

The Veil and Capitalist Discourse: A Lacanian Reading of the Veil beyond Islam

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Unveiling fears

The first half of 2010 is marked by two events that have made the question of the Islamic veil a heated topic. In July, the lower house of the French Parliament overwhelmingly (335 votes to 1) approved Jean-François Copé's January proposition to ban burqa-style Islamic veils¹ in public places. At the same time, Québec's Premier, Canadian Jean Charest, proposed a similar legislation that would ban Muslim women from wearing the niqāb or face-veil. According to this legislation, known as Bill 94², Muslim women would not be able to receive or deliver public services while wearing a niqāb. "No one in public space can wear clothing intended to hide the face," French legislation asserted. In accordance with this bill, the first law in North America to ban face covering, Québec's Bill, obliges Muslim women to show a face "in plain view, for reasons of identification, security and communication."³ Back in 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy proclaimed the burqa to be "against French culture" and so, the new law was supposed to defend national identity. In the words of French officials, the legislation is seemingly proposed for the sake of old values of equality and freedom. To quote French Justice Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, the government is concerned precisely about "values of freedom against all the oppressions that try to humiliate individuals; values of equality between men and women, against those who push for inequality and injustice."⁴ As it often appears, however, the real reason masked by the rhetoric of the struggle for human rights and values is, unfortunately, mere anxiety constructed, supported and disseminated by the media. It is used as an easy tool for justification of certain political decisions.

The nature of such fear is not too difficult to understand. In 1960, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in chapter XIV "Love of one's neighbor," Jacques Lacan challenged Kantian moral law by pointing out that "the traditional moralist always

falls back into the rut of persuading us that pleasure is a good, that the path leading to good is blazed by pleasure” (*Ethics*, 185). Lacan distinguishes between pleasure and *jouissance*, or unlimited enjoyment that goes beyond the pleasure principle and is a mixture of pleasure and suffering—sometimes ecstatic and often ineffable. While pleasure is a good, *jouissance* is often destructive. Lacan refers to Freud’s observation in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that “man tries to satisfy his need for aggression at the expense of his neighbor, to exploit his work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to appropriate his goods, to humiliate him, to inflict suffering on him, to torture and kill him” (qtd. in *Ethics*, 185). Lacan reanimates the meaning of Freud’s lines by explaining that one always deals with his awareness of the nature of human aggressivity which causes fear and anxiety based on coexistence with one’s neighbor: “One would have to know how to confront the fact that my neighbor’s *jouissance*, his harmful, malignant *jouissance*, is that which poses a problem for my love” he concludes (*Ethics*, 187).

Dealing with the consequences of 9/11, over recent years, a lot has been written to address the variety of aspects of the trauma caused by this event.⁵ In his 2006 essay “Neighbors and Other Monsters,” Slavoj Žižek reiterates Lacan’s thoughts from *The Ethics* in an attempt to challenge the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. Unlike the Levinasian face that does not threaten freedom of the “self” (which is, of course, not a Lacanian concept), but endows the “self” with a responsible freedom, Žižek claims that the Other’s face evokes anxiety and fear. In his later essay “Neighbor in Burka,” Žižek suggests that a covered face causes anxiety “because it confronts us directly with the abyss of the Other-Thing, with the Neighbor in its uncanny dimension;” he explains that “the very covering-up of the face obliterates a protective shield, so that the Other-Thing stares at us directly (recall that the burka has a narrow slip for the eyes: we don’t see the eyes, but we know there is a gaze there)” (1). But, the gaze, according to Lacan, is not reduced to the look; the gaze is one’s awareness of being seen. Žižek’s interpretation of the woman in the burqa suggests that we do not know *the exact spot* from where we are being looked at,

while at the same time, upon confronting the person wearing the full body cover, one *knows* he is being seen by this person; as Lacan says of consciousness, the gaze is “seeing oneself being seen.” Fear is produced by the gap between appearance and being that signals the departure from the field of vision. It took Lacan a number of years to summarize the concept of the “gaze” topologically. Localizing the gaze on the *spot/screen*, Žižek’s interpretation draws on Lacan’s early theory of the gaze developed in *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964) and *Seminar XIII, The Object of Psychoanalysis* (1965-1966). Later Lacan leaves the “screen” and “spot” from *Seminar XI* behind and employs the topological figure of the Moebius strip to *de-monstrate* “the real of the structure that cannot speak itself” (Ragland, *Lacanian Optics*, 107). As Ellie Ragland notes, “the Moebius strip has the shape of the gaze,” since its “edge and surface are continuities that overlap in a twist, thus transforming the outside and inside into one another by unary traits of subject identification that anchor themselves to an actual hole, while also creating the hole they surround” (*Lacanian Optics*, 104). The twist of the Moebius strip hides the point of departure from the imaginary field of vision and brings one to an encounter with the void, loss and lack: the real of the scopic field.

