

## 15. That's how you people do things around here, right?!

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Fig. 15.1: “The Federal Republic of Germany wishes you a pleasant temporary stay.”



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A while ago, I was invited to a symposium on diversity and cultural education. That evening the plan was to go out for dinner, as usual. A gentleman I had previously sat with on a panel approached me. “Fadi, you live here. Won't you take us to a good Oriental restaurant?” We were a group of six or seven people.

“I love Arab food, whether it's Moroccan or Afghan. It's simply magical,” he explained to me. Now, I'm not generally comfortable doing this kind of thing. You can never please everyone and are quickly blamed for the smallest details. And in this case, I didn't know where to start. Was I to explain to him that Afghanistan is not an Arab country? I had only eaten Afghan food once – and yet to him, I was the expert.

When I eat out in Berlin, my first choice is not always “Arabic” or a place “Arabs” are expected to frequent. Berlin offers so many different global cuisines at affordable prices that I personally – as a real Arab – also like to go out for Vietnamese, Korean,

or Peruvian food, or even simply for burgers or pizza. I was hungry myself. So, I then led the group to one of my favorite Arabic restaurants. The restaurant was decorated in a simple and culturally neutral style. It had a 60s DDR Sputnik-style chandelier and an angular, streamlined glass and wood counter.

*Fig. 15.2: The Arabic restaurant with the GDR decoration – Photo 1*



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Arriving at the restaurant (see Fig. 15.2.), my fellow panelist was disappointed. “This is not authentic,” he declared. That made me curious. I asked him which restaurants he felt were actually authentic. He then gave me a long lecture about where he had eaten which dishes and which ones had been truly “authentic”. The restaurants he named were predominantly ones furnished in exotic Oriental style. I then asked whether he had ever been to an Arab country – from Morocco to Afghanistan. No, he said, he hadn’t.

This story has stayed with me for some time. Of course, I am familiar with Orientalist patterns, but it surprised me that even enlightened young people in my peer group should apply such patterns, including people who – I presumed – have dealt with colonialist and post-colonialist perspectives. I especially did not expect this among people who belong to the arts and cultural scene.

*Fig. 15.3: The Arabic restaurant with the GDR decoration – Photo 2*



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When it comes to decorating an Arab restaurant in Berlin, many owners fill it with reprints of Orientalist paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries as an expression of their cultural identity. It is not surprising to see works by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Georg Macco, Leopold Carl Müller, or Francesco Ballesio in a falafel or shawarma snack bar. Ballesio, like many other Orientalist painters, never traveled to the original locations himself before creating images of the Orient that were nevertheless widely accepted as “authentic”.

Such colonialist and imperialist perspectives have been applied not only to Arab or Islamic societies. As we all know, as a rule, every people and every society is pigeonholed, including Germany and the Germans. But the global structures of power and representation affect the extent to which cultures are reduced to clichés – so the impact is felt less by the colonial powers than by those who were colonized. This disbalance extends, not only to Arabs or Muslims, but also to Africans, Latin Americans, Asians, and to some extent, to Southern and Eastern Europeans.

Usually, distorted or prejudiced perspectives catch my attention. I often wish they wouldn't. As a student, I was always asked to “create something ‘Arabic’”. I was not exactly enthusiastic about that. Above all, I didn't know what this “Arabic” should look like. And I didn't think anyone else would, either.

But I was wrong. Many people simply applied their own definitions and criteria and assumed the ability and prerogative to pass judgment. In the end, it was an older, experienced lecturer, a certain Professor Veit, who finally persuaded me to create an “Arabic” design in his basic fundamentals of communication design course. The task was to visualize a music genre of our choice. I thought it would be a good

exercise to visualize Classical Arabic music, a genre broad enough to defy narrow definition.

But in the end, my designs were never “Arabic” enough for the professor. He made suggestion after suggestion that seemed absurd to me. One was that I should apply gold glitter, sprinkling it onto the drying ink – a technique I imagine a student might have used years ago to illustrate a fairy tale from the Orient, but certainly not something connected in any way with my understanding.

Veit then told me about a former student of his from Vietnam, a man who had always wanted to create “American” designs. That student, Veit said, considered “American” to be synonymous with “Western” or “modern”.

