“Unconquered still”

The continuation and dissemination of Malcolm X’s story through artistic appropriation in Ayman Yossri’s *Subtitles* series

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Introduction

The art scene of Jeddah has received increasing international attention in recent times. Artists who had been working for years in the Saudi metropolis, are now recognized outside of the Kingdom. Especially the 'Edge of Arabia' exhibition, held in 2008 in London, saw Saudi artists breaking through internationally. Among them was Ayman Yossri Daydban (born, 1966). Although, strictly speaking, Yossri is no Saudi artist, as he was born in Palestine and possesses the Jordanian nationality, he has lived in Jeddah for most of his life. His artistic work deals primarily with issues such as cultural heritage, national identity, globalization and its resulting processes of interculturalization. He approaches these topics in a very personal manner, using *objets trouvés* meaningful to him, which he repurposes into artworks. In 2010, Yossri started producing a series of artworks he calls *Subtitles*. These are made by pausing (mostly) American films at a moment in which an interestingly composed image is coupled with a meaningful Arabic text: the film's subtitles. Yossri then takes a print screen of the still, removes its colours and adjusts its contrasts. Finally, he presents them in the form of prints.

Among his *Subtitles* series are appropriations of Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*, which was released to cinemas in 1992. This movie is about the life of the eponymous African-American political activist who rose to prominence in the 1950's. Malcolm was a controversial figure who has left a major imprint on American history. Contemporary opinions on him differ: some remember him as an inspiring black leader who defied America's white power structure, while others dismiss him as a racist spewing violent and hateful rhetoric. In the Middle-East he is known as the first prominent American to convert to Sunnism, the most widely practiced branch of Islam. Malcolm subsequently performed his *hajj* (pilgrimage) in the Saudi kingdom. By appropriating *Malcolm X*, Yossri at once effectuates an actualization of Malcolm's historical legacy and reintroduces his life narrative to Saudi Arabia, bringing to light the complicated consequences of "simply taking an image". This thesis will be an inquiry into Yossri's strategy of appropriation, and the complexities of its continuation and dissemination of Malcolm's story.

The first chapter will discuss the concept of artistic appropriation, Yossri's appropriative method, and its cultural influences and societal implications. It will examine the question: In which ways do Yossri's *Subtitles* series generate new meanings by appropriating Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*? The theoretical frame will primarily consist of literature from the fields of appropriation and adaptation studies. It will explore the postmodern notion of appropriation, its philosophical basis, and its application by artists of the Pictures Generation. Comparing their appropriative practices with Yossri's can be interesting, because they share

methodological and visual characteristics, while their societal contexts are radically different. Therefore, sociological works discussing artistic expression in the contemporary Saudi society will be consulted, in order to examine the socio-cultural atmosphere in which Yossri works.

The second chapter will discuss Yossri's actualization of Malcolm X's legacy. It will explore the question: what current relevance do the *Subtitles* series establish for the historical significance of Malcolm X by appropriating Lee's film? Yossri's re-constitution of Malcolm's "myth" will be discussed through the theoretical lenses of social agency and political hegemony. Therefore, Alfred Gell's and Chantal Mouffe's theories relating both concepts to artistic practices will be examined. Furthermore, literature from the field of film and media studies, and primary source material about Malcolm's life will make up the theoretical frame for this chapter. Finally, in order to establish what Malcolm's legacy means in the contemporary world, news media covering recent socio-political developments in Saudi Arabia have been consulted.

In the final chapter, the *Subtitles* series and its main character are envisioned as cultural bridges between the American and Saudi societies. It will explore the question: in which ways do the *Subtitles* series effectuate intercultural dialogue between Saudi Arabia and America? The literature consulted here will examine the problematic notion of intercultural dialogue, along with the discourse of "Othernesss" as examined in the writings of Edward Said and Linda Nochlin. Finally, this chapter will draw from the Frankfurt School's critical theory, in its intercultural exploration of American and Saudi religious histories.

As of 2018, Yossri's artworks are summarily discussed in magazines, websites and exhibition catalogues. However, no academic studies of his work yet exist. Therefore, this thesis will approach Yossri's work interdisciplinarily, interpreting them through various theoretical lenses in order to gain meaningful insights. Additionally, Yossri was interviewed about the creative processes and cultural contexts that shape his works. His statements provide crucial insights in discussing his artistic practice. Though the *Subtitles* series has become quite substantial over the years, this thesis will exclusively discuss artworks that appropriate *Malcolm X*. The images presented in this thesis are found on Yossri's website and other webpages. Additionally, two works of the *Subtitles* series are on display in the Greenbox Museum in Amsterdam, a self-proclaimed "cabinet of curiosities" which exhibits contemporary art from Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, a *Subtitles* artwork was on display in the 'Longing for Mecca' exhibition in The National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, where I first became acquainted with Yossri's series.

I'm the poetical poltergeist I heist tracks from the past and return 'em to the present time in rhyme form, what was once dead is now resurrected on the record, and the physical words are mere residuals for my bidding

–Pharoahe Monch, *The Extinction Agenda*, 1994

1. CONCEPTUALIZING AYMAN YOSSRI'S APPROPRIATIVE PRACTICE

This chapter will examine the phenomenon of appropriation in Ayman Yossri's *Subtitles* series, and its ability to generate meaning in relation to its source material. The first section will provide theory from the fields of appropriation and adaptation studies, in light of which Yossri's work will be discussed. It will furthermore make use of a comparative method by relating Yossri's artworks to earlier examples of appropriation, by several artists of the so-called Pictures Generation.

In the second part, the origins and theoretical underpinnings of this American form of appropriation will be discussed, after which Yossri's artistic practice in the markedly different Saudi context will be examined. It will foreground the challenges of practicing appropriation in an atmosphere typified by religious fundamentalism and state censorship, but at the same time attempts to demonstrate the opportunities such an environment offers for complicating the effects of appropriation. The primary question explored here will be: In which ways do Yossri's *Subtitles* series generate new meanings by appropriating Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*?

1.1 The *Subtitles* series, between adaptation and appropriation

Stacks of DVD copies are among the numerous objects that Yossri has collected over the years. He watches the movies in his small private "cinema" at his house in Jeddah. Viewing these mostly American Hollywood productions, aside from being entertaining and emotional pastime, is an integral part of the early process of creating his *Subtitles* series. It is during this activity that Yossri pauses films, and takes print screens that he further develops into artworks. *Tahabbani, La Tahabni* (fig. 1) is one such work that resulted from this process. It represents an early scene in Spike Lee's movie, in which Malcolm bluffs his way into the leadership of a criminal gang by playing Russian roulette. We see the character putting a pistol on his head, while Arabic subtitles below generally convey what he exclaims ("Love me, love me not"). This remarkable shot does not consist of documentary material on the historical Malcolm X (1925-1965), but depicts the American actor Denzel Washington

portraying him on film in 1992. Recognizing this particular scene as potential material for his artistic practice, Yossri decided to pause it and use the resulting still image. He describes his artistic process in more detail:

> I rely on watching movies that are broadcasted to the public. I sit on my couch and with a camera I take a photo of a scene that attracts me. After a few days (or sometimes months) I return and take a screenshot of the scene. I wait until I rid myself of the affect of the actual movie, after which I am able to focus and concentrate on the Arabic language of the subtitles. It is then that I choose the notion that is appropriate within the subject matter that I am attempting to realize and express through the work. I consequently modify and graphically manipulate the image if necessary (extract its colours etc.) in an attempt to neutralize the image and free it from its intended context.[1]

So, Yossri transforms the original aired movie into a manipulated still image, which is then only a digital file. The final artwork consists of a print of this picture, which is typically exhibited in a light box or fixed behind a plain of glass. Thus, the defining trait of Yossri's artistic process is claiming extant cultural artefacts and reworking them into "something new". This method of taking and using something that is not one's own has come to be defined as appropriation.

Etymologically "appropriation" derives from the Latin word *ad*, meaning "to", and *proprius*, meaning "own" or "personal". Together they form the verb *appropriare*, which translates to "to make one's own".[2] Appropriation thus describes a practice in which ownership is claimed over something already in existence, which can be subsequently used for one's own purposes. Theorized within the artistic realm, this generally means either creating a visual reproduction of an existing object, or physically taking this object and presenting it in an alternative context.[3] While Yossri takes ownership over the source material (film), it is a visual reproduction (print) that he eventually presents as artwork. This type of appropriation was pioneered by American artists of the 1970's Pictures Generation, who took various types of visual material, from avant-garde photographs to commercial images, which

[1] Interview with Yossri, April 11th, 2016

[2] Nelson 1996: 161-162

[3] Giving a (tentative) definition of appropriation is important, because it has sometimes been employed to describe processes that are considered to be very broad and abstract, raising questions over the usefulness of appropriation as a theoretical tool. The art historian Robert Nelson contends that, in recent years, the concept of appropriation has been extended to the very act of human perception, interpretation and memory. Nelson warns that this will turn appropriation into "a theoretical Pac-Man", which devours all other conceptual approaches and thereby becomes analytically obsolete (Nelson 1996: 164-165). About the neighbouring concept of adaptation, the cultural theorist Rainer Emig similarly cautions that, if culture is conceptualized as a continual process of adaptation, then it describes everything, but at the same time nothing that can be properly defined or theorized (Emig 2012: 19).

served as the raw material for their own work. Consequently, academic discussions among art historians and cultural theorists about artistic appropriation was generated, leading to the formation of new fields such as appropriation and adaptation studies. In the following part, Yossri's artistic practice will be examined in light of theories from these fields, and his artwork *Tahabbani, La Tahabni* will be discussed in relation to the works of several artists of the Pictures Generation.

While the term appropriation will be used throughout this thesis, the emerging field of adaptation studies may shed some interesting light on Yossri's artistic practice. According to literary scholar Pascal Nicklas, in both appropriations and adaptations the relationship between newly created works and their original sources is crucial, as the meaning of the latter is enriched and actualized by the former.[4] They thus resignify and reanimate an original work. The difference between the two concepts, Nicklas states, lies in the distance between the source and the new work. He argues that an adaptation stays relatively close, and is therefore more faithful, to the original.[5] Indeed we see in *Tahabbani, La Tahabni* an evocation of a particular scene in *Malcolm X*, which the viewers might replay in their minds, cognitively actualizing Lee's film in the process. Its mimetic quality makes conjuring the cinematic source easier, as it does not stray far from Lee's original imagery.

This faithful character of Yossri's work can be related to Pictures Generation artist Sherrie Levine's usage of modernist photographs from the 1930's, from which resulted her well-known *After Walker Evans* pictures (fig. 2). In art historical discourse, these have been primarily typified as appropriations. Interestingly however, these photographs equally show traits of adaptations in their visual fidelity to Evans's originals. According to the artist Stefanie Ball-Piwetz, they were made in a process called "internegative", in which Levine took photographs of reproductions of Evans's pictures that she found in books. She used the resulting negatives to create new photographic images, which constituted direct visual copies of Evans's originals.[6] Art theorist Molly Nesbit defines Levine's photographs as "shifts", because they are several productions removed from Evans's pictures, whereby they have lost their original clarity.[7]

Tahabbani, La Tahabni has similarly "shifted" from Lee's film. Like Levine, Yossri appropriates not the original source, but a distributed DVD copy of it. However, the artwork

[4] Nicklas 2012: 2
[5] Nicklas 2012: 4
[6] Ball-Piwetz 2007: 24
[7] Nesbit 2003: 254

remains quite close to the original frames, both compositionally and in "levels" of production, because it is the result of a print screen, which captures the image exactly as it presents itself on screen. Still, Yossri somewhat negates the faithfulness of *Tahabbani, La Tahabni*, by manipulating the colours and contrasts of Lee's shot. He introduces more intense shades into the image, contrasted by a bright sepia, which effectuates a visual distance to Lee's film. Moreover, Yossri erases his emotional proximity to the film by waiting until its "affect" has worn off, in order to mentally create distance with Lee's story and characters.

Both Levine and Yossri engage in the act of "displacement", defined by art historian Catherine Abrams as "the detachment of a visual element from a specific context, and its placement in another." In Levine's case, Abrams contends that this involves reproducing the original entirely, keeping intact its denotative meaning, yet altering its historical connotative significance by displaying it under her own name.[8] Levine's *After Walker Evans* photographs are left untitled, leaving the viewer completely free to interpret the image, in contrast to Evans's originals that bore titles such as *Frame House in Ossining, New York,* which immediately anchor the picture theoretically. Yossri's displacement of Lee's film involves isolating a single frame of it, and exhibiting it under a title dictated by the Arabic subtitles it coincidentally displays.

It seems that Yossri's work is best defined by Nicklas's conception of adaptation; it manages to actualize *Malcolm X* because of its visual fidelity to Lee's picture, and does not seem to "rework" the original material. Rather its appearance and even its title are largely determined by what Lee produced eighteen years earlier. Yossri's usage of a single frame of *Malcolm X* enables it to act as *pars pro toto*, a sort of teaser, for the film as a whole. The art director Steven Heller uses this analogy to describe the work of Barbara Kruger, stating that her work prompts curiosity by hinting at a message, similar to teaser advertisements.[9] He characterizes Kruger as a graphic designer, noting how she employs the language of mass communication.[10] Her background in graphic design is reflected by her artwork's effective combination of "catchy verbal slogans" composed over a black-and-white image (fig. 3). Unlike Levine, who takes "high art" from the modernist canon, Kruger chooses to work with what curator Carol Squiers calls "peripheral images". These are banal, often absurd, yet readily familiar pictures that make up the visual language of mass media advertising. Taken out of context, they strike us as highly ambiguous; perfect for Kruger to repurpose into

[8] Abrams 1991: 104-105
[9] Heller 1999: 114
[10] Heller 1999: 116

subversive messages.[11] Yossri's work is reminiscent of Kruger's in its monochrome quality and the feature of prominent texts. However, these artists' source material resignifies the new work in different ways, as Lee's film "speaks" through Yossri's artworks in both word and image, while Kruger theoretically loads photographs with a text of her own making. Indeed, Squiers explains that Kruger "ruins" the pictorial representations she takes, because her slogans impose new meanings on them.[12] In comparison, Yossri's work seems "caught" in the original meaning produced by Lee, from which it is seemingly unable to free itself.

However, this is not to say that Yossri's work is a passive re-presentation of *Malcolm X*. Other traits of adaptation reveal a more active side to the *Subtitles* series. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon emphasizes the reproductive continuity of adaptations, and conceptualizes the phenomenon as the re-telling of a story in a different form. Hutcheon gives numerous examples of narratives that have been transposed from one medium to another, and notes that "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication."[13] Thus, adaptations preserve the essences of stories, while embodying new cultural forms to convey them with. We find that this kind of intermediality plays an important role in Yossri's *Subtitles* artworks, because they transpose the narrative of Malcolm's life, originally written in *The autobiography of Malcolm X*, and later adapted by Lee's film, onto prints. It is when one realizes the importance of this intermedial process, that the transformative quality of the *Subtitles* series is fully appreciated.

