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Wearing a veil. Gender and generations in post revolution Tunisia

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Abstract: The subject of essay is the decision to wear a veil on the part of some young Tunisian women. After having reconstructed how the research process in Tunisia developed, and how this experience is considered in the broader path developed by the visual sociology laboratory, one will therefore deal with the veil as a practice of resistance and subjectification. In the Tunisian post-revolution, the female body represents a territory of symbolic struggle between generations that move in the tension among modernity and tradition.

Keywords: veil, visual sociology, gender and generation, video laboratory

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Introduction

This article will deal with the experience of a video laboratory conducted with a group of 20 sociology students from the popular (urban and rural) and poor middle classes in a major Tunisian public university.

A documentary¹ and a book² were born from this experience. The documentary, in the Tunisian language, is the result of the writing, shooting and editing of the students, with our supervision. In the book, instead, we narrate all that happened around this work. From the very material that was generated in this specific research context - an ethnography of the backstage - we drew from to build the further reflection that we want to deepen in this paper.

The subject of our essay is the decision to wear a veil on the part of some young Tunisian women. It seems interesting to reflect around this practice for several reasons. From a methodological and epistemological point of view, to show the potential of visual sociology to reduce the hierarchy of research and modify the perspective of the gaze towards an oblique point of view. Indeed, on the “body of the others” (Fusaschi, 2003), it is easily possible to apply a gaze impregnated with ethnocentrism, which claims to recognise needs and provide ways of liberation (Sayad, 1999).

From a heuristic point of view, because the practice of wearing a veil, in the post-revolution, takes on particular meaning precisely at the intersection of the concept of gender with that of generation.

At the same time as the creation of the documentary, a very fruitful research space was created that allowed us to tackle many different themes that we tried to understand by putting together our and their views. Thus, a story of approximation was produced around daily practice; the study of everyday life, which is an aspect of the sociology of culture, indeed it focuses on “what is more descriptive and ordinary, on implicit, on experiences, on the backgrounds and the details of social life” (Jedlowski & Leccardi, 2003). There were many themes that, due to the kind of interactions that the field generated, we were able to get to know in depth. On these pages we will deal specifically with gender issues about the veil, a sticky theme from many points of view, but extremely emblematic of many of the tensions that are found in Tunisia in the “post revolution” and, above all, significant as it was possible to deepen some particularly delicate aspects of certain phenomena, thanks to the type of research context.

¹ Après le printemps, l’hiver, online: http://www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it/lab/?page_id=826

² Dopo la rivoluzione. Paesaggi giovanili e sguardi di genere nella Tunisia contemporanea, ombre corte, 2017.

The realisation of this work led us to live immersed in that context and to be part of the interactions that were produced in it. All this was possible thanks to the effects in the field of visual sociology. Visual sociology, indeed, is not only a vehicle of ethnographic practices, but transforms the way of doing research and involving male and female researchers and the subjects involved for various reasons in research (Queirolo Palmas & Stagi, 2015). It is not simply about giving a camera or a camcorder to the natives or the subjects of the research to give power back to them, as a pioneering line of visual anthropology did, in the utopian search for objectivity. It is about sharing the ends of the work, the look and the story. Visual sociology is a way of doing research, of which ethnography is part. The construction of documentary work not only travelled in parallel, but it was the end recognisable by all the people involved in the path developed: a hypothetical container in which everything converges, which has therefore made sense of the contribution of all, shortening distances, changing roles, and producing specific types of interaction.

After having reconstructed how the research process in Tunisia developed, and how this experience is considered in the broader path developed by the visual sociology laboratory, one will therefore deal with the veil as a practice of resistance and subjectification (Saitta, 2015).

In the Tunisian post-revolution, the female body represents a territory of symbolic struggle between generations that move in the tension between modernity and tradition.

Video laboratory

The laboratory, part of an educational exchange project in the years 2015 and 2016, had the official and initial goal of creating a visual sociology workshop, designed to illustrate theories and teach investigation techniques related to subjective image production. However, the group's dynamics altered the intent from the outset, transforming the seminar into a place of reflection in which to portray fragments of interpretation or description of social phenomena: the workshop's objective became the construction of a collective film about post-revolution Tunisia based on instances and themes chosen by the participating students.