Then one day, the student was asked to design something “Vietnamese”. When he presented the first drafts, they were met with criticism. “But that’s how people design in Vietnam,” he answered. “No, no, no,” Veit had said. “You’re doing it all wrong if you create Vietnamese design as *you* think it should look. You should do it the way *we* think it should look.”

Veit did not mince words. That statement is deeply prejudiced and, as it demeans the Vietnamese perspective compared to the Western one, one could even consider it racist. A younger professor might use different words. But in graphic design, primarily meant to serve communication purposes, Veit’s stance might well be considered normal or standard: After all, in communication, it’s always important to take the viewer’s visual habits into account.

For example, I wouldn’t go into a store with dark wood paneling and furniture, small green lamps, and a Guinness logo on the window if I were looking for a delicious falafel. I wouldn’t walk into a restaurant, decorated with Asian elements and red wooden furniture if I got a craving for burgers on the road. And no matter what kind of food Abdullah offers, honestly, I would be very skeptical of him.

Our visual habits, like our habits in general, influence both our behavior and our attitudes. By consuming certain images and motifs – be they in the media, in art, or on Facebook – we form our opinions and positions. That’s nothing new! And like the paintings and images of the Orient from over 100 years ago, the depictions and stereotypes of today serve certain political and cultural purposes.

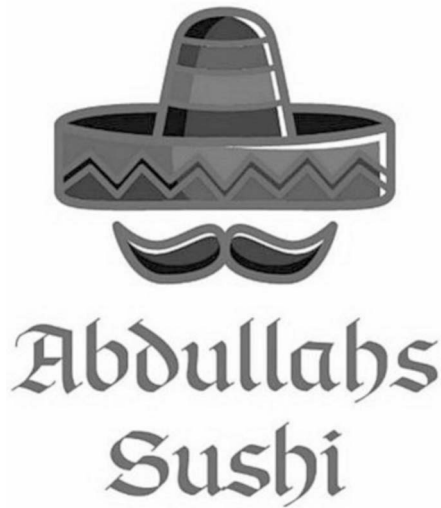
Hollywood has inherited and advanced myths about the Orient shaped in Europe through painting and literature. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, Jack G. Shaheen<sup>1</sup> documents 100 American films that, over many years, have portrayed Arabs and Muslims as evildoers, money-hungry sheikhs, religious fanatics, faceless masses in black, harem maidens, and even subhuman individuals. Shaheen explains that while Hollywood no longer maligns other races to this degree, it still perpetuates myths and gross exaggerations about race and religion when it comes to Arabs.

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1 Jack G. Shaheen (2001; 3rd revised edition 2009) *Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Interlink Books.

No doubt that American film productions had a huge cultural impact on the whole Western world including Germany, where viewers nowadays are certainly more conscious of stereotypes. People tend to be more capable of identifying and classifying primitive Hollywood stereotypes as such. But what about the motifs of the past 10 to 20 years? They are motifs of war and displacement victims; injured or dead people in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan; people on the run, especially children in wet clothes and orange life jackets; or the dead bodies of others who have not survived the escape journey. The most prominent one is the Syrian toddler, Alan Kurdi. The motif of his dead body lying on the beach was reproduced again and again over months and even years in the media – and indeed in art, including by Ai Weiwei, posing as the dead boy in a photograph as a notable addition to countless works of art, literature, and films about these tragic events and their outcome.

Fig. 15.4: “So why do we never see such motifs?”



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What do these motifs, and what do such images and representations do to us – especially given repeated and incessant exposure? One may argue that they are necessary to generate attention and sympathy for the victims. But is that really what they do? After all, who among us can remember the last time in the past 30 or 40 years she or he saw a picture of a dead western european or north american white person? Did we see the dead victims of mass shooter rampages in the U.S. or the attack on Charlie Hebdo in France, or bodies of the teenagers killed at that summer camp in

Norway? I certainly have not seen any such images – no photos, paintings, statues, or installations that depict and immortalize these victims in their victim status. Aren't these victims worthy of our attention and sympathy as well? This is a rather striking and peculiar contrast!

