

# Performative Radicalism in contemporary Canadian documentary film

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Film criticism in the social sphere: Have Faith in Yourself. Know no Fear. Irshad Manji's 2007 documentary film *Faith Without Fear* promotes a mission to reform Islam, in order to bring it out of the seventh century and make it applicable to contemporary life. The film has achieved success in a disparate variety of cultural circles, from social activists to neo-conservative ideologues. This incongruous response belies the fact that the current historical moment is steeped in a process where the individual does not have the necessary historical referents to engage in political and critical analysis with the world at large. Despite Manji's role as a media icon in Canada and beyond, and that her work has been positively accepted by the mainstream media culture in North America, her 2007 film and her popular status still need to be framed by the engaged lens of critical scrutiny.

The initial context of analysis is to address the three ring circus of the *post-political*, the construction of an *optic personage*, and multiculturalism. The sum of this process has resulted in what we term *performative radicalism* that imbues the optic personage with an *aura of activism*. The whole process results, finally,

in self-promoting work – documentary film, contextualized by a website and two monographs – that does not produce social change.

Within the Canadian context the multicultural framework sanctions *resistant ethnicity*, as ethno-cultural agents define themselves against the practices of social management by the white mainstream. While this allows for a specific space for ethno-cultural identity, it also embeds, in the end, white-Canadian identity as the normative standard in the social discourse. This ensures that ethno-cultural identities remain as dynamic buffer zones at the periphery of dominant economic and political practices.

The problems that derive from Manji's film are representative of practices of narcissism: the optic personage performs social activism so as to become a new point of aggregation for potential activists through an implementation of post-political action – predominantly rhetorical – that conflates the historical political dialectic. When the documentary is used as the echo-chamber for the optic personage, instituting a continual self-referential process, this alters the traditional documentary genre. The new format highlights an a-historical reading

of the lifeworld, and promotes a spectacularized presence of the documentary filmmaker/personage. The process finalizes the infamous clash of cultures while professing social agency, so as to create an amorphous, seemingly involving space of denunciation. By focusing on Irshad Manji's documentary it is possible to illustrate how performative radicalism parallels the rhetoric of neo-conservative Canadian / American political structures while proclaiming a progressive, liberal vision. In the end, a basic question can be posed: Who benefits from this?

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### Framing the zero degree of our pleasures, briefing history

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 created a domino effect in terms of political thought throughout the world: the end of the Soviet Union made it seem as though ideological polarizations had run their course. Reconfiguring the geo-political realities throughout the world was informed, in part, by Francis Fukuyama's article 'The End of History' that appeared in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989, subsequently expanded upon and published in book form as the bestselling *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). The general position pointed to the fact that the dialectical process was now exhausted since one vision had won the day: liberal democracy had triumphed over its exhausted opponent. The reconfiguration of the political habitat in the West started, within the category of post-modernity, to envisage a post-political discourse. It was now possible to transcend the old political categories of left and right.

What this has meant practically is brilliantly simple. What is identifiable as the post-political discourse is that the 'right' discourse won the day. It becomes a useful narrative script for politically naïve individuals and it manifests itself, for example, on the back cover of Manji's first book, *Risking Utopia: on the edge of a new democracy*, as what Michael Adams calls the 'all-too-common-sense notions of left and right' (Manji, back-cover, 1997). This is reflective of the 1990s right-wing parlance in Canada that recuperated 'common sense' as a social *Weltanschauung* of cohesion and integration of disparities.

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### Faith Without Fear – integrating the optic personage in the public sphere