The laboratory made it possible to combine a formative dimension with a production dimension. The field also developed in a double register: on the one hand the students and their observation located in different social worlds, on the other we researchers who were able to observe their observation. The material (making a film together) and the temporal (multiple times, and with multiple interruptions) economy of research led to an increasingly intimate sharing of the spaces of university, family/home and friendly life of

the participants. With our *informants* we went through classrooms, lessons, exams, lunches and canteens, family houses and student rooms, research situations in several bourgeois and popular neighbourhoods in Tunis, production of images and visuals, night time entertainment, events of political militancy, urban explorations without specific goals and travel to the country's borders. Our permanence in the field, in the fields, went hand in hand with the construction of distance relationships with research subjects through social networks.

During the initial training sessions, the participants found a dialogical consensus (motivating their importance in terms of scientific and political relevance) on the research themes, subject of the ethnography and film narrative. Our task was limited to organising such explorations and animating a space of permanent reflection on the empirical situations that the group created went through.

The research device we applied in the research experience in Tunis is similar to others already experimented with as the Visual Sociology Laboratory of the University of Genoa: building a workshop around a group and/or a theme, imagining an articulation of empirical activities that unite in a common work for the researched and researchers, transforming as far as possible those observed into observers, recording group movements and living daily lives through the sharing of practices and situations. There have been several experiences that the laboratory has developed around this ethnographic mode: in prisons (Beneduce, Oddone & Queirolo Palmas, 2014) and in LGBT worlds (Stagi, 2015), among youth gangs (Queirolo Palmas, 2015) and among methadone consumers followed by the social services (Navone & Oddone, 2015).

From a methodological standpoint, the video laboratory is a well-defined, time-space set in which to meet the subjects of the research, with a view to common action: using audio-visual language and cinematographic techniques to work out a collective narrative. Secondly, the video laboratory becomes an occasion for meeting, processing and group discussion, offering a wealth of useful material for social research of the worlds involved; at the same time, it becomes a time of reflection on itself and their own experiences for the participants. The proposal to set up a visual laboratory was born in a transdisciplinary perspective that integrates the forms of quality social research with group dynamics, biographical analysis with the use of visual language as a dialogic tool, self-reflection and return of experiences (Navone & Oddone, 2015, p. 96).

The same assumptions on which the participatory video is based, which through practice pursues forms of polyphonic authorship, primarily involving the protagonists of their sociological films in the assembly phase (Frisina, 2013, pp. 103-113) and that is defined:

a scriptless video process, directed by a group of grassroots people, moving forward in iterative cycles of shooting–reviewing. This process aims at creating video narratives that communicate what those who participate in the process really want to communicate, in a way they think is appropriate. (Johansson *et al.*, 1999, p.35)

The various experiments have indeed paved the way for ethnographic research, mediated by the presence of the camera as a field exploration and research writing tool, in order to make the relationship with the protagonists more dynamic.

Ethnography is always a relationship between researchers and social actors, and the documentaries that have been produced in recent years by the Visual Sociology Laboratory in Genoa bear the traces of such sharing and common growth over time, constantly evoking the presence of researchers/authors in a direct or allusive way.

In the various experiences that have been made, the proposal of a video laboratory has always been functional to overcoming the separation between “us” and “them”: the possibility of an “oblique position” (Rahola, 2002) helps to justify our presence in the field, a sense of meaning, while at the same time offering participants the opportunity to enjoy the status of active, participatory, performative subjects in the direction of co-authorship.

The aim of the video laboratory, just as the participative video, is to ensure that visual search paths do not end up having oppressive outcomes (visibility as control or as a show) and reduce the asymmetries of power between researchers and participants (Frisina, 2015).

In the films where we have built the field as an experimental laboratory³ - *Loro Dentro*, *Buscando Respeto*, *Permiso de soñar* - the mechanics of image production with the subjects of the research allowed us to generate a *space-time bubble*, proliferating sites, long durations and relationships with which to try out a hybrid authorship, and with which to share the power of representation (Balma Tivola, 2004). In these writing workshops, sociology and cinema, where individual biographies that relate to the most general worlds of the tale converge - the gangs in *Buscando Respeto*, drug addiction and the relationship between young migrants and services in *Permiso de soñar*, young people held in *Loro Dentro* - making films is the pretext for ethnography.

