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Maja Tabea Jerrentrup



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Oriental for a Day

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Maja Tabea Jerrentrup

Introduction

- 1 “The Orient” is a much-used image that we often encounter in everyday life, for example in advertisements for travel, furniture or jewelry (see e.g. Orienttravels.com, Orientalfurniture.com, Jewelleryslam.de). It has been intensely discussed in cultural studies at least since Edward Said’s groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978).
- 2 In this article, however, the account goes a step further – it is not just about constructing an image of the “Orient,” but about the desire to experience the “Orient” with one’s own body in the context of staged photographs. “Oriental photo shoots” are a very popular topic in the “staged photography” scene. Usually the scene, which comprises several hundred thousand members in German-speaking countries, brings together people who organize photo shoots on various themes. Themes that are popular besides “Orient” include, for example, “classic nude”, “special make-up”, “high fashion”, or “fantasy.” For the members – photographers, make-up-artists, designers, and predominantly female models – social media play an important role for coordinating shoots, but also for showcasing and discussing their work.
- 3 In this context, then, the question arises as to why this genre is so popular in a post-colonial world, what functions it fulfills, and how this can be evaluated.

Approaching the Topic

- 4 Edward Said has famously reviewed “the approach of Western writers, scholars, and artists to the Middle East” and formulated “a theory of artistic imperialism and its relationship to power and the imagination” (Sellers-Young, 2013:3). Said has been occupied with the representation and interpretation of the Orient¹ in the Western society, and with inadequacies and undesirable consequences of this representation that appears as a “closed system in which objects are what they are because they are

what they are, for once, for all times” (Said 1978: 70). Through its visual representation, which was especially taken up by scholars such as Linda Nochlin (1983) and Ali Behdad (2015), the Orient has been increasingly alienized and “essentialized, [...] reduced to a timeless essence” (Carrier 1995: 2) and appears as the antithesis of the West: “The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien (Other) to the West” (Komalesha 2008: 22).

- 5 As Michel-Rolph Trouillot states, the West itself is “a historical projection, a projection *in* history. But it is also a projection *of* history, the imposition of a particular interface between what happened and that which is said to have happened” (2003: 12). This is based on the fact that Western thinking is usually “hierarchical and reproaches the self-definition of all cultures except the modern West” (Murphy 2013: 5). To gain further insight into the West’s view and visualization of the Orient, we will take a short look at the history and ways in which the Orient has been and continues to be portrayed in various fields. For this purpose, three areas are considered that show particularly clear references to the representation of the Orient and are interconnected: (1) (pseudo-)ethnographic photography mixed with promotional images for (2) tourism, that, in turn inspires further representations in the service of marketing or (3) art.

Ethnographic Photography

- 6 In the early years of photography, “native types”, that picture the “habitus of foreign people” (Theye 1998: 57-65, for a critical discussion see Gartlan 2006: 240) were in vogue, photographs of indigenous people wearing their traditional dresses and make-up (e.g. works in Dages 2004), eventually performing what was perceived as “typical” tasks (Theye 1998: 57). Because of the need for long exposure, but also in order to make the pictures appear more “original,” they were often heavily staged: “In many cases, the photographers’ intention was to stage a supposedly original life by deliberately hiding all attributes that could have pointed to Western influences” (Theye 1998: 57). In addition, erotic productions took a significant place in this context (Theye 1998: 57). The ethnographic value of such pictures is, however, debatable, thus, they could be seen as rather pseudo-ethnographic or may tell more about the photographer’s culture than about the photographed: instead of giving accurate impressions of the people photographed they often rather “reflected the wishes of the westerners, their ambitions, their obsessions and symptoms” (Faris 2002: 78).
- 7 Furthermore, up to today, photography may have a problematic status in anthropology, as it is characterized by the “contradictory charge of being simultaneously distant and close” (Poole 2005: 166), which Susan Sontag famously described in her below mentioned account of tourist photography (2008: 10). On the practical side, not every anthropologist has received a compulsory photographic training and accordingly do not properly use the potential of the technique and may not be aware of its limitations and peculiarities. Nevertheless, especially recently, many university programs have emerged to improve the situation.
- 8 (Pseudo-) ethnographic photography is still a popular motif in coffee table books today which “often emphasize the exotic and offer minimal analysis” (Schildkrout 2004: 327). Such books may shape the expectations of tourists, and self-stagings of people in the respective areas as a reaction, which will be explored in the following.

