The urban veil: image politics in media culture and contemporary art

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Chapter 5

Reflections on the Image of the Muslim Veil in Fashion

5.1 Hussein Chalayan, *Between*, spring/summer collection fashion show, London (1998).

Between was the 1998 spring-summer collection of Hussein Chalayan, a Turkish-Cypriot designer based in London. Through strategic use of the fashion show as medium, Chalayan provoked a reflection on cultural codes underlying female sexuality and ideals of beauty, and how they are constructed and experienced in different cultural contexts. In one section, the models came out wearing wooden capsules on their heads, with only a slit for them to peer through. Each capsule had a different form, lending individuality to the wearers despite the fact that their facial characteristics were concealed. A second part of the show presented models wearing square-shaped mirrors around their heads, creating a surface around the models' faces that mirrored back the gazes of the gathered fashionistas. The finale to the event showcased seven models and was choreographed to

unfold progressively like a flipbook. The first came out wearing nothing but a black mask partially covering her face, followed by models increasingly covered from the head down; the last was covered entirely. Other than her exposed feet and hands, only a pair of eyes peered out from behind a black silhouette of cloth. The reference to the *chador* was blatant.

In photographs of this portion of the show, the models' bodies, whether completely naked or completely covered, take on similar postures. The women face the audience with the confidence of a model accustomed to being exposed. In static poses, arms at their sides, their gazes are blasé. They have submitted to the fact that their bodies are given over to the field of vision. In one image, a partially veiled model deviates, peeking to the side in an almost conniving way, as if she were engaging visually and looking back at someone in the audience.

The 2007 cover image of *mslm Fashion Magazine* presents a very different image of the Muslim veil. The magazine was produced by a group of young Dutch Muslim women living in the Netherlands. This image presents a figure in various textures of white, dusty-rose, and silver cloth. The figure's head and shoulders are clearly covered by a veil; in fact, no skin is visible in this image. The white sneakers, tight silver leggings, and shimmering veil speak to a youthful, urban aesthetic. In opposition to the compliant and inactive poses of the models in Chalayan's show, the veiled Muslim woman is bent over in a dynamic posture that expresses vitality.

5.2 *mlsm Fashion Magazine* (2007). Cover page. Photograph: Ari Versluis.

In comparing these two fashion statements, I am confronted with very different images of the Muslim veil in its encounter with fashion. The first suggests a reflection on two different codes of dress, with the female body as primary receptacle of each; whether naked or entirely clothed, the body is given over to be seen. This is distinctly not the case with the second, in which the body is not entirely given to be seen—not because it is completely covered, but because of its dynamic posture. These two images provide the general trajectories that will be pursued in this chapter: one thread will address fashion as a system of governance and interpellation; the second will demonstrate the many creative possibilities offered by this same system to subjects, veiled women in this instance, when it is integrated with the many registers of their everyday lives.

To be sure, fashion is a ubiquitous system that increasingly affects and shapes all facets of our lives, facilitating economic expansion through the reification of quotidian practices of dress and lifestyle. According to the philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, we currently live in an era of "consummate fashion." In *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Lipovetsky describes consummate fashion as having a specific history closely linked with the development of modern democratic values of individualism and freedom in the West.[213] The era of consummate fashion is underscored by a temporality of the present, an aesthetic of seduction and consumption (primarily of the female body), and finally, a frenzy for the new.

This description of the fashion realm appears incongruent with the requirements of modesty adopted by many practicing Muslim women. And yet, as Lipovetsky reiterates throughout his study, although the era of consummate fashion has come to infiltrate all aspects of our lives, it has also taken on a radical pluralism that opens up new sites of creative possibility for self-expression. He states, "Fashion's new configuration is open, un-compartmentalized, and nondirective."[214]

In this chapter I will argue that the subject of consummate fashion embodies a double movement that adheres to the system's logic. The term "fashion" has its roots in the Latin word, *facere*, which means "to make." The subject's double movement in fashion consists on one hand of being made—that is, of *being fashioned* into a certain mold by the system, in which psychic processes of idealization regarding images play a key role—and on the other hand, *fashioning oneself* through a process of self-creation *through* the system, or using the fashion system to create one's own self-image. This

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[213] Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy,* trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton University Press, 1994).
[214] Ibid., 119.

double movement is what makes fashion such an intriguing and rich site of cross-cultural encounters and self-negotiation in explorations of the urban veil.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, Chalayan's work will provide the grounds for a discussion of the role the female body occupies in consummate fashion. The formal structure of *Between* manifests self-reflexivity with regard to the fashion show as a medium. Chalayan's innovative use of this medium and its conventions reveals how its emergence is historically connected to the rise of the female body as spectacle and object of desire in modern consumer culture. Although the tenets underlying the position of the female body in this system are at odds with Islamic ideals regarding modesty, *Between* provides an example in which it is the practice of veiling that unsettles the workings of consummate fashion.

In the second section, the cover of the *mslm Fashion Magazine*, which depicts the veiled woman in a dynamic pose, offers a point of departure from the *being fashioned* dynamic of the fashion system. This image enables an examination of fashion as a tool for self-affirmation and the presentation of the female body not as object, but as subject of desire. This requires substituting the psychoanalytical model of desire, predicated on lack, with Deleuze's concept of desire as connective. In this context, fashion is explored as a vehicle for creativity and self-expression.

The concept of the "mirror" will be used in the analysis of a second series of photographs taken from *mslm Fashion Magazine,* in which young, veiled, Muslim women are portrayed in typical fashion poses. Reading these images through the concept of the mirror points to the slippery line between the double movement of being fashioned

and fashioning oneself—which demonstrates that points of conformance and emancipation are not easily disentangled.

In the third and final section, I will adopt the notion of "generation" as a perspective through which to approach the images in *mslm Fashion Magazine*. The images corroborate subjects that do not completely identify with the neoliberal fetishization of individualism, or swith a traditional understanding of communitarianism. "Generation," as recently defined by Fredric Jameson, articulates an active subject position that engages, rather than passively endures, the struggles of a specific historical moment and location. I contend that this subject position, based in individual experience, extends beyond the self—through identification processes—to a collective experience of the historical moment.

