



Non-documentary burqa pictures on the internet

Ambivalence and the politics of representation

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ABSTRACT ● The article analyses non-documentary burqa pictures that have been published on the internet. A burqa is understood in the article to mean a cloak that has a mesh for seeing through and covers almost all of the woman's body. The burqa is a specific form of veiling, but is distinctly different from most of the other forms of head cover or female dress in Muslim cultures. Pictures of burqas can be found on the internet especially in relation to the defeated Taliban regime of Afghanistan. However, the spectrum of pictures of burqas on the internet is wider than this. The article discusses whether the images reproduce the burqa as a symbol of women's oppression and subordination and how such meanings are made with the pictorial material. The article focuses on examining non-documentary pictures from such perspectives as representations of the body and relations between the East and the West. The reason for choosing these themes is that whereas the documentary pictures of the burqa on the internet make the body simultaneously nearly invisible, but significant, many of the non-documentary pictures of burqas create an intertextual setting for the pictorial analysis and make the body an object of significance. The embodiment in the pictures of burqas can be interpreted within the context of western gender discourse, to which the concealing burqa is in a troubled relationship. Although the pictures of burqas easily symbolically maintain categorical conceptions of women's subordination, non-documentary pictures are used in order to criticize western politics and their use of cultural stereotypes. Such pictures are ambivalent and this makes their absolute

interpretation troubled, although the symbolism of subordination associated with the burqa may remain unchanged. Unresolved ambivalence of representations opens, however, a space for critical questioning of cultural stereotypes. ●

KEYWORDS ● ambivalence ● body ● Islam ● West

Introduction

It was shortly after the 9/11 attacks that pictures of women wearing burqas in Afghanistan started to pour in via different media. News media used 'documentary' photographs, but other pictures, such as drawings, which can be called non-documentary, were available on the internet. Pictures and videos and so forth, setting George W. Bush or Osama bin Laden in strange, humorous or insulting situations, appeared widely, especially on the internet. These supposedly comic scripts, cartoons, collages and pictures portraying events around 9/11 have been studied in the context of the internet. Giseline Kuipers (2002) argues that such visual images are reactions to 'ambivalent feelings provoked by the media coverage of these events'. Comical intent is bound to other realms, as comic work may seem like an affirmation of the state of the world depicted elsewhere. Decoding of such representations depends, of course, on how the viewer takes a stance towards them. Kuipers shows that in her material, most of the comic representations were personified and dealt with the leading actors in the world political scene related to the events of September 11 2001.

The most widely known of the internet's non-documentary burqa images is perhaps that of the Statue of Liberty wearing a burqa. A major difference between non-documentary burqa pictures compared to personal internet jokes is that women wearing burqas are not named and therefore remain anonymous. Nonetheless, the comical intent of all these may cause laughter, but similarly may be considered as insulting. This is important in respect of Muslim populations, especially after the 9/11 attacks, as many immigrant populations have been suspected and asked to prove their loyalties to the nations where they are living, such as the UK (Saeed, 2004: 71–3). Marianne Gullestad (2003) analyses autobiographical texts written by Norwegian journalist Nazneen Khan, who has a Muslim background. According to Gullestad, Khan examines her feelings and belonging to Muslim culture and western culture in the context of the state of the world after 9/11. Khan describes in her texts how she can understand the hatred of 9/11 attackers, as she has also been tired of the demonization of her Muslim cultural heritage.

Women wearing burqas were commonly used in news articles to illustrate women's subordinated situation in Afghanistan well before September 11

(Fahmy, 2004). These have been used to highlight the Taliban regime's fundamentalism and to bring up issues of its questionable use of juridico-political power towards women (Rantanen, 2003). Especially important has been the role of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), as it was able to distribute secretly taken pictures and video films, which were taken with cameras hidden under burqas and which witnessed the misdeeds of the Taliban regime. These raised wide public concern and caused many to comment against them, including political actors, various more or less clearly political organizations, internet magazines, public debate forums and personal commentators. Myra Macdonald (2003: 171) points out that RAWA's campaigns and actions for promoting women's rights are, in fact, the part of the story of Afghanistan that was rarely told in western media. She argues that its actions are indeed 'totally at odds with the "victim" image of burqa-wearing women that fitted more comfortably with western discourses'.

I got my share of various views, jokes and pictures after the 9/11 attacks via emails and other communication devices, as did everyone who handles much of their daily work routines with computers, email and the internet. At the time when the USA and its allied forces started the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I started to gather pictorial material of burqas from the internet, as it seemed to offer a site for thinking about how broad cultural differences are produced and maintained by using clothing as a signifying practice in the media. This article deals, therefore, with representations of burqas, not the actual uses of the garment or the views of people who wear them. I do acknowledge the importance of such work, but this article examines symbolic aspects of burqa pictures and therefore does not deal with the actual practice of wearing burqas. However, many of the central themes are present in the pictures, as the burqa has been maintained as a proof of Islamic suppression of women's freedoms (for example, Macdonald, 2003). The material in this article is connected to issues of people's everyday life, as visual representations maintain stereotypical cultural conceptions. What I wish to show is how the burqa pictures on the internet produce such cultural stereotypes. As such, they have potentially disempowering political implications and consequences, but, as the analysis will show, there are possibilities for critique of such stereotypes.

