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Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government and media have persistently foregrounded the imminent threat of Islamic terrorism. This alleged threat is not limited to the active war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan but is by now perceived as fully global. The media has played a key role in propagating visual signifiers of terrorism: indeed, with the rise of new television channels such as Al Jazeera and the use of the Internet by the “terrorists” themselves, the visibility of terrorism has only been amplified in recent years. Alongside the overt threat of violence, debates about the forced or voluntary practice of Muslim women adopting the veil have raged not only in Western Europe but also in Iran, Turkey, and other locations.¹ This is clearly a debate largely premised on the public visibility of the female Muslim body. The image of the terrorist today is male, but the strong reactions the headscarf issue has elicited recently in France and in other nations in Western Europe suggest that the covered Muslim female body remains a potent source of anxiety (Pluralism Project 2004; van der Veer 2006). The alleged hidden agenda of veiled women is thus not dissimilar to the supposed goals of the terrorists, that is, the rejection of Western values in favor of the imposition of Islamic law.²

Western obsession with the figure of the veiled Muslim women has been foundational to orientalism since at least the nineteenth century (Alloula 1986; Yeğenoğlu 1998), but the veiled figure was characterized earlier by passive eroticism. Although the visual correlation between ter-

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¹ I use the word “veil” throughout this article with the awareness that it now functions as a visual marker of difference with respect to Muslim women’s practices of subjecthood from Western liberalism and individuation, rather than marking the sociological accuracy of specific and diverse practices of body covering by Muslim women, such as burqa, chador, dupatta, hijab, niqab, etc.

² Mahmood Mamdani offers a trenchant critique of values-based explanations of recent geopolitical developments in relation to Islam (2004).

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Figure 1 Zaynab's Sisters commemorate the eighth anniversary of the holy defense against Iraq. Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 129, fig. 5.7. Photographer unknown, ca. 1988. © 2001 by the University Press of Florida. Reprinted with permission.

rrorism and the covered female Muslim body was explored in films such as *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), it was brought to mass attention of the Western public in the wake of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Media and photojournalists from the late 1970s onward have frequently depicted endless masses of Iranian women, covered in black chador, participating in the revolution.³ With the advent of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, images of Iranian women armed with rifles in regimented formations also became prevalent, including in Iranian propaganda publications (fig. 1). The crisis in which American hostages were held by Iranians for 444 days during the period 1979–81 was given prominent play in U.S. media. Indeed, Melani McAlister has argued that the media reception of developments in Iran between 1979 and 1989 decisively transformed popular understanding of the Middle East and its relationship to terrorism: “‘Islam’ became highlighted as the dominant signifier of the region, rather than oil wealth, Arabs, or Christian Holy Lands. None of these other constructs disappeared, of course, but they were augmented and transformed by a reframing of the entire region in terms of proximity to

³ See, e.g., the works by the photographer Abbas associated with the famous Magnum Photos agency (Abbas 1994). His work is also available online at the Magnum Web site, http://www.magnumphotos.com/c/htm/TreePf_MAG.aspx?Stat=Photographers_Portfolio&E=29YL53UHPG4. Other images of the revolution can be seen in Balaghi and Gumpert (2002).

or distance from ‘Islam,’ which became conflated with ‘terrorism’” (McAlister 2005, 200). Moreover, McAlister has claimed that it was during this period that terrorism itself became understood more narrowly as primarily a mediated visual phenomenon (201). Arguably, developments since September 11 have further consolidated these conceptions.⁴

In this essay, I argue that the photographic work of the artist Shirin Neshat from the mid-1990s intervenes in the ongoing orientalist obsessions with the trope of veiled women and its reformulation in political debates about the role of the veil in contemporary society as well as in contemporary visualizations of the U.S.-led global war on terror. This body of photographic work is important for understanding the post–September 11 scenario in two ways: as articulating the relationship between terrorism and the gendered body and as foregrounding the threat of terrorism in its current globally imminent and dispersed reach rather than as localized to a nation such as Iran proper. Through a close reading of the photographs and in dialogue with critical work on allegory, I develop a postcolonial reading of Neshat’s photographs that demonstrates their renewed salience for understanding the imagery of terror in the post–September 11 context.

From realism to allegory

The Iranian-American artist Neshat produced a collection of photographic works between 1993 and 1997 titled *Women of Allah* that brought her to international fame in the art world.⁵ This work has clearly shaped the subsequent trajectory of Neshat’s film- and video-based work: from 1996 onward Neshat has produced an acclaimed body of video installations, and especially since her 1998 work *Turbulent*, she has realized most of her artistic works in video. The earlier photographs, while forceful and impressively done, are clearly less refined in comparison with her later video- and film-based work, which is far more aesthetically accomplished. And while many critics—including Neshat herself—have characterized her earlier photographs as literal and didactic (Camhi 2000, 150), these very qualities allow the photographs to reveal Neshat’s ongoing concerns more visibly. Arguably, the video work feels safer to the Western viewer because it largely sidesteps issues of tension and conflict between the West and the Muslim world, focusing instead on aesthetically examining the dilemmas of Muslim women within Muslim societies, which the Western ob-

⁴ An insightful look at the media revolution in the Arab world as spearheaded by Al-Jazeera, launched in 1996, is provided in the documentary film *Control Room* (2004).

