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EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Staging the Other. Orientalism in contemporary media practice[1]

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Abstract. The so-called "oriental" has always been a subject for "western" fascination. Today, the staging of the "orient" in (hobby) model photography is among the most popular themes: costumes and props from various cultural contexts are combined to form a new whole. Based on participant observation and interviews, the article traces back possible individual motivations for embodying the "oriental," among them nostalgia, corresponding with the description of the orient as "timeless," the need for spirituality, the wish to express femininity, and to work on identity with regard to identity trials and the definition of the own identity through the help of its imagined opposite. Considering society as a whole and its *zeitgeist*, the phenomenon is interpreted using the concepts of escapism and kitsch, which can be observed in mainstream culture as well. Furthermore, cultural appropriation is discussed as a way to prevent getting to know other cultures, but at the same time, the "oriental" photoshoot is also seen as a chance to generate interest and to practice creativity. The article shows that the analysis of staged photographs offers a base for understanding the cultural context in which they have been taken and/or circulate, and that the photo motifs can be seen as expressions of psychological motivations.
Keywords: Photography; staging; Orientalism; escapism; cultural appropriation.

[es] Poner en escena al otro. El orientalismo en la práctica de los medios de comunicación contemporáneos

Resumen. Lo llamado "oriental" siempre ha sido objeto de fascinación "occidental". Hoy en día, la escenificación de "Oriente" en la fotografía de modelos (por afición) es uno de los temas más populares: se combinan trajes y accesorios de diversos contextos culturales para formar un nuevo conjunto. Basándose en la observación participativa y en las entrevistas, el artículo rastrea las posibles motivaciones individuales para encarnar lo "oriental", entre ellas la nostalgia, que se corresponde con la descripción de lo oriental como "intemporal", la necesidad de espiritualidad, el deseo de expresar la feminidad y de trabajar la identidad con respecto a los ensayos de identidad y la definición de la propia identidad con ayuda de su opuesto imaginado. Teniendo en cuenta la sociedad en su conjunto y su *zeitgeist*, el fenómeno se interpreta utilizando los conceptos de escapismo y kitsch, que también pueden observarse en la cultura dominante. Además, se discute la apropiación cultural como una forma de evitar el conocimiento de otras culturas, pero al mismo tiempo, la sesión de fotos "oriental" también se ve como una oportunidad para generar interés y practicar la creatividad. El artículo muestra que el análisis de las fotografías escenificadas ofrece una base para entender el contexto cultural en el que se han tomado y/o circulan, y que los motivos de las fotos pueden verse como expresiones de motivaciones psicológicas.
Palabras clave: Fotografía; escenificación; Orientalismo; escapismo; apropiación cultural.

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1. Introduction

Mehendi, Indian sarees, Moroccan carpets, and Turkish bellydance costumes—in (hobby/amateur) model photography it is common to throw it all together and attach the label "oriental" photoshoot (Fig. 1). The term "orient" derives from the latin "oriens" meaning "East" and thus denotes from an ethnocentric perspective areas that are in the East of Europe, originally the Near and Middle East, and later expanded to the Far East. However, it is not at all clear which areas the term includes and which should not belong to the "orient". The opposition "orient" versus "occident" shows how the world was traditionally divided into two diametrically opposed areas. The terms "orient" respectively "oriental" themselves "have become something of a pejorative expression since the second world war […] It continues to appear, though, in tourist brochures where it is apparently meant to conjure up images of appropriately exotic opulence" (Inden, 1986, p. 404).

Similar to pictures in tourist brochures, photographers build sets with colorful fabrics, embroidered cushions, water pipes, and exotic musical instruments; make-up artists paint their vision of mehendi patterns on the skin of the models and decorate it with bindi stickers and kajal; and models in detailed costumes pose lasciviously or elegantly in these surroundings—even if none of the team members has any connection to what they call "oriental." This article looks at the phenomenon and aims at giving answers to the question why this genre is still so popular[3]. Furthermore, it suggests approaches to its evaluation.

Figure 1. The opulent dresses made from old fabrics by textile artist Shalisari, worn by model Svenja and model Chira can be seen in opposition to the old and simple, wooden floor. Both are parts of the "oriental" shooting, the abundance and the "backward." Photograph by the author.

[3] A survey I conducted in 2020 revealed that almost 50% (n = 56) of those, who model for a year or more have already done at least one "oriental" photoshoot and that another 30% would like to do one.

