

A hybrid gaze from Delacroix to Djebbar: Visual encounters and the construction of the female “other” in the colonial discourse of Maghreb*

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The Algerian author Assia Djebbar, following the Horatian principle of *ut pictura poeisis*, visualizes the historical moment at the start of colonization, where French and Maghrebian culture first meet, as a reciprocal *face à face*. The city of Algiers lies sprawled before the conquerors as a mysterious Oriental, about to draw the gazes of the first foreign artists:

Dawn on this thirteenth day of June 1830 [...]. As the majestic fleet rends the horizon the Impregnable City sheds her veils and emerges, a wraith-like apparition, through the blue-grey haze. A distant triangle aslant, glinting in the last shreds of nocturnal mist and then settling softly, like a figure sprawling on a carpet of muted greens. The mountain shuts out the background, dark against the blue wash of the sky. The first confrontation. The city, a vista of crenelated roofs and pastel hues, makes her first appearance in the rôle [sic] of ‘Oriental Woman’, motionless, mysterious. [...].

When the squadron left Toulon, there were four painters, five draughtsmen and about a dozen engravers on board... The battle is not yet joined, they are not yet even in sight of their prey, but they are already anxious to ensure a pictorial record of the campaign. As if the imminent war were to be considered as some sort of festivity. (Djebbar 1993: 6,8)¹

This literary re-imagination of the conquest of Algiers, which Djebbar develops in her historical and autobiographical novel *L'Amour, la Fantasia* [*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*] drawing on the eye-witness accounts of French officers, contains the basic questions underlying my considerations on the historical constitution of the “other” in French colonialism in North Africa.

* I would like to thank warmly David Burnett for helping me to translate my Teutonic academic style into English.

¹ Original quote: “Aube de ce 13 juin 1830 [...] Devant l'imposante flotte qui déchire l'horizon, la Ville Imprenable se dévoile, blancheur fantomatique, à travers un poudroiement de bleus et de gris mêlés. Triangle incliné dans le lointain et qui, après le scintillement de la dernière brume nocturne, se fixe adouci, tel un corps à l'abandon, sur un tapis de verdure assombrie. La montagne paraît barrière esquissée dans un azur d'aquarelle. Premier face à face. La ville, paysage tout en dentelures et en couleurs délicates, surgit dans un rôle d'Orientale immobilisée en son mystère. [...]. Au départ de Toulon, l'escadre fut complétée par l'embarquement de quatre peintres, cinq dessinateurs et une dizaine de graveurs... Le conflit n'est pas encore engagé, la proie n'est même pas approchée, que déjà le souci d'illustrer cette campagne importe davantage.” (Djebbar [1985] 1995: 14, 16).

1. To what extent is femininity encoded as a symbol for cultural difference in the French colonial discourse, as it is in the Spanish and English cultures of conquest?²
2. How does the construction of femininity manifest itself in different visual media, and what is the relation between media specificity and cultural or sexual coding?
3. How can stereotypical representations of this sort be interpreted beyond the simplistic opposition of Orient vs. Occident or Self vs. Other?

My contribution pursues a dual aim. On the one hand, it attempts to show the overlap and interpenetration of gender and cultural differences in the process of constructing otherness. Moreover, the visual representations are not to be construed as stereotypes (and validated as such),³ but are to be reread with an eye to the ambiguity inherent in their genesis. A hybrid-gear reading of these images should help extricate them from the dichotomy attributed to them by virtue of colonial power relations. Thus, I do not intend to point out the reductions, distortions and conventionalized patterns in these representations in the manner of an archaeology of stereotypes, but to show how these came into being through the obliteration of a variety of elements and ambivalences. Hardened, one-sided viewpoints and the static thought patterns that go along with them, known as Orientalisms, are to be rolled back and their poles set into a state of oscillation. For the very purpose of counteracting the renewed authoritarian appropriation of colonial images through one-sided, neocolonial, scientific, pedagogical, moral and other discourses, they should be considered with a view to their innate hybridizations and moments of tension.

Visual media play a central role in the formation of cultural patterns of perception and interpretation, as well as serving a key function in the act of colonization. Hence reappraising European colonial history without taking the production of images into account seems unthinkable. Historian Pascal Blanchard argues as follows with regard to film and photography:

[...] it is impossible to measure the whole dimension of the colonial enterprise if you don't include, if you don't show, if you don't analyze this production of images [...] to measure to what extent the colonial culture is a system. (my translation)⁴

² For depictions of the Latin American subcontinent as a woman and the female imagination of Las Indias, see Hölz (2000).

³ According to Deleuze (1997: 282) – following an argument from the field of painting but applying it to American movies – even parodies of clichés serve to perpetuate them.