If anything, it is this fear that inhabits the rhetoric of the officials expressing their full certainty in forcing the Muslim women to take the veil off. However, what makes this rhetoric resonate with many is a number of shared stereotypes or misconceptions about the veil, gender, woman, freedom, as well as the East and the West. I address these officials in this essay to argue that “unveiling” is not “liberation” and to explore the veil on the basis of its function. I shall use Merleau-Ponty’s terms of “visible” and “invisible” to discuss the meanings of presence and absence of the veil. Through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, I shall, however, examine the veil, focusing on the “invisible” veil beyond the Islamic world, on the veil as a semblance.

Contextualizing the veil

The veil and veiling are culture-specific phenomena:

depending on the era and cultural region, the veil carries different meanings. At the same time, veiling can be encountered in different religious contexts—Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. In some cultures, veiling plays an important role in establishing a relationship with the local past.⁶ Discussion of the veil concerns the ways the subject participates in the social (or, to use Jacques Lacan’s words, the symbolic) realm. As Lacanian scholar Renata Salecl reminds us, the subject always “identifies with the symbolic order in pre-modern, modern and post-modern societies” (141). She explains that if people return to old traditions or rituals, “they are not simply copying past cultural forms; they are reinterpreting these forms in a new way,” yet related to the original meaning of the tradition (Salecl 141). Suzanne Brenner points out that veiling reflects “the dynamic interplay of the personal and the social” as Muslims face “an uncertain modernity” (673). The subject identifies with the symbolic order to obtain a group identity, insofar as being different from the others “produces anxiety: [the subject] is ridiculed and despised by the others” (Salecl 143). However, to wear the veil is, today, a personal choice. In *Muslim Next Door: The Quran, the Media, and That Veil Thing*, Sumbul Ali-Karamali explains that from olden times until today, the veil has been a representation of modesty, stressing that it is true for both sexes, “and though it is true that the veil enjoins women and not men to pull their garments closer about them, women in those days wore those particular garments, anyway. Men were already covered” (135). Cultural differences complicate the signification of the veil, especially, the way it signifies sex and gender. As Fadwa El Guindi illustrates it, *lithma*, a face-cover worn by women in Yemen and by some Bedouin and Berber men, is associated with both femaleness and maleness; besides, she speaks of the neutral-gendered terms such as “*abayah*” of Arabia or “*burnus*” of the Maghrib that signify the over garments for both sexes (7). Yet, in some cases the veil signifies gender, a social performance of sex. For example, in her book *Behind the Veil in Arabia*, Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan mentions the case of *xanith* that she studied in Sohar, Oman (1982) which she describes as “a third gender role” (168-186). Fadwa El Guindi uses this case in *Veil: Modesty*,

Privacy and Resistance for discussion of the dynamics of Islam in the contexts of liberation and resistance and he comments: “Though anatomically male, [*xanith*] does not stand exactly for a man. The term stands for males who are not ‘men enough’ for Omani woman to veil for. And while they perform sexual services for men, they are not considered women and their services are homosexual in nature” (8). As Wikan points out, the head cover determines *xanith*’s difference from both genders of man and woman: “Men and women wear head covers. A *Xanith* does not” (173). If anything, the case of the *xanith* shows that the veil may signify the distinction between biological sex and gender in its social performance by marking where biological sex and gender do not coincide. These facts undermine at least two major stereotypes about the veil. First, the cases of *lithma*, *abayah*, and *burnus* demonstrate that the common association of the veil only with womanhood is erroneous; and second, that wearing a veil is not a religious law but, a matter of personal choice as Muslim women may not wear any veil at all. This makes banning the veil from the streets of European countries, such as France and Belgium, acts of ignorance rather than liberation.

Freedoms of masquerade or masquerade of freedom?

From a Lacanian perspective, the veil will never disappear because there is always the *object a*, the lack of being and cause of desire, veiled. As Lacan writes in *Seminar IV: The Object Relation*, “...with the presence of the curtain, what is beyond as lack, tends to be realized as an image” (1). What is this image? We live in the time of an extensive medicalization of beauty, when cosmetic and plastic surgery serve as a means of both personal fulfillment and social realization. Disseminated by the media, images dictate the standards for the “ideal look” that a woman in consumer culture “puts on” and “wears”—as a veil. The discourse of perfectibility of the body either surgically or by means of nanotechnology parallels the discourse of digital manipulation of images in the most unexpected way: they share the idea of easiness of modification. It is no longer shocking that attractiveness can be associated with the “re-touched” or “fixed” face. Despite frequent disappointments in

the results, a surgery is the way to beauty. The face assumes the representative function of a profile picture, as the look of the face is now a matter of choice. As Žižek notes in his essay on the burqa, “surgically changed and thus deprived of the last vestiges of natural authenticity” the face is not different from a concealed face under the burqa (1). Besides, the very notion of “perfectibility of the body” implies that according to the standards of beauty in consumer culture, the “natural authenticity” of the face is always incomplete and always lacking something that may potentially help it achieve perfection. Today we are bombarded by the options to fulfill the lack of practically any physical characteristic and to temporarily fill in the lack-in-being by a semblant.