2. Approaching the Topic

When talking about "oriental" photographs, two approaches may come to mind, one focusing on historical aspects and the other on tourism:

In early photography, "native types" were en vogue, pictures of indigenous people wearing their traditional dresses and make-up. Because of the need for long exposure, but also in order to make the pictures appear more "original," they were often heavily staged: "In many cases, the photographers' intention was to stage a supposedly original life by deliberately hiding all attributes that could have pointed to western influences. In addition, erotic productions took a significant place among commercial photographs" (Theye, 1998, p. 57). The ethnographic value of such pictures is, however, debatable. Instead of giving accurate impressions of the people photographed they often rather "reflected the wishes of the westerners, their ambitions, their obsessions and symptoms" (Faris, 2002, p. 78). As such, it will be shown that there are clear similarities to the subject discussed. This also links to the term "Orientalism" coined by Edward Said, which was taken up by scholars looking specifically at visual products, such as Linda Nochlin (1983) and Ali Behdad (2015).

Another approach could be travel or tourist photography. One of the most famous texts on the subject is an essay by Susan Sontag who strongly criticizes it: among countless other aspects, she is referring to the way tourist photography objectifies the other: "They turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed" (Sontag, 1973, p. 81). Instead of confrontation or communication with the other, there would be only a quick snap that rather distances the photographer from the photographed: „Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter" (1973, p. 6, see also Thurner, 1992, p. 37f.). As will be shown, there are parallels to the "oriental" photoshoot, because dealing with or getting to know the "other" often plays a subordinate role as well.

With these two approaches in mind, let us now consider the scene in which the photoshoots take place. The scene is constituted by two kinds of settings: there are online activities on social media, mainly Facebook and Instagram, or fora specifically dedicated to photography such as model-kartei.de or fotocommunity.de. Furthermore, real-life meetings—the preparation of the shootings, the shootings themselves, events, and workshops—take place as well. The scene comprises about 400,000 to 600,000 members alone in the German-speaking context where the research was conducted.

Within the scene of staged photography, various genres can be identified, e.g. emotional portraits, fashion pictures, or classical nude motifs. An umbrella term for a very popular genre is "fantasy." In this genre, extraordinary dresses and props are preferred, which are usually very detailed, delicate, and often hand-made. Often, they are presented in a mixed way, using costumes and props from different narratives to form a new whole. This is also the case in the sub-genre "oriental," however, the props and costumes used refer to respectively are taken from actual cultural contexts. The term appears in a colloquial way—a scientific use is rather obsolete anyway (cf. Jerrentrup, 2018, p. 80). As shown above, it is very difficult to define: it would be probably impossible to tell which geographical areas, which artifacts, traditions, spiritualities, attitudes, etc. would be included—yet, it is obvious that the concept is based on a way of thinking that distinguishes ontologically and epistemologically between "the orient" and "the occident" (cf. Said, 1978, p. 11). In

"oriental" photoshoots, the term obviously denotes things that are different from the elements typically found in the own cultural context. "Oriental" props and dresses are anything but simple or sober, they are very colourful with a focus on warm colours, have an antique, handmade feel to it, and, when it comes to the costumes, they are often quite revealing.

To answer the question why people fancy "oriental" photoshoots I look back at more than 10 years of participant observation in the scene[4] of (hobby) model photography, which gave me the opportunity to interact with a great number of models, stylists, and photographers and helps me to ensure that I can speak with some confidence about the scene.

Furthermore, I interviewed 25 amateur models, middle class women between 18 and 43, and ask them to describe their own "oriental" photographs and how they experienced their "oriental" shoot(s). These interviews were done either in person, via telephone or via e-mail, as to the preference and availability of the interviewee. Among the interviewees, there were four persons who labelled themselves either as "oriental" or "half-oriental."

In order to also take photographs into account, I looked at 50 photographs posted between 2015 and 2020 that were published in popular Facebook groups and show "oriental" scenarios. To make sure that I do not misinterpret these pictures I only considered photographs that were clearly labelled as "oriental" by their accompanying text or hashtags.

The answers of the interviewees were categorized, just as the photographs I looked at. However, even if there is a touch of "quantitative" analysis included by giving percentages, the categorization still implies that a qualitative judgement underlies the quantitative count (cf. Miller and Sinanan, 2017, p. 6).

Table 1.

Concept	**Exemplary expressions from the interviewees / Visual elements found in the photographs**	**Percentage**
Nostalgia	"It makes me think of old times." "Here, the world is still alright." "On the one hand it would be nice if the world was still like this, on the other, I would probably hate it."	76%
	Antique looking materials such as old carpets and / or old jewellery Elements that look like being hand-crafted	92%

[4] I use the term "scene" instead of subculture, as "sub-" implies a hierarchy I want to avoid. Further, following Dick Hebdige, subcultures are understood as subversion to normalcy which is not (that) obvious in this context. As I will explore, the scene has in some ways rather individualistic tendencies and is not (primarily) meant to bring together people who feel neglected by the mainstream society. However, identity plays an important role, just as in subcultures.