⁴ Original quote: “[...] il n'est pas possible de mesurer dans toute sa dimension l'entreprise coloniale si l'on n'intègre pas, si l'on ne montre pas, si l'on analyse pas cette production d'images [...] pour mesurer combien la culture coloniale est un système”. See the interview with Blanchard conducted during an exhibition on the

The colonial powers were well aware of this visual *power* and influence, and put the production of images and the realm of the visible under its control from the very start. A central office, *l'Agence générale des colonies*, was set up in France in 1919 to censor pictorial material along ideological lines, and it was here that 80% of the pictures used in the French colonies originated.⁵

So the visual construction of the “other” is a fundamental part of the colonial strategy, no less important than the military conquest itself, since laying siege to a foreign territory presupposes some sort of legitimation.⁶ The conquerors bestow this upon themselves in a performative act, disambiguating their invasion as a gesture of domination and thereby purposively masking the simple curiosity of the approaching invaders, their *desire* to possess the “other”, their insecurity and fears.⁷ The violence employed in the act of colonization – French colonial forces fought tooth and nail for nearly forty years (1832-1871) against the Berber resistance in southern Algeria – is therefore necessary in a performative sense, in order to establish a superiority which is *de facto* only “one side of the medal”. Power relations between different cultures do not exist *a priori*, but have to be *created*, and visualized in the process. Images imply actualities which they succeed in creating through the power of representation. Artists were sent to North Africa on the first French warships to document the moment of penetration into unknown territory and, *ipso facto*, make the anticipated foreignness their own, translating it into a familiar system of images. The threat thought to emanate from the sinister “other” and jeopardize the self – Bhabha, following Freud’s concept of the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919), uses the term “unhomely” – is to be warded off through the power of visual appropriation.

As Oriental fictions, these constructions of otherness went down in history with the Egyptian campaign of Napoleon (1798). They gained currency through literature, art, opera and architecture, and can be traced back to artwork and travel accounts of the sixteenth century.⁸ Since the late nineteenth century, the projection of the foreign went beyond traditional texts

subject in April 2005, as part of the program *Images et Colonies*: <http://www.flucuat.net/2456-Pascal-Blanchard> (Jan. 12, 2007).

⁵ The television documentary “Les trois couleurs de l'Empire” by Jean-Claude Guidicelli (2001) is informative on this subject.

⁶ Djebar refers to painters, draftsmen, engravers – later on photographers and cameramen – as the producers of colonial images. The work of the Algerian author, historian and filmmaker, with its devotion to the intermeshing and ambivalences of European-Maghrebian history, is an important reference point for my own reading of images. A central theme is the roaming viewpoint between cultural perspectives.

⁷ It was curiosity which could have held the key to understanding, curiosity with regard to foreigners and travel being a key to knowledge and learning in Islamic culture, particularly Sufism.

⁸ See Sievernich/Budde (1989: 231-244). The aforementioned volume, covering a timespan of 800-1900, also deals with the European encounter with the *Orient* beginning in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance through contacts with Islamic culture and the rediscovery of the Ancient Orient.

and images to include the more technical, photographic media, suggesting an empirically tangible and – for the viewer – transparent reality, therefore lending itself with particular effectiveness to the creation of stereotypes.

Dichotomic relations are construed in certain optical dispositives, which in turn give rise to a prevailing cultural view and the ascendance of the viewer. The development of visual apparatuses, a prosthesis for the human eye such as the mechanical camera eye, allows the body of the viewer to dissolve and become an abstraction. The image produced by technical means implies a subject that sees without being seen and is therefore quasi-universal, describing its object without any apparent reciprocal effect. This *incorporeal* omniscient view appears objective the moment it blocks out its partially, culturally and historically defined standpoint, along with its attendant strategy. Dichotomies such as subject-object or victim-perpetrator are fabricated through the constructive power of the given view. Through the image-creating capabilities of photography and film, the power of representation is amplified; cultural ideas are habitualized, codified and communicated in an attention-grabbing way so that the hierarchies depicted seem increasingly real.⁹

Ever since the Enlightenment, a kind of evolutionary criterion served as the pretext for the establishment of power relations in this manner, enabling the “other” to be *grasped* as part of a prehistory based on categories derived from natural history. One’s own visual tools are construed as an expression of cultural superiority, of scientific and technical mastery, whereas the “other” appears as a backward creature at the mercy of nature – indeed, is cast in this light through fantasies of omnipotence.

Thus, the category of gender as cultural construction of sex, refers not only to the object portrayed in the visual media under consideration here, but configures the (construing) gaze on the production-aesthetic side as well, which through the use of media creates the concept of otherness in the framework of a gendered order of vision. I am not concerned here with the question of how appropriate these images are in relation to the contingency of reality, but with the production process itself, which is blocked out for the sake of freezing the gaze, producing coherency and stereotypical modes of perception. The complex and contradictory nature of producing – never unambiguous – images must be laid bare in order to augment the one-sided and reductive approaches to canonical images.

⁹ The colonial gaze does not only have an effect in more obvious contexts such as ethnographic zoos or world expositions (which the Surrealists Breton, Éluard and Aragon strongly objected to), but continues into the present in the media discourse or in designing objects of research based on outmoded perpetrator-victim schemes.

