

THE VEIL, THE GAZE AND THE FEMININE

Cristiana Cimino

Introduction

The veil that Muslim women wear in various forms (*hijab*, *chador*, etc.) has only come to the attention of Westerners since these women, who are more and more numerous, walk beside us in the streets, study in Western schools and universities and participate in various ways in public life, in countries that were not used to it. Committed, competent women, and even ordinary women, with a shared denominator: they wear the veil. Since the veiled woman has appeared in real daily life, as an image mediated by our Western eyes, the issue of the veil has become hot, arousing feelings of various kinds, ranging from suspicion to explicit hostility (as a threat to our lifestyle, to the myth of identity), from curiosity (often sexual) to tolerance (generally as another side, the democratic side of intolerance). Before all this, the veiled woman was at most a remote figure, assimilated to images of an embarrassing colonial heritage, to folklore, and above all to ‘underdevelopment’ and the ‘inferior’ condition of the woman in the countries that use that veil. Not that the veil is not also an instrument of control and subjugation of the female body in societies where male power and violence do not even try to camouflage themselves, but things are more complex.

To begin to deal with the issue of the veil means to deal, in the meantime, with the theme of the relationship that Arab-Islamic culture¹ has with the ways (forms) of seeing and showing the body². But, even before that, it is necessary to make some remarks about the relationship that Islam has with the gaze and with the image, which seem antithetical to the West. Some aesthetic considerations will

¹ It is this culture to which I refer to throughout.

² Ali Mohammad al Qattan Al Fasi (524, Almohad regime) wrote the text considered as the most comprehensive on the body and the ways to show it/cover it. His position was similar to some current Islamist positions. Al Fasi develops the concept of *awra*, which refers to everything that is to be considered an extension of the female body, such as the voice.

lend themselves to clarify this point and illustrate two different visions (literally, in this case), of the world.

A disciplined gaze

The Western concept of the image is almost alien to Arab-Islamic culture, although in the 19th century the Ottoman Empire introduced images definitively and forcibly, encountering enormous resistance. But to speak of the Ottoman empire is already far from Islam understood as a group of people sharing a religion and a language, Arabic, in which the revelation of the Word of God has expressed itself. Nor does it seem that there are traces of images in the art of the pre-Islamic Arab world, whether nomadic or settled. Although there is a debate about the (not absolute) absence (Naef 2004) of representations in Islam (sacred, human, animal), its art is basically an aniconic art (Burckhardt 1985). As sacred art, oriented by the doctrine of *tawhid* (the unity of God), it aims at to express the concept of God in a way which is as purified as possible from the passions of which the image is a vehicle. In the face of a Western tradition which, with the due exceptions³, entertains the image, that central and, indeed, passionate relationship which we know, Islam privileges something else. In 630 A.D. Muhammed had the tribal images exhibited in Mecca destroyed and, during the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik [685-705], the controversy with Christianity (i.e. with the Byzantine Empire) over the decisive destruction of the image exploded. Although there are very few explicit references to sight and gaze in the Qur’an⁴, Quranic exegesis and especially the reading of the *hadith*, over the centuries, have fueled, if not generated, a taboo related to see-exhibit. The Muslim juridical corpus (*fiqh*), in the face of God’s law (*sharia*), with the complicity of a society with a strong patriarchal structure, has been progressively built up as an order characterised by the taboo of the image and seeing/exhibiting. This is (the taboo) currently represented for Westerns in an elective way by the veil, which many Muslim women wear for the most diverse reasons and whose mythology, for the most part, is a Western construction.

³ There has always been a tension in Christianity between those in favour of images and their veneration, and those hostile to them and this tension has erupted from time to time. Most notably, in the East in the eighth and ninth centuries in the great iconoclast controversies (Ladner 1940), and in the West in the sixteenth century Protestant reformation (Philips 1973; Wood 1988). However, we can even see an iconoclastic tendency within Catholicism in the twelfth century with the early Cistercians (Tkacz 2004). In general, the suspicion of the image in Christianity came from a reading of the Old Testament (Exodus 20, 1-6). On the gradual development of the polemic against idol worship in the Old Testament see Pfeiffer (1924). The two Byzantine iconoclast controversies erupted, in part, under the influence of an environment created by Islam (von Grunebaum 1962; and especially, King 1985).

⁴ See the Qur’an 17:36; 24:30, 31; 33: 59. In the last one the reference is to the female veil as a sign of difference between Muslims and other women.

