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Manifestation and concealment between Western and Islamic aesthetics

Reassessing the orientalist prejudice about the “Land of mysteries”

Abstract

The paper engages with the aesthetic dimension of Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism (1), focusing in particular on the trope of the Islamic world as a “land of mysteries” (2). From a Gadamerian perspective, it argues that this trope may in fact reflect a genuine aesthetic difference rather than merely colonial bias: while Western art emphasizes mimesis and the revelation of truth through visual representation, Islamic art – guided by theological concerns – seeks to make room for what lies beyond the visible (3). Although shaped by power imbalances, the Orientalist fascination with Islamic “mystery” – it is argued – inadvertently acknowledges a genuine aesthetic alterity and potentially prompts intercultural aesthetic dialogue (4).

Keywords

Islamic aesthetics, Orientalism, Intercultural aesthetics

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Introduction

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) notoriously critiques traditional representations of the Islamic East as biased outcomes of unequal power relations. My Gadamerian contention is that, however compelling, his analysis risks overlooking the hermeneutic potential of certain prejudices within European Orientalist tradition. I will focus in particular on the depiction of Islamic world as a "land of mysteries", a trope rooted in classical and colonial literature that, I contend, may in fact reflect an actual aesthetic divergence between Western and Islamic paradigms.

Both in practice and in its aesthetic conceptualisations, Western art often revolves around the practice of mimesis and the idea that, by mirroring visible reality, art can contribute to the unfolding of its inherent truth. Islamic art seeks instead to contain the power of images and to highlight the limits of the visible realm as such. Drawing on scholars like Titus Burckhardt and Ğum'a Aḥmad Qāḡa, but also directly on the speculative tradition of Islam (Ibn 'Arabī), I argue that Islamic aesthetics is grounded in the dialectics between "apparent (*ẓāhir*)" and "non-apparent (*bāṭin*)" and, specifically, in the hermeneutic process (*ta'wīl*) of tracing manifestations back to their unrepresentable – divine – source. Far from intensifying the inherent truth of the visible, the deliberate rarefaction of sensory forms pursued by Islamic art, as well as for instance by the prescription of the female veil, is meant to prevent its idolisation and to make space for the mystery of the invisible.

The Orientalist portrayal of the Islamic East as "mysterious" can thus be seen not only as a colonial projection but also as a coarse intuition of genuine aesthetic alterity. In this sense, I conclude, Orientalists can paradoxically help us question the temptation to measure Islamic world on Western aesthetic parameters, bringing us to the necessity of an intercultural aesthetic dialogue.

1. Orientalism and aesthetics

Said's work has become a seminal point of reference for any contemporary discourse on European representations of the Islamic world. In that landmark study, the Palestinian scholar argues that the Western imaginary of the East – particularly the Islamic East, from which he himself originates – has been fundamentally shaped and biased by its project of domination and colonisation. Since then, almost any scholarly approach to this

world (or rather, to this constellation of worlds, since their very reduction to a single, unified horizon is *to some extent* part and parcel of the Orientalist narrative [see *infra*, §3]) has begun with a critical deconstruction of Western ideological stereotypes.

While Said does not dwell at length on the aesthetic dimension of orientalism, this aspect is nonetheless present in his work and has since been developed by scholars who have expanded upon his critical legacy (Lemaire 2001; Benjamin 2003; Ismailinejad 2015). As Pierre Bourdieu among others has shown, aesthetic judgment is constitutively shaped by structures of power (Bourdieu 1984: 41) – meaning both that ruling classes always condition what is perceived as beautiful and that power, in turn, always relies on aesthetic legitimation. From this latter perspective, the orientalist project – the effort to “dominate, restructure, and have authority over the Orient” (Said 1978: 4) – has always involved, at its core, a claim to aesthetic supremacy.