A recurring image, indeed a *topos* of all colonial histories, is the imagining of the “foreign” as female, i.e., the sexualization of cultural difference: “The foreign continent to be discovered or conquered has always been depicted as a woman”, the latter being equated, particularly since the Enlightenment, with nature, which for the conquerors in their *civilizational* mission is the “foreign” per se.¹⁰ By the same token, in the modern body and gender order woman is not only functionalized and biologized, but also exoticized in her purported naturalness. Then the “Oriental” woman is a creature of nature in a double sense: she is the epitome of unspoiled wildness and at the same time *nature* by virtue of her biological function.¹¹ This implies an essential, natural inferiority of the “other”, when in fact it is the reinforcement of social power structures at work. The construction of gender differences – whether metaphysical or biologicistic – was put into the service of colonial power performance, marking off the “civilized” from the “other”. Thus, since the Early Modern Age, the conquest of the New World, and, in particular, since the Enlightenment, there have not only been “structural analogies in the discourse about savages and women”,¹² but a downright overlap of discourses. The manifold constructions of the ethnic / female “other” have followed two trends. On the one hand, “otherness”, construed as backwardness, is idealized following the myth of the Golden Age. It is considered an expression of unspoiled naturalness, in line with the mythologem of the *bon sauvage* from Montaigne to Rousseau, juxtaposing the *original* purity of the noble savage with the corruption of modern men. Yet at the same time, the “other” is also demonized, being portrayed in Christian discursivization as the embodiment of depravity or human sinfulness: women are depicted as godless temptresses and the very opposite of reason, whereas Indians are sodomites and cannibals. The representation of territories, continents and cities in the form of female figures – e.g., the at once cannibalistic and seductive *America* – invariably contains references to a dimorphic female nature, harking back to the medieval allegory of the world as a woman.

The colonial production of difference likewise takes up these European traditions, with the female body time and again serving as a signifier for unfathomable foreignness and described as a universal icon for otherness.¹³ These strategies of “body politics” – tactical body

¹⁰ See Weigel (1990: 130).

¹¹ This model became more prevalent during the Enlightenment, because “[t]he fact that humankind is viewed as a creature of nature has particular ramifications for the female who, on account of her function in the biological reproduction process, seems more endowed with natural functions than the male” (Steinbrügge 2019: 73). On the discursive construction of a “female” nature in French literature and theory of the eighteenth century, see the work of Steinbrügge.

¹² See Weigel (1990: 121).

¹³ The abundant portrayals of women in the colonial canon of images also reveal the codification of a heterosexual norm which Hayes (2000) links to strategies of colonialism.

construction through codification – transform the body into a place of power.¹⁴ The female body becomes a surface for symbolic transference to concrete women, anchored in a long, not exclusively European tradition of portraying women.¹⁵ As with the categories of race¹⁶ and class, the codification of gender aims at the symbolic constitution of hierarchical bodily *images* in legitimation of colonial interests.

Although the idea of a symbolic production of cultural otherness became a mainstay of cultural theory with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), there were parallel, even postcolonial approaches in the *Orient* which to this day have barely been acknowledged. The Moroccan theorist Abdelkébir Khatibi (1983), a pupil of Roland Barthes, formulated his critique on the discourse of French Orientalists as early as 1976. This lack of reception is surely due to language barriers, the anglophone field of *cultural studies* seldom referring to texts in French, or other languages for that matter.¹⁷ Moreover, Khatibi depicted the problems of Orientalism in a less pithy and globally relevant manner, discussing instead specific works by French Orientalists (professors Jacques Berque and Louis Massignon from the *Collège de France*).¹⁸ As described by the concepts of “orientmaking”, “othering” (Spivak) or “disoriented Orientalism” (Khatibi), representations of difference can be interpreted as forms of cultural identity in which the “other” is symbolically created to consolidate a mythically transfigured, hegemonial authority and identity. But the potential of generating overarching cultural patterns, as implied in Said's concept of *Orientalism*, and hence of *succeeding* in creating monolithic paradigms of the “other” – whether Oriental or Occidental in assignation – is called into question by the concept of hybridity. Rather, the symbolic drawing of boundaries would seem to be an indispensable strategy in dealing with foreignness, and a requisite part of any construction of identity. How else but through ascribing qualities from their own horizon of meaning could Europeans and non-Europeans grasp the respective “other”?¹⁹ Bhabha's concept posits cultures not as units capable of being topographically and holistically

¹⁴ The material body is, in line with Foucault, of great importance as a place of representation for power and politics: it is disciplined, conveys knowledge, while at the same time being subversive and unruly (particularly Foucault 1976).

¹⁵ Symbolic modeling of the body takes place in all cultures, e.g., through veiling in Islamic cultures. Despite the prohibition of representation, Islam does have artistic traditions depicting figures, Persian miniatures, for instance.

¹⁶ Meaning not only (racial) biological, but also the geographic construction of ethnic difference.

¹⁷ Revealingly, it was an American researcher of Argentinian descent, Walter D. Mignolo (*Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000: 67), who cited the Moroccan Khatibi, particularly the concept of the “pensée autre”.

