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The good, the beautiful and the sublime

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Book Reviews

The good, the beautiful and the sublime

Bavand Behpoor

*No...don't come to me! There is more allure / In waiting with sweet apprehension, fear. / Just while seeking out everything is pure; / It's nicer when just foreboding is near.*¹ – Desanka Maksimovic

Since the books reviewed here discuss what citizens of Islamic lands might think or produce, or have thought or produced, would one be justified in acting as a good oriental, opening the review with a lengthy introduction, quoting poems and narrating stories as we go along, similar to what Persian classical authors used to do? Would the review, in that case, discuss something *different* (because, as some Deleuzians would have it, style is the message), or would it be just another way of talking about the same subject? The question of which style of *thinking* fits the marriage of Islamic culture and new media is the first issue surfacing in the comparison of the two books reviewed here.

Having already quoted a poem, I continue with a story. Years ago, while still living in the orient, I told a European academic friend of mine, 'I love English. It is impossible to talk nonsense in this language the way one does in Persian. It simply shows through. It's as if English is historically rationalized.' She replied, considerately, 'You have been extremely fortunate with the texts you've come across.' It did not take me long to realize how right she was. In London, I learned how one very much needs an *ethics* of thought in a free market of concept production. Life in the third world² provides every citizen with enough questions to ponder. It creates a collective 'restlessness', a challenge to resist madness on a daily basis, not necessarily synonymous with finding good answers or being forced into rational thinking. In the absence of a bigger image, they must either find a way to curb their thought or tolerate the pressure of being deprived of subjective consistency on every level, a pressure more intense than even Lacan would have advised. There is something at work here that can be called 'technologies of harnessing thought',

shortened to ideology for simplicity's sake – but not really that. It is a methodology for answering problems rather than solving them.

In my new settings, I started to realise that even in a historically rationalised system there are ways for experiencing the excitement of an intellectual and to acquire their appeal without taking risks. One needs to find the proper language. Contrary to an 'urgent' social situation, where one asks 'what for' more than 'what if', the desire to 'invent interesting problems' is a luxury exclusive to Western academia. To occupy the standpoint of local 'technologies of harnessing thought' is not completely negative. From down here, Western technologies of knowledge-production appear *as* technologies. Some in the 'Islamic lands' have even tried to give it a name: Occidentalism. Or, in other words: to think the West in local terms. In the two books reviewed here, one looks in its own way at Occidentalism as part of the approach, the other needs it to 'unfold'.

Two tangent circles are a good simile for the books compared here – they approach a similar subject from different directions. Both books are written by academics, in a language addressing professionals, on the relationship of the Islamic world and new media. This is all they have in common. However, two tangent circles determine a path: the line connecting their centres. Let us now look at those centres and domains.

Dorothea E. Schulz's *Muslims and New Media in West Africa: Pathways to God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) is a book on the role of new media in Islamic lands. She approaches her subject from an anthropological perspective, as far as methodology is concerned. The thinking in this instance is very much inspired by critical theory. Schulz tries to read theory into what she observes, though always checking with facts on the ground and previous literature. This circle has a very small radius in its research focus, which is limited to the city of San in Mali. Attempts at generalisation, to form an understanding of Islamic renewal in West Africa and beyond, are made whenever possible. The data is derived in great part from firsthand resources, literature, and experience.

Laura U. Marks' *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010), on the other hand, has a very broad scope. Marks prefers a philosophical approach not confined to any single branch of philosophy. The book gathers and integrates, like a tornado, whatever serves the purpose: from David Böhm and quantum physics to Ibn Sina, Deleuze, Guattari, Peirce ('if you are familiar with the philosopher' [p. 10]), Foucault, and Rumi. The list continues: from Leibniz to Bergson, Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Kindi, Mansour al-Hallaj, Kant, and Spinoza. From Amr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz to the computer scientist Charles Benett, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Aloïs Riegl, Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Hytham, and Ilya Prigogine. These thinkers are not just referenced, but their methods and arguments are

combined as a mode of reasoning. It brings to mind Xerxes' epigraph at Persepolis: 'I have done whatever is beautiful to the eye.'