Tourist Imagery

- 9 “Photography and tourism are widely considered to be intrinsically linked” (Garrod 2008: 346), a connection that can be seen with regard to the promotion of destinations, but also with photography as an occupation during touristic journeys: the vacationer may find it difficult to suddenly not have to work, so he or she looks for something to do. Although the term “Orient” had acquired a slightly pejorative undertone in the second world war, it “continues to appear [...] in tourist brochures where it is apparently meant to conjure up images of appropriately exotic opulence” (Inden 1986: 404).
- 10 One of the most famous texts on the subject of tourist imagery is an essay by Susan Sontag who looks at tourists and their photography: among countless other aspects, she is referring to the way tourist photography objectifies the Other: “They turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed” (Sontag 2008 (1973): 81). Instead of confrontation or communication with the Other, all that takes place is a quick snap that rather distances the photographer from the photographed: “Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter” (2008 (1973): 6, see also Thurner 1992: 37ff.).
- 11 Yet, as already mentioned, people actively participate in the image and the term “Oriental” to work on their own identity and to eventually use it to their advantage. Susan Nance (2009) describes how people from various backgrounds formed the idea of the exotic Orient in North America: “For the first 150 years of American history, the most broadly influential people to speak about the Eastern world were people who played Eastern by presenting themselves in Eastern personae [...]. Some of these individuals were native-born Americans, some were migrants or immigrants from North Africa, West Asia, and South Asia [...] These performers told stories about affluent abundance, guilt-free leisure, spiritual truth, natural manhood, the mysteriously exotic, feminine self-discovery, romantic love, racial equality, and the creative possibilities for individuation in a market economy” (2009: 1-3).
- 12 Similarly, tourism ministries or similar organizations of countries like Morocco or India use Oriental image to market themselves: the image of India, for example, “as a land of miracles and magic remains a familiar one today, and continues to attract sensational journalists, the alienated, or otherwise philosophically disenchanted Westerners” (Lamont and Bates 2007: 324). Postcolonial India takes advantage of Orientalised image and uses the slogan “Incredible India” (Sudipto 2016) to promote its tourism. However, the stereotypical images of an Oriental, traditional, and “mystical” India are not only key features in how India is presented to non-Indians. Tourism agencies that promote domestic tourism in India uses similar imagery, as do photographs and texts posted on social media by organizations like the Indian Institute of Photography and other artistic institutions aimed mainly at Indian students and art circles.

Art

- 13 As shown, visions of the Orient were and often continue to be “highly selective, creating Oriental archetypes through which the ‘Otherness’ of eastern peoples [can] be readily identified” (MacKenzie 1995: 46). Similar aspects that are important in

ethnographic and tourist imagery form the archetypes continuously used in art, such as the “timelessness” of paintings noted by Linda Nochlin (1983: 122) that correspond to regrading the Others as temporally distanced groups (Fabian 2014). Nochlin shows that art cannot be seen as a domain that operates independently from politics and power, from assigning features to the Other and gaining an interpretive monopoly. Of course, this emphasis should not hide the fact that there were painters and collectors from the orient, such as Halil Bey, who appropriated art in their own way or painted a different picture of the orient, such as Osman Hamdi (Celik 2002: 23); but these are rather the exception than the norm.

- 14 Another interesting point is that Western art cannot actually be seen independently from foreign influences which have inspired Western styles as different as Jugendstil and Cubism. Artists of the former style, most prominently Gustav Klimt, were intrigued by Japanese woodblock prints and Arabic floral patterns, whereas Cubism might never have come into being without African masks. Fashion design would also look completely different without the influences of the Other (Martin and Koda 1994: 12). These developments may also be seen in the context of power relations and mutual influences: Oriental-inspired Western art may also influence the self-perception and/or the self-marketing of the presented groups, just as does the art they create themselves. As Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts put it, Orientals should be “recognized as participants in the production of counternarratives or resistant images, rather than solely as mute objects of representation” (2002: 3).
- 15 As shown, ethnographic photography, tourist imagery, and art influence each other, as does the self-representation and self-image of people from the Orient. The Oriental photo shoots discussed below seem also to be inspired primarily by these sources, and clear visual parallels can be identified.

The Setting of the Study

- 16 The setting of this study is the German-speaking scene of staged photography already described in the introduction. In the following discussion, the two central aspects, photography and social media, namely the medium Instagram, will be explained in more detail.
- 17 The geographical setting should also be addressed, briefly. The location is difficult to define, but as it is about the German-speaking photography scene, the focus is on the area of Germany, Austria, and parts of Switzerland. “German-speaking” usually means that English is used as well, especially for Instagram hashtags, but most of the people locate themselves in Germany and normally use German or German plus English in their image descriptions. The interviewees (see below) speak German, live in Germany, and are active in the German-speaking scene. However, being “German” does not necessarily correspond to the self-perceived and assigned identity of the people who were interviewed.