Data and methods

The research material consists of pictures of burqas and captions and short texts that are connected with them on worldwide web pages. The burqa is here understood to mean a cloak that has a mesh for seeing through and that covers almost all of the woman's body. It needs to be distinguished from the diversity of Muslim female dress and veils, such as the chador, or hijab,

which also refers to an idea that connects Muslim dress to religiosity and modesty (Mernissi, 1992; Watson, 1996: 141, 146) as to various forms of headscarf. I have used two search engines to locate the pictures, Google and AltaVista. Google (25 March 2003) located 396 burqa pictures and AltaVista 376. Pictures were arranged individually on a single internet page or presented along with textual material. One basic difference between documentary and non-documentary pictures is that the former almost never appear without text. The emphasis of the analysis is on visual images, as the main aim of the article is to study non-verbal and symbolic aspects of burqa pictures.

Collecting research material from the internet is far from unproblematic. Lately, there has been growing methodological interest towards it as a tool for research and as a means to collect research material (Hewson et al., 2003; Hine, 2000; Jones, 1999; Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, it is hard to find guidelines for deciding how to choose material from the internet. Another limitation is that web pages continually disappear and new ones emerge. The internet is a specific and manifold electronic cultural technology for communication (or CMC, as it is academically referred to). There are newspapers, journals, official databases, archives, literature, personal homepages, discussion groups, and so on (Hewson et al., 2003; Jones, 1998). Christine Hine (2000: 14–40) discusses the internet both as a culture and as an artefact and states that the internet as an artefact ‘is no more than the sum of the computers that can communicate’. This fact has a bearing on the methodological possibilities for collecting material. There is virtually only access to pictures in connection with other computers/servers. The internet is also limited to the places where these computers are located. This means, in general, that more affluent societies have greater capabilities to maintain and create the internet. It is fairly safe to assume that a greater amount of burqa pictures, for example, is located in western servers.

Collecting textual research material from the internet on burqas can be done using search engines. Google found some 24,000 pages (two years later, in 2005, this figure had risen to 109,000). One could take a random sample of these pages. This would mean that the researcher should decide how frequently to pick up web pages. Along with this, one could continue by deciding how many ‘clicks’ would be followed from these pages back and forth (Mittra and Cohen, 1999). In addition, classification of the pages would be a possible option (1999: 194–5). Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart (2000: 197) discuss the way in which much of the contextual information on the internet is missing, especially when compared to everyday life. Contextual information can, however, be gathered from internet pages. One can follow the URL address path backwards in order to locate it more firmly. This means going back to the ‘root’ of the pages step by step. This way, information can be acquired, whether the page is on an internet

magazine or is somebody's personal web page. Along the way, one may find contact information or email addresses of those who have created or maintain the pages. Consequently, I was able to approach several authors of the images.

My starting point for this article was burqa pictures. I did not make any numerical classifications of the pictures, as one could (Kuipers, 2002). Using Image Search, synonyms such as burkha, burqa and burka were used in locating pictures. Image Search proved to be a fruitful technique that is effectively limited to,¹ and focuses on, a particular material and locates it. Second, it provides a general overview of the variety of pictures. At first I did not take a paper copy of all the viewed pages, which later turned out to be a mistake, as some of the pages had ceased to exist.

Theoretical framework

Conceptually, I began approaching burqa pictures by adapting Stuart Hall's (1992, 1997a, b) work on representation, spectacular otherness and relations between 'the West and the Rest'. According to Hall (1997a: 24–6), analysis of representation can be roughly divided into three different approaches. First, representation is a true reflection of reality. Second, representation is intentional. This means that what the author wants to say with the representation is taken into consideration. Third, representation is a construction. With this approach, it is important to make a distinction between the material world and the symbolic practices and processes where meaning and language operate. It may be said that the latter of the three approaches is most widely applied in research within cultural studies. For the third approach, the most prevalent issue is that of whose truth representation presents. It directly brings up questions of power. But it can be argued that the other two should not be dismissed altogether. Related to the 9/11 attacks, one could draw two simplistic blocks and a line approaching them to represent the event. With this representation, one would mainly need the first approach to representation: the drawing reflects past reality. If one added a text to it, such as 'it ruined our paradise' or 'workings of global inequality', then we couldn't manage without the other two approaches in order to analyse it as a representation. In particular, the third approach stresses the contextual setting, as representation is considered to be a symbolic practice rooted in material existence. Hall's insights on representation can be applied to the analysis of burqa images, as he includes pictures within the framework of representation (Hall, 1997a).

