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Archival gambits in recent art

What can an image do?

Anik Fournier

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Abstract

In recent decades new technologies have increased access to and the manipulation of audio-visual material, to the point that today, reusing found footage has for many become a daily practice. Although the word 'archive' still continues to evoke notions of preservation, order, and authority, images circulate through increasingly pervasive mediascapes, being ripped, cut, retouched, pasted, and repurposed along the way. If the rise of neoliberal hegemony in the 1980s turned everyone into a consumer, in the early 1990s, with the introduction of the JPEG and other formats of what Hito Steyerl has called 'poor images', everyone became a produce.

Keywords: Arab, archive, art, image, installation, Muslim

Living Tomorrow (2005) by the artist Linda Wallace is a three-channel, database-driven installation. The artwork's database consists of sequences taken from the American soap opera *The Bold and The Beautiful*, as well as images of surveillance cameras, Dutch landscapes, and Muslim veils. The images are all subjected to a kaleidoscopic effect that turns them into geometric, textured surfaces. A program designed by the artist randomly streams the images to three projectors and subtitles them with scripts that Wallace has written; they include excerpts from 'Annals of National Security: The Coming Wars' published in the *New Yorker*, 'A New Breed of Islamic Warrior is Emerging' published in the *Wall Street Journal*, and a speech by Osama Bin Laden from 2004.¹ The result is a rough storyline in which the soap opera's protagonists discuss the 'world of appearances', the present 'dark ages', 'the spiritual vacuum', and the 'problem of oil', while claiming that they are 'fighting networks with networks'. Through the shuf-

fling of images and subtitles, murders take place, marriage proposals are made, and some are refused because the blond protagonist claims that ‘she wants to wear the headscarf’. Woven into the unfolding narratives – through which a distinctly Dutch cultural and geographic landscape emerge – is the highly publicised 2004 murder of the Dutch film producer Theo van Gogh. Although the juxtapositions and connections in *Living Tomorrow* strike the viewer as fictive and even humorous, as the piece progresses she is confronted with something more complex: the many social, cultural, and political threads of a society are shown to intersect in new ways.



Fig. 1: Living Tomorrow
(Linda Wallace, 2005).

In recent decades new technologies have increased access to and the manipulation of audio-visual material, to the point that today, reusing found footage has for many become a daily practice. Although the word ‘archive’ still continues to evoke notions of preservation, order, and authority, images circulate through increasingly pervasive mediascapes, being ripped, cut, retouched, pasted, and repurposed along the way. If the rise of neoliberal hegemony in the 1980s turned everyone into a consumer, in the early 1990s, with the introduction of the JPEG and other formats of what Hito Steyerl has called ‘poor images’, everyone became a producer.² Such transformations were extended and intensified through web 2.0. Nicolas Bourriaud referred to the figure of the DJ – a post-producer remixing the growing abundance

of audio-visual material – to characterise the media user tapping into the rapidly increasing and accelerated circulation of information.³

These shifts in archival practices raise crucial questions. Have such developments fulfilled Joseph Beuys' claim that everybody is an artist? Or conversely, have avant-garde traditions of appropriation and montage lost their artistic privilege? What becomes of the status of the image within this context? Are images in reality now more accessible, and hence visible, or has the overwhelming info-sphere only rendered their invisibility within bottomless pits of archives more apparent? How have these shifts marked what an image can (be made to) do? Finally, within the entanglement of local and global networks, where can the archive be located today?

In order to address these questions, this essay takes as a case in point the socio-political landscape of the Netherlands, which is one among several European countries where the Muslim veil has become a contentious topic in recent years. The over-abundance of images of veiled women that has ensued as a result has turned the image of the veil into what art historian Sven Lütticken has referred to as a minor genre of its own in European print media.⁴ A close reading of *Living Tomorrow* together with other recent works that are formally structured as archives and in which images of veiled women figure elucidates both the political stakes and the creative possibilities of current transformations in image culture relating to the archive.

In the first section, *Fitna* (2008), the controversial short film composed of appropriated media images by Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid – PVV), together with the film-essay *Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal/Introduction to the End of an Argument: Speaking for oneself/Speaking for others* (1990) by Jayce Salloum and Elia Suleiman, demonstrate how archival practices continue to be strongholds for the production of cultural meaning and identity. In this section I discuss tensions between instances of 'revenants' and 'active borrowing' from cultural archives to illustrate how certain images remain dormant, while others, such as the iconic image of the Muslim veiled woman, are reactivated time and again, serving as imaginary anchors in times of disorienting change.

