EDITORIAL:

(RE)THINKING ISLAMIC IMAGERY

Patrícia Silveirinha Castello Branco (IFILNOVA)

Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad (SOAS University of London)

Sérgio Dias Branco (University of Coimbra/IFILNOVA/CEIS20)

This issue of *Cinema* is dedicated to the topic of Islam and images. In proposing this topic we were particularly interested in discussing the philosophical understandings of Islamic imagery production, their roots in the history of philosophy, the Islamic tradition of aniconism and anti-ocularcentrism, its influences on styles and movements in the history of art (namely abstract imagery), their development in contemporary societies dominated by new technologies of the moving image, the relationships between the classical and the contemporary, the manual and the digital, artefacts and technologies.

In releasing an issue on this theme we aimed at offering an open debate to the academic community and, mostly, we aimed at trying to understand what kind of aesthetic and political bias could be found in particular images originating from Muslim contexts and diasporas. At the same time, we were making an effort to explore how such images encompass forms of visibility, ways of doing and making, and ways of conceptualizing the world that can enrich our contemporary debate on aesthetics and politics. Can a better understanding of Muslim traditions of visual art, old and new, that rely on astonishing traditions of thought, making and experiencing, function as a fruitful contribution within our global contemporary art and politics? We certainly believed it did.

The selection of essays that compose this issue reflects our aims and are a direct response to our initial intentions, developing the topic in several directions.

The first essay, entitled "The Role of Images in al-Fārābī's Political Thought" by Sara Virgi, directly responds to some of our most important aims and intentions, addressing the concept of image in Abū Nasr al-Fārābī's philosophical thought. In her essay Virgi carefully and consistently considers how for al-Fārābī's images are taken as a decisive instrument for the legislator and religious leader to guide people towards "political happiness," or the "achievement of ultimate perfection," that is, "the perfection of the community as a whole." She demonstrates that for al-Fārābī virtuous images have a

particular potential to "inspire the audience's will to follow moral values and obey political rule," and the way the philosopher constructs his influential insight into this matter.

Dario Tomasello's "An Unexpected Imagery: The Heart's Vision and Other Synesthetic Functions of the *Dhikr* into the Islamic Tradition" directly addresses the various layers of the complex issue of Aniconism in Islamic Tradition, questioning the common sense idea that Islamic Tradition operates a general denigration of images. This idea draws upon the Islamic aniconistic bias. Instead, Tomasello argues for the tremendous importance of imagery in Islamic tradition, by relying on the synestesic and multi-sensous ritual of invocation (*dhikr*) and the way it encompasses a visual dimension that, nevertheless, it is neither reducible to a fixed representation of the Divine nor to figurative deceptions of earthly or divine realms. Drawing mostly on the Sufi tradition within Islam, Domasello tries and demonstrates how the Divine is experienced, not represented, and how that experience is also strongly imagetic, favouring a crucial role for images as part of a global synesthesic experience within Islamic mysticism.

M. Javad Khajavi's "Calligraphic Animation as Visual Music: A Genealogy of Islamic Synchronization of Sight and Sound" traces a new genealogy line for visual music calligraphic animations "all the way back to the relatively widespread comparisons between Islamic calligraphy and music that existed for centuries." This article explores musical analogies used in describing calligraphy throughout the history of Islam and reviews some calligraphic artworks that establish a correlation between sight and sound, showcasing diverse artistic approaches. The genealogy line includes visual music calligraphic animations contextualized in the same broad historic-cultural background.

From philosophical and mystical insights we move on to investigate how aesthetic and political prejudices can be embodied in particular images. Mani Saravanan's "Seeing the Unseen: The Invisible Worlds of Jafar Panahi's Cinema" discusses how contemporary cinema of a Muslim-majority country like Iran, mirrors the political, ethical and aesthetical tensions of an Islamic state, through the "intersection of visibility and ethics" and, at the same time, functions as a mirror, reflecting Islamic seemingly paradoxical attitude towards visible images in Islam. Saravanan focuses on Jafar Panahi's exploration of the unseen and unseeable in two of his docufiction films: The video-essay style documentary *This is Not a Film* (2011), and the film *Taxi Tehran* (2015). By drawing on an extensive analyses of the two films, Saravanan argues that, "Panahi's subversion of the

visual medium to seek the invisible resonates with Levinas' call for an art that is incomplete in its completion and thus for an art that can question the certainty of the world within which it is set."

The following essay, Shrabani Basu's "The Foil and the Quicksand: The Image of the 'Veil' and the Failure of Abjection in Iranian Diasporic Horror" further explores the issue of the unseen and unseeable, this time dealing with the complex question of the "veil" and fear in two contemporary Iranian diasporic "horror" films: Babak Anvari's *Under the Shadow* (2016) and Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). Basu's argument raises several issues related to revelation/occultation in Iranian and Islamic culture and approaches this topic simultaneously from an aesthetic, social and political perspective.

From film to new media, and from Islamic culture centred analysis to a broader mediatic panorama, Taida Kusturica's essay focuses on the cultural and ideological hegemony of capitalism and imperialism as constructed by digital media representations. In "Post-Cinematic (Mis-)Representation of Islam," Kusturica further argues that from World Trade Center attacks in 2001 "a mutual agency between digital media and religion, has become ever more intertwined in a re-employment of the old orientalist trope against Islam and Muslims." The essay develops the idea that new digital media in the 21st century shape and reflect new hegemonic forms of visibility that excludes Islam as a cultural and religious phenomenon.

This issue also includes an interview with Laura Marks, who has been discovering in the last several years an aesthetic of enfolding and unfolding, not only in classical Islamic artworks, but also in a body of contemporary independent film and video from the Arab world. Such an aesthetic is also as a way to understand the diverse modes in which images can function and turn the events perceptible. Marks's lastest book *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (The MIT Press, 2015) specifically examines a comprehensive body of independent and experimental cinema from the Arabic-speaking world within the particular political, social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts of the last 20 years.