

Moroccan Letter

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News in the West about Arabs is based on four stereotypes: the heartless terrorist, the corrupt leader, the fanatical fundamentalist, and the uncultured immigrant. Only after the start of the Arab revolutions in 2011 were images of a young population calling for universal values of a western origin released. While the Arab-Islamic world is characterised by its passivity in tourism guides and by its violence in the press and television, women are represented as victims of their own culture. In this way, the West shows its superiority and sees the other world as a threat. In order to break down existing prejudices, it is necessary to facilitate the circulation of cultural productions from the Arab-Islamic world, which lack both international presence and contemporary relevance in all their artistic aspects.

Cartas marruecas [Moroccan Letters], the novel by the Andalusian writer José Cadalso published in 1784, whose title has inspired this article, criticises the society of his time using the narrative device of the astonished foreign traveller, following the model of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. When describing 18th century Spain, the amazement of that young Gazel, the lead character in the book, would not differ much from the impression of uncertainty, consternation and anger of a young Maghrebian when seeing himself portrayed in the European media today.

The news that circulates in the West about the Arab and Islamic world usually features one of the four basic stereotypes that Paul Balta¹ noted as the prevailing patterns since the 1950s: the heartless terrorist, the mean and capricious Gulf Emir, the fanatical fundamentalist, and the poor and uncultured immigrant worker.

We must ask ourselves about the reason for the persistence of such clichés, which have been feeding, almost without exception, the western imaginary about Arabs and Muslims; about such an extraordinarily vast number of people – over 200 million in the case of Arabs, and around 1,500 million in that of Muslims. Are there no Arab photographers with perspectives capable of giving us distinct pictures free from these prejudices? Or is such a strict selection due, instead, to the sifting, before their dissemination, by the big press agencies (International Press Agency, United Press International, Reuters, Agence France Presse) which control most of the news market?

Of these four stereotypes, only immigrants are sometimes treated with some respect, with a sympathy not free of paternalism; a paternalism, in the end, aimed at legitimising their inferiority and dependence on a power that mo-

1. Paul Balta, "Los medios y los malentendidos euroárabes", in José Bodas Barea and Adriana Dragoevich (eds.), *El Mundo Árabe y su imagen en los medios*, Madrid, Comunica, 1994.

nopolises the freedom to accept or expel them at its convenience. This treatment is also seen in the case of children, who appear as inevitably passive victims of circumstances from which only “we” can save them, whether in the case of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and famine, or artificial disasters, such as war or even the social structure itself. There is no lack of images of children staring sadly at the camera, looking at us with an attitude which can be interpreted as defencelessness and silent pleading; almost, we would say, in a permanent call for “humanitarian” intervention.

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Only very recently, since January 2011, when the so-called “Arab revolutions” began, did pictures appear showing Arab men and women with some warmth, preferably youths and, in the case of women, dressed liked Europeans with their heads uncovered, without the highly symbolic *hijab*. We will later return to the specific treatment of the image of Muslim Arab women. It is enough to note here that the call for sympathy and identification by readers and viewers is based on the selection of images by others who suddenly turn out to be “us”. Notice that the socially acceptable model, our model of friendly positive revolution, is still that of a May 68 reduced to a public exhibition of beauty and youth, two expensive basic products of our consumer economy; the idealised image that our society has of, or dreams about, itself. However, identification obviously does not happen only in terms of physical appearance, rejection of the others, their different air, their exotic look and their decision to look like us, but also as their demands coincide with values that, although we define them as universal, are considered western, of an

unquestionable European origin: democracy, human rights, individual freedoms, and so on. If we add to this the repeated emphasis on the importance of the use of new communication technologies and virtual social networks, it would seem that we are witnessing a real conversion to the West. It apparently matters little that the strike forces – if you prefer, the cannon fodder – of these revolutions are being led by impoverished social sectors due to imposed neoliberal policies and the crisis of the global market system.