5.1 Between: The Fashioning Operations of Desire

Chalayan is reputed for creating collections that are conceptual in their form and experimental in their mode of presentation. The designer was born and raised in the Turkish part of Cypress, straddling the margin between Muslim and Christian worlds. He now lives in London, where he moved in his early twenties to study fashion at Central Saint-Martins.

Between, Chalayan's spring-summer collection of 1998, received much attention for the self-reflexivity his show. Instead of utilizing the platform to parade the new styles of his latest collection, Chalayan transformed his show into a critical reflection on dress codes across different cultures and the main tenets that structure the fashion world. As a finale to *Between*, a model appeared wearing nothing but a partial black face-covering.

The six models that subsequently emerged were increasingly covered in black until the final figure appeared in a full *chador*.

Press reviews for *Between* differ. Constance White, a fashion journalist for the *New York Times,* found the show to be a "provocative exploration of Islamic women's place in society using the chador as the fulcrum."[215] Caroline Evans comments that it is hard not to read into the mixture of veils and naked bodies familiar tropes of the eroticization of Muslim women as "exotic and mysterious other presences onto which Western image makers can project, as onto a screen, the idea of lascivious Eastern sexuality."[216] White's comment, on the one hand, is a positivist reading of the designer's investigation of the status of Islamic women in society, but her use of the term "society" remains non-localized. This ambivalence is revealing and will be discussed further below. Evans, on the other hand, cautions us about the dangers that the use of the *chador* poses, as it readily lends itself to the re-inscription of established cultural and sexual power relations. Yet, both author's comments focus on Muslim women, or in Evans' case, the projected image of Muslim women.

In these two instances, as in most reviews of the event, the authors fail to give a satisfactory account of what was so unsettling about *Between*. The strong reaction to the show was not due to the naked bodies, which are relatively frequent in high-end and experimental fashion shows, nor to the *chador* itself. Rather, I contend that the appearance of the chador in a fashion show in combination with nude female bodies conjured a set of blatant contradictions. The shock came with the realization that certain

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[215] Constance C. R. White, "Hussein Chalayan's High-Wire Act," *New York Times*, April 21, 1998, accessed September 12 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/21/style/hussein-chalayan-s-high-wire-act.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.
[216] Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003): 285.

culturally specific codes that at first appeared incongruous could begin to intersect and inflect each other.

I agree with Evans that the appearance of the *chador*—choreographed in an almost titillating reversal of a strip tease—evokes familiar tropes of the erotic Muslim woman, and extends an invitation to the orientalist gaze. As discussed in chapter one, the veiled woman resists Enlightenment ideals of visibility and transparency, frustrating both the subject's power to know and the consequent confirmation of his or her sense of self. This resistance to the knowing gaze provokes scopic desire, which is a desire to unveil, possess, and know what is imagined to lie behind the veil's folds. However, *Between* does not permit this process of scopic desire to come into play fully.

First, scopic possession requires the gaze's dominance over a passive object. The model in a fashion show is such an archetype: an object on display for the visual pleasure of a gathered audience. Whether completely clothed or almost naked, the model gives herself over to the realm of the visible. This compliant gesture is usually achieved by adopting a blank, disengaged facial expression that neither returns nor confronts the onlookers' gaze. The models in *Between,* however, do not maintain this customary disengagement. First, as mentioned briefly above, in one of the sections of the show, the wooden capsules that covered the models' heads afforded them a kind of mask through which they could see without being seen. When the models reappeared, wearing mirrors around their faces, the gazes from without were refracted—sent back to the audience members, who were confronted with their participation in the creation of the spectacle they had gathered to see.

What is most important for my study with regard to *Between's* finale is that even though the models' bodies were increasingly covered in black cloth, which initiated the process of resistance to the gaze that then provokes desire, the models' eyes peered out from the gap in the partial face-covering and thereby confronted the gaze. In various images documenting the event, one model is shown glancing to the side and another, forward; while others even appear threatening as they engage visually with the audience. Looking back disables the possessive gaze as well as the scopic regime of desire.

Secondly, as discussed throughout this study, the eroticization of the Muslim woman about which Evans warns is contingent upon you/me inscriptions that allow the Western subject to construct her identity by positing the veiled woman as absolutely other. White's comments on *Between* exemplify this reading. Because the author does not explicitly locate the term "society," the reader is left to wonder whether she meant to refer to Muslim majority countries—most probably Iran? Or perhaps to London? Or is she alluding to Western societies more generally? Because White does not specifically use the possessive pronoun "our," the phrase "Islamic women's place in society" suggests a constitutive outside or a geographical entity set apart. Hence, White's statement strongly implies a binary us/them logic.

White's comments also convey that she did not attend the fashion show in person, because Chalayan in fact took strategic measures to unsettle such a binary logic. The fashionistas and journalists who were present at the occasion had to make their way to London's East End, where Chalayan had selected a venue in the middle of a neighborhood with a large Bengali population. The event was scheduled so that attendees would necessarily pass through the celebration of an Islamic festival on their

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way to the show.[217] Chalayan's decision to present his collection with a clear reference to the *chador*, and hence to Islam, was meant to echo the presence of religion within the immediate lived context. As has been noted earlier, although the *chador* signals an unambiguous reference to the imposition of a set of dress codes in Iran, its strong symbolism is often conflated with very different forms of veiling outside Muslim-majority countries. Thus, the deliberate link between the show's content and the location where it was held ultimately highlighted the continuities and discontinuities between the powerful sign of the chador and the presence of the Muslim veil in the immediate locale. By indicating the transformations that occurs when dress codes travel across borders, Chalayan invited the audience to recast the reading of the Muslim veil as a sign of religious difference into a scenario that is more inclusive.