Photo 1: Model: Viola



Oriental photo shoots are characterized by an opulent mix of various elements from different cultural contexts.

Photo by Maja Tabea Jerrentrup.

Instagram

- 18 Under the headline “defining social media...it’s complicated”, Harry Dyer shows how pervasive social media are, and argues that their influence on identity formation can hardly be overestimated (2020: 28, for identity and photography see Altmeyer 2016: 21). This connection between social media and identity has been analyzed with regard to various groups (Gündüz 2017, Vincent and Lannegard 2021) and can be understood as a discursive process (Jakaza 2022: 3). Unlike other social media such as Twitter, Instagram is based on pictures, and can literally be seen as a space for aesthetic visual communication (Leaver et al. 2020: 40).
- 19 The use of social media has been discussed in various ways, with a focus on both positive and critical aspects. Among the downsides, there is loneliness and isolation in real life (Hu 2009, Dror and Gershon 2012), the focus on superficiality (Geiger 2008: 33), cybermobbing (Katzer 2013: 55), and the negative consequences of social comparisons, even if users are educated about cognitive biases (Weber et al. 2021). Furthermore, algorithms lead to the creation of filter bubbles. “FoMo”, fear of missing out, can also be seen as a positive factor, as it enables users to establish connections (Roberts and David 2019) and develop a “sense of belonging” (Allen et al. 2014: 21) that may add to real-life connections but also can be more abstract and more comprehensive than these. In this context, social media also offer the chance for more variety (Tomova 2017), and people with very different interests, needs, inclinations and backgrounds find like-minded people; furthermore, support groups on various topics can be formed (Gajaria et al. 2011). Here, the link to identity becomes particularly clear. In addition, social media bring issues into the public consciousness, as the #blm and #metoo debates

have shown. With regard to art and design, it also plays a role that social media can provide inspiration for own artistic projects.

- 20 One aspect of identity just mentioned is particularly important for my argument. Identity is broadly understood as the need for a self-understanding as a coherent being with certain characteristics and a history (Schönhuth 2005: 91), that is, with synchronic and diachronic aspects. Further, it relies on alterity, thus, the demarcation from others (Wulf 2006: 43). Identity has long been a contested term, but more than ever, due to social media, it remains permanently provisional and cannot be fixed (Brandes 2010: 15). “Never before has the individual been able to make such a variety of decisions on his or her own [...] never before has the individual been solely responsible for so much” (Stolz et al., 2016: 1).

Staged Photography

- 21 The term “staging”, broadly defined by Matthias Weiß (2019) with reference to the work of theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, encompasses all cultural techniques and practices that make something appear. The term can imply “giving oneself and others an idea of oneself in a double sense of the word” (Weiß 2019: 89). From this perspective, every photograph is staged, but the staging discussed here goes one step further. It refers to the way in which people create a moment especially for the photograph that would not have existed without the intention to take a picture and often meticulously planned location, costume, makeup, pose, and lighting (photo 1). In this way, “deliberately crafted ‘untruths’” (Garcia 2011: 6) are called into being. Once the photo has been taken and edited, the people involved in turn stage it on Instagram, which may include a text and hashtags, but also the placement within a sequence of images, the connection to a username, and so on. As already indicated, identity plays a central role in staging (see Melcher-Schönach 2005: 16).
- 22 This is also shown by the large body of literature on dress (e.g. Eicher 2000, El Guindi 1999, Entwistle 2000) and the recent focus on the design of the body, which “seems to be increasingly staged and presented in the transition from modernity to reflective modernity” (Scheiper 2008: 119). In this article as in most of today’s anthropological and psychological views “the body is not viewed as an object, entity or vessel for the self, but as an active and mutating form that permits and restricts particular modes of being-in-the-world” (Gillies et al. 2004: 100), a form that allows it to make experiments. So Oriental photo shoots are not necessarily about communicating one’s true self or part of one’s real identity. Photographs are social objects that have been assigned social uses (Bourdieu 1990: 73), but in staged photography, it is often not only about the “who” but also about the “how”: how was it staged? is it a good realization of a theme? For the model, due to “photography’s indiscriminating data ratio” (Pinney 2008: 145), staged photographs always stay ambiguous and do not tell whether the model is playing a role, acting out a trait, or what her interest in the theme may have been.
- 23 Critically, the world created by such pictures can be understood as an illusion formed by “extravagant expectations” (Boorstin 1992: 4). Nowadays, perhaps, its foundation is even the delusion of grandeur: you can become anything you want. On the other hand, behind this lies the postmodern claim that one can or may invent oneself outside of given identity possibilities. Consequently, staged photography can be a suitable “protected terrain” for identity work, emphasized by the opportunity of changing and

re-staging (Mechler-Schönach 2005: 16). Narrative identity is of particular importance in social media, for “the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others” (Mc Adams et al. 2006: 4), and pictures from Oriental photo shoots are part of this narrative.