¹⁸ He investigates, in particular, the Orientalizing language which, embedded in metaphysics (Heidegger's ontotheology), essentialism, positivism and humanism (Khatibi 1983: 120-126), produces simulacra following Deleuze (ibid. 128).

¹⁹ The question of interlacement within the colonial structure was first raised in critical and (*avant la lettre*) postcolonial texts by Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Aimée Césaire.

differentiated from each other, but as quantities, constantly in the process of being generated anew and rewritten symbolically. Any stable point of reference for measuring the truth or forgery, the success or failure of images of otherness necessarily becomes invalid. Rather, the focal point of research becomes the ambivalences and dynamics of those cultural discourses in which authorities are articulated and boundaries shifted. Therefore, Bhabha states:

In my own work I have developed the concept of hybridity to describe the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity. Strategies of hybridization reveal an estranging movement in the “authoritative”, even authoritarian inscription of the cultural sign. At the point at which the precept attempts to objectify itself as a generalized knowledge or a normalizing, hegemonic practice, the hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of *negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal*. (Bhabha 2005: 58, emphasis added)

Unlike Said, Bhabha assumes that power discourses are never unambiguous and are therefore as unlikely to *succeed* as Orientalization. Thus, the colonial (image) archive contains not only the same old patterns of attribution, but also hybrid inscriptions, moments of a creative (uncontrollable) process of identity construction. To a certain extent, every colonial model bears witness to the presence of its author, his desires, and his entanglement with what he declares as foreign or “other”. Accordingly, it is less a matter of decoding otherness as an “invention” of the “other” than of investigating colonial representations for aspects of *negotiation* and for traces of inscriptions of a self continually thwarted by the “other”.²⁰

Since the “other” is constituted in the colonial gaze, the start of French colonization allowed an Orient construction of North Africa to penetrate the European consciousness and even become the focus of a wide-ranging fashion in Europe. One of the first European artists to travel to Morocco – even before the *littérateurs* Lamartine, Nerval, Flaubert, Gautier and Loti – was the French painter Eugène Delacroix. Having made a name for himself in France, the extraordinarily talented historical painter set off voluntarily, and full of curiosity, on his diplomatic voyage. The studio painter documented this utterly new experience in his travel diary. On his return voyage to Algiers he became the first Frenchman to set foot in a harem²¹ on North African soil, thereby breaking a cultural taboo. Twice he violates the Islamic prohibition of looking. He enters the harem of an Algerian man where only the host is allowed to enter, and he looks at unveiled Arab women, which in Islamic culture is prohibited to every

²⁰ Reference should be made here to the research on Latin American colonial discourses with its analysis, following O’Gorman (*La invención de América. El universalismo de la cultura de Occidente*, 1958) and Todorov (*La Conquête d’Amérique. La question de l’autre*, 1982), of chronicles and other texts from the period of conquest (see de Toro 2007).

²¹ This privilege had been granted previously only to the court painter Jean Baptiste Vanmour, who was accredited in Istanbul (Thornton 1989: 342). Similar to “Orient”, the concept of “harem” is a popular projection surface for various cultural inscriptions, its forbidden nature serving to trigger off and intensify desire.

man outside the family.²² The act itself, a foreign man intruding upon the home of the Algerian, is tantamount to a conquest or “expropriation”.²³ Gender difference is displaced by the construction of a cultural one: the Algerian man is for Delacroix just as foreign as the women he “looks over”, gender difference gives way to a more clearly delineated cultural boundary. Delacroix’s perception of the *foreign* women is based on familiar ideas such as the feminine ideal projected on Antiquity. “J’ai eu l’immense chance de visiter un harem à Alger. C’est beau! C’est comme au temps d’Homère! La femme dans le gynécée s’occupant des enfants, filant la laine ou brodant de merveilleux tissus. C’est la femme comme je la comprends” (quoted in Boudjedra 1996: 25). The women’s quarters he sees give him the impression of an “untouched” world preserved in its naturalness – the harem embodies here the *natural* domestication of women – subscribing to Rousseau’s ideal of woman. In the tradition of the “noble savage” topos and following the Enlightenment concept of nature, the people of other cultures are conceived as creatures of nature having no part in what is deemed as “civilization”. This is the dominant image of the “foreign” in the nineteenth century. Baudelaire, too, interprets the otherness depicted by Delacroix as a natural difference:

[...] there he [Delacroix, C.G.] could study in his own time the man and the woman and the independence and native originality of their movements, and understand as well the ancient beauty by the aspect of a race purged of all misalliance, adorned of health and of the free development of the muscles. (my translation)²⁴

Both man and woman in the other culture are construed as creatures of *nature*. That this does not automatically imply cultural essentialism is revealed by Baudelaire, who labels the painter Delacroix himself with the purportedly anti-bourgeois *sauvage* concept, Orientalizing him so to speak: “Il y avait dans Eugène Delacroix beaucoup du sauvage; c’était là la plus précise partie de son âme, la partie vouée toute entière à la peinture de ses rêves et au culte de son art” (ibid. 1986: 174).