Their transitory process, from film to screenshot to print, are akin to some of Louise Lawler's works. Lawler is known for her artistic experiments with cinematographic media. The art historian Sven Lütticken notes her use of frame enlargements (fig. 4). He argues that these reveal what is not seen in an original film; isolated from the narrative flow of the movie, they undermine its logico-temporal order, whereby they offer possibilities for reading it against the grain.[14] Similarly, *Tahabbani, La Tahabni* represents frozen footage of a momentous scene in *Malcolm X*, which keeps the audience in suspense over the outcome of the game of roulette. Usually, the viewer is able to understand and situate Malcolm's death-defying act within the context of Lee's story. However, Yossri places the shot outside the movie's narrative structure, undoing its contextual logic, after which the subtitles no longer simply confirm what the image implies. The artwork breaks the hierarchy of signification between word and image and puts them on equal footing, after which they can both confirm

[11] Squiers 1999: 140
[12] Squiers 1987: 77
[13] Hutcheon 2006: 7
[14] Lütticken 2014: 22

and contradict each other, or tell different stories entirely, depending on the viewer's "general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society".[15]

Thus, whereas it first seems that Yossri plainly reinstates Lee's narrative, his de-contextualization of *Malcolm X*'s scene opens up a space for its critical reinterpretation. In this respect, the *Subtitles* artworks activate their viewer in a similar way that Levine's *After Walker Evans* series does, which, contrary to their apparently simple re-presentation of Evans's images, open up space for assigning new significance to them. The art critic Craig Owens defines Levine's photos as "expropriations" in so far as they disrespect the paternal authority and the singular meaning of Evans's images.[16] Indeed, Levine's works serve to negate the authority and singularity of the photographs that were formative of the modernist canon. Evans remains significant though, because it is his difference with Levine that in part determines the interpretations of the *After Walker Evans* series. Indeed, art theorist Howard Singerman remarks that reading Evans's photographs with the knowledge that they are signed by Levine, would be to engender them differently.[17] The historical subject matter she draws from further emphasizes Levine's gendered "Otherness". After all, art historian Christopher Tradowsky notes "in remaking Walker Evans' depression-era FSA photographs Levine stands among the disenfranchised cultural "others" therein portrayed."[18] This observation works to enrich possible readings of Yossri's *Subtitles* artworks, which does not merely entail rearranging the internal components (text and image) of *Malcolm X*; it also involves relating Yossri's socio-cultural background to Lee's and his cinematic characters', in order to critically reconsider what Malcolm's story currently signifies in Saudi Arabia.

For example, out of context *Tahabbani, La Tahabni* fails to convey the original story of a young man who, bereft of the opportunity to climb the American social ladder, is driven into desperate situations. Instead we are presented with the remarkable image of a figure who seemingly enjoys taunting fate, playing Russian roulette. Though disgendered in the Arabic translation, the subtitles reading "*Tahabbani, La Tahabni*" may relate to the French game of affection. Indeed the literary scholar Asghar Seyed-Gohrab states that *mahabba*, from which the verbs in the subtitles derive, refers to earthly affection.[19] The artwork may then illustrate the desperations one may be driven into by love or rejection. However, Seyed-Gohrab adds

[15] Hall 1997: 38-39
[16] Owens 1983: 73
[17] Singerman 1994: 87
[18] Tradowsky 2010: 90
[19] Seyed-Gohrab 2015: 82

that *mahabba* equally refers to divine love,[20] which may turn the artwork into a symbol of spiritual sacrifice or martyrdom; a transcendence into the Beloved (God) by ending one's earthly existence. Such mystical notions are highly controversial in the conservative Saudi state. Indeed, religious readings of the artwork may bear strong societal implications as well. Similar to Spike Lee's picture of a desperate Malcolm, which urges us to reflect on the consequences of institutional racism, Yossri's artwork may explore institutionally "forbidden" paths to God, and demonstrate the violent legal consequences of such a quest.

Although this is but one interpretation of *Tahabbani, La Tahabni*, it demonstrates that Yossri's artwork is more than a mere re-presentation of Lee's film; rather, it decontextualizes, translates and resignifies its original components. This realization leads the present discussion past adaptation and towards exploring the concept of appropriation. Surely, Yossri's artworks show characteristics of adaptations, in their visual mimesis of *Malcolm X* and their intermedial continuation of the character's story. However, their "shifts" from cinematic medium to print inevitably causes them to transform the significance of Lee's film. Indeed, Pascal Nicklas argues that appropriations, unlike adaptations, rethink the terms (the content rather than the form) of the original.[21] Moreover, Catherine Abrams contends that, although appropriations rely on their original sources for significance, they also critically comment on them.[22] It is the *Subtitles* series' rethinking of and critical commentary on *Malcolm X* that will be further examined in this thesis and, recognizing this transformative character of Yossri's artworks, they will be referred to as appropriations from here on.

1.2 Appropriation, from American origins to contemporary complexities

The origins and theoretical underpinnings of postmodern appropriation art can be traced back to the American urban society of the 1970's. Images were displayed on billboards, posters, magazines and TV screens, and played a defining role in shaping the city's visual appearance, which could be conceived as colourful collages of various printed and digital media. There was however a perceived darker side to this image-saturated urban landscape: while the Cold War-era in which American society manifested naturally generated optimism among Americans over their own capitalist free-market economy, philosophical debates over its production of mass media took a rather bleak turn.

[20] Ibidem
[21] Nicklas 2012: 4
[22] Abrams 1992: 50

Jean Baudrillard was one of the prominent thinkers who wrote on this topic. He argued that mass media, as prominent symptoms of America's capitalist model, effectively generated non-communication, because their dissemination of information worked merely one-directionally into the realm of the social. It negated the traditional idea of mediation as a form of responsible communication, which always opens up a space for response.[23] In addition to such a perceived flood of visual and verbal information, it was the message's urge to consume which propagated America as a capitalist society, and which dominated its culture. Art historian Simon Morley wrote that the mass mediation of the banal and inauthentic, by means of commercial advertising, soap operas and Hollywood movies, "heralded the final victory of the culture of consumer capitalism over any possibility of a viable counterculture of resistance."[24] The signs that constituted this society were envisioned by Baudrillard as intrinsically unstable, and in constant need of capital in order to be meaningful. Otherwise, words and images no longer intersected the external reality in any convincing way. In this unstable world bereft of authenticity, only mass media were able to evoke a simulated stable reality ("hyperreality") in which the original had been completely replaced by the copy.[25]

This pessimistic outlook on society can be related to philosopher Roland Barthes's cultural critique of "myth", which he conceptualized within the field of semiotics.[26] Myth, according to Barthes, uses the sign (the whole of signifier and signified, denotation and connotations) as raw material to "feed" off (indeed Barthes saw myth as a parasitic phenomenon), and use it to establish its own mythical system.[27] Thus, an advertisement poster promoting a McDonald's hamburger then no longer merely signifies beef and bread (the denotation) or the notion of fast-food (connotation), but rather the glorification of America's consumer society (myth). American social reality, described above as exclusively made up of signifiers, copies of a real world without any corresponding original or significance, is eminently prone to the practice of "mythification".[28] Barthes was practically unable to theorize modes of resistance to such discursive myth-making practices.

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[23] Baudrillard 1981: 169-170

[24] Morley 2003: 176

[25] Ibidem

[26] The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure laid the groundwork for semiotics (the study of signs). He envisioned the sign as a whole which constitutes "signifier" (the form: an actual word or image) and "signified" (the corresponding concept that it triggers in our minds). Expanding upon De Saussure's concept of the sign, Barthes describes that aside from the sign's denotation, its first level of meaning, deeper layers of signification can be produced when interpreted in a wider semantic field of culture. This turns the entirety of the former sign into a signifier, which is then coupled with a new signified: the connotation.

[27] Boer 2011: 217

[28] Barthes 1972: 135

As it turned out however, Barthes's concept was able to "arm" the new generation of artists which came up in America's mass media society. The Pictures Generation artists employed the strategy of appropriation to re-inscribe signs in their own mythical systems, in order to resist that of the dominant culture. This can be defined as "counter-mythification".[29] By appropriating the signs that were made to give meaning to America's consumer society, they were able to subvert this pervasive myth. Of course there was a notable pitfall to this artistic practice of which these artists were well aware. It implicated an acknowledgement of the deplorable state that American culture was in, as the artists chose to work within the semiotic system engendered by America's capitalist free-market economy. In doing so, they furthermore acknowledged the political hegemony of the capitalist system, because they realized that outside the market there was nothing. Some artists, like Barbara Kruger, even have a professional background in commercial design and advertising, and their artistic strategies mirror the promotional strategies of mass media. This would spur curator Douglas Eklund to ask whether their appropriative practices were "critical or collusive". He argues that they were both: on the one hand the artists were part of the system they attempted to resist, but on the other they had correctly foreseen that appropriation was to be the defining trait of future American culture.[30] Moreover, they realized that working within America's consumer society gave them a position from which they were able to subvert it. After all, Barbara Kruger's seductive messages may seem to be aimed at an audience of passive consumers, yet they actually attempt to raise awareness in the viewer, so that (s)he is able to challenge the dominant ideology of consumerism.[31]

Over thirty years later, Ayman Yossri would employ strikingly similar appropriative strategies in Saudi Arabia. Yossri too grew up in a major urban and cosmopolitan centre: the city of Jeddah. Although this coastal metropolis might look remarkably similar to its American counterparts, its political organization and cultural production are not structured around a liberal ideology. Instead they are strictly regulated by Saudi Arabia's religious establishment, the *Dar al-Ifta*. This institution traces its roots back to 1744, when a pact was made between the tribal leader Muhammad ibn Saud and the religious reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. The former would politically unite the Arabian Peninsula and govern it in accordance with the latter's strict interpretation of Islam.[32] The current incarnation of the

[29] Indeed, Robert Nelson even suggests "myth" and "appropriation" are synonymous, and he renamed the former into the latter in his 1996 essay 'Appropriation'.
[30] Eklund 2009: 309
[31] Morley 2003: 179
[32] Meijer 2012: 4

Saudi State, founded in 1932, is ever ruled by the Saudi royal family, and the Dar al-Ifta is still partly comprised of descendants of al-Wahhab. Their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, most commonly known as Wahhabism,[33] remains the dominant political ideology in the Kingdom.

The public enforcement of this ideology has had considerable effects on Saudi Arabia's film and image culture. The Middle-East scholar Muhammad al-Atawneh has analysed *fatwas* (legal opinions) given by Saudi *muftis* (legal scholars). From these he extrapolated authoritative opinions on cinemas, images and likenesses of human beings. Managing and attending cinemas, he found, is prohibited under Dar al-Ifta legal ruling. Additionally, it is forbidden to privately own and watch movies that have no religious or educational function.[34] Concerning visual media, there exists a general consensus among scholars that, in some aspects of contemporary life, images are indispensable.[35] Nonetheless the creation of human likenesses is prohibited for the reasons that human creation would vainly compete with God's, and that the resulting icons might lead to the practice of *shirk* (polytheism, idol worship).[36]

Thus, whereas American cities have been conceived as spaces typified by images, contemporary Jeddah is largely devoid of such visual stimuli. However, the Dar al-Ifta is not able to nullify the effects of globalization, among which is the dissemination of cultural artefacts, including pictures. Indeed there exists a rift between the ideal society imagined by religious scholars, and the deviant form that it practically manifests in. [37] Nevertheless, images are likely very differently received and interacted with in Saudi Arabia than in America. They do not constitute a cultural norm, but rather they are exceptional occurrences. Their rarity deprives them of the ability to completely "enclose" citizens in a fabricated reality, a realm of surfaces, mere signifiers without significance. So, pictures in the Kingdom do not seem to produce an inward looking world, but rather seem to point at external realities; a world beyond Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Yossri watches American movies in order to catch a glimpse of this outside world, to feel connected to people internationally. This foundational activity in his

[33] Adherents of what is often called "Wahhabism" deem this to be a derogatory term. They identify as Salafis (those who practice Islam in the ways of the early generations of Muslims, called *salaf* or "ancestors"), or *Muwahhidun* ("Unitarians", emphasizing the monotheistic aspect of their faith and the oneness of God).
[34] al-Atawneh 2010: 110-111
[35] al-Atawneh 2010: 116
[36] al-Atawneh 2010: 167-168
[37] The fact that films are in fact being showed in Saudi Arabia is one of the examples in which this field of contention between learned Islamic opinion and lived Islamic practice becomes apparent. The fact that Ayman Yossri's figurative artworks are exhibited in public galleries in the Kingdom is another example. The state somewhat makes up for this apparent "gap" by subjecting cultural expressions to screenings and censorship.

artistic process is therefore experienced as a particularly emotional one.[38] This might indicate that images in Saudi Arabia, in contrast to America, are experienced as significant and multi-layered objects that, rather than activating people to buy material goods, contain a strong emotional charge that effectuates a feeling of global interconnectivity. They offer ways of receiving the world in one's private space.

Artistic appropriation involves more than a mere reception of cultural artefacts though. Indeed the appropriator transcends the role of static receiving object and assumes the position of active subject, capable of exercising agency in the world around him. Remarkably enough, according to al-Atawneh, films are subjected to a manipulative agency before they even reach their intended Saudi audiences. He notes that official inspectors are allowed to screen "suspect movies" in order to evaluate them for approval.[39] Yossri describes this process in more detail:

> These movies are usually given permission to be broadcast by a government body, in which they have already gone through a type of censorship. At times this is rigorous, as some scenes of the movie are cut on the basis of political, religious or social inappropriateness. At other times, and for the above-mentioned reasons, the translations of the language or dialogue are not exact translations, but are more appropriate according to the official performing the censorship.[40]

So, not only do Saudi inspectors cut images or scenes they deem inappropriate, they also rewrite the Arabic subtitles in ways that befit the socio-cultural norms established by the Dar al-Ifta. Thus, before Yossri even watches *Malcolm X*, the film has unavoidably already been appropriated by the Saudi state. This practice can be related to the art historian Hal Foster's argument that a dominant culture may appropriate signs of certain social groups, which can in turn be resisted by counter-appropriation. This involves using a sign (reconstituted by a dominant culture) as a starting point for another semiological chain, adding new meaning and re-inscribing it in a counter-mythical system.[41] Foster adds that counter-appropriations are typically created by the excluded "Others" of history.[42]

This makes Yossri's appropriation of *Malcolm X* a postcolonial two-fold battle of semiotics. On the one hand, his artworks are resignifications of an American cultural artefact by an Arab artist. This places the *Subtitles* series in a framework of critical responses to

[38] Interview with Yossri, April 11th 2016
[39] Al-Atawneh 2010: 110
[40] Interview with Yossri, April 11th 2016
[41] Foster's decription of counter-appropriation is similar to the aforementioned counter-mythification in many respects. However, Foster adds to this notion the dimension of the cultural "Other" who engages in appropriation, opening the phenomenon up to the fields of Postcolonial and Gender Studies.
[42] Foster 1989: 264-265

colonial representations of Arab subjects, of which the literary theorist Edward Said laid the foundation with *Orientalism*. On the other hand, Yossri's appropriations can be explained as subversive responses to the manipulative practices of the Saudi state, by using their own reconstituted signs against their political hegemony. Signs that might ironically resurface at a Saudi art gallery. Yossri's semiological struggle at two fronts is further complicated by his appropriated source material, *Malcolm X*, which is itself known for its subversive message against the American culture from which it sprang forth, and which deals with a controversial historical figure who divides public opinion to this day. The following chapter will focus on how this "battle" plays out, by examining how Malcolm's legacy was appropriated and mythified by various agential forces in history, and how Yossri artistically engages in this struggle of signification in the contemporary Saudi Kingdom.