⁵ For an informative interview with Neshat about the photographs, see Sheybani (1999).

server can empathize with yet maintain comfortable distance from. By contrast, the photographs threaten the Western viewer and unavoidably delineate terrorism and gender as key contemporary geopolitical fault lines; therefore, they have become invested with renewed significance.

Neshat's work is instructive in drawing attention to complex questions of cultural translation between seemingly incommensurable entities, the West and Muslim women. Neshat's art has been exhibited in major venues and featured in magazines and journals too numerous to recount here. She is arguably the most prominent artist of Muslim background exhibiting internationally; because her work directly references the visual representation of Muslim women, it ends up bearing an inordinately heavy critical burden and is frequently taken to index the status of all women in Islam. Although one might correctly argue that any project that claims to represent all women in Islam is meaningless since the category of Muslim women is extremely diverse even in a single country such as postrevolutionary Iran, it is precisely Neshat's canny recognition of the easy slippage between stock media imagery of revolutionary Iranian women as metonymic of all Muslim women that has brought the artist's strikingly graphic yet deeply ambivalent work to prominence. This has helped to situate Neshat as the singular privileged translator who is able to mediate the image of Muslim womanhood in the West by means of her powerful aesthetic representations.⁶ In this essay, I demonstrate that, while Neshat initially does refer directly to the media image of the revolutionary Iranian woman, this functions only as a point of departure to a less literal, more complex trajectory of meaning that her photographs enact.

Rather than seeing Neshat's photographs as simply engaging with orientalist fictional depictions of harem interiors and veiled women or as documentary portrayals of actual conditions of Iranian or Muslim women, one can more productively understand them as being allegorical.⁷ The allegorical mode is profoundly ambivalent and complex, and it mediates meaning between realism and fiction in a manner analogous to the effect that the calligraphic screen in Neshat's photographs creates between the work and the observer. This is strikingly evident in figure 2. Indeed, in this figure, the calligraphic text creates a *niqab* (a face veil covering the

⁶ For an example of Neshat's public role as the aesthetic voice of Muslim women, see the article by Deborah Solomon in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (2001).

⁷ For example, Wendy Meryem K. Shaw, in her thoughtful essay, carefully levels the charge of reifying orientalism against Neshat's video works: “[Neshat] ends up constructing texts of gender as totems rather than as complex participants in a discussion of the historical and social construction of global gender identities” (Shaw 2001–2, 52).



Figure 2 Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, gelatin silver print and ink, photo by Cynthia Preston. © Shirin Neshat 1994. Reprinted with permission.

lower part of the face) by covering up precisely the parts of the face that remain exposed by the chador. Such a reading of Neshat's photographs allows one to venture beyond the purely Iranian referent, in favor of an unlocatable yet immanent site. Neshat's work also refuses to choose between the subject positions supposedly available to the modern Muslim woman—either traditional (subjugated) or Westernized (liberated)—and instead marks Muslim women's instability, untranslatability, and incommensurability in the representational media strategies of the contemporary world.

Neshat's work constantly references the veiled woman, whose unsettling and overdetermined effect on the Western audience can be gauged from accounts by various observers (Milani 2001; Zabel 2001). The subject of Neshat's photographic work certainly appears to focus centrally upon the Iranian postrevolutionary woman in the public sphere, or more accurately,

her figure as representation.⁸ Neshat's photographs, on the surface, appear to completely fulfill Iranian legal strictures regarding the public display of the female body in contemporary Iran.⁹ By seeming to strictly conform to Islamic-Iranian codes of public conduct, Neshat denies the viewer an immediate and simplistic reading of equating freedom with unveiling. The West as such figures nowhere as an overt subject of Neshat's photographs. However, the audience of Neshat's photographs was, and has remained, primarily the Western art world. Her remarkable success is due to her promotion by European and American critics, curators, galleries, and museums.¹⁰ Neshat has arguably come to occupy the position of the most significant visual interpreter of the status of Muslim women universally.

Rather than simply providing realist windows into the sociological reality of Muslim women, Neshat's photographs, while relying upon portrait and photojournalistic genres, subtly alter them, orienting them toward an allegorical reading. Contingent props and temporal elements are carefully absent from the minimalist photographic frames, allowing for a fruitful ambiguity in interpreting her works. Two other important aspects of the photographs produce a further distancing effect. The first is the calligraphic and ornamental screen that is overlaid upon the exposed body parts of the majority of these photographs (figs. 2 and 3). The second is the removal of the woman figure from being an anonymous element in a mass public to its individualized placement in a new frame. I will argue that both of these features also encourage allegorical reading. But to understand the specific modes of allegory deployed, an intervention in contemporary theories of allegory is first necessary.

Allegory and difference

I draw upon recent theoretical work that has recovered allegory as an explanatory framework for (post)modernism, in which the allegorical mode of reference oscillates between a metonymic and mimetic realism, on the one hand, and the metaphoric and poetic imaginary, on the other

⁸ See Neshat's insightful comments on the Women of Allah series in a recent interview in which she situates her diasporic location in relation to revolutionary Iran (Neshat 2006).

⁹ For accounts of the complex history of public visibility of the female body in Iran, see Hoodfar (1993), Naghibi (1999), and Najmabadi (2005).

¹⁰ However, a number of distinguished U.S.-based Iranian scholars—including Hamid Dabashi, Hamid Naficy, and Farzaneh Milani—have also contributed insightful essays for Neshat's catalogs. See Dabashi (1997, 2002, 2005), Naficy (2000), and Milani (2001).