In the article “The Masquerade, the Veil, and the Phallic Mask,” Ragland argues that the veil participates in the process of sexuation, Lacan’s rethinking of how one takes on gender identity, claiming that “the veil speaks the message that is not a discourse, but is of the semblant.” Ragland suggests that “the veil is a masquerade-like solution to the question of what man is to woman and woman is to man” (19). In other words, Lacanian masquerade supports the norms established by tradition and law constitutive for the symbolic order. One may note that Lacan’s term of “masquerade” comes from a 1929 article “Womanliness as a Masquerade” by Joan Riviere, where she discusses a case of an “intellectual woman,” who takes herself to be a man masked as a woman (76). In her analysis of her case, as well as of a new type of women of the 1920s, Riviere describes “womanliness” as a defense, “as a masquerade in order to hide their masculinity and to avert anxiety and the retribution feared by men” (78) and opposes such a woman to the Freudian woman entirely submitted to the Lacanian law of the Name-of-the-Father as, Freud’s woman, had not been given other options to maintain her life outside of marriage. But if the woman knows that the phallus is only a semblance, then “womanliness is not a defense but a tool, a weapon. In the era of the Other that does not exist, in the era of the decline of the Name-of-the-Father and its effects, the proliferation of objects *a* seems like a logical consequence for seeing the emergence of this new figure of women” (Aguirre 89). This *postiche* woman,

the fake woman, or the postfeminist woman, is, of course, lacking, since she is not a psychotic, yet, she “puts forward no lack,” as a result of the discourse of the perfectibility of the body and awareness of the possibilities of its alterations, a discourse that promises to conquer aging and continuously supply revitalized and enhanced body parts. This woman, Jacques-Alain Miller says, “artificially adds on what she lacks, but only if it comes from a man [secretly].” Nonetheless, she pretends it comes from herself, belongs to her (Miller 2000, 21).

The masquerade of consumer culture

There is a reason why targeting women as consumers on “the market of beauty” is so rewarding. From a psychoanalytical perspective, it has to do with the logic of “the not-all,” also known as predicate logic, by which Lacan explains the feminine position on the sexuation graph.

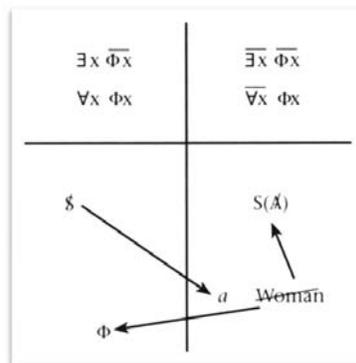


Fig. 1. The sexuation graph from Lacan’s *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972-73).

The two formulas on the left side of the graph, designating the masculine position, read “there is at least one x which is not submitted to the phallic function” and “for all x , the phallic function is valid” (masculine side, bottom right). They demonstrate, to quote Lacan, that “the whole here is thus based on the exception posited as the end-point” (*Encore*, 79-80). Simply put, masculinity is based on sameness that is recognized on the basis of its difference from one exception, an assumption that can be traced back to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. The right hand

feminine side of the graph also presents a relation to negation, yet, in a different way: it reads as “there is not one x which is not submitted to the phallic function” and “for not all x , the phallic function is valid” (feminine side, bottom right) and it implies that “it will not allow for any universality—it will be a not-whole” (Lacan, *Encore*, 80). In the words of predicate logic, the equivalences must be addressed individually rather than through a general formula and it will mean that women resist sameness and female *jouissance* cannot be generalized. As Lacan puts it in *Television*, it is always “a woman—since we cannot speak for more than one” (40). The Woman does not exist, yet it does not stop there, but intensifies invention and marketing of the endless opportunities for reinventing the definition of the woman in consumer culture along with offering ever new effective solutions to become such. Therefore, it is the consumer culture that stimulates construction of what Jacques-Alain Miller regards as the postiche woman (*femme à postiche*) or fake woman for whom “appearance is everything” and “it must seem to come from herself, to belong to her” (Miller, *The Relation*, 21). What we observe today is not new, since women have used all kinds of artifacts to put color on their lips, eyes, etc. Therefore, it is a structural function, not a recent one commensurate with capitalism. However, the consumer culture supplies one with a new means of masquerade and produces new ideologies to support the postiche woman’s desire to construct herself to create an impression of being the phallus, or the most wanted—being what men lack.⁷ Contemporary Lacanians call this accepting one’s castration and residing on the side of the feminine. By doing so, however, she recognizes her own lack of having, but denies it, pretending “to be the possessor who lacks nothing and no one” (Miller, *The Relation*, 21). As Ragland comments, “in the masquerade of normativity [the woman being the *nor-mâle* there], the veil is whatever is in fashion, whatever fills up the lack-in-being” (16).

