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Islam and Psychoanalysis, *edited by* Sigi Jöttkandt and Joan Copjec

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## EDITORIAL

### *Islam and Psychoanalysis*

**10** the 2002 feature film by the Iranian filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami, consists of the same elementary formula, “man + car,” as many of his other films, except that in this case there is a woman rather than a man at the wheel; she drives through the traffic-congested streets of Tehran rather than the less densely populated countryside; and the film was shot with two digital video cameras before being transferred to 35 mm film. Like all digital films made now, this one cannot help but raise the question of the referent, of the real, which was thought to be protected by the indexicality of cinema. This medium-specific question of the real, however, acquires in this digital film, *10*, another culture-specific inflection, one brought out by Christian Jambet’s reading of the film.<sup>1</sup> Its most memorable image occurs through the gesture of one of the passengers in the car, a young woman whose fiancé has just broken off their troubled engagement: the grieving woman removes her headscarf and tearfully exposes her shaved head. This image exemplifies, in Jambet’s reading, the status of the image, as such, in the modern world (but here, specifically, in modern Tehran), where images (and indeed the entire order of appearance) have been shorn of any trace of the real, of that hidden dimension (the dimension of the *Deus absconditus* or the hidden Imam) which had once lent appearance its prestige. The balding of appearance which Kiarostami’s film observes takes place, in short, through the effacement not of an exoteric but an esoteric referent.

The aesthetic question raised about the nature of the modern image is thus closely linked to a spiritual concern about the demise of a messianic faith, as well as to social concerns about the position of women, who seem to be abandoned by this modern society to (miniature) malevolent or (relatively) indifferent forms of male authority. The film’s episodic structure lends itself to a constant questioning, rather than the construction of a comprehensive “cover story,” some sort of answer. Thus, while the insistence of the mosque as a site—visited by the disappointed and self-unveiled fiancée; an aged woman, bent by years and her devout posture; and perhaps by the car’s driver—serves as a concrete reminder that piety or mosque movements are said to be on the rise in Islamic countries, we do not know if these various visits should be taken to mean the same thing, to betoken a movement, or whether they are signs of hopelessness or reaffirmations of a traditional form of spirituality. The placement of a woman in the driver’s seat, beside a sputtering and shrunken patriarchy, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Jambet, “The Death of Epiphany,” trans. Robert Bononno, *Umbr(a)* 2009, special Islam issue (forthcoming).

form of her scene-stealing son, raises afresh all the questions we have wanted to ask about the precise relation of secular male authority to religious authority in the Islamic world.

But how can we pose these questions in the language of psychoanalysis in which some of us think? Reading psychoanalysis and thinking of Islam can seem radically incompatible enterprises, especially now that the notion of a common humanity has been deservedly trounced and cultures are no longer thought to be bound together by it or judgeable according to its standards. If psychoanalysis can be said to be a theory of “the subject,” does it not rely on this now forsaken notion of common humanity and does it not have to forsake any pretension to be able to utter a valid assessment about matters pertaining to Islam, a culture in which psychoanalysis is not the native tongue?

This editorial is not the place to answer such a large and complex question; it is the place to pose it—as a real and important question rather than as an implied accusation. Fine; put psychoanalysis on the spot. But then allow it to answer. You will find that it has a lot to say on these matters of the separateness or incommensurability of individual subjects and cultures and the problem of judgment. It will explain why its own intervention is not at all a judgment, but a construction and what this difference entails. But even as we open the floor to psychoanalysis, give it a chance to address criticisms, clarify its position, we do not expect that its practice or its theory will remain unchanged by its encounter with the specific issues arising in the Islamic world.

As it turns out, *10* grew out of an idea for a film about psychoanalysis in which an analyst, forced by authorities to shut his doors after a patient complains that her analysis led her to sue for divorce, begins to interview his patients in the closed confines of his car.<sup>2</sup> Rather than domesticate the film, make it appear more familiar to Western audiences, this anecdote about its supposed origins is unsettling; it explodes the film, opening a host of questions we do not yet know how to answer. What would an analysis sound like, how would it proceed, that actually dealt with the day to day issues confronting the women in the film? Being a prostitute in Tehran while living under its modesty system, for example, cannot give rise to the same sort of psychic challenges as being a prostitute in a non-Islamic city. And this is only the beginning.

This special issue of *S*—together with that of our sister journal, *Umbr(a)*—on the topic of Islam could therefore not be more urgent, nor the timing, coinciding with Robert Bononno’s English translation of Fethi Benslama’s *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, more propitious.<sup>3</sup> In his remarkable book, Benslama interrogates the psychoanalytic notion of the father from the perspective of Islam, where God is assumed to have no paternal function. This distinction between God and the father has significant implications for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis in the Islamic world and resonates throughout the essays in this issue. So, too, does the

<sup>2</sup> Geoff Andrew, *10*, (London: BFI, 2005) 35.

<sup>3</sup> Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2009).

important relation between the flesh and the spirit, conceived as more intimate among Islamic thinkers than it is in the West, as Jean-Michel Hirt usefully underscores.

In training our attention on Islam at this incisive moment in its history, our intent will be to re-tune the structures of the psychoanalytic corpus to several of the keys of the Arabic language, to voice the speaking cure from within the resources of the Muslim treasury of signs. We'll have to begin with the subject of another science, also founded on the cogito, one whose suturing operation delivers not the One of the Cartesian miracle, but a Zero. This alternative form of the cogito—an "I am thought, therefore I am"—conceives the subject as an originary objectivity, the I as thought (by god). What falls out from the Averroesian count-as-One is not an object but the *subject itself*. Islam's nominal definition is, indeed, submission, *infinite abandonment*.

Long overdue in the English tradition, this encounter between Islam and psychoanalysis has an extended and distinguished history in North Africa and France, and several of the essays translated here, most notably Benslama's text, "The Veil of Islam," are utterly foundational in this respect. Proposing the veil as that which averts the eye of god from the feminine body much as the stain averts the gaze, Benslama invites the reader to envision "the possibility of seizing the knowledge that allows the stain-woman to be the condition of representation." In a similar gesture, we hope with this issue to begin to seize Islam as an unseen, averted knowledge through which the stubborn and enigmatic imperative, "Be psychoanalytic!" might be taken up.

*Opening, reading, interpreting, translation, revelation, submission:* these will be the key words indexing this encounter between Islam and Psychoanalysis in their mutual opening to the field of the impossible.