Spirituality	"I like using symbols—even if they don't mean anything, but look like something meaningful." "It has got something connective just like yoga."	68%
	Real or imaginative symbols, often in jewellery items or in the decoration Statues or paintings of Gods and Godesses Posings connected with meditation	44%
Femininity	"I feel very feminine in this dress and setting." "It means celebrating femininity."	64%
	Typically exclusively feminine attires Feminine/ erotic posings or dresses / jewellery that stresses female attributes	96% 78%
Identity — Otherness	"It is very different, just the opposite from how I actually look like." "It is interesting to embody something I am not, it is like playing with my identity."	48%
	Not applicable	
Identity – Partial Identity	"The oriental princess in my photographs is actually a part of myself." "I love everything oriental, it just suits my personality, even if I cannot be like this in everyday life."	24%
	Not applicable	

3. The Fascination for the "oriental" Photoshoot

In the following, the motivations for being staged in settings and costumes that are characterized as "oriental" will be in focus. Motivation is a factor that influences people's behaviour so that they can satisfy their psychological motives or needs. There can be conflicting needs, for example when a woman wants to express her femininity, but at the same time defines herself by attributes that (traditionally) have more masculine connotations, such as strength or independence.

As already explained above, the analysis is based on interviews and participant observation, as well as a content analysis-like structuring of the answers and observations into clusters.

3.1. Nostalgia

Expressions that can be interpreted with regard to nostalgia were mentioned by 76% of the models and the elements used as costume or decoration usually look antique or hand-made. The term "nostalgia," which was frequently used by the interviewees themselves, has its origin in the spatial and used to be understood as a kind of homesickness. Later, a shift of meaning from the spatial to the temporal has happened but "even Kant and Rousseau address the fundamental inseparability of these two dimensions of homesickness, which still plays a central role […]: the talk about the 'digital natives' and the 'digital immigrants,' for example, is between the same semantic poles"[5] (Schrey, 2016, p. 342f.).

Space and time are closely connected since it takes time to overcome space, which in turn changes over time—at least since the industrialization. Since then, nostalgia has become the longing for something unattainable. "Orientalist painting depicts a world of timeless customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were drastically altering Western society at the time", states Linda Nochlin (1983, p. 122). Looking at photography, this is reflected by Susan Sontag (1973, p. 120), who writes about the wish to return to a "purer" epoch characterized by manufacturing instead of industrial production. Ingrid Thurner takes up this idea and looks at travel photography. For many travellers, the photo motifs should be as "original" or "primitive" as possible: "the more ancient a production method is, the more photogenic it is"[6] (Thurner, 1992, p. 25)—even more: she quotes a group traveler at the such a sight: "Horrible. I have to take a picture."[7]

Thus, the foreign is understood as a reminder on the own culture's past—a time which might have been hard and in some ways terrible to live in for most of today's people, but fulfilling and pleasant in other aspects. It is obvious that a very evolutionist mindset underlies this line of thought and that it is missing to acknowledge the specific traits and history of other cultural contexts. The staging of "the other" appears as a mean for compensation since the own present is experienced as deficient (cf. Fischer, 1984, p. 217) despite some perceived advantages. Among the aspects considered as missing may be the "aura" mentioned by Sontag following Walter Benjamin (cf. Benjamin, 1980)—a feeling of authenticity and originality. Foreign cultures' handicrafts are imagined to be less alienated, to be closer to human nature and to nature in the broader sense. Nature nowadays is understood as a value itself (cf. Kirchoff et al., 2012, p. 10), an attitude that has its roots in the era of romanticism. As a counter-movement to classicism which along with the Enlightenment demystified the world, romanticism indulged in the wild and untameable nature, and the mystical endlessness—things we tend to miss in our present. Far away cultures, just as the own past, are imagined to be closer to nature, both with its beneficiaries as well as with its hardships.

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5 „Bereits Kant und Rousseau thematisieren die prinzipielle Untrennbarkeit dieser beiden Dimensionen des Heimwehs, die auch im engeren Kontext der ‚analogen Nostalgie' noch eine zentrale Rolle spielt: Die Rede von den ‚digital natives' und den ‚digital immigrants' etwa bewegt sich erkennbar zwischen denselben semantischen Polen."