There are a number of demands towards the “appropriate” woman’s look cultivated by today’s consumer culture. Usually, they are either related to certain physical characteristics of the body such as “slim,” “young-looking,” “worked out,” or fragmented body parts such as full breasts and lips,

hair removed from her legs and underarms and so on. No matter whether by subtractions from the body or supplementations to it, they function to fill in the lack and as endless interpretations of womanliness. The look is constructed to correspond to similar requirements of consumer culture. It is that of the *mask*. This is the fact that Western societies are not able to admit and therefore, as Ragland comments, “One can even call the culture of the veil one of honest consciousness” (14), since with “the veil [a woman] shows that one need no sexual masquerade—a masquerade where the men pretend to be real men and the women real women” (12). At the level of every day experience, a veiled woman is free from the pressure of her surroundings when, for example, it’s just a “bad hair day.” In Western societies, however, a normative masquerade remains the major way of dealing with the fact that there are no essential characteristics of The Woman; that The Woman cannot be generalized; that she does not function according to the universal logic of all and therefore, there is no such thing as “all women.”

In addition to being culturally constructed, manipulated and often assumed and worn as a mask, womanliness is commodified. On a big scale, such commodification is another product of global economy responsible for westernization and canonization of beauty standards. A number of troubling topics have been addressed in recent scholarship in this regard. For example, drawing on Michel Foucault’s theory of medical practice as disciplinary power, Carole Spitzack interprets cosmetic surgery as the inscription of cultural standards of beauty (38-50). In accordance with this, Anne Balsamo observes that typical guidelines for determination of treatment for cosmetic surgeries often, if not always, discuss desired harmony of angles and proportions for “the ideal female face” regardless of race (685-695). It has been noticed that “ethnic surgeries” that allow transgressing ethnic groups and becoming “ethnically anonymous,” as Elizabeth Haiken terms it, have lately come to be more popular. Based on her interviews, Eugenia Kaw discusses mutual reinforcement of medicine and consumer-oriented society that causes medicalization of racial features (301-310). Under the mask of liberation and the promises of personal fulfillment for women, global consumerism systemati-

cally creates and fosters women’s desire to surgically adjust their appearance to the temporary canons of a given epoch, a decade, or even a year. As Kathy Davis suggests, “Ethnic cosmetic surgery evokes ambivalence. As a kind of ‘surgical passing’ it can be viewed as a symptom of internalized racism, or as a traitorous complicity with oppressive norms of physical appearance” (86). Apart from racist implications, the model of ethnical anonymity entails unification and universalization of the surgically achievable standards of attractiveness. If so, how different is this from the function of the veil that covers each woman’s particular *jouissance* and makes her obey the logic of all, of all being similar, which, according to Lacan, means masculinization since the logic of all corresponds to the masculine side of the upper part of his sexuation graph?

Lacan’s capitalist discourse

Now I will return, yet again, to the global economy and to the capitalist discourse. To be recognized as an (attractive) woman is a matter of a signifier, reproduced and disseminated in the global context. In his 1972 lecture at the University of Milan, Lacan speaks about the fifth discourse in addition to the four discourses introduced earlier in his 1969-70 *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*—the discourse of the master, of the university, of the hysteric and of the analyst. The fifth discourse is the capitalist discourse that is a half- reversed discourse of the master (6). For Lacan, a discourse is “what can be produced by the existence of language” and what “makes some social link function” (“On Psychoanalytic Discourse,” 12), it is “a social bond, founded on language” (*Seminar XX*, 17). Lacan’s theory of discourse demonstrates that there is a relation between systems of discourse and individual human subjects and, one thing that makes Lacan different from poststructural-

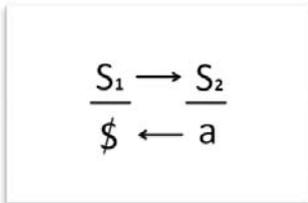


Fig. 2a. The master discourse.

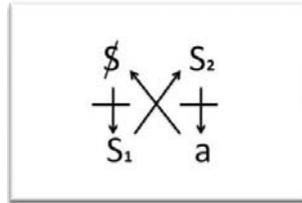


Fig. 2b. The capitalist discourse.

ists is that he believes it is the subject-as-agent who is one of the operators of discourse, not vice versa.