This text incorporates examples from art history as well as contemporary art, mostly to elucidate rather than support the arguments, as this is beyond the power of single examples. The first chapter is dedicated to describing the aims of this ambitious book, the least of which is enhancing Deleuzian aesthetics to tackle infinities. Marks writes on the first page, '[i]n what follows, I show, in Islamic art and philosophy, some of the deep sources of contemporary information culture and new media' (p. 1). This translates into: 'I argue that contemporary algorithmic thought and art spring (in part) from an ignored and once-despised "source": the Islamic world and its merely decorative-seeming art' (p. 25). This prepares the ground for the following claim: '[t]his book argues that there is a broad continuity between Islamic and Western aesthetics' (p. 5); which develops further: '[t]he enfolding-unfolding approach I propose in this book, with its origins in Deleuze and Guattari, Peirce, Böhm, and other thinkers, aligns surprisingly closely with certain strains of Islamic thought' (p. 11). Later, in a couple of paragraphs, 'a synthesis of Ibn Sinian and Deleuzian thought' (p. 14) is achieved. On the way to claiming 'Böhm's quantum physics strongly echoes Islamic Neoplatonism' (p. 20), while establishing 'a parallel between the art of Islam and the systems-based art of computers' (p. 19), and finding 'in Islamic art and thought the logical depth – the largely forgotten but constitutive history – of contemporary information culture' (p. 23), the author modestly hopes that her 'concept of immanent infinite can suggest a secular and worldly alternative to transcendental religious belief' (p. 20).

As one might expect, such an approach would require plunging into history in order 'to assert actual historical connections – causal, solid and indisputable' (p. 25) between new media and Islamic art. There is a great deal of engagement with history here, and the author never appears to be intimidated by the dangers of treading upon unknown paths. Much is explored, integrated, and eloquently explained, and whenever the possibility of a connection appears, it is conceptualised on the basis of what has been gathered. One might question through which methodology such a history is read. Marks is quick in responding to any suspicions that might arise regarding her methods and their limitations: 'In short, this book's approach to Islamic art is archeological (in Foucault's sense). But what I attempt to do in contemporary art history is genealogy. Arguing for discontinuity, then, this book attends to the ignored and despised underside of history.' (p. 25)

This enormous historical enterprise, which is nothing short of a comparative study of Eastern and Western thought and art in a timespan stretching over a millennium, is addressed in chapters three to five before moving along to 'focus on principles that arose in specific cultural and political milieus' (p. 33).³ As a result of such brevity, the Travels and Transfers between the two worlds, from the

seventh to the twelfth centuries, are studied in four pages. Instead of ‘genealogy’ or ‘archeology’, the endeavour mostly occurs in the form of ‘drawing parallels’. For instance, chapter six ‘suggests a *parallel* between the algorithmic yet baffling “stratigraphic” carpets of the Seljuks and later and the neobaroque cinema of our time’ (p. 34), while chapter seven suggests that ‘Islamic atomism offers a strong *parallel* to the bewildered passivity that characterizes contemporary cultures of globalization’ (p. 34). In chapter nine, the author seeks ‘new media *parallels* in interactive cinema, immersive environments, and Web 2.0’ (p. 35). Parallels are not necessarily connections. It is no wonder that Deleuzian arguments are applied to justify irreconcilable disjunctions.

Drawing parallels between supposedly disconnected objects is an exercise of creativity. It can be said that something of a Picassoesque strategy (the *rappports de grand écart* – the most unexpected relationship possible between things⁴) is at work in *Enfoldment and Infinity* – but applied to art history rather than to the artistic process. The mind is able to establish connections between any two desired objects, and history is rich enough to provide numerous ‘moments’ that can be read into a narrative. Still, genealogy and archeology (as the suffix ‘-ology’ suggests) need to be based on some kind of logic and a criterion for selection if they are to qualify as science rather than creative writing. The two poles under which this book gravitates are *contemporary* new media and *historical* Islamic art. What is left out is the *history* of Western new media and *contemporary* Islamic art, in addition to anything that might disrupt that binary. Marks’ book displays beautiful prose and is composed in a rigorous academic manner, though there are a few paragraphs that might force a re-reading. She is clear and confident in what she states and conscious of the gravity of the claims that she makes. However, the book responds to the problem it poses rather than solving it, ultimately equating the two.

Schulz’s book aims to study the movement of Islamic moral reform in the city of San (a market center of approximately 25,000 inhabitants) and the role new media technologies play in ‘these reconfigurations of conventional forms of religiosity’ (p. x). The book is based on research done between July 1998 and July 2006 (lasting about 16 months) to explain the present success of reform-minded Muslim leaders in a town typifying other smaller towns in southern Mali. Such an anthropological approach might, among readers sensitive to the issue (including the Occidentalists), raise the suspicion of a hidden colonialist ‘interest’ in the subject, though this suspicion is constantly refuted by taking into account the subjectivity of the objects of the study.