Certainly, *Between* risks allowing onlookers to read Western tropes of the veil into the appearance of the *chador* on the stage. And yet I suggest that even more forcefully, the show evokes questions about the current fashion system and its economies of desire surrounding the female body. I have mentioned how the veiled fashion models stare back at the audience, consequently disabling the scopic regime of desire that underpins the orientalist image of the veiled woman. I now want to address the fashion system's imbrication in this scopic regime, which is rooted in an economy of (male) desire that is specific to modernity, consumer society, and the West—and in which the image of the female body plays a central role.

Previous chapters have demonstrated how the image of the veiled woman has often served as a screen onto which male anxieties regarding the colonial other could be projected and contained. In her persuasive article "The Other Side of Venus: The Visual

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[217] Ibid., 285.

Economy of Feminine Display," Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains how the image of an eroticized femininity emerged in nineteenth-century France, serving as a receptacle for anxieties and desires with regard to modernity, the rise of commodity culture, and the breakdown of traditional social and gender relations.[218] It is noteworthy that prior to the nineteenth century, the male nude, and not the female nude, was predominant in Western art.[219] However, in the nineteenth century, a new bourgeois aesthetics emerged that substituted the female body for the male not only in high art, but also in popular culture.[220] During the nineteenth century, women's fashion completely eclipsed men's fashion in western countries as well.[221] Solomon-Godeau offers insight into how this shift to the female body in representation and fashion occurred concomitantly with the appearance of new technologies of image reproduction such as lithography, and later, photography and film.

Lipovetsky also addresses the simultaneous bureaucratization of fashion and industrialization of image production.[222] For the first time, these new image technologies had the capacity to keep up with fashion's "frenetic rhythm."[223] The intimate connection between the temporality of modernity, photography, and fashion was observed in treatises on the history of photography by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, as discussed in chapter three.[224]

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[218] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Female Display" in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective,* eds. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 143.

[219] See Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956).

[220] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus," 115-116.

[221] Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion,* 73-74.

[222] Lipovetsky, 53-58.

[223] Ibid., 58.

[224] See Siegfried Krakauer, "Photography," and Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography."

The result of the historical convergence of new technologies of reproduction and the bourgeois aesthetics of the female body was a much-increased circulation of woman-as-image in both elite and non-elite spaces in the form of nudes, pinups, female celebrities, fashion plates, titillating erotica, and pornography.[225] The widespread reproduction, circulation, and consumption of woman-as-image forged a distinctly modern economy of desire, in which the commodity fetish became intimately connected to the consumable woman. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin draws such an analogy when he writes that "to desire the fashionable, purchasable woman-as-thing is to desire exchange-value itself, that is the very essence of capitalism."[226]

The commodity fetish and woman as image of consumer society directly corresponds to the colonial fetishization of the image of the veiled woman. In both instances, there is a desire to "have" the image or visually possess the woman. Moreover, both occurrences are anchored in fantasy. Just as the veiled woman stands in as an image that is actively produced through a desiring subject of representation, so too is the eroticized image of femininity produced materially and psychically in nineteenth-century France. In this second scenario, the images reveal nothing of the subjectivities and material conditions of the subjects generally represented. According to Solomon-Godeau, "It is as though the real absence of women as actors in the bourgeois civil sphere was filled by compensatory fantasies—or constellation of fantasies—about femininity."[227]

It is noteworthy that the economy of desire present in the early-nineteenth-century circulation of colonial postcards of veiled women, for example—which was discussed in chapter one—dovetails with the shift that transformed the image of the European woman

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[225] Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus," 116.
[226] Benjamin, qtd. in Solomon-Godeau, 129.
[227] Ibid., 117.

into a fetish commodity in France during the same period. In both cases, the absence of visibility and hence knowledge of the female subject is actively displaced, projected onto fantasized representations.

What is most important for my argument in Solomon-Godeau's article is how display culture, femininity, and image technologies all converged at this historical moment to naturalize the central role that women came to play in consumer society. This role is best characterized by Laura Mulvey's term "to-be-looked-at-ness,"[228] and it continues to prevail in the era of consummate fashion. Guy Debord has demonstrated the extent to which the primary mode of address for consumer society is the register of the visual, and more precisely, the spectacle.[229] I argue that the image of woman that the fashion world continues to produce participates in the same gendered, libidinal economy described by Solomon-Godeau when she discusses their nineteenth-century prototypes. She writes that these image technologies tended "to articulate the sexuality of femininity in terms of specularity rather than activity."[230]

In *Between*, Chalayan's use of the *chador* while experimenting with the fashion show medium taps directly into this subtext of the consummate fashion system: specifically, the naturalized conflation between the female body, the spectacle, and the libidinal economy of desire. The sequential appearance of models that produces an image of the veiled woman—which moves from a completely exposed body to a completely covered body that looks back—evokes the structure of early experiments with the moving image. I believe this is not serendipitous, but rather demonstrates Chalayan's commitment to a conceptual and self-reflexive use of his medium.

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[228] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
[229] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle.*
[230] Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus*,*" 134.

The form of the fashion show that we know today began between 1908 and 1910 in the French haute couture fashion houses and quickly became "authentic spectacles."[231] The fashion show shared in the consumerist logic of display in which female models were not subjects but consumer goods designed to lure consumers. In the words of Lipovetsky, "The idealized models of haute couture were the luxurious live counterparts of attractive shop windows."[232]

If I have evoked Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness," a term with which she characterizes the image of the woman in classic cinema, it is because I believe there is a correspondence between the emergence of the fashion show and early experiments with the moving image. Both manifest a fetishization of the woman's body in motion. In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* Linda Williams explains how early moving-picture apparatuses, such as the zoopraxiscope used by Muybridge at the turn of the century, were developed in the name of science and a desire to understand the body in movement. This stemmed directly from the new capacity to capture movement with a mechanical eye. Williams argues that what was born as a set of scientific questions rapidly turned into a frenzy for the visible, resulting in pornographic answers. [233] According to her, by the late 1890s, Muybridge's "fetishization of the female body, then channels and displaces an original male will-to-knowledge—the 'academic question'—into so many games of peekaboo around this body."[234]