In the second section, Aernout Mik's *Raw Footage* (2006) and *Schoolyard* (2009) are brought into dialog with Wallace's *Living Tomorrow*, foregrounding how images are increasingly unmoored from archives and their established historical narratives. The expansive reach of screen culture into our daily lives has stretched the archival form out into a horizontal field of associations. The analysed works make clear how this extended configuration has intensified how archives mediate social relations – which does not,

however, ensure greater visibility for images. In fact, images are increasingly vulnerable to being forgotten, even while they have greater potential to acquire new meanings as they converge with the social, cultural, and political transformations taking place in the hypermedia environment in which they circulate. It is for this reason that tracing the archival history of an image – here the iconic image of the Muslim veiled woman – becomes a method for mapping the slippery terrain between the various possibilities of an image within present archival practices: to be lost in circulation, to be reinscribed into past tropes and semantic readings, or to institute more complex readings, remaining sufficiently open to the instability of the moment to help unlock cultural imaginaries.

The archive of an image: Fast forward to the past

Although it is tempting to entirely disregard *Fitna* on the basis of its amateurish production and overt Islamophobic stance, the short film provides the occasion to outline shifts in current archival practices. Furthermore, it allows me to pinpoint the extreme to which images of veiled women have come to be instrumentalised within populist discourses that have had undeniable political weight, not to mention legislative repercussions, in recent Dutch society. By extension, the film epitomises how archival practices continue to be perceived as crucial sites of cultural and identity formation. Posted on YouTube, the film further demonstrates that people from all walks of life (here a politician) have become archivists, sifting through and interpreting accessible audio-visual material in order to build their own audio-visual composition and historical narratives. These narratives are then widely distributed on pervasive social media platforms. In what follows, I discuss how such user-generated montages often confuse spatio-temporal coordinates, reflecting the disorienting experience resulting from the conjunction of the global and the local in screen culture.

Fitna constitutes an audio-visual essay composed of found footage culled from various sources including official print and audio-visual media, firsthand witness accounts provided by handheld mobile devices, demographic statistics, verses from the Qur'an, and quotes from various Muslim authorities. The proposition underlying the film is crystal clear: Dutch society must be safeguarded from the threat of 'Islamic ideology'. To be sure, the entire piece is structured around a clear antagonism between 'us' versus 'them', corresponding to the film's two parts. The first is a presentation of 'them'. In this section quotes from the Quran are juxtaposed with a

media montage meant to demonstrate how specific suras (sections of the Quran) induce Muslims to carry out acts of violence against non-believers. The non-believers are the implied 'us', represented as the direct victims of Islamic ideology, and exemplified in audio-visual footage of 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings, and hostage killings carried out by extremists in Afghanistan. The second section is introduced by the heading 'Netherlands Under the Spell of Islam'. In this part, the future 'we' has taken political correctness and tolerance too far and has allowed 'them' to overthrow the local culture and values. This threat of Islamic ideology to Dutch society is meant to be demonstrated by numerous references to the murder of the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh by a radical Muslim on 2 November 2004.

Fitna propagates the structure and narratives of a populist discourse. In this piece we have the components of what political philosophers Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe identify as the primary features of an attempt to establish a discourse as hegemonic. First, *Fitna* articulates social space as an us/them antagonism. The establishment, which is inscribed on 'their' side of the divide, is no longer perceived to represent the demands of the people, 'our' implied side. In *Fitna*, the establishment is the government that has become too lenient regarding immigration and integration, so that core Dutch values such as tolerance are now portrayed as menaced. Second, Wilders takes on the role of the charismatic leader who voices the frustrations and desires of the people. Third, the internal frontier, articulating a divide between the establishment and the people, is created through 'versatile symbols'⁵ which have the capacity to speak to and represent a wide range of frustrations felt by the people.

The overabundance of images of veiled women in *Fitna* is used as such a versatile symbol. The veiled woman in this piece references indoctrinisation represented by a three-year-old wearing a white headscarf and already displaying intolerance towards Jews. She also signals the oppressive and violent nature of Islamic culture and men – especially in their treatment of women, exemplified here by images of the decapitated head of a veiled woman after being executed for adultery. Most overtly, statistics demonstrating the increasing immigration of Muslims to the Netherlands are superimposed against the backdrop of veiled women in distinctly Dutch cityscapes, wearing full face-coverings and pushing baby strollers. These images are meant to symbolise a refusal of integration, and as a result, the potential repercussions of shifting demographics.

What is most relevant to my argument here is how the montage of *Fitna* conflates images coming from radically different socio-political contexts,

as well as a disorienting use of the past, to create a discomfiting image of the future: there is a fusion of women's treatment in Middle Eastern geographic and cultural contexts with the depiction of a future Netherlands. Such spatial and temporal muddling is characteristic of debates surrounding the Muslim veil in Europe in general, as exemplified by the widespread misuse of the term *burqa*, the full-length body covering worn by women in Afghanistan, Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, and tribal areas. The term resurfaces in *Fitna* in images of newspaper clippings with headlines such as 'Cabinet: No Burqa Ban', referring to the Dutch coalition government's decision in 2008 not to move forward with a tabled request to ban face covering in the Netherlands. The widespread use of the term *burqa* in debates regarding face covering in Dutch media is a direct result of Wilders' deployment of the term in 2005 when he asked that the cabinet take measures 'to prohibit the public use of the burqa in the Netherlands'.⁶ The mobilisation of the inappropriate term has had important consequences, invoking the Taliban regime. It is clear that the conflation of this powerful symbol of women's oppression with the veiling practices specific to Dutch society aims to stir up strong sentiments of discomfort and fear.