6 „Je altertümlicher eine Produktionsweise ist, um so fotogener bietet sie sich dar."

7 „Grauenhaft. Ich muss ein Foto machen."

3.2. Spirituality

Another reason to stage the "oriental" is its association with the spiritual in contrast to the "western" demystified and enlightened world. Statements that can be interpreted as linked to spirituality were given by 68% of the interviewees. The spiritual is e.g. expressed by placing statues of African masks or Hindu gods and goddesses in the background, by holding incense sticks in folded hands, or by posings like meditation. Symbols are particularly popular, ranging from visually simple ones like the peace sign to highly complex ones such as mandalas. Some symbols used do not refer to a certain spirituality in the narrower sense. The hexagram, for example, is used in many different religious contexts, and Lucifer's seal is mentioned in an old textbook of magic. The necronomicon was invented by the horror and fantasy book author H. P. Lovecraft and since then is used by several books and authors; the sign stands for magic. I also encountered self-made symbols such as amulets with certain patterns that do not originate from a specific cultural contex but evoke the aura of carrying a deeper meaning.

The emphasis on the spiritual matches current trends in parts of our society, e.g. paganism and yoga (cf. Baender-Michalska and Baender, 2014, p. 175f.), which might be traced back to a spiritual rootlessness in our secular society that in face of growing global problems fails to provide mental support. This was held by secularization theory, which assumes that certain aspects of modern life have led to a decline in individual and community religiosity (cf. Stolz and Könemann, 2016, p. 1, cf. Pollack and Olson, 2008).

In addition, the fascination for foreign spiritualities may date back to the Hippies of the 1960ies whose styles and spiritualities were e.g. inspired by Indian traditions, or to the "modern" or "urban primitive" movement that dates back to the late 1970ies when Fakir Musafar, an American performance artist and researcher, went public with his body modifications and experiments, in which he achieved states of ecstasy and acted as a shaman to others, inspired by what he called "primitive" cultures (cf. Musafar in Favazza, 1996, p. 328).

Yet, in "oriental" photoshoots, spirituality remains mostly on the visual level: in all these years of participant observation, I have not come across more than one or two models that identify with a concrete spirituality of the "orient," nor has it been mentioned by any of the models interviewed. An exception are models who have their family roots in Hindu or Muslim traditions, but they also tended to mix the symbols of their spirituality with others. In several cases, models were not even aware of the actual meaning of the symbols used.

All this indicates that there is a high interest in spirituality and its expression through the help of symbols. However, the symbols' imagined meanings are very individual, just as some of the symbols were only created by the models themselves based on the look of actual symbols. This individualized meaning-making can be seen in connection with "delimitation" inherent in the detraditionalized, multimodal, dynamic, and individualized mass communication (cf. Bachmair, 2017, p. 175).

3.3. Femininity

Statements that can be seen in the context of femininity were mentioned by 64% of the interviewees. The women often present themselves as beautiful, mystical,

erotic, and at the same time as rather passive. In this context, a distinction must be made between the shooting situation and the result. Whereas the models can be very active in the situation of the shooting, assembling the props and building the set, they are perceived as quite passive in the resulting photos—they usually sit or lie down, lolling elegantly. Of course, staging actions is not very common in model photos, because movements are often more difficult to capture than anything static. Nevertheless, one can see models in other fantasy genres, for example, walking, running, riding, shooting with a bow, etc., while in the "oriental" photoshoot, they are mostly static and passive.

Hence, the way women are portrayed in these pictures is to some extent contrary to social expectations in everyday life. In the "western" cultural context, in which the scene takes place, women can work in the same areas as men, often strive to get the same positions as men, and, maybe as a consequence, in some ways adapt to the male world, which is illustrated for example by wearing blazers and suits in muted colours. However, as women face multiple constraints, e.g. when trying to combine family and job (cf. e.g. Steinbeck, 2002, p. 435), their efforts often fail. Looking at well-paying and highly respected jobs, women are still seriously under-represented in almost every country and sector.

The "oriental" woman in the picture does not care about this. She is wearing her very feminine attire, indulging in her femininity without being confronted with such expectations (cf. Nance, 2009, p. 2), even more, without being confronted with men: in the microcosm of the picture, there are no men and such photographs are usually not taken with the intention to please men, even if this is suggested by the erotic aura. As many models report, their boyfriends or husbands prefer more natural or realistic pictures and cannot really relate to the fantasy worlds staged in model photography.