The pleasure of the visible that emerged around the woman's body in movement in these forms of proto-cinema, and the appearance of the female model on the catwalk,

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[231] Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion,* 58.
[232] Ibid., 78.
[233] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 38.
[234] Ibid., 49.

each reflect the burgeoning naturalization process of a certain image of femininity as spectacle proper to consumer society and the consummate fashion system. I therefore believe that Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the female image in classic cinema can also pertain to the archetypal model in a fashion show. Here too, the woman is placed outside the narrative flow of action and is deprived of the capacity to return the gaze; she is therefore only present as an image to be looked at, which is to say, as spectacle.[235] Yves Saint-Laurent said that he did not see his models as women but rather as mannequins, stating that if there was one aspect of a model that retained his attention, it was solely how their shape lent itself to the presentation of a certain line.[236]

Without overemphasizing the connection between the moving-image and the fashion show as it pertains to the female body, I wish to suggest that this connection yields useful insights into Chalayan's *Between*. In his use of a sequence of models to enact the gradual donning of the *chador*, the structure of the spectacle mimics the fundamental structure of classical cinema, in which several separate images are presented, consecutively aspiring to the illusion of one continuously evolving image. In this sense, we can say that Chalayan is referencing the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the models as image.

The presence of the *chador* intervenes as a blatant contradiction of this "image" of femininity. As discussed previously, the practice of veiling is tied to wide-ranging interpretations of Islamic ideals of modesty as a female virtue, and is underscored by a general distrust of the visual realm. In Europe and North America, the *chador* is an iconic

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[235] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures,* 12.
[236] See Isabelle Graw, "Fashion and Vitality," *Texte zur Kunst* 20:78 (June 2010): 125. Yves Saint-Laurent is quoted as having said "Les mannequins? Ce sont des modèles uniquement. Je ne pense pas à elles en tant que femmes. Si quelque chose retient mon attention, c'est uniquement pour faire ressortir une ligne."

symbol of these tenets and is therefore understood as being at the antipode of the celebration of the female body in the consummate era of fashion. Admittedly, there is a precariousness in utilizing these tropes, in which the gradual covering of the body in *Between* runs the risk of enticing rather than resisting the gaze. And yet as I argued above, the veil in this instance enables the models (especially the more veiled ones) to look back without being seen, unquestionably refuting not only the orientalist gaze, but also the traditional role of the fashion model: her "to-be-looked-at-ness." Chalayan's experimental use of the models and the fashion platform in *Between* consequently gestures to the fashion show's fundamental ideology. *Between* exposes consummate fashion's participation in a distinctly capitalist and male economy of desire, as well as its capacity to "conceal its constituent relations of production"[237] that have normalized the role women play within this economy.

In the preceding section, I argued that *Between* reveals how the female subject, both veiled and unveiled, is fashioned by Western libidinal economies into an image of desire. I have also proposed that the scopic regimes underscoring colonial imagery of the Muslim woman, veiled and unveiled, are directly linked to the rise of the worship of the displayed female body as spectacle in the age of modernity. Furthermore, I explored how Chalayan, by staging his fashion show among the festivities of a local religious event, introduced a connection between the symbol of the *chador,* which is customarily used to signal an absolute other, and the very different form that the practice of veiling takes in the local context—where it is already an integral component of London's social fabric. The image of the Muslim veil in this fashion show, in contrast to what Evans and White

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[237] Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus," 133.

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argue, does not merely represent dress codes related to Muslim women, but is also used to intervene and expose the central values and norms prevalent in the consummate era of fashion. However, while the image of the Muslim veil in *Between* provokes questions regarding the fashion system, it does not explain how the Muslim veil actually participates in that system. This question will be addressed in the following section.

5.2 The Self-Fashioning Possibilities of the Urban Veil

In the first section, I discussed the fashion show as a medium specific to modernity. I now turn to fashion's second established media platform dating from the same period: the fashion magazine. The cover of *mslm Fashion Magazine* is intriguing when juxtaposed with the image of the Muslim veil put forth in *Between*. I have examined the way the *chador* in *Between* is used to illuminate the fashioning operations of the gaze on the female body, which results in the production of a certain image of both the veiled woman and femininity in the West. I will now argue that the image on the cover of *mslm Fashion Magazine* demonstrates the creative potential of the fashion system: how the subject can work through the system to affirm and negotiate her self-image. This implies that she is no longer an object of desire, but a desiring subject. The psychoanalytical model of desire that I have been working with up to this point is inadequate for theorizing this shift. In the next section, I will therefore present an alternate paradigm of desire, which accounts for the affirmative movement of the subject in fashion.

The *mslm Fashion Magazine* was the exhibition catalog of a show at MAMA, an art gallery run by the Public Art Squad Foundation in Rotterdam.[238] MAMA focuses on the artistic production of young local artists. In this instance they asked a group of "fashion-minded," second-generation Dutch Muslim women to organize and produce work for an exhibition on the Muslim veil and fashion.[239] The group of women curators behind the project consisted of young designers, architects, writers, and artists. The project provided a space for these women and their audience to imagine what form a fashion magazine would take if it were dedicated to Islamic dress codes produced by Muslim women in the Netherlands.

The blatant paradox of having a "*covered* girl" as the "cover girl" of a fashion magazine is an obvious entry point into this discussion. The "cover girl," referring to the photograph on the front page of a magazine, is a genre onto itself. The genre's connection to the libidinal economy of consumer and spectacle culture outlined above is clear: the terms "cover" and "girl" reference both display and gender (note the absurd sound of "cover boy"). The primary communicative objective behind the cover girl image is recognition. The recognizable face of a movie star, entertainer, or fashion model is used associatively to represent the style of the magazine and to lure people into buying.[240] In addition to being a recognizable face, the chosen cover girl is typically recognizable for her embodiment of an idealized image of femininity and beauty.