There is a direct relation between the affect of fear and the archive of meanings of the feared object. For example, taking a psychoanalytical approach to the question of fear, Sara Ahmed explains how the proximity of an object of fear induces cannibalistic fantasies of being devoured by the other. The self here refers at once to 'me', 'us', 'what is', 'life as we know it', and 'life itself'.⁷ The fantasy of being consumed by the other through proximity immediately invokes the instinct of preservation: a desire to flee from the fearsome other in order to protect the self. In this scenario the self turns towards the object of love, which can be the mother figure, but also a safe enclosure such as the community or nation. Crucially, for an object to feel too close implies that it already signals that it is to be feared. In Ahmed's words: '[p]roximity involves the repetition of stereotypes'.⁸ The movements of proximity and distance between signs and the feelings that they induce in the process do not have their origin in the psyche but are rather a trace of how historical narratives remain alive in the present.⁹ If the affect of fear is produced by objects whose past associations determine how they are perceived in the present, then it follows that the archive of images plays an important role in the construction of what Kaja Silverman calls the 'cultural screen' – a 'repertoire of representations' through which a culture 'figures all of those many varieties of "difference" through which cultural identity is inscribed'.¹⁰

Introduction to the End of an Argument: The media archive of the Muslim veil

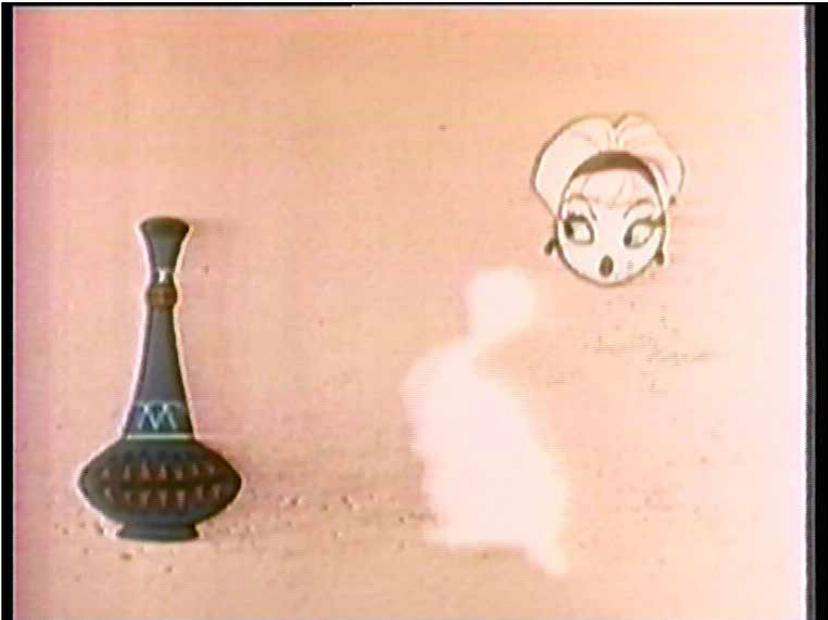
To further investigate the ambivalent temporal and geographic references that are meant to evoke both belonging and fear in *Fitna*, it is crucial to engage with the archive of the Muslim veiled woman – by which I mean the history of representations of the Muslim veiled woman and, for this study, representations in media culture outside Muslim-majority countries. *Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal/Introduction to the End of an Argument: Speaking for oneself/Speaking for others* (which I will henceforth refer to as *Introduction to the End of an Argument*) by Jayce Salloum and Elia Suleiman does much by way of excavating this archive. The film is a 45-minute choppy montage of audio-visual material that reveals the politics of representation of the Middle East in Western media.

Taking the archive as their starting point, the artists combed through media history, selecting images from the history of cinema such as the Lumière brothers' depictions of Egypt, excerpts from Ken Russell's *Valentino*, images from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Nightline*, as well as fragments from the history of television that span a wide range of genres including cartoons, sitcoms, newscasts, and documentaries.¹¹ What is striking upon first viewing *Introduction to the End of an Argument* is a discrepancy in the representation of the Middle East and the use of the image of the Muslim veil in the media as a sign of otherness then (1990) and now (2010). Whereas in *Fitna* the predominant 'other' is Islam or the Muslim, at the time this piece was made 'the Arab' occupied the dominant position in this regard.

