

Unconsented Visibility

Sadaf Sadri

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Committee:

Flint Aaron Jameson

Kemi Adeyemi

Rebecca Cummins

Ellen Garvens

Afroditi Psarra

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Sadaf Sadri

Chair of the supervisory committee:

Flint Aaron Jameson

Department of Photo-Media

This paper addresses the research behind the work “*Unconsented Visibility, (2022)*” as part of my graduation thesis. In the following pages, I will elaborate on the aim of the piece and the related choices.

This piece consists of three video pieces focusing on the Western gaze, surveillance and the events that form the Western gaze on the Middle East in general and the ones that have formed the current state of Iran-US relationship in particular.

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The violence of the gaze and the discriminations that follow it is my primary interest in this research. What compelled me first to dwell on the gaze, was the entangled society that raised me. Growing up under an Islamic hegemony that enforced incompatible new laws on the society without considering the cultures and traditions before its domination, forced me to develop various personalities instead of one solid sense of self. These new rules imposed on society and the violent suppression of any opposition have formed various micro-communities that keep living in line with their past traditions in private spaces. Hence, a huge part of the society still functions the same old way, with a fake facade to deceive the status quo.

To pass in such a complex society, I found myself in the position of developing various personalities suitable for each micro-community. An innocent young girl to pass among the religious companions of my grandmother; a rebel tomboy to pass among the oppositions who were my father's friends, and the list goes on. Hence, my first relationship with the gaze is a manipulative one. What does the gaze really mean when you are a shape-shifter?

Another response to the ever-present gaze is the constant feeling of being looked at. Conceivably, the reason behind this feeling can be paranoia. However, it can also be explained by the Islamic education system implanting the idea of being constantly watched by a God in my unconscious through the years.

The third dimension of the gaze, which is the most important part of this research, is the colonizing, orientalizing effect of the Western Gaze towards the Middle East. In this work, I am interested in examining how colonial representation and news coverage of the Middle East has exploited realities, skewed identities and undermined accomplishments.

As Edward Said explains in his book "Orientalism", one of the important attributions of the authority, in this case the US, is the power to control mindsets and create persuasive presentations that do not necessarily have their roots in truth but in affirmation of the benefits of the authority. Therefore any data that comes from the authority must be analyzed, a fact that is easy to neglect in the media bombardment we are experiencing.

Continuing, Said compares the East to a stage that supplements the West's representation of the East.

“The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. ...The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. An Orientalist is but the particular specialist in knowledge for which Europe at large is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist. (p 63)”

Orientalism and Theatre may not necessarily be the terms that explains the contemporary state of affairs I am touching upon, however, trading that term Orientalism with Islam and Theatre with Media, will bridge the idea of the last passage to the contemporary state of affairs I am interested in. To connect [these](#) two conversations, referring to Said’s other book “*Covering Islam*” can be beneficial.

“... it has given consumers of news the sense that they have understood Islam without at the same time intimating to them that a great deal in this energetic coverage is based on far from objective material. In many instances "Islam" has licensed not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility. All this has taken place as part of what is presumed to be fair, balanced, responsible coverage of Islam. Aside from the fact that neither Christianity nor Judaism, both of them going through quite remarkable revivals (or "returns"), is treated in so emotional a way, there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés. And always it is supposed that the "Islam" being talked about is some real and stable object out there where "our" oil supplies happen to be found.” (p 71)

And therefore, as Said continues to explain:

“...there is a consensus on "Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there.” (P 77)