In them, and thanks to them, we questioned ourselves about the strategies of representation of subordinates, about what is exposed and what is concealed, about how they build themselves, in an identity policy that negotiates with us researchers and/or with our proposals on the representation of

³ For a reflection on film ethnographies, see Queirolo Palmas (2018). For a review of the films made by the Laboratory, visit the website: www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it

a specific social world; a practice of ethnographic cinema laboratory similar to Touraine's proposal (1978) on sociological intervention groups. Following Frisina's description (2013, pp.124-125), "a group is similar to individuals who share a similar experience or commitment, who recognise themselves in the questions posed by researchers (...) sociological intervention does not claim representativeness, it is not its goal (...) researchers create an experimental space because in addition to discussing with each other, the actors can meet and discuss with those who identify themselves as opponents, that is, crucial stakeholders for the desired change".

These experimental laboratories also generated visual products that could then be circulated to a larger field than the group that made them and produce research through the practice of restitution and back translation. Our films then play on a number of registers: field access vectors, ethnographic field builders, litmus paper of power relations in the field through the work of the restitution.

Gender and generations

Treating this issue in the perspective of generations seemed to us particularly interesting because in this territory the lags between modernity and tradition, which the Tunisian revolution of 2011 strained, are becoming evident. On the bodies of young Tunisian women many looks act as control devices: traditionally they are male, linked to the value system of honour and shame, and in unexpected ways, the generational female one, which oversees the deviations from both modernity and tradition. In an exterior and recognisable control system, however, young Tunisian women succeed in building negotiation and resistance strategies that pass through work on their bodies.

Before following this research path, we wondered at length about the possibility of using a gender glance crossing another socio-cultural space, dissociating it from its localised determinations. In fact, even the so-called post-structuralist perspective, despite starting from corporeality and the incorporation of gender differences, recognises that although they are stabilised by a symbolic order, they cannot be deconstructed solely by means of a symbolic operation (Sassatelli, 2006). As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) wrote, gender cannot be reduced to a voluntary act, it cannot be a mask that can be worn or removed at will. And precisely this incorporation also makes the subject an "opaque entity to herself, never fully self-transparent and knowable" (Butler, 2006, p. 31).

Compared to the transcultural perspective, studies conducted by anthropologists such as Balandier, Leach, Barth and Amselle have led to a sharp change in perspective: with the abandonment of the paradigm of discontinu-

ities between cultures, in favour of that of continuity, or even in the variant of Jean-Loup Amselle, of indistinction and of original *métissage* (Gallissot, Kilani & Rivera, 2001). For Amselle, cultures are the result of mestizo logics that do not appear as isolated segments or watertight compartments, but as “societal chains”, i.e. culturally continuous, which cannot be clearly defined as opposed to the closest socio-cultural realities, with which they share more similarities than differences.

For those who undertake a cognitive process in which they try to resonate gender with culture, it is therefore essential to be aware of their own, situated, positioned and partial knowledge, influenced by space-time factors, by the gender to which they belong of course, but also by social roles and especially from their own life stories. But it was just the closeness/distance of gender that led us to be able to know and discuss some of the themes according to some perspectives not taken for granted.

In particular, in this paper we will discuss two practices followed by many young Tunisians – veiling oneself voluntarily and medicalisation of virginity - as ways of negotiating between social order and subjectivity⁴. The young Tunisian woman is, in fact, at the centre of an ideological and social debate, at the centre of the most important contradictions between modernity and tradition: it is she who is the subject of misunderstanding and conflict, it is she who is reduced either as a symbol of refusal or of the acceptance of Westernisation. And this is all the more evident in the generational relationship.