In Islamic culture the true *hijab* (which in Arabic means not only 'veil' but also curtain, for example, the one through which one could speak to the caliph) is something spiritual that separates human beings from the blinding and unbearable sight of God⁵. In the face of Christians accounts which *show* the mystery of the incarnation, the distinctive signs of the mosque are pivotal: the *qibla* (wall) in which the empty niche of the *mihrab* is carved, indicating the direction of Mecca. The very structure of the mosque is functional, encouraging recollection on the divine, as well as representing the sacred while delimiting a space for prayer (*sutrah* which comes from the root *sitr*, concerning veiling), purified by the believer and protected from the world of the senses. Islam is a religion that is not based on the manifestation of divinity, on the contrary, the absence of sacred images has the function of feeding the presence of a God who is invisible by definition and as 'Absolute Reality' must remain so. It is the word, instead, that takes the central place. The Qur'an was thought to be uncreated, and transmitted to the Prophet⁶ in classical Arabic⁷. The word Qur'an, from the verb *qura'a* (to read or recite), was handed down orally, and on all kinds of objects - parchments, palm-leaf stalks and stones, known as *suhuf*. It was Abu Bakr who decided to collect these various texts into one manuscript, which a group of scribes did. Of these, Zayd ibn Thabit was the principle scribe. He died in 655. The ms according to Zayd, remained with Abu Bakr until he died in 634. Establishing the text, further sanctioned its immutability: the book becomes a true 'incarnation of God' (Belting 2011) to whom the same veneration was transmitted and reserved. Scripture becomes an 'image of the word' (Dodd and Khairallah 1981). Calligraphic art and ornament acquire, in Islam, the importance that the image and perspective have had for the West, but with diametrically different implications. In the Qur'an, and in books in general, both have the function of telling, and therefore of supporting the word. There is a sort of isomorphism between the writing/ornament and prayer, which favours the recollection of the believer and meditation, in a way that could be defined as ecstatic, that is to say, it aims at a contingent and radical wavering of the subject that practices it. The absence of analogical images, which is also a homage to the religion of Abraham, as well as an opposition to any form of idolatry, wants, above all, both to underline the unity of a God, invisible and distant by definition, and to discipline the gaze. The conformation of the mosque, with its quiet monotony, the emptiness of the *mihrab*, the ornaments on the walls, often in the form of writing, discourages the focus of the gaze on a precise point, on a fire that, instead, will be fundamental in Renaissance art. Everything contributes to the *wandering* of the gaze, in the search for a psychic order that evokes the presence of God precisely in his absence-invisibility. We cannot forget that the natural

⁵ Qur'an 42: 51, Consultation.

⁶ The first word that God addresses to the Prophet is the injunction: read!

⁷ Modern Standard Arabic, which must be distinguished from modern vernacular or spoken, everyday, Arabic, is derived from the Classical Arabic of the Qur'an.

scenario in which the pre-Islamic Arabs moved, and which will continue to welcome the rapid expansion of Arabic-speaking Islam, was the desert, the mystical place par excellence. With the doctrine of *tawhid*, Islam rejects the Christological incarnation of a God who remains unique and invisible by definition, the access to which and whose presence is entrusted to the individual believer in prayer (*sutrah*), purified as much as possible from external stimuli. It is evident that there is a mystical component inherent in the Islamic religion, but even before being a faith, Islam is a practice that affects all areas of life. The absence of an iconic image and the predilection for geometric and modular forms (including the writing that lends itself well to its geometrization) that are repeated, is further reinforced by the rationalism that marks the so-called Islamic ‘golden age’, during the Abbasid caliphate, with the capital Baghdad, which began in 750 and ended in 1258, with the execution of the last caliph by the Mongols. The aniconic image, which is formally abstract i.e. not naturalistic (the West had to wait for the avant-garde), is constructed through the geometric-mathematical calculation of the trajectories of light. In this regard, the most representative author is Alhazen [Ibn al-Haytham 965-1040], the inventor of the darkroom, whose crucial discoveries on optics are still applied to the theory of perception. In his major work, *Perspectivae (Opticae Thesaurus) or De Aspectibus*, he formalised his theory of vision from the laws of the propagation of light. Translated into Latin in 1572, it was very significant for the spread in the West of an Arabic theory of vision which, however, remained confined to a purely scientific field even with the advent of the modern age. The systematisation of vision by images, in the Renaissance, could not fail to take into account the underlying geometric-mathematical coordinates of the measurement of visual (light) rays; however, the Renaissance, which thought of itself as the sole heir of classical antiquity, could not tolerate the Arab origin of those geometric-mathematical theories of vision which, whether one wished it or not, were the basis of perspective. For Alhazen, who renounced both the theories that foresee the emission of particles from the eye and the idea that images are formed in the eye as copies of things, vision and seeing are to be attributed to the physical existence of that medium which is light. The ‘visual forms’, completely purified of the anthropomorphic and iconic component in general, arise from an abstract mosaic of luminous points that strike the eye, whose ‘form’ but we could also say formula (or signifier), can be calculated on a mathematical basis. Put another way, the transformation of the world into an image, the series of geometric points through which the world is transformed into an image, can be decoded through a system of mathematical calculations. Alhazen’s interest is reserved for the functioning of the device i.e. light (as a physical existence) and its trajectories, the way light is reflected and transmitted on the surface of a mirror and not the image as such.