Figure 3 Shirin Neshat, *Moon Song*, gelatin silver print and ink, photo by Cynthia Preston. © Shirin Neshat 1995. Reprinted with permission.

hand.¹¹ Of specific interest for this essay is the work on postmodern allegory in relation to visual arts by Craig Owens, while Fredric Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad, and Rey Chow have contributed important insights into the work that allegory is seen to perform in the third-world and post-colonial context.

Jameson controversially asserted in 1986 that all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories. This claim has been thoroughly critiqued, yet it remains useful in understanding how the idea of allegory is implicated in postcolonial readings (Jameson 1986, 69). Briefly, Jameson has suggested that third-world literature cannot be analyzed as purely libidinal or private. Rather, it always engages with larger social questions and thus

¹¹ The resuscitation of allegory in twentieth-century thought was pioneered by Walter Benjamin and has been further explored by Paul de Man, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Fredric Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad, Imre Szeman, Susan Buck-Morss, Craig Owens, Hal Foster, Jenny Sharpe, Rey Chow, and other thinkers influenced by critical theory and poststructuralism. Jameson provides an important distinction between metaphor and allegory (2001). Also of considerable interest is Linda Nochlin's extended discussion of allegory in her two-part essay on Gustave Courbet (Nochlin 1988).

produces political texts even when they are seemingly personal. In contrast, literature and other cultural forms in the West have lost their social and political character and remain purely private, invested with an individuated libidinal charge. Jameson's formulation depends upon an oppositional relationship between the first and the third worlds, between which he discerns real differences, even while acknowledging the danger of orientalizing the third world (Jameson 1986, 77). A consequence of his formulation is that both the first world and the third world are assumed to be distinct and unified entities. It should be noted that Jameson's schema enacts a hierarchy that is both temporal and spatial. The third world, located in separate geographical space, is also decades behind culturally in that it is able to narrate only political and realist texts. The simple correspondence that Jameson attempts to set up, where he equates an outdated and obsolete realist or representational fiction with the third world and formally experimental and avant-gardist texts possessing great inner depth with the West, is due to Jameson's stagist view of history. The old-fashioned third-world text fails to provide a fully satisfying aesthetic experience. Jameson reiterates these assertions in his essay. At the beginning of the essay he writes: "The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce; what is more damaging than that, perhaps, is its tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development and to cause us to conclude that 'they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson'" (1986, 65). At the end of the essay, he writes: "I hope I have suggested the epistemological priority of this unfamiliar kind of allegorical vision; but I must admit that old habits die hard, and that for us such unaccustomed exposure to reality, or to the collective totality, is often intolerable, leaving us in Quentin's position at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, murmuring the great denial, 'I don't hate the Third World! I don't! I don't! I don't!'" (1986, 86). For the first-world reader, then, third-world literature is not unlike bitter medicine—unpalatable but good for the Western patient in inducing the realization that community-based social reality has completely withered and vanished in the West.

Ahmad's forceful critique covers a wide range of problematic issues in Jameson's formulation. Of immediate relevance to this essay is Ahmad's suggestion that in the West a process of selective incorporation canonizes certain types of texts and a few non-Western writers—a Jorge Luis Borges or a Salman Rushdie—while it excludes the heterogeneity of the remainder. Based on these highly selective examples, Jameson grossly overgeneralizes his case and produces an idealization of a singular ideological motivation for all third-world texts (Ahmad 1992). Here, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's

comment, the “dominant *radical* reader in the Anglo-U.S. reactively homogenizes the Third World and sees it only in the context of nationalism and ethnicity” (1988, 246), corresponds with Ahmad’s critique, despite sharp differences in the two authors’ overall positions otherwise.

Jameson’s perspective, however, cannot be so easily dismissed. Ahmad does acknowledge that the West possesses powerful selective and legitimating mechanisms that reduce the heterogeneity of the non-West to produce a flattened image of the third world, an effect that is based upon schematic and incomplete knowledge of the particular locations in which the text is produced. Of course, we might argue that the Western reader should always seek a more accurate, detailed, and nuanced context for a particular cultural artifact. However, the problem of the Jamesonian reader is precisely that he (and the reader is necessarily masculine here, according to Ahmad [1992, 122]) can only generalize based upon the highly selective and decontextualized cultural artifacts that are accessible to him, and for him the local and particularized context of a cultural artifact is less significant than its value as a foil for the Western self. I later demonstrate how Neshat’s photographs both perform and problematize this Jamesonian demand.¹²

One needs to attend not simply to the production of cultural artifacts but also to their afterlife, which includes their circulation in the West. Moreover, the production of much cultural work that subsequently becomes prominent in the West is, in fact, greatly influenced at the moment of its creation by the perceived reaction of Western audiences—and thus much of this work is partially or entirely made for the West. Neither Jameson nor Ahmad accounts for the fact that prominent authors and artists, many of whom reside in the West and create work for a primarily Western audience, nevertheless become sole representatives of various facets of the third world. For example, would Jameson consider Rushdie’s writings third-world texts? Although Rushdie left South Asia decades ago, he is still widely considered an authority on South Asian literature.¹³ Or is it perversely more accurate to state that Rushdie is expected to represent South Asia as an authentic translator precisely because he left South Asia decades ago? And, of direct concern for this essay, Neshat’s photographic work, whose primary audience from the beginning of her career has been the Western art world, is also unclassifiable in Jameson’s schema for the same reason—she left Iran a long time ago, just before the 1979 Iranian revolution.