So why do we never see such motifs?

In my search for answers, I came across Susan Sontag's essay "Regarding the Pain of Others."<sup>2</sup> I found two of her arguments very insightful. First, it doesn't really matter with what intentions one produces, reproduces, or disseminates images and depictions of horrors. Their sheer volume dulls our feelings. Just as the health warnings on cigarette packages hardly deter anyone from smoking. Second, motifs of violence occurring only in foreign lands and happening only to "others" create a disconnect between the subject and the viewer. They suggest that tragedy is inevitable and unavoidable – and thus more acceptable – as long as it is experienced by strangers, and they create the sense that violence happens elsewhere and to others. When I arrived in Berlin, I was frankly disconcerted that whenever I noticed cultural references to the Arab region, they were always laden with violence, war, women's oppression, religion, or, ideally, a mixture of all of these.

I kept asking myself: Why is the apparent interest in such content often more important than the aesthetic quality of the work itself? And why do we hardly see works that deal with other themes – an abstract sculpture, a love poem, a family drama, a comedy, on stage or on screen? Do such works exist at all? If so, why are they not here?

The interaction between the seller and the buyer has shaped markets for thousands of years. It is habits and buying patterns that shape markets and products. And the richer the buyer, the more the maker and seller will adapt to the buyer's preferences.

On the international art markets, it is unfortunately no different. If both the public and the cultural stakeholders in Berlin and in other Western metropolises are most interested in art that deals with the suffering of others, that is simply what will be produced most. And when criteria such as quality and authenticity are aligned with Western notions and expectations of the ethnic and geographic identity of artists and artworks, the repeated and exclusive exposure to other people's tragedies will continue to dull empathy, and at the same time build a sense that other people's problems do not affect us: "We are safe here".

Some time ago, Ai Weiwei decided, very publicly, to leave Berlin. He said Germany is self-centered and was not open to dissenting voices. I was intrigued by his

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2 Sonntag, Susan (2003) Regarding the Pain of Others. Picador New York ([https://monoskop.org/images/a/a6/Sontag\\_Susan\\_2003\\_Regarding\\_the\\_Pain\\_of\\_Others.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/a/a6/Sontag_Susan_2003_Regarding_the_Pain_of_Others.pdf)).

case. A reporter immediately interviewed him for *Die Welt*,<sup>3</sup> ironically enough, was less concerned about Weiwei's perception of Germany and more concerned about the artist's stance on Hong Kong, China, and the evil influence of China on the *Berlinale*, which was not showing his films.

I can't judge whether his films were not shown because the Chinese government wanted it that way. What I can judge is this: If a world-renowned artist like Ai Weiwei, whose works were widely recognized and celebrated – especially in Germany, finds Germany to be self-centered and not open to dissenting voices, what must younger or “less prominent” artists experience – artists more dependent on funding and commissions? Western democratic countries like Germany are said not to practice censorship. But what role do self-censorship and the limits of what can be said play concerning the published forms of expression and themes in art and culture?

And isn't paying attention to diversity actually quite trendy right now – especially in cultural venues and institutions? In a city with flourishing old and new migrant societies, the topic is widely discussed and debated. In my opinion, when cultural stakeholders talk about diversity, they are primarily concerned with the diversity of the audience. The resounding dilemma is: How to interest the migrants and their children and grandchildren in the cultural asset of the German *Leitkultur*, and how to educate them culturally as an audience? The contents are hardly questioned, nor are the structures and the representation of people of color within these structures given much consideration. And only very rarely do they appear as active players in the art scene.

As a student, I was taught by Veit that what really mattered was not authenticity as an objective criterion but that subjective expectations were met. What does that mean, then, for Berliner people of color, to whom the culture industry only concedes the role of passive spectator or else to whom it dictates which authenticity they must represent?

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3 Rodek, Hans-Georg (2019) Ai Weiwei. Warum ich Berlin und Deutschland verlasse. Eine Abrechnung. August 8 (<https://www.welt.de/kultur/kino/plus198185345/Ai-Weiwei-Warum-ich-Berlin-und-Deutschland-verlasse-Eine-Abrechnung.html>).

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