The problem of the meeting of cultures is often discussed as a problem of simplified and essential stereotypes, which can in certain contexts be named as racism, for example (Hall, 1997b). Richard Dyer (2002: 45–55)

discusses how although thinking is based on classification, it is not to be regarded as the same as (dangerous) stereotypical classifications. There is a difference between thinking with classifications and thinking stereotypically. Ambivalence (or, as it is sometimes referred to, hybridity) is one of the terms that have been discussed widely in this respect, especially within postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 2004; McClintock, 1995; Werbner and Modood, 2000; Young, 1995), but the term has also been discussed elsewhere (Bakhtin, 1984, 1987; Freud, 1978; Merton and Barber, 1963). What is important for analysing burqa pictures is that ambivalence is useful for thinking about cultural identities and representations. There is no consensus about what ambivalence means. For Bhabha, it means most importantly 'inbetween space', which emerges as hegemonic and repressed groups interact, but which has potentially empowering aspects for thinking about the workings of culture (2004: 3, 38–9). Anne McClintock (1995: 62–74) offers a useful critique of ambivalence and states that the important aspect of Bhabha's work is to question whether 'ambivalence [is] inherently subversive'. For others, Bakhtin's work marks one of the important moments in discussions of ambivalence (Werbner and Modood, 2000). Bakhtin's insight into language and the merging of languages can be seen as fruitful for thinking about how 'cultures' interact, even within one text. His view on the appropriation of language is based on a contest, as there is 'not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others' (Bakhtin, 1987: 294).

In sum, representation brings up questions about the production of cultural stereotypes. The body of work done around the concept of ambivalence gives insights into questions such as how stable representations actually are in the end. The first section deals with documentary burqa pictures, which conform more easily to uniform modes of representation. In the second section, I will analyse non-documentary burqa images, where the uniformity of representations crumbles and ambivalent representations contest and offer critiques of cultural stereotypes.

Documentary burqa pictures

Documentary pictures may be defined to mean pictures that are intended to be realistic. Such images are commonly published in news articles and in other official web pages. Here, it will be necessary to sketch some major aspects of documentary pictures, which were included in a previous study (Rantanen, 2003). There are intertextual relations between documentary and non-documentary burqa pictures. This interrelation is significant, as there are crossings of genre boundaries from news pictures to non-documentary spheres of media. Documentary pictures are borrowed,

manipulated and used in other contexts widely on the internet, but this also applies to non-documentary pictures.

Roughly two thirds of the pictures on the internet are documentary images and are related to Afghanistan. As pictures, they share some characteristic features, two of which are worth highlighting here: *exclusion* and *collectivity*. By the feature of exclusion, I mean that many documentary burqa pictures show a woman or women separated from others. There is no need for words conveying the meaning of exclusion, as the pictures seem to convince the viewer of the fact. Many times there are several women in a group, sometimes guarded by a man. Featuring women in groups seem to stress aspects of the control of women and the lack of possibilities for action in the public sphere. Texts where documentary burqa pictures were published can be analysed in connection with them, but pictures themselves as constructions support both the idea of exclusion and collectivity and, as such, both aspects convey meanings independently without words. There may be a crack in the wall behind a motionless woman; one of the women in a group may reveal a fearful face; women may be marching in a line and be under surveillance and forced, it may seem, by the threat of punishment. For example, there is a picture of women in burqas marching in a column under the surveillance of a man, below which the caption states that: 'Afghan women are forced to cover every inch of their bodies when outdoors.'² Bringing up these features about pictures is not intended to deny that there was real suffering among Afghan women under the Taliban regime, but to highlight how a victim identity is produced by news texts and by a picture concerning Afghanistan. Shahira Fahmy (2004: 102–8) has analysed the Associated Press's pictures of Afghan women during the Taliban regime and after its fall. The study shows that there were slight changes of depiction, for example, camera angles were more equal (i.e. less from a high angle) and women were pictured more in front after the fall of the Taliban. Changes have occurred in the picturing of Afghan women when it comes to documentary photographs. Burqa pictures are, therefore, discussed within a framework of women's oppression and non-visibility. As such, the visual content of imagining plays a significant role, producing the burqa strongly as a symbol of inequality. It could even be argued that it is such a strong symbol that in order to make contrary claims, one can only undermine it by representing the West in a one-sided way, for example, that the West is decadent and corrupt. In general, there is a large body of academic work that considers veiling in terms of either western ethnocentrism or Islamic ideology and offers a critique of such binary settings (for example, Ahmed, 1992: 151–67; Watson, 1996: 152–7).

Non-documentary burqa pictures

Non-documentary burqa pictures are connected to documentary pictures by the fact that they both show representations of women wearing the same clothing. In this sense, they both have the same basic material in meaning-making. Second, both documentary and non-documentary pictures have been connected to the political situation of Afghanistan and to the 9/11 attacks in many ways, as part of political agenda settings and public support campaigns or as a personal response to women's situation in Afghanistan.³ What is different, however, is that in non-documentary pictures, burqas are either placed in a context where they do not seem to belong or are used in a way that reveals something other than documentary pictures. Non-documentary pictures can be just as similar to documentary pictures, but in many cases, they are not. The genre boundary between documentary and non-documentary burqa pictures is to a certain point based on the difference between the factual and fictional, but this boundary is hazy, as the meanings given to burqas may well remain the same, regardless of the genre to which a picture belongs.