Manji has honed her optic personage as a radio and television host and author and guest speaker over the last two decades. After the events of September 11 2001, her presence has been socially necessary and this translates into cultural currency. Her promotion of self, climaxes with the release of her self-referential 2007 documentary titled *Faith Without Fear*, which was nominated for several awards in 2007 and 2008. The film is Manji's journey 'to reconcile her faith in Allah with her love of freedom' (back of DVD cover). Such statements end up framing a very problematic and essentialized view of Islam that is also very self-promoting. Freedom, for Manji, is specifically a western feminist vision of freedom, which because of its association with issues of feminism and liberalism, and freedom of worship and the interpretation of religious doctrine, appears, at face value, to be very positive and enlightened. However, within the context of Manji's film, her reception by popular media – such as her guest appearances on Fox Television and CNN, etc. – are actually authoritarian manifestations of one culture over another: the West over the East echoing the same effects as Zach Snyder's 300 (2006), or Wayne Kopping and Raphael Shore's *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West* (2005). In effect, Manji's optic personage in the documentary can be summed up as a dynamic Trojan horse, who globe trots to various Islamic hotspots in no seemingly logical, historically determined context or order, despite her claims to the contrary. The finality of the film is to expose the 'problem with Islam' – a term she repeatedly invokes and legitimizes by a reductive mechanism of interacting with the Other. In a sense, hers is a revision of Islam through the convex lens of Protestantism: to take the *Qur'an* and, like Luther in his relationship to the *Bible*, read it without mediation from the religious establishment. However, the problem with this type of exercise is that there is always the temptation when reading for oneself to succumb to prophesizing and martyrdom.

As a result of both her construction of identity and its multiple interactions with media apparatuses, her personage is established as authentic, legitimate, and representative of diversity, but it is nevertheless a performative, highly constructed, one. The possibility of capitalizing on the gratification of one's media image while performing radicalism is visibly manifest. The optic personage adopts the currency of easily identifiable public tags, which include being politically outspoken, adopting rhetorically progressive vocabulary, being dialectically challenging and subsuming gender issues, including issues of sexual freedom. Specifically, the optic personage is invested with the purpose of nurturing and maintaining the paradigm for public activists. In other words, it is a post-political ready-made agency: post-political, or grounding itself in the a-historical moment within the fluidity, or absence of, right/left-political actions. In a sense, this is analogous to the techniques of appeasement and cooption used by French President Nicolas Sarkozy to persuade four members of the French Left to join his newly formed cabinet.

### **The optic personage, (re) active self-representations**

The optic personage is the invention, or the end result, of a mediatic process which started with the film industry, and bloomed under the proliferation of the television-world that has 'emancipated' itself in the last decade. Since the optic personage is cocooned in media representations, its status is that of a phantasmagorical reality, living and performing for the mediatic circle. Its appearance and propagation denotes the leaking of the virtual world and its diffusion into the material world. Though the optic personage corresponds to specific biopatronimics, the optic personage, using the media circuit, is a promotional and narcissistic technological device used by the convergence of specific economic and political interests to promote 'an engaged practice of reality.' 'Engagement' here designates the perfunctory aspect of agency and empowerment in progressive look-alike social interactions. In the post-political lifeworld these are the residues of attempts at changing and empowering others. It still bears the aura of activism and of social

responsibility, assuming the status of the common parlance of hero/heroine of the people.

In reality, however, the optic personage is a vessel for public engagement by proxy, at a safe distance, where individual existences are voided of their critical potentials. Further, the neo-activists, who use the optic personage to popularize their socio-political positions, are nurtured by the mediatic circle: a specific constellation of economic, social and political forces. Performances of activism recuperate their message so successfully that the dominant discourse(s) can appear to be in a dialectical engagement with other constituencies. Yet, any actual form of critical change remains suppressed: this repression of one's human potential can negatively manifest itself in pathologies and addictions that are easily exploitable by the economic market, such as drug addiction, sexual addiction and gaming addictions. The pseudo-dialectical tension formulated through the narrative of the activist documentary, however, is maintained so that there is never any synthesis, or progress; instead there is a constant tug-of-war, which gives rise to aesthetically pleasing mediatic performances. Althusser would have integrated such process in his concept of 'ideological state apparatus', or how education, the family, the media, arts and literature, and religion work to contain any forms of 'real resistance'.

The lure of the pool, the stream of identity  
In reflecting determined economic and political interests, the optic personage partakes of the second-degree of the star-system process. (The first degree being the Hollywood star. These optic personages are media stars used to target and select an engaged public.) It is not a vacuous presence à la Sophia Loren or Angelina Jolie, United Nations Goodwill Ambassadors (a different modelization of social activism), given that its performance is the embodiment of progressive, illuminated involvement – with all the sacrifices that can entail the quest for truth(s). As such, it creates a status that is separated from the banalities of everyday life. Attractive to those of us interested in making the world a better place, it promotes a participatory visibility of resistance, which invariably carries a quasi-religious prominence. And, in demanding our attention, the second-degree star fulfills dreams of redemption and appeasement. Conversely, in its



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*cogitus interruptus* relationship with the viewer (maintaining the same power relations governing present neo-liberal processes), the activist optic personage diminishes its viewer(s) to the basic role of passivity, since its hieratic engagement perpetually postpones actual engagement and community-building processes.