¹² For another critique of the idea of the third world, see Chow (1995, 56).

¹³ For example, Rushdie coedited a major anthology of South Asian literature for the fiftieth independence anniversary of India and Pakistan (Rushdie and West 1997).

Ahmad echoes this critique, noting that there are plenty of realist writers practicing in the West, and fabulist writers working outside, who do not conform to Jameson's schemata. If a cosmopolitan and sophisticated reader like Jameson, keenly interested in global cultural production, finds third-world cultural production hopelessly old-fashioned and formally uninteresting, Ahmad's contention that a local context of cultural production ought to be understood before the work is placed as representative of the third world is not likely to be realized any time soon, if ever. Therefore, a reading strategy must not simply rue these diminished possibilities and strive to expand them but also read the few token canonical artists in more complex ways in order to extract the maximum medicinal benefit from them. Clearly, this situation also places the token artists in impossible binds such as having to negotiate a personal vision while standing in as fully representative of their communities—the “burden of representation” theorized by Kobena Mercer (1990). This scenario is especially difficult for the diasporic artist, who has no native public that functions as an already constituted interpretive community. What are the strategies a diasporic artist might deploy to avoid producing old-fashioned, obsolete work yet still refer to the longed-for social community? At the very minimum, the diasporic artist's work needs to be at least partially addressed to a Western audience but also to self-reflexively attend to the problems inherent in the process in which realism is translated into something more palatable for Western taste. Before analyzing Neshat's photographs in this light, however, allegory needs to be further theorized in the context of the nation.

Allegory and the nation

Chow and Imre Szeman have pointed out that a major problem in Jameson's formulation is that the nation in his national allegory remains untheorized (Chow 1995, 57, 82; Szeman 2001, 814).¹⁴ Unless the nation is understood in a more complex manner, the charge that the nation can be represented only by mimetic realism will continue to be leveled, with the nation assumed to be self-evident and coherent in its own right. In light of this critique, the term “national allegory” now appears strangely incongruous, a tension that is, in fact, visible in Ja-

¹⁴ According to Chow, Jameson's failure to interrogate the meaning of “nation” leads him to read the situation of the third-world protagonist as “semiotically transparent” within larger social conditions.

meson's own definition of "allegory": "If allegory has once again become somehow congenial for us today, as over against the massive and monumental unifications of an older modernist symbolism or even realism itself, it is because the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemy of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol" (1986, 73). So the very idea of national allegory appears to conjoin a delimited representational mode with one that is multiply polysemic. Yet, if the national is to be characterized by realism, allegory cannot simply be a matter of discontinuity alone. Rather, the very polysemic modality of allegory also incorporates realism within itself, according to Owens, whose formulation I will discuss shortly.

Jameson's positioning of the third-world cultural artifact as an allegory, however, provides an opening to consider the works beyond their emblematic status simply as realist/national/social/political artifacts (Szeman 2001, 812). Szeman has maintained that, in the context of Jameson's more recent observations on globalization, "the nation" does not simply refer to a space or a community delineated by the nation-state in any simple sense but rather includes at least two expanded meanings: first, the possibility of other forms of social life that are different from American mass culture, forms that have accommodated themselves to modernity while remaining separate from American social and cultural modes;¹⁵ second, a utopian space imagined by social and cultural movements as a "truly progressive and innovative political response to globalization" (Szeman 2001, 821).¹⁶

This reformulated understanding of the nation, which no longer bases itself on realism and on geographic specificity, is now more suited for the purposes of understanding diasporic postcolonial art. Reading this in relation to gender and globalization, one can posit the following with reference to Neshat's photographs.¹⁷ The photographs do point toward

¹⁵ For Jameson, French cinema has furnished an important case, and a contemporary example might well be Iranian cinema, which has greatly influenced Neshat's own video work.

¹⁶ For an account of contemporary Iranian cinema, see Dabashi (2001).

¹⁷ At this juncture, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of formulations such as Jameson's, which insist on real differences between the first world and the third world, also needs attention. Mohanty is especially wary of insisting on this difference when it is the figure of the woman onto whom this difference is projected: "While the category of 'oppressed woman' is generated through an exclusive focus on gender difference, 'the oppressed third world woman' category has an additional attribute—the 'third world difference!' . . . third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read 'not progressive'),

irreducible social differences between a universalized and globalized commodified order in which the figure of the woman carries a charge as a consumer and as an object of spectacle, on the one hand, and an Iranian/Islamic order where she symbolically carries a threat to the imagined global order yet where she also remains an object of (veiled) spectacle, on the other. And the spread of this threat has become global in scope, with significant sectors of urbanized and educated women (re)turning to the veil in the Muslim world and in the West itself. Whether the veil is a coercive and compulsory mandate, as in Iran, or a choice that is in many cases resisted by the state, as in Turkey or France, the veil becomes a spectacular marker of imagining a new utopian/dystopian community.¹⁸ In this respect, the older geographic spatialization of difference by national borders is now fractured and imminently reproduced at a microscopic level across the globe. Finally, the veil identifies the problem of identity and difference as an intimate, lived, bodily relationship marked by the figure of woman. Yet that figure's subject position cannot be resolved either as a fully autonomous self or as an anonymous subjugated figure in a premodern or mass collective. Instead it is detached from geographic and temporal referents, now suspended in menacing and immediate space-time proximity.