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[238] *mslm Fashion Magazine*, ed. Soad Bouchentouf, Hasna Boutahiri, Yonca Ozbilge, Bushra Sayed, and Anny Sheikh (Rotterdam: Veenman, 2007).
[239] MAMA website, accessed August 30, 2010, http://www.showroommama.nl/projects/MSLM.cfm.
[240] Carolyn Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1998).

The veiled woman on the cover of *mslm Fashion Magazine* is manifestly not recognizable. Crouched over so that her face is hidden from view, her body is decentered to the far right of the frame and only half-present within the image. In fact, her gender is assumed from the stereotypical feminine palette in which she is dressed, and from the headscarf, which is a distinctly female practice. Neither the woman nor the formal composition of the image expresses specularity. To the contrary, the various textures of materials in which she is clothed, the emphasis on their respective folds, creases, and deflection of light—and the manner in which the veiled figure stands out in relief against the white background—all speak to the sense of touch, and hence, to the aesthetics of the veil outlined in chapter one. This aesthetics is confirmed by the glossy, decorative flowers that span the surface of the cover. These ornamental motifs are palpable to the fingertips, but only visible when the light hits them in a certain way.

This "cover girl" image of a veiled woman clearly disables the workings of the spectacle that would transform the image into a visual object of desire. That said, I argue that desire is expressed in the image, albeit not following the Lacanian definition of desire on which I have been drawing. In that paradigm, desire is located in the psyche of the observing subject: it is embedded in a perceived lack and is directed towards a representation. In the words of Laplanche and Pontalis, desire "is not a relation to a real object independent of the subject but a relation to phantasy."[241]

Deleuze articulates an alternate schema of desire that reflects the underlying textures of this image, in which an assemblage of various elements are woven together to express a movement of self-affirmation. Here I would like to reiterate the combination of elements in the cover image and what they express: the stereotypical feminine colors and

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[241] Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis,* 483.

the headscarf identify a Muslim woman; the dynamic posture and slender figure communicate agility of movement; the combination of the ankle-high sneakers and silver leggings covered by a loose, knee-length skirt reflect the fashion aesthetics of urban youth, promoted by the likes of H&M and American Apparel at the time the magazine was produced; the emphasis on textures, folds, and the translucent decorative pattern embody Islamic aesthetics of touch and ornamentation; the fact that the figure is not visually objectified or made to represent an ideal of female beauty focused on the body manifests the Muslim principles of modesty and consequently, a commitment to Islam.

Therefore, the cover of this fashion magazine becomes a site where an assemblage consisting of fashion, the stereotypical genre of the "cover girl," textures, the Muslim veil, urbanity, youth, femininity, Muslim values, religion, and colors all intersect. I am not proposing that these elements communicate the represented veiled woman's desire to be agile, hip, and fashionable. I maintain rather that taken together, these different elements produce readings of the urban veil that must be seen as the subjective expression of the group of young Dutch women behind the project. In this light, the assemblage of elements manifests a desire, which is affirmative and creative— and, I argue, distinctly Deleuzian.

Deleuze developed his concept of desire in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and in *Dialogues,* largely in collaboration with Félix Guattari. For Deleuze, desire is not a psychic state; it is an energetic impulse, a creative process that exists on a plane that is constituted individually and collectively. According to Deleuze, "each group or individual should construct the plane of immanence on which they lead their life and

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carry on their business."[242] In this constructivist approach, desire does not presuppose a subject, nor is it directed toward an object or fantasy. Consequently, the female body is not an object of desire in this model, but as Patricia Pisters explains, "The body desires to connect with other things (human or other) and become something else: there is no longing for lost origins, but a desire to connect from where one is (i.e. always in the middle)."[243] Desire in this model is an ongoing process that is intimately connected to individual and collective forms of becoming.[244]

The cover image of *mslm Fashion Magazine* is a manifestation of the various elements that together communicate the daily life of a group of young Dutch Muslim women—a life in which both religion and fashion play a role. In this instance, the veil is not used as a feminist strategy to resist and criticize consummate fashion, but rather is seen to coexist with fashion and other elements that express a sense of the collective self at a specific moment and location.

The affirmative, self-fashioning side of fashion was the subject of a recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: *American Woman: Fashioning a National Identity between 1890 and 1940.* Focusing on "archetypes of American femininity through dress," the exhibition reveals how "the American woman initiated style revolutions that mirrored her social, political, and sexual emancipation."[245]

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[242] Gilles Deleuze, from *Dialogues*, quoted in *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993): 136.
[243] Patricia Pisters, "From Eye to Brain. Gilles Deleuze," 32. By "origins" the author is not referring to a diasporic situation, but rather to the psychoanalytical process by which the child enters into the symbolic order and first experiences its separateness from its mother.
[244] François Zourabichvili, *Le Vocabulaire de Deleuze* (Paris: Eclipse, 2003): 29.
[245] "American Woman Fashioning a National Identity," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed August 25, 2010,
http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId=%7Bca088c8e-d618-4503-91e7-833569115bf2%7D.

Although I find the idea of fashioning national identity based on styles of femininity highly problematic and essentializing, it is significant that fashion is presented as taking part in larger movements of social formation and emancipation. From this perspective, fashion trends affirm a desire to be perceived in a specific, or alternate, way. On a collective level, fashion can manifest a desire for a world other than the one that currently exists, and can affirm new subject positions in that world, both of which are concomitantly coming into being. The art historian Isabelle Graw has articulated this idea, stating that fashion "has the power not only of giving expression to a specific attitude toward life, but also of creating or anticipating it."[246]

I maintain that this is the form of desire expressed on the cover of *mslm Fashion Magazine.* Here, the veiled figure embodies a subject position that is committed to Islam and its ideals of modesty. The veil, the sneakers, the leggings, together with the body's dynamic pose, express an affirmative sense of self that is young, urban, and Muslim. By strategically evading scopic operations specific to consummate fashion, the image affirms a life-world in which the commitments to Islamic values and fashion coexist. In this way, what Lipovetsky refers to as the deeply pluralistic nature of the consummate era of fashion makes possible the combination and expression of numerous positions and sites of identification specific to Muslim women.