With the exception of the presentation of these “Europeanised” youths, whose immediate antecedent would lie in the coverage of the protests against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2009, the characters involved will be strictly limited to the short list cited, although these prototypical images could also be classified according to a series of recurrent attitudes.

In travel guides and illustrated magazines on leisure and tourism, Arabs and Muslims appear with a passive, or rather peaceful, attitude, as if on the margin of the real world – of our world –, frozen in an undefined moment of history, but undoubtedly located in the past. Quite often travel agencies talk about an evocative “journey to the Middle Ages.”

The use of Arab natural or urban landscapes as exotic backgrounds in fashion reports is also quite common. If there are people, they are a complement to the setting, considered as just one more element of the decor. Outstanding among the terms used as captions for these images of the traditional, permanent, eternal or, perhaps, ahistorical Arab, are courtesy, friendship and hospitality. There are also less positive terms, such as passiveness, fatalism and suspicion of anything strange. Emphasis is placed on their anti-western or anti-modern character, anchored in a substantial, intrinsic immobility.

Meanwhile, the image of the Arab linked to current events, to news in the daily press and on television, will rarely deserve attention except in the case of being linked with violent acts, whether terrorist attacks, armed confrontations, executions or lynching, or in threatening attitudes. Such attitudes can be aimed, for example, at hostages or be expressed through highly symbolic acts of violence, such as trampling or burning a western flag, frequently American, or carrying out the most culturally execrable action in our cultural tradition: burning books. The defiant gesture of the demonstrator, preferably bearded, forms part of a long tradition of representations that would endorse the immanent warlike spirit of the supposed *Homo islamicus*; an amalgam whose quintessence we would find in a picture in which the same hands are holding firearms while flourishing no less dangerous copies of the Koran.

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Moreover, also in relation to this irrational provocative attitude, the foolish Muslim will appear suffering the inevitable repression of his rash acts, whether at the hands of his own police forces, western armies obliged to intervene directly or of the police that on the borders of fortress Europe are forced to use the only language that they apparently understand. Therefore, we see Arabs watched, Arabs arrested, Arabs handcuffed, Arabs with their hands behind their heads. And Arabs with their face to the ground, in a position that overly resembles another in which, when illustrating more general reports, the predominant image will be that of Muslims praying, preferably together; anonymous masses of people on their knees with their faces on the ground. Judging by the frequency with which this scene is presented, we would say that the

Muslim, when he is not “about to go to war,” does nothing more than pray.

Notable in terms of the representation in the media of Muslims as victims of their own culture is the issue of what we could describe with the formula “women in Islam.” The image of women is highly symbolic, as patriarchal societies make them the depositaries of the responsibility to preserve community values. Thus, women become receptacles and machinery of ideological reproduction aimed at giving continuity to the differentiated identity of the group.

As a valuable prize and a real standard bearer, the woman, the female body, is seen as a battlefield for settling the conflicts between the West and the others, between (our) modernity and (their) tradition. The fight to resolve who this body belongs to, to save it from the clutches of obscurantism and oppression leaves the individual aside, of course, relegated to a scandalously forced passiveness.

We can see in the obsessive debate on the *hijab* the extreme synecdoche of this fight: a woman with her head covered becomes an allegory of a despotic and unjust culture. There are not many photographs of women wearing the *hijab* and laughing: the idea is that there is no possible joy under the veil. Women with a *hijab*, when their individual identity is not diluted, forming large crowds of worshippers or pilgrims or as a passive silent group, always in the background, appear in demonstrations or even holding weapons; and the final aberration, the extreme of alienation, is the female suicide terrorist portrayed with her children and her weapons before self-immolation. There will also be a large number of pictures of women as explicit victims, crying or lamenting the misfortunes caused by the thoughtless and fanatical actions characteristic of Arabs. In its turn, the image evoking the Orient of the mysterious veil hiding a beautiful face, only letting us glimpse the disturbing eyes of a concealed

beauty, has been consigned to the field of kitsch and advertising.