Within this paradigm, the Orient was construed as the realm of disorder, irrationality, and excess, which the West – structured, harmonious, and *beautiful* – was called to redeem. This asymmetrical dialectic mirrors the metaphysical binary between form and matter, or spirit and nature. In Hegel’s terms, the West indeed emerges explicitly as the culmination of Spirit’s historical development, while the East is put just at the beginning of that spiritual unfolding and explicitly relegated to a state of formlessness and selflessness (Hegel 2018: 414)¹. The geometric borders of former colonies remain a stark (and tragic) visual reminder of this Western impulse to impose *kosmos* – both “order” and “ornament” – upon a world construed as aesthetically and politically disordered.

The foundational expression of this aesthetic ideology is already traceable in Aeschylus’s *Persians*, a text that Said himself explicitly references (Said 1978: 56). The Greek victory over the numerically superior Persian enemy is not only military but aesthetic – a triumph of form over formlessness, as the recurring use of the language of *order* in reference to the Greeks makes clear:

¹ This cartography of spirit was notoriously inverted by thinkers such as René Guénon or Henry Corbin, for whom the West comes to represent rather a condition of spiritual impoverishment, materialism and loss of metaphysical orientation (Guenon 2001; Corbin 2007). This reversal can already be discerned in the Illuminationist tradition of the Persian Ishrāqiyūn. In a famous mystic recital by Suhrawardī – just to quote an explicit example – “West” is symbolically associated with the realm of matter’s nocturnality – a place of opacity, forgetfulness, and existential exile, while the “East” is cast as the locus of inner light and metaphysical ascent (Suhrawardī 1980).

The right wing led the van, in order due [κόσμω],
Behind it the whole fleet, well aligned [εὐτάκτως],
Then one great shout rose up, all in unison [ὁμοῦ].
(Aeschylus 1939: 39, transl. mod.)

The tendency to aesthetically stereotype Oriental worlds as the negative mirror of the West persists across modern and contemporary representations, confirming that the West still needs the Orient “as its contrasting image and idea” (Said 1978: 1). What is noteworthy, however, is that the *Islamic East* has been particularly targeted by this narrative – even more so today, when the *aesth/ethic ugliness* of this world has even evolved into a recurring *topos* in post-9/11 cinema. The gap between how that world is represented and how it actually is – “the very location of politics”, as Bleiker puts it (Bleiker 2001: 510) – has been the focus of extensive scholarly inquiry (e.g., Ismael, Rippin 2010; Bayraktaroğlu 2018; Wahid 2024), as well as of critical works such as Sut Jhally’s documentary *Reel Bad Arabs: how Hollywood vilifies a people* (2006). Fully in line with Said’s diagnosis, the persistent claim of aesthetic superiority promoted by contemporary Western visual culture has been in a way both the cause and the effect of the global geopolitical balances of the past twenty-five years – and the Islamic world continues to be denied the orderly beauty of the Western world.

2. *The prejudice of the Land of Mysteries*

Among the various dimensions of this stereotyping, a particularly revealing aspect – and the one on which this paper will focus – concerns the idea that the Islamic Orient is a dark, hazy, and *mysterious* world. One need only think of the typical frames used in Hollywood films that seek to immerse viewers in the atmosphere of a Middle Eastern city – Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, Tehran. These scenes are typically rendered in yellowish tones, with blurred or smoky images, often accompanied by ethnic music and background sounds (the call to prayer, the noise of markets, braying donkeys, honking horns). While Western metropolises are depicted as bright and clear, the Arab-Persian-Turkish world appears veiled, covered by a haze.

The image of the veil is far from incidental, as the female veil – in all its forms, from the *hijab* to the even more “mysterious” *burqa* – becomes a kind of objective correlative for the Islamic world as a whole, shrouded

in an impenetrable layer that prevents it from being seen from the outside. And if the veil is the topical object, the *topos* is undoubtedly the harem: a place of delights and vices that remains hidden in the most remote and labyrinthine recesses of the palace, accessible only to the sultan and therefore always merely imagined by the Western traveler (Ismaïlinejad 2015: 70).

