



Seeing Through Their Eyes

*Cultural Significance in the Reading and Interpretation of
Offending Images*

A Master's Thesis for the Degree "Master of Arts (Two
Years) in Visual Culture

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ABSTRACT

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Offending images are representations that hurt people's feelings deeply. My thesis deals with the way in which people read and interpret these offending images. It becomes important to understand what makes some viewers vulnerable to a certain image thereby provoking strong reactions against it. The aim is to put myself at the receiving end, in the place of those who are offended and look at the images from their perspective. It involves delving into the intricacies of the images, which constitutes initially in providing a coherent definition of offending images and tracing the background which shapes their interpretation. The significance of one's culture is what influences perception. As a result the cultural construction of the viewer is undeniably intertwined within this subject of offending images. It is a phenomenon that is more often referred to than analysed. I, therefore, intend to construct an in- depth analysis of two images to exemplify their offensiveness which leads to and incite such passionate reactions. The two empirical materials chosen are a fashion photograph of Dutch model Lara Stone in *Vogue Paris* October 2009 issue and an art installation, *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société*, 2009, exhibited in Brussels, Belgium, by the French artist Mehdi-Georges Lahlou. The methodology that I have chosen to carry out my research is a deductive and an inductive one. This has allowed me to use the images as a starting point and to contextualise historical materials on race and religion combined with an analysis of the reception of the images. The theories will therefore be adapted into creating a new perspective on the issue of offending images.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introductory Outline of the Problem

The title *Seeing through their Eyes* directly refers to the problem that I will be dealing with, which is taking a look at offending images from the point of view of those that it offends. The questions I want to ask of the images is very relevant to W.J.T.Mitchell's observation of pictures which "is not just what they mean or do but what they want-what claim they make upon us and how we are to respond"¹. That is the gist of the problem I will be dealing with, which involves not only trying to understand the roots of the depiction that offended but also the reason it strikes the chord of revolt in certain people.

Most of the time an image or work of art creates national or even international uproar when a particular group feels that their culture is being represented in a derogatory way and that there has been a transgression of their values and beliefs. Cultural values are intrinsic and personal moulds of people's identity which renders a common outlook on things making certain issues sensitive to those pertaining to that particular group. Then again, not everyone within the same culture thinks and reacts in the same way, there are divergent ways in which they formulate their thoughts and feelings. The images I have chosen are products of multi-cultural societies which as a result unsurprisingly vary by way of its reception but my focus will primarily be on people who have been strongly affected by the images.

1.2 The Case Studies

My thesis will be based on the visual artistic endeavour of two images that have been judged as being offensive due to the manner of their representation. They will therefore be the empirical material used as reference to put the research queries into

¹ W.J.T.Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, preface.XV.

context and act as examples to show how cultural values and heritage when violated are considered offensive thereby provoking and instigating harsh reactions.

The first image I have chosen is a fashion photography of the Dutch model Lara Stone in the French *Vogue Paris* issue, October 2009. The reason for controversy is due to the fact that the model being white, had black make-up all over her body which seemed to have been reminiscent of blackface imagery and minstrelsy shows in the eyes of some black people in notably the US² and to some degree in Britain. In France where the magazine came out, the controversy was on a minute scale.

The second image I have chosen is an installation work, *Cocktail, ou Autoportrait en Société (Cocktail, or Self-Portrait in Society)*³, exhibited in the month of September 2009, in a vacant studio at Charles Rogier Passage in Brussels, by the French artist, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou who lives and works in Brussels. This work juxtaposed the sacred and the profane which seemed blasphemous to certain people of the Islamic community, as the artist remarks “humour and Islam remains a problematically compatible combination”⁴. The work was therefore forced to be taken down earlier than expected due to the strong reactions and commotions it stirred.

1.3 Focus & Limitations

While researching possible images to use, I came upon many different types of offending images, both historical ones and more contemporary ones. I finally settled on the two images I am using, thereby allowing me to talk about two different perspectives that ultimately converge into similar aspect of creating offence. The issues related to my two images dealing with race, colour and religion respectively have quite often dominated debates within the area of visibility in the public sphere.⁵

² Lizzy Davies, ‘Outrage over Vogue Photographs’, *Guardian*, 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/oct/13/french-vogue-photographs-outrage>>, retrieved 25 February 2010.

³ My Translation.

⁴ Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, ‘Cocktail, ou Autoportrait en Société’, *Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*, <<http://www.mehdilahlou.com/>>, retrieved 28 January 2010.

⁵ Some notable examples from different historical eras include, the images of Prophet Muhammad in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (2005), *Piss Christ* (1987) by Andres Serrano, the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D.W Griffith, *Submission* (2004) by Theo Van Gogh, or some Australians performing in blackface on *Hey Hey it's Saturday* (2009), a variety show.