The use of the optic personage has a direct impact on how politics and culture are narrated to the public, as is the case in *Faith Without Fear*. In a post-political era, the rise of media gurus in several forms has been accelerated. We have, as we always have had, our political pundits and favourite interview personalities on the news-media. However, in the present digital media, it is possible for Manji to transcend the traditional boundaries of journalism by declaring herself a religious, social, cultural, political pundit and using her sophisticated website, blog, and IrshadManjiTV sites to provide promotional sound-bites of her cultural production, which can be purchased through the sites, and to brand her work for ‘active consumerism’.

An archetype with a variance would be Michael Moore’s early rise to fame with *Roger & Me* in 1989, whose notoriety was not only due to his progressive practices of exposing problems such as the automobile industry, or the war in Iraq, but also due to his narrative style, which placed his journalistic personality at the centre of the issue. His role in *Roger & Me* is that of the investigative reporter who exposes a social injustice, which seemingly

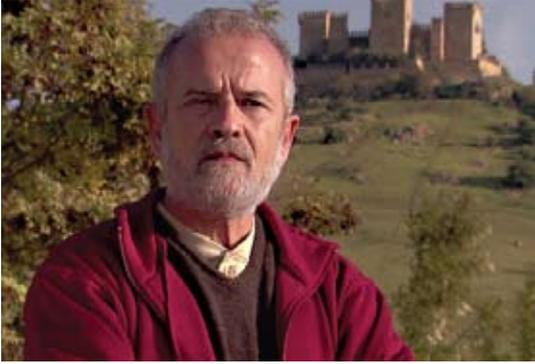
touched him at a personal level in terms of community and class: the film invokes autobiographical elements, making the main argument against the alienating and reifying processes of corporations and the capitalist system. In reaction to the death of the author, as sanctified by the post-structuralists in the late 1960s, the late 1980s and early 1990s mark a rebirth of the author(s), and the narrative legitimization of the autobiographical para-literary elements that give ‘reality’ credibility to the text. Around the same time as Michael Moore was working on *Roger & Me*, in literary theory personal narratives were acquiring credibility and legitimization as a proper narrative and genre, linked as they are by the post-modern process of the depoliticization of the public sphere. The rebirth of a literary star system is one end result. Salman Rushdie, for example, both benefits and suffers because of the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality.

Would Michael Moore’s rise to fame have been possible had he remained behind the camera? One could argue that his presence in the narrative was necessary since – in order to address specific problems – he had to be directly involved, and, in so doing, guide public opinions. Interestingly enough, his working process addresses the media circuit and is foregrounded by it. For example, in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), he targets and exploits a Hollywood Superstar, Charlton Heston, in order to position himself antagonistically and visually

within the media spectacle. As President of the National Rifle Association, Mr Heston was an unrepentant – *mors tua vita mea*, or ‘from my cold, dead hands’ – ideologue of the right to bear arms. The instrumental use of Mr Heston pertained to the indictment of the world of arms in Moore’s work: where young men who modeled themselves after misguided forms of resistance (the so-called trench-coat mafia indicting violent video games, and movies like *The Matrix* [1999]) culminated in the Columbine School massacre. The original media coverage of the events, the making of the documentary, the subsequent celebratory reception of *Bowling for Columbine* in Europe (Cannes, 2002 Special Prize), and the plethora of media appearances of the director, all partake of the mediatic circle where one spectacle multiplies itself through other forms of spectacle. While Moore’s earlier films are a platform for raging against the machine, they do not necessarily promote social activism. Some of his later films, such as *Sicko*, work synchronously with other media technologies – namely the Internet and his official website – to inform the public about possibilities for social action, such as writing to their local government representatives to advocate for the 9/11 workers. Pay particular attention to his emphasis in terms of providing agency back to the reader. The site says, ‘Urge Congress to Support Legislation: Support the 9/11 rescue workers by asking your congressperson to support H.R.3543. . . . If your congressperson is not a cosponsor of this comprehensive 9/11 health care legislation for the sick and injured, **contact your congressperson** and demand that he or she give our 9/11 heroes **the same level of care as the detainees at Guantanamo Bay**’ with web-links provided for visitors to the site to determine who their congressperson is and how to contact him/her. Michael-Moore style and media practices pre-date the explosion of reality TV in the late 1990s. Yet, with the rising interest in reality TV, and the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality, Michael Moore’s practices are recuperated by other documentary filmmakers looking to highlight issues of social concern relevant to their own ideological projects. In Canada, the most successful to date is Irshad Manji, and her signature oeuvre: *Faith Without Fear*.