On the internet, there are various pictures, drawings, collages and pictures of installations and performances of the burqa that use its symbolism in discussing and commenting on cultures, relations between cultures and relations of power. Some are works of art, others are meant to be comical, while others make commentary on various political debates. Play on visibility and covering is central to these images, but there is not just one way to address this issue. It is an issue that lies at the centre of these representations, as their content and meanings are tied to it. First, I will discuss the relation of burqas to the body. Contrary to the documentary pictures, wherein one of the captions stated that Afghan women cannot show more than 'an inch of the body', many of the non-documentary pictures utilize revelations of the body. There is hardly any oriental exoticism (Said, 1985; Watson, 1996: 153) in documentary pictures, but rather just indications of plain oppression of women, especially in connection with Afghanistan. I will argue that visibility and invisibility of the body are central aspects in making the burqa a symbol of oppression vis-à-vis liberation. This becomes apparent when looking at revealing burqa pictures (see Figures 1 and 2). Here is also one of the major differences to documentary pictures, as, in these, the face is made visible as an indication of women's freedom from Taliban rule or vice versa, whereas, in non-documentary pictures, it is the visibility of the body that is more central. It may be that present 'western imagination' is itself obsessed with bodies, as one could argue after looking at Figures 1–3. On the other hand, nakedness is also central to the Qu'ran (the Bible could also be mentioned in this respect) in connection to dress (Mernissi, 1992; Watson, 1996: 144–5). No wonder that the body and burqa are brought together, as they are both contested areas of cultural debate.

Figures 1 and 2 can be considered comments and critiques on the Taliban's politics of forcing women to wear burqas in public places. What is revealing in these, in contrast to documentary pictures, is the visibility of



Figure 1 'Sotto il Burqa Niente' (Nothing under the burqa; translation by Riitta Kyllönen). Reproduced with kind permission of Gianni Molaro.



Figure 2 'The Crusaders Free the Afghan Women. No More Burkhas'. Reproduced with kind permission of Magnus Johnstone.

female bodies. It is indeed contrary to the Taliban's regulations (Sharif, 2005: 347). Such areas are even more visible in Figures 1 and 2, which are most charged with eroticism. I will later discuss Figure 2 in more detail, as it is crusaders who commit the violent act of liberating and who largely do not carry positive connotations of the West. There is, then, a certain ambivalence in Figure 2, as 'liberation' and 'oppression' converge. In a different fashion, the title of Figure 1 is ambivalent in the sense of what is meant by 'nothing under the burqa'. It is true that both documentary and non-documentary pictures make women objects of the gaze, but rather differently. These two examples can be viewed to produce women as exotic others, but their bodies also seem to conform to a western beauty ideal of the slender body which is, in Figures 1 and 2, charged and in an erotic pose. This ideal is of course controversial and contested within western culture. Quite clearly, both pictures consist of symbolism that can be considered highly stereotypical. One can argue that these pictures not only point to issues of Islam's relation to the body, but that they are part of western representations of bodily ideals and discourses. In this sense, the female body is made an object of the gaze and desire. It is commonly argued in the critique of patriarchy that women's bodies are made a site of (male) pleasure and control and that, as such, it supports the subordination of women (McClintock, 1995; Mernissi, 1987; Stratton, 1996). As the visible body of a woman is contrasted to the burqa, the possibility of showing a naked body can be interpreted to highlight ideas of western liberties. This is also manifested in a news text for a fashion show where the burqa in Figure 1 was displayed, citing the author of the design talking about the work as 'a homage to women's liberation through nakedness and beauty'.⁴ The



Figure 3 'Explosive'. Reproduced with kind permission of Pat Carra.

visibility of the body is made an issue of cultural politics and it is this that directs Figure 1 in its critical stance towards the Taliban regime. But the question of the body is also approached in a different manner, as in Figure 3, in which the irony of liberating Afghan women is tied to people's bodies in a similar way as in Figure 2.