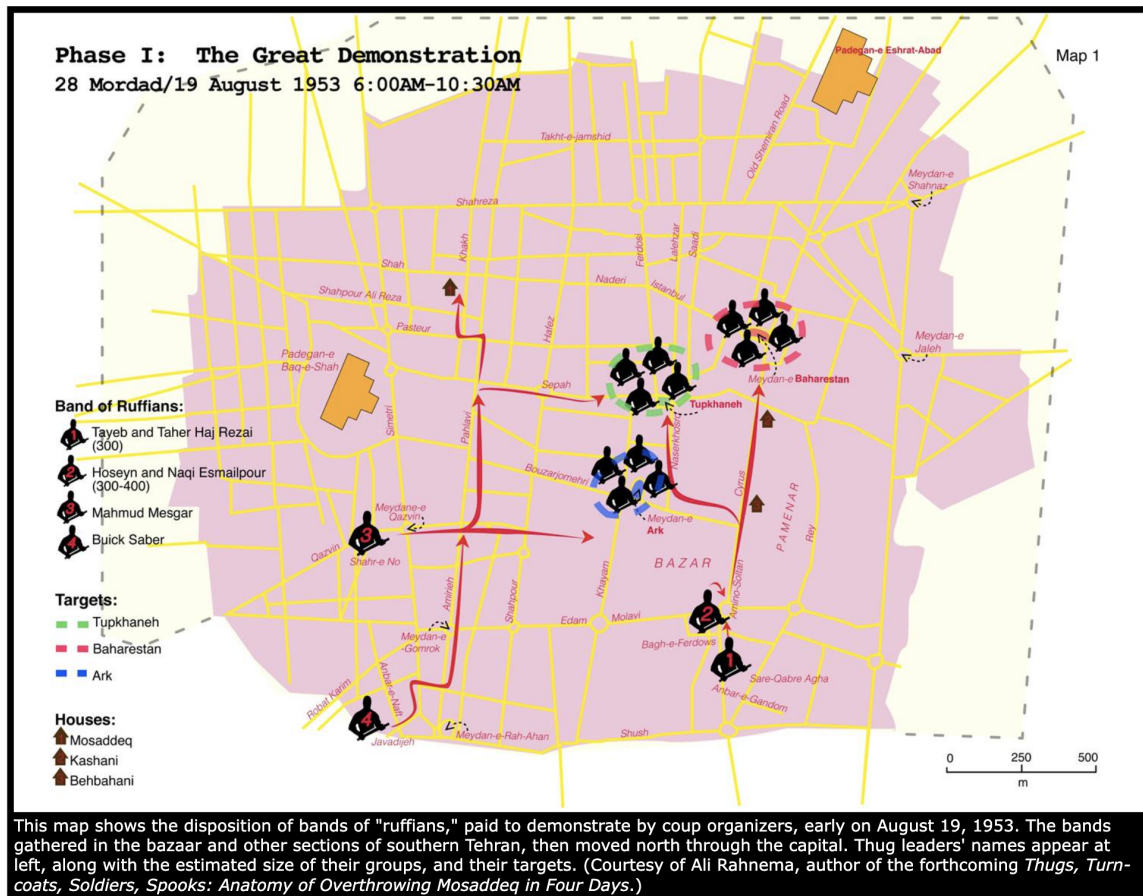
Growing up in one of the world’s largest oil producers, I constantly find myself questioning the role oil plays in my experiences. Is oil the reason behind the interest of imperialists and colonizers in Iran during the last couple of centuries?

Let’s answer this question by focusing on the Iran-U.S relationship during the last few decades.

There are three major events that have formed the current relationship between the two countries that my piece at the Henry Art Gallery focuses on; the 53 Iranian Coup, The Islamic revolution events that resulted in the seizure of the U.S embassy in Tehran and the Iran-Iraq war.

The 1953 Iranian coup d'état which overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh who was democratically elected by the people is perhaps the first major participation of the United States in Iran's politics. The goal of this coup was to strengthen the power of the Shah of Iran by eliminating Mosaddegh who nationalized Iran's oil which was controlled by Britain's Imperials before. The role that CIA has played in the coup can be seen by the documents later released by the CIA.

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/>



Putting the Shah back in power was beneficial for the Western powers because he was more amenable to do an oil deal with them. However, supporting the Shah set the stage for the future Islamic Revolution of Iran which demolished the relationship between the two countries.

Iranians turned against the Shah's dictatorship in 1978 and overthrew him in 1979, following which he fled to the U.S. This point of this story is probably the pick of the drama. The point that has been no coming back from until this very day. After the occupation of the U.S embassy by Iranian revolutionary students, Iran started to be represented as the Islamic devil in the US media which is still continuing to this day.