In 'Western Hostility toward Muslims: A History of the Present', Tomaz Mastnak delineates a historiography of such shifts in which the self has been constructed through the radically reductive processes of naming an 'other'.¹² Mastnak's analysis illustrates that the name representing the West's other changes over time. However, what remains constant is how this named other stands as the reference point for the fabrication of a sense of 'us-ness'.¹³ In reality this us-ness was and still remains internally divided – it can only be secured as a unified self through fantasy and the identification of a common threat located in an immutable other.

The ordering of media representations of the Middle East in *Introduction to the End of an Argument* resonates with Mastnak's argument, demonstrating how complex political events and power relations are violently reduced to names and tropes – associations that are repeated across genres and media history. *Introduction to the End of an Argument* emphasises the central role the image of Oriental womanhood plays in referencing the

construed backward and despotic nature of Arab men and culture. The representations of Muslim and Arab women are revealed as being plural and even conflicting in certain ways.





*Fig. 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d: Introduction to the End of an Argument
(Jayce Salloum and Elia Suleiman, 1990).*

Throughout the duration of the piece we are presented with very different images of Arab and Muslim women that can basically be divided into four categories: the veiled woman, the harem woman, the belly dancer, and the terrorist. At first glance, the belly dancer and veiled woman can appear to embody contradictory representations of Muslim/Arab womanhood. However, I opine that they ultimately operate in a similar fashion and highlight what I maintain continues to be the basic dynamic of archival processes in the present: the interplay between passive inheritance and active borrowing from the plurality of images and narratives that constitute cultural archives.

To be sure, the association between the victimised and segregated veiled woman and the Middle East has not always existed, nor has it been the predominant representation of the Orient. As Leila Ahmed states, ‘the issue of women only emerged as the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam as Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries.’¹⁴

In *Western Representations of Muslim Womanhood, from Tergamant to Odalisques*, Mohja Kahf excavates a long neglected Western trope of the Muslim woman that was predominant in literature during the Middle Ages.¹⁵ According to Kahf, before it became Christendom’s arch enemy, the Islamic world was perceived as superior to European societies in many ways. In this literature the Muslim woman appeared as a powerful queen or noblewoman who embodied the earthly might of Islam. The Muslim woman was typically portrayed as imperious, characterised by her large size and wanton sexuality. Instead of being a figure that needed to be maintained as a radical other, at the end of such stories, she would often convert to the side of the Christian hero and ‘embrace a more passive femininity, and become part of the European world’.¹⁶ Today, this trope of the Muslim woman is all but forgotten. Nonetheless, revenants of the Muslim queen resurface in other historical Western representations of women from the Orient, notably those that support Western erotic fantasies. The figure of the odalisque and imaginaries of the seraglio in the 19th century are legacies of the medieval Muslim queen stripped of her power and freedom. The belly dancer is another and one of the most predominant iterations of this trope of Muslim womanhood in the history of Western media, as evidenced by the preponderance of belly dancers featured in *Introduction to the End of an Argument*.

Such highly sexualised images intersect with the operations of the image of Muslim veils because they embody fantasies of what is hidden from foreign eyes. That said, I maintain that it is the excessive repetition of both

tropes of Arab/Muslim womanhood across time and media platforms, as made clear in this artwork, that most forcefully discloses what is at stake in the image of the Muslim veil's current repurposing. I argue that their reappearance time and again is both a reaction to, and symptom of, the global expansion of a hegemonic system, as well as a dwindling of the social imagination.

Derrida's book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* is most often evoked in discussions of the archive. However, in the present study, I take the archive to be a repertoire of images. I find that the vocabulary in Derrida's earlier work *Specters of Marx*, *The State of the Debt*, *The Work of Mourning*, *The New International*, and in particular, the notion of inheritance that is found there, is particularly apt for understanding how certain images from the repertoire disappear, resurface, or are reactivated over time. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida points out that the notion of inheritance, which evokes the idea of something being passed down from generation to generation, is a state of being. Inheritance is given whether the receiver wishes it or not. And yet, although one does not choose to inherit, the process of inheriting is never passive: it always involves an active response on the part of the receiver. If what we inherit were always transparently legible and knowable we would never be more than what we inherit, a process that would quickly come to a standstill. If archives are a form of cultural inheritance, then it follows that what we inherit (the archive) is never a fixed or static entity; it is never at one with itself. The archive possesses an inherent injunction that opens it up to a process of constant interpretation. According to Derrida, 'the injunction itself (it always says "choose and decide among what you inherit") can only be one by dividing itself, by speaking at the same time several times – and in several voices'.¹⁷

Consequently, the process of inheriting is coupled with procedures of decision-making and interpretation – and therefore with the inevitability of inventing something other than what is given, that is, creating something new. This feature is certainly what makes the archive such an appealing site for intervention in the present. Derrida further describes a temporal paradox that occurs when a trace from the past appears in the present, which he refers to as a revenant or specter. The specter that appears in the present moment exists in multiple times, for 'no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future', causing a 'disadjustment of the present'. Also, in times out of joint (for example of crisis), feverish borrowing from the past ensues, 'and the borrowing speaks borrowed language, borrowed names'.¹⁸