The “stolen glance” (Djebar) in the harem would preoccupy the painter for many years to come. His oil painting *d’Alger dans leur appartement*, exhibited at the *Salon de Paris* in

²² Moussa (1990: 224) presumes the painter got around the prescription by being led to the chambers of Jewish women, who were not subject to the visual ban.

²³ It is precisely because the act itself is an expression of tremendous sexual energy that the jealous protagonists in Spanish baroque novels carefully bar the doors and guard the keys, for instance, in *El celoso extremeño* by Cervantes and a version by María de Zayas, *El prevenido engañado*.

²⁴ Original quote: “[...] là il [Delacroix, C.G.] put à loisir étudier l’homme et la femme dans l’indépendance et l’originalité native de leurs mouvements, et comprendre la beauté antique par l’aspect d’une race pure de toute mésalliance et orne de santé et du libre développement de ses muscles.” (Baudelaire 1986: 78, emphasis added).

1834,²⁵ became the object of fascination for an audience taken with the Oriental craze. The painting, called the “plus beau tableau du monde” by Renoir, shows typical elements of the harem fantasies found in European painting. The exotic props can all be found here: water pipe (in the foreground), Oriental rugs and pillows, ornamental wall tiles, and a Koran plaque in the background. The women’s attire reveals additional Oriental motifs: head scarves, *babouches*, valuable jewelry, and clothing such as the traditional Ottoman brocade vest worn by the woman on the left-hand side of the picture. The women appear natural. Sitting barefoot on the floor, the phantasm of their doubly unspoiled nature is enacted: the harem as a place of primitiveness and sexual mystery, standing in for the culture of the colonized which is deliberately hidden from view. But can Delacroix’s artistic obsession be reduced to colonial propaganda and “*érotisme bon marché*” (Boudjedra)?²⁶ Oriental paintings – not only Delacroix’s – serve to visually create and resurvey the space being incorporated into France as colonial territory. Nineteenth-century art critics blocked this aspect out, concentrating instead on the aesthetic qualities of the painting’s novel light and color effects (cf. *L’Algérie des peintres*).

ILLUSTRATION 1

First version of Eugène Delacroix, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur intérieur* (1834)

What stands in the way of reading the painting as a mere stereotype is that Delacroix *stages* the voyeur’s gaze, with explicit reference to the viewing context. He simultaneously exhibits the ambivalence of his Orientalizing composition. The women, immersed in themselves – not particularly alluring or provocative – seem to be on stage, draped in a colorful décor. A curtain framing the field of vision is raised to one side by a servant girl, thus symbolically lifting the veil: the visual perimeters in both directions are rolled back for a brief moment. The black slave girl marks the boundary between the harem women and the outer world, her gaze is a proxy for that of the viewer. The color of her skin accentuates a further difference, making the other women seem like aristocratic beauties and legitimate wives. Delacroix’s

²⁵ The painting was purchased later by Louis-Philippe and is today to be seen in the *Louvre*.

²⁶ “There is no doubt that Eugène Delacroix was one of the most famous French painters of the nineteenth century, but this painting which made of him a celebrity is limited typically by the colonial, orientalist, exotic even erotic gaze – a cheap eroticism, by the way – despite the employed exceptional technique.” Original quote: “Il n’y a pas de doute qu’Eugène Delacroix fut l’un es plus grands peintre français du XIXe siècle, mais ce tableau qui a fait sa célébrité est typiquement restreint par la vision coloniale, orientaliste, exotique, voire érotique – un érotisme bon marché, par ailleurs – malgré la technique exceptionnelle utilisée [...]” (Boudjedra 1996: 26f.).

Femmes d'Alger do not satisfy the stereotype of dark skin. A further indication that the “stolen” gaze is staged are the shutters slightly ajar in the background. Delacroix has painted a harem fantasy while reflecting on the constraints of visual representation. He shows not only a scene from a harem, but behind the façade exposes various viewpoints and their attendant hierarchies, dispositions and interpretations.²⁷

In the early 1980s, the Algerian author and historian Assia Djébar opened up a new debate about the famous painting, turning it into an instrument for the literary reappropriation of a female history of Algeria, an Algerian “herstory”. Delacroix’s painting, the leitmotif of her collection of short stories by the same name, becomes the inscription surface for a series of tales which can be read as a female chronicle of both Algerian wars. In a postcolonial ephrasis, Djébar reflects in the book’s epilogue upon colonial (visual) constellations which continue into the present and which she then proceeds to break up. She evokes the artist’s voyeuristic curiosity, his longing for the forbidden gaze, and thereby disables a one-way exoticist perspective.²⁸ She interprets the scene recorded in the painting as a cultural encounter affecting both sides equally and thus hindering their cultural essentialization. The painter, well-aware of the unique and brief opportunity afforded to him, meticulously noted all the details of what he saw in sketches and watercolors, which he then used to paint both versions of the painting (1834 and 1848) in his studio.