As Said emphasizes again in *“Covering Islam”* this demonization is not necessarily about one crazy unruly country but about Islam as a symbol of backwardness:

“By this I mean that like so much of the postcolonial world, Islam belongs neither “to Europe nor, like Japan, to the advanced industrial group of nations. It has been regarded as falling within the purview of “development perspectives,” which is another mode of saying that Islamic societies were considered for at least three decades to be in need of “modernization.” The ideology of modernization produced a way of seeing Islam whose apex and culmination was the image of the shah of Iran, both at his zenith, as a “modern” ruler, and when his regime collapsed, as a casualty to what was looked upon as medieval fanaticism and religiosity.”(p 72)

Also, the seizure of the embassy was a good point for both countries to create a solid portrait of an enemy of each other to solidify the importance of patriotism and nationalism.



Figure No.1

The reaction of the United State to the resistance of Iranian citizens is a very interesting point in this story. Carter’s interview with Christian Bourget, a french journalist, illustrates the mindset of the U.S president towards this event.

“... Christian Bourguet describes his late March 1980 meeting with Jimmy Carter at the White House. Bourguet, a French lawyer with ties to the Iranians, acted as an intermediary between the United States and Iran; he had come to Washington because, despite an arrangement worked out with the Panamanians to arrest the ex-shah, the deposed ruler had left suddenly for Egypt. So they were back to square one:

BOURGUET: At a given moment [Carter] spoke of the hostages, saying, you understand that these are Americans. These are innocents. I said to him, yes, Mr. President, I understand that you say they are innocent. But I believe you have to understand that for the Iranians they aren't innocent. Even if personally none of them has committed an act, they are not innocent because they are diplomats who represent a country that has done a number of things in Iran.

You must understand that it is not against their person that the action is being taken. Of course, you can see that. They have not been harmed. They have not been hurt. No attempt has been made to kill them. You must understand that it is a symbol, that it is on the plane of symbols that we have to think about this matter.*”

“In fact Carter does seem to have viewed the embassy seizure in symbolic terms, but unlike the Frenchman, he had his own frame of reference. To him Americans were by definition innocent and in a sense outside history: Iran's grievances against the United States, he would say on another occasion, were ancient history. What mattered now was that Iranians were terrorists, and perhaps had always been potentially a terrorist nation. Indeed, anyone who disliked America and held Americans captive was dangerous and sick, beyond rationality, beyond humanity, beyond common decency.” (Said, 113-115)

Of course, Carter's reaction is not unexpected as the United States colonization has been masked by the good will of the U.S government. To go way back behind this event and explain the approach of the colonizer, I will take advantage of another quote by Said:

“Although Kelly's suggestion that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese colonialism is the most appropriate guide for contemporary Western politicians may strike some readers as a little quaint, it is his simplifications of history that are most representative of the current mood. Colonialism brought tranquility, he says, as if the subjugation of millions of people amounted to no more than an idyll and as if those were their best days; their abused feelings, their distorted history, their unhappy destiny do not matter, so long as “we” can continue to get what is useful to “us”—valuable resources, geographically and politically strategic regions, a vast pool of cheap native labor. The independence of countries in Africa and Asia after centuries of colonial dominion is dismissed as lapsing into barbarism or despotism. The only course left open, after what he characterizes as the craven demise of the old imperial order, is a new invasion according to Kelly. And underlying this invitation to the West to take what is rightfully “ours” is a profound contempt for the native Islamic culture of Asia Kelly wishes “us” to rule.” (p 75)

The last important event to mention is the Iran-Iraq war. Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980 with the hope of taking advantage of the unstable situation in Iran due to the recent revolution in 1979. The support of the United States vanished the remaining hope, if any, that Iran could have in its relationship with the United States.

Video No.1 uses footage from Iran's national television and U.S media to touch upon these events but not from a political point of view but with a focus on their impacts on citizens of the two countries. Of course, being the subject of colonization is a hard experience for people who are living under the pressure of sanctions, bans and stigma that is still being pointed towards Iran, Iranians and the Middle East in general.

However, at this very moment, it is impossible to ignore the impact of oil, the subject of all these events and the power struggle between men to control it on the environment and our daily lives no matter where we reside. Thus, the video includes footage of the environmental crisis that the United States along with the rest of the world are grappling with.

It is important to explain that, by no means in this piece, I am trying to blame anyone for this unbalanced relationship but to bring attention to the toxicity of the politics behind it.