In its archiving of images, *Introduction to the End of an Argument* demonstrates how the repetition of clichés of Arab womanhood that span over 50 years of media history have created a depository for future borrowings of images and what has become as a result their barefaced associations. Whereas the notion of inheritance stipulates that the reoccurrence of past cultural images can cause a disjunction in the present, what this piece makes clear is that images of Arab womanhood are continually appropriated precisely because they can serve as ready-made sign-posts for both their spatial (indexing a geographic entity that is removed from the West) and temporal (presented as pre-modern, un-emancipated tropes of womanhood) semantic operations.¹⁹ However, through its own strategic archival form, *Introduction to the End of an Argument* institutes a disjunction. The piece not only reveals the politics of representation underscoring such borrowings, it also simultaneously undermines their original effects. It gestures toward the injunction of the archive, meaning its plurality, and in the same instance demonstrates that most often it is the same clichés that reappear time and again. The hyperbolic repetition of the same tropes throughout the history of the moving image derails the linearity needed to secure the pre-modern versus modern logic that images of Arab womanhood corroborated in their original contexts. It is in this light that I maintain that the artwork reflects the increasing depreciation of the social imaginary. The work's repetitive and circular form speaks as much to a problematic past as to its prospective reactivation. *Fitna*, created some 20 years after Salloum and Suleiman's video essay, and its re-instrumentalisation of the trope of the Muslim veiled woman within present day Dutch society, supports this observation.

Too much and not enough images

Schoolyard, by Dutch artist Aernout Mik, offers further insight on the increasing impoverished state of our current cultural imagistic repertoire. The piece presents a double screen projection in which the students of a Dutch high school appear to have been expelled into the exterior courtyard. As is signatory of much of Mik's work, the piece unfolds in silence. However, images of a swarm of students, teachers, administrators, and security personnel provide a clamoring visual field in which group dynamics are constantly and unpredictably mutating. The gathered people are of diverse backgrounds that reflect the make-up of Dutch society, notably of Moroccan, Turkish, and Surinamese descent. As the pictures unfold, the crowd enters into various configurations that intermittently converge into moments of

recognisable archetypal media representations. For example, youths playing on and vandalising cars progressively evokes familiar suburban protests, while processions, in which an individual is hoisted up and transported by the crowd, evokes stock images of funeral processions in the Middle East. Through a subtle and gradual alteration in facial expressions and bodily movements, the procession turns into the suggestion of a football player being paraded around after having scored the winning goal. The piece is filled with morphing transitions between camaraderie and rivalry, pleasure and violence, of individuals being a part of, or disconnected from, the group's composition. On a basic level, *Schoolyard* raises questions regarding the emotional charge invested in media images, and how such images are internalised and acted out in everyday social situations.

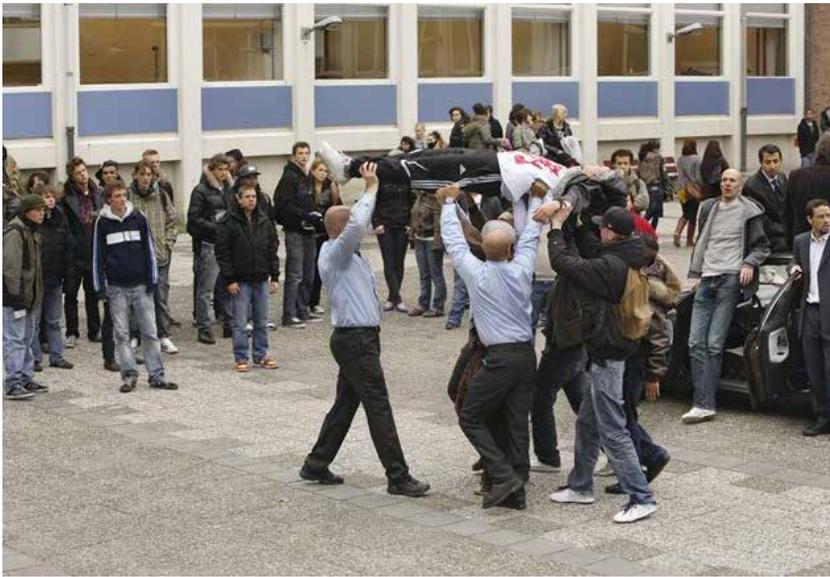


Fig. 3: Schoolyard
(Aernout Mik, 2009).

Important for my focus is how this installation does not reutilise found material. I have chosen to include it within the context of a discussion on current archival practices because it directly engages with the psychic level of the cultural screen and addresses the central paradox in my argument: that the depreciation of societies' capacity to create new imagery that corresponds to the complexities of the present moment is occurring alongside the snowballing overspill of images within an expanding screen culture, and by extension, an expansion of the archive.