Male models appear very seldom in "oriental" photoshoots, whereas there are occasionally women posing together, often shown in romantic situations that can be interpreted in various ways: besides homoerotic aspects, this could address the fantasy of ladies of the harem, a fantasy imagined as typical for men: "In Western cultures, images in which women represent objects of gaze and men represent subjects of gaze dominate so that the organization of gaze reflects and establishes hierarchical gender relations [...] The perspective of the observer is usually constructed as a male subject's position"[8] (Lewin, 2015, p. 294). According to Lewin, a "male gaze" is established as a norm. "Feminists argue that media images of women are always directed at men and that women are encouraged to look at themselves and other women the way men do" (Crane, 1999, p. 541)—following this line of thought, images showing two or more (mostly heterosexual) women in homoerotic poses are the result of the deeply rooted convention to take over a male perspective and thus of a dependency of the male judgment.

On the other hand, the very feminine and sometimes homoerotic staging can signify the love and appreciation of the female in general, which can be seen in context with self-love. This becomes obvious in some statements of interviewees such as "It shows my appreciation for women in general, it stands for self-love." Self-love as a fundamental force is found in writings all over the world from diverse disciplines (cf.

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[8] „In westlichen Kulturen dominieren Bilder, in denen Frauen Blickobjekte und Männer Blicksubjekte repräsentieren, sodass die Organisation der Blicke hierarchische Geschlechterverhältnisse widerspiegelt und festschreibt […] Die Perspektive der Betrachtenden ist meist als männliche Subjektposition konstruiert."

Maharaj and April, 2013, p. 120) associated with survival, enlightenment, growth, elevation, etc. As shown by Maharaj and April, self-love does not equal narcissism and egoism, but is a way to find rest and peace and ultimately to be able to transcend the ego and enjoy a sense of connectedness to others (2013, p. 124). However, which reasoning is applicable will be hard to identify, even though all models I talked to reported to do the shooting for themselves, there might be an unconscious influence of the established "male gaze."

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the (hobby) models' presentation as "oriental" is very different from the public perception of the "real oriental woman": "She is [...] the epitome of the oppressed woman, who also keeps herself out of social life because of the restrictions imposed on her, such as wearing a headscarf"[9] (Gökce, 2015, p. 3). The "photo orient" appears even more detached from reality when looking at the current discourses about immigrants from countries that could be labelled as belonging to the realm of the "orient." In this discourse, the typical "oriental" person is young, male, and following the reasoning of several right-wing parties that currently gain popularity, difficult to integrate—far from the "Aladdin," who would make a good male counterpart for the "oriental" beauty. This observation matches a statement of a female bellydancer from North Africa, whom I photographed. She reported that there is a high demand for dancers for parties and events, but being a "real oriental woman" it would be more difficult for her to get jobs than for "western" dancers. "Oriental" photoshoots thus cannot be understood as a political statement but, on the opposite, as a way to detach the political sphere from the aesthetic.

3.4. Identity

The term "identity" is used in very different disciplines and it may not be possible to give a brief overview. Identity can be understood in relation to society or the individual, can be a fact or a need, can look at the whole or different partial identities, can be seen in a synchronous or diachronic way (cf. Henning, 2012, p. 21ff.). For our context, it is interesting that nowadays identitiy is considered as increasingly problematic: "Never before has the individual been able to make such a variety of decisions on his or her own […] never before has the individual been solely responsible for so much" (Stolz and Könemann, 2016, p. 1). Living in such a multi-option "me-society" can be exhausting and lead to a feeling of insecurity (cf. Wenzel, 2016, cf. Altmeyer, 2016, p. 28): there are few prescribed roles to follow and few clear expectations. The path of life is difficult to plan and foresee. Belonging and identity are no longer given but have become work projects.

Some critics "discern in such transformations a thoroughgoing liquidation of human bonds—one consequence of which has been an increasing emphasis on self-reinvention in daily life as a means of keeping at bay the insecurity that new individualism inspires" (Elliott, 2016, p. 74), whereas others view such social changes in potentially positive ways, for example resulting in increased levels of self-reflexivity.

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[9] „Ist sie doch […] der Inbegriff der unterdrückten Frau, die sich auch aufgrund der ihr auferlegten Restriktionen, wie das Tragen eines Kopftuchs, aus dem gesellschaftlichen Leben heraushält."