As Marshall W. Alcorn explains, Lacan “pays special attention to the particular *organization* of discourse within the subject that produces the subject’s uniqueness,” the moment when the subject’s ‘inside’ “discourse is formed from taking in material form from an ‘outside’ field of discourse”⁸ (37). Alcorn points out that the boundaries between the two are porous, which means the “outside” field of discourse and the “inside” field of discourse constantly enter each other. For example, we can follow this logic reading the schema of the capitalist discourse, a variation of the discourse of the master, that Lacan introduced in his several talks in the early 1970s calling it a global discourse, the discourse that dominates the world (Miller 1990, 17). The schema (Fig. 2b) reads: the master signifier (S_1) in the place of truth gives rise to knowledge (S_2) in the place of the other; and this knowledge is that the goods will fill in the lack-in-being. There is no repression in this discourse (which we see in the discourse of the master designated by the arrow going from a to \S from the master signifier to the subject), in consumer culture obtaining goods cannot be repressed, on the contrary, the desire to buy goods is constantly over-stimulated in a variety of ways. Miller explains that in 1968, Lacan referred to the growing impasses of civilization as “precisely the growing impasses of a civilization of growth:”

a civilization which tends to exploit more and more without setting any limit in advance. We are now experiencing the efforts of various groups in our society to put a limit on this growth. We know this civilization of growth was supposedly produced to satisfy needs. But as a matter of fact, we produce needs, new needs, and never satisfy desire. Capitalism could be defined by Lacan as the intensive production of the want-to-enjoy: that is, the lack-of-enjoyment and at the same, the desire-to-enjoy. (9)

Further on in the article, Miller discusses the ways the object a , cause-of-desire, supports the superego in the growing impasses of civilization; he suggests that the media industry is

the very production and multiplying of the objects *a*, especially such objects as the voice and the gaze, by means of the TV and the radio (17). Indeed, today's subject of consumer culture is very sensitive to the lack as she believes the lack can be filled with the objects *a*. Of course, in an attempt to fill the lack, she constantly fails insofar as the lack-in-being cannot be fulfilled once and for all. This model is not new except for the matter of immediacy with which we now want to attain satisfaction and the multiplicity of the objects *a* that a desperate subject of the consumer culture can obtain in exchange for money, the condition Renata Salecl describes as "the tyranny of choice" (Salecl 2006, 1). On the other hand, today's subject is the subject that is aware of the inexistence of the Other. Unlike the time of Freud, Lacan realizes that the Other is now also barred, it has a lack, designated by Lacan's matheme \emptyset . Today, there is no longer a singular Name-of-the-Father, but plural Names-of-the-Father—there is no one law, there are laws, alternative and even contradictory. As Eric Laurent and Jacques-Alain Miller point out in their *Course on the Other and Its Ethical Committees*, "Whether explicitly, implicitly, in misrecognizing it, unconsciously, they [not dupes] know that the Other is only a *semblant*" (17). Our epoch when "everything is nothing but *semblant*," they claim, is "caught in the ever accelerating movement of a vertiginous dematerialization which goes as far as to englobe with anguish the question of the real. This is the epoch in which being, or rather the sense of the real, has become a question" (17). This brings me back to the discussion of the Lacanian woman, the *postiche* woman, who is aware of the shaky nature of the fundamental signifier that confers her identity, names her, and positions her within the symbolic order as she also knows that the phallus is only a semblance. Miller says the *postiche* woman "hides her lack of having and pretends to be the possessor who lacks nothing and no one" (2000, 21). In the following, I will discuss the ways in which the *postiche* woman deals with the problem of castration.

Hiding: visible and invisible veils

In "The Prisons of *Jouissance*," Miller suggests that "the image is a screen for what cannot be seen" (43). "What

cannot be seen” is often the subject matter of the discourse and imagery of many cosmetic commercials, promising “miraculous results” in the process of making “what cannot be seen” entirely invisible. For example, by asking you to “reveal your most radiant, youthful and beautiful skin” (Philosophy) or to “discover the skin you were born to have” (Lancôme), cosmetic brands send a double-sided message to consumers. On the one hand, they challenge—to their own benefit—the notion of the surface as such: “peel away one layer and you uncover another layer of skin is undeniably profound. It is as profound as the unfathomable layers of an onion,” as Mark C. Taylor interprets this message in *Hiding* (2007). On the other hand, such an image is indeed a screen for what cannot be seen—the best, most radiant and youthful skin you were born to have.



Fig. 3. Airbrushed Olay Twiggys and her real recent photograph.

Taylor rephrases the message in the following way: “The face is opaque— seductively opaque. It is covered with a translucent layer that can easily be peeled away to reveal the presence of the face proper” (205). He points out that the revealing veil of nondecorative cosmetics make it “decorative.” As the discourse of cosmetic commercials demonstrates, the imaginary skin loses texture and *punctuation* (its uneven tone, microinflections, and other “defects”). Taylor focuses on the rhetoric of Olay, saying that “the revealing veil is not flawless but is marked with writing:

*Now, lift away the dull, dry surface of your skin
and uncover the newer, younger looking skin.*

Introducing Oil of Olay Renewal Cream
Our new Dual-Action Hydroxy Complex
85% 30%
improved skin clarity *reduction in the look of fine lines*” (205).