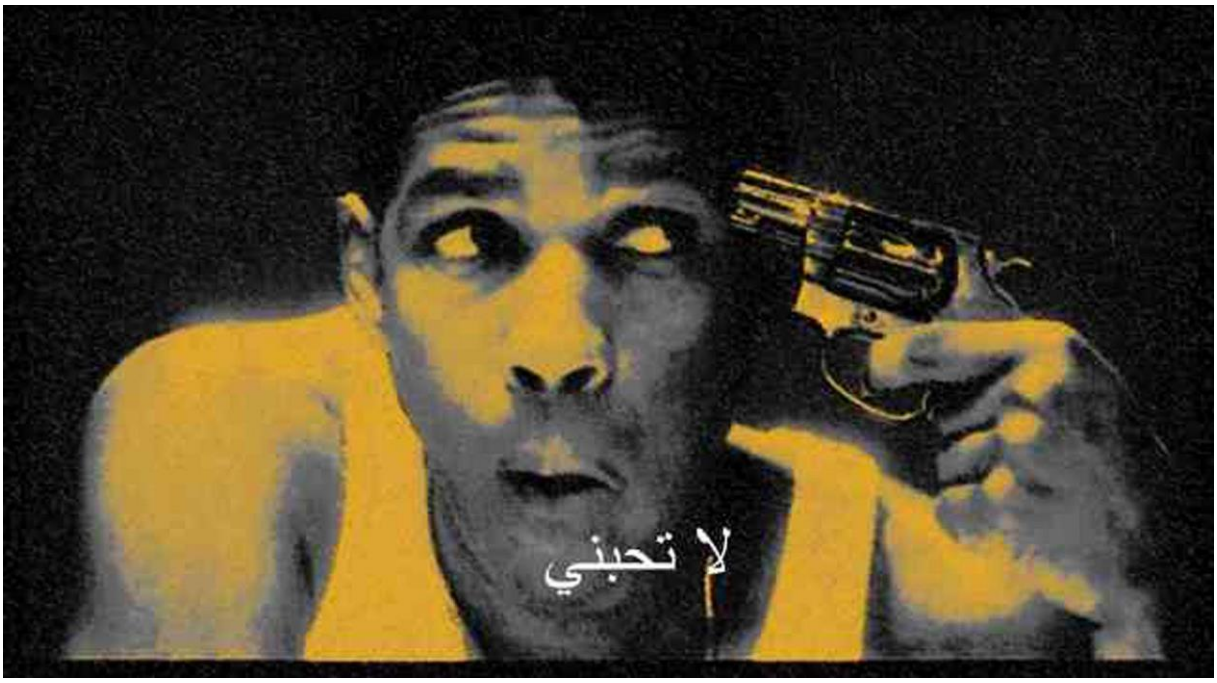

Fig. 1 Ayman Yossri Daydban, *Tahabbani, La Tahabni* (last part), lenticular print, 62 x 110 cm, 2010.

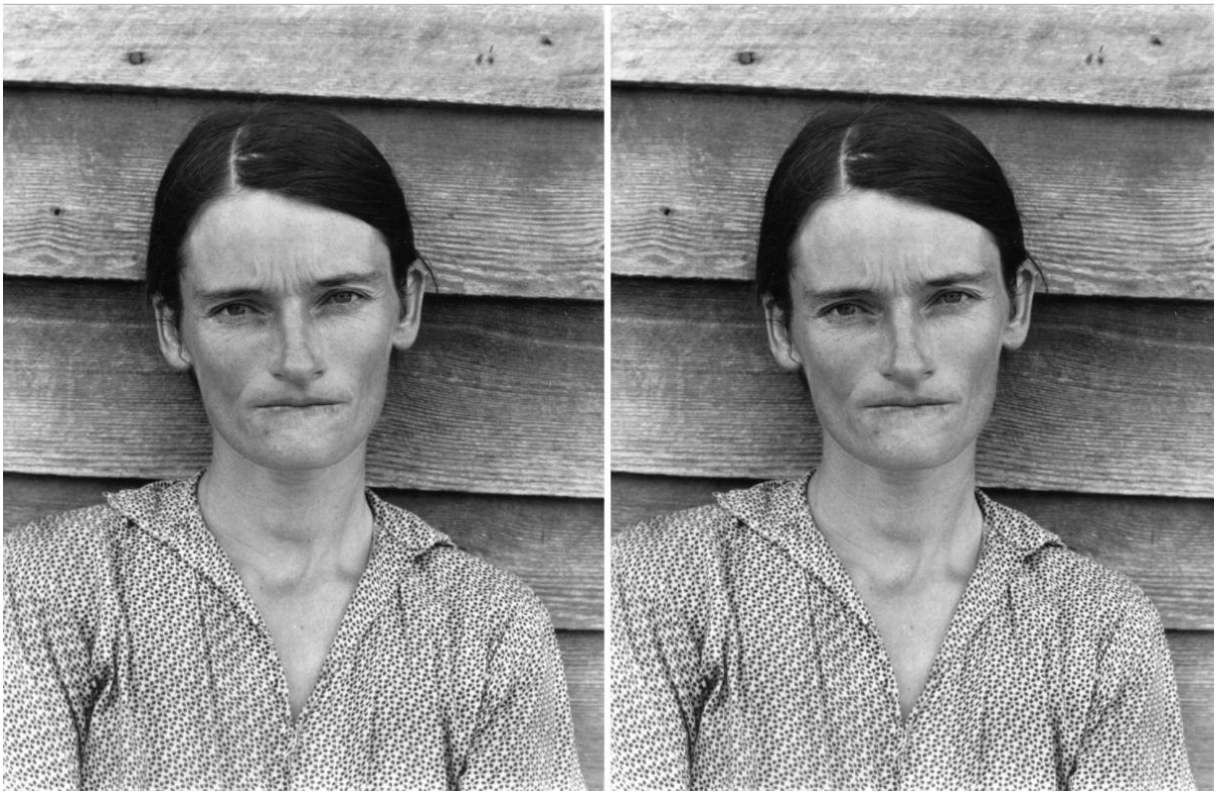

Fig. 2 Left: Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (After Walker Evans)*, 1981; right: Walker Evans's original picture, 1936.

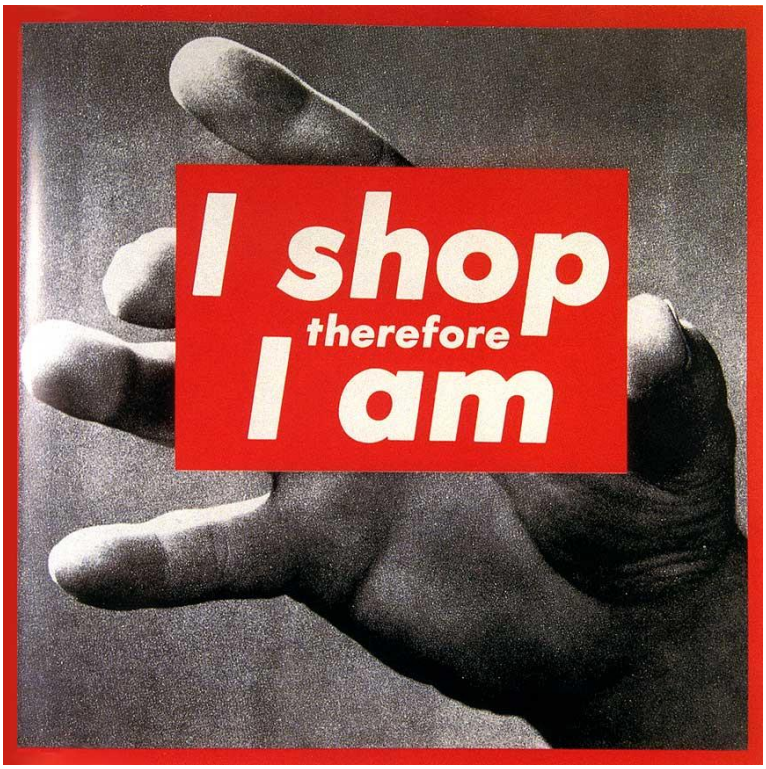

Fig. 3 Barbara Kruger, *I Shop Therefore I Am*, 1987.

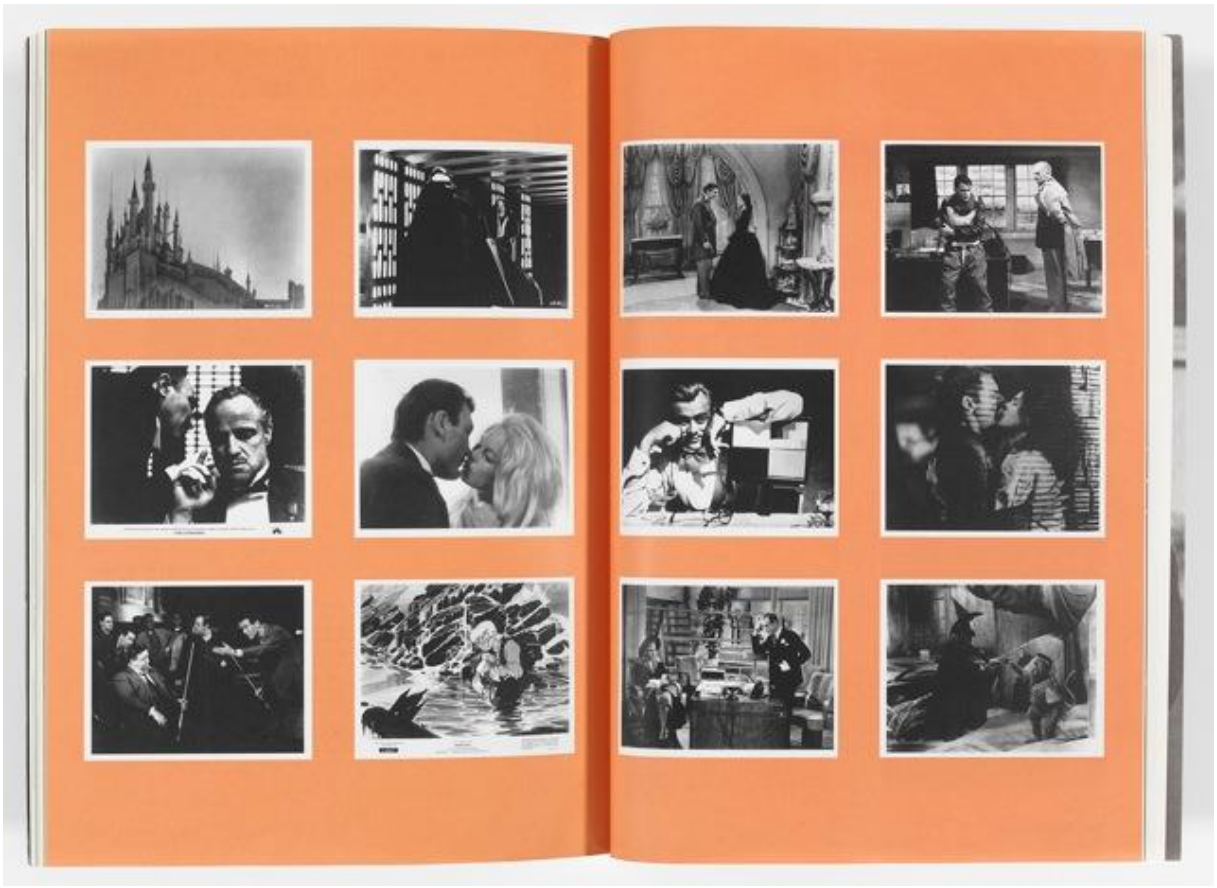

Fig. 4 Images from Louise Lawler's project *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture*, 1979 (reproductions in a book by Sven Lütticken).

Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.

–Malcolm X, *Letter from Mecca*, 1964

2. TRANSLATING MALCOLM'S MYTH TO THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The previous chapter has examined Ayman Yossri's practice of appropriation, but only hinted at its actualization of *Malcolm X* in the present time. This chapter will examine the question: what current relevance does the *Subtitles* series establish for the historical significance of Malcolm X by appropriating Spike Lee's film? The first section will introduce the theoretical frame through which Yossri's works will be analysed. This will primarily consist of the theory of art and agency proposed by the social anthropologist Alfred Gell, and artistic practices as counter-hegemonic interventions, as described by the political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Subsequently, two artworks from Yossri's *Subtitles* series will be discussed in light of these theories, in order to understand how they reframe the myth of Malcolm X, in order to critique the contemporary Saudi state in which they were produced.

2.1 Art, agency and hegemony

In his own words, Malcolm's life "has always been one of changes".[43] Indeed, his biography has often been presented as a sequence of personal transformations, wherein the brilliant yet troubled young Malcolm Little is forced into a life of crime and assumes the alias Detroit Red, who inevitably ends up in prison to be "reborn" as Malcolm X, the black segregationist preacher for the Nation of Islam, to finally embrace Sunni orthodoxy during his pilgrimage to Mecca, as el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.[44] Sometimes these shifts demonstrate Malcolm to have been a submissive patient of a racialized society, which denied him a career that was deemed to be "white only". However, he was as much an empowered agent able to shape his own future as a public figure, who himself knew best how to engage with the civil rights question of his time. Indeed, the concept of agency runs like a red threat through Malcolm's work, as his primary goal was activating African-Americans to define the meaning of blackness

[43] Haley 2001: 31
[44] Stevens 2002: 280

themselves and achieve equal rights with their fellow citizens.[45] What's more, after his untimely assassination in 1965, the significance of Malcolm's life has been under continuous contestation, in which hegemonic institutions that attempt to exercise agency over Malcolm's image, are challenged by contenders who lay equal claim on his legacy. With his *Subtitles* series, Yossri engages in this very struggle. His artworks reconstitute the complex historical network of agential forces which have mythologized Malcolm's life to their own benefit. They utilise this to comment on, and indeed engage in, power dynamics in the current Saudi kingdom. In other words, Yossri's artworks can be envisioned as social agents, "acting" within the Saudi socio-political sphere.