## Democracy versus Tribalism

In *Faith Without Fear*, Manji’s performance as a radical activist personage proposes that Islam should reform itself in order to meet the demands of a changing global cultural climate. Yet, the documentary reduces and polarizes the ‘trouble with Islam’ to tribalism versus the modern neo-liberal democratic paradigm. As a lesbian Muslim woman, Manji’s rhetoric paradoxically mirrors the conservative communicative strategies of Canadian and American societies in such a way that different political perspectives conflate in the mainstream public. Her personage validates the rhetoric of anti-Islamic attitudes, since a woman who claims to be a devout Muslim – by her own definition, interpretation, and performance of that term – presents them. She calls for reform for Islam so that it better suits her ideals, and in so doing, would conform with the demands of a conservative Western society in its construction of the enemy Other. Mainstream, predominantly white, viewers might be enchanted by a progressive rhetoric that suggests change, agency, inclusiveness, and the hermeneutic value of being able to read and interpret religious text (in this case the *Qur’an*). However, the film does not nuance the criticisms of Islam by contextualizing them within historical developments that have challenged religious dogmas. The film fails to acknowledge that other religions can be contested according to individual rights, interpretations, absolutist readings and have also been the cultural ground for fanaticism at various times. And despite the fact that paradigms such as witch-hunts are used to frame her anti-historical retelling of Islamic ‘development,’ Manji as narrator does not acknowledge that events of this type have occurred as a result of Christian fanaticism at different historical moments as well. The performance therefore caters to an inactive, non-interactive, consuming public so enamored with the ideal/idealism of the activist as the protector of their civic values that it suffices for them to be mirrored within the process of the performance. In a post-political era it is typical of spectatorship to be conflated with participation, just as performance is conflated with activism. An analysis of Manji’s performative strategy reveals that her media persona piggybacks on those



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still acceptable humanistic principles that deal with the Other, so as to recuperate and transform them into tools by which to destabilize Islam and demand its surrender in terms of Westernization. In other words, *Faith Without Fear* reflects the tri-partite tensional structure in Canadian social practices and cultural policies: 1) the residual conflict between official Multiculturalism and its lived everyday practice; 2) the contemporary commodification and rhetoric of terrorizing each-Other; and, 3) the actual historical and political foundations that have exported Canadian Multiculturalism, through UN sponsorship, as the model of a diversified social management program.

Multiculturalism in a post-political era

Official Multiculturalism in Canada is structured on and around the tension of constructed differences. For the purpose of this article, 'Multiculturalism' with a capital 'M' denotes official state multiculturalism: with a small 'm' it signifies the lived everyday reality of that term outside of legislated, state multicultural practices. So that Multiculturalism ensures the maintenance of composite status quo power structures, embracing ethno-cultural groups into displays of active participation in the *Canadian Dream*. While administering the mosaic showcasing of status diversity, these structures of representation, in fact, maintain the official discourse(s) produced by the federal state, or official Multiculturalism. For example, one

must look only as far as the questions pertaining to the pioneer narrative: Who is admitted entrance into that historical identity? What is the role of the ethno-cultural immigrant in this foundational discourse? When does the transition from immigrant to ethnic citizenship take place? These issues are generally filtered through a sense of representational belonging. In so doing, the tensions in Canada's Multicultural nation-state, which are the result of a political hierarchy grounded in the national identity myths of English / French histories of colonization – subsetting ethnicities, presently, into *integrated spaces of performance* – are left unresolved at a critical level.