Methodological Approach

- 24 To understand staged photography and identity further, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with women who had chosen to be staged as Oriental. Previously, 15 years of participant observation into staged photography formed a basis for a solid ethnographic perspective.
- 25 The interviews were based on insights from a former study conducted in 2020: an ethnographic content analysis of a photo sample posted between 2015 and 2020 on Facebook, rather more popular at that time, and 25 interviews with amateur models aged between 18 and 43 years who had already staged the topic. The study aimed to find out the psychological motivations for Oriental photoshoots, and the categorization of these motivations serve as a guide for the current study.
- 26 In the present study, a sample of eight women aged between 20 and 38 and from different cultural backgrounds was generated from the author's personal photography-related contacts. Personal acquaintance can strengthen an interview, and lead to a more open atmosphere. Everyone gave their informed consent to participate in the study and were granted anonymity. Asked for their “cultural identity”, four women said they were “German” and added that others would also usually identify them as “German” or “European”. Another four told they were “(rather) Oriental”, though this may be caused by the research topic “Oriental photoshoots” being disclosed to the interviewees from the very beginning. They stated that other people would usually ask them for their ethnic origins, and from their appearance, first name and surname it would be obvious that they may come from a different culture. Two women said they had a Turkish background, one woman's family was from Sri Lanka, and one was Italian, but with Egyptian ancestry. All of them had taken part in Oriental photo shoots on time for pics-basis before, so they had not been paid to model but receive photographs instead.
- 27 The underlying principle for choosing interviews and participant observation as methods is to “move away from the kind of thinking *about* others [...] and toward a new conceptualization of alterity and history through which we can think *with* others” (Beckett 2013: 167). The interviews were more in-depth than those of the former study, and the models had worked with me, or at least had met me in person, before, so interviewing them took place in an open, trusting, and friendly atmosphere.
- 28 In the previous analysis of the images (Jerrentrup 2021), it had been noticed that the fascination with Oriental photo shoots was often related to several interconnected topics that will be elaborated in the following: femininity, nostalgia, spirituality, and the overarching concept of identity. These topics will be explained with reference to the current interviews.

Femininity

- 29 The women in the photos mostly present themselves as sensual and erotic, in revealing outfits, and in inviting but at the same time quite passive, often reclining poses (photo 2) which resemble the aforementioned ethnographic imagery and representation in paintings, of which the painting “The Turkish Bath” (1862) by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres is a very good example. Of course, when speaking of passivity here, a distinction must be made between the look of the picture and its creation. The models are usually very actively involved in the planning of the shoot, and any passive-looking pose is also actively selected.
- 30 The way the models dress and pose appears in many ways contrary to the requirements and expectations in their everyday lives; for example, typical office dress tends to imitate masculine clothing. Everyday life often prevents the expression of feminine identity, yet, at the same time, professionally, one can by no means speak of equality (e.g. Steinbeck 2002: 435). Therefore, the female role is or continues to be problematic. In the Oriental shoot, on the other hand, the woman is indulging in her femininity without being confronted by men that do not even appear in this microcosm of the picture – though the photographer and the later recipient may be male.
- 31 Despite the implied eroticism, all interviewees confirmed that it is apparently not primarily about wanting to please men, but to embody female beauty; and with the help of this embodiment to be able to experience self-love, associated with enlightenment and growth (Maharaj and April 2013: 120) – “embracing oneself”, as one model put it.
- 32 Furthermore, two Western conceptions collide in relation to Oriental women, especially, when it comes to the example of the stereotype of Islamic women. On the one hand, there is the idea of the dependent and submissive Muslim woman: “She is [...] the epitome of the oppressed woman, who also keeps herself out of social life because of the restrictions imposed on her, such as wearing a headscarf” (Gökce 2015: 3). On the other hand, harem fantasies, evoking permissiveness and voluptuousness, play a role something already evident in the previously mentioned paintings (e.g. in the work of the painter Quintana Blas Olleras, Jean August Dominique Ingres, or Eugene Delacroix).
- 33 For the interviewees describing themselves as German, there was clearly a dichotomy here, resolved by the paraphrase “fantasy Orient”, which is disconnected from reality. The interviewees describing themselves as Oriental identified with the image of the mystical-erotic Oriental woman more strongly than to any reality – to “a past time”, as one of the interviewees put it. Apparently, there is the thought that it is a historical reality, which itself can be seen as an Orientalist position.