ILLUSTRATION 2

Watercolor draft of the *Femmes d'Alger* by Eugène Delacroix

The watercolors reveal not only the intriguing colors and objects, which Delacroix names with precision, but also the names of the women depicted: Moûni, Zohra Bensoltane, etc., wrenching them out of their anonymity. Though they remain unnamed in the painting, the French painter at least leaves behind traces of them in an otherwise womanless Algerian and French history. Djébar emphasizes that Delacroix is more than a mere representative of a colonial ideology, not a conqueror but an interested eyewitness (1999: 186). The famous painting and its genesis bespeak a transcultural Algerian-French history in which neither the “native” nor the “foreign” can exist in dichotomous dissociation.

²⁷ It is no coincidence that the theme was handed down to subsequent generations of painters, becoming a model for both European and Arab artists (Picasso; Houria Niati – cf. to Schuchardt 2006).

²⁸ See the convincing argument for Djébar’s postcolonial reading of the painting in Schuchardt (2006: 200-208), who expertly refutes O’Beirne’s critique of Djébar.

The representation of Arab women in the popular medium of the colonial postcard seems wholly different than in painting, the photograph appearing as a more realistic mode of reproduction and the impersonality of mass-produced pictures (almost) disguising every hint of subjectivity.

The new consumer mass medium is soon put in the service of colonial propaganda. With the introduction of special printing techniques around 1900, postcards can be produced serially by the postcard industry, being sold in Algeria mainly as advertisements for the settler colony. Colonial photo studios arose shortly after the invention of photography. The first photographs are innocuous outdoor shots, but the colonies' inhabitants increasingly become the focus of attention, being "studied" photographically in studio takes. Women, as anonymous *femme-objet*, are one of the prime subjects for photographers. They are portrayed as sinful and impulsive, wild and backward, naïve and childish in order to appeal to the erotic imagination of European postcard collectors and to signalize their availability (see manifold examples in Alloula 1981, Sebbar/Belorgy 2002 and Taraud 2002).

The anonymity of viewer and object coincides with the scopic desire of the voyeuristic photographer, which finds its expression in the *mise-en-scène*. The mass reproduction of photos marks a new dimension in commercialization with the dissemination of popular motifs. Evident here is the rigidity of the visual images. The artificial scenery disembodies the concrete female figures presented, allowing them to be inscribed with the male viewer's fantasies.

The Algerian author and poet Malek Alloula, who published these postcards in 1981 as *Le Harem colonial* [*The Colonial Harem*, Minneapolis 1986] interprets the stereotypical construction of the female body in the photographic medium as a reaction to the conqueror's repeatedly frustrated gaze, which everywhere it looks finds veiled Arab women. Paid models, he argues, have to replace the unattainability of the Algerian woman as a kind of "imaginary epiphany", the colonial postcard becoming the medium par excellence for the symbolic appropriation and occupation of the female body (ibid. 18). He opens up an-*other* perspective on the representation of the colonized, exposing the colonial force normally ignored in a more superficial visual discourse. Yet the cultural difference created by the exoticist construction remains. The entanglement of the gaze with its object and the reciprocal gaze, the markings of the producer, are disregarded.²⁹

²⁹ Alloula (1981: 10) criticizes the cultural subjugation of women in the medium of photography, but these women remain little more than static objects in his analysis. Their recognizable visual encounters with the photographer and the subversion of the colonial gaze are not dealt with systematically.

Conversely, in numerous postcards the habitus of the viewer can be detected in the gaze of the women depicted. Contrary to the Islamic ban on the female gaze, they aggressively stare into the camera – presumably at the behest of the famous photographer Jean Geiser from Algiers – and thus become unwelcome witnesses to a cultural encounter. “When we look at these photographic postcards today, something is visible that is not present in them *materialiter*. It’s the body of the women photographed, which is viewed and visually touched” (my translation).³⁰ The women depicted on the postcards reflect the photographic moment, unveiling the phantasma of their portrayal by reciprocating the voyeuristic gaze of the male onlooker and thereby unmasking it. Though they may be silent objects, their gaze turns them – in transgression of religious taboo – into subjects; watching back offers an answer to monopolization by the viewer, her gazes break through the constraints of colonial visual control.

ILLUSTRATION 3

Postcard of Jean Geiser *Mauresque dans leur intérieur* (quoted in Alloula 1981: cover, p. 27)

As in Bhabha’s *mimicry*, the women in the camera eye ostensibly conform to the viewer’s expectations, yet by imitating the colonial culture (“*almost the same but not quite*”, see Bhabha 1994: 89) underline their otherness and hence the ambivalence of the colonial act of appropriation: her gaze suggests that representation is frozen in stereotype. By looking back, staring imperiously at the photographer and his camera, they refer to the viewer, calling to mind the visual constructions of his own culture. After all, it is his own deeply rooted mode of interpretation which construes Arab women as erotic objects, prostitutes,³¹ lesbians, wild women, etc. But behind these stereotyped visions, there is always a resistance to recognize constituting a hybrid version of the supposed clear representation.

