

**"What does the Veil know?"**  
**DOCOP-seminarie met Eva Meyer**

**1 februari 2006, 14:00-17:00, R.Annex**  
**Rodestraat 14, 2000 Antwerpen**

What does the veil know but will not tell us directly? This phrasing may sound like an odd personification – the veil is not a person and can't know anything – but for the moment I would like the question, and the figure of speech, just to cross your mind, like an epigraph or a haunting melody. Against this background music, we can reexamine how we define knowledge, knowledge by experience or personal acquaintance, knowledge as awareness of facts, knowledge as an understanding of patterns of relations, and realize that the veil insists, knows that there is more to it than we can ever know about it.

An Assyrian legal text of the thirteenth century BCE restricts veiling to respectable women and prohibits it for prostitutes. The Middle-Assyrian Laws from 750-612 BCE prescribe punishment for a harlot or slave girl found wearing a veil in the street. Ovid (43 BCE-17CE) in Book IV of his „Metamorphoses“ relies on the veil to convey a Babylonian love story: Pyramus and Thisbe fall in love, but their parents disapprove of their relationship. The lovers agree to meet in secrecy at the tomb of the Babylonian King Ninus. Thisbe, who arrives early, sees a lioness and flees into a cave, leaving her veil behind. The lioness, whose muzzle is dripping with the blood of a fresh kill, rips Thisbe's veil. When Pyramus finds the torn and bloodstained veil, he concludes that the lioness has killed Thisbe and commits suicide with his sword. When Thisbe finds Pyramus' dead body, she throws herself on his blade.

These are some of the first known references to veiling, and interestingly enough, they all refer to the veil's potential for leading to wrong conclusions. It is this very potential which is embraced by storytelling but restricted by law in order to contain female sexuality and to structure the social status imposed on women: In the Assyrian, Greco-Roman, and Byzantine empires, as well as in pre-Islamic Iran, veiling and seclusion were marks of prestige and symbols of status. Only wealthy families could afford to seclude their women. The veil was a sign of respectability but also of a lifestyle that did not require the performance of manual labor. Its absence was a sign of poverty and prostitution, but also of the performance of movement, in the streets and on the fields, unimpeded by the veil. It is the practice of veiling that makes women's absence omnipresent and turns the veil into cause and symbol of political, social, and religious controversy.

Moving forward to the present day, we find ourselves confronted with an ideological split that instrumentalizes a cultural and religious artifact for various reasons. Analyses of different political representations of the veil demonstrate that its symbolic significance is constantly being defined and redefined, to the point of ambiguity. In Iran the veil was abolished in 1936 for its backwardness by Reza Shah and less than fifty years later reinstated by the Islamic Republic of Iran to mark its progress along the ideological path of Islam. And let's not forget the West that rejects the veil as being associated with women's oppression under Islam, while capitalizing on the enormous marketing potential of its secret sexiness. Moreover, there exists a vast relay of texts and films in which the veil is used not only as metaphor, metonym, or synecdoche for the experiences of what are for the most part, though not always, Muslim women, but also for its visual and literary dynamics. All this testifies to the semantic versatility of a mere piece of cloth, and, in doing so, forces us to suspend the parameters of our investigation carefully.

We must be aware that once the semantics of the veil can be defined, they set a dynamic in motion that dictates a paradigmatic context. And while the politics of the veil can be divided into two main reactions, against or for the veil, we must refrain from doing the same by instead exploring the differences within these reactions, going from difference to difference within the folds of the veil, and releasing the veil from any certain meaning, be it religious, sexual, social, or political. It is its ubiquity that seems to allow everyone to form an opinion about it, and it is its ambiguity that stops us short and imposes on us not the veil, but the omnipresence of absence, its potentiality.

„Taking the veil“ means to withdraw from the world. For it is not as it appears to be or as we would like to have it. Our withdrawal does not concern some good or bad quality of that world. Rather it concerns no quality at all or the very fabric of the quality that surrounds the subject, confined within the space of its consciousness, like a veil. “Know thyself” were the words with which visitors were welcomed at Apollo's shrine in Delphi. Philosophy turned this into the transcendental postulate that humans are to know themselves as rational beings. Even if it is meanwhile assumed that this refers not only to theoretical self-knowledge but also to the experience of the boundary where one knows one is just a human being, what is still missing here is the distinction whereby one knows one is only one human being and needs others as a quality in which we are immersed, as in a veil. Yet this immersion can only take place as a willed and systematic indirectness, a multivoiced monologue, cut loose from any subjectivity. It possibly shows a lack of imagination, expressing itself without reference to anything else, independently of any question of its actualization. Of course,

this does not mean there is anything unreal about it. It is a way of looking the world's complexity in the face.

