

Brenda McCullers, ARH 6930, Fall 2014

The articles, “Between cult and culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum” by Finbarr Barry Flood (2002) and “Orientalist representations of Palestinians and Arabs in some postcolonial film and literature” by Yosefa Loshitzky (2000) are examples of how art, literature, and film have been used to validate authority and manipulate the masses. The primary focus of Finbarr Barry Flood (2002) is to discuss the “iconoclastic practices of Muslims living in the eastern Islamic world, especially Afghanistan and India” and “the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas” (p 641-642). Yosefa Loshitzky (2000) discusses “Orientalist representations of Palestinians and Arabs in film and literature with a special focus on Amos Oz’s novel *My Michael* (1967) and its filmic adaptation by Dan Volman” (p. 51).

In 2001, the Taliban government of Afghanistan destroyed the rock-cut Buddhas at Bamiyan, reinforcing the idea that the “Islamic culture is implacably hostile to anthropomorphic art” (Flood, 2002, p. 641). This act was classified as Islamic iconoclasm—a forceful opposition to figuration. Flood explains that the concern relating to this specific event was not typical. Figuration over the years did not necessarily lead to destruction of artwork. Flood justifies this with historical accounts and writings that lead one to understand the complexity of this practice. Different sects and faiths had different opinions. Many events occurred during times of military conquest or political change.

In the past, evidence indicates that Islamic iconoclasm involved defacing artwork rather than destroying it. Flood shares different examples of Islamic

iconoclasm that include a man spoiling the faces of people within a manuscript being auctioned off; the Princely feast, from the Khamsa of Nizami, Iran; and statues considered to be idols had their heads cut off. He explains that many defaced items were found displayed or repurposed in other areas indicating that destruction did not occur. Even the Bamiyan Buddhas were faceless before their destruction. So why was destruction necessary?

While the museum considered the Buddhas “evidence of a classical European influence on the early medieval art of the region”(Flood, 2002, p. 653), the Taliban felt different. Many believed that the Taliban’s iconoclastic outbreak was actually a political ploy devised for the Internet to protest the government’s failure to eject Osama bin Laden. Nonetheless, Flood believed that their response was an attack “on the institution of the museum as a locus of contemporary iconolatry” (Flood, 2002, p. 651). With no Buddhists left in Afghanistan, why were their religious images left in the museums? Flood goes on to explain the global implications of this event. Not only was the Taliban directing the act toward the Hindus of India or the Buddhist of the East, they were also directing the act toward European and American museum directors attempting to rescue the statues. It was the Taliban’s belief that the museum had become a type of “secular temple” exhibiting idols as art, and the Western institutions were full of hypocrites. As a result, a political judgment was made that “all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed” (Flood, 2002, p. 655).

In contrast to the political demonstration of the destruction of the Buddhas at Bamiyan, Yosefa Loshitzky describes how literature and film have been used to

present issues associated with the representation of Palestinians and Arabs. Loshitzky explains that by intertwining conflicting images and representations within the narrative "My Michael" the author, Amos Oz, is able to incorporate "changes in Israeli self-identity as well as traumatic political conflicts with the East" (Loshitzky, 2000, p. 52). The story represents people within old colonialist views but includes contemporary issues such as: Orientalism, fantasies of the other, sexual taboos, women as other, and treats each in turn as a way of locating the specific within the larger context of Israeli society" (Loshitzky, 2000, p. 52). It does not hurt that Amos Oz is regarded as "Israeli political conscience and moral voice" (Loshitzky, 2000, p. 68).

In conclusion, Flood's article provides a dramatic public display with art at the center of the political statement. Loshitzky shows how literature and film can affect mainstream views and believes recent "Israeli artistic discourse on Palestinians and Arabs (including Oz's later works) shows more openness towards the more contradictory and disturbing aspects of the conflict" (Loshitzky, 2000, p. 67). Both authors present art as a way to influence others and indicate that people fashion their own identity and their own opinions by how they view others. Consequently, art will continue to be used as a method to express, impress, and impact.

References:

Flood, F. B. (2002, December). Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum. *The Art Bulletin*, 84(4), 641-659. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3177288.pdf?acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Loshitzky Yosefa, "Orientalist Representations: Palestinians and Arabs in Some

Post-Colonial Film and Literature" in Elizabeth Hallam and Brian Street,
(eds.), "Cultural Encounters: Representing "Otherness" (Routledge, 2000),
pp. 51-71.