Multiculturalism requires a bio-political performance in specific designated areas of participatory socialization. These areas can be called *integrated spaces of performance*, which are both mandated and lived as daily practices where the ethnic-designated body is asked to perform, to act out for the various media technologies his/her sense of cultural authenticity. However, this is an impossible authenticity, given that it is already altered by the expectations and designations of the viewing public. A striking illustration would be festivity-related performances, such as *Heritage Days*, where ethnicity is showcased and bio-politically marked individuals present their palatable selves. Heritage Day performances involve *tasting piquant foodstuff*, *visioning saltatory others*. They cause no disrupt-

tion to official discourses about and in relation to ethno-cultural subjectivities. In so doing, the mutual project of appeasement is rendered through the equally participatory actions of the performances: as the dancers enjoy becoming Other, the spectators enjoy consuming the culture, both through viewership and gourmandizing. In this paradigm, Canada reaffirms for itself that it is *de facto* multicultural. In refusing the definition of the Canadian mainstream, ethnics are guided by the media instruments at hand – when they are deemed necessary to the discourse of cultural diversity – to also define themselves against the governing practices as a form of *resistant ethnicity*.

Resistant ethnicity serves two explicit purposes in maintaining the power of the dominant discourse: 1) it circumscribes a specific space for ethno-cultural identities to publicly manifest themselves, and 2) it also embeds the white-Canadian identity as the normative standard and ensures that ethno-cultural identities remain as dynamic buffer zones at the periphery of dominant economic and, conversely, political practices. Such a basic, schizoid, cultural process is channelled through the conversion of legitimate, subaltern, social-political goals into narcissistic, and individualistic manifestations. Through media apparatuses, which are themselves mechanisms of the imaginary of social governance, the doubly displaced subjectivity (the Other) is invested with public meaning through technologies of self-governance and representation at everyone's economic disposal in a post-modern world.

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### **Faith Without Fear in a Multicultural world**

Irshad Manji's film resorts to the basic principles of permitted performances of Multiculturalism: the people being interviewed 'dance' for and are 'savoured' by Manji's camera lens. Lamia, the Californian woman-convert to Islam who lives in Yemen and is interviewed by Manji, is made to feel self-conscious of her acquired Yemeni practices; she is aware of how her interviewer and the North American public may see her as someone who has relinquished her sense of agency. The viewer is curious to discover what kind of American woman converts to Islam and moves to Yemen – who is the 'us' that

can become one of 'them'? The viewer's curiosity is piqued by the filmic introduction given to Lamia. When the documentary cuts to a more formal interview scene, the viewers/voyeurs are gratified when Manji asks the woman, 'Would you feel comfortable at this point to remove the *niqāb*?' Lamia feels compelled to meet the demands of her interviewer and she removes her veil after saying 'I can do that, if you'd like to be...for me to do that now...'. Manji replies, 'Let's see.' And the viewer waits and watches as Lamia undoes the veil and reveals herself. This act resonates as a gratifying exploitation of the body, because Lamia exposes her face to make her point – that she is still in control of her life – but in the end the act is exhibitionist within the context of her Yemeni reality. The removal of the veil assumes a synecdochal quality since the *niqāb* is suggestive of the *abaya*. As she strips out of her chosen cultural and religious garments, Lamia represents a variance of the process in the integrated areas of performance. The camera sets up a defined space of representation where the ethnicized Other is now authenticating her 'conversion.' This titillating detail in a brief scene, is reflective of a narrative reverberation throughout the documentary. In the end, when the Other is encountered by the camera, it is the very camera's gaze that creates the area of performance and that integrates Otherness as a manipulated/altered rendition of the bio-political subjectivity. Finally, Otherness is domesticated for the particular message, an ideological construction that sustains the narrative. Lamia is further questioned about her use of the veil and how it is reflective of the society she lives in. She agrees with her interviewer's observation that wearing the veil is not entirely a free choice in a society such as Yemen, where one is not allowed to act independently on many accounts, not just issues of public dress. In her words: 'In that type of society it can't truly be a free choice... because it is not a society that allows free choices in many ways, not just in terms of how women should behave.' The use of the demonstrative adjective 'that,' used in reference to 'that type of society', announces (in a pronounced way) that Lamia is suddenly displaced from her own context and is caught between her two worlds: her Californian origins and her current home in Yemen. At that moment, in her denunciation, she is recuperated to the West.