Moreover, *Schoolyard* is in many ways a logical development of *Raw Footage* (2006), and I therefore find it necessary to analyse the two works together. The earlier piece is the product of Mik's skimming through and repurposing countless hours of discarded audio-visual material of the war in Yugoslavia from Reuters (the news agency's scrapped material never made it into evening broadcasts). The content shows the in-between moments of daily life in situations of war and was judged insufficiently spectacular, dramatic, and condensed to represent the conflict to outside viewers. The artist encountered them at the agency in boxes labeled 'for sale'.²⁰ Whereas the images in *Raw Footage* register all those images lost in selection, forgotten in the pits of archives and left out of dominant historical narratives, *Schoolyard* magnifies how the archetypal images in circulation lead to forms of automatism, to the point of being perceived and even performed in a semi-trance-like state.

Read together, *Raw Footage* and *Schoolyard* poignantly reflect how the overflow of audio-visual material characteristic of the global expansion of financial markets and information networks is experienced as both too much and, simultaneously, not enough – not enough insofar as we cannot escape the repetition of the same scenarios, images, and clichés to make sense of our present moment and our future aspirations. As Hito Steyerl has argued, and as Mik's work makes clear, today all modes of (image) production are always already a form of post-production, modes of repurposing our disparaged social imaginaries in a circular fashion. In her words, today 'post' no longer signifies 'after' production. 'Rather, we are in a state in which production is endlessly recycled, repeated, copied, and multiplied, but potentially also displaced, humbled, and renewed.'²¹ Certainly, if *Schoolyard* leaves us dangling in a semi-conscious state, it is because for Mik such moments of ambivalence harvest the seeds from which a new (imagistic) language can develop.

Although there are several references to racial, generational, and class tensions in Dutch society in this film, the way in which distinct individuals pass from one role to the next in the ongoing collective performance – from being bullied to being venerated, shunned, and then mourned – renders notions of fixed identities and stereotypes untenable. Significantly, in this art work the Muslim veil is one among various forms of head-covering, including masks, hair, and hoods. Together with the morphing nature of the piece, these visual markers operate akin to the role of masks in Greek tragedy, allowing actors to appear repeatedly without being identified with a specific character. In this piece, apart from the intermittent recognition

of sensational scenes from the media, no fixed anchors – temporal, spatial, and character identification – are provided.

Returning to the ‘too much and yet not enough’ character of the piece, such bewilderment together with the synchronised, but different, perspectives of the two screens produce a simultaneous overflow and loss of information. As a result, the images can never fully be taken in, ascribed into a clear timeline, or attributed fixed meaning by the visitor. In this installation, the present moment is experienced as being at once thickened and fractured. In the artist’s words, ‘an active involved play with the mechanics of memory ensues where you are forced to move between a direct personal physical sensation and complex collective images’.²²

Living Tomorrow: The archive in an expanded form

The thickened and fractured nature of the hypermedia present provides both the context as well as the form for Linda Wallace’s archival work *Living Tomorrow*. As is the case with *Schoolyard*, in *Living Tomorrow* the archive of images and text take shape in an expanded installation format that reflects how the archive is no longer only situated within state vaults and databases, but rather now inhabits the screens – big and small – of our urban spaces and personal devices. In this manner, the visitor finds herself physically immersed in the various strands of visual material and information that frames a historical period (the present) and locale (the Netherlands). In fact, while creating the piece during a residency at Montevideo, the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam, Wallace was able to incorporate current events as they happened, such as the murder of Van Gogh, turning the work into a live archive that had the capacity to capture its immediate context as it was unfolding. Furthermore, the images of the American soap opera reflect how global media and entertainment conglomerates permeate the daily experience of that locale – hinting, in a humorous fashion, to the disjunctive conjunctions that can occur as a result.

Living Tomorrow further emphasises the expanded form of the archive and image culture in our daily lives by calling attention to the materiality of images and the mechanisms of cultural identification that they so often uphold. This is most forcefully achieved through the material treatment of the images, whereby the screens in *Living Tomorrow* disallow being read as windows onto the world. Rather, all the images have undergone a kaleidoscopic effect that blurs the contours and legibility of what is represented.

In this work, representations are transformed into morphing surfaces that call to mind geometric patterns, textures, swirls, and folds.



Fig. 4: Living Tomorrow.

This material aspect of the images is at the antipode of the Albertian model of visualisation, which in European culture has determined the understanding of the viewing subject – both the maker and perceiver of the work – since the Renaissance. This model imagines the viewer at the apex of vision, located outside the image. Such a position of dominance over the field of vision is believed necessary for acquiring knowledge about the object of perception and, by extension, the perceiving subject's sense of coherence. Although subsequent technological innovations and critical theory have unseated the basic assumptions of this model, ideals of transparency and of a domineering viewing subject continue to have an undeniable presence in image culture.²³ Corresponding to these visual techniques are mechanisms of identification of sameness and difference. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the formation of the perceiving subject requires the identification of visual difference in a knowable other, a process exemplified by the operations laid bare in *Introduction to the End of an Argument*.