For generations, Western intellectuals – long before Hollywood filmmakers – have associated the Orient with an aura of darkness and mystery, which, as Edward Said has noted, is one of the defining features of orientalist discourse (Said 1978: 25). Goethe, in many respects a perceptive interpreter of the Arab-Persian world, links the Orient precisely with the mystery of the formless (Goethe 1914: 14; Merzari 2024), frequently drawing on the imagery of secrecy and veiling in his *West-Eastern Divan* (Goethe 1914: 29, 142). The great German poet underscores how travel within the Islamic East entails a form of disorientation (WA IV.27, 21), anticipating almost *verbatim* a theme later to be found in Gustave Flaubert, for whom the experience of the (Egyptian) Orient – unlike for Goethe, encountered in person – involves literally the feeling of “being lost” (“here is the true Orient [...] you already sense something immense and merciless in the midst of which you are lost”, Flaubert 2013: 617).

The Islamic East appears as a realm of hyper-stimulated sensibility and sensory overload – few scenes capture this as vividly as Flaubert’s description of the dancer Kuchiuk Hanem (Flaubert 2013: 659-64). Precisely for this reason, however, it also turns into a place of total intoxication. When everything is intense, nothing remains distinguishable; instead, what endures is a form of blindness or anesthetic numbness, embodied by the unreal silence of the desert. Another great poet of this blinding East is undoubtedly Gérard de Nerval, whose *Voyage en Orient* describes Egypt literally as “grave and devout, always the land of enigmas and mysteries” (Nerval 1972: 35), and explicitly refers to the veil as that “mystery with which the most interesting half of the Eastern people envelop themselves” (Nerval 1972: 37).

This poetics of the veil, however, was not confined to literature. In mid-nineteenth-century Paris, a parallel visual vocabulary was being developed by Orientalist painters such as Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose works arguably offer the most vivid portraits of this remote world.

Gérôme’s *Napoleon and his general staff in Egypt* (1863), for example, renders in a near-dreamlike vision of the desert what Flaubert had described in prose: “le soleil! le soleil! Et un immense ennui qui dévore tout!”

("The sun! the sun! And an immense ennui that devours everything!", Flaubert 1980: 283). The blinding, all-encompassing light – what Flaubert had called that "liquid light that seems to penetrate the surface of everything and the transparency of the atmosphere" (Flaubert 1973: 546) – dissolves contours and suspends meaning, turning the scene itself into a mirage. "Ex Oriente Lux", "From the East comes the light", declares the classical adage; yet, as the imagery of the desert continually reminds us, the light of the Orient is not a light of *clarity* and *distinction* but one of dazzling excess.

When the mystery of the Islamic East does not stem from the blindness induced by overwhelming light, it shifts to the interior spaces where light scarcely filters through – paradigmatically, the *harem*, as imagined by Gérôme (*Harem*, 1876) and Delacroix (*Women of Algiers in their apartment*, 1834), where the female nude is shielded by the palace's darkness and thus, in a sense, "respected and preserved" (Ma 2011: 22). Above all, Gérôme's *The snake charmer* (1879) – famously chosen as the cover image for the first edition of Said's *Orientalism* – vividly encapsulates this kind of "shady" mysteriousness. In the painting, a young boy, the eponymous snake charmer, performs with a python before a group of soldiers in what appears to be the room of a sultan's palace, decorated with blue tiles, carpets, and calligraphic motifs blending Turkish-Ottoman and Egyptian-Mamluk elements. The boy is naked, ostensibly to prove there is no trick in his performance, yet this nudity – as art historian Linda Nochlin has observed – takes on a particular tension – a mystery, somehow becoming a synecdoche for the mystery of the Orient itself.