The veil is a sign that always means more than oneself, whether worn or not: a fetish whose presence or omission already speaks on one's behalf, silencing, provoking aversion or sympathy in onlookers, in those who have the power of looking. Its mere absence can have a "liberalising" effect and western acceptance of a ferocious dictatorship, such as Ben Ali's kleptocracy in Tunisia. We usually take the part as the whole and see progress and justice in any trait or gesture that makes us similar.

In the treatment of the image of the Arab-Islamic world, both in the mass media and in education, Spain does not especially differ from other western countries. However, its designation as the arch enemy of the West – in substitution of the phantom of communism, which vanished with the Berlin Wall – frequently takes place by exploiting a historical legacy fully interiorised in our collective consciousness. This legacy has precise functions of identity definition, drawing the frontier between us and the most immediate external Other, Morocco, and our internal Other, al-Andalus. The obsession of the Catholic Kings focused on the extirpation of the latter in the name of ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic homogeneity, a blind obstinacy that indelibly marked our history and about which the most reactionary ideological inheritors still boast. Thus, 500 years of arrogant racism have culminated with the Disneyfication of a heritage whose commercial operation only serves as an excuse for consumerism, encouraging feelings of a farcical colonial superiority with respect to the past.

The feeling of superiority also prevails in the vision that the Spanish consciousness constructs of Morocco. Superiority in all aspects: technological, military, aesthetic and

moral... an absolute superiority, civilisational, which nevertheless still sees the Other as an enemy, the closest and therefore most dangerous, a permanent threat. The old network of watchtowers that mark out our coasts today takes the form of the Integrated System of External Vigilance, along what is now called the EU southern border. This system is aimed at keeping "irregular immigration, the drug trade and terrorism" at bay.

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In the mass media, Morocco is easily characterised by the four simplified typologies with which we opened this article: the terrorist, the uncultured immigrant, the corrupt leader, and the fanatical fundamentalist. Mass tourism contributes to maintaining the remaining Moroccans immobilised in our imaginary as an additional attraction, whose design is determinately conditioned by the need to meet the demands of a consumption of exoticism, which does not call for dialogue but services; not people, but goods.

The highly superficial and manipulated tourism experience is the only opportunity for most of us to interact with the Arab or Muslim Other. Thus, when dealing with breaking down such a firmly established framework of prejudices their cultural productions must be used for the less usual exercise of giving a platform to what millions of Moroccans, Maghrebians, Arabs and Muslims think about themselves, the world and us. Not only historical productions, which allow us to understand, for instance, "what Europe owes to Spain's Islam," to cite the beautiful book by Juan Vernet,² but very

2. Juan Vernet, *Lo que Europa debe al islam de España*, Barcelona, El Acantilado, 2006.

particularly the most contemporary, as our Eurocentric automatism tends to link Arab art and culture to the past. The Arab world that we find in libraries and bookshops or in Internet search engines will be mostly medieval and will provide us with examples of ceramics, calligraphy, decoration, Arabesques and religious architecture, but nothing modern or contemporary. And if we are ever given the opportunity to see works by living artists firsthand, it will be in group exhibitions, specifically aimed at showing them almost as a curiosity, or in rather forced encounters in which their work is placed in parallel to that of Spanish artists, in search of apparent stylistic affinities that support and legitimise it. Once again, we use our own yardstick. No less regrettable is the fact that these exhibitions include the same few names again and again, not only of artists but also curators and managers of the organising associations, who exchange the different roles or even play them simultaneously! There is also a preference for certain expressionist or naïf aesthetics, with a halo of lyrical primitivism, evoking “past enchantments” and aimed at strengthening the perception of dealing with an “underdeveloped” yet “authentic” art. It goes without saying that this short-sighted institutional policy excludes the possibility of having artists who, although usually present on the international contemporary art circuits, are conspicuous by their absence, except with very few exceptions, in our exhibition halls.