The displaced referent

Now we can finally turn to Neshat's photographs themselves. In order to reference a documented body of work, this essay cites the collection published in Italy in 1997 titled *Women of Allah* (Neshat 1997). This edition contains thirty-eight photographs, taken between 1993 and 1997, and includes essays by various scholars. Also interspersed among the photographs are translations of the poems by Forough Farokhzad and Tahereh Saffarzadeh that provide the Persian letters, verses, and ornamental patterns that are inscribed on as many as thirty of the photographs.¹⁹ Four of the works are untitled—the rest bear loaded allegorical titles, such as *I Am Its Secret, Rebellious Silence* (fig. 2), *Allegiance with Wakefulness, Face to Face with God*, and *Seeking Martyrdom* (fig. 4).

It is important to note that Neshat herself did not shoot any of the

family-oriented (read ‘traditional’), legal minors (read ‘they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights’), illiterate (read ‘ignorant’), domestic (read ‘backward’), and sometimes revolutionary (read ‘their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight!’). This is how the ‘third world difference’ is produced” (Mohanty 1991, 72).

¹⁸ On the question of the veil in Turkey, see Göle (1996).

¹⁹ On the life and works of Farokhzad and Saffarzadeh, see Milani (1992).



Figure 4 (and detail) Shirin Neshat, *Seeking Martyrdom*, variation #2, gelatin silver print and ink, photo by Cynthia Preston. © Shirin Neshat 1995. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

photographs in the series but that she collaborated with a number of photographers in realizing the images. However, she did inscribe the painstaking calligraphy and ornamental patterns inspired by South Asian and North African henna and tattoo practices. The photographs are technically of varying quality and generally cannot be characterized by the sort of aesthetic mastery that an influential tradition of American black-and-white photographers has practiced since the days of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Neshat's calligraphy, while carefully done, compares unfavorably with the work of master calligraphers of Arabic and Persian. Similarly, the ornamental patterns are beautifully drawn but do not stand up to some of the intricate accomplishments of henna artists. I demonstrate later how Neshat's refusal of aesthetic mastery is a strategy that orients the photographs allegorically.²⁰

²⁰ A comparison with Martha Rosler's *Bowery* photographs is instructive here. Rosler's

How do Neshat's photographs differ from realist, documentary photographs or self-portraits in which the artist practices self-ethnography? While poetry, revolutionary politics, and photojournalism together might remain abiding reference points for Neshat's artistic process to unfold, these referents begin to be displaced by the allegorical mode enacted by the finished photograph. The photographs are allegories by the very fact that, as photographs, they possess the capacity for such a reading, as argued by Owens, but also through a number of formal devices, of which the most important are their titles and their calligraphic/ornamental overlay.²¹ Before discussing these, however, it is worthwhile to point out numerous other, more subtle, aspects that enable them to be read as allegories.

An important aspect of Neshat's body of photographs is its seemingly random production of images, engaging repeatedly with the same issues but lacking any temporal or narrative link between subsequent images. The avoidance of narrative and temporality is critical to Neshat's spatialization of the problem of the veil and her insistence on its coevalness with the present rather than its firm relegation to the past through a stagist view of history. Therefore, there cannot be a development or narrative in the imagery. However, a single image would also not suffice, according to Owens's vital essays on postmodern allegory (Owens 1980a; 1980b), from which I quote at length:²²

This projection of structure as sequence recalls the fact that, in rhetoric, allegory is traditionally defined as a single metaphor introduced in continuous series. If this definition is recast in structuralist terms, then allegory is revealed to be the projection of the metaphoric axis of language onto its metonymic dimension. Roman Jakobson defined this projection of metaphor onto metonymy as the "poetic function," and he went on to associate metaphor with poetry and romanticism, and metonymy with prose and realism. Allegory, however, implicates *both* metaphor and metonymy; it therefore tends to "cut across and subtend all such stylistic categorizations, being

1981 project also attempts to juxtapose the signifying practices of text and image in problematizing the idea of realist documentary. Benjamin Buchloh, writing on the deployment of allegory in Rosler's *Bowery* photographs, notes a similar deadpan, affectless, and non-aesthetic strategy analogous to that of Neshat's: "Rosler's crude attempts to try her photographic hand at mimicking the great urban 'documentarians' style is of course . . . thoroughly disappointing to the cultivated photographic eye" (Buchloh 1982, 53). Buchloh is not denigrating Rosler's work but pointing out how Rosler's allegorical mode differs from the work of other photographers who strive for a documentary or poetic aesthetic excellence.

²¹ Owens has noted the strong "allegorical potential of photography" (1980a, 71).

²² For a critique, see Foster (1996, 86–91).

equally possible in either verse or prose, and quite capable of transforming the most objective naturalism into the most subjective expressionism, or the most determined realism into the most surrealistically ornamental baroque.” This blatant disregard for aesthetic categories is nowhere more apparent than in the reciprocity which allegory proposes between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered. (Owens 1980a, 72–74)

By projecting her concerns in photographic work in which random and successive images are produced in a series, Neshat, while continuing to reference realist photojournalistic visualization, in which an image is part of a larger narration, problematizes this mode itself by suggesting that its tropes are shared by poetic and fragmentary modes.