Photo 2: Model: Chira Tane; Outfit: ShaliSari



Lascivious and reclining poses are typical in oriental shoots.

Photo by Maja Tabea Jerrentrup

Nostalgia

- 34 The femininity depicted in the photographs can be linked to nostalgia. Nostalgia, like homesickness, has its origins in spatial distance; and according to Dominik Schrey, the temporal dimension was added later (Schrey 2015: 342f.), although the two dimensions are closely linked. As already mentioned, “Orientalist painting depicts a world of timeless customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were drastically altering Western society at the time” (Nochlin 1983: 122). This is reflected by Susan Sontag (2008: 120), who writes about photography's nostalgia in the wish to return to a “purer” epoch characterized by craft-based manufacturing instead of industrial production. Just as in ethnographic photographs, tourist images, and art, the foreign appears here as a memory of one’s own past, which is portrayed as a time when, unlike the present, people lived in greater harmony with themselves, their femininity, and their surroundings (Fischer 1984: 217).
- 35 Multiple statements given by the interviewees can be linked to this concept of nostalgia, including alienation, and the accompanying lack of originality and authenticity. The term “authenticity”, often chosen by the interviewees, is very contested in cultural anthropology: it is, for example, reminiscent of the representation of African religions “still possessing an authenticity that the civilized, modern Westerner has lost” (de Witte 2004: 136). This view of authenticity was heavily criticized for overlooking heterogeneity and dynamism, with authenticity here being “a cultural construct of the modern Western world” (Handler 1986: 2). In Oriental photo shoots, the lack of authenticity perceived in modern Western culture is apparently compensated for by creating an artificial world that conveys a more original appearance - by a staged authenticity.

- 36 Interestingly, the interviewees mentioned their regretted lack of authenticity several times in the context of social media, which may seem counter-intuitive, since they themselves participate in these very social media, and stage extremely the images they want to present there. It is also social media that make the shoots possible in the first place.

Spirituality

- 37 The longing for spirituality may be seen in the context of nostalgia as well. It can be traced to a spiritual rootlessness in Western secular society that fails to provide spiritual support in the face of growing global problems, as asserted by secularization theory, which holds that certain aspects of modern life have led to a decline in individual and communal religiosity (Stolz et al. 2016: 1; Pollack and Olson 2008). This is also presented in connection with “modern primitive movement” which is inspired by so-called “primitive” cultures (Musafar in Favazza 1996: 328). Furthermore, current trends like paganism and yoga point in a similar direction (Baender-Michalska and Baender 2014: 175ff); underlying all of this is the individualized need to find meaning that can also be seen in connection with the detraditionalized, multi-model, dynamic, and individualized mass communication, and the countless options for meaning-making it presents (Bachmair 2017: 175).
- 38 Spirituality also played a role for the interviewees, or, as it was said, a not further specified “feeling of spirituality,” which apparently evolved around the themes mentioned by Dyson et al., “meaning, hope, relatedness/connectedness, beliefs/belief systems and expressions” (2007: 1183). In this context, a “feeling of community” was also mentioned: firstly, photo shootings constitute teams. This is the case while preparing and implementing the shoot, and during the retouching process. In addition, together with many other models who stage themselves in an Oriental way and often use similar aesthetics, one is part of an imagined community: the community of models who take part in and fancy Oriental shoots. At the same time, however, it is also a very individualized community, as there are no binding symbols, gatherings, or beliefs – which would actually be conceived as key aspects in communities. However, there are several symbols that are used quite frequently, such as Fatima’s eye, the Egyptian eye, the peace sign, or the ohm symbol. Their specific meanings though – how they are understood in the respective context – are apparently not negotiated, but rather vague notions of “lucky charm” or something similar exist.

Discussing the Results

- 39 Apparently, Oriental photo shoots help models to work on their own identities by the short escape into their dream that shows what fascinates them, but at the same time makes clear who they are not—identity cannot exist without alterity (Wulf 2006: 43; Magg 2013: 42).
- 40 In this context, two aspects are particularly salient and can be derived from the interviewees’ answers and the afore-mentioned motivations: the negotiation of sexuality and, associated with this, the compensation for one’s own shortcomings. Both aspects may be short-lived for the models in question – the photo shoot does not last particularly long – but are nonetheless sustainable, since the result are photographs

that can be viewed at any time and published and discussed on Instagram at different times. Looking at the results, it also becomes clear that “self-representations are not necessarily free from Orientalism and can in fact be self-orientalizing” (Ostapyk 2019: 1).