The theory that objects, like living entities, are able to mediate social agency was proposed by Alfred Gell in his book *Art and agency*. It covers Gell's quest for an anthropological theory of art which, unlike established art historical approaches like aesthetics or semiotics, should focus on social relations. Gell foregrounds art's "intention, causation, result and transformation" and defines art as "a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it".[46] In order to transcend the function of representation, Gell envisions artworks as social agents; causal sources which make events happen within their social sphere ("art nexus").[47] As such, Gell's idea can serve as a useful theoretical tool in describing the social dynamics represented in, and engendered by Yossri's artworks. Doubly so, since different agential forces have already appropriated Malcolm X's story along its transformative process into the *Subtitles* series. Conversely, Yossri's work provides an opportunity to move Gell's theory past some of its outdated aspects, and employ it in light of new artistic developments and contexts.

For instance, even though Gell claims his theory can be very widely applied,[48] he chooses to focus on the arts of "indigenous people" produced in "local contexts" and subjected to "limited circulation". The institutionalised art world is then characterised as "Western", and "alien" to this, and is seen as a usurper of art's original social nexus.[49] Gell seems to hint at the idea that art institutions are spaces within which art is bereft of its agency. However, contemporary artists produce works to be exhibited within the very context of galleries and museums which, rather than nullifying the work's social functionality, constitute their original nexus of social relations.

[45] Hoerl 2008: 356
[46] Gell 1998: 5-6
[47] Gell 1998: 16
[48] Derlon 2010: 130
[49] Gell 1998: 8

Secondly Gell largely ignores the political dimension of agency. The idea of agency was originally theorised within the discipline of sociology, in which it is related to the concept of "structure". The dynamics between agency and structure are political, in so far as they describe an individual's ability to act autonomously in relation to a political order. About this dynamic, the scholars of strategy and organization Sandy Green and Yuan Li, state that structure constrains agency because the social forces of institutional myths determine actor's activities.[50] On the other hand, they note that agency shapes structure, since these forces are themselves constituted by actor's activities.[51] Thus, the two concepts are no opposing forces which meet at some neutral "no man's land". Rather, structures are myth-producing institutions which encompass the entire "battleground" within which one can exercise a certain level of agency. In this light, Chantal Mouffe's theory of artistic interventions in hegemonic orders becomes relevant.

At the centre of Mouffe's argument is the unattainability of consensus within the framework of politics. Political identities are always relational, and products of us/them dichotomies. Reaching consensus means constructing an all-encompassing "us" without a corresponding "them", which is impossible since these can only exist in relation to one another. Every consensus is therefore inevitably accompanied by dissent, making it a "conflictual consensus" in which political struggle must take place.[52] In other words, any political hegemony is necessarily challenged by counter-hegemonic activity. Mouffe states that hegemonic orders result from discursive constructions which, through a process of "sedimentation", become naturalized. They produce forms of identification which crystalize over time in taken for granted identities, creating the illusion that there is no alternative.[53]

Thus, the primary task of critical art is producing new subjectivities and imagining alternative worlds, demonstrating that things can be "otherwise".[54] Such artistic practices work to resist hegemonically constructed popular conceptions of the world, which the political theorist Antonio Gramsci has termed "common sense".[55] Mouffe characterizes these forms of artistic resistance to a hegemony as "counter-hegemonic interventions" through which common sense can be transformed. It is important to note that, in order to maintain their hegemony, political orders rely on their institutions to constantly shape identities.

[50] Green 2011: 1667
[51] Green 2011: 1669
[52] Mouffe 2013: 8
[53] Mouffe 2013: 89
[54] Mouffe 2007: 5
[55] Gramsci: 1999: 433

Therefore, counter-hegemonic interventions must engage with these institutions (challenging hegemonies on their own terrain) in order to construct alternative subjectivities and engender new conceptions of the world.[56]

Having introduced the theoretical frame of this chapter, we can use it to examine the role of agency and hegemony in Malcolm X's myth and its reconstitution by Yossri's *Subtitles* series, in order to examine their critical character in the contemporary Saudi society.

2.2 *'Abeed*, from the slave master's house to the House of Saud

Yossri's artwork *Abeed al Manazil* consists of eight prints that depict Malcolm X engaged in a televised discussion (Fig. 5). Some zoom in on his face, detailing his varying expressions and moods. Others depict wider shots, in which he is seen using hand gestures to emphasize his rhetorical points. His overall appearance runs counter to the ways African-Americans had been popularly represented on television, namely as uncivilized, irrational and childlike.[57] Instead, Malcolm is seemingly depicted as a neatly dressed, well-spoken individual, who engages in intellectual debate to defend his convictions. Importantly however, it must be noted that Malcolm, during his on-screen appearances, espoused the philosophy of the Nation of Islam (NOI), which he was simply made to reproduce on camera, and which for a time obscured his personal convictions.

The NOI was an exclusively African-American ("Black Muslim") organisation, which taught that the white man was by nature an evil creature ("devil"). It presented itself as the "true religion of all Black people".[58] The Black Muslims believed that God, in a human incarnation, had personally mentored Elijah Muhammad, who founded the NOI.[59] Muhammad was therefore seen by his followers as the prophet of God and the unquestioned head of the organization. Malcolm, being introduced to the NOI ideology while in prison in 1946,[60] was struck by Muhammad's message. As he reminisced over his past life, he came to realise that all white people he had encountered have had evil intentions with him. He subsequently attempted to better himself in prison, to rid himself of the white man's lifestyle

[56] Mouffe 2013: 90
[57] Hooks 1992: 103
[58] Boesak 1976: 14
[59] Marable 2011: 77
[60] Natambu 2002: 128-129

and his "poisonous products", [61] and to educate himself about history which Elijah Muhammad taught had been "whitened". After he got out of prison in 1952, Malcolm joined the NOI. As a "minister" and public speaker, he started spreading its message throughout the United States, gaining prominence in the organisation while dramatically increasing its membership.[62] Malcolm lectured at NOI temples, universities, and on radio and television.

It is in such a setting that *Abeed al Manazil* situates him. During his public appearances, Malcolm never spoke for himself, but rather started his sentences with the words "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us...".[63] Interestingly, Malcolm's lack of agency over his own speech went further than that, as the foreword of his *Autobiography* (by co-writer Alex Haley) reveals that Malcolm did not even have control over his own life story. Haley states that the book was to be dedicated to Elijah Muhammad and its sale proceeds were to go to the NOI.[64] Moreover, during the initial sessions at Haley's studio, Malcolm would dictate NOI rhetoric and praises of Muhammad,[65] giving the impression that the life he wished to record in the book, was one in complete service of his master. Thus, the *Autobiography*, like Malcolm's every deed, was to be representative of the "common sense" that existed within the NOI, and which originated in the teachings of Muhammad. He had used his alleged "prophethood" to construct an authoritative vision on the American past and black people's futures, which could only be attained through his doctrine. Indeed, the literary scholar Nancy Clasby describes how Muhammad's "true knowledge" re-explained Malcolm's past, lending him "a starting point for his own plunge into history."[66] Muhammad's teachings gradually restructured his follower's identities and worldviews, producing disciplined people who cultivated a strong hatred for the white man. Chantal Mouffe characterizes this process as the "crystallization" of identities through which hegemonic orders consolidate themselves.[67] Thus, the "genesis" of Malcolm's myth, the *Autobiography*, took shape within the NOI's rigid "structure" within which Malcolm had no personal agency.

Like the *Autobiography*, Yossri's *Abeed al Manazil* similarly engages in the mythification of Malcolm's life. How then does it manage to resignify his legacy in the

[61] By this, Elijah Muhammad meant the specific lifestyles and products that caused harm in black communities. For instance, alcohol and other drugs were seen as the white man's tools to keep the black man in check. However, in speech and clothing Black Muslims were not unlike their fellow white Americans.
[62] Marable 2011: 123
[63] X 1971: 69
[64] Haley 2001: 14
[65] Haley 2001: 15
[66] Clasby 1974: 23
[67] Mouffe 2013: 89

contemporary world? The answer lies in its subtitles, which provide a common theme, relevant to early and later contributions to Malcolm's myth. The subtitles refer to Malcolm's famous monologue, called "House Negro" which vaguely translates to *Abeed al Manazil*.[68] In it, he used to describe two types of "negroes" during the American slavery era: the "field negro" and the "house negro". While the former was subjected to forced labour on plantations in the worst circumstances imaginable, the latter enjoyed good living conditions,[69] next to the house of his master.[70] The former hated his master with a passion, while the latter "loved his master more than his master loved himself".[71] However, the subtitles in *Abeed al Manazil* only describe the "house negro" and omit the characterization of his unfortunate counterpart, leaving the viewer with a remarkable story about the intense love a slave has for his master.

In Yossri's work, this "house negro" narrative is reinforced by the subtitles' particular use of Arabic grammar. The closest translation of "negro" in the Arabic language is *zanji* ("black African").[72] Although "negro" was used in Malcolm's speeches, Lee's film and the *Autobiography*, the Saudi fabricators of the Arabic subtitles avoided this racial characterisation, possibly because it is out of line with the "colour-blind" ideology of Islam. Instead, they chose to focus on the social status of the "house negro" as a slave, by referring to him with variations of the word *'abeed*. Throughout the history of the Arabic-speaking world, slaves have befittingly been referred to as *mamluk*, meaning "owned" or "belonging to", emphasizing that they were essentially the property (objects) of a person.[73] 'Abeed however has quite different, yet no less interesting connotations.

The scholar of religion John Morrow states that the root word *'abd* (from which 'abeed stems) denotes "slave" as it means giving up freedom, surrendering completely, and acknowledging the authority of another over oneself.[74] Notice how he describes acts which are performed by a subject, rather than forced upon an object. 'Abd therefore distinguished itself from mamluk in its performativity. Morrow furthermore states that, in Arabic-Islamic culture, the concept of 'abd is closely related to that of *din* (religion).[75] In this sense, the word

[68] I would like to thank Driss al-Haddad, chairman of the Khalid Mosque in Heerhugowaard, for translating the subtitles in *Abeed al Manazil* in both Dutch and Latin-scripted Arabic.
[69] Second print: *kana yartadie malabies anika wa-ya'ekul maayakfie miena ta'aam* (he wore decent clothes and ate good food).
[70] First print: *inna 'aabda almanzil ya'ieshu fi almanzil bi-lforbi min sayidih* (the slave had a house next to the house of his lord).
[71] Fourth print: *fakana yuhibbu sayidahu, wa'adunuhu haana yuhibu sayidah akthar mienmaa yuhibu hada al-akhir nafsahu* (he loved his lord, and I think that he even loved his lord more than his lord loved himself).
[72] Azhari 2016: 20
[73] Egger 2004: 90
[74] Morrow 2013: 55
[75] Ibidem

describes mankind's relationship to God. After all, in the Qur'an, God is reported as saying: "And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me."[76] In the original Arabic text, the last word in this line is *ya'budun*, which can translate both to "worship Me" and "submit to Me", and derives from 'abd.[77] Stemming from this same root are *'ibadah* (worship) and *'ubudiyyah* (submissiveness). The imam Mohamed Baianonie remarks that 'ibadah refers to "the ultimate obedience, the ultimate submission and the ultimate humility to Allah (S.W.T.) along with the ultimate love for Him."[78] Finally, Morrow states that 'ubudiyyah connotes "spiritual slavery".[79]

By now it is clear that 'abd and its grammatical derivations refer to humanity's unique relationship with God, characterised by extreme forms of worship, submission, humility and love. It is this kind of relationship that is the subject of *Abeed al Manazil*, in which the love of the house servant for his master is such, that when a field slave asks him to separate from his "unjust lord",[80] he will reply: "why run? Is life here not much better?"[81] It is in the two prints bearing these lines, that Malcolm's face is zoomed in on, showing his expression of agony and indignation over the archetype of the house servant. Indeed, Malcolm used to end his monologue by proudly proclaiming: "I'm a field negro".[82] While this demonstrated his conviction that the "house negro-field negro dichotomy" was applicable in his own time, Malcolm's outspoken identification with the latter reveals his position in relation to the Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm's description of the house servant referred to civil rights leaders, who worked to achieve complete integration for African-Americans in society. This was contrary to the NOI doctrine which insisted on complete black segregation and eventual separation.[83] The Black Muslims thus decisively positioned themselves outside of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement, calling its leaders "house negroes" for their close relationship with the white man. In the vocabulary of *Abeed al Manazil*, civil rights leaders were denounced as being "'abeed" of America's racist power structure.

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[76] http://islamawakened.com/quran/51/56/default.htm

[77] Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic make use of root systems. Herein, consonantal roots refer to a general concept, from which more specific concepts can be derived. For instance, the Semitic root k-t-b denotes "script" in the general sense, while words that derive from it like *kitab* and *kutubi* mean "book" and "bookseller" respectively.

[78] http://www.islam1.org/khutub/Ibadah_in_Islam.htm

[79] Morrow 2013: 55-56

[80] Seventh print: w*a'ien jaa-a 'abden akhar wada'aah ila alharab mien thaliha assayidu addaliem* (and when another slave asks him to run away from the unjust lord).

[81] Eighth print: *kana yujibuhu limadaa? Ayu hayatien afdal mien haathihi?* (he asked him why do you want to flee? Is life here not much better?).

[82] X 2008: 219

[83] Cashman 1991: 174-175

Strikingly however, it is Malcolm who, like no other, personifies the figure of the ‘abeed in all of its grammatical diversity. After all, his relationship with Elijah Muhammad was characterized by intense forms of worship, submission, humility and love. Indeed one could say that he was a “spiritual slave” of his master, which is made apparent by this remarkable statement:

> My adoration of Mr Muhammad grew, in the sense of the Latin root word *adorare*. It means much more than our ‘adoration’ or ‘adore’. It means that my worship of him was so awesome that he was the first man whom I had ever feared - not fear such as of a man with a gun, but the fear such as one has of the power of the sun.[84]

This text demonstrates the amalgam of immense love and fear Malcolm had for Elijah Muhammad, to the point of worship. *Abeed al Manazil* can therefore be interpreted as a description of Malcolm’s own love for his master. This surprisingly reveals Malcolm to be an ‘abeed, displaying the very same “house negro” characteristics that he so outspokenly detested. We have discussed how the concept of ‘abeed closely describes racial and social relationships which Malcolm X clung on to, in addition to describing Malcolm’s own submissive position in relation to Elijah Muhammad. As we will see, it is this crucial concept with which *Abeed al Manazil* actualizes Malcolm’s historical legacy, in order to comment on the contemporary Saudi political order.