“The first rule for understanding the human condition is that men live in second-hand worlds. They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of their lives is determined by the meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings. No man stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact. No such world is available. The closest men come to it is when they are infants or when they become insane: then, in a terrifying scene of meaningless events and senseless confusion, they are often seized with the panic of near-total insecurity. But in their everyday life they do not experience a world of solid fact; their experience itself is selected by stereotyped meanings and shaped by ready-made interpretations. Their images of the world, and of themselves, are given to them by crowds of witnesses they have never met and never shall meet. Yet for every man these images—provided by strangers and dead men—are the very basis of his life as a human being.” (Said 158-159)

Two other videos are included in the exhibition as well that focus on the gaze impacted by the events and the media coverage. The two videos are the recordings of passers-by looking at a figure wearing a burqa, one shot at Times square and one at New York City's Chelsea market.

The wearer is participating in a non-performance by standing still without asking for any attention. However, they are recording the gaze of the lookers at them using a camera under the burqa.

The attempt of these two videos is to bring attention to the hostile uncomfortable relationship between the citizens of the United States and the Middle East, merely because of the toxic politics and inaccurate education of the two regions against each other.



Figure No.2, Still from the *Unconsented Visibility* (2022)



Figure No.3, Still from the *Unconsented Visibility* (2022)

Pondering the power relation between one who looks and one who is being looked at and trying to change this dynamic, I started thinking about camera and lens and then gradually the mirror opened new ways of looking at this matter.

The desire for incorporating a physical presence into the work is an extension of earlier work that brought reflections of the viewers into the physical space of my work using mirror fragments. This started to occur after my immigration to the US. Perhaps because of the fact that seeing my own reflection on window shops, reflective buildings, cars, etc. was shocking for it reminded me that I do not fit or am not supposed to fit into this environment. More importantly in a reversal of the direction of the gaze, reflection is also necessary for western citizens. Westerners need to acknowledge the role they play in the events of the Middle East. Therefore, being inspired by Iran's *Ayneh-kari* (mirror-work), I started to make *Ayneh-kari* (mirror-work) photographs of the Middle Eastern wars.



Figure No.4, *Untitled* (2019)

I believe that the mirror can be a very violent medium for it confronts us with what we are not necessarily prepared to see. Besides the violence of the mirror, there is a symbolic side to mirror in Iran that interests me as well. The mirror in Iran's Islamic architecture is a symbol of water. There is a contrast between the interpretation of mirrors in the West, symbolized by the story of narcissus,

with what mirror means in Iran. Contrary to the myth of Narcissus, broken mirrors are used in Islamic art to shatter the reflection of the viewer so they look within themselves, instead of looking at themselves.

Perhaps it is also useful to know that some of the concepts in Islamic art in Iran derive from Sufism and the difference between Sufism and Islam is that Islam believes in one dominant God that is in control of everything. Sufism, however, believes in unity, which means the human being is of one united soul and each of us, if we reach the power within us, can be a God. Therefore, we see the symbols with infinite patterns with no beginning and end in Islamic art which reminds us of “Multiplicity within Unity” (The Sense of Unity, P6)

As Ardalan and Bakhtiar explain in their book “The Sense of Unity”:

“The traditional artist creates external art form in the light of the inspiration which he has received from the spirit; in this way, the art form is able to lead man to the higher states of being and ultimately to Unity (P 7)”
“Each number and Figure, when seen in its symbolic sense, is an echo of Unity and a reflection of a quality contained in principle within that unity, which transcends all differentiation and all qualities and yet contains them in a principal manner” (Foreword Xiii)

In general the function of the shapes is to remind human beings of spirituality..

“In traditional Architecture, as in traditional art, nothing is ever divorced from meaning. And meaning is none other than the spiritual, as the word ma’na معنا has the sense of “Meaning” and “the spiritual” both in Persian and Arabic. (Xiii)”

Therefore, fragmented mirrors are used on the burqa to return the embedded aggression of looking and to manipulate the power dynamic between the looker and the receiver of the look. But Also, the patterns of the mirror, invites the viewer to let go of all assumptions of the other and re-discover a new relationship with the burqa, as a symbol of the Middle East.

My desire ultimately with all of this work is to complicate the gaze, reverse its inherent violence, and to engage in Middle Eastern culture in a new way.

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