Negotiating Sexuality

- 41 As the study has shown, the expression of the models' femininity plays an important role in staging Oriental photo shoots. The interviewees emphasized that it was not a matter of impressing men. However, “in Western cultures, images in which women represent objects of gaze and men represent subjects of gaze dominate so that the organization of gaze reflects and establishes hierarchical gender relations” (Lewin 2015: 294). According to Sonja Lewin, by usually putting the observer of a picture in the male subject's position, a “male gaze” is established as the norm. “Feminists argue that media images of women are always directed at men and that women are encouraged to look at themselves and other women the way men do” (Crane 1999: 541). However, interestingly, the boyfriends or husbands of the models interviewed usually preferred more natural photographs instead of the highly staged Oriental scenarios. Still, “feeling sexy” was an argument for nearly all interviewees regardless of their self-identification. In line with the previous study, the models stressed that their expression would be detached from male judgement.
- 42 Moreover, the sexuality conveyed by the photographs has some specific features, among them the high degree of staging associated with an abundance of props, decoration, jewellery etc., opulent costumes and make-up and meticulously selected poses, but also with (pseudo-) symbols that speak of an imagined, maybe woman-centered spirituality. Occasionally, women are shown in homoerotic poses. Recent research has shown how gay male fantasies have been catered by photo studios and individuals in North Africa dating back to the beginning of the 20th century (Boone 2014: 383ff), which can be seen in connection to the initially mentioned (pseudo-) ethnographic photographs and art works. Previous or persistent socially intolerable forms of sexuality such as homoeroticism and promiscuity have long been artistically depicted in connection with the Orient: in order to fulfil Western expectations of the Other, non-Western women's identity was presented as “ceaselessly promiscuous and sexually available” which “perpetuates a racial hierarchy that normalizes and neutralizes violence against women of color” (Wong 2018: 1).
- 43 The idea of the Orient became a safe place for desires that were at least in the 19th and parts of the 20th century not socially accepted, and for the models, continues to be: in their fantasy Orient, they can feel overly erotic and feminine in a way everyday life does not appreciate. To dress as Oriental allows Western women to take part in the fetish of hypersexuality before returning to appropriate, respectable norms of sexuality. As confirmed by the interviewees, this hypersexuality seems so alien or “over the top” that men are often not even particularly attracted to it. However, the interviewees considered the staging respectively the bodily experience as a celebration of womanhood, female empowerment, and thus, of self-love (Maharaj and April 2013: 120), which takes on spiritual traits.
- 44 As already explained, the photo-Orient is detached from the social image of today's Oriental woman (Gökce 2015: 3). Among the interviewees who identified as Oriental,

three connected the staging with the freedom to act out one's own desires; thus, with independence and empowerment. One of them explicitly linked this to a patriarchist society but at the same time stressed that she was "proud to be a strong Oriental woman". One woman did not see much connection to sexuality, saying that it was "sensual, but not sexual".

- 45 The media image did play a role indeed, as the women identifying as Oriental said they would want, even feel, the mission to show that "Oriental women are strong and self-confident". Yet, this raises the question, why being "strong and self-confident" apparently is linked to being "sexy," at least, when it comes to Instagram. This can be interpreted as the subjects submitting to an Instagram aesthetic—Instagram may have a democratizing potential (Tomova 2017: 2ff; Farinosi and Fortunati 2020: 43; Duffy 2013), but also seems to equalize certain differences if one wants to be successful quickly. Nevertheless, there are also different examples on social media, e.g. Romanik and Rahall argue that Hijabi women redefine the hijab to be diverse and unique (2018). Therefore, it would not be appropriate to assume media determinism, but a self-selected representation, which, as one Oriental interviewee put it, can be considered as a "compensation" and leads on to the next point. However, this statement was about the compensation of the social perception of a group perceived as "non-Western," but in the following section, we will talk about the compensation of deficits in Western everyday life which, nonetheless, can also refer to the women identifying as "Oriental".