The allegorical charge of the photographs is effected through multiple registers. Imagine looking at all the photographs without the inscribed text and ornament, the way some in the series appear. A feature shared by practically all the figures in the photographs—with or without calligraphic overlay—is their lack of affect and depth. The faces of the characters betray few emotions, and the photographs are rendered in a flat and staged manner. And, as already discussed, if one were to judge them as fine art portrait photographs, they would fare poorly. While they participate in many of the conventions of studio and portrait photography, as portraits they are not expressive because their lighting, exposure, and printing enact a deflated, collage-like aesthetic effect.

Moreover, Neshat’s appropriation of the postrevolutionary dress codes is subtle but unmistakable. At this juncture, it is instructive to compare Neshat’s photographs with the infamous film *Submission*, made by the Somali-Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who has been militantly opposed to traditional Islamic strictures regarding gender. Ali was an immigrant Muslim from East Africa, and the film was made in collaboration with the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. *Submission*, which aired on Dutch public television in 2004, certainly proved to be controversial. It led to the murder of van Gogh and to death threats against Ali herself. The film is clearly made with a missionary zeal to expose the “backward” practices of traditional Muslims, and it shows Muslim women fully veiled, including their faces (except for their eyes), enacting roles as victims of various gendered strictures of Islamic law.²³ The veil covering them, however, is

²³ The bad faith of the film is evident from the fact that many practices such as incest and rape decried in *Submission* as Islamic practices are not sanctioned by even the most

so transparent that it reveals the entire body (except for the face) to the camera's gaze, creating a titillating spectacle not unlike the effect of French colonial postcards of Algerian women that circulated a century earlier, many of which also show the head and/or face covered but reveal the woman's body, including her breasts (see Alloula 1986, esp. 126). The women in *Submission* also have Quranic passages inscribed on their bodies, an inflammatory depiction of Islamic strictures and a motif superficially similar to Neshat's overlay of text on her photographs. The differences between Ali's and Neshat's projects, however, are crucial. Unlike Ali's characters in *Submission* and unlike works by other artists who represent the female Muslim body in various states of unveiling, Neshat does not unveil her figures. Moreover, Neshat never inscribes Quranic text on her figures, choosing to use Persian poetry instead.²⁴

By deftly avoiding the crude and inflammatory dichotomies that *Submission* revels in, Neshat's photographs instead enact a latent and proleptic confrontation between the Western viewer and the depicted menacing Muslim woman, a confrontation in which the subject and object are both ensnared. In a number of the photographs, the veil donned by the figure is not the one commonly used in Iran but instead is a strange garment resembling a nun's habit more than the Iranian chador (fig. 4).²⁵ Thus, while seemingly staying within Iranian veiling practices and not showing forbidden flesh such as breasts, Neshat subtly estranges her figures from conventional depictions of Iranian women.

Further, Neshat's photographs are manifestly nonnarrative, as has been pointed out above and also by others (Abbaspour 2001, 80). Unlike Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills, whose placement of a film character in an architectural setting or interior produces a strong sense of "condensation of narrative" (Phelan 1993, 62), evoking the sense that the photo still is merely one frame in a continuous and legible narrative, Neshat's works, with their static character, remain resolutely nonnarrative, without any sense of movement.²⁶ Despite their apparent referencing of images of militant

conservative interpretations of Islamic law. *Submission* is currently available online via Google Video at <http://video.google.com>. Peter van der Veer has perceptively analyzed the crisis of Dutch multiculturalism in the context of this film and its aftermath (van der Veer 2006).

²⁴ See, e.g., the work of the artist Jananne Al-Ani (2003).

²⁵ Sharon L. Parker, a graduate student at the University of Arizona, pointed out this and other incongruities in a conference paper. Parker showed Neshat's photographs to Iranian women living in Iranian diasporic communities in the United States. Rather than affirming recognition of the images of the photographs, because of their displaced references, the women expressed bewilderment as to their possible meaning or import (Parker 1999).

²⁶ Mitra Abbaspour also compares Neshat with Sherman, but her interpretation differs from the one advanced here (2001, 82–83).

women in the Iranian revolution, the overall effect of Neshat's photographs is as distant from revolutionary fervor as possible. By a subtle and deft use of minimalist formal compositional devices, Neshat has seized the codes of revolutionary documentary and propaganda imagery to construct images open to and oriented to new readings.²⁷ Again, Owens's comments on the nature of allegory are apposite in this regard. He writes: "Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. . . . He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement" (Owens 1980a, 69). He continues: "Allegory concerns itself, then, with the projection—either spatial or temporal or both—of structure as sequence; the result, however, is not dynamic, but static, ritualistic, repetitive" (Owens 1980a, 72).

In the context of Owens's observations, it is worth stressing that the seriality of Neshat's photographs is spatial in character since all traces of temporality are carefully absent. The only modern objects in these photographs are guns and bullets, but these objects could have been present in photographs exposed decades earlier. Unlike images of revolutionary Iranian women in the media, who are usually shown as massed in Iranian streets, Neshat's minimalist photographs are not specific to a particular time and are therefore always already in the ever present. As shown later, this has important ramifications for how the photographic allegories comment on contemporary global issues, especially the notion of community, which is also a central concern of Jameson's third-world essay.