Furthermore, and in keeping with Graw's words, fashion becomes a type of *habitus*, a term I borrowed from Mahmood in chapter three to discuss the invisible processes of subject formation underscoring ritualistic practices such as veiling. In keeping with this logic, the manner in which a subject chooses to express herself through dress codes both reflects and creates an inner attitude. In her article, "'Islamic Fashion' in

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[246] Isabelle Graw, "Fashion and Vitality," 127.

Europe: Religious Conviction, Aesthetic Style, and Creative Consumption," Annelies Moors describes the different styles of dress, including sporty, urban, and elegant, that are emerging amongst Muslim women in the Netherlands. Moors writes of how numerous women she interviewed explained that "their main concern is to produce a 'fit' between a particular style of dress and their personality or inner self."[247]

I will revisit this (collective) self-fashioning movement of fashion below. For now, I want to discuss briefly the precarious distinction between the two movements of the subject in fashion that I have outlined thus far: that of being fashioned by the fashion system and its gaze, and that of fashioning oneself through the system. It is certainly not my claim here that the presence of a Muslim veil in a fashion photo is transformative. Nor am I saying that if a Muslim woman has overseen the production of the fashion image, the Deleuzian model of desire will necessarily come into play. On the contrary, a series of photos in the *mslm Fashion Magazine* of the organizers behind the project makes it clear that fashion is the ground where a certain form of recognition is sought, and on which measuring-up to an ideal image is an imperative. Therefore, the terrain between the two movements I have outlined is very slippery. The analysis of one of these images will serve to demonstrate this point.

The magazine's first series of images, "Meet the MSLM'S," serve as "fashion portraits" of the veiled and non-veiled Muslim women that produced the exhibition and the catalogue for MAMA. The images are accompanied by captions that reference the designers of each item of the featured clothing, as well as the bibliographic details of the "models." In one image, a figure is dressed in black from head to toe. At first glance the

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[247] Annelies Moors, "Islamic Fashion" in "Europe: Religious Conviction, Aesthetic Style, and Creative Consumption," *Encounters* 1 (2009): 192.

image speaks of luxury: the model's black attire consists of high-heeled boots, loose-fitting pants, a suit jacket fitted at the waist by a belt, black leather gloves, an exposed neck, a tight scarf pulled into a bun at the back of her head, and large, tinted sunglasses. The model sits on a chair placed below a marble stairwell with an Art Deco, metal-worked banister. The formal composition is constructed around the diagonal line of the stairwell that divides the image between a lower front section, where the model bathes in daylight that serves to enhance her glamorousness, and the dark background.

5.3 From the series "Meet the mslm's" (2007) Photograph: Nadine.

The model is posed in such a way that she, like the rest of the image, appears lifeless. She sits nestled into the right corner of the hefty chair, legs crossed, with her right hand on her knee. Her left arm is draped over the chair's side and a gloved hand falls over the front of the armrest. Her face is directed to the left of the camera, looking beyond the frame of the image, and bears an expression of self-composure.

However, the self-composure expressed in this image has little to do with a desire to affirm oneself in a creative manner that would have emancipatory effects. Here, the figure has transformed herself into an image. Like the stylish glasses perched on her nose, as well as the designer seat upon which she is posed, the model in this image is transformed into an object on display. The veil within this economy is one decorative element among others in a world of glamour and style.

I therefore want to distinguish clearly between the workings of the "mirror" in fashion and the self-affirming fashion image that I argue has productive and transformative repercussions. The concept of the mirror is aligned with the fashioning movement of the subject: it represents fashion's technique of governance. The Lacanian mirror stage, as discussed above, occurs when the child identifies proprioceptively with an exterior image that she perceives as being more ideal than her own sense of self, and she consequently identifies with, and absorbs, this ideal image. This process is narcissistic by nature and belongs to the order of the imaginary; crucially, it continues throughout our lives as a central psychic function in the construction of subjectivity. Silverman writes:

> Seminar VII thereby intimates that idealization is an activity which the subject performs first and foremost in relation to the corporeal image within which he or she most aspires to see him or herself. All other images which are subsequently idealized are somehow related to it. Indeed, to idealize an image is to posit it as a desired mirror.[248]

Following this line of thought, the mirrors framing the model's heads in Chalayan's *Between* are not only a strategy to deflect the gaze that fashions the female

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[248] Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World*, 44.

body through a scopic regime of desire: rather, the model-mirror nexus also stands in for the mirror in which the gathered onlookers desire to see themselves reflected.

Silverman also addresses the predisposition of the subject to perform, in an act of mimesis, the ideal image at the moment of being photographed. The anticipation of being turned into an image provokes the awareness of the gaze, and a desire to be acknowledged and recognized as measuring up to its ideals. Roland Barthes describes how the body responds, through a pose, to the awareness that it is the object of the camera's gaze; as a result, the body actively transforms itself into an image even before the shutter opens.[249]

In performing a pre-fabricated ideal image at the moment of being photographed, the subject, in a sense, rescinds herself in order to become image. Indeed, Silverman has stressed how the ideal-image tends to be grounded in established representations. Consequently, even though Barthes characterizes the enactment of the pose as "active," the result of this action can very well result in a passive, self-subjection to existing norms. Silverman explains:

> To assume, in advance, the shape of a particular photograph represents at most an attempt to exercise some control over an unavoidable transaction; it is behavior in which the subject engages at the behest of the camera/gaze, and in response to the impossibility of avoiding specularity. Mimicry also proceeds in relation to a preexisting representation, which, in the case of the pose, derives from the cultural screen. It is thus limited to what is at a given moment representationally "possible."[250]

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[249] Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire : Note sur la Photographie* (Paris : Gallimard Seuil, 1980): 25. [« Or, dès que je me sens regardé par l'objectif, tout change : je me constitue en train de « poser », je me métamorphose à l'avance en image. Cette transformation est active : je sens que la Photographie crée mon corps ou le mortifie, selon son bon plaisir »].
[250] Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World*, 204.