In *Living Tomorrow*, the Albertian model is replaced by images that call to mind fabric and screens, foreclosing any sense of transparency or facile visual identification of the subject matter. The images in each channel are constantly morphing into each other, and the random juxtaposition of representations and narratives across three screens subjects the viewer to a state of constant variation and fragmentation. In this way, the viewer is denied the possibility of inhabiting a position that is outside, controlling, or dominating with regard to what she sees,²⁴ making the interdependency of self and image conspicuous. Insofar as the image is not easily identifiable, habitual processes of identification in relation to images are not readily set in motion.

This frustrated stance to which the visitor is subjected in the installation has significant implications for how images of Muslim veiled women operate within this context. Images of the Muslim veil appear sporadically throughout the piece, both as patterned representations and also in references to headscarves in various strands of the storyline. The archive of the Muslim veil and its multiple connotations that were exposed in *Introduction to the End of an Argument*, and repurposed in *Fitna*, are significantly rerouted here. *Living Tomorrow* literally works through horizontal conjunctions in the present rather than via borrowings of historical associations. To return to the installation format of *Living Tomorrow*, the image of the veil emerges as one among many interdependent elements in a field of associations. The morphing images of veils at the market intersect with blond soap opera stars' proclamations regarding their religious commitments, surveillance cameras, news footage of the murder of van Gogh, and Dutch agricultural landscapes. As a result, the horizontal mapping of these segments positions the Muslim veil, American pop culture, global politics surrounding oil, controversial views on immigration, and surveillance cameras alongside each other as competing narratives that reflect daily life in the Netherlands. Allusions to the image of the veil's erotic or victimising connotations are significantly hampered in this constellation. In fact, as a result of the shuffling and haphazard connections, the veil becomes a tool of empowerment for the blond soap opera protagonist, who claims that she wants to don the headscarf and live 'beyond appearances'.

I contend that the various threads of narration and images depict the complexity of ongoing transformations in a post-industrial Dutch social landscape. In fact, the narratives and imagistic compositions that begin to emerge for the visitor are arguably far more ominous than the politics of belonging and exclusion commonly supported by images of the veiled women. In their article 'Neoliberal Xenophobia in the Netherlands', Jolle

Demmers and Sameer S. Mehendale argue for the need to look beyond media representations and racist repertoires of images to understand more fundamental transformations that effect widespread social unease in the Netherlands. They posit that the merging of the socialists and liberals in the early 1990s was the main instigation for an accepted inevitability of a set of changes fueled by neoliberal market logic. These ongoing changes have significantly affected education, welfare, housing, health care, and social security in the country.²⁵ Furthermore, these wide-ranging transformations have caused the disintegration of key features of Dutch society in the last decades, namely the waning of Dutch social welfarism and merchantness. In their place a bureaucratic surveillance state has emerged. Most significantly, a central effect of the marketisation of Dutch society under the neoliberal project is ‘atomization under the rubrics freedom, progress, and efficiency’,²⁶ causing the destruction of collectivities and the emergence of new forms of liquid belonging.

The picture that *Living Tomorrow* paints is akin to such a description of the significant shifts taking place in Dutch society and their affectual, and often violent, repercussions. Here, Anglo-American television culture and its celebration of individuality, glamour, and wealth confronts the murder of a politician for his anti-immigrant views. Ironically, images disclose that ‘Living Tomorrow’ is taken from an IT company in Bijlmer, a suburb of Amsterdam, whose slogan is ‘Living Tomorrow – Where Visions Meet’.²⁷

Hence, the archival strategies undergirding *Living Tomorrow*, whereby images peel away from the database and morph in random connections with other elements, do not easily reconfirm what is thought to be known. Rather, the piece asks the visitor to question how its constitutive segments relate, complicate, and even problematise each other. Instead of ready-made clichés, the visitor is forced to engage with composite images, in which the pervasive presence of foreign commercial entertainment culture intersects with the increasing control and surveillance of Dutch citizens; in which the ‘problem of oil’ and finance are aligned with the contested topic of racism and the integration of minorities; and in which modes of production, such as agriculture, are juxtaposed with modes of consumption (of local produce at the market as well as images of global screen culture). Most significantly and in keeping with the typical fragmented narrative structure of the soap opera, this piece does not present a continuous linear progression of time, nor for that matter a circular repetition of history. Rather, in this instance the visitor is subjected to the multiple competing temporalities that create the disjunctive experience of the present moment.