Abeed al Manazil was created in 2011, an unruly year in Saudi history. The Arab Spring, which swept across the Middle-East, challenged authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria.[85] Remarkably enough, Saudi Arabia never features among these countries. In his essay ‘Is Saudi Arabia immune?’ the political scientist Stéphane Lacroix notes that the Kingdom shares socio-political factors which had caused the uprisings elsewhere.[86] Indeed February and March saw increased levels of political activism. However, by mid-March the Saudi regime had the situation completely under control again.[87]

A major factor in the Saudi “evasion” of the Arab Spring is the invisibility of the protests. Whereas the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were widely covered by news media, the Saudi uprisings were not given as much attention. This can be attributed to the reliance of Western countries on the stability of the Saudi government, which sustains favourable conditions for diplomatic relations and the international oil trade. To reiterate this point, the

[84] X 2001: 311
[85] Arjomand 2015: 2
[86] According to Lacroix, these factors include high unemployment among young people, pervasive corruption, widespread repression, and an increasing age gap between the ruling class and the people.
[87] Lacroix 2011: 48

investigate journalist Russ Baker states: "Consider Libya vs Saudi Arabia. Two oil producers, one unpredictable and unreliable, one tight with the West. Heavy coverage of dissent in one, almost none in the other."[88] In this light, *Abeed al Manazil* describes the dependence of the legitimacy of the house servant (the Saudi regime) on the will of his master (Western countries). The house servant realizes that, once this unlikely relationship is broken, he will be an easy victim for the infuriated field slaves (Saudi citizens). Having gained legitimacy from his master, the house servant in turn has to violently discipline the field slaves in order to keep the status quo of slavery in place. Indeed the Saudi government has to police the uprisings in order to maintain good conditions for diplomacy and international oil trade. Its reward is the absence of Western media interest in revolutionary activity within the Kingdom, creating the impression that such activity does not exist at all. *Abeed al Manazil* thus seems to reflect on the modern-day house servant, who desperately attempts to legitimize himself for the object of self-preservation. However, this relationship is mutual, and Western countries equally depend on Saudi Arabia for buying oil, which raises the question who the house servant and the master are in this diplomatic tie. Mass protests are potential challenges to this flourishing diplomacy, necessitating that they be internationally ignored and domestically uprooted.

There is however a more important factor in the failure of popular uprisings in the Kingdom: identity politics. The Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi religious establishment together shape national consciousness and religious identities. The Saudis portray themselves as sources of development, modernity and unity of a "Saudi nation" which at its core is bound to the royal family.[89] Conversely, national identities are shaped within the socio-religious domain over which the Wahhabis preside, in exchange for which they bestow religious legitimacy on the House of Saud. The historian Toby Jones describes this as a mutually beneficial religious-political alliance.[90] This notably manifests at times of social upheaval. The Saudi response to a call for protest on 11 March 2011 serves as a good example. The event was planned online and was to be a massive demonstration calling for the formation of a civil society and a constitutional monarchy. It was nicknamed the "Hunayn Revolution".[91] When the day arrived however, nobody but one protester showed up.[92] According to the columnist Eman al-Nafjan, this was a response to the fatwa which prohibited petitions and

[88] http://whowhatwhy.org/2011/12/07/the-saudi-arab-spring-nobody-noticed/
[89] Lacroix 2011: 53
[90] Jones 2011: 51
[91] Alongside its more common nickname, "Day of Rage", the planned protest was called after the Battle of Hunayn, which was fought in 630 by the early Muslims against a dissenting tribe of Bedouins, the Hawazin. The battle ended in a victory for the Muslims and is noted for being mentioned in the Qur'an.
[92] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13507318

demonstrations.[93] It legitimized extreme measures against disunity, and was religiously supported by sayings of the Prophet Muhammad: "He who wanted separate affairs of this nation who are unified, you should kill him with [the] sword whoever he is".[94]

Here, parallels with Elijah Muhammad's hegemonic order over the NOI become apparent. Although both the Saudi state and the NOI were allegedly founded on Islamic moral principles, their subjects live not in accordance with God's words directly, but rely on authoritative figures to interpret them. Their interpretations of the sacred texts are translated to laws. This interpretive activity is known as *ijtihad*, which describes using independent reasoning in order to create a new law.[95] This means that, when the Qur'an and *Sunna* (the canonical texts in Islam) lack solutions to an issue, legal scholars have to interpret them in a way that it can be resolved. Complementary to ijtihad is *taqlid*, which means following the opinion of a *mujtahid* (practitioner of ijtihad). According to scholar of Islamic law, Mohamed Abdelaal, taqlid means "imitation", but has the macabre connotation of "putting a noose around one's neck".[96] In Saudi Arabia, legal scholars are discouraged to practice taqlid, and obliged to practice ijtihad.[97] However, the general populace, who lack legal training and official scholarship, is forced into the role of *muqallid* (practitioner of taqlid) and is thereby dependent on the mujtahid's opinions as rules to live by. This interpretive monopoly becomes especially problematic when ijtihad is made to serve an oppressive political ideology.

Abeed al Manazil depicts Malcolm X describing the character of the house servant, which mirrors his own obedience to Elijah Muhammad, the single authority ("mujtahid") on God's plan for an African-American future. The subservience of his followers ("muqallids") kept his hegemonic order over the NOI in place. Following the analogy of this relationship of power, it seems that *Abeed al Manazil* describes the Saudi people, as they reluctantly accept their status of 'abeed, submitting to the will of the Saudi state. The love for their master, like the house servant's, is a functional and superficial one; a love that sustains the relative safety and peace of the current situation. Thus, like Malcolm suggested in his speeches, the age-old house servant character frequently resurfaces in post-slavery societies. It is the one who submits to a hegemonic order, rather than opposes it; whose practices affirm the common sense rather than subvert it. Indeed *Abeed al Manazil* may stand for the 'abeed of the House

[93] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/12/saudi-protests
[94] http://islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/fatwa-council-senior-scholars-kingdom-saudi-arabia-warning-against-mass-demonstrations
[95] Hallaq 1997: 117
[96] Abdelaal, 2012: 160
[97] Bramsen 2010: 161

of Saud; the overwhelming majority that chooses not to engage in counter-hegemonic activities, but abide by the rules formed by Saudi mujtahids, out of self-preservation.

Interestingly, the relations of power in which Malcolm's *Autobiography* was produced, parallels to a significant degree *Abeed al Manazil*'s production process and social context, which Alfred Gell calls its (art) nexus. Similar to Muhammad's considerable agency over the production of the book, Saudi laws and censorship constitute a structure which limits Yossri in his artistic activities. Saudi officials exert their agency over the creative process in two ways: they "streamline" the subtitles featuring in Yossri's work, so that they better convey the common sense of the state, and they screen the work before it is exhibited. This makes *Abeed al Manazil* a state-approved artwork and a bearer of its ideology. As a confirmation of the Saudi state hegemony, Yossri's artwork can hardly be characterized as what Mouffe calls a counter-hegemonic intervention. Indeed, rather than revealing that society can be "otherwise", *Abeed al Manazil* both describes the legitimacy of an historical hegemony (Elijah Muhammad's), and constitutes a cultural artefact which implies a contemporary one (the Saudis'). Therefore, it seems unlikely that it can serve as a causal source which bestows political agency upon its Saudi audience. Rather, through the artwork, Yossri seems to express solidarity with his audience over their socio-political status quo. Indeed, *Abeed al Manazil* might reach the Saudi viewer with an emotive agency which connects his/her individual fate with millions of others in the Kingdom. Yossri too is implicated in the artwork, as an 'abeed of the system. He situates himself as part of the silent majority; among the people who could not subvert the state monopoly over ijtihad, and who are thereby forced to comply with its legal rulings.

2.3 Malcolm's explorations of new conceptions of the world

The year before Yossri created *Abeed al Manazil,* he produced another eightfold artwork titled *The Opening* (Fig. 6). Again, it deals with the relationship between the 'abeed and his master, however, it engenders several shifts in its nexus of social relations in favour of its agency. The prints depict Malcolm X performing the Islamic prayer inside the Muhammad Ali Mosque in Cairo. They detail the figure's face, which expresses a great level of concentration with the ritual he performs. The repetition of white circular shapes in the background contributes to this feeling of isolated meditation. The subtitles present an English

translation of *Surah al-Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Qur'an,[98] and indicate what the figure recites. The text is emphasized by the horizontal orientation of the prints, which cut out large parts of Lee's original imagery, whereby they increase the prominence of the subtitles. Vertical stripes dominate the overall visual quality of the artwork. These can be associated with scratches on old film that show up as continual lines when it is projected.[99] The prints therefore seem to evoke historical footage of Malcolm, captured by an old camera, instead of being mediated by Hollywood cinema.

The Opening situates Malcolm in a period of his life that was highly uncertain, yet unprecedentedly open to new opportunities. During his pilgrimage to Mecca, he learned about the Islamic faith as practiced by millions of orthodox Muslims around the world, and understood this was contrary to the NOI's racist ideology. After all, Islam posits that all human beings are equal before God, thus negates racial inequality. Realizing that Elijah Muhammad's doctrine was detrimental to African-American civil rights, Malcolm left the NOI and converted to Sunnism. From this point onwards, he condemned every form of racism and was ready to work with the broader Civil Rights Movement. Thus, *The Opening* depicts Malcolm "reborn" as a "real Muslim", who prays in accordance with the *sharia* of Islam, rather than the ritual prescriptions of the NOI. The rejection of his old beliefs and the embrace of the new is emphasized by Surah al-Fatiha in the subtitles.

Tafsirs (exegeses)[100] of al-Fatiha explain that this chapter is seen as *Umm al-Kitab* ("Mother of the Book"), because its mere seven verses convey the entire meaning of the Qur'an, in addition to being its opening chapter.[101] Al-Fatiha starts with verses praising God and his attributes ("The Beneficent", "The Merciful" etc.), which are represented on the first four prints of *The Opening*. The fifth verse starts with *Iyyaka na'budu* ("You alone we worship").[102] Scholar of Islam, Muhammad Abdul-Rahman, states that this "perfect form of obedience" implies what the entire Islamic faith is about.[103] Al-Fatiha thus primarily expresses that only God, without partners, rivals or equals, should be worshipped. The final verses ask His guidance on *as-sirat al-mustaqeem* ("the straight path"): the way of the true

[98] http://islamawakened.com/quran/1/st3.htm
[99] Cheshire 1979: 261
[100] I would like to thank Hamid Babrakzai for the lecture he delivered on Surah al-Fatiha in the local Afghan mosque in Alkmaar. His tafsir was short but comprehensive, and provided a theoretical point of departure for further examining the Qur'anic chapter and relating it to Malcolm X's life and Yossri's artistic practice in Saudi Arabia.
[101] Abdul-Rahman 2009: 12
[102] *Na'budu* stems from the root word "'abd" discussed in the previous paragraph. *The Opening* and *Abeed al Manazil* thus seem to be linguistically related through their conceptualizations of worship and submissiveness.
[103] Abdul-Rahman 2009: 39

believer on which God's grace rests.[104] In this light, the subtitles may express Malcolm's renunciation of the NOI's "false god and prophet". Subsequently, they describe his new religious philosophy and practice, submitting to the "true God" who judges people on the merits of their actions, not the colour of their skins. Interpreted in the political context of Saudi Arabia, *The Opening* seems to demand its viewers to consider whether they are on the "straight path", or a deviant one. Whether they are loyal to a "just" master, or a "false" one.

The artwork represents a rare occurrence in Yossri's oeuvre, because it appropriates a unique Arabic-spoken scene in Lee's film. Its Saudi audiences therefore cannot be fooled by manipulated Arabic subtitles, and these are notably absent. The English subtitles featuring in *The Opening* were not added "over the picture", but rather they are an integral part of Lee's original film. After all, his American audience cannot understand Malcolm's Arabic-spoken monologue. Hereby, *The Opening* is able to demonstrate the limitations of Saudi state manipulation of cultural expressions. Yossri excludes the Saudis from the process of signification to this key scene in *Malcolm X*, which includes a religious text of considerable importance. He presents a Qur'anic quotation central to the Islamic faith, completely free of Saudi ideological interpretation.[105]

Given its prestigious title of "custodian of the two holy mosques",[106] the Saudi royal family presents its kingdom as the centre of "authentic Islam". Yossri's artistic exclusion of the Saudis as exponents of such normative faith, symbolizes a broader movement among Sunni scholars who have increasingly marginalized the Saudis for their Wahhabi beliefs. They relate the Saudi state ideology to the controversial act of *takfir*: excommunicating "bad Muslims" from the Islamic faith, after which they should be killed as apostates. Mainstream Sunni scholars find this reprehensible, dangerous and akin to the practices of terrorist organizations. That is why, during a recent Sunni conference in Grozny, where all of the world's leading scholars gathered, Saudi scholars were not invited.[107]

As both an artistic expression and a religious text, *The Opening* attests to the limitations of Saudi state censorship, and symbolically negates the Dar al-Ifta's interpretive monopoly over the Islamic faith. However, it was still screened by Saudi officials before being approved for public exhibition in galleries, raising questions over the artwork's critical

[104] Abdul-Rahman 2009: 45

[105] http://www.weeklystandard.com/rewriting-the-koran/article/5869 This article implies that even the most sacred text in the Islamic faith is subjected to Wahhabi rewritings. Surah al-Fatiha too is ideologically altered in what Stephen Schwartz calls the "Wahhabi Koran".

[106] Cuddihy 2002: 110

[107] http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/the-sunni-conference-at-grozny-muslim-intra-sectarian_us_57d2fa63e4b0f831f7071c1a

force towards the Saudi hegemonic order. Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* has been subject of a remarkably similar discussion: can it actually critique institutionalised racism in the form of a Hollywood product? This debate will help us see *The Opening* in a new perspective, revealing its critical potential.

Film historian Keith Corson describes the 26 year process of attempting to adapt *The autobiography of Malcolm X* to a feature film.[108] He cannot but note that the long-awaited movie turned out an uncontroversial "classical Hollywood biopic" with a "reassuring and harmless" Malcolm X.[109] Communication scholar Emmett Winn notes how Lee's film was criticized for being "too politically safe, mainstream, and commercial".[110] Cultural historian Thomas Doherty notes *Malcolm X*'s "deferential fidelity" to the *Autobiography*, and contends that Malcolm's story was better told by the latter.[111] Doherty also remarks that Lee's movie turned the "grainy Malcolm of archival memory" into "Malcolm X the product", his image featuring on numerous forms of merchandise after the movie's release.[112] Similarly, historian Dan Georgakas states that the film fails to deal with Malcolm's later life as el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, an identity that "does not fit neatly on a baseball cap".[113] *Malcolm X* is thus received as a commercial product made for the masses, which neither lived up to the revolutionary potential of its subject, nor transcended the confines of conventional Hollywood storytelling. However, some writers were more optimistic about the film's artistic merits and critical force.