This image is promoted by commercials of cosmetics along with the ways to achieve this image quickly and with “miraculous results.” It should be said that the techniques of veiling are complicated, they are not only about addition, but also about subtraction (pulling off the dead cells of skin adds to the “ideal” image of a face). This Olay ad addressed by Taylor in *Hiding* is from the 1990s. Its discourse strikes one as unusual due to its technicality (for instance, “lift the surface of your skin,” “uncover the skin”). Skin is presented here almost as a garment, which can be easily removed from... one’s “real” appearance, liberating it from the old one, or from an unwanted layer of pixels that could be removed easily in Photoshop. Some inverse logic is suggested here: what can be removed by Photoshop, should be removable by the skin care products. Ironically, last year Olay appeared in the center of a scandal around their airbrushed ads. A magazine ad for the Olay beauty product featuring Twiggy has been banned by “the advertising watchdog” after more than 700 complaints that “the ad was not only misleading but also socially irresponsible, because it could have a ‘negative impact on people’s perceptions of their own body image’” (Sweney 1). Unfortunately, the campaign against airbrushing is predestined to fail for a number of reasons. Apparently, criticism of airbrushing as such does not make for a strong argument in many cases when the original is not available: photography is a “magic” of light, “light-writing” and in many cases, a good photographer may avoid retouching by merely working with the light in the studio and with phototechnology. Besides, being “a screen for what cannot be seen,” the image is expected to perform the function of masking: it should not be excessive, though, in both departing from reality and in depicting it as it is, since it is “what cannot be seen.”

According to a Gillette survey, 92 percent of women (13 and older) in the U.S. routinely shave their legs. *Luxury Magazine* explains to us that “female skin looks beautiful when

it is clean and smooth. This is what fashion tells us. A modern woman would wear quite open or even half-sheer dresses which do not anticipate hair growing somewhere that it should not. That is exactly why hair removal all over one's body is so demanded right now" (1). The discourses of fashion and of cosmetics not only often overlap, they have become interchangeable. Human skin is more often referred to as a garment one wears, being able to "clean" it, to change its texture, tone, level of moisturization, or any other quality. Now we know skin can be "fashionable." Skin is now in a new relationship with identity: by wearing and taking care of skin, one fashions an identity (beyond race) in the way one does by wearing clothing. Given my examples, such fashioning is performed by subtractions rather than by additions, which, according to Mark C. Taylor, does not make any difference:

Subtraction is no less artificial than addition. The 'newer, younger looking skin' that is revealed when the 'dull, dry surface' of the skin is 'lifted away' is every bit as made-up as the face whose mask is lucid. In the art of cosmetics—and what art is not cosmetic?—everything is made up. Fashion is an endless game of hide-and-seek in which hiding always has the last word, even when there is nothing left to hide but skin that reveals more skin. (207)

In other words, both subtraction and addition are technologies of veiling that veil by means of revealing. Jacques-Alain Miller explains that "clothing itself is in the movement of showing and hiding" (45), especially "when there is nothing left to hide," as Taylor says.

Jouissance and the invisible veil

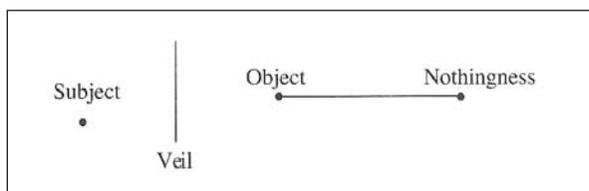


Fig. 4. The function of the veil according to Lacan in *Seminar IV*.

In *Seminar IV, La relation d'objet (The Object Relation)*, Lacan presents this schema. I suggest reading it in the following way: first, there is a subject; second, if there is the veil, there is an object; and third, if there is no veil, there is nothingness. I quote Miller, who explains this schema in the following way: "One can play with the veil, imagine things. A little bit of simulacra can also help [...]. The veil creates something *ex nihilo*. The veil is a God" (Miller 44). Miller's mention of simulacra suggests the invisibility of the veil as it "simulates" an object: the veil is present when an object appears (from nothingness) and it means the veil performs its function. Because The Woman does not exist, the veil simulates its essence and maintains the fantasies of *what she is* and *what she wants* and links fantasy to *jouissance*. As Ragland points out, the function of the veil is to eliminate *jouissance* and to point out that *jouissance* is repetitive, "beyond the pleasure principle" (11). *Jouissance* is stolen from a veiled woman. Lacan opposed *jouissance* as a mixture of positive and negative affects to the *symptoms* one enjoys more than oneself. It is "the pleasure principle" that functions as a limit to enjoyment and commands the subject to "enjoy as little as possible," to repeat, while "the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go 'beyond the pleasure principle'. However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear" (Evans 94). By transgressing "the pleasure principle," the subject learns and challenges the limits. As Chris Jenks defines it, "transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (2). While denial is the rejection of the limits caused by the death drive, affirmation is a result of adjustments to the limits but not without challenging them. As an example, I take the campaign against retouching ads (Twiggy for Olay — when advertising the miraculous results the ad designers went a little too far). I suggest that such a campaign is not so much about the ad's message being misleading, as it is against excessive imagery (here it appears that if the image of "too old" is unacceptable, the image of "too young" is excessive). Lacan explains it by saying that "The structure of a living being is