Compensating Deficiencies

- 46 As the expression of femininity, nostalgia, and spirituality plays a role in staging the Orient, this must be for the reason that the Western present is experienced as deficient (Lamont and Bates 2007: 324)—that these aspects need space. What is particularly striking with regard to the Oriental photo shoots is that the fascination that dates back a long time is still strong at a time when the geographical areas usually referred to can be seen as quite disenchanting—not just after 9/11 but, particularly in Germany, after an incident in the city of Cologne when organized groups of men from North-Eastern countries molested women in 2019. All the more so, the Orient becomes a fantastic place that, disconnected from reality, demonstrates the "rigidity of rationality has ignored the nature of human being" (Pujati 2018: 120).
- 47 Following Pujati, the fantasy Orient can be described as "kitsch:" according to one definition, kitsch is overly emotional, lacking originality (Gelfert 2000: 15) and associated with shallowness and showmanship (Hecken 2019: 156). In this way, there are parallels to the typical hope for likes on Instagram (Lee et al. 2020: 2142) that are usually nothing more than quick clicks without much engagement—just as kitsch aims at a quick reaction. Yet, there is something connective about kitsch: "It is part of our emotional engagement in the human drama" (Solomon 1991: 13) and has its roots in people's longing for common enchantment and utopia (Gyr 2005: 362)—matching the fact, that most Oriental photographs look similar, using similar props, posings, and arrangements, no matter if Western or Oriental models are staged. As described above, this also gives the models a sense of imagined [?] community, of being part of something bigger.
- 48 Moreover, the experience of the Orient fantasy on one's own body goes one step further than mere reception, as bodily states produce or consolidate affective states

(Barsalou et al. 2003). Therefore, embodying something, actively experiencing it may be understood as even more useful in compensating deficiencies than other forms of engagement, thus, as a form of increasing a person's well-being.

Outlook and Conclusion

- 49 Now that it has become clear why the photo genre “Oriental” is popular in the post-colonial world and what functions it fulfills, the question of the extent to which the staging of the Orient is just another kind of mental recolonization crystallizes as a central concluding aspect.
- 50 According to the interviews, two aspects are particularly salient here; unlike painting, staged photography always refers to existing things, to bodies and objects that exist “in real life” – going hand in hand with a preoccupation with reality and an awareness, for example, of different places of origin and meanings of props and costumes. This is all the more likely because the models are usually heavily involved in the planning and bring along their own props, which they may have acquired on vacation or borrowed from friends with a relationship to other cultures. This paves the way for an engagement that goes beyond the purely visual characteristics of the objects. In the engagement with the Other, bridges can also be built, e.g. a Muslim model also used accessories from the Hindu area in her staging, such as bindi stickers, and thus also expressed appreciation of the other tradition. The creative appropriation implies a certain degree of interest that should be preferable to indifference (Ow Yeong 2014: 9). In this context, again, embodiment is important, which distinguishes staging from travel photography, for example. If one embodies an Oriental persona oneself, it is no longer only “a perfect ‘other,’ warranting Western supremacy and segregation” (Martin and Koda 1994: 9), but becomes—even if it refers only to a fantasy Orient—part of the own person and her own narrative.
- 51 As just mentioned, creativity is another central term to address, which, in anthropology, is understood as “human activities that transform existing cultural practices in a manner that a community or certain of its members find of value” (Rosaldo et al. 1993: 5). Creativity can be seen in the context of alienation: “It is commonplace that contemporary writers are alienated and ‘alienation’ looms large in book reviews and literary criticism” (Kaufmann 2015: xxxii ff.). Thus, it may be useful to take over a position from the outside of one's own cultural context in order to become creative. Of course, this raises the question of cultural appropriation. Because the Oriental in the photo shoot is a “construct, its practitioners typically situate its authenticity in the artist's right to create (through fusion) statements that reflect individually [...] relevant tensions and realities” (Deagon 2016: 376). Yet, creativity is itself a historically and culturally constituted and situated idea. Romantic traditions conceptualize creativity as the “ex nihilo creation of products of self-evident and universal value – most emblematically in the field of art – by highly exceptional individuals” (Wilf 2014: 397) which obscures social and cultural aspects (Schneider and Wright 2013: 1). This corresponds with the fact that in Western societies, creativity is often understood when and if it abstracts from lived experience, while the cultural Others should just represent themselves and their creativity has continued to be valued mostly for the “cultural understanding” it provides—thus, in a limited field: when non-Westerners exhibit their art in a Western country, the focus is usually on their cultural

identity and it is marketed precisely around this construct (Cooks 2011). This, again, can be understood as discriminating. Consequently, it could be interesting to accompany the models identifying as Oriental on different photo shoots and examine how they work on different topics, which – depending on the observations – does not necessarily have to be interpreted under the concept of Orientalism or “cultural difference.”