Dan Woodman (2018) is one of the authors who has dealt most with the relationship between gender and generations. Drawing on the conceptualisation of generations introduced by Mannheim (1952), his approach investigates the differences and oppositions within generational categories. Mannheim conceptualised society as a mixture of continuity and change. According to his conceptualisation, a new generation emerges when the previous constellation of beliefs and lifestyles becomes inadequate to new social conditions. The new emerging social formation creates an area of possible answers, but not in a deterministic way. The new “generational location” can react in different ways, often even antagonistic. The different answers are called “generational units”. A generation is therefore united by common problems that it can deal with differently. Gender and class, indeed, intervene in the intersection with the generation (Woodman, 2018). Barbara Risman in a recent work used the generational frame to study the changes of gender models in young people and managed to build different types - rebels, inno-

⁴ Both of these practices are developed more in depth in the sociological film produced by us – *Après le printemps, l'hiver* – and in the book that recounts the results of the ethnographical research (Queirolo Palmas, Stagi, 2017). The film can be freely accessed at the following address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPvIrNce6yA>

vators, straddlers and true believers- (Risman, 2018, 5-9), which are nothing other than “generational units”. Together, they contribute to recreate a new gender structure with different strategies depending on the value orientation, the class to which they belong, and, in general, the capital available.

In our research, as we will see on the following pages, a gender contrast emerges between two cohorts in which social class, religious orientation and area of origin, become variables that construct, according to Mannheim’s definition, different “generational units”.

The veil

The stereotype of Arab women subjugated to their men (fathers, brothers, children or husbands) is one of the main topics of “cultural racism against Islamic populations accused of ‘patriarchal and sexist abuse’ of women” (Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 6).

The neo-colonial and neo-patriarchal power regime which is exercised and has as subject the body and the lives of Arab-Muslim women is a form of new “neo-colonial sexism” in which the image of the weak and subjugated woman serves in fact to produce images of violent, primitive and coarse men; another form of Orientalism (Said, 1978) as a cultural and political but also sexual construction.

From this point of view, the veil has always been considered the most tangible sign of female oppression; the submission of women to the patriarchal regime has in the past justified colonial rule and in the present the wars for the “exporting of democracy” and for the liberation of women from the oppression of Islam and patriarchal constraints: “liberating women from religious and sexual oppression seems to be the eternal mission of the West” (Parisi, 2012, p. 166).

In the context of these reflections, it is particularly interesting to deal with the Tunisian situation, which has lived from independence on the imposition of modernisation and westernisation, made operational by a ban on wearing the veil in public places.

Indeed, Habib Bourguiba’s great modernisation plan was largely based on the theme of female emancipation. The veil and education of girls were the essential themes discussed by modernists and conservatives at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Personal Statute Code, promulgated on 13th August 1956, is considered the most advanced in the ‘Arab’ world. In fact, it abolished polygamy, the duty of obedience, repudiation, forced marriage; it legalised divorce; it gave women the right to vote. It operated, at the legislative level, a radical transformation of the legal status of women through provisions that were fundamental and innovative for the time and context.

In Tunisia after the Revolution, however, there was a rapid change, especially at university: girls have returned to wearing a veil and today this gesture triggers passions in Tunisian society. Opinions are divided between those who regard it as individual freedom, which falls within the framework of freedom of dress, and those who totally reject it.

The new practices of wearing a veil, in fact, represent a creative synthesis that seeks to combine fashion and tradition, which finds spaces of freedom in the revival of shapes and colours that hybridises styles and tendencies, shows the capacity for subjectivisation of Tunisian women against the contrast between religious imperatives and modernity (Ghribi, 2012). The “new veils” also allow renegotiation of spaces of movement in public space, as “they give Tunisian woman a freedom of movement while remaining in the *dedans* (developed through clothing), although she moves in the outer landscape, the *dehors*” (Ben Zakour, 2012, p. 58).

Women in the cohort of the ages from fifty to sixty, encountered during the research, expressed very critical positions on the choice of the younger to wear a veil. According to Najet, one of our interviewees, young women have decided to go back to wearing a veil especially for fashion; otherwise you would not be able to explain why they choose different styles (Egyptian, Turkish) and there is such close attention to the matching of colours. During the interview, she told us with great rancour, the episode of a young intern in her office who confessed to wearing one when her hair was a mess. In her view, it is especially the media in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that circulate certain models of femininity and beauty, but they also send out other messages on female roles and positioning.

