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“Extraordinary renditions: imaging, mapping, and immobilising the lives of Others”

In years following 9/11/2001, I became increasingly aware of the manner in which images of terrorising ‘Dark Bodies’ are conflated with the terms and discourses connected to the politics of fear to achieve the strategic goal of controlling the movements of Others, and how politically powerful decision makers and prominent media figures promote and use public anxieties and assumptions about danger, risk, and fear in order to ensure our participation in the mechanics of surveillance.

In this paper, I am interested in interrogating the manner in which body-mapping and body ‘publicity’ – through the vernacular of ‘photo stories’ on the internet, TV, and popular magazines – have become crucial to incorporating consumers in the discourse of terror during years following 9/11/2001, indicating the complex functions and ongoing life of visual images of ‘terror’ and ‘terrorists’ in the ‘west.’ I also investigate the function of fashion images that incorporate the War on Terror, the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Oriental,’ and the role of the female consumer within this environment of manufactured shock and terror.

My inquiry on fashion photography is situated within a larger project that examines the role of imagery and narratives about the “terrorist” or Dark Other within the biopolitics of control. Because legal definitions of what constitutes the human and her or his rights is always accompanied by discourses of the fragility of the subject in need of “protection”—the native, the

woman, the Other—those given legal protection also come to be under greater control and surveillance. If a ‘threatening’ or ‘Dark Body’ wishes to leave a particular location or circumstance, the first step in relocation includes a mandatory map of the body: beginning with the ‘mug shot’ for the passport and visa, the finger prints. Those who are now publicised as ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening’ must pass through increasingly intrusive gauntlet of x-rays, body-mapping apparatuses, and ‘voluntary’ divestments of personal information in interrogation rooms as they pass through checkpoints and borderzones. Furthermore, because legal definitions of what constitutes the human and her or his rights is always accompanied by discourses of the fragility of the subject in need of ‘protection’—the native, the woman, the Other—those given legal protection under the nation also come to be under greater control and surveillance.

It is against this backdrop that fashion photographer Steven Meisel’s photo essay appeared in the September 2006 “State of Emergency,” a complex photo story referencing identifiable tropes of violence linked to images and narratives emerging from conditions of heightened security after 9/11/2001, and the subsequent War on Terror. Meisel’s photostory appeared at a time when European newspapers regularly contained stories of CIA-organised ‘renditions’ of those labelled as terrorists – none of whom were charged in courts of law. Many in the US are either oblivious to these stories, and, like my students, are shocked by the reports that their own country is involved in what amounts to government-sanctioned kidnappings, carting people away without the right to trial, the legendary free call to a lawyer, or even the option of contacting a family member or loved one: the basic human rights we have come to regard as granted within the promise of freedom offered by the US. Once kidnapped, prisoners are transported secretly to gulags scattered throughout nations that are part of the

“Coalition of the Willing” – Egypt, Jordan, and Libya: silenced and, in fact, disappeared from the domain of the real.

In the billion-dollar industry that is high fashion, photo shoots do not happen haphazardly; the fantasies therein often reflect social, cultural and political currents occurring at a particular moment in time. In fact, fashion capitalises on engaging with whatever current conditions have caught the public’s attention. In connecting the advertisement of clothing with a specific set of markers that evoke the images and narratives of “extraordinary renditions” and Abu Ghraib – images and stories of spectacular state violence transmitted and publicised by the popular press, televised news, and internet sites during that same year – Meisel couples references to identifiable tropes of state violence with the inherent violence of being a player in the world of high-fashion consumption, with its attendant body-policing culture. Translating these tropes of state violence into a fashion photo story, replete with cowering Prada-clad “prisoners” in various “stress positions” kneeling before “TSA agents”, machine-gun toting “soldiers”, and snarling Alsations highlights the manner in which being subjected to constant visual inspections via photographic documentation and imaging technology adds to the discourse of terror-manufacture – be it by the policing strategies of the state, intent on securing the borders of nation and ‘self’, or by the high-end consumer groups, who similarly police the borders of body acceptability according to a tightly regulated set of physical markers.

These images are powerful in many ways – but their ability to re-direct our thoughts towards consumption may be the most unsettling. The unsettling we experienced when we regarded the original photographs from Abu Ghraib—wherein we grappled with seeing the self as an irreconcilable Other in the gleeful faces of the soldiers meant to be protecting our

interests—that disturbance is largely tamed or nullified: in Meisel’s images, our gaze is directed towards the goods we desire, carried by the “disappearing” bodies of the models; concurrently, perhaps, we read that the subjectivity of others needs to be removed in order for us to carry on with a certain level of consumerism. In a way, that is what the War on Terror is “about” – removal of an Other’s subjectivity in order for 5% of the world’s population to maintain a runaway consumption.

Meisel and *Vogue*’s fashion editors may be suggesting that the War on Terror is a war that protects our right to consume those very goods that allow us to mobilise and give expression to our agency as modern subjects, while simultaneously removing the agency, mobility and subjectivity and speech of Others, whose alterity has placed them beyond the domain of representation. If the fashion editors for *Vogue* intended that to be the message, they are brilliant – but somehow, I think that they were interested in creating desire for the goods, not critiquing desire and consumption, or the accompanying losses for those outside the borderlands of power.