The philosopher Jonathan Lee discusses apparent directorial mistakes in *Malcolm X* which he calls "cinematic parapraxes": subtle ruptures in the film's "fabric". These indicate counter-aesthetics rather than Hollywood conventions, and imply the film's "unconscious": its underlying structures which deny any singular reading of the film, and open it up for critical interpretation.[114] Lee relates these mimetic irregularities to Frantz Fanon's idea of the fundamental "instability" of our socio-political world, and argues that they contribute to the

[108] Corson writes a fascinating narrative describing the difficulties of translating Malcolm from book to film, starting with artistic disagreements over a Malcolm X biopic in the 60's, its unlikeliness to materialize in the blaxploitation-era of the 70's, and an unfavourable climate for counter-hegemonic cinema in the Reagan-years of the 80's. In the 1990's, Hollywood struggled to reach black audiences with relatable films, Malcolm's image unprecedentedly re-emerged in African-American popular culture, and independent black filmmakers had carved a niche for themselves in the industry. Thus, a perfect atmosphere for the production of *Malcolm X* was created.

[109] Corson 2010: 84-85

[110] Winn 2001: 463

[111] Doherty 2000: 45-46

[112] Doherty 2000: 35

[113] Georgakas 1993: 35

[114] Lee 1995: 158

film's transformational quality.[115] The communication scholar Kristen Hoerl notes how Malcolm is seen facing obstacles towards success, works tirelessly to overcome them, and in the end achieves greatness. The character thereby demonstrates that class inequality is a mere hurdle to be overcome by individual hard labour.[116] Spike Lee thus frames Malcolm's story in the liberal ideological common sense of the American Dream, familiar to American pop-culture audiences.[117] Hoerl notes that a discrepancy is created when Malcolm's critique of the American political system is represented within the narrative of his personal achievements, whereby the American Dream myth is at once celebrated and falsified.[118] Thus, she argues, by framing counter-hegemonic ideas in the common sense-narrative of a hegemonic order, space can be opened up for their wider social acceptability. Hoerl characterizes *Malcolm X*'s deployment of this strategy as "cinematic jujitsu", using counter-techniques which use the strength of an opposing force to achieve a more dominant position.[119]

The Opening uses a similar "jujitsu-technique" in order to be able to reach a large audience in a public space: it presents a conversion narrative which the Saudis hold as a dear chapter in their history. After all, it was in Saudi Arabia that Malcolm embraced the "true faith", after which he lectured his fellow Americans on the idyllic Muslim society devoid of racism.[120] Thus, *The Opening* complies with the Saudi self-image, and seems to reify its political hegemony. However, critical interpretations of the artwork might equally decode a potentially emancipatory message; one that removes state censorship and ideological manipulation that perpetuate the Saudi hegemonic order. Yossri appropriates Malcolm's "conversion myth" (a source of Saudi national pride) and, as Hal Foster would say, re-inscribes it in a counter-mythical system, in which Malcolm's liberation from the NOI doctrine is analogous with the undoing of the Saudi hegemonic grip on the nation. Thus, within their own cultural institutions (Saudi art galleries) and on the force of their own myths, Yossri undermines the Saudi common sense, and demonstrates that society can be "otherwise".

Examined within Gell's notion of the art nexus, the complex historical struggle of agency over Malcolm's myth that dwells beneath *The Opening*'s surface, works to activate (exercise agency on) the interpretive mind of the viewer. This may cause him/her to locate

[115] Lee 1995: 166-167
[116] Stevens 2002: 280
[117] Hoerl 2008: 358-359
[118] Hoerl 2008: 362
[119] Hoerl 2008: 358
[120] Indeed Ayman Yossri describes Malcolm X as a "hero" and an "icon" In the Saudi religious culture (From an interview with Yossri on May 21st 2016).

Malcolm's story in the contemporary Saudi context. Interestingly, interpreting *The Opening* also implies subjecting its religious text to personal ijtihad; a unique opportunity considering that Saudi ideologists were excluded from interpreting and manipulating the artwork's text. The idea of independent reasoning, along with the image of Malcolm as a newly "liberated" individual, may endow the viewer with a sense of interpretive agency in the Saudi religious landscape, which had seemed to constitute the state's most rigid structure. Indeed, in a state governed in accordance with religious principles, popular ijtihad may function as an emancipatory practice. The sociologist Amanda Keddie notes how the practice generates a sense of agency among Muslim feminist scholars, whose independent reasoning authorises their own ways of relating to gender questions in Islam.[121] Similarly, Saudi popular ijtihad could spur reconsiderations of socio-religious issues, which may demonstrate that the "straight path" looks wholly different than framed within the common sense of the state.[122]

Interestingly, Yossri recently took the notion of ijtihad one step further. At his 'Give me the light' exhibition, he rearranged *The Opening*'s prints to form a pyramidal shape (fig. 7), which inadvertently corrupted the sequential integrity of Surah al-Fatiha featuring in its subtitles. This bold move of "undoing" the Qur'an, makes the work transcend asking whether we are on God's "straight path", and instead question what such a path entails, whether there actually exists one, or indeed a multitude of them. Yossri's facilitation of a more boundless interpretation may be characterized as "ijtihad beyond Islam". We find that this kind of individual reasoning which opens up to that which is beyond a currently held worldview, typified Malcolm X. Indeed the literary scholar Bashir el-Beshti states that, although Malcolm seems a different person in every new incarnation, his "essence" of fluidity remains intact.[123] Thus, fixing his life in any single cultural representation would be a daunting task, one which Malcolm himself increasingly doubted was possible.[124] He writes to Alex Haley about his autobiography:

[121] Keddie 2009: 267

[122] Indeed, according to Stéphane Lacroix there is an increased amount of independent scholars who challenge the interpretive monopoly of Saudi mujtahids. He also remarks that a growing community of young prodemocracy activists use new media to avoid official censorship. *The Opening* questions the reach of these state practices as well, and seems equally hopeful over topics such as popular agency in Saudi Arabia.

[123] Beshti 1997: 363

[124] Malcolm, reflecting more and more on the problems of the autobiographical process, asked Haley: "How is it possible to write one's autobiography in a world so fast-changing as this?"

> I hope the book is proceeding rapidly, for events concerning my life happen so swiftly, much of what has already been written can easily be outdated from month to month. In life, nothing is permanent; not even life itself."[125]

Literary scholar Paul Eakin doubts whether Malcolm would have arrived at any definitive identity, had he not been assassinated.[126] The quotation above demonstrates Malcolm's doubts that a "completed life" can be recorded by an autobiographical process; that his life could "sit still" long enough for the autobiographical "I" to "snap its picture".[127] Lee's film demonstrates the same principle. In one of its early scenes, Malcolm's sane, reflective voice-over is heard recalling his reprobate past as the low-life criminal we see on-screen, suggesting that the off-screen narrator has since changed,[128] and will continue to change even as he is narrating his story.

Malcolm increasingly recognized his dynamic "self-incompleteness" and thereby the limits of a static autobiography.[129] By showing an alternative ordering to Surah al-Fatiha, Yossri opens up Malcolm's legacy beyond the boundaries of Islamic normativity, and recalls a figure who was ever open to new ideas about the world. This closely connects to Mouffe's ideas about art's possibilities of showing an "otherwise" to society and of creating alternative subjectivities. Indeed Yossri's artwork goes against the grain of "crystallized" Saudi identities and "sedimented" ways of conceiving religion and society, by urging the viewer to actively interpret Malcolm's conversion story and its accompanying holy text in *The Opening*. Conceived, in Gell's sense, as a social agent, the artwork exerts agency on the interpretive mind of the viewers, facilitating the creation of alternative subjectivities through their restructuring of Malcolm's story. It is this activation of the audience that constitutes the artwork's counter-hegemonic practice. The social nexus within which this transferral of agency occurs includes Saudi art galleries, offering the artwork the opportunity to challenge the political hegemony of the Saudi royal house within its own institutions. Of course, it is imperative for the artwork to negate the Saudi hegemony for it to bring about such a transformative process, and in this regard we have seen *The Opening* to be more effective than *Abeed al Manazil*.

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[125] Haley 2001: 39
[126] Eakin 1976: 237
[127] Eakin 1976: 241
[128] Doherty 2000: 40
[129] For further readings on the tension between the historical and the autobiographical Malcolm X, see: Felber, Garrett A., '"A writer is what I want, not an interpreter": Alex Haley and Malcolm X—conceiving the autobiographical self and the struggle for authorship', *Souls*, 12 (2010), pp. 33-53.

Fig. 5 Ayman Yossri Daydban, *Abeed al Manazil*, Fujicolor Crystal Archive Print, 26 x 51 cm, 2011.

Fig. 6 Ayman Yossri Daydban, *The Opening*, RC Print Diasec mounted on Dibond, 26 x 46.5 cm, Greenbox Museum of Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia, Amsterdam, 2010.

Fig. 7 Ayman Yossri Daydban, *The Opening* (alternative arrangement), 'Give me the light' (solo exhibition), Jeddah, 2016.

People are of two kinds, either your brothers in faith or your equals in humanity. They will commit slips and encounter mistakes. They may act wrongly, willfully or by neglect. So, extend to them your forgiveness and pardon, in the same way as you would like Allah to extend His forgiveness and pardon to you.

–'Ali ibn Abi Talib, *Nahj ul-Balagha*, 1009

3. YOSSRI'S *SUBTITLES* SERIES AS MEDIATORS BETWEEN CULTURES

So far, appropriations have been discussed as phenomena that effectuate temporal continuity in already existing stories. Interestingly however, the literary theorist Julie Sanders suggests a conception of appropriation as a form "adaptation which transposes original culture to a new culture". An appropriation, Sanders states, may use the characters, themes and plots of an original artwork, and shift its language and setting into new cultural contexts. She adds that the new artwork then creates analogies that form a bridge between the culture of origin and the new one.[130] As for the present discussion, this is an interesting take on appropriation because it adds to the temporal dimension of the concept, a distinctly spatial one, as it works to disseminate narratives from one culture to another.

This chapter will discuss Yossri's artwork *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* in light of this spatial conception of appropriation. It will examine the following question: in which ways does the artwork effectuate intercultural dialogue between America and Saudi Arabia? This question will be explored by looking at possible American and Saudi perspectives on the artwork's imagery and vocabulary. Thus, whereas the previous chapter discussed Yossri's appropriations as reconstitutions of various constellations of power, this chapter will explore their possibilities of engendering intercultural dialogue between two nations. Hereby, the artwork shifts from a "nexus" of social actors who exert agency upon one another, to a "forum" on which viewers of various cultural backgrounds engage in readings of the work.

3.1 Intercultural dialogue and the question of otherness

Yossri's *Subtitles* series have been subjected to intercultural processes, both during and after their creation. From a Saudi cultural position, features of American dominant culture (Hollywood cinema) and counter culture (Malcolm X) are appropriated, and conveyed in the globalized language of contemporary art. Moreover, Yossri describes the central character

[130] Nwosu 2015: 37

Malcolm X as "the perfect icon for this cultural connection and communication [between Saudi Arabia and America] that led to an effective change in the events of history."[131] Finally, the *Subtitles* series have been exhibited both inside the Saudi Kingdom and internationally in notable museums across Europe and America. Therefore they not only constitute signifiers and symbols derived from diverse cultural origins, they also bring together various audiences whose differing readings of the works could be envisioned to engender an intercultural dialogue between them. In this sense, the artworks themselves serve as "forums" that facilitate such engagements.

In studies of the benefits and problems of intercultural dialogue, the tension between the universal and the particular seems to be the central focus. Some scholars, like psychologists Blaine Fowers and Barbara Davidov, point out that values are firmly rooted in particular cultural traditions, and measured against culturally specific conceptions about what is good.[132] Furthermore, the sociologist Aviad Raz states that the dissemination of concepts across cultures inevitably involves interpretation and translation.[133] The philosopher Jacques Derrida has demonstrated that these processes are inherently slippery,[134] removing the concept's anchoring in the specific cultural context from which it originated.[135] The idea of cultural specificity and the problems of interpretation and translation, thus seem to limit the possibilities of effective intercultural communication. Social psychologist Gazi Islam attempts to evade this problem by opting for a conception of humanity as a "single speech community", with different local dialects of a shared language. To aid the initiation of civil conversation, he stresses the importance of employing tolerance for others.[136] However, the historian Zihni Özdil asserts that tolerance, contrary to its positive reputation, is a hierarchical concept which engenders inequality among peoples and cultures (i.e. I will not kill you; I will tolerate you).[137] One who is merely tolerated in dialogue is essentially "othered" and made inferior. It thus seems like there is no way around affirming difference in dialogue. Indeed the notion of particularity ultimately prevails over that of universality, as the latter is inevitably broken up into particulars (dialects for instance), thereby engendering otherness, that needs bridging by problematic concepts such as tolerance.

However, some scholars accept distance and difference as necessary aspects of

[131] Interview with Yossri, May 21st, 2016
[132] Fowers 2007: 705
[133] Raz 2010: 58
[134] Derrida 2001: 145
[135] Phipps 2014: 111
[136] Islam 2007: 705
[137] Özdil 2016: 29

dialogue that need not be seen as "burdens or sources of alienation".[138] Fowers and Davidov assert that dialogue makes visible the "indissoluble otherness" between us and those culturally different from us.[139] To Raz, the idea of difference creates opportunities in dialogue, stating that "the act of looking at the image of our familiar culture as it is reflected on and by the opposite side has the potential to produce fertile epistemological distancing, a hermeneutic repositioning from which the familiar can be seen in a new light."[140] Thus, adding to philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's point that we have to understand what it would be like to be an addressee in order to understand his/her position,[141] one is able to reconsider one's own position from the perspective of that addressee. Otherness is thus conceived as an inherent phenomenon in intercultural dialogue, which can be harnessed in productive ways. Literary theorist Gayatri Spivak too points to the importance of distance and otherness, which she claims facilitate ethical forms of engagement. Spivak states that exchange necessarily implies that something does *not* get across, by which she means the other's intimate experience, which "can be spoken of but never passed on to the "other" to the extent that it becomes tangible".[142] It is this impossibility of complete "intimacy" that ensures the ethical in human engagements, because it acknowledges distance, and thereby prevents interpretive control in the dialogue. In other words, neither individual can speak *for* the other.[143] This is not to say that distance necessarily facilitates ethical engagement. To the contrary, when these are artificially increased to serve nationalist or other identitarian projects, interpretive control of the other's narrative is frequently assumed. Edward Said has discussed this phenomenon at length in his groundbreaking study *Orientalism*. In the following part we will see how Yossri's artwork *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* invites its American audience for an Orientalist reading, whereby it denies the opportunity of fruitful cross-cultural understanding, and facilitates the production of reductionist views of the Other.