Contrasting the Taliban and western fashion is certainly dichotomous, as such binary settings are considered problematic, especially between relations of representation between cultures (Hall, 1997b: 154). Baris Kiliçbay and Mutlu Binark (2002: 499–509) analyse Turkish fashion texts and fashion catalogues and note that veiling in general is also marketed and developed as a symbol of the Islamic way of life. They argue that veiling is not just an indication of the rise of political Islam, but, in the 1990s, it has also become part of the rise in the consumer culture and fashion of Islam (see also Ahmed, 1992; Watson, 1996). However, it has been argued that political Islam is a transnational movement and, within this, the veil is used as a symbol of cultural authenticity (Atasoy, 2003). Veils and burqa should not be conflated, as may happen when the issue of veiling is discussed in the popular media. In Sweden, Germany and France, there have even been attempts to ban schoolgirls from wearing veils at school and one can easily note that the word burqa is brought up. In France, legislation prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols at school, excluding small crucifixes, was passed in autumn 2004. But the result of such efforts seems only to strengthen the issue of veiling as a political issue and has given rise to demonstrations. The discussion is not centred on modesty, but is clearly one of politics between cultures. Similarly, the French legislation also aims to ban large crucifixes and Jewish kippas, and so on, in order to make public schools free of religiously motivated confrontations. However, this debate predates the events of 9/11, as there was public discussion in France in 1989 about the possibility of the veil being a provocative symbol (Halliday, 1995: 185).

Figures 1 and 2 may well be interpreted to be a confessional practice of sexuality of the West (Foucault, 1990). In this light, the visibility of bodies (and the possibility of revealing the body) is an important ingredient in western discourses of sexuality. In contrast to that, it seems that these pictures and the documentary pictures on the whole can be interpreted to mean that societies that have burqas are just as Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' indicates. For example, Figure 1 states that the body is denied in the Islamic state, but at the same time, revealing the burqa celebrates western freedoms. The indication of freedom (and its relation to the body) is apparent in many of the texts that mention and contrast both the burqa and Barbie, for example: 'Think about it: Barbie dresses as she wishes, and this includes as little as she wishes.'⁵ The reason for bringing up Barbie's relation to the burqa is motivated by the fact that there exist several versions of Barbie in a burqa on the internet, of which some are called Taliban Barbie.



Figure 4 Performance by Collettivo Peppina Bausch at the European Social Forum, 2002 in Florence. Reproduced with kind permission of Collettivo Peppina Bausch.

Collettivo Peppina Bausch's performance consisted of two women wearing underwear, transparent plastic burqas and black veils over their eyes. In the performance, there were also other representations that aimed to bring up different aspects of women's position in western societies. Other women were carrying posters of women, such as manager woman, mother woman, houseworker woman and model woman or 'beauty object woman' (note the Barbie poster in the background in Figure 4). Interestingly enough, it is the women wearing burqas that get media attention, even though the aim of the performance was to highlight that modern western societies do transform women into objects and use women's bodies in advertising and that these societies are not free from oppression, although nobody is directly forced to wear particular clothing. The performance is intriguing, as there are several themes present: the women's faces are masked, but their bodies are visible; the real women under the burqas are made visible, as transparent plastic is used; anonymity is stressed by their masked faces, but their bodies are still offered as objects of the gaze. These divergent elements make these burqas ambivalent and culturally charged. Journalists seem to be particularly interested in the burqa performance. It is then reasonable to state that connecting burqas with the visibility of the body produces a fascination for the media, regardless of the aim of the performance. This fact is nicely highlighted by the viewpoint of the photograph itself.

The authors of the performance also thought, as I did, after seeing news and images from Afghanistan, that it seemed that the stereotyped view about the burqa had become an excuse to strengthen the myth of western superiority. The historical importance of the veil and its role between Islam and the West have been significant and controversial since at least the 19th century (Ahmed, 1992). Burqas' relation to these broad cultural ideologies



Figure 5 (Translations left to right): ‘Oppression of women’; ‘That would be the way to discipline the missus’; ‘*Star Wars*? Princess Amidala!’ Reproduced with kind permission of Jenny Holmlund and Peter Eriksson.

is special in that it is also critiqued within Muslim societies. On the other hand, ideas of ‘western liberation’ are examined in relation to the burqa. For example, people have commented on the fashion show picture in Figure 1. One Italian electronic journal ironically commented that these burqas were ‘logically open in strategic places (buttocks, breasts and such like) apparently to stress women’s right to freedom! . . . what a great effort of civil activity, such subtle societal-political thought.’ These comments show that counter-arguments take the body as the starting point of the argument, but then again, the image of an ideal slender female body is a widely critiqued issue in the West without connection to burqas. But these acts also open up questions of multiculturalism and women’s situations across cultures. In particular, Collettivo Peppina Bausch’s performance questions both western and other stereotypes of idealized womanhood.

In non-documentary burqa pictures, it is not only the body that is at stake. Freedom is brought up in a slightly different sense too; that is, the freedom of public liberties. Both Figures 5 and 6 emphasize the issue. In the first one, a woman carrying a shopping bag (note that the man is not carrying anything, but is wearing working attire) and waiting for the bus to arrive states that wearing a burqa is negative and means oppression of women. But the male viewer sees it rather differently as a wish: ‘that would be the way to discipline the mrs’. Both of the views are stereotypical western views on veiling, one could argue: women’s liberation in the West and men’s desire to control women (Ahmed, 1992; Watson, 1996). The older woman in the script connects the burqa with patriarchy and the man praises the patriarchal view of male domination. The third comment, on the other hand, places the burqa in an imaginary context, out of this world to the



Figure 6 Fourth Barbie convention, Italy. Reproduced with kind permission of Rieko Hagiwara.

world of fiction, as she herself also belongs to a fantasy world of gothic fan culture. A woman wearing a burqa passes by nonchalantly, ignoring these comments altogether. The critique is aimed, therefore, at western conceptions of the burqa.