³⁰ Original quote: “Betrachten wir diese Fotopostkarten heute, dann ist in den Fotografien etwas sichtbar, das nicht in ihnen *materialiter* präsent ist. Es ist der Körper der fotografierten Frauen, der erblickt und im Blick berührt wurde” (Stemmler 2004: 119). My German colleague of Romance Languages Susanne Stemmler contributes to the heated debate about Alloula’s way to publish colonial postcards of the Maghreb. She defends his attitude to contextualize these visions purely with colonialism while other scholars criticized his presentation. Woodhull for instance sees in Alloula’s interpretation a new limited vision of Arab women, because they are only focused by masculine gazes (“colonialists expropriate maghrebian men”) embodying not themselves but the Maghrebian culture (Woodhull 1993: 37ff). Unfortunately, neither Woodhull nor Eileraas (2003) – another critic of Alloula – are developing alternative interpretations for the postcards, therefore I’m proposing a lecture of them as ‘hybrid gaze’.

³¹ Blacks, Orientals and Jews are historically branded on repeated occasions with the “whore stigma” (see Gail Pheterson: *The Whore stigma: Female dishonour and male unworthiness*. Den Haag: Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid 1986).

In an intermedia extension of the colonial photo album, the filmmaker Djebbar directs her camera at one of these postcards, focusing by way of example on the gaze that defines the picture.³² In her full-length film *La Zerda et les chants de l'oubli* from 1982, dealing with the medialization of memory and tradition and, more specifically, a female *memoria* of the Maghreb, she chooses a picture of a veiled woman but adds to it something vitally new. Whereas in her prose work she gave voice to Delacroix's muted women by way of a fictive literary orality as a proxy for the stories of Algerian women, the medium of film allows for real-life – and not simulated – sound. The veiled women on the postcards are given voice in the form of an audio track. An off-screen female voice speaks, sings and whispers the following line in Arabic, *the* language of the female memory of the Maghreb:³³ “memory is the woman's body, her free eye alone can fix its gaze on our present.”³⁴ The sentence appears as a subtitle in French, a reference to the colonial medium, in contrast to the oral Maghreb culture. Changing camera settings animate the postcard – they imply a roaming gaze, the viewer setting fixed motifs in motion.³⁵ The women come to life and seem to move, the previously silent images talk back, as it were. The director enacts the significance of women – their bodies and voices – for the oral-affective form of memory, laying the foundation for a transmedia historiography out of *memoria* culture and film documentation. The addition of a soundtrack undermines the transfixation of the female body in the colonial allegorizing of the Orient and the personification of the “other” in female figures. The abstract photographic images of women are rewritten. The filmmaker Djebbar succeeds in confronting colonial *body politics*. Through the medium of film, she undoes the expropriation of the female body in the colonial canon of images, the silencing of culture, and the excision of voice and sound. In this manner, the commandment of silence imposed on Arab women by their own culture, the “second mutilation”, (see Djebbar 1980: 158) is broken.

Djebbar's documentary film also contains footage of a French reportage on a southern Algerian “tribal festival”, apparently staged for the colonizers.³⁶ Unlike the postcard, which was

³² Mulvey's (1980) gender-specific cinematic perspective – male viewer molds female object – is translated here into colonial categories.

³³ Even if it seems to be High-Arabic in this case, Djebbar intentionnally not uses the colonial language.

³⁴ The woman, for her part, can *steal* a gaze from behind a protective veil: “Elle y paraît surtout silhouette fugitive, éborgnée quand elle ne regarde que d'un œil. [...] Mais cet œil libéré, qui pourrait devenir signe d'une conquête vers la lumière des autres, hors du confinement, voilà qu'il est perçu à son tour menace; et le cercle vicieux se reforme. [...] Une femme – en mouvement, donc 'nue' – qui regarde, n'est-ce pas en outre une menace nouvelle à leur exclusivité scopique, à cette prérogative mâle?” (Djebbar 1980: 151f.).

³⁵ See Stemmler's (2004: 102) phenomenological approach, which construes seeing as touching and as a space-creating power. The seeing subject of the conqueror perpetually loses itself in the “other”.

³⁶ I wish to thank Susanne Gehrmann for pointing out the Eurocentric nature of the term *tribe*, which – although Maghreb authors do use it – is considered a deviant model of membership in family groups and “closed societies” of this type.

likewise taken from colonial image archives, but circulated, the film material she uses in *La Zerda* is made up of outtakes, the parts cut out by French censors. By adding an ironic commentary to the supposedly straightforward image discourse of French documentary films, the film director demonstrates that it is possible to appropriate and rewrite audiovisual representations from the colonial period. Whereas the French camera lens focuses voyeuristically on the exoticized celebrants and enacts their otherness, Djebbar applies the act of *ethnological* description to her commentary, which, turning the tables, focuses on the French officers who appear in the film and assume a hegemonial stance.