The artwork depicts thirty figures, clad in white robes, walking behind each other in succession (fig. 8). The scene is captured from the side, so that the line of people extends from the left to the right edge of the print. Yossri captured one of Spike Lee's wide shots in this artwork, so that the figures are relatively small compared to their surroundings. Additionally, their position in the frame suggests a very low horizon, which leaves roughly

[138] Fowers 2007: 706
[139] Ibidem
[140] Raz 2010: 58
[141] Gadamer 2004: 330-331
[142] Spivak 1996: 270
[143] Ball 2012: 180

two-thirds of the image to be filled with sky. In the film, this scene depicts a blue-gray sky contrasted by a darker shade of brown for the desert floor (fig. 9). The bright white of the robes clearly stands out against both colors. In Yossri's artwork, there is only a subtle demarcation between heaven and earth; the figures seem to float in a vacuum of plain gray. Its shade is so bright, that the robes almost entirely blend in with their surroundings, rather than standing out. It is only the actual bodies of the figures (their skin and hair) which are clearly singled out by darker shades, being almost black.

The overall appearance of *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* suggests that Yossri not only took out the colors of Lee's picture, but also used high levels of contrast which erased the many nuances between black and white. This makes for a semi-abstract work of art, with stylized human forms moving from side to side through the picture plain. Their heads create a rhythmic succession of unidentified dark spots, that make for an alternative suggestion of the movie's communication of linear movement through the frame. Formally speaking, the artwork may connect to American audiences through its use of "modernist" features. Indeed the vast emptiness in *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* may remind one of the large color plains in Barnett Newman's work, while its visual rhythm could evoke the suggestion of successive movement in futurist paintings. Still, no matter how tempting such comparisons may be, they tend to work only on the formal level. There does however exist a genre of art which bears notable similarities to Yossri's work, both formally and in terms of content: nineteenth-century Orientalist painting. In works such as Prosper Marilhat's *Syrian Arabs on a journey* we see figures walking in line through vast desert lands, similar to what is depicted in Yossri's print (fig. 10). Marilhat's painting shows a preference of visual composition, akin to Lee's cinematographic style that Yossri draws from: the figures walk across a horizontal axis, and convey a sense of humility in relation to their vast surroundings of empty desert lands and cloudless skies. The latter comprise more than half of the painting.

Such scenes may strike Western viewers as romantic and picturesque. However, art historian Linda Nochlin points out their underlying ideological implications. Nochlin remarks that Orientalist paintings are characterized by "absences", which become notable "presences" when we are made aware of them.[144] The most striking example of such "conceptual deprivation" is the absence of history. Indeed desert scenes such as Marilhat's portray "Oriental culture" as if it were "spared by the historical processes" that European societies went through, and instead shows people "bogged down in their traditional habits and

[144] Nochlin 1989: 35-36

customs".[145] Indeed Said notes that the Western vision on the Orient tends to be static, frozen, and fixed eternally, the implication being that the region lacks the possibility of development and transformation.[146] This is reflected in Marilhat's painting, which ignores the processes of industrialization and nation-building going on in Ottoman urban centers at the time, and instead depicts a nomadic migration, seemingly severed from the tethers of history. In *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* we detect a similar strategy to present the Middle-East as a "timeless" space. Had Spike Lee chosen to turn his camera towards the Meccan skyline, it would have captured the inexhaustible Saudi construction projects going on at the time. This would have given the viewer an opportunity to locate the shot at a certain stage of Saudi societal development. Instead *Malcolm X*, and by extend Yossri's artwork, offers no such historical anchorage.

Another one of the absences that Nochlin identifies is that of the Westerner, who does not appear in the scene among the "Orientals", but who is always implicitly present in his "controlling gaze" that "brings the Oriental world into being".[147] "Gaze", conceived here in the Lacanian sense, functions to establish the relationship between subject and object,[148] the object being caught in the gaze of the subject. According to Said, the position of the Westerner as subject who looks, studies and represents the objectified Oriental (who is looked at, studied and represented), is connected to the dual notion of knowledge-power, stating "to have such knowledge of such a thing [the Orient] is to dominate it, to have authority over it".[149] Indeed various scientific disciplines, such as anthropology, were employed in order to gain knowledge of the Orient(al), as part of the colonial project.[150] The supposed scientific objectivity of knowledge resulting from such endeavors, can be found reflected in what Nochlin calls the "Orientalist transparency"[151] of paintings such as Marilhat's.[152] This naturalist style ensured the Western viewer that the Orient looks exactly like it is depicted, placing these paintings among numerous essays, novels and lectures that became sources of authoritative knowledge over the Orient. *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* in part negates such transparency by presenting a manipulated image, hinting at subjective modification which emphasizes the mediation of the original picture. Although this might differentiate the work

[145] Peltre 2004: 193
[146] Said 2003: 208
[147] Nochlin 1989: 37
[148] Beardsell 2000: 8
[149] Said 2003: 32
[150] Lewis 1973: 582
[151] Indeed this "transparency" leads to another of Nochlin's "absences", namely that of art. Nochlin describes the eye for minute detail and the absence of any sign of the artist on the canvas in Orienalist painting, which leads to "artless depictions" which are supposedly objective and truthful.
[152] Nochlin 1989:38

from the Orientlist painting tradition, it reinforces Nochlin's observation of the absence of the Westerner. In Lee's film, we see people of various cultures and ethnicities performing religious rituals, including European or American Caucasians. However, because of the high contrasts in Yossri's work, differences in hair and skin color are erased, evoking the Orientalist depiction of dark bodies from a white subject position.

Though Orientalist painting is suggestive of several "absences", which locate the Oriental as the pre-eminent "Other" to Europe, it also makes use of notable "presences" which work to increase the difference between West and East. Gustave Guillaumet's painting *Evening prayer in the Sahara* offers an excellent example of this (fig. 11). Compositionally, it again lines a group of figures along a horizontal axis, and situates them in a desert setting under a great clear sky. This particular arrangement may suggest a link between the prayer performed by the figures and the great unknown (the divine) represented by the vast heavens. Such connection we see reflected in *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa,* which similarly depicts people with outstretched hands engaged in religious rituals. Religion can be envisioned as a notable "presence" in the tradition of Orientalist painting, by means of which the Easterner was othered from the Westerner. Indeed the philosopher Chris Goto-Jones notes that nineteenth century Europe was deemed "post-spiritual"[153], stating that "while the European male was supposed to be rational and devoted to technology, the Oriental male was represented as somehow retaining his connection with the more mystical and spiritual forces of the cosmos."[154] The white-cloaked figures in Guillaumet's painting create another visual similarity to Yossri's print. In both works, these uniform garments emphasize the idea of collectivity rather than individuality, as the figures blend in with their respective groups, exemplifying the collective effort of communal prayer. Eastern communality can be seen as another "presence", a signifier of difference with the individualized West.

We have seen how *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* displays features of the Orientalist painting tradition, by conjuring up the familiar image of the Middle-East as frozen in time, technologically backwards, but spiritually vibrant and community based (allegedly the exact opposite of the Western world). Moreover, Yossri's artwork makes the same compositional choices and similarly portrays the "unwitting Middle-Easterner" *en profil*, emphasizing that the viewer's perspective is that of the Western subject who "captures" the Easterner. According to Said, Orientalist ways of representation "still dominate our [Western]

[153] Goto-Jones 2014: 1454
[154] Goto-Jones 2014: 1459

contemporary cultural and political perspectives".[155] Thus, not only do reductionist visions on the Middle-Eastern "Other" linger in the American collective subconscious, Yossri's artwork actually evokes Orientalist imagery and therefore invites for a reductionist reading. Therefore, meaningful intercultural dialogue mediated by *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* is obstructed, because its imagery pre-structures a relationship of power between the American viewer and the Middle-Eastern viewed. The American understanding of the other's position becomes limited to what (s)he is not, thereby obscuring any shared humanity from which to start a dialogue. A re-evaluation of the viewer's own position from the point of view of the other would likely lead to the realization of one's own society as modern, technologically advancing, individualistic and lacking in spirituality (i.e. "Other").

Moreover, the Orientalist character of American perceptions of the Middle-East has likely increased in the post-9/11 era. The historian Nasser Hussain examines the British suspension of the rule of civil law in their Indian colonies during times of crisis, which they justified by means of the colonial discourse of otherness. Hussain characterizes this as the "jurisprudence of emergency".[156] Building on this notion, literary theorist Stephen Morton suggests that the contemporary discourse of terrorism serves a similar purpose, seeing that "the expansion of US and British military power in the twenty-first century" is often justified by invoking the postcolonial terrorist, while ignoring that terrorist threat is in part an effect of colonial discourse.[157] In effect, the "war on terror", while inheriting the colonial strategy of "jurisprudence of emergency", fails to extend its causal logic to examine the root causes of the "ultimate evil" that it is made to fight. Instead, art theorist Kimberly Powell asserts that the "war on terror" enforced the idea of Us versus Them, (the United States versus Islam) which "sustained a climate of fear of terrorism that is linked repeatedly to Muslims".[158] This was facilitated by popular media which persistently covered Islam exclusively through the frame of terrorism.[159] Therefore, over time, people's perceptions of Muslims become inextricably bound to the image of the terrorist. This may charge the "Otherness" of the religiosity depicted in *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* with an additional sense of anxiety. In this light, the Arabic subtitles in Yossri's work, unintelligible to the general American reader, become images rather than words, conjuring up the propagandistic symbols of al-Qaeda or ISIL.

[155] Said 2003: 42
[156] Hussain 2004: 6-7
[157] Morton 2007: 36
[158] Powell 2011: 90
[159] Reese 2001: 9

The idea of weariness for the other also works the other way around. Art historian Oylun Albayrak notes that Mona Hatoum's work *Measures of Distance* divides its audience into two groups by featuring Arabic script: those who read Arabic and those who do not. Albayrak continues that this positions the Western viewer as a foreigner, unable to read that which is private, namely Hatoum's conversations with her mother.[160] Indeed, from a postcolonial perspective, the (formerly) colonized artist may hide metaphysical truths from the sight of the (former) colonizer. Art historian Ian McClean states: "Unlike Enlightenment notions of truth and clarity, which aim to be naked and fully revealed, Indigenous metaphysics (like that of Judaic and Gnostic traditions) considers truth as veiled".[161] Indeed such hidden metaphysical meaning exists in Arab cultures too, where a distinction is made between *zahir* (the apparent) and *baatin* (the veiled) and which, according to the artist Mahwish Chishty, creates a dialogue between what we plainly see and "what reality holds within".[162]

This idea of "hidden truth", unable to pass from one speaker to another, closely connects to Spivak's notion of ethical engagement which, in Arabic vocabulary, can only take place on the level of zahir. The aspect of baatin must remain hidden to prevent any one party to take interpretive control, to speak for the other. Indeed, in Mclean's sense, artists hide metaphysical truths in order to prevent the occurrence of "interpretive colonization". However, this already suggests an unequal colonizer-colonized relationship, which negates any effort of ethical engagement. Moreover, we have seen how *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* obstructs ethical dialogue on the level of zahir, as its apparent, unveiled features are suggestive of Orientalist representation, which pre-determines a power relation between West and East, driving the two sides apart. The following paragraph will take a Saudi perspective on Yossri's work, foregrounding ways in which a reading on the hidden level of baatin can reveal historical similarities between American and Saudi culture.

3.2 Shared ideals and their practical limitations

The idea of hidden truth in *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa,* which is only accessible by the "in-group", the speakers of Arabic, and thus exclusive in its legibility, can convey more inclusive and universally shared ideas. Saudi audiences would be able to treat the subtitles as verbal

[160] Albayrak 2012: 15-16
[161] Mclean 2006: 607
[162] Chishty 2008: I

language, instead of mere visual form, reading it, as the title suggests, as "*Kunna jamee'an ikhwa*" ("We were all brothers"). Additionally, Saudi viewers likely recognize Yossri's work as representing the hajj, which after all takes place in their country around the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Aside from the communal acts of worship, it is the *ihram* which signifies the Muslim pilgrimage in this image. According to art historians Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, the ihram is a spiritual state, which is expressed during the hajj in the form of clothing. Men wear two unsewn pieces of white cloth, while women have no explicit dress code, though they often choose to don white robes as well. By means of this uniform white, the ihram expresses the equality of all human beings before God.[163]

It is precisely this equality that Malcolm X articulated when he exclaimed "We were all brothers" in Lee's film, which was in turn based on the historical account of Malcolm's pilgrimage, in a letter he sent to his followers in America. The words "brothers" and "brotherhood" feature numerous times in this letter, and represent the peaceful coexistence between "people of all colors" which Malcolm never believed to have been possible.[164] Thus, a Saudi viewer might read the word *ikhwa* in yossri's artwork in relation to the notion of brotherhood that is so foundational in the Islamic religion.

According to scholar of Islam Yasir Qadhi, "ikhwa" (singular: *akh*) derives from the verb *wakha*, which means "to intend good for somebody".[165] Variations of the word feature numerous times in the Qur'an, most notably in *Surah al-Hujurat*, which states: "The Believers are but a single brotherhood [*ikhwatun*]".[166] Anthropologist Carla Jones and scholar of religion Ruth Mas state that this Islamic brotherhood is referred to as the *umma*, which is derived from the root word *umm* meaning "mother".[167] This suggests that all believers are brothers who originate from a single symbolic mother, not by any biological lineage, but by ascribing to the Islamic faith. In addition to this single "origin", the believers are envisioned to work towards the same goal. In his influential work *On the duties of brotherhood*, the medieval religious scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali likened the "brothers" of the umma to a pair of hands that wash each other, as they "are of mutual assistance towards a single aim".[168] He continues that their brotherhood is only fulfilled when they are companions in a single endeavor, adding: "In a sense the two are like one person".[169] Ghazali's analogy seems to be

[163] Bloom 1997: 84
[164] http://www.malcolm-x.org/docs/let_mecca.htm
[165] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9w0LmwoWing
[166] http://islamawakened.com/quran/49/10/default.htm
[167] Jones 2011: 4
[168] Ghazali 1979: 21
[169] Ghazali 1979: 22

grounded in a local context. Astoundingly however, today the umma consists of 1.6 billion Muslims and is a truly globalized community which transcends kinship on the bases of ethnicity, tribe or nationality.[170]

This brings us back to Malcolm's amazement over the "tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world (...) participating in the same ritual".[171] In a sense, *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* conveys what Malcolm felt during his hajj. We see a succession of believers walk across the desert while reciting the *talbiya*, a prayer by which the pilgrims announce their presence before God.[172] Although Yossri's choice to rid the figures of subtle color differences may have been a stylistic one, in the context of spiritual brotherhood, this uniformity may convey the idea that, even though the believers are of different nations, they are all brothers in Islam. Yossri himself seems to underline this interpretation, stating:

> The Islamic religion is based on the concept of equality of all mankind (...), where there is no color racism or social inequality. We can see that clearly during hajj, where all kind of people are in the same white uniforms at the same time.[173]

Thus, the uniform black skin and hair color in Yossri's artwork may express that there is essentially no difference. Furthermore, the black skin may connote an exemplary figure in the matter of equality: Bilal ibn Rabah. Like Malcolm's ancestors, Bilal was a man of African descent who was captured by a slave trading society, namely the Quraysh in Mecca. When, from among the Quraysh, the prophet Muhammad began to preach Islam, Bilal was the fourth man in history to follow his message.[174] Consequently, Bilal was tortured by his master. As Yossri states in detail:

> They used to drag him on his back naked on hot sand and throw rocks at him just to convince him to get back to his master's religion. Still, he kept saying his famous sentence: "I have one god, I have one god". This historical personality liberates from slavery through his strong beliefs that equality is for all mankind.[175]

Eventually, Bilal became the first *mu'adhin* (caller to prayer) in the early Muslim society,[176] not because of any question of race, but simply because he had a good voice for it.