While performing radical activism what she is doing is actually scripted by the western media already: criticism of emigration to the East, conversion and observance of Islam, wearing the *Burqua* which signifies immediately – correctly or incorrectly – the oppression of women’s rights. By following the script once again specific tags are associated with a negative reading of Islamic religious and/or associated cultural practices.

The optic personage has naturalized western social practices making them the unquestioned standard by which the film frames the

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This momentarily displaces the viewer, as well, while the meaning of ‘that’ in relationship to the speaker must be decoded. Where is ‘that’? Yemen, United States? The interviewer’s capacity to recuperate the interviewee is indicative of the persuasive process that is part of all film-making, regardless of claims of objectivity. The staging effect is something that the participant and the spectators need to be aware of so that the immediacy of the image effect does not result in a lack of critical engagement.

While Manji denounces the uniformity of the *niqāb* and *abaya*, since it demeans women by denying a visible manifestation of individuality and constrains them into the hegemonized fabric of society, it is hypocritical to lead such a line of inquisition with Lamia – who chooses to wear the *Burqua* in order to comply to norms of social acceptability in her new-found home – when Manji herself dons a turtle-neck in Yemen, an equatorial climate. This indicates that she too, to a degree, will conform in order to avoid open confrontation or causing offence. However, contrary to this performance of social sensitivity, what sustains the narcissistic regurgitation through the whole documentary is that the other side of narcissism is the authoritarian self, which manifests as moral superiority and control of others. Ultimately, Manji, as the optic personage, determines what is acceptable without having it infringe on women’s personal rights.

Other. However, Manji’s optic personage is highly constructed and very much displays popular conceptions of the engaged feminist, which she even jokes about, referencing her short spiky hair and other aspects of her appearance. Her focus on external representations of identity through dress codes and body language, are for Manji, manifestations of one’s beliefs and/or practices of social agency. While this, to a degree, corresponds to reality, the reductive process of focusing only on external representations as ideological statements is misrepresentative.

Part of Manji’s process of identity creation and promotion also has to do with whom she aligns and maligns herself: for example Salman Rushdie is invoked as a ‘fellow traveller’, while the Imam is introduced as her fiercest critic. The documentary subjects, for the most part, are unaware of how their responses will be framed and absorbed to become part of the aura of the media icon. In other words, the appearance of Salman Rushdie in the documentary, is suggestive of a shared religious and critical perspective between Manji and the Muslim-born writer and essayist, who had a fatwa issued against him in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini, then the Supreme Leader of Iran. Although both criticize Islam, Manji is a believer who advocates looking to the *Qur’an* as the word of God, whereas Rushdie is, ultimately, a secular intellectual. Nevertheless, their differences are not identified in the film. She pres-

ents a sound bite of her and Salman Rushdie in intellectual conversation, insinuating a complicity of perspective. The same occurs with the Yemeni woman writer, Arwa Othman, who is critical of the changes in women's status in Yemen over the last thirty years, and who advocates for women's rights. Manji's interview of her in the film focuses solely on the fact that Arwa does not always wear the full-veil and shows some of her hair. Manji emphasises that Arwa places herself in danger through this choice, and then draws parallels between the dangers Arwa faces and the threats against her own life. The focus on the optic personage and her similarities with the interviewee, however, do not allow space for the elucidation of Arwa's philosophical or religious opinions beyond her thoughts on this one issue. What appears to be empathy for the Other is actually a narcissistic manipulation that allows focus to again revert back to the optic personage, who is the actual subject of the film.