Allegory, supplement, labor

If allegory is identified as a supplement, then it is also aligned with writing, insofar as writing is conceived as supplementary to speech. It is of course within the same philosophic tradition which subordinates writing

²⁷ Among numerous critical essays on Neshat's work, Igor Zabel's comes closest to recognizing this appropriation: "The 'woman in black'—so heavily laden with stereotypes and fantasies—is the figure Shirin Neshat uses as the central motif in her photographs. She does not try to purify the image of its role as signifier for the otherness of the Muslim world. Such an attempt would necessarily fail, since the image itself is inseparable from this connotation. She does quite the opposite: she simulates it, making us aware of its constructed, artificial nature" (2001, 17).

to speech that allegory is subordinated to the symbol. It might be demonstrated, from another perspective, that the suppression of allegory is identical with the suppression of writing. For allegory, whether visual or verbal, is essentially a form of script.

—Owens 1980a, 84

The most significant markers of the photographs' allegorical mode are manifested outside the works (their titles) or on their surfaces (the inscribed ornamentation and calligraphy) and are therefore supplemental.²⁸ As noted earlier, the titles are overdetermined and suggestive (in sharp contrast again with Sherman's Untitled Film Stills, e.g., which are simply sequentially numbered). The textual inscriptions, which appear to be of immense significance to the reading of Neshat's photographs, are drawn from the rebellious, sexually liberated poetry of the feminist modernist poet Farokhzad and the postrevolutionary poetry of Saffarzadeh, which, in contrast to Farokhzad's work, is largely sympathetic to the aims of the revolution.

However, of far greater significance is the fact that the texts, written with much patience and care by Neshat, are completely unreadable for the immediate primary audience of the photographs, the Western viewer. Neshat resolutely refuses to provide translations with her photographs, so that the deciphering of the poetry is clearly impossible for a non-Persian reader (fig. 2). The calligraphy doubles as ornament in these images, but it also works as undecipherable text, reiterating the cliché of oriental inscrutability. Owens has aligned both writing and allegory with the logic of the supplement. Owens's observations provide an apt description of Neshat's photographs, in which the ornamental and calligraphic writing is secondary, a logical and procedural afterthought to the primacy of the photograph. Neshat's inscriptions furthermore rely on a supplemental translation, which may or may not be forthcoming.

Neshat's photographs go even further in their allegorical import by inscribing the "third world difference" (Mohanty 1991, 72) as ornament in the photographs, as if mimicking alienated hand-labor. The spectacular irruption of ornamental patterns (fig. 3) and calligraphy (fig. 2) on the surface of the photograph can also be read as enacting the duality between hand-labor and mechanical reproduction, between sophisticated automatic man-

²⁸ Although some photographs might lack the inscriptions while others might lack titles, the supplemental, allegorical function across the whole body of the work is enacted by the embeddedness of each in the entire series.

ufacturing in the industrialized countries and the massive growth of sweatshop labor overseas under the aegis of contemporary globalization, where commodities are still produced by patient hand-work, mostly by women. Arindam Dutta has pointed out that the artisan functioned as a supplement to organized factory labor during the nineteenth century and that the obsessions of British aestheticians with flat, nonprojective oriental design intersected with the unfolding of a flexible, empirical imperialism in the British colonial project (2001, chaps. 3–4). Neshat's designs might well point toward a continuation and intensification of tendencies identified by Dutta and, with respect to economic exploitation, the irruption of hand-calligraphed oriental design in postmodern art alerts us to the problem of economic disparity in neoliberalism today, which relies on the flexible, supplemental labor of women sweatshop workers. Neshat's photographs are thus multiply supplemental: as photographs being a privileged medium for allegory itself, as the bearers of ornament, and as emblems of labor and value.

Neshat has stated that she was inspired by South Asian and African henna and tattoo patterns, which, according to Neshat herself, is not so much an Iranian or even an Islamic practice. Rather, henna and tattoos seem to be practiced in the generic orient, such as "Indian cultures," which are not necessarily Muslim: "I was . . . struck by the tradition of tattoo in the Middle Eastern and Indian cultures. Later, when I was composing my images that dealt with the body of a Muslim woman, inscription on her skin seemed appropriate" (Bertucci 1997, 86). Notice how Neshat's statement underscores the lack of a precise geographic and sociological motivation for the texts and patterns. And, because the origin of Neshat's designs is not traceable to Iran proper, the pattern functions as a generic oriental signifier, referencing the Islamic Orient as well as South Asia and Africa, where henna body decoration is prevalent. While the photographic medium has generally been understood as freezing moments in the passage of time, Neshat's static postures, with their surface cover of ahistorical oriental design, arrest any sense of narrative movement. In this connection, Dutta's comment on the nineteenth-century ahistorical understanding of ornament by British aestheticians retains its validity: "The immediate understanding of non-figural patterns was seen as free from the encumbrances of either conceptual canonization or historical periodization. The pattern is *of* history, not *in* history" (Dutta 2001, 297). It is precisely this ahistorical utopian/dystopian space indexed by oriental henna designs circulating within a fully commodified postmodern consumer society that has allowed performers like Madonna to appropriate this aesthetic but

whose appropriations characteristically emphasize only the utopia of the orient.²⁹

The (not quite) global subject

Neshat's work questions Western modes of portrayal of the figure that emphasize the autonomous individual. But she is equally interrogative of the media representation of the Iranian revolutionary woman, whose anonymous and massed silhouette has been a clichéd trope since the beginning of the Iranian revolution. Neshat moves precisely in the opposite direction, from the mass subject back to the singular—from depiction of a nonindividuated collective toward the representation of an individual, decontextualized and reframed in a studio setting. Insightful portrait photography is generally understood to reveal something of the character and inner personality of the subject. Neshat's photographs, however, offer up only an affectless subject overlaid by a supplemental oriental design that is itself flat, ornamental, and ahistorical. The ornament further serves to flatten the portrait and drain it of affect and depth (figs. 2 and 3), emptying out the interiority ascribed to the Western(ized) subject and relaying the photographic figure further into the realm of allegory.

