, et al. *Shirin Neshat*. Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2001.

Golombek, Lisa, and Maria Subtelny, editors. *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the 15th Century*. E.J. Brill, 1992.

Hadot, Pierre. *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*. Belknap P, Harvard UP, 2006.

Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt, Garland Publishing, 1977, pp. 3-35.

Karriker, Alexandra Heidi, editor. *Film Studies: Women in Contemporary World Cinema*. Peter Lang, 2002.

Khatib, Lina. *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*. I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton UP, 1997.

Macdonald, Myra. "Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of Image and Voice in Media Representation." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 7-23.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1991.

Moore, Linsey. "Frayed Connections, Fraught Projections: The Troubling Work of Shirin Neshat." *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1-17.

Naficy, Hamid, editor. *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*. Routledge, 1999.

Naficy, Hamid, and Gabriel Teshome, editors. *Otherness and the Media*. Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993.

Pisters, Patricia. *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory*.

- Stanford UP, 2003.
- Said, Edward. *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. Photographs by Jean Mohr, Pantheon Books, 1986.
- Shirazi, Faegheh. *The Veil Unveiled*. Florida UP, 2001.
- Shohat, Ella. "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema." *Otherness and the Media*, edited by Hamid Naficy and Gabriel Teshome, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993, pp. 45-84.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. "Introduction." *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media*, edited by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Rutgers UP, 2003, pp. 1-17.
- . *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, 1994.
- Studlar, Gaylyn. "Out-Salomeing Salome: Dance, the New Woman and Fan Magazine Orientalism." *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, edited by Mathew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, Rutgers UP, 1997, pp. 99-130.
- Weber, Cynthia. "Not Without My Sister(s): Imagining a Moral America in Kandahar." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2005, pp. 358-76.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Organs without Bodies*. Routledge, 2003.