Posing for photographs and identity are closely connected (cf. Jerrentrup, 2018, p. 87 f.). The perceived identity is initially based on a kind of alienation that is similar to the mirror experience: "Since the ego of the mirror experience is based on an image, the identification of the subject with the self-image in the mirror is an estrangement. Just like the mirror, photography transforms the subject into an image"[10] (Brodersen, 2017, p. 145) and thus makes it better manageable. Since photographs can be staged, selected, and edited, they are particularly suitable for identity work. Furthermore, due to "photography's indiscriminating data ratio" (Pinney, 2008, p. 145) staged photographs always stay ambiguous and do not tell whether the model is rather playing a role or acting out a trait. Therefore, it seems to be a very suitable "protected terrain" for identity work, which is emphasized by the chance of changing and re-staging (cf. Mechler-Schönach, 2005, p. 16).

Looking at "oriental" photoshoots, the scenarios staged are very different from the models' everyday life. The "orient" understood as a counterpart helps to define the own cultural identity (cf. Niekisch, 2002, p. 27, cf. Hepp et al., 2003, p. 11), a definition that in today's multi-optional society requiring do-it-yourself-identities (cf. Buechler, 2016, p. 219) is under threat. Consequently, the shoot helps the "western" model to define her own identity by the short escape into her dream that at the same time makes clear who she is not—identity cannot exist without alterity (cf. Wulf, 2006, p. 43, cf. Magg, 2013, p. 42). This reminds on "western" paintings of "oriental" scenes: "Visions of the Orient were highly selective, creating oriental archetypes through which the 'Otherness' of eastern peoples could be readily identified" (MacKenzie, 1995, p. 46).

On the other hand, the "oriental" photoshoot provides an opportunity to live out traits that would be undesirable in everyday life or that would not fit into the own lifestyle, which can refer to the already mentioned aspects of nostalgia, spirituality and femininity.

Furthermore, the "photo orient" also helps to create an imaginative cultural identity itself: the scenarios staged seem to take place in a traditional world with prefabricated roles. Of course, the "photo orient" is based on associations with the foreign, the exotic, but such photoshoots do not try to pretend that they actually take place in a different cultural context—in this sense, there is no obligation to do justice to real traditions, but creative freedom. Yet, the individual pictures her "photo orient" as a place in which jewellery, tribal tattoos, traditional-looking costumes, and spiritual symbols demarcate clear group memberships and label the individual as a part of an imaginary group. The ideas, which different models are implementing in various "oriental" photoshoots, are all similar and seen in this light, one can actually find traces of a common "fantasy culture" respectively "fantasy cultural identity."

4. Interpretations

After looking at the motivations for "oriental" photoshoots, possible interpretations with regard to the cultural context are in focus. This means that we move away

[10] „Da das Ich der Spiegelerfahrung auf einem Bild basiert, liegt der Identifikation des Subjekts mit dem Selbstbild im Spiegel eine Entfremdung zugrunde. Ebenso wie der Spiegel verwandelt die Fotografie das Subjekt zu einem Bild."

from individual motivations towards more general interpretations, which also refer to the *zeitgeist*, understood "as a hypothesis for a pattern in meaningful practices that is specific to a particular historical time-period, links different realms of social life and social groups, and extends across geographical contexts" (Krause, 2019, p. 1). What is particularly striking with regard to the "oriental" photoshoots is that the fascination for the oriental with all its facets, which dates back a long time, is making a comeback in a time when disenchantment is being questioned: in Max Weber's sense, the term describes the secularized "western" society, in which science is more important than spirituality and rationality is particularly valued: "In modern culture, everything must be rational, measurable and also empirical [...] Later, when modernity with its rationality disappoints humanity" it has become clear that the "rigidity of rationality has ignored the nature of human being" (Pujiati, 2018, p. 120). Embodiment is also significant in this context. The "oriental" is not only looked at or admired, but staged and experienced on one's own body—it is embodied by the model. Embodiment plays a central role in information processing, a.o., bodily states in the self produce or consolidate affective states (see Barsalou et al., 2003). So embodying something, actively experiencing it in one's own body, goes even one step further than other types of engagement.

4.1. Escapism and Kitsch

"Oriental" photoshoots and their results seem to convey a feeling of relief, which can be interpreted as escapism: model photography takes place in a safe terrain detached from the everyday life, in which it is allowed and appreciated to present oneself like this. The needs, which are articulated in "oriental" photoshoots, therefore do not imply any changes in real life. Again, it appears unpolitical—instead of changing the everyday life to better suit the individual's need, a separate sphere is created to satisfy them. Nevertheless, scenes, youth cultures, art forms, etc. can have an influence on the mainstream culture or interact with it.