Clearly, these black and brown folk are mystified – but then again, so are we. Indeed, the defining mood of the painting is mystery, and it is created by a specific pictorial device. We are permitted only a beguiling rear view of the boy holding the snake. A full frontal view, which would reveal unambiguously both his sex and the fullness of his dangerous performance, is denied us. And the insistent, sexually charged mystery at the center of this painting signifies a more general one: the mystery of the East itself, a standard *topos* of Orientalist ideology. (Nochlin 1989: 35)

In the eyes of the Europeans arriving in Turkey, Morocco, or Egypt, the East appears shrouded in an aura of mystery. At this point, however, a provocative question could be raised: is this merely a *topos* of Orientalist ideology, as Nochlin suggests? Of course, the most obvious way of imagining the Other has always been in terms of the inaccessible, the impenetrable – indeed, the mysterious. Yet perhaps it is not entirely inappropriate to wonder whether there is something particularly – in fact, objec-

tively – mysterious about the Islamic East when seen through European eyes.

Taking this possibility seriously entails an attempt to reconsider Orientalist prejudice outside of any ideological framework that may itself be prejudicial. By granting a form of *hermeneutic charity*, in a Gadamerian sense, to the Orientalist portrayal of the East as a “land of mysteries”, we might find out that the authors of Orientalism are not just “mystifiers”, but also – at least to some extent – witnesses to an alterity².

3. *Islam’s mysterious aniconism: Aletheuein or Ta’wil*

A preliminary clarification is necessary. The tendency to refer to “the Islamic world” or “the Islamic aesthetics” as unified wholes is, as previously noted, *prima facie* shaped by an orientalist framework. Both the Islamic and the Western contexts obviously constitute internally diverse and dynamic systems. Yet what concerns us in the present analysis lies on a level where the Islamic world, precisely *insofar as it is Islamic*, does share something in common – just as the Western world, *insofar as it is Western*, that is, *insofar as it is rooted in a (partially) shared tradition*, likewise shares some common ground. This is without any intention of denying – indeed, with the explicit aim of *highlighting*—the fact that include rather different identities within themselves.

In this respect, as we will state explicitly (cf. §4), our intention is to navigate the space between West and Islamic East in the way that François Jullien approaches the Chinese culture (Jullien 2012; Postel 2019) or that Wael B. Hallaq employs the notion of “paradigm” (Hallaq 2018): the purpose is not to reify two monolithic blocs opposed by differences, but rather to allow two complex horizons emerge from within an *écart* that itself discloses the layered constitution of each. The task is to trace tensions, tendencies, and dominant trajectories, and not to posit essentialist or reductive definitions.

² A similar *hermeneutic charity* toward Orientalist painting was central to the much-debated 2019-2020 exhibition at the British Museum, *Inspired by the East: how the Islamic world influenced Western art*, which sought to interpret such works as a genuine attempt to prompt an artistic/aesthetic dialogue between East and West, see <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/inspired-east-how-islamic-world-influenced-western-art> (last accessed: June 27th, 2025)

Indeed, the constructive validity of speaking about an “Islamic aesthetics” is evidenced by the fact that artistic practices within these cultures have, until very recent times and across diverse landscapes, maintained an intimate link with the religious dimension of Islam. Numerous scholars from within these traditions, moreover, have themselves reflected on the unity of Islamic art understood precisely as *Islamic* (Qāḡa 1976; Hindī, Al-Kīlānī 2019). Engaging panoramically with this tradition – I argue – may grant us the critical possibility of looking at Western aesthetics with a similarly wide perspective, illuminating some of its recurring or salient features behind the personalities of single paths and authors.

A basic phenomenological observation offers a point of departure: Islam world has not developed – at least in its dominant trajectories – a civilisation of representation comparable to that of the West. While European artistic culture has historically elaborated on the analogy between God, who created the world, and the artist as *homo faber*, who in turn is creator within the confines of his/her microcosm, the Islamic world decisively rejected this analogy on theological basis³.

Only God is, properly speaking, *al-Muṣawwir* – the Fashioner of Forms (*ṣuwar*), the Painter – and the Muslim artist is thus forbidden from competing with Him by re-creating the world in *mimesis*. Such prohibition is particularly strict for the representations that involve the *breath of life* – that is, precisely those representations that in the Greek conception are essential to the painterly gesture, recalling that the Greek term for painter, *zographos*, literally refers to one who writes/draws (*graphein*) life (*zoè*). The Muslim artist cannot breathe life into their paintings, for doing so would imply becoming an *alter deus*.