And yet, as I argue is the case in the cover image of the *mslm Fashion Magazine,* this occurrence of being photographed, and the subject's active response in the form of a pose, can also become an instant in which the response productively transforms and disrupts the cultural screen.

I will now address a second set of images in this magazine that also eschew the specular side of fashion. In this final section, I will explore this point of view directly in relation to the image of the urban veil.

5.3 The Urban Veil in Fashion

Several photos in the *mlsm Fashion Magazine* are grouped together under the title "Osdorp Girls." Orsdorp is a suburb of Amsterdam and has come to be known over the last few decades as a milieu for immigrants and cheap housing. The series of photos was taken by two Dutch photographers, Martine Stig and Viviane Sassen, and the women in the photos were dressed by Emmeline de Mooij, a Dutch fashion stylist. Each photograph depicts one or more veiled women in Orsdorp's urban landscape. The images first appeared in 2005 in the avant-garde British fashion magazine, *Dazed & Confused.* None of the garments worn by the women in the images is credited to brand names or individual fashion designers. Therefore, the series of photos is not promotional; rather, it is presented as a staged social portrait of veiled Muslim women and their "street fashion" in Osdorp.

Conscious of the fact that the artists behind the series of photos are Dutch, and well aware that the images are indeed staged, I nevertheless believe that they corroborate a self-affirming movement underscored by the Deleuzian notion of desire; the photos

shed light on what is at stake in the encounter between fashion and Muslim women who are also committed to the practice of veiling. I will provide close readings of three of these images in order to address a manifested desire both to connect with and shape a social landscape. Furthermore, the orchestration of looks in the images provides the starting point for a discussion of an alternate cultural screen under construction in these photos. I will demonstrate how the women look to each other as "idealized images," while simultaneously reflecting both individual and broader stylistic trends.

5.4 Viviane Sassen and Martine Stig. *Osdorp Girls* (2007).

The first image figures two veiled women. One of them is positioned immediately on the opposite side of the frame, with her back to the viewer; she appears to be looking

in the direction of the second woman. This second veiled figure is further back and is directly facing and looking out at the viewer. Both women are wearing clothes made of various types of white fabrics and seem, simultaneously, to merge with and emerge from the white concrete building wall in front of which they are photographed. The image is bathed in daylight, which conveys a pervasive, white, textured appearance. The relief effect is emphasized by the fact that the woman in the foreground with her back to us is slightly out of focus, whereas the second in the background is sharply in focus. This operation has a "push-pull" effect, meaning that it visually pushes the foreground back and pulls the background toward the surface of the image. These same features, namely the palette and textures of the clothes that match those of the constructed urban landscape, and the collapsing of the foreground into the background, are repeated in several other images in the series.

These formal aspects of the work are consistent with the Islamic aesthetics of the veil. But what is more important here is the meaning these features generate through the series of images: they are strongly suggestive of a co-imbrication of the women and their immediate urban context.

To further this claim, it is necessary to examine a second image. In this photo there is a group of three women, each of whom wears different colors, fabrics, types of clothing, and veils. They stand in a triangulated constellation in front of a concrete housing complex. Two of the women are visibly engaged in conversation and hold grocery bags, one of which is red and has "Dirk" written on it in bold white letters—the name of a chain of grocery stores in the Netherlands. The third woman stands between

them and the viewer. She is turned in such a way that suggests she was engaged in the conversation until something behind her caught her attention.

5.5. Viviane Sassen and Martine Stig. *Osdorp Girls* (2007).

The aesthetics of this image suggests that the women were photographed off-guard while they candidly went about their daily activities. This is characteristic of the genre of street fashion photography that emerged in Britain in the 1980s. Street-style photography was inspired by punk and New Wave subcultures, and attempted to promote everyday street fashion and trends as a statement against the elitism of the fashion

world.[251] Street-style aesthetics are characterized by their opposition to the elaborate *mise-en-scène* that operates behind images in the fashion industry: they feature full-length shots, natural light, simple back drops, and a tactic of showing "real people" in "everyday situations."[252] Today, street style fashion photography has become *the* genre of fashion blogs, fashion's so-called new "democratization" platform. At the same time, it has been fully incorporated into the fashion system and widely used by established fashion photographers for mainstream fashion magazines. The fact that the series under discussion was first published in *Dazed & Confused* is a case in point. That said, the relevance of its use for the Osdorp Girls lies in the tactical importance that the cityscape plays within this genre. In street style fashion photography, the city is not seen as a backdrop but "as an important factor contributing to the formation of a specific style."[253]

The images of the Osdorp series intimately connect the women to the urban setting by integrating their style, textures, and colors into the city's architectural and everyday fabric. Here, a distinct style is presented as being specific to an urban locale, giving form to the age, gender, religion, and even the class of its wearers. Specifically, the aesthetics of the everyday in these images enables the dialog between the women and the city to take place in two directions. In keeping with the push-pull effect in some of the images, the style is seen as emerging from, and inflecting, its milieu. In an affirmative and creative mode that is aligned with the Deleuzian model of desire, the fashion style in the images can therefore represent a connective impulse emanating from the bodies of these young women as nexus.

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[251] Monica Titton, "Fashion in the City: Street–Style-Blogs and the Limits of Fashion's Democratization" *Texte zur Kunst* 20:78 (2010): 134.
[252] Ibid., 134.
[253] Ibid., 136.

I want to pursue this argument further through the analysis of a final photograph in this series. In this photo, five full-length, veiled women in various colors are seen making their way across an empty parking lot. The shot is taken at an oblique angle from above, and the women occupy almost the entirety of the two-page spread. The veiled figures converse with each other in a brightly lit scene; one woman lags nonchalantly behind. The women are covered in a stylized manner, attesting more to the creativity of the stylist than actual forms of dress one would encounter on the street. Still, what is striking is both their prominent visibility as a group, and the details that visually distinguish them from each other. In the former case, they share the commonality of the veil, their gender, their age, and a common style; small details in the different colors of their accessories and clothing distinguish them from each other.