The same concern about a regression of the female condition has long been argued by a colleague who studies gender, also in the same age cohort as Najet. What she particularly fears is a return to religious radicalisation, which can go through the media models of female fashion and beauty. In addition, according to some of her recent research, she believes that younger people assign no value to the achievements of feminism and that they only aspire to return to the home sphere and care roles. Our responses during the interview, aimed at better understanding her statements, tried to bring her story back to the current scenario of a major economic and employment crisis. Women’s unemployment, in fact, and above all, with regard to high education rates, shows very high percentages and makes it difficult to interpret aspirations without considering the strength of a context that is structurally making women fall back on the domestic: some choices may even represent a form of negotiation, recounted and valued as a practice of subjectivation. For our colleague, however, the attitude of young people, who return to the domestic sphere and choose the role of care, should be read only as a betray-

al towards emancipation and the struggles that women of her generation had carried forward.

Instead, as our research associates, with whom we shared the realisation of the sociological film, led us to understand, behind every veil or behind its rejection, there is a story, belief, and consciousness that only the person concerned is able to explain and take on; the work of resistance and subjectivation is inscribed in the meanings of practice, and that is where it has to be deciphered.

According to sociologist Marnia Lazreg:

the veil is at the same time a concept - there are several ways of thinking about, talking about, perceiving, and even taking it for granted - and a habit. As a concept it is the point of intersection between ideology and politics, culture and freedom of action. As a custom, it cannot be separated from history. And it is as a part of history, the story of the relationship between men and women, which is experienced and perceived by women in various parts of the world. The combination of concept and custom makes it 'natural' making it appear normative and immutable. The story of the veil affects the concept, explains its usage patterns and helps us understand what its future development might be. "(2011, p. 62).

For this reason, according to Lazreg, the question cannot simply be treated as an individual choice, since "the ability to act in the world is not independent of the social structure in which it is expressed and it is not an absolute concept" (ibid, p. 60). Moreover, while on the one hand a certain perspective of feminist studies has tried to return subjectivity to those who choose to wear it, considering it as an instrument of power and negotiation with oppression, on the other hand, this position tends to devalue the position of those who refuse to wear it, liquidating it as a choice of "westernisation". The veil is loaded with meanings that cannot be swept away on the basis of an individual decision, so she states: "Every time a woman puts on a veil, her decision involves other women" (ibid, p. 62).

The case of Nadia, one of the protagonists of the visual sociology laboratory conducted in Tunis and who accompanied us on a large part of the field work, is quite emblematic. Nadia wears the veil only to go to university; in the different stages of our relationship she will give us different versions for her choice. The first time she tells us that she did it as a protest against the refusal of a visa:

Two days ago, I went to the consulate of your country. I wanted to ask for a visa to go and see my sister in Parma. I have the money, the invitation, everything. I am a student with a three-year degree in sociology. They asked me what work my father did and I said his business is working the land, being a farmer. They did not even allow me in to

make the application. I felt humiliated. I thought of your hypocrisy when you fill your mouths with words like democracy, relationships between the shores of the Mediterranean, dialogue between cultures. I no longer believe you. So I decided to wear my veil, to cover myself in protest.

Nadia, in the context of some discussions, will claim to have worn it as an act of protest against academic power, as a scenic transgression, as an experiment to understand how you see the world from that position and how the world perceives and treats you. A lecturer, intimately, would later tell us that Nadia put on her veil after having been subjected to harassment by a colleague. In this case, the veil, which was first described as a stigma as a sign of cultural backwardness and inadequacy to carry out the part of sociologist, becomes a gesture of protection from that male chauvinism expressed by those same subjects who should embody the idea of modernity in their teaching function. The veil thus becomes a gesture that expresses resistance to sexism but reflects gender oppression, a sign in a game of glances, in a struggle of positions. In the end, in the documentary *Après le printemps, l'hiver* which she herself contributed to, Nadia chose to say this:

My experience with the veil has shown me a lot of things and how people can hurt you, classifying you in a certain category or another only according to your appearance that does not resemble his or hers. In addition to the comments that I received of the kind that you are not beautiful with a veil ... the veil is not for you ... have you become religious? But the most ridiculous comment is "what is that cloth that you put on your head, go, do not talk to me about it ...". From that moment on, I have found out just how much veiled women suffer and how they feel discriminated and oppressed even if they represent the majority of our society today, especially after the fall of Ben Ali ... and so, instead of understanding the message of this strong claim of a veiled body bearer of messages, we are accusing this body saying that it does not contemporary society ... And, in my opinion, we are correcting one mistake with another, forgetting that in all these cases it is our body that is at stake ... What is the relationship of the veil with public space? I wear one for many reasons: it is a kind of protection, a stimulus, but this is my body and I do what I want ... I'm always the same Nadia who is looking for ... what has changed is the look of others towards me ... Such a situation still faces us with fundamental questions ... Are identities fixed or rigid or are they negotiable? And should we defend them as fanatics? That is why I say that my identity is a sort of dilemma so it is a continuous construction, this is the journey I'm interested in, not the arrival.

Within the various versions present in Nadia's stories, reproduction and resistance, social determinism and agency are encompassed. To interpret its

meaning, one must look at the scene and background, interstitials and occult practices; as Goffman (2003) has shown, mimicry, oblique gesture, and transformation of the stigma into an emblem representing the three modes through which stigmatised people manage their public status. The quality and type of stigma depends on the scene that is passed through: the family, the neighbourhood, the school and the public space. And in each of these social places the discourse on the veil, its meaning and pleasantness can take on different curvatures, since it represents a form of negotiation between subjectivity and social order⁵.

Conclusive reflections

The so-called “honour and shame” syndrome was one of the most important “ways of thinking” that in the late 1950s a group of anthropologists, led by J.G. Peristiany, applied to the study of the Mediterranean, understood as a territory characterised by common features that guaranteed cultural homogeneity. These scholars argued that “there is a binary gender-related opposition, according to which honour is associated with men and shame with women” and that both honour and shame “are inextricably united, linked to one other by both cognitive and affective ties” (Brandes, 1987, p. 122 cited in Magrini, 1985/2016). For a long time abandoned, since it was considered a stigmatising and altering outlook of the backwardness of certain Mediterranean areas, it has emerged in recent years in the European debate on migration (Bimbi, 2015; Danna, 2007).

Such a perspective would appear to contrast net lines of separation between cultural aspects seen as opposites: modernity and tradition, society and community, global and local, and above all public and private.

If honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of society and the so-called “public opinion” and concerns men, its opposite, shame, is referable to women. Virility and shame are complementary qualities in relation to honour: the virility of family men is indeed functional to the protection of the sexual honour of his women. Continuing in this reflection it can also be stated that dishonour is collective while shame is individual. In this sense it is extremely interesting to try to consider this paradigm in a reflection on the cultural continuities of the Mediterranean area undergoing the process of modernisation. Individual accountability, which means having to solve at a personal level the contradictions and problems that are generated at the social level, is a characteristic feature of modernity and change that it generates. In the Tunisian context, the choice to use the veil in certain circumstances or more generally to work on body bound-

⁵ For a complete review on the veil and Islamic feminism, see Scudieri, 2013.

aries with self-surveillance, are negotiation strategies that show how the contrasting forces of modernity and tradition break on the female body and must be managed. In this sense, the body of the young Tunisians can be interpreted as an 'experimental' place in which all the scattered, contrasting and reconstructed signs are inscribed and collected that testify to the ferment of a culture.

Where different "generational units" produce different resistance or negotiation strategies.

Investigating this type of object was possible because the people who participated in the research were not only involved actors and "provoked and accompanied" self-analysis, according to Bourdieu's definition (1993), in co-constructing the sense together with the researchers, but they were themselves researchers who used sociological knowledge and gender sensitivity, enhancing our culturally-situated gaze to produce self-ethnography of themselves.

One of the keys to access, in terms of research, to such intimate worlds was the option of the participatory and ethnographic film: not only breaking the distance between observed and observer, but above all looking for ways, within a laboratory frame, for a co-writing of narrative and representation capable of opening up a greater space for social reflection.

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