In this context, the phenomenon of "kitsch" plays a central role. Kitsch is defined by its lacking respectively pretended originality (cf. Gelfert, 2000, p. 15) and a "disproportion of content and form" (p. 181) and is often mentioned in the same breath as e.g. conditioning, schematism, shallowness, and showmanship (cf. Hecken, 2019, p. 156). Excessive, uncritical sentimentality is also particularly characteristic for kitsch. At the same time, however, it also represents a connection between people: „It is not self-indulgence that motivates us to absorb ourselves in a painting and welcome the emotions it evokes. It is part of our emotional engagement in the human drama" (Solomon, 1991, p. 13). Kitsch has its roots in people's longing for common enchantment and utopia (cf. Gyr, 2005, p. 362). While kitsch-like works may fall under the definition of art from the outset in some cultural contexts—such as in the South Asian region, where the central concept of "rasa = essence" prioritises art's ability to transmit feelings—kitsch has been made acceptable in the so-called "western" cultural context only recently by artists such as Jeff Koons (cf. Liessmann, 2002, p. 15). Koons became famous for kitschy, erotic photo collages, but also for oversized porcelain figures and balloon dogs. The hipster movement also took up kitsch and gave it an ironic twist, for example, in that typical paintings of roaring deer, which were usually found in petit bourgeois, old-fashioned households, were now defined as hip (cf. Willenbrink, 2015).

So if kitsch is increasingly understood as a (potential) art form nowadays, it is on the one hand about the unmediated address of human emotions that is appreciated, and on the other hand about the ironic reflection of the same.

With reference to "oriental" kitsch themes, there are several examples, also from mainstream culture: boho- and Hippie-fashions are currently experiencing a comeback in mainstream clothing. Both have their roots in cultural scenes and now are re-framed in an ecological discourse, the "vintage" meaning the "reused" and thus "sustainable." For the "oriental," similar aspects can be observed: some typical elements seem to be part of the mainstream already. The current popularity of Mehendi patterns as tattoos, do-it-yourself jewellery, ethnic prints, dreadlocks, etc. (cf. e.g. Jerrentrup, 2020) could be connected to the popularity in the scene. The rediscovery of yoga and self-awareness practices are also often associated with "oriental" cultures. Therefore, the "oriental" photoshoot might stand for escapism, but it cannot be regarded as isolated and has interactions with "western" everyday culture.

4.2. Cultural Appropriation and Creativity

The controversy on cultural appropriation (cf. e.g. Daynes, 2008, p. 164, cf. Robinson, 2018) has reached mainstream society, popularized e.g. by a video that went viral in 2016 and showed an African-American woman debating with the white student Cory Goldstein about his dreadlocks. Another disputable example offers "Tribal Bellydance," a dance style developed in the U.S. using costumes and movements, which evoke the idea of an ancient Middle Eastern culture and use costume decorations from Afghanistan and India: "Because tribal is an American construct, its practitioners typically situate its authenticity in the artist's right to create (through fusion) statements that reflect individually and immediately relevant tensions and realities" (Deagon, 2016, p. 376).

In this context, the already mentioned term "Orientalism," coined by the literary scholar Edward Said comes to mind, who gave a "review of the approach of Western writers, scholars, and artists to the Middle East formulate a theory of artistic imperialism and its relationship to power and the imagination" (Sellers-Young, 2013, p. 3). When representing something "oriental," it is often based on the assumption that there must be a fundamental difference between "orient" and "occident," between "they" and "we" (cf. Said, 1978, p. 11). Said shows that ever since antiquity this opposition has characterized the European way of thinking. Following Said, Susan Nance describes how people from various backgrounds formed the idea of the "orient" in North America: "For the first 150 years of American history, the most broadly influential people to speak about the Eastern world were people who played Eastern by presenting themselves in Eastern personae—or 'Oriental' or 'Moslem' or 'Hindoo' persona […]. Some of these individuals were native-born Americans, some were migrants or immigrants from North Africa, West Asia, and South Asia […] These performers told stories about affluent abundance, guilt-free leisure, spiritual truth, natural manhood, the mysteriously exotic, feminine self-discovery, romantic love, racial equality, and the creative possibilities for individuation in a market economy" (Nance, 2009, p. 1f.). All these aspects can be found in today's "oriental" shootings, just as the "timelessness" noted by Linda Nochlin with regard to paintings (1983, p. 122).

Around the Millenium "the invocation of tribal culture by 'modern primitives' and neo-tribals, gave new meaning to images of the primitive […] Coffee-table books displaying illustrated bodies from around the world […] often emphasize the exotic and offer minimal analysis, yet they still serve as references for revival movements and contemporary practices" (Schildkrout, 2004, p. 327). These books not only show foreign people's physique and dresses but also rituals and spiritual aspects without much explanation, which can make them appear even wilder, further away, and more different, and eventually offer more projection screen for own ideas.