ILLUSTRATION 4

Screenshot from Djebbar's documentary film *La Zerda et les chants de l'oubli* (1982)

In doing so she repudiates the pre-established object-subject perspectivization of the images, turning the French conqueror into the object of her film. In a reversal of colonial logic, she expresses a lack of understanding for colonial subjugation and its ethical legitimacy. Djebbar presents the French as the real “exotic ones” at the Algerian festival, which was most likely organized expressly for their colonial masters. The varied camera angles indicate planned and strategic shots. The *friendly* French general “inspects” a row of Arab women, kissing them on the cheek – and demonstrating in the process his lack of knowledge of their native culture. His “etiquette”, or lack thereof, is an act of colonial arrogance and a display of power, but also an expression of his ignorance in regard to their religion and tribal traditions. His application of French customs in his dealings with colonial subjects is an attempt to establish closer contact, which the women and tribal members, in conformity with their own traditions, do not go along with.

ILLUSTRATION 5

Screenshot from Djebbar's documentary film *La Zerda et les chants de l'oubli* (1982)

Through the use of montage and commentary, Djebbar distracts the viewer from the superficial visual language of the reportage film towards the cultural staging of film material, revealing that colonial representations can be reinterpreted and do not represent unambiguous, pre-

established models for viewing historical reality. They can be reappropriated and turned around for revisionary colonial perspectives.

All of these strategies dealing with pre-existing French materials – whether the paintings of Delacroix, the postcards of anonymous photographers, or colonial documentary films – which Djebbar writes over like a palimpsest by rearranging and supplementing them, show that, although a (male colonial) gaze may prefigure these images, the representations in their materialness contain more than just this one view. Just like cultural boundaries in the European discourse on identity, this view can be adjusted and reinterpreted. The examples show the varied contributions made by traditional and technical visual media to the construction of the “other” in the colonial discourse. Whereas in painting the visual fascination is manifest in the primarily aesthetic approach of an artist to his subject matter, through the use of color and composition, a more effective production of difference can be attained from the analogous media of photography and film due to the potential of mass reproduction. Yet all visual representations are distinctly ambivalent, irrespective of the specific medium. An interpretation aimed at the interstium and hybridization of the representation of otherness reveals that the process of femininity and alterity is culturally produced. Unmasking these attributions for what they are opens up new possibilities for a comprehensive recodification of colonial image and text production, as cross-cultural and intermedia memory which is subject to a continual process of reappropriation and reinterpretation. It is important, however, that these ambivalent images circulate, and are not hardened in an ideological quarrel like demonstrated in Sebbar/Belorgy (2002).³⁷ The visual appropriation of a foreign culture is only possible through the use of force – Delacroix can only penetrate the harem with the protection of the colonial powers – and it is colonial culture that turns women into photographic objects. Yet interpreting these images merely as colonial propaganda and eroticism fails to acknowledge that racism and sexism are also perpetuated *within* societies and cultures, and that every representation contains various layers of meaning. Only by arresting them is a stereotype formed. Consequently, “colonial” representations have to be historically and politically contextualized without, however, losing sight of other perspectives and categories of difference, whether aesthetic, cultural, gender-specific, etc. Thus, for instance, even the so-called *genre mineur* colonial films contain structures of meaning considerably more complex than mere colonial structures.³⁸ Another

³⁷ For more details concerning this picture dispute on the colonial dimension of the postcards see Stemmler (2004).

³⁸ A similar approach to breaking up old dichotomies is presently emerging in the interpretation of colonial films. During a symposium on colonial films in Rabat, the Moroccan film expert Abdelkader Benali (2001: 2) asks, for example: “[...] faudrait-il continuer à concéder l’ensemble des films coloniaux seulement à partir de

question is who owns the colonial image archive. Djebbar offers an answer in exemplary fashion by reappropriating parts of it, inscribing new perspectives onto the material, and disclosing it, so to speak, as a “loan” from the colonial culture by inquiring after the fates of those depicted.

On the other hand, to finalize and absolutize every difference of women and colonized in general is problematic; focusing on the phenomena of hybridity illustrates the temporary and strategic character of such postulations. In this light, the essentialist interpretations of the “other” produced in the colonial image discourse appear to be codifications that have arisen under specific historical and cultural conditions and which, consequently, are subject to new and continued interpretation. Arab women in the media of the conqueror appear not only as the “other”, but show traces – sometimes without their intention – of a cultural encounter which, behind all the superficial dichotomies of native vs. foreign, Orient vs. Occident, and male vs. female, has yet to be deciphered. Concrete (visual) representations from the colonial period have been reinterpreted, revealing ambivalent gazes, an oscillation between different cultural patterns, and overlapping frames of reference in a transcultural historical perspective – not a (traditional) paradigm of static historical images and interpretations, but, rather, a process in which cultural boundaries, identities, and subjects are historically produced, i.e., continually re-established and altered.

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leurs implications dans la pensée coloniale, et dans le processus formel qu’ils établissent en vue d’intégrer le colonisé dans un système de représentation?”, and pleads for a distinction between cinematic structures and the ideological patterns they give rise to (ibid., 4).

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