As an example of seeing how the specific details of a photograph displace and subsume realist referents in favor of allegorical ones, consider the motif of the red tulip in Iranian revolutionary imagery, where it functions as a ubiquitous symbol of martyrdom and sacrifice. The motif of the tulip inserted in the barrel of a rifle held by a woman is also common, reproduced in Iranian posters, magazines, postage stamps, and other media (figs. 1 and 5).³⁰ Neshat's subtle interventions include appropriating this motif by placing the woman with the rifle and flower in a studio setting rather than in a public space (fig. 4). For this photograph, it is significant that the decorative calligraphy does not cover the woman's body but provides a flat screen behind the figure, the mediation function being performed by the flower here.³¹ Moreover, the stem of the flower has not been inserted in the muzzle of the gun but is held alongside it, literally

²⁹ On African henna practices and their appropriation by Western avant-garde fashion and media, see Hassan (1998).

³⁰ See Hanaway (1985), Fischer and Abedi (1990, 341–79), Chelkowski and Dabashi (1999, figs. 13.6–13.9, 13.24), Shirazi (2001, figs. 5.6, 5.7), and Rizvi (2003).

³¹ This photograph is also presented with slight color variations and different calligraphic backgrounds in two other catalogs (Edelstein 1997, 18; Dabashi et al. 2002, 88).



Figure 5 Red flowers as symbols of love and sacrifice on postage stamps of Iran, issued between 1979 and 1986. Color version available as an online enhancement.

displaced; nor is the flower fully red, but turns yellow along its top half.³² The right arm of the female figure is also impermissibly exposed, as is her neck, even while she appears to be in *hijab* that resembles a nun's habit. The image is clearly catachrestic, lacking proper reference to the public dress code of revolutionary Iran.³³ This misappropriation of the image from its original Iranian context helps in resituating the armed female protagonist well beyond realist media depictions or the Jamesonian national to an unnamed and thus potentially global context.

In an important recent essay, Hamid Dabashi has compellingly argued for a “transaesthetics” at work especially in Neshat’s later videos (2005, 53), further stating that “her art is no longer Iranian, Islamic, Western, Eastern, or indeed divided along any such national, regional, or bipolar

³² The meaning here is quite different from that of the activities of American peace protesters during the Vietnam War, who popularized the act of inserting flowers in the guns of soldiers.

³³ An alternative reading of this image that references Iranian symbols is offered by an Iranian writing under the pseudonym of “Ahmad T” (Ahmad T 1997, 19).

dichotomies or set of sensibilities" (79). I have sought to demonstrate that transaesthetics is present even earlier in Neshat's photographic work as well, provided we interpret the term to index an imminent yet unnameable global visual sphere. Neshat offers a critique of the mass Iranian-Islamic female subject but also points to her nonarrival as a properly individualized Western subject.³⁴ Her photographs index the impasse of available subject positions in contemporary globalization for Muslim women, many of whom have apparently refused the promise of autonomous Westernized subjectivity, as indicated by their outward appearance. Neshat's figure of allegory—neither individuated (free) nor collective (enslaved), belonging neither to Iran nor to any other locatable site—bears the charge of being both the supposedly subjugated silent Muslim woman and the menacing global terrorist.

Conclusion

Neshat completed the *Women of Allah* series in 1997, well before September 11, 2001, yet its current relevance in addressing the perceived global threat of Islam is striking in articulating the link between gender and terrorism. While Neshat draws upon the repertoire of classic orientalist images of the veiled figure, she displaces their charge from being the passive object of the erotic gaze toward a confrontational modality. The photographs emphasize flatness, affectlessness, coterminosity, and veiled threats, enacting a mode of spatial allegory. By deploying a minimalist aesthetic, Neshat removes temporality from her photographic frames and avoids possible references to a stagist and developmental judgment regarding modernization, in which the West can be seen as temporally ahead of backward Islam. Instead, the photographs insist on the contemporary salience of Islamic Iran and, by extension, of the entire Muslim world as fully global and coeval with modernity, permitting no safe escape by relegating them to the premodern. With their juxtaposition of mechanical reproduction overlaid with painstaking ornamental and textual handwork, the photographs also index the condition of commodity production in contemporary globalization that relies increasingly on the skills of female workers in the informal sector. And, because the veiled woman is increasingly also visible in the West and a source of contention in its public sphere, the spatial allegorization of this terrorist difference is now freed

³⁴ Ruth Noack has perceptively noted Neshat's critique of the Western subject in her video works: "This type of representation can and must, in my opinion, be seen as an attack on Western culture, which would be unthinkable without the myth of individual, autonomous subjectivity" (Noack 2000, 39).

from its geographic moorings and reenacted immanently at dispersed sites throughout the global public space.

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