So there are multiple, interwoven stories from the time of the explorers, through the colonial period, to the present day, from the initially mentioned ethnographic photographs to touristy snapshots, which shape our image of the "orient" and can all be interpreted as a kind of mental recolonization. As Paul Valéry famously put it: "For the word 'Orient' to produce its full impact on your mind it is important, above all, that you have never been in the inadequately identified region the word refers to […] That is how you create the stuff that dreams are made of" (cited in Koppelmann, 2015).

Instead of efforts to get to know the "orient" and understand it in its own terms, the stereotype stands for its own purposes. This way of thinking, which finds its expression in imprudent cultural appropriation, may prevent the "orient" from being adequately represented, from being understood, respected, being regarded as equal, and finally even from developing.

However, as already mentioned, there is also a creative element in the usage of elements from other cultural contexts as in the "oriental" photoshoots: things are not just taken over but changed with regard to their function and their appearance, as well as to their arrangement. Thus, one could argue, it is not appropriation in the narrower sense, but a typical way culture develops—by getting an impression of something and changing or improving it to cater to the own needs, by getting inspired and being creative (Fig. 2).

Creativity can be seen in the context of alienation: "It is commonplace that contemporary writers are alienated and 'alienation' looms large in book reviews and literary criciticsm" (Kaufmann, 2015, p. xxxii f.). Artists from Ludwig van Beethoven to Amy Winehouse illustrate how creative people fail to fit in. However, in photography, two aspects are important that seem to make creativity more down to earth: first, creativity happens in a team, and therefore has to be communicated and negotiated (cf. Hartkemeyer, 2005, p. 226), and secondly, due to photography's indexicality, creativity has to deal with the real world. Therefore, the ability trained can become more relevant for everyday problem-solving (cf. Funke, 2004) and help the individual in her everyday life. In relation to the "orient", this may not mean an intensive preoccupation with the subject, but it implies a certain degree of interest that should be preferable to indifference (Ow Yeong, 2014, p. 9).

Figure 2. Mehendi is usually worn on the hands. In portrait photography, the attention should be rather on the face, so it was changed. Further, it is not real Mehendi, but eyebrow pencil for easier removal. Model: Viola. Photograph by the author.

5. Conclusion

As shown, there are various reasons for the popularity of "oriental" photoshoots. Broadly speaking, these shoots are beneficial for the individual in various ways. However, their assessment is difficult: are "oriental" photoshoots just a sign of a society that is not able to meet some fundamental needs? Does living out these needs in a separate sphere lead to a depoliticized society or does it offer new opportunities to combine different identities—and ultimately makes a statement for more plurality? Are photoshoots inspired by "oriental" cultures an expression of creativity and an appreciation of or an interest in the "other" or do they treat the foreign only as a fundus of props?

I cannot give a final assessment, but in conclusion, I would like to offer further food for thought. It might come as a surprise that (hobby) models and make-up-artists from so-called "oriental" areas often suggest the topic themselves and bring props and costumes from their cultural background to be combined with others. In these cases, the "oriental" photoshoot might be considered as a tool to define parts of the own identity and give it a fairy-tale touch. At the same time, it is defining other parts of their identity as "not oriental," made clear by the fact that they themselves consider the shooting as "exotic" and "different" (Fig. 3).

This got me thinking about whether the "western" respectively the "own" is also exoticized in model photography. In fact, the popular "pseudo-authentic" style can be interpreted as such: here, one sees models in contexts that resemble a "western" home, but are often specially organized or rented apartments that represent "upscale living." Frequently, the models wear lingerie or outfits that emphasize the informal, e.g. men's shirts, cuddly sweaters, as well as strange combinations, such as a sweater, but no bottom. Women are often presented in erotic poses, as in the expectation of a partner, or in poses that signal cosiness, for example embracing a steaming coffee

cup. The typically used open apertures make the background blurred and therefore a little mysterious.

This style creates a pseudo-authentic aura—the participants and the audience are well aware that "western" everyday life does not look like this. Instead, an ideal version of everyday life in their own terms is created which makes the own "foreign," corresponding to the literal meaning of "exotic" as seen "from the outside". This alienation can be understood as a basic constant of staged photography—and it is particularly interesting to analyze which aspects are emphasized in the staging since they tell us something about our own motivations and needs.

As such, the "oriental" photoshoot, like other themes in staged photography, offers a rich fundus for the analysis of one's own cultural context.

Figure 3. Model Javaneh has "oriental" roots, yet does not try to show an authentic "orient." Photograph by the author.

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