The sensitivity that comes with colour, race, and religion always demand urgent attention when subjected to defamation. These images being contemporary, there has not been much written about them in terms of theory, but there have been many articles published in the newspapers and comments flooded on the internet regarding the images which I have used in support of my work. I have taken two different types of work in two different media, one being an art installation and the other photography in mass media. The common ground is that both of the works are artistic enterprises, that created uproar and this is the prime attribute that made them relevant for my work.

1.4 Goals and Current State of Research

In the midst of social controversy surrounding offending images, the topic I chose for thesis material seems very relevant in light of the actual situation. In January 2010, the issue of the offending image crept up once again in Sweden.⁶ The artist Lars Vilks had made some cartoons of Prophet Muhammad as a dog in 2007 which angered many Muslim people in both Sweden and internationally. This had created cause for concern⁷ especially after the violent backlash of the Jyllands-Posten⁸ images of the Prophet. As a result, Vilks images have been doing the rounds again in March 2010, with many articles published about possible death plots against the artist which once again fuelled the controversy with many countries retaliating against Sweden.⁹ Offending image is therefore a topic of great relevance within the actual social and cultural environment.

A considerable amount of work has been published on freedom of expression or on the laws and limits of censorship¹⁰ but on the topic of offending images I have not

⁶ (NA), 'Somali Threats Against Swedish Illustrator', *The Local*, 2010, <<http://www.thelocal.se/24198/20100104/>> retrieved 13 April 2010.

⁷ (NA), 'Malaysian Demonstrators Burn Swedish Flag', *The Local*, 2010, <<http://www.thelocal.se/25752/20100326/>>, retrieved 13 April 2010.

⁸ (NA), *Somali Threats Against Swedish Illustrator*, *The Local*.

⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰ For example Lawrence Rothfield, *Unsettling Sensations: Arts-policy lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art*, Rutgers University Press, 2001, Richard Serra, 'Art and Censorship', in *Ethics and the Visual Arts*, Elaine A.King, Gail Levin (ed.), Allworth Press, New York, 2006, Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, J.M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: essays on censorship*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997.

found as many books, with the more current publications being principally newspaper articles. Among book publications, most research uses the same images that were at the centre of controversy during a certain period, for example Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), Robert Mapplethorpe's *Portfolio X* (1978) series, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) and a few others. They refer to some image that has offended, but do not really go into the soul of the image, that is, what in them makes them have a life of their own and instigate people. There are many written works supporting the freedom of artists. I am more interested in trying to understand the people who are offended. Most of the time, people who are offended by artistic images are being branded as ignorant. So, for me it is an opportunity to step on the side of those considered ignorant and try to understand the emotions of those who are offended. Their culture and what they have absorbed from it becomes rather instrumental in the judgment that they make. To my knowledge no single book deals with images that offend by way of its reception, feelings, emotions and theories to ground them in. They mention the art works as stirring commotion but they rarely go into the details of the images that make them sensitive to the group of people it affects and also not much emphasis on their respective backgrounds. I hope my work fulfils this lack by structuring the analysis of the images. I believe it will also lead to wider area of queries that should not be neglected when faced with the subject of offending images.

1.5 Research Questions

The questions the thesis deals with are, firstly, what is an offending image? It is also important to understand how individuals interpret and read the images that have offended them and how they construct meanings. The images of the French *Vogue* and Mehdi-George Lahlou's work will initiate queries regarding the reasons people found them offensive. What did they see in them that made them offended? The subjects of the two images that I have chosen are culturally different, therefore it becomes relevant to build an understanding of the attachment one might have with their culture and what is the importance of it in judging the image that offends. The impact of the offending image differs from culture to culture, what might be

considered offensive to one person may not necessarily be felt in the same way to someone of a different culture. Therefore it becomes compulsory within my work to question the role of emotions that are felt by the individuals who are offended. Are their feelings and emotions important in interpretation? Are emotions cultural construction which influences people's judgments?

1.6 Theories and Methodology

'Offending Images' in J.W. Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?* encouraged the idea for this thesis. He uses the term offending images to describe different types of offences related to images and his observations have been of critical importance within my work. It has allowed the growth of different ideas related to this topic. Surfing through the internet in search of articles has also been primordial, the newspaper articles found online on the two images allows easy access to sources of information. Online Newspapers and comments left by viewers were important regarding reception and for understanding the hype the images created internationally, such as *CNN* or *L'Islam en France* amongst others.

