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Balasescu, A.H.

Citation

Balasescu, A. H. (2005). The Veil and Fashion Catwalks in Paris. *Isim Review*, 15(1), 20-20. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16989>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Veil and Fashion Catwalks in Paris

ALEC H. BALASESCU

Every fashion season, fashion catwalks in Paris reunite American and Middle Eastern clients. In January 2003, only a few months before the outbreak of war in Iraq, a surprise awaited them at the exit from the catwalks. An alternative catwalk was set up with four models wearing four Afghanian-inspired burkas: the Power-burka integrating in its design the American flag, the Faces of Dictators displaying portraits of political figures of the moment from president Bush and Tony Blair to Saddam Hussein and the King of Jordan, the Trained-dress in camouflage colours, and the Petition-dress inviting signatures for peace on its white surface. When asked about her choice, Majida said: "everybody knows that at the Chanel catwalk for example, many Middle Eastern and American socialites are present. So, if they can be together and get along on that occasion, why can't they do it when it implies the lives of their own people?"

In France, however, the law promulgated in February 2004 reduces the meaning of the veil to a unique interpretation: the veil is the ostensible sign of a religion (Islam). In October 2004 the communist mayor of Montreuil gave a municipal edict forbidding an announced fashion show reserved just for Muslim women. The reasons claimed were the following: the integration of the veil in a fashion discourse "presents the danger of banalizing" this object, and the proposed event is gender segregated, that is, against the principle of Republican inclusion. The first reason denotes the anxiety of some parts of the French public in facing the possibility of exploring meanings of the veil other than those assigned by the new law. The same anxieties were transparent in July 2004 when Majida Khattari organized her latest exhibition "VIP (Voile Islamique Parisien)" at the School of Beaux Arts in Paris. The artist attempted to "open an alternate venue in a conversation that has been artificially polarized towards the extremes. Both positions, that of Islamic fundamentalists and that of Republican integrationists, are damaging. There are no nuances allowed in this discussion." Using the same artistic modes of expression, Majida Khattari organized a catwalk for *both* men and women wearing veils: a statement that subverted religion, gender, and fashion meanings. Thus, there were black chadors bearing the in-

This article explores the work of Majida Khattari, a Parisian/Moroccan artist whose fashion catwalks /performances challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about the veil. In the context of increased interest in Modern Islam, she proposes an aesthetic approach towards the intersection between Muslim and European forms of expression.

scription "Tchador j'adore"—in reference to Dior's publicity campaign—but also veils in silk printed with the VIP logo imitating LV (Louis Vuitton) logo and replacing the small characteristic signs with the crescent moon and the hand of Fatma. The enthusiasm of the host institution decreased in the month preceding the show (scheduled during

the fashion week) to such an extent that they refrained from sending out the invitations.

The gaze

It seems that the relation between the colonial powers and the colonized Muslim territories are almost always intermediated by the veil. In France's case, the veil was successively the obsessive object whose removal would mark the success of the "civilizing process," the fetish of the colonial enterprise, and, later on, the apple of discord in metropolitan France. On the streets of Paris, a woman wearing a headscarf attracts attention; the veiled woman leads one immediately to think about Islam. Majida Khattari's artistic work makes visible this complex texture of significations intricately woven between fashion and the veil. Fashion catwalks are forms of expression that exemplify the ideal-type of the modern subject formation: the individual is presented as monad, displaying the marks of her/his possessive identity (gender, class, ethnic, or age-based, even if sometimes subverted). Fashion practices appear as the herald of the perfect modernity in which the individual is the product of her/his own (un-)informed choices displayed upon the body, while the body is the vehicle of this representation in the public sphere. The veil is a troubling discord in this logic since it indicates a presumed space of lack of choice (that is, an alternative mode of subject formation).

There is more into the sidewalks of Paris than circulation of people. In fact, Paris as we know it emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, the period of the consolidation of the secular state. The reconstruction of nineteenth century Paris was made possible by, and closely followed, the rules of visibility where the streets became the place of display of the newly established social order. The streets were enlarged and rebuilt in such a way that allowed the eye access to every corner. They also allowed the better display and circulation of commodities, as well as that of the forces of order. The street space was invested with political symbolism. In this manner secularism became engrained in and by a specific spatial (architectural) configuration that privileges flow, visibility, and transparency. Thus, the veil dispute in France is less about Islam, and more about the disruption of the seeming free flow of the gaze which thereby implicitly questions the underlying visual principle of citizenship formation.

It is interesting to observe that not only Muslim women wear the veil. Islam in France, unlike fashion, is not a legitimate instance of women's control. The veil is perceived as re-instituting a private realm in the public, and a religious dimension in the secular space.

Alec H. Balasescu is Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of International Communication, the American University of Paris. This article is based on a study financed by the Wenner Grenn Foundation for Anthropological Research. E-mail: Alec.balasescu@gmail.com

J'adore Tchador, a garment by Majida Khattari, was presented at the VIP catwalk in Paris, July 2004.



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