Care has been taken to allow the subjects of this study to speak to the generalisations that are made about them. The book fulfills the claim that it allows the reader ‘to understand their moral endeavour as being in line with traditional religious practices, and not in terms of religious fundamentalism and radical

otherness' (p. 19). Interviews with ordinary citizens held in Bamakan, Arabic, or French are treated on the same level with scholarly analyses derived from previous literature. Book chapters may open with a quotation by a 'Father of Nine Children' rather than a philosopher. There is no sign of fear of the face of the Other, in a Levinasian sense of the word. The Other is not kept at a distance or praised as an instance of the Sublime, but rather allowed to speak for herself with the words at her disposal. Those considering anthropology to be problematic as a discipline will have related problems with the methodology applied in this book. However, within the discipline itself, the study remains balanced. The attention paid to careful 'translation' of local terms of discourse into Western synonyms (or their explanation whenever a translation is inadequate) is adorable. One instance of this is the book's subtitle, 'Pathways to God', used by the author as a phrase to describe women's understanding of their own efforts.

Despite its clear language, this is not an easy book to read; it cannot be absorbed in a sequence other than intended, and the reader might well be lost if they do not follow the narrative. The book cannot be consulted for extracting solitary facts and each chapter comes as a block of text elaborating on a situation bordering on very different disciplines – economic issues might be at stake as much as politics or gender relations. These are not considered as strictly disconnected fields, rather as interconnected factors affecting a single historical situation. There is no shift in the methodology used by Schulz, yet the reader can feel the force applied to fit a multi-faceted discussion into a single book – probably the result of a years-long affinity with the subject. This is not a book for a wide public. However, for anybody interested in Islamic reform in third world countries, it would prove to be an insightful educational resource. The book can also serve as a guide to further references, as it covers a very wide swath of literature.

In approach, Schulz pays much attention to the social context, economic milieu, and power relations in order to analyse the role of new media, which is addressed only in the smaller portion of the book. Schulz's book does not follow a strict format since much attention is paid to the 'problem' itself rather than its presentation. The book testifies to an intellectual endeavour 'sorted' in an academic order, but not tailored to fit into it. Where consistency is disrupted, it is because facts are given supremacy over theory and not the other way around. One can feel an urge on behalf of the text to make sense of a complex situation, as every human situation is. As a result, the book has recorded the dynamics of such an attempt, rather than a fascination with an intentional discord which remains infinitely out of reach.

Notes

1. Translated by Dragana Konstantinovic.

2. I prefer this term to *developing countries*. The latter implies they are developing towards developed countries. They are not. It also implies that developed countries have finished developing. They have not.
3. Chapters six through ten examine 'a particular movement in Islamic art in terms of the relevant Islamic theology, philosophy, and poetics of the period' (p. 33).
4. '... [B]ecause there is a certain difficulty in establishing the relationships in just that way, and in that difficulty there is an interest, and in that interest there's a certain tension and for me that tension is a lot more important than the stable equilibrium of harmony, which doesn't interest me at all. Reality must be torn apart in every sense of the word.' (Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake. *Life with Picasso* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964], p. 60)

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A multiplied medium

Reviewing recent publications on television's transitions

Markus Stauff

In recent research on academic knowledge production there are intimations that a certain fuzziness of the investigated object, even a somewhat vague set of questions, are not the worst starting points for scholarship. These points often lead to exciting insights. This might explain why, for some time now, various academic engagements with television have provoked discussions and created conceptual tools that are of interest to media studies in general. Media studies seems to be a field (fortunately, it still cannot be considered a proper discipline) that is more dependent on the on-going transformations of its main object than other academic areas of inquiry. What constitutes a medium and how different media relate to each other are discussed on a theoretical level, but they are usually defined in relation to the dominant media constellation at hand.

Television can be said to be the origin of the umbrella term 'media' in the 1950s and 1960s. It epitomised the concept of 'mass media', which was at the heart of media research for decades. In the 1980s, television was still the central reference point for discussions on representation, reception, and the 'active audience'. However, beginning in the 1990s, digital media (computers, cyberspace, networks)