dominated by a process of homeostasis, of isolation from reality” (46). According to “the pleasure principle,” the images of commercials have to be pacifying, pleasing, and maintaining *homeostasis*, in other words, they have to contribute to the technologies of veiling that proscribe deadly *jouissance*.

Lacan identifies the function of the veil as absence which, however, creates the object *a* from nothingness; this leads him to conclude the following about the illusory aspect of desire:

Absence is painted upon the veil. This is nothing other than the function of a curtain, whatever it may be. The curtain gets its value, its being and its consistency, from being clearly that upon which absence is projected and imagined. The curtain is, if one may say, the idol of absence. If the veil of Maya is the most common metaphor in use to express the relation of man with everything which captivates him, that is not undoubtedly without reason, but surely sustains the sentiment that man has a certain basic illusion within all the relations woven from his desire. (1)

Graphically, the function of the veil, constituted in maintaining these connections, is presented by Lacan’s schema. The paradox of the veil described by Lacan is that by covering nothingness, the veil turns it into something, an object. Then, as soon as nothing becomes something, the veil itself becomes *invisible*: Lacan’s phrase “absence is painted upon the veil” only confirms the veil’s presence.

Outside inside

In *Seminar IV*, Lacan speaks about “the demand which creates the subject’s need for a veil;” it is this demand, according to the psychoanalyst, that proves that “there is also an institution of a symbolic relation within the imaginary” (3). Here he refers to two of the four orders that for Lacan constitute the structure of the human subject, they are tied into the Borromean knot—the imaginary, the realm of *imago* and relationships; the symbolic, the realm of language, culture and law; and the real that lacks mediation, absolutely resists sym-

bolization and therefore is “impossible.” The later Lacan says, however, that the real returns into language continuously via fantasy, drive, trauma, symptoms, *lalangue*, and so on. If the symbolic order, as Dylan Evans thinks, is “the realm of death, of absence and of lack”¹⁰ (204), the subject needs the imaginary veil that allows him to cover the lack, the nothingness, substituting it with the object *a*, a semblance.

In “Extimacy,” Miller claims that “the objet *a* is a semblance as such” (8). The image of Twiggy’s face on the Olay commercial is not the semblance itself but a contribution to the process of veiling, or construction of the semblance—whether it is the image of an ageless woman from the past, familiar, always desirable and fashionable, or a sexy model from the cover, exposing her body without even the smallest flaw. These schemas used by Miller in “Extimacy” and by Lacan in *Seminar XI* are interesting to compare. Topologically, it is one and the same “uncanny” figure that challenges the relation between “inside” and “outside.” It was Lacan, however, who began it in 1956-57 in *Seminar IV*: “the organism remains exterior, just as much as the outside world,” he claimed (47). To Lacan, “reality is only perceived by man, in his natural, spontaneous state at least, as radically selected. Man deals with his or her own selected bits of reality” (*Seminar IV*, 47). This selection is regulated by the Other of the symbolic and is concerned with elimination of the abject—everything that does not correspond to the manufactured (imaginary) image by which the body is being veiled, everything that is related to a biological real of the organism, flesh.

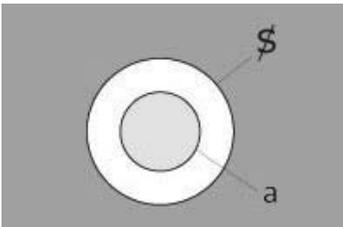


Fig. 5. The image used by Miller in his essay “Extimacy” where he speaks of the object *a* being in the center of intimacy

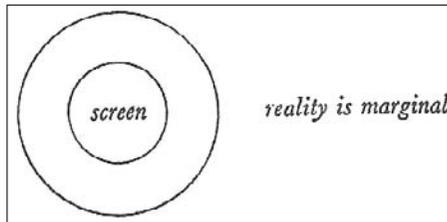


Fig. 6. A schema from Lacan’s *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “in its relation to desire, reality appears only as marginal” (108)

Lacan distinguishes between *the field of vision* and *the scopic field*. For him, the field of vision is “a relationship to reality without *jouissance*” (Miller, *Prisons* 49), reality balanced by the pleasure principle, in other words, “veiled” human reality. As Miller explains, what [Lacan] calls the scopic field is reality and *jouissance*. [...] Lacan’s fundamental thesis is that in the scopic field one does not perceive, one does not feel, one does not see, one does not experience the loss of the *objet petit a*” (50). “The screen,” created, for the most part, by the intrusion of the object *a* into the center of intimacy, marginalizes the biological real that results in the loss of affect and the return to homeostasis.