In Figure 6, the burqa is connected to Martin Luther King Jr's famous 'I have a dream' speech. It makes a clear political statement, as the topic of the fourth Barbie convention in Italy was 'career women', but also because there is a video camera visible under the burqa. The most likely dream is that women should be able to fulfil their personal dreams and careers in life and that this doll presentation aims to state that such options are not possible in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. But actually it is not clear at what issue the dream is targeted, as there were several issues in King's speech, such as equality between blacks and whites, freedom and justice, to name a few. There is, then, some loosely targeted openness in the work, and, as there is a Barbie under the burqa, one could make a counter-argument that there is some problematic ideal under the garment that could also be criticized.

On the whole, when the burqa is placed out of its documentary context, its potential meanings seem to become more open to various interpretations. In Ulrick Désert's art installation 'The Burqa Project: On the Borders of My Dreams I Encountered My Doubles Ghost', which was displayed in windows in New York during the first anniversary in 2002 of the victims



Figure 7 ‘The Burqa Project: On the Borders of My Dreams I Encountered My Doubles Ghost’. Reproduced with kind permission of Jn Ulrick Désert.

of the 9/11 attacks, is perhaps the most destabilizing play of symbols (see Figure 7). Désert’s work seems to wonder whether Germany, France, the US and Great Britain are somewhat fundamentalist world political actors or not, and, if they are, then it seems adequate to think that it is this fundamentalism that these leading political powers try to hide and are unwilling to abandon or at least show their political ideologies by unveiling. Or maybe the point is to say that women are under the yoke of western male-dominated ideals and made invisible within the context of western nationalism. Or maybe the emphasis should be on colonialism instead. One could go much further and maybe even end up thinking of the *Star Wars* movies, as the authors of Figure 5 have. Désert’s work made me think of Darth Vader’s Red Guards in *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. It is clear that these movies consider covering one’s face as a symbol of evil since, as Darth Vader returns to the good side of the force, his face is revealed as evil disappears. But this is not the central theme of the revealing/hiding of the face, as it is not an issue of evil under the burqas in documentary pictures. Rather, the central theme is the victimization of women and forced wearing of the burqa as an indication of oppression and fear of being sanctioned in Afghanistan due to an improper outfit. Veils in general have also been romanticized as a marker of exotic orientalism (Macdonald, 1997). This could even be applied to the role of burqas in Figures 1 and 2, where there is potential exoticism, but it remains repressed by ideological factors. One might remember the opera singer in Luc Besson’s movie *The Fifth Element*, where the mystic star of the show Diva Plavalaguna arrives at Folsom

Paradise in a burqa and is keeping the four elements safe inside her from the reach of evil forces. This is the only clearly positive use of a burqa in the fictional sphere that I have seen, but there may be others.

But in Désert's work, an indication of the evil of western powers perhaps rises more easily to the surface, that there are bad deeds and secret agendas of world domination under the burqas of the national flags of major western powers. But this play of bringing stereotypes together makes Désert's work difficult to interpret unambiguously. One could also argue that women who come from elsewhere to the West are forced to wear the 'burqa of western ideals' in order to integrate and be accepted into western societies. These various possibilities of interpretation are due to the fact that the viewer can choose different emphases on the work's elements and starting points: one can begin interpretative work either from flags, burqas or women and accord various weights to their interpretation. One can say that the artist succeeds well with his artwork's intention to 'create and destroy stereotypes'. The Tenement Museum in Lower Manhattan, which had displayed his work, introduces it to viewers as an invitation to examine and engage with prejudices. Comments from the museum's visitors' book and email messages also show that 'The Burqa Project' can be interpreted in several ways and it seems that this artwork is ambivalent in so many respects that one conclusive interpretation is impossible to attain. We can get a glimpse of interpretations from some of the responses given in viewers' accounts below. From these, it is apparent that there is not one conclusive and exhaustive interpretation available. Second, what is clear from viewers' responses (even as these people might represent a selective group of people) is that people do think of issues of multiculturalism and its possibilities for positive communication between cultures and are aware of the problematic nature of stereotypical representations between cultures (see Huntington, 1996, and Hannerz's 1999: 400–5 critique of Huntington's argument about multiculturalism, which states that it is dangerous for a nation's identity). Here are some of the responses:

Women, religion, imposition. Makes me thing [*sic*] that the person who wears it doesn't count because no image is available. Inspired by the recent insight into the Arab/Muslim culture. To provoke a reaction by using conventional flags as the material for a very controversial cloth.

Meant to be inflammatory. That western powers want to take over eastern lifestyles or that somehow these cultures do not mix to our minds. Or that western society is not as gender-equal as we like to believe. Commenting on culture clashes. Wanting to bring attention to the differences and similarities of cultures.