Plato famously described *mimémata* as shadows of *aisthetà*, of the things perceived by the senses: in this world – we might say – sensible things do not cast the shadows of their *mimémata*, and thus lack the depth and dimensionality that these shadows would confer them. This alone gives Islamic landscapes an unmistakably mysterious quality. The Westerner – used to omnipresent images – finds no representations here

³ In this context, we will set aside the debate concerning whether the theological prohibition was also determined by political and material factors – as argued, for instance, by Grabar (Grabar 1973: 75-103, esp. 97-8) – and will focus instead on the fact that this prohibition ultimately prevailed, endowing the Islamic East with an aesthetic profile recognisably distinct from that of the (first pagan, then Christian) West. This, of course, should be considered within the framework of the complex horizons previously mentioned, bearing in mind that the West too has historically exhibited aniconic tendencies in certain milieus and phases of its development.

to reflect or echo his/her sensory experience of the world. Everything exists – if we can put it this way – only once, just like in the shadowless – and indeed, mysterious – hour of noon.

But there's more: this aniconic atmosphere also forces the orientalist gesture of painting into a peculiar kind of transgression – making visible something that, by its very nature, asks to be seen only directly. Orientalist painting is voyeuristic in the Islamic world not only because it depicts an "other" through a gaze that is not its own, but more fundamentally because it *depicts* an "other" that demands not to be depicted at all.

The hypothesis that we should consider is thus that orientalist painters, when they present the Orient as mysterious, are moved – fully consciously or not – both (1) by the otherness of this aniconic world and (2) the resistance that this world offers to their *techné*. The objectivity of the Islamic mystery would thus lie in its refusal to represent and be represented, and these, undoubtedly, are at least two good reasons why such mystery cannot be reduced to a mere ideological construction. Yet both these reasons, as we aim to show, are symptoms of something deeper still: (3) a way of valuing the polarity between manifestation and concealment that is not merely different from, but in fact the very opposite of, the Western understanding.

Let us delve more deeply into what lies behind the aniconic prohibition – or rather, into the two civilizations that meet in their differing perceptions thereof. The Islamic prohibition on representation – which results into what we commonly refer to as *aniconism* – should not, strictly speaking, even be described as a "prohibition" once approached from within an Islamic perspective. This has been clearly demonstrated in the work of Ġum'a Aḥmad Qāḡa and, even earlier, by the brilliant mind of Titus Burckhardt – "the first person in the West to expound seriously the inner meaning of Islamic art", as Seyyed Hossein Nasr admitted (Nasr, Jahanbegloo 2010: 216). Essentially, their claim is that to view mimetic representation as the norm, and its absence as a deficiency, is itself the outcome of a Western perspective (Qāḡa 1976: 46-7; Burckhardt 2009: 29-32).

For the Westerner, the impulse to represent is natural, and representation constitutes, even more crucially, an opportunity to intensify the truth of what is represented. From Aristotle's notion of poetry as "more philosophical than history", to Hegel's definition of art as "the sensible appearance of the idea", and Heidegger's account of art as "the setting-into-work of truth", a single claim remains central across the dominant trajectories of Western aesthetics: representation, or at least certain modalities thereof, serves to clarify and deepen our experience of the world.

Even Plato – who in this respect may be considered the least “Western” among the Western philosophers – never fully rejects this idea, as evidenced by his partial concession to *eikastic* painting.

Most notably in its representational dimension, art (*techne*) is understood as a mode of *aletheuein* – to borrow a phrase from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book VI, 1139b36-1140a24) – that is, of disclosing something *of* and *about* its represented subjects. Works such as *Oedipus Rex*, Raphael’s *Transfiguration*, or Picasso’s *Guernica* share the common power to let us see what it means to be human more clearly than any ordinary encounter ever could: art amplifies the world thus rendering it, in a certain sense, more truthful than it is in our immediate aesthetic perception.