The panorama is not so different if we speak of music: the most common practice, when programming or recording Moroccan music, for instance, is to turn to its enormous and highly valuable folk or classical tradition, preferably al-Andalus music. Thus, current production is ignored even though it is obviously influenced by what is happening in the rest of the world. Moroccan rap or electronic music, for instance, is equally as interesting or boring as the western version.

To continue with Morocco, the translation of contemporary literature into Spanish is a very recent phenomenon in the case of works originally written in Arabic. Only a few novels and collections of short stories have been translated and even fewer poetry books, released by minority publishing houses. The best known authors are those translated from French who have been successful in France. Something similar can be said of the powerful communication tool of cinema. If someone with the standing of Youssef Chahine saw his first work shown in Spanish commercial cinemas only after having been awarded a Palme d’Or at Cannes Film Festival, what can the youngest filmmakers expect? Very few films go beyond the world of specialised festivals, bearing in mind that in Spain there is only one festival, which started in 2003, specifically devoted to Arab cinema: the Festival Amal, in Santiago de Compostela. Moreover, it was possible to see films by Moroccan, Maghrebian or Arab filmmakers at the Barcelona African Film Festival, the Tarifa African Festival, the Valencia Mediterranean Film Festival and the even more wide-ranging Festival de Cines del Sur, in Granada.

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Moreover, we should take into account that a small stronghold of big corporations (Vivendi, Viacom, Time Warner, Disney) control the structure of the information and entertainment industry. Fiction is as powerful as the documentary genre when producing and disseminating images and ideas about the world. It seems that we are bound to the persistence of the commonplaces of the culturalist racism of the main film productions. Thus, Arabs will continue to be represented ridiculously and maliciously through a series of prototypes which, finally, do

not speak of them but of us, of our deeply-rooted prejudices. These are the results of our fears, obsessions and fantasies projected onto what we have constructed as a kind of inverted reflection, a negative image of what we consider to be the traits that define us. In this way, we emphasise their incapacity to evolve in opposition to our modernity, their resistance to change in contrast to our dynamism, their irrationality faced with our control, their fanaticism in contrast to our tolerance, their warlike spirit faced with our love of peace, their traditionalism in contrast to our modernity, and their paralysing particularities in contrast to our universalism.

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In this respect, it is urgent to listen to the others with their own voice, given the flagrant *décalage* between what they know about us – thanks to their link with, not to say subordination to, the world media market – and the stagnant poverty of our knowledge about them, completely useless when venturing an indispensable dialogue in a context of global interdependence. Thus, it is necessary to facilitate the circulation of cultural productions from the Arab-Islamic world, which currently amount to a meagre and trivial number, beyond the borders of the specialised ghetto. The

market feels no urgency to correct these shortcomings, and the logic of periodical festivals and macro-events, exceptional by definition, is always insufficient.

In a context such as the Spanish, where a large number of citizens and much of the intellectual elite, for unfortunate historical reasons, are extremely reactionary and scornful of cultural plurality – as well as any diversity, whether religious, linguistic or of any other kind –, the effort of artists, creators and others involved in culture yields clearly discouraging results. These can only be overcome by accepting the structural nature of the problem and with the firm commitment of the institutions to an ongoing policy – not subject to the logic of immediate profitability – of support for the dissemination among us of truly relevant productions about the complex, living and multiple reality of the other shore of the Mediterranean, as well as for the projects led by the conviction that there is not, and never has been, essential, untouched and aseptic cultures. This concept is actually an oxymoron.

Unfortunately, we are still far from generating experiences such as those which, in the American context, gave way to artistic, political and critical practices, such as the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo or works by Guillermo Gómez Peña, immersed in the daily and constant intercultural traffic that defines the world we inevitably share, and in which the ongoing process of construction and questioning of all identities takes place.