The concept of *al-nuqus* includes all the decorative figures (*muqarnas*⁸, windows, calligraphy) that will replace the ornament with the iconic or mimetic image. In the light (*Al nur* is also the name of a *surah*), more than symbolic, real incarnation of God, the mathematical laws that govern the cosmos are highlighted, which, in their ‘abstract’ beauty, are on the one hand empirically demonstrable, on the other hand they subtend creation itself.

A divided gaze

The West produces images. During the Renaissance, perspective quickly becomes a question of image, the world itself becomes an image (Heidegger 1968), and the gaze on the world is an iconic gaze. The image of reality and that of perception become an analogue, equivalent, while eye and gaze are one, as is well illustrated by the winged eye that Leon Battista Alberti chooses as his emblem. Perspective is an invention (with medieval precursors) that makes use, moreover, of the Arabic knowledge of mathematics and geometry to build a designed space that places man at its centre. With due objections, perspective becomes art and a universal way of being in an anthropocentric rather than theocentric-medieval world. The subject enters the picture through the gaze (we would say the eye), which detaches itself from the body and mimics the eye of God who sees everything. Art, with perspective, simulates a space in which the observer becomes an illusorily master of his own gaze, a true instrument of the knowledge of the world (Alberti 2003). The perspective space, considered as the equivalent of the visual sphere of man, inaugurates the axiom for which the theory of vision is a theory of the image.

The geometrical optics i.e. Renaissance optics, emblematic of an aesthetic and of a conception of the world, is characterised by the construction of visual space through certain coordinates and, according to Lacan, is based on the attempt to elude the gaze as the ‘underside of consciousness’ (Lacan 1998: 83). The imaginary, certainly grandiose, grip of the geometric dimension does not, evidently, exhaust what ‘therefore, far from it, what the field of vision as such offers us as the original subjectifying relation’ (Lacan 1998: 87). The reverse use of Durer’s device (Lacan 1998: 83) introduces what of vision escapes the geometric perspective, notoriously illustrated by anamorphosis. It, as in Holbein’s painting ‘The Ambassadors’, shows, hidden and immanent to the geometric dimension,

⁸ This term refers to the relief ornaments found in vaulted ceilings, in niches, in some decorations.

‘the subject as annihilated - annihilated in a form that is, strictly speaking, the imaged embodiment of the minus-phi (- φ) of castration’ and, therefore, of desire (Lacan 1998: 88-9).

But what is really at issue, according to Lacan, in the scopic field, is that ‘the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say’ (Lacan 1998: 106). What we are trying to avoid is the objective, alienating function that the gaze exercises on the subject. The heart of the experience of the uncanny, according to Lacan, consists in being confronted with the drive in the form of the object a (gaze): the scopic drive appears in the visual field of the subject, constituted precisely around its exclusion. The image of the double, which in this case is not the specular-imaginary one, is bearer of anguish because it alienates the subject, making him an object at the mercy of the drive, a pure enjoying substance. The gaze is what alienates us because it is born, immersed in the field of the Other; radicalizing, and freeing itself. On this point, from Merleau-Ponty (1988), Lacan enunciates that the gaze is on the side of the *perceptum* and not of the *percipiens*, in the sense that ‘the gaze is what includes us in the spectacle of the world as beings looked at’ (Miller 1998: 188-89, my translation). If the first is altered (as happens with anamorphosis) it produces alterations in the *percipiens*. The subject is nullified by the gaze, a prey to the scopic drive, that breaks into the visual field. The gleam of the sardine can, which leaves Lacan siderated, reflects that light ‘which is in no way mastered by me. It looks at me, solicits me at every moment, and makes the landscape something *other* than a landscape, something other than I called a picture’ (Lacan 1998: 96), constructed on the basis of a perspective. It is therefore a real surplus, precisely the one on which the geometric perspective operates an elision.