Oppression. Capitalism. 1st World. Moslem. Moslems are in all countries and a part of all countries. Women are oppressed in all countries. Moslems are covered over/invisible in 1st World countries. Expose prejudice.

The first of these comments touches on the issue of visibility and oppression; the second one turns the question to western self-criticism; and the third one turns to questioning the invisibility of Muslims in western countries. Désert's work is not alone in using western flags, as there are other similar works that make more direct statements, such as the one where a burqa made of 'stars and stripes' is connected to the following text: 'The most dangerous burqa . . . is such which you cannot wear/show (il burqa piu pericoloso . . . è quello che non sai indossare; translation Riitta Kyllönen).⁶ This makes a more open claim about the dangers of the US's hegemonic role and attitude. Here, words connected to the picture firmly set the direction of meaning. In this image, the burqa-wearing figure is also drawn into a hostile position. Both of these use the burqa's potential as being a signifier of oppression, which is, of course, in itself problematic for the critique to use a stereotypical means of presentation, but the end results are most different.

Contrary to this single burqa in US flag fabric, Désert's text is ambiguous: 'On the Borders of My Dreams I Encountered My Doubles Ghost.' Who are my doubles? Does it mean Muslims or women, as the author is a man? But, then, the 'I' position may be offered for the viewer to fill in, which would alter the starting point of the whole questioning. Who are these doubles ghosts? The options are multiple and depend on what the viewer decides the words signify. Here again, the possibilities of interpretation remain open and inherently ambivalent in the sense that there is no definitive conclusion to be reached. I think that the most important feature of non-documentary burqa pictures lies here: that representations, in many cases, remain ambivalent.

This has two consequences that I want to address. One deals more with how representations may be used tactically to convey meanings and bring up discussion of classifications that are stereotypical in nature. Of the examples I have used in this article, they are often clearly intended to be comic. As such, they come close to what Bakhtin (1984: 5–12, 1987: 69–77) means by parody. Even as such, quite a few of them, like 'Crusaders Free the Afghan Women' or 'The Burqa Project', are rather serious and the direction of intention is not clearly biased (see Bakhtin, 1987: 75–6). For Bakhtin (1984: 11–39), mediaeval parody had positive regenerative ambivalence and power, which in his view is missing from modern plainly negative and ironic parody. I think that it is not necessary to bind ambivalence to parody; it can also be applied to even 'serious' discourses. Non-documentary pictures may be, and have, therefore, a capacity for being at the same time parodical and serious or even just plain serious.

Conclusion

Documentary burqa pictures are very much uniform representations. Non-documentary burqa pictures, on the contrary, are in many ways ambivalent representations. As I have shown, they make comments both on aspects of western and Muslim ideological assumptions. The position of women and gendered themes of discussion are also presented in the images. They are very much images, following McClintock's argument (1995: 61–73), wherein categories such as sexuality, gender, ethnicity and other cultural assumptions converge. As they do, there arises moments of ambivalence. I would agree with Bhabha that ambivalence may open a 'third space' where, for example, space is opened for undermining stereotypical representations, such as those utilized in documentary burqa pictures. In the non-documentary pictures, there are also examples of such images that are ambivalent in that special sense whereby any interpretation inherently remains contested or, if one interpretation is reached, there remains something deeply disturbing about it. I would argue that 'The Burqa Project' is such an image.

I have leaned in the analysis much on cultural and literary conceptions of ambivalence. There are at least two other notions of ambivalence. The other is psychological/psychoanalytical, which has been discussed thoroughly within postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 2004; McClintock, 1995) and elaborated as a concept that attacks its eurocentrism, and its meaning has changed from implications of normal and pathological (Freud, 1978: 28–31) or its biological bases (Young, 1995). Within the discussion of cultural hybridity, however, the term ambivalence is discussed in relation to psychology, such as in the work of Bhabha, where he discusses how anxieties about difference may occur (2004: 132).

Robert Merton and Elinor Barber (1963: 91–9) distinguish six different versions of sociological ambivalence. Their ideas are contrasted to psychological ambivalence so that, in their view, psychological ambivalence takes the structure of social relations as a given. This means that the focus has been only on thinking of conflicting emotions, thoughts or actions within inner experience and psychic mechanisms. Merton and Barber argue that sociological ambivalence is based on society's structure and on status differences and that sociological ambivalence results from conflicting roles and values within the structure of society. Their view can be said to be more culturally orientated than psychological ambivalence, which looks at people's inner experiences and psychological processes. Merton and Barber place their idea of sociological ambivalence on a role theoretical base, but they do see the norms of society as a complex matter, as there can, according to their view, be six different variations in sociological ambivalence. They all deal with situations wherein different norms, values and roles are in conflict and which arise from one's place within the structure of society. This bears a resemblance to postcolonial hybridity and it would be an

interesting field for theoretical elaboration to work with both Merton's work and postcolonial theories of hybridity. A clear connection to postcolonial theory arises when Merton and Barber (1963: 91) distinguish that one of the versions of sociological ambivalence arises from a situation wherein a person has internalized the values and norms of at least two different cultures. This is perhaps a rather simple setting, as variations in such situations are common. The most notable difference is that hybridity is for postcolonial theory an analytical starting point to study colonial and postcolonial experience and that the setting is from the start between two cultures, not within the structures of a single culture.