In summer 1996, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation in Iran published rules for the Iranian cinema, censoring not only the representation of the woman's body, but also the contact between women and men. Women were forbidden tight clothing, not allowed to show any part of the body except face and hands, and they should not have physical contact or exchange tender words or jokes with men. Confronted with these restrictions, Iranian filmmakers had to figure out a form of patience, they had to turn to the image not as representation but as nodal point or passage in the circulation of meaning. It displaces the locus of the gaze, which is not a subjectivity, but the right distance from the belief in God that puts at a distance both the explicit censorship of representation by the East and the implicit censorship carried out by representation in the West.

What has recently become synonymous with those cultural and religious differences repeatedly presented to us as unbridgeable, alien and terrifying, has in fact been part of both Western and Eastern cultures for millennia, from aristocratic women of ancient Greece to contemporary brides and widows worldwide. The veil is not a sign of truth but of change, an emotional territory which is peculiarly resistant to any theory of the subject that refers to a thinking, feeling, and willing self as an existing part of what used to be called a person. Both the discourse of the subject and the ideology of the subject converge in the veil as a narrative about the discourse that underrepresents its complexity while giving up on representation altogether, exceeding rather than undermining its goal. It surpasses the interpretative thought organizing the discourse of emotion that unites the inside/outside imagery of personal experience by projecting both sides. It stretches between a world in which representation is in charge, and another world that opens onto its own presence. It reveals that it is there, despite the ideology of emotion's tendency to efface it in favour of subjective expression, and it compels us to do what it asks for: to redefine both knowledge and emotion as a structure that cuts expression loose from personal feeling, and does not fall back on the mediation of professionals. That's why we have to organize the veil's impulses into two areas linked by the conjunction „and“: description - including unwilling description - of actual experience that gives way to an experience leading to overdetermination of the image of the veil, and an ontology of the unthought that gives way to a self-differential text, the text of the veil.

**Eva Meyer** 1950 in Freiburg geboren, Studium der Philosophie, Kunstgeschichte, Archäologie, Literaturwissenschaft in Freiburg und Berlin. Ausbildung zur Puppenspielerin an der Figurentheaterschule in Bochum, Mitbegründerin des Lilith-Frauenbuchladens und Verlags in Berlin, Internationale Lehrtätigkeit.

**Veröffentlichungen (Auswahl):**

Zählen und Erzählen. Für eine Semiotik des Weiblichen; Wien, Berlin 1983

Versprechen. Ein Versuch ins Unreine; Basel, Frankfurt 1984

Architexturen; Basel, Frankfurt 1986

Briefe oder die Autobiographie der Schrift; Bern 1986

Die Autobiographie der Schrift; Basel, Frankfurt 1989

Der Unterschied der eine Umgebung schafft. Kybernetik-Psychoanalyse-Feminismus; Wien, Berlin 1990

Trieb und Feder; Basel, Frankfurt 1993 Tischgesellschaft; Basel, Frankfurt 1995

Glückliche Hochzeit; Frankfurt vorauss. Herbst 1999

Eran Schaerf 1962 in Tel-Aviv, Israel geboren. 1978-82 Architekturstudium. 1985-87 Städtebau, Video, Photographie an der Hochschule der Künste, Berlin.

**Ausstellungen (Auswahl):**

1988: (It 's) I prefer chocolate, Galerie Anselm Dreher, Berlin

1992: Documenta 9, Kassel 1993 Aperto, Biennale di Venezia

1994: We is o.k., De Vleeshal, Middelburg

1995: Among others, Biennale di Venezia

1996: Surfing Systems, Kunstverein Kassel

1997: Recasting, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerpen

**Gemeinsame Filmprojekte:**

1997: Comme d 'habitude. Une Pièce à engager, 27 min, digital video

1998: Documentary Credit, 71 min, digital video

1999: Europa von weitem, ca. 75 min, digital video