Some considerations

If the West produces images and, at the height of its discourse, tries to evade the gaze, Islam, on the other hand, establishes a series of ways aimed at its domestication. The aniconic character of Islamic art discourages the trap inherent in the imaginary order, ‘which is particularly satisfying for the subject’ and therefore any illusion of mastery (Lacan 1998: 74). On the contrary, what is favoured is the assumption of submission to a God incarnated in the image-word of the Book and whose presence is electively expressed in his absence. The mathematical calculation underlying the geometry of the *muqarnas* (ornamented vaulting), a symbolic form, as Panofski would say, of Islamic culture, or of certain decorations on the walls of mosques (often in the form of calligraphy), or of the

grilles of the *mashrabiya*⁹ (whether grand, as in the Alhambra, or simple as in private houses), which project the light filtered into forms that change with the rotation of the sun, take part in the construction of a great device aimed at taming the gaze. If we do not need a vanishing point it is because it exists only in the eye of the beholder and not in the world, where, instead, we are caught up in something else, in *Other Thing*, in that real surplus (that gleam, to put it in Lacan's terms) which is light. The desire to maintain a connection with an Absolute (God-light) draws on a profoundly mystical root in Islam (not only in Sufism) which wants to be preserved and which foresees a direct relationship with God. Therefore, it requires a discipline in the gaze, for example, which is part of the life of the Muslim practitioner and which is, in itself, very disciplined. The attempt to maintain the relationship with this surplus, with an Absolute that becomes manageable, takes shape in a series of devices that filter, work, and translate into a very codified language, operating a symbolization of what one wants to keep alive, beyond its killing. It constitutes a borderline between the symbolic and the real, significant of an operation that has already renounced the mastery (practiced, instead, from a geometric point of view) of what cannot and must not be mastered-eluded, and has, instead, the great ambition to establish a discipline (which is also a life practice) that allows individual and direct access to God, in a very delicate balance. In Islam, woman is *haram* (sacred), where the same term also indicates what is forbidden, impure (taboo like certain foods, certain practices), which would be nothing new even for the Western world. Woman is *haram*, sacred, as guardian of the *ghayb*¹⁰, of the invisible, of the inaccessible¹¹. Islamic theologians and jurists have preferred to discourage this reading which clearly indicates a woman's elective closeness to God, favouring, instead, that which sees the woman as the guardian of the house, the family, etc (Zilio-Grandi 2010). Nothing new. If the sacredness of the woman is linked to her being the guardian of the mystery, her *hijab* hides the unbearable, the stranger par excellence, a stranger outside discourse that is, moreover, translated into a carefully codified discourse, in the ways I have tried to say here. The veil (in the Qur'an mentioned only once) would be part of those devices that aspire to tame the gaze as the field of a surplus that one wants to keep alive. B. Nassim Aboudrar, on the subject of the veil, speaks of its being 'integrated into a set of norms that are part of a coherent visual system' (Aboudrar 2015, my translation).

Over the centuries, it seems that in Islam, at least in some socio-cultural areas, the side related to taboo rather than sacredness has prevailed, so that the 'real' veil has the function of covering the

⁹ These are the grilles that in Islamic culture have the function of our windows.

¹⁰ Qur'an surah 6; 59.

¹¹ In this regard see the controversial surah 4: 34.

objective, alienating effect that the scopic drive exercises when it appears in the visual field of the subject (Lacan 1998). One could also say that what is closed outside the door returns from the window, that is, the scopic object itself, at that point no longer domesticated, indeed, I would say solicited by the taboo. The side of the woman's relationship to an Absolute, to a surplus, degrades into the taboo of seeing/showing: the veil (I remember that from *sitr* comes *sutrah*, sacred space of prayer) is no longer designed to veil the woman as sacred because she is close to God; instead the sexist and sexophobic side prevails, for which the veil becomes an attempt in the real to annul the encounter with the power of the scopic object. I would go so far as to say that being at the mercy of the drive, it generates an attempt at *forclusion* that 'goes back' in the veil, undoubtedly real, of the woman. Women 'veiled', covered from head to toe in black, illustrate the fact that if there was anything else to cover, it would be covered, that is, that this kind of cover has no limit.

The *hijab*, which originally veiled the woman as sacred, guardian of the invisible, of the Mystery, becomes, in its degraded version, a brutal cover of what can never be covered, that is, the alienating power of the scopic drive; a naive and terrible operation that conceals and therefore signals, once again (that is, despite the differences in culture), the unsustainability of what is, by its nature, unclassifiable and unquantifiable, that is, the surplus of the feminine real.

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