The Islamic way of framing the artistic gesture relies on entirely different premises: truth that can never properly reside in the sensible realm. Islamic art, accordingly, does not seek to intensify the truth of *aisthesis*; rather, it seeks to preserve us from the deceptive intensity of aesthetic experience, neutralizing the force with which *aisthesis* ensnares and captivates us in our habitual engagement with things. For the Muslim, the excess of visibility – and not its opacity – is the starting point, continuously surrounded as we are by images at risk of becoming idols. A few foundational verses for Islamic aesthetics from Sura 6 articulate particularly well in this sense how the path of truth inspired by Islam – here spoken by Abraham in the first person – teaches us to distrust the seduction of visible light:

So we were showing Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and earth, that he might be of those having sure faith. When night outspread over him he saw a star and said, “This is my Lord”. But when it set he said, “I love not what sets (*lā uḥibbu al-āfilīn*)”. When he saw the moon rising, he said, “This is my Lord”. But when it set he said, “If my Lord does not guide me I shall surely be of the people gone astray”. When he saw the sun rising, he said, “This is my Lord; this is greater!”. But when it set he said, “O my people, surely I am quit of that you associate. I have turned my face to Him who originated the heavens and the earth, a man of pure faith; I am not of the idolaters”. (*Qur’ān*, 6: 75-9; transl. by A.J. Arberry)

Not loving what sets is at the very heart of the Islamic “profession of faith” in the One God – *tawḥīd*, literally a *nomen actionis* of the verb *wahḥada*, “to bring to unity (*wahḍah*)”. The Muslim has to make space for the manifestation of God by breaking the idols that asserts themselves as autonomous lights apart from the one (invisible) Light – and let’s recall that Abraham’s father is described by Islamic (as well as by Jewish-Christian)

tradition as an idol-maker. The task of the Muslim artist, in this sense, is to render the world less noisy – less saturated with false lights – so that it may become more transparent to the singular light that truly shines.

If we reconsider Islamic aniconism according to this premise, it becomes clear that it is not merely something negative – an abstention from representation – but the positive affirmation of truth precisely through the refusal to insist in the sensibly beautiful. What Islamic art is constantly supposed to remind us, is that nothing in this world shines by itself – that every visible light is indeed weaker than the invisible light from which it draws its being.

Islamic thought – especially in its mystical expressions and in a figure such as Ibn ‘Arabī – assigns to the human being, the privileged creature within creation, a hermeneutic mission: not to negate the visible multiplicity – what Arabic calls *al-zāhir* – but to reconnect it to its hidden divine source, *al-bāṭin*⁴. The very term for hermeneutical interpretation in Arabic, *ta’wīl*, is telling: it is the verbal noun of *awwala*, meaning “to return to the first (*al-awwal*)”. To interpret is to bring back the external to its interior, the many to their One, the appearances of the world to the unmanifest God (Corbin 1999: 237-45).

In this perspective, artistic image-making can be counted among the forms of *ta’wīl* (cf. Qāḡa 1976: 82; Clévenot 1994: 119). Unlike in the Western tradition, it does not bear an alethic task – that is, to make the hidden visible – but rather an *an-alethic* one: to return apparent beauty to its source in the non-apparent. In other terms, art is not meant to clarify the sensible world – and precisely for this reason it is not mimetic –, but to unveil what is obscured by it; not to fill the void that always surrounds us, but to return things to the void that we *rarely* encounter.

