



Review of the Book “Veils, Nudity and Tattooes: The New Feminine Aesthetics”

Irena V. Lebedeva (a) & Victoria A. Lubimova (b)

(a) Caspian Institute of Sea and River Transport. Astrakhan, Russia. Email: [irenalebedeva\[at\]mail.ru](mailto:irenalebedeva[at]mail.ru)

(b) Astrakhan State University. Astrakhan, Russia. Email: [li_xiaowei\[at\]mail.ru](mailto:li_xiaowei[at]mail.ru)

Abstract

This article reviews a book by a German philosopher of culture Thorsten Botz-Bornstein “Veils, nudity, and tattoos: the new feminine aesthetic” published in London, Lexington Books, 2015, 189 pp., (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-4985-0046-3

Keywords

Monograph; Culture; Muslim; Nudity; Symbolism; Tattoo; Veil; Nakedness



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Рецензия на монографию «Чадра, нагота и татуировки: новая женская эстетика»

Лебедева Ирэна Валерьевна (а), Любимова Виктория Александровна (б)

(а) Каспийский институт морского и речного транспорта. Астрахань, Россия.

Email: irenalebedeva[at]mail.ru

(б) Астраханский государственный университет. Астрахань, Россия.

Email: li_xiaowei[at]mail.ru

Аннотация

В данной статье приводится рецензия на монографию немецкого философа культуры Торстена Ботц-Борнштейна «Чадра, нагота и татуировки: новая женская эстетика», опубликованную в Лондоне издательством Лексингтон Букс, 2015, 189 стр., (твердый переплет), ISBN: 978-1-4985-0046-3.

Ключевые слова

монография; культура; мусульманский; нагота; символизм; татуировка; чадра; обнаженное тело



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What do tattoos, nudity and veils have in common? All three affect the skin, are non-traditional fashion items, express identity and are associated with certain taboos. All three can be private and public, degrading and empowering, backward and progressive, depending on how they are interpreted. In addition, the symbolic meaning of all three have changed significantly over the past thirty years, making a comparison possible.

The book under review, a small 92-paged monograph by a German philosopher Thorsten Botz-Bornstein “*Veils, Nudity and Tattoos. The New Feminine Aesthetics*” is a philosophical reflection on the issues of corporeal symbolism and functions of body closure/disclosure in modern cultures.

The author, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, was born and educated in Germany. He specialized in the sphere of Russian semiotics, later shifted his interest to Japan and conducted research in Kyoto University. He is the author of several books, namely:

- “Place and Dream: Japan and the Virtual” (Rodopi, 2004);
- “Films and Dreams: Tarkovsky, Sokurov, Bergman, Kubrik, Wong Karwai” (Lexington Books, 2007);
- “Vasily Sesemann: Experience, Formalism and the Question of Being” (Rodopi, 2006);
- “Aesthetics and Politics of Space in Russia and Japan (Lexington Books, 2009);
- “The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity (Lexington Books, 2010);
- “The Veil in Kuwait: Gender, Fashion, Identity” (with Noreen Abdullah-Khan, Palgrave, 2014); and
- “Transcultural Architecture: Limits and Opportunities of Critical Regionalism” (Ashgate, 2015).

The reviewed book is the result of his recent life and research in Kuwait.

In the introduction the author argues that, as opposed to the past, nudity no longer represents a natural state of the body: rather it indicates a violation of nature. Nevertheless, it has a high ideological value. The veil, that seems on the first glance as something completely opposed to nudity, has become part of the new physical culture together with nudity and tattoos.

To understand the new concepts through which tattoos, nudity, and veils are determined, says Botz-Bornstein, certain tropes must be previously deconstructed. These include the trope of Western civilization vs. Oriental barbarism, the trope of the Muslim woman as the ultimate victim of an Islamic patriarchy, but also the trope of covering a body as the progress of civilization.

Against this background, the questions posed in this book is anthropologically broad: How are tattoos, nudity, and veils related to civilization? Is nudity itself "primitive," and does the covering (veiling) of a body signify a step on the way to civi-



lization or a step away from it? Do tattoos effect a shift from the primitive to civilization or does the untattooed, pure skin represent a supreme civilizing value even in contemporary postmodern culture?