Ultimately, the scene with Arwa Othman does not permit explanation of the problematic Yemeni social, cultural, and political developments in the last three decades. Arwa, in the article 'Freedom flower "has withered away"', explains: 'Our expatriates were influenced by the... Sunni Salafis in Saudi Arabia and imported their views of the veil. We slowly started to see the *al mashaqir* and traditional dress vanishing to be replaced by the veil' (al Qadhi 2008). The editing of the film focuses on the homogenizing practice of wearing the *abaya* and *niqāb*, in order to naturalize a dichotomy of self-legitimization that inherently denigrates the other perspective. In the end, the veil, as an image, supplants any discourse around the veil that would nuance its complexity. Within this general context of personalized issues and relations, the viewer is left to assume that Manji's position is the same as all the people she interviews, which may or may not be the case. With Salman Rushdie or Arwa Othman she manipulates the conversations and interviews in order to elicit from them the position that she is arguing in the film, allowing no nuance to interfere with the process of polarization that the narrative sets up. Rushdie and Othman represent radicalism within their own communities, and their resistance to social norms puts them in physical danger. In both cases, Manji uses the opportunity to

draw parallels to illustrate how she too lives in danger, is called a devil or Satan, and is threatened for her beliefs. Ultimately, these parallels are narcissistic ruminations meant to portray her as a would-be martyr and strangely parallel other practises of martyrdom that the media associates with specific areas of the globe.

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## Unveiling Maya

In conclusion we cannot deny that there is a process at work: across Canada, the US, and Europe, pro-West Muslim-born optic personages have appeared such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali in Holland (now in the US), or a Magdi Allam in Italy. They are the result of a mechanism of cultural production larger than themselves. These optic personages are interchangeable, new masks for a *Commedia dell'Arte* of the post-political. As characters, they are bound by their optic personage and yet they can improvise within the confines of their masks. However, given that time has come to a stop – as auspiciated in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* or by Fukuyama's acolytes – it seems that, paradoxically, time is on their side, as they encompass and navigate the post-political conditions of the present times. In this process the political subject comes to the oblivion of historical referents necessary to engage critically with the world portrayed by the optic personage, as well as the world at large. Therefore, the possible critical map ends up corresponding to the actual territory of representation. Whatever references are given by the optic personage are mirrored back in a closed, self-referential circuit. It is not a labyrinth and yet in this world-out-there, anyone who wants to participate is contained by the ever fluid images of engagement. In the film, when we are shown the map of Yemen this corresponds one-to-one to the rhetorical strategy that makes Yemen the synecdoche for the whole Arab world. In this process of cultural and geopolitical reductionism, the complexity surrounding the issues selected for digestible representation is sublimated by the narcissistic and self-referential personalization, so that each oppressed woman that we see on the streets wearing a veil is actually an extension of the optic personage. For example, when Manji goes to a shop in Yemen and costumes herself in the *Burqua*, she adopts sarcasm and condescension to ridicule first the use of the

*Burqua* and then the male salesclerk who is capitalizing on this cultural fashion norm and, by implication, capitalizing on the oppression of women. However, by personalizing the issues, through jokes and complaints about the physical constriction the *Burqua* imposes on her ability to see and breathe properly, the process of aestheticizing the subjugation of one gender by another is not addressed. No serious discussion or criticism takes place. The film simplifies discussion of the *Burqua* to western stereotypes about how this garment limits the freedom to express one's individuality through fashion statements. There is no acknowledgement of the rigidity inherent in western fashion choices that classify different social groups according to clothing and accessories (including technological devices). Furthermore, the narrative does not address the individuality cloaked by the *Burqua* which can still be expressed within designated social spaces: either the private sphere or in women only gatherings, for example. There is no nuance. The issues represented are swallowed up by the dichotomy set up in the film, which does not aspire to create social awareness, only to argue for an agenda of Islamic reform.

The optic personage performs for the a-historical audience, a post-political engagement on a multicultural stage in Canada and elsewhere. This performance of resistant ethnicity is one outcome of legislative policies created to perpetuate illusions of diversity in pluralistic societies. The conditions and tensions within the contemporary world, represented as the natural setting for the clash of civilizations, nurture the evolution of the optic personage as the focal point for a performance of social engagement that presents no threat to the current western paradigm. These performances ensure the constancy of existing conditions: the optic personages (Manji and others like her) are imbued with an aura of activism but their performances freeze, through the image frame, any actual intervention in the social sphere. At the end of the movie, Manji and her partner parachute to the ground, to announce the need for reform. The scene is emblematic since it resonates with another moment from recent history: George W. Bush, in full pilot's gear, lands on the USS 'Abraham Lincoln', at sea off the coast of San Diego California on May 1, 2003 to announce the end of the Iraq War. •

### Contributor details

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