Conclusion

The veil, as an outer garment in Islamic culture, is a social and religious symbol whose function is related to “the honor of being morally pure” (Miller, “Notes” qtd. in Ragland 14). As it is often contrasted to an exposed and overexposed body image of the non-Islamic world produced by fashion, music and film industries, this essay questions such an opposition. My goal has been to demonstrate that regardless of the character of the veil, visible or invisible, additional or subtracted, the veil has to be treated topologically within the entire range of components of the process of veiling—the subject, the object/nothingness, and the screen/image as depicted in Lacan’s drawing from *Seminar IV* (Fig. 6). In this essay I explored the veil defined on the basis of its function (i.e. turning nothingness into an object) which, surprisingly, remains actual even outside the cultural context. I claim that due to the persisting visibility of the Islamic veil, common understanding stereotypically pictures it as the only technology of covering a woman’s body, opposed to the technologies of liberation in the West. This essay challenges such understanding and claims that the technologies of veiling exist in great variety in the non-Islamic world as well. I treat the techniques usually associated with “uncovering” and “perfection” of the woman’s body as techniques of veiling. To name a few, these are the practices of depilation and epilation, application of nano-cosmetics, as well as some of plastic and cosmetic types of surgeries, and so

on. The veil—"visible" or "invisible"—will never disappear as there is always the object *a*, the lack-in-being, cause of desire, veiled. Therefore, on the one hand, the veil regulates what is considered excessive by the symbolic order—the veil hides the excess. However, I claim, it is precisely this invisibility of the veil in the non-Islamic world that is the reason for often false assumptions about the Islamic veil and agitation for "liberation" from it. In the age of nano-technology, a literally *uncovered* body does not mean "unveiled" or "liberated." The veil is not going to disappear as there is always the object *a*, the lack-in-being, veiled. Therefore, as I have tried to show, rather than questioning whether "to unveil or not to unveil?" one might ask "what is the veil?" and "who is unveiling?".

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Endnotes

¹See: Erlanger, Steven. "Parliament Moves France Closer to a Ban on Facial Veils." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/14/world/europe/14burqa.html>> [Accessed August 13, 2010].

²According to *The Age*, a poll at the end of February 2010 showed that 57 per cent are in favor of support for a law banning the full veil. See: "France to unveil report on banning the burqa." *The Age*, January 25, 2010. <<http://www.theage.com.au/world/france-to-unveil-report-on-banning-the-burqa-20100124-msje.html>> [Accessed March 6, 2010].

³Olwan, Dana. "The Unfairness of Bill 94 Unveiled." *Rabble*.Ca. May 12, 2010. <<http://www.rabble.ca/news/2010/05/unfairness-bill-94-unveiled>> [Accessed July 12, 2010].

⁴Erlanger, Steven. "Parliament Moves France Closer to a Ban on Facial Veils."

⁵ As far as the Lacanian perspective is concerned, I want to direct my reader to the following work: Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety* (Routledge, 2004).

⁶Suzanne Brenner suggests that in Java, the growing trend among women toward wearing Islamic clothing ("veiling") challenges local traditions as well as Western models of modernity. Analysis of Javanese women's narratives of 'conversion' to veiling against the background of the contemporary Islamic movement reveals that veiling represents both a new historical consciousness and a process of subjective transformation that is tied to larger processes of social change in Indonesia. In producing themselves as modern Muslims, veiled women simultaneously produce a vision of a society that distances itself from the past as it embarks upon a new modernity. (673)

⁷ Miller distinguishes this type of woman from the phallic woman on the basis of their performance of *being* and *having* the phallus: "We must distinguish the phallic woman who constructs herself as the woman who has, who is on the side of having and whom I am calling the *postiche* woman, from the woman who constructs herself as being the phallus" (Miller, *The Relation* 21).

⁸ Later on in this article I discuss in detail Lacan's term "extimacy," developed by Jacques-Alain Miller, implying that the subject's center resides outside.

⁹The complaints were gathered for a campaign against airbrushing in ads by the Liberal Democrat MP Jo Swinson.

¹⁰ Evans continues saying that "the symbolic is both the pleasure principle which regulates the distance from the Thing, and the death drive which goes

‘beyond the pleasure principle’ by means of repetition; in fact, ‘the death drive is only the mask of the symbolic order’” (204). This passage brings us back to the function of the pleasure principle in Lacanian interpretation discussed early in this essay.