Tempting as comparisons between Bilal and Malcolm X may be, they tend to reinforce

[170] Hsu 2010: 135
[171] http://www.malcolm-x.org/docs/let_mecca.htm
[172] Ingram 2015: 75
[173] Interview with Yossri, May 21st, 2016
[174] Kabha 2006: 532
[175] Interview with Yossri, May 21st, 2016
[176] Hamel 2008: 250

Malcolm's romanticized observations that Saudi Arabia has a long history of racial equality, while his own country was still struggling with race issues during his time. Following these views, *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* presents a vision of Saudi Arabia as Muhammad's idealized early Muslim society, a safe haven of spiritual brotherhood sheltered from the racist practices of the Western world. Thus, in the context of intercultural dialogue, such a reading inevitably shares deficiencies with the Orientalist view discussed above, and may well be characterized as Occidentalism. After all, it similarly enforces a split between Us and Them, though this time from an "Eastern" perspective. This interpretation also very closely follows Malcolm's historical statements and their perpetuation by Lee's film, while Yossri's strategy of appropriation suggests a shift from the treaded path of the existing story. The following part will effectuate a rearrangement of this narrative and its assumptions, by using the concept of brotherhood in *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* in a comparative perspective, making visible Saudi and American shared ideals and their historical shortcomings.

Malcolm X was a complex and multifaceted individual. He identified, among others, as a Harlemite, American, African, Muslim and civil rights leader. Therefore, his statement that "We were all brothers" may be interpreted within the context of any of these identities. Interestingly, the fact that this quotation is rendered in the past tense, suggests a historicization of the notion of brotherhood. We find that, like *ikhwa* in the Muslim world, the idea of "brethren" is of fundamental importance in American history. The political philosopher Ruth Starkman states that two conceptions of brotherhood predominate in American political culture: a Christian and a secularist one.[177] The former stems from Christian natural law, as developed by the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, and entails a "'spiritual brotherhood' between humans arising out of the bond with God, 'the father and the godchild'".[178] The latter is conceived as a "brotherhood of humanity", a foundational ideal in the French Revolution, expressed by the slogan "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*".[179] The ideal of spiritual brotherhood in which all men are free and equal, seems to culminate in the second sentence of the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."[180] According to documentary film maker Dinesh D'Souza, the founding fathers resolved the

[177] Starkman 2013: 596
[178] Aquinas 2000: 3807
[179] Carlyle 2010: 293
[180] Jefferson 1950: 429

contradiction between this statement and the continuing practice of slavery, with the following reasoning: "All men are created equal, blacks are being bought and sold in America [and are thus unequal], therefore blacks must not be men."[181] In fact, the "all men are created equal" phrase was simply "a rejection of the subordinate status of Englishmen in America to Englishmen in England", with "men" meaning free, adult, landowning, white males.[182] The abolition of slavery was never a question in the minds of the people who wrote the Declaration, let alone the obtainment of African-American citizenship and equal rights. The denial of black humanity was legitimized by unorthodox interpretations of Biblical stories, such as that of Noah's curse upon the descendants of his son Ham, who "were condemned to blackness and future enslavement".[183] Such exegeses and the institutions they attempted to sustain, run counter to Biblical passages which emphasize humanity and equality: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[184]

Thus, we find that the notion of brotherhood alluded to in *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* also plays a major role in the ideological underpinnings of the American nation. However, historically it has failed to practically manifest in society. Drawing from the Frankfurt School's critical theory, the philosopher Dustin Byrd describes this tension between normative religious principles and their negation in everyday lived experience, as part of the dialectical history of religion.[185] Fundamental in this historical structure, is the difference between religions that are *adversus mundi* (resisting the world) and *pro mundi* (conforming to the world).[186] According to Byrd, all Abrahamic faiths came into being to resist the slavery, barbarism and oppression of the worldly orders in which they were revealed. However, he continues, "these faiths can be co-opted by the worldliness of power, status and wealth", whereby they lose their "revolutionary and emancipatory potentials" that made them so attractive to the "victims of history".[187] The resulting type of passive religiosity, that conforms to the political status quo, was characterized by Malcolm X as "novocaine" religion, likening it to a sedative that makes the people "suffer – peacefully".[188] Having assessed the nature of American Christianity as pro mundi and thus unable to properly address African-American

[181] D'Souza 1995: 33
[182] Tarter 2013: 116
[183] D'Souza 1995: 34
[184] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+3%3A27-28&version=ESV
[185] Byrd 2016: 96
[186] Boer 2012: 11-14
[187] Byrd 2016: 96
[188] X 2001: 12

civil rights issues, Byrd follows Malcolm's logic that Islam bore within it all the adversus mundi qualities that might help rid America of racial inequality. However, he fails to adequately problematize the pro mundi character of Islam in Saudi Arabia.

The interpretation of *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* as Malcolm's enlightened encounter of spiritual brotherhood and racial equality, is ironically corroded when we realize that slavery was an accepted institution in Saudi Arabia until 1962; no more than two years before Malcolm traveled there.[189] Implicit forms of slavery were practiced well after his visit. Foreign workers from South-East Asia have been known to be unregistered and had to hand in their passports to their employers. In several cases they could not leave their employer's house, were denied pay and were raped and beaten. Workers are not protected by labor laws,[190] nor are they granted citizenship.[191] A US State Department report on "Trafficking in Persons" from 2005, states that "Saudi Arabia is a destination for men and women from South and East Asia and East Africa trafficked for the purpose of labor exploitation". [192] Moreover, hundreds of thousands of workers who migrate to Saudi Arabia voluntarily, "fall into conditions of involuntary servitude".[193]

In this light, *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* represents an ideal community that once was, but what has since become an unattainable vision. Thereby, the past tense of the phrase "We were all brothers" transcends its original meaning (Malcolm simply wrote his *Letter from Mecca* in the past tense), and instead suggests the decay of the emancipatory potentials of adversus mundi religions, when they deflate into state ideologies that sustain socio-political status quos. As a forum for intercultural dialogue, Yossri's artwork then becomes a space to fairly reconsider the ideal of brotherhood on which one's country was founded. Saudi viewers may challenge their dominant state narrative of colorblindness and universal equality, and recognize that phase of Islamic history has long passed ("we *were* all brother"). As such, the artwork, like Spike Lee's movie, functions as an inner critique of the society in which it was created. Having subverted the idealization of the Saudi state, *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* offers a platform for assessing other cultures in a fairer way and on an equal basis. Its subtitles may point to the American ideals of brotherhood, which African-Americans have found to be a

[189] Vlieger 2012: 92
[190] Rein 1998: 123
[191] Recently, the humanoid robot "Sophia" was granted Saudi citizenship, before any live human beings who risk their lives as foreign workers in Saudi construction projects.
[192] https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2005/46616.htm
[193] In these conditions these laborers are physically and sexually abused, are withheld payment and access to their travel documents, and are restricted in "their freedom of movement and non-consensual contract alterations."

myth, as they have faced adversity at every step on their path to attain true equality.[194] Conversely, they may recognize a similar failure of brotherhood to take root in their own society. This comparative view may remind us of Aviad Raz's idea of seeing the familiar reflected in the new light of the other's perspective. In this way, "otherness" is utilized constructively to facilitate intercultural dialogue, instead of being artificially increased to serve identitarian projects and essentialized notions of "Us" and "Them". As Gayatri Spivak asserts, otherness must be acknowledged. This in turn makes the examination of shared notions of brotherhood in the context of the other's cultural specificity a productive and ethical practice. It recognizes a shared humanity and similar social ideals, and provides new perspectives from which to assess these notions in the past, and to approach them in the future.

In the end, *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* may simply provide a Biblical or Qur'anic view of an ideal community, perhaps even a glimpse of Paradise. Indeed the monochrome gray field in which the believers find themselves, suggests a sense of the supernatural, a place removed from the earthly realm. The subtitles hint at a past society, untainted by issues of race and class, which may never be attained again. However, the image, like the holy scriptures, may stand as a symbol of perpetual striving towards true and universal human brotherhood in the future.

[194] McAuliffe 2010: 78

Fig. 8 Ayman Yossri Daydban, *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa,* Lightbox, 87 x 155 cm, 2010, The British Museum, London.

Fig. 9 Spike Lee, *Malcolm X*, 1992 (screenshot).

Fig. 10 Prosper Marilhat, *Syrian Arabs on a Journey*, oil on canvas 28 x 50 cm, 1844, Musée Condé, Chantilly.

Fig. 11 Gustave Guillaumet, *Evening Prayer in the Sahara*, oil on canvas 137 x 285 cm, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Conclusion

At first sight, Ayman Yossri's *Subtitles* artworks seem like faithful adaptations of *Malcolm X*, considering their mimetic re-presentation of the original cinematic imagery. However, by freezing the film's narrative, isolating single frames, and presenting them as prints, Yossri's makes his artworks transcend Malcolm's story. Taken out of the linear narrative of the film, the *Subtitles* series gain the ability to rethink it, depending on the interpretive input of the viewer. Arabic-speaking audiences are able to cross-read the images with the subtitles. Key Arabic concepts, and their rich connotations and grammatical derivations, serve as anchors around which the interpretive process unfolds. Yossri's strategy of appropriation effects the significance of Malcolm's legacy in several complex ways.

Firstly, the *Subtitles* artworks effectuate a temporal continuation of Malcolm's story in the present time. In *Abeed al Manazil*, Malcolm draws us into the history of the 'abeed, the slave who willingly submits to his master out of worship, which might make the Saudi viewer meditate on his own socio-political status in the Kingdom, when (s)he extends the 'abeed analogy to the present. This effect of societal critique is bound to the original material that Yossri appropriates, as Lee's film deals with a revolutionary political figure who resisted America's white power structure. As Lee endured the hardships of producing controversial cinema within Hollywood's limitations and conventions, so Yossri struggles to create artworks that are both accepted by, and subversive towards, the Saudi political order. Saudi officials screen the original cinematic material, and rewrite its subtitles to better reflect state ideology. Additionally, Yossri's finalized artworks are screened before exhibition. The *Subtitles* series thus walk a thin line between state approval, ideological conformation, and political subversion. Not surprisingly, some artworks are more successful than others in reconstituting Malcolm's myth for counter-hegemonic purposes. Indeed we have seen that *Abeed al Manazil* presents a power dynamic that reflects the current Saudi political hegemony, while failing to convey a societal "otherwise". It is therefore unlikely to confer upon its viewer the agency to politically activate him/her, and in the process create alternative subjectivities. *The Opening* seems more successful in this regard, outwardly presenting a symbol of Saudi national pride, while sheltering an alternative vision on religion and society which, exercising agency on the viewer's interpretive mind, may activate him/her to question the Saudi hegemonic order.

Secondly, Yossri's *Subtitles* series are both derived from, and suggestive of, intercultural processes. The historical Malcolm X, the eponymous character in Lee's picture, and the film itself, travelled from America to Saudi Arabia. Malcolm's views on both

societies, might function as a starting point for thinking about and discussing the other. As forums for intercultural dialogue, the *Subtitles* series are likely read in very different ways by Saudi and American audiences. Saudi viewers are able to read the text and the images intertextually, the meanings of which they might relate to the American or Saudi situation. In *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa*, they may realize that the asymmetries that Malcolm described between America and Saudi Arabia, stem from his idealization of Muslim culture, rather than fair observation. The idea of brethren (ikhwa), central to the artwork, may actually spur viewers to recognize the shared ideals of both countries, along with their difficulties in realizing them. American viewers likely read the text and image as a pictorial whole, as they cannot read the Arabic subtitles. Although *Kunna Jamee'an Ikhwa* shows a glimpse of Saudi society, it seems to allude to Orientalist depictions, which may cause the American viewer to drive American and Saudi culture further apart through the process of "othering".

In the end, interpretations of the *Subtitles* series allow Malcolm's story to gain new meaning between times and cultures, and the possibilities for interpretation, as Derrida points out, are endless. For instance, aside from religious takes on brotherhood, one could consider Arab political efforts to achieve nationhood as "crosssectarian brethren",[195] politico-religious movements such as the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (Muslim Brotherhood),[196] and the tribal *Ikhwan* militia,[197] all of which had considerable impact on Saudi history. Moreover, different subject positions and cultural perspectives might enrich readings of Yossri's artworks, among which are liminal groups that were left undiscussed in this study, such as Arabic-speaking Americans. Yossri's artworks demonstrate that Malcolm's story, unlike the man, is still very much alive in the present, and interpretive contestation over the meaning of his legacy will endure for times to come.

[195] Sheehi 2000: 15
[196] Wright 2011: 18
[197] Habib 1978: 16

Images

Cover image
Screenshot by author

Figure 1
https://www.athrart.com/artist/Ayman%20Yossri_Daydban/works/1336/#!1347

Figure 2
https://i.ytimg.com/vi/HK4nblNgfGc/maxresdefault.jpg

Figure 3
http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/images/BarbaraKruger-I-Shop-Therefore-I-Am-I-1987.jpg

Figure 4
https://svenlutticken.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/getinline.jpg

Figure 5
https://www.athrart.com/artist/Ayman%20Yossri_Daydban/works/1336/#!1330

Figure 6
https://www.athrart.com/artist/Ayman%20Yossri_Daydban/works/1336/#!1357

Figure 7
Photo by Aarnout Helb

Figure 8
https://www.athrart.com/artist/Ayman%20Yossri_Daydban/works/1336/#!1344

Figure 9
Screenshot by author

Figure 10
https://www.photo.rmn.fr/CorexDoc/RMN/Media/TR1/L656UR/99-024878.jpg

Figure 11
https://i.pinimg.com/originals/62/24/52/622452244c6494e283c81d7f4f7c6a71.jpg

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