Therefore, by locating the visitor within an expanded three-channel structure that produces a landscape where haphazard connections between images, narratives, and temporalities occur, the work insistently ascribes to the visitor the role of archivist. This is a position that each of us are in fact increasingly occupying in our daily lives, as we are bombarded from all sides with images in circulation, images that either succeed or fail to capture our attention – images that we select, interpret, repurpose, and re-perform, or neglect and even delete, in our attempts to ascribe meaning to the world around us. *Living Tomorrow* maps a fictive portrait of Dutch society, providing possible endings and consequently opening up its polyvocal past and present. In Derridean terms, we can read the notion of inheritance in the database of *Living Tomorrow* as '[speaking] at the same time several times – and in several voices', while leaving the injunction 'choose and decide among what you inherit' as an invitation to the viewer.

Wallace's installation heightens the experience of the disjunctive present. The failure to find one's bearings, place oneself outside of what unfolds, and read into it what is already thought to be known, institutes an evaluation and ultimately a politicisation of the represented historical moment and context. Consequently, the piece successfully opens up the possibility for new inscriptions of plausible futures unfolding in the present.

Institutive trajectories for the archive

With the objective of addressing several questions regarding recent transformations in archival practices, I used the iconic image of the Muslim veiled woman and its significant connotations in media culture outside Muslim majority countries as an analytical tool in order to theorise what the stakes are for images and, ultimately, social imaginaries in the present. By looking at what an image can (be made to) do within the context of different archival strategies, my analysis has demonstrated that despite the greater dissemination of images, democratisation of archival platforms, and expansion of screen culture into our daily lives, images are no less vulnerable to being lost – or conversely, repeatedly instrumentalised due to their versatile symbolism, supporting affective constructs of cultural identity and belonging in times out of joint.

Certainly, it remains crucial to understand the historical deployment and meanings of specific images in order to see how they are co-opted in the present. That said, I maintain that *Living Tomorrow* provides a productive archival strategy for disentangling an image from its historical, and

hence archival, associations, locating it within a horizontal field in which it intersects with other historical narratives of a social-political context. As a result, the image acquires the potentiality of being inscribed with alternate connotations that are more appropriate to that context. Instead of clichés we are given a composite and fractured image, which has a greater capacity to institute multifaceted readings as it responds, conflicts, and potentially renegotiates dominant imaginaries of that locale.

Finally, Wallace's piece highlights how it is not only those who work directly with images – cutting, appropriating, deleting, pasting, and re-distributing them on social media networks – who are archivists. Rather, as a result of the archive's expanded form, we have all become archivists, mentally performing archival practices of interpretation, reaffirming old or inscribing new associations and historical narratives between what is already in circulation. Although the current flow of money, information, and people often have disorienting repercussions on a local level, we can still learn from artistic propositions such as this one to remain attentive to how these various occurrences intersect with each other and what new images and imaginaries come to the fore as a result.

We live in a historical moment when what was formerly designated by the term 'West' is losing its claim to global hegemony, and when uprisings are more frequent, especially in the Middle East. These occurrences produce radical uncertainty. Within this context, it is imperative that the deadlock of borrowing past clichés as false points of reference in the present be broken. Learning to be attentive to our daily (unconscious) archival practices and the composite, fractured images they can produce is essential for allowing the complex momentums underway to run their course and expand how they are perceived and articulated in the present.

Notes

1. Hersh 2005; Johnson & Crawford 2004, p. A16.
2. Steyerl 2012, pp. 13-45.
3. Bourriaud 2002.
4. Lütticken 2007, p. 108.
5. A term used by Laermans 2010, p. 72.
6. Geert Wilders cited in Moors 2009, p. 398.
7. Ahmed 2004, p. 64.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
10. Silverman 1992, p. 19.
11. Campbell 2010, pp. 118-123.

12. Mastnak 2010, p. 34.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
14. Ahmed 1992, p. 150.
15. Kahf 1999.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
17. Derrida 1994, p. 16.
18. *Ibid.*, p 6.
19. In her interdisciplinary study, Jarmakani considers the temporal paradox underscoring the use of the figures of the belly dancer and the veiled woman in media culture. Jarmakani argues that these Orientalist images tend to surge up in moments of profound transformation in the history of capitalism. Every time there is a new round of capitalist compressions, which affect daily experience of time and space, certain markers are needed to both legitimise and attenuate their disorienting consequences.
20. Rogoff 2013, p.128.
21. Steyerl 2012, p. 12.
22. *Ibid.*
23. For a discussion of how the Albertian model of visualisation persists in contemporary media society and continues to participate in subject formation, see Lavin 1996 and Jones 2006.
24. This form of perspective represents what Deleuze proposes as 'baroque perspectivism', which begins with the assumption that both the viewing subject and the point of view (the image) are in a state of constant co-variation. Deleuze 1993, pp. 19-20.
25. Demmers & Mehende 2010, p. 51.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
27. Lynn 2005.

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