5.6. Viviane Sassen and Martine Stig. *Osdorp Girls* (2007).

It is often said that the Muslim veil hides the individual features of its wearer, rendering her invisible within public spaces. In my opinion, this is an argument that can only hold in contexts where the practice is imposed. However, in liberal democracies where the veil certainly covers part of the woman's body, it does not render the body invisible, but rather, marks it as the visible sign of a commitment to Islam. Therefore it affirms the wearer's individuality in the public realm. In a group, such as in many of the images of *Osdorp Girls*, the veil is a shared feature that signals them as different from the majority in Dutch society; but the wide-ranging styles, colors, and personal interpretations of the practice also carve out a space of individual expression, and therefore difference, within the group. Many of the images under discussion here reflect this space.

The orchestration of the looks of the figures in the *Osdorp Girls* gives form to this complex configuration of identification found in the encounter between fashion and women committed to Islam in secular neoliberal societies. In these images, the women are seen to engage each other visually, while at least one figure always looks beyond the frame, and often looks engagingly at the viewer. Such orchestrations of looks replicate the complex web of identification processes inscribed by the image of the urban veil discussed in the previous chapter.

It is relevant here to discuss the proliferation of fashion blogs and its effects for individuals and the fashion system alike. Numerous fashion blogs belonging to young Muslim women and dedicated to Muslim dress codes and fashion have appeared in the past several years. These include, among others, "Muslim Style," "Hijab Style: The UK's First Style Guide for Muslim Women," "We Love Hijab," "Modest Flair," and

"FiMiNin."[254] These blogs create a space for young Muslim women to exchange ideas and creative ways to negotiate their religion and fashion. Moors reminds us of the wide-ranging attitudes adopted by Muslim women in the Netherlands regarding whether fashion can be combined with Islamic requirements and female virtues. She explains how the range of styles reflects these various attitudes and provokes the need for a shift in analysis away from "communities of conviction" to "taste communities."[255]

The blog "Hijab Style," edited by Jana Kossiabati, a British woman of Lebanese origin living in London, receives as many as 2300 visits a day.[256] Kossiabati claims that one of the main objectives behind her blog is to provide a site for young Muslim women to share experiences and ideas regarding their constant struggle to fit in. In her words, "Young women are increasingly looking for fashion that doesn't set them apart from the rest of society."[257] Hence, beyond serving as a platform for Muslim women to discuss fashion, blogs also provide a space in which to express the challenges of living in secular societies.

I contend that the organization of looks in the *Osdorp Girls* photographs demonstrates the identification of young Muslim women with one another—a process which not only creates an alternate cultural screen, but also an identification with the broader fashion and stylistic trends of the society in which they live—and a

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[254] See "Islamic Fashion," accessed Septeber 15, 2010, http://caribmuslimah.blogspot.com/2007/12/new-photo-blog.html, "Hijab Style: The UK's First Style Guide for MuslimWomen," accessed September 15, 2010, http://www.hijabstyle.co.uk/p/about.html, "We Love Hijab," accessed September 15, 2010, http://welovehijab.com/, "Modest Flair," accessed September 15, 2010, http://www.modestflair.com/, and "FiMiNin," accessed September 15, 2010, http://fiminin.blogspot.com/.
[255] Moors, "Islamic Fashion," 191.
[256] Shaimaa Khalil, "Muslim designers mix the hijab with the lastest fashion" BBC News, accessed October 30, 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10105062.
[257] Ibid.

corresponding desire to fit in. Again, the body is the nexus from which the complicated web of identifications originates.

The Osdorp Girls series is intriguing for the manner in which it refutes a full-fledged endorsement of individualism that is key to consummate fashion, and at the same times eschews the sense of self-enclosed group. Frederic Jameson recently used the term "generation" to identify a collective subject position that experiences its historical moment through common struggles. He states, "The experience of generationality is … a specific collective and historical one," and adds, "a generation is not forged by passive endurance of events, but by hazarding a collective project."[258] Kossiabati identifies fashion as an active response for a generation of veiled Muslim women in the West to a specific historical moment: "Our generation became more aware of their identity when we were thrust into the limelight after 9/11 and 7/7 and other events of the past decade or so. We were forced to deal with people questioning our faith, our identity and the way we look."[259] I therefore characterize the manner in which this group of Muslim women engages with fashion as generational. Fashion for this group of Muslim women becomes a platform of connectivity, through which religious beliefs and a desire to fit in and take part in wider stylistic trends coexist.

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[258] Fredric Jameson, "Fredric Jameson: Valences of Dialectic," review by Benjamin Kunkel, *London Review of Books,* April 18, 2010.
[259]Khalil, *"*Muslim Designers."

Looking Back

To recapitulate the main points of this chapter, I will return to the first photo of the *Osdorp Girls* series in order to demonstrate how the veil becomes a strategy to look back in the consummate era of fashion: a looking back that can be articulated on three levels. First, I argued that the encounter between the Muslim veil and fashion has the potential to unsettle the male economy of desire that undergirds the fashion industry. Looking back from behind the veil allows one to reject being the object of desire, and assume the position of a desiring subject. Second, in this image, the operations of the mirror in fashion are rerouted. The orchestration of the figures and looks in the image suggest that the woman with her back to the viewer looks at and identifies with the veiled girl directly in front of her. This latter woman embodies an alternate ideal-image, different from the ones upheld by the cultural screen and produced through the image repertoires proper to mainstream fashion. This second veiled woman offers to the woman who looks at her, and to the viewer, an example of an ideal-image of modesty that is in compliance with Islam. Finally, that same girl who looks back from behind the veil she wears—as well as the veiled woman who serves as a kind of protective shield in front of her—affirms both her position of religious difference and her desire to engage and connect with the space and the viewers outside the image.

By extension, the images represent an alternate "cultural screen," or mirror, in which veiled Muslim women can see themselves reflected on their own terms: which is to say, terms that are specific to a group of practicing young Muslim women living in urban milieus in the Netherlands.