The author points out, that according to conventional comparative approaches, tattoos and nudity operate within the same system of signifiers, because both have to do with the exposure of the body and are sexually connoted precisely because of this, while a veil covers the body and thus cancels these connotations. The author claims to have proven this assertion wrong, at least for the modern culture. In his book the veil and nudity are not presented as opposites, but as interacting branches of the same discourse. To oppose nudity and veil, is, to the author's view, to fall in a trap that leads, for example, to creating "liberating nudity" and "oppressive veils" as rigid concepts (Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p.7).

However, the bikini is not necessarily more liberating than the veil. Above all, it is important to understand that both the veil and the nudity are unique forms of expression that derive their power from an inner self-contradiction. Both covering a body and baring it can be seen as humiliation and empowerment. In this they are comparable to tattoos. Second, both nudity and veil have a metaphorical power that is inconsistent with their original meaning, especially when it comes to religious and metaphysical statements. "Naked truth" or "veiled truth" are strikingly convenient expressions, even though they say nothing about nakedness or veiling in specific anthropological contexts.

The author points out that symbolism of nudity and veiling is nowadays increasingly extended into the realm of politics. It has been said, for example, that "Muslims are on a crusade to cover up anything that threatens their faith, be it Western democracy, history or simply any form of change". It is the radicality of these expressions that can make them either convincing or irritating.

As for tattoos, there are more similarities between them and veils that meet the eye. Both, as the author puts it, ".....emanate an uncanny power affronting "liberal" subjects and filling them with horror because both represent permanent body alterations. More radically, what tattoos and the veil have in common is that the covering they represent can be perceived as a device that displaces and destroys the items it covers" (Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p.8)

As Samantha Holland insightfully remarks in her review: "Botz-Bornstein's central argument is that tattoos and veils recuperate the political body: in the context of protests, of challenge, and creating their own space and agency. The veil is his starting point, and in comparing it to tattoos and nudity, and at other points to Slut Walks and male chastity belts, he interrogates the success of the phenomenon despite the paradoxes: respect, modesty, sexuality, female power, female non-power" (Holland, 2016, p 619).

Now we will briefly cover the structure of this interesting book.

Chapter 1 discusses the veil as a physical and cultural phenomenon comparing it to other articles of body covering humankind has employed. Both the veil and the sunglasses, for instance, aim at interrupting gazes, they cause a selective



covering of a face, the difference being which part of a face is covered and which uncovered.

Chapter 2 focuses on those women who see their veiling as an act of resistance and liberation that connects to feminist strategies in general and in the light of the Third Wave Feminist Thought in particular. The author finds similarities as both pro-veiling positions and Third Wave Feminism oppose previous anti-sex ideologies of earlier feminist generations.

In Chapter 3 the author compares veiling to some of the key virtues of African-American identity: temperance and self-control. Can the veil serve as an instrument of coolness? Does this piece of cloth maintain the crucial balance between visibility and non-visibility? Does it express assimilation and cultural resistance, submission and subversion, control and inability to control?

Chapter 4 presents the debate over the veil through French feminist Sarah Kofman's reflections. Kofman believes that respect for women simultaneously degrades and elevates women because "respect for women is always the moral and glorious flip side of men's 'misogyny.'" (Kofman, 1997, p. 371). The veil proves to be a highly ambiguous object for precisely these reasons.

Chapter 5 examines the phenomenon of spatial segregation and compares Africa- American spatial segregation to the gender segregation increasingly practiced in Muslim countries. The author argues that in both cases segregation is resolved through the creation of a "cool space" of playful transgression.

Chapter 6 compares the veil versus tattoos and nudity. In this chapter, parallels and differences between the three are analyzed and systematized.

Chapter 7 analyzes the spectacular rise in popularity of tattoos in the last decades which the author calls tattoo Renaissance. This allows to speak about a shift from tattoos to body graffiti.

Chapter 8 delineates the concepts of the "barbaric" and the "civilized" in the cultural discourse on tattoos. The goal here is to examine tattoos from the angle of the above-mentioned dichotomy. This chapter explores the particular connection that tattoos maintain with nudity. In contrast to the past, tattoos are now used to reestablish the body as a "civilized entity": The tattooed body is never fully naked and can never be fully wild.

Chapter 9 examines the role of males in relation to fetishism and nature.

The book ends abruptly and has a really small conclusion, which we always regret in academic papers. Quoting someone else's words at the end of one's own book is also a big structural and academic *no-no*.

But that is a very minor drawback. The book "*Veils, Nudity and Tattoos. The New Feminine Aesthetics*" is interesting, has a fresh perspective, employs a philosophical approach to the material. It argues, challenges, opposes the new ideas against the old ones and offers a new reading of corporeality and related problematics.



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