Stuart Hall (1997b) suggests that we need critical work in studying stereotypes. After that, it might be possible to dismantle them, but at least one can bring up the problematic nature of stereotypical representations in producing otherness and contest them. Here, the essential question is who has the power to control and define stereotypes and towards what ends (Dyer, 2002). The second suggestion to some problematics is Julia Kristeva's (1991) psychoanalytic philosophical discussion of Freud's work and her conclusion that the stranger is within ourselves. She argues that it is perhaps the only way to avoid harassing the other outside ourselves. This way, it may be possible to recognize otherness within oneself in a way that leads to something positive. This would enable one to better understand otherness in others and possibly make it easier to communicate with others and even find more mutual ground with the other. The third suggestion comes from the texts of Spivak, who stresses that one must learn to speak to the other and earn this right by taking the other seriously (Vuorela, 1999: 27).

Many of the non-documentary images are interesting as representations where conceptions of cultures meet and merge. 'The Burqa Project', for example, criticizes the nationalism of the four countries and their quite straightforward politics of intervention within the international scene. On the other hand, we might consider it to be a critique of the supposed equality between the sexes in the West. In a somewhat different vein, Figure 5 concentrates on western stereotypes. In these works, cultural stereotypes of a symbolic nature meet and create something other than these symbols alone would do.

The ambivalent nature of such work seems to have the power to question stereotypical representations. In this sense, ambivalence is not just a question of hegemonic representations or the possibility of the subaltern to speak and with that a process of changing sign systems (Spivak, 1988: 197). I would suggest that ambivalence should not be considered as merely dialogism (Kristeva, 1989: 66–72, 88–9, 113–21). Non-documentary pictures do use dialectical settings, but, more importantly, their ambivalence seems disturbing and critical to hegemonic efforts. This unresolved situation can be said to open a space for thinking of burqa representations as the crossing

of a complex set of cultural assumptions and therefore their place in the cultural and political sphere may become articulated and discussed.

Stuart Hall (1998: 2–3) argues that we still need the concept of identity in order to discuss how politics, subjects and discourses interact. Second, he states that it is fruitful to see identity as non-static, but also relies on Freud's conception that identification is inherently ambivalent. Along with that, one can state that this idea can also be applied to questions of representation in order to stress that they, too, may be multiple within one representation, as I have tried to show. Then, even as we do have more or less static and hegemonic cultural representations, it might be fruitful to consider representation in general in the same manner as Hall considers identity: that representations may well be unstable. This seems apparent in non-documentary burqa pictures. Ambivalence in non-documentary burqa pictures means not only turning binary settings upside down, which is always a possible option for attacking the hegemonic position, as Hall remarks. Ambivalence, as was found in this study, is different in the respect that it does not direct its attention at only one target. In this sense, the ambivalent representations studied here are 'a strange encounter' (Ahmed, 2000), where strangeness derives from mixing several different worlds together.

Some, but not all, burqa pictures undermine the validity of stereotypical representations between cultures and pose a critique of their binary nature. They may even point to the fact that even hegemonic cultural stereotypes are constructions of cultural history. This is not to argue that this would be the only means, but it can be seen as an alternative to such strategies that seek first to bring up stereotypes and then undermine their power in order to make them void. Ambivalence in representations may then work as a means to give rise to and remind one of the possibilities of 'double consciousness' (Werbner and Modood, 2000: 20–3) or an 'inbetween moment' (Bhabha, 2004: 3).

Ambivalence opens up a unique space for thinking of possibilities for dialogue between cultures. This is to some degree a confusing matter, as seems to happen when viewing 'The Burqa Project' or Barbie in a burqa with the text of Martin Luther King Jr. To my mind, the intricacy lies in this process whereby one is led to think of otherness in a way that makes you wonder at your own assumptions when doing interpretative work. Broadly speaking, such wondering may lead one to think reflectively and turn one's attention to the very legitimacy of stereotypical representations, wherever they may occur.

Notes

- 1 This is a slight limitation, as the classification of images is done by the search engines.
- 2 See: (www.asap-net.org/archive/changelinks.html).
- 3 See, for example: (www.rand.org/publications/randreview/issues/rr.12.01/full_alert.html); (www.now.org/nnt/fall-98/global.html).
- 4 See: (www.concento.it/Moda/2002/01_Gennaio/20/napoli_sposi.jhtml).
- 5 See: (www.chipstah.com.oldchip/000600.html).
- 6 See: (<http://www.acidlife.com/mayhem/deletia/nothingtodo/burqa.html>).

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