As Burckhardt notes, Islamic art assumes as a consequence the task of re-creating the desert – a space that, par excellence, fosters concentration on the singular truth of God (Burckhardt 2009: 31). This attempt permeates the architectonical orientation of space in general: through the empty niche of the *miḥrāb* inside the mosque, Islam orients the sensible

⁴ The reconnection of the *zāhir* (the outward, the manifest) to the *bāṭin* (the inward, the hidden) does not imply, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, any devaluation of the former in favor of the latter. There is no hierarchy between these two dimensions of truth and of the Divine, as Ibn ‘Arabī himself clearly explains (Ibn ‘Arabī 1911: 2, 563). Rather, one must understand that manifestation is always the manifestation of a hidden interior, and that the non-manifest necessarily finds a form of manifestation. This is the theophanic logic at the heart of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics – and indeed of much of Islamic esotericism more broadly, as studied in particular by Henry Corbin (Corbin 1999).

realm toward the likewise empty space of the *Ka'ba*, the axis mundi where the human horizon intersects with the vertical of divine mystery – not as a site of meaning-saturation, but as a silent summons to the ineffable. It is noteworthy, however, how this idea of a fertile desertification of space takes place in particularly resonant examples such as Ibn Ṭūlūn Mosque in Cairo. This building literally opens a void within the urban density of the city, and the disorienting sobriety of its interior seems designed precisely to muffle the noise of the world and remind us that truth is, by nature, invisible (Burckhardt 2009: 138-45).

The female veil too shall be connected – at least in its purest intention – to this “value of concealment” (Alvi 2013), which requires visible beauty to be lifted into the realm of the unseen. Those corporal forms which might anchor the beholder to the world of bodies are carried into the realm of imagination – *khayāl* – the intermediary territory where, as classical Islamic theories of theophanies suggest, the beauty of the sensory world borders on and spills into the beauty of the invisible.

Yet the same aesthetic logic applies basically to all the different expressions of Islamic art, from miniature painting to decoration. The former, despite any seeming proximity with Western figurative tradition, “testifies to the presence of an absent God”, as Ayada beautifully puts it (Ayada 2010), and often makes its effort to evoke an absence even more explicit by erasing or veiling faces (Curatola 2019: 28-32)⁵. The latter, as Qāḡa and Curatola note (Qāḡa 1976: 46-7; Curatola 2019: 23-7), is not to be seen as a compensatory art, taking the place of prohibited *mimesis*, but as the triumph of a gesture that seeks to render space infinite, open-ended, and inconclusive. If every Western painting is confined by the four sides of its frame – where it begins and ends – the arabesque and the calligraphy enact the infinite iterability of the many, which are never sufficient to express the One, and which, through their very insufficiency, are directed back toward it.

Deserving of particular attention, however, for its paradigmatic power in articulating the grammar of Islamic aesthetics, is the poetics of reflec-

⁵ Clévenot, for his part, argues that Persian miniature painting in particular constitutes an exception, ultimately implying an aesthetics of unveiling that stands, in some way, in contrast to the aesthetics of veiling characteristic of Islamic miniature art more broadly (Clévenot 1994: 222-3). There is more than one reason behind this interpretation, including the Zoroastrian background that influenced Iranian Islam, as well as parallels in the specific features of Persian mystical poetry. Ultimately, such oscillations are part of the internal tensions from within each paradigm that the logic of *écart* – as we have framed it – is precisely called to reveal.

tion so richly cultivated in Arab-Islamic garden design, and powerfully evoked in Nacer Khemir's film *Bab'Aziz* (2005). Water pools, by reflecting what is above, allow us to glimpse a sky that both *is* and *is not* there, reminding us – as Ibn 'Arabī writes – that all that is visible is nothing but a reflection (Burckhardt 1987: 117-23), and that the world we inhabit is the shifting threshold (*barzah*) between a visible that is *also* other, and an Other that is *also* visible (Ibn 'Arabī 1911: 3, 304; 470). Moreover, the light refracted in the water and striking the surrounding architecture – as we see magnificently realized in Andalusian design –, transforms the solid matter of *muqarnaş* in wood or marble into the shifting immateriality of a luminous vibration (Qāḡa 1976: 78-9). Here, light does not serve, as in a Caravaggio painting for example, to clarify or reveal, but to deliver the visible world as it trembles within the dazzling mystery of God. The deeper we move into truth, the less clearly we see – indeed, the truth of artistic *ta'wīl* is the truth of *an-aletheia*.