- 52 A concluding evaluation of the Oriental photo shoots as cultural appropriation, creative practice, or individual therapy would hardly do justice to the matter. However, what this article has argued as important is that the shoots were described as an “enriching experience” by the models concerned, regardless of their origin. Photography has been described as beneficial for the psyche, as it can lead to quick expressions, eventually even of aspects that are hard to put into words (Rabinowitz and Holt 2013, Schänzel and Smith 2011). Further, it has been associated with empowerment and personal development (Mundt 2009: 97). The Oriental photo shoot, in particular, creates an opportunity to articulate oneself, to negotiate sexuality, and compensate deficiencies.

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NOTES

1. In the following, the quotation marks are omitted for the sake of clarity.

ABSTRACTS

In so-called Oriental photo shoots, women stage themselves to convey an image of opulence, eroticism, mysticism, etc. After a brief review of the visual representation of the Orient in ethnographic photographs, tourist imagery, and art, the article turns to the scene of staged photography, in which the Other – even if only imagined – is experienced on one's own body in contrast to other forms of representation. In-depth interviews with amateur models who describe themselves either as "German" or "Oriental" identify motivations for these stagings, among them the expression of femininity, nostalgia, and the longing for spirituality. These aspects can be condensed into two areas of conflict: the negotiation of sexuality, which in the image of the Oriental woman seems on the one hand untamed, on the other hand oppressed, and the compensation of shortcomings of one's own cultural context, which nevertheless appears as without alternative in real life. Finally, the evaluation of the phenomenon will be discussed – to

what extent the embodiment entails aspects beyond mere fascination and to what extent it is a matter of creativity or cultural appropriation.

Dans les séances de photos dites orientales, les femmes se mettent en scène pour véhiculer une image d'opulence, d'érotisme et de mysticisme, etc. Après un bref examen de la représentation visuelle de l'Orient dans les photographies ethnographiques, les images touristiques et l'art, l'article se penche sur la question de la photographie mise en scène, dans laquelle l'Autre - même s'il n'est qu'imaginé - est vécu sur son propre corps, contrairement aux autres formes de représentation. Des entretiens approfondis avec des modèles amateurs qui se décrivent comme "allemands" ou "orientaux" permettent d'identifier les motivations de ces mises en scène, parmi lesquelles l'expression de la féminité, la nostalgie et le désir de spiritualité. Ces aspects peuvent être condensés en deux domaines de conflit : la négociation de la sexualité, qui dans l'image de la femme orientale semble paradoxalement indomptée ou opprimée, et la réparation des défaillances de son propre contexte culturel, qui apparaît néanmoins comme sans alternative dans la vie réelle. Enfin, l'évaluation du phénomène sera discutée - dans quelle mesure l'incarnation comporte des aspects allant au-delà de la simple fascination et dans quelle mesure il s'agit d'une question de créativité ou d'appropriation culturelle.

En las llamadas sesiones fotográficas orientales, las mujeres se escenifican para transmitir una imagen de opulencia, erotismo, misticismo, etc. Tras un breve repaso de la representación visual de Oriente en las fotografías etnográficas, la imaginaria turística y el arte, el artículo se centra en la escena de la fotografía escenificada, en la que el Otro -aunque sólo sea imaginado- se experimenta en el propio cuerpo en contraste con otras formas de representación. Las entrevistas en profundidad con modelos aficionados que se describen a sí mismos como "alemanes" u "orientales" identifican las motivaciones de estas escenificaciones, entre ellas la expresión de la feminidad, la nostalgia y el anhelo de espiritualidad. Estos aspectos pueden condensarse en dos áreas de conflicto: la negociación de la sexualidad, que en la imagen de la mujer oriental aparece por un lado indómita, por otro oprimida, y la compensación de las carencias del propio contexto cultural, que sin embargo aparece como sin alternativa en la vida real. Por último, se discutirá la evaluación del fenómeno: hasta qué punto la personificación conlleva aspectos que van más allá de la mera fascinación y hasta qué punto se trata de una cuestión de creatividad o de apropiación cultural.

INDEX

Mots-clés: photographie, Mise en scène, Orientalisme, Sexualité, Nostalgie, Appropriation culturelle

Keywords: photography, staging, Orientalism, sexuality, nostalgia, cultural appropriation

Palabras claves: fotografía, puesta en escena, orientalismo, sexualidad, nostalgia, apropiación cultural

AUTHOR

MAJA TABEA JERRENTROP

Hochschule Landshut, Germany

maja-tabea.jerrentrop@haw-landshut.de