4. Conclusion: toward an aesthetic dialogue

This digression through the fundamental aesthetic principles of Islamic art thus brings us back to the mysterious East depicted by Gérôme and his contemporaries. The feeling of this world as a “land of mysteries” is clearly ideological, yet it attests – even if only superficially – to an encounter with an entirely different aesthetic paradigm. The mystery enveloping the Islamic Orient is not merely the product of a colonizing gaze, but also the impression left by an aesthetic tradition that has deliberately sought a rarefaction of the visible.

From this perspective, the naïve manner in which intellectuals and artists commonly associated with Orientalism approached Islamic art may be seen as more fruitful than the systematic approach of a thinker like Hegel, who in his *Lectures on fine art*, and specifically in the section devoted to the “symbolism of the sublime”, fundamentally misconstrued this tradition, with particular reference to the aesthetic of the so-called “Mohammedan poetry” (cf. Hegel 1975: 368-71). Hegel regarded the Islamic Orient merely as a point of origin to be surpassed, namely, as the primitive stage of that capacity of representation that the West would later bring to completion, whereas the paintings of artists such as Gérôme – despite all their distortions – intuitively confront us with a genuine alterity. The latter arguably invite us to an intercultural aesthetic dialogue much more

than the former, who sees the confrontation with the East as essentially lifted (*aufgehoben*).

Ironically, the same Gérôme offering us one of the most powerful intuitions of the Islamic world and its an-alethic vocation paints in 1896 – perhaps with a reference to the Dreyfus Affair – an indirect celebration of the Greek-Western understanding of truth: *Truth coming out of her well*. Truth lies at the bottom of a well, as a saying attributed to Democritus goes (DK 68 B 117), but the task of the wise – and, in this case, of the artist – is to bring it out. To bring what is hidden into the open – *a-letheuein* – is indeed, as we have seen, one of the dominant ambitions of Western artistic tradition, when observed panoramically from the exterior viewpoint that the Islamic world allows us to attain. By contrast, from the opposite side, Islamic art appears characterised by the attempt to draw what is manifest beneath a veil, bringing back (*ta'wīl*) the external beauty into its invisible interior. Arguably, the distance that separates a world unfamiliar with any prosopopoeia of truth from one that gives it the shape of a naked body deserves more attention than it has been given so far.

Just as François Jullien has done with regard to the Chinese tradition, it may for the future be useful to experience the alterity of the Islamic context in such a constructive and self-reflective manner, in order to discern those fundamental elements that traverse Western aesthetic sensibility along its dominant trajectories, and which, *from within*, remain rarely examined. The encounter with the other could become in this sense an opportunity not to fix an identity permanently defined, but to render fertile and open up once again the terrain of what we call our own. To borrow the words of the French scholar, it is a matter of “revisiting the assumptions from which our thought in Europe has developed – assumptions that are buried, unspoken, [...] because [European thought] has fully assimilated them, and upon them it has flourished” (Jullien 2012: 5). Passing through Islamic civilization would thus mean “attempting to develop an oblique, strategic vantage point, one that takes European thought from *behind*, from the vantage of our own *unthought*” – that is, of “that from which we think, and which, precisely for this reason, we never think” (*ibidem*).

Such an approach to the Islamic alterity might mislead us into oversimplifying the worlds at stake; yet the risk involved in finding shared lines of tension must not hinder the value of what we are meant to uncover precisely through them. For that, we need the hermeneutic awareness that *paradigms* are indeed in no case essentialist schemes, but, as said, horizons that are complex within themselves, and continually enable the possibility of their own transgression. With this in mind, together with the

an/alethic threshold between East and West, we could then discover those moments in which the two paradigms historically drew closer to each other; even more crucially, we may grasp the value of moving as translators along the borders, bringing ourselves to the very limits of these paradigms and activating the unthought of our respective traditions. As we have sought to show, Orientalism itself, far from simply stifling the potential for dialogue, sometimes inhabits precisely the margins of such translation.

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