The theories that I have used have been adapted to fit the requirements of my research. Emile Durkheim's concept of the sacred and the profane from his book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*¹¹ has been used with regards to *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société*. Even though the book was published in the early 20th century and my images are contemporary, from 2009, the distinctions he makes between the sacred and profane are very much applicable and gives support to the differentiation that I have made based on what has been said and commented in newspaper articles and blogs by people who have been offended by Lahlou's installation. In the same text, the studies he made on the totem were adapted in the fourth chapter in a more general sociological way to fit both images. I have used the idea of the totem with regards to the attachment and importance the clan assigns to it, to build a comparison of the attachment and importance some people associate with their race, colour or religion. In the case of the thesis, the totem and what it represents reflects the importance of cultural affiliations for it guides the way people

¹¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Free Press, New York, 1915.

interpret. In order to understand the way the images have been perceived and interpreted, Hans Georg Gadamer's concept of play, with his idea of presentation and representation in *Truth and Method*¹², also discussed by Nicholas Davey in his essay 'Hermeneutics of Seeing'¹³, was of utmost relevance. Interpretations within my work involves emotions, therefore I have opted for Jesse J. Prinz's book, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*¹⁴ which deals with emotions intertwined with Roland Barthes punctum and studium. Barthes usage of the concept was used in the analysis of photographs but I borrowed these terms based on the impact they convey. I believe they are appropriate as a triggering factor of emotions.

The method that I have applied for my research is both a deductive and inductive approach. It will help in presenting the reading and interpretation of offending images in a new way. I have tried to build a new paradigm based on the results of my enquiries to present a new way to approach this topic¹⁵. The role of the deductive method is to use the images I have chosen as starting point. It initiates the importance of tracing the respective backgrounds which led interpreting the French *Vogue* and *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* as offensive. In the case of *Vogue Paris*, it will be research carried out on the history of the blackface and how it brings back memories of sufferings which has been banalised for the sake of fashion. The observation made from Lahlou's installation revolves around Islam that has been a major influence on his work. The inductive approach would be to use the avenue offered by the deductive method and build a new paradigm out of it. The methodology therefore that my research involves it both tests theory and tries to develop and construct a new one for a different kind of understanding¹⁶.

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum, London, 1975.

¹³ Jesse J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

¹⁴ Nicholas Davey, 'Hermeneutics of Seeing', in I Heywood, B Sandywell (ed.), Routledge, London, 1999.

¹⁵ Vernon Trafford, Shosh Leshem, *Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate*, Open University Press, Berkshire, 2008, p. 94.

¹⁶ Trafford, Leshem, p.97.

1.7 Academic Relevance

I believe that offending image is a topic of multi-disciplinary debate for it has wide scope within various areas of study. My research will be situated within the field of the visual culture for it is equated with visuality and the phenomenon whereby visualisation which gives us the power to grasp certain structure instates our position as living beings within cultural settings. The area of research I will be covering will also be an issue of hermeneutic findings, for as per the latter's definition my work will entail the experience that has to do with the way of looking and perceiving.

1.8 The Offending Image

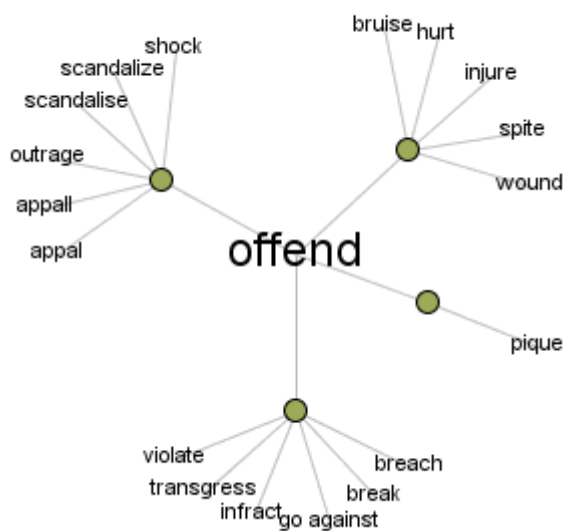


Figure 1: Visual Thesaurus Map¹⁷

The word offend as depicted in the Visual Thesaurus Map branches out to varied synonymous words that shares the same meaning and connotes the same idea. Accordingly to shock, violate, hurt or transgress does not infer only to causing physical harm but can also be equated to an intense provocation which as a result, can cause physical reactions.

¹⁷ Image from the Visual Thesaurus, <http://www.visualthesaurus.com>, Copyright ©1998-2010 Thinkmap, Inc. All rights reserved, retrieved 29 March 2010.

Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1995, exemplifies the provocation and emotional injury caused by a work; the image of the Virgin Mary was juxtaposed with elephant dung, which as a consequence led to its disfigurement by a religious catholic man who was offended and took it upon himself to splash white paint across it.¹⁸ The offensive nature of images is deemed transgressive thereby having the power to hurt one's feelings causing outrage.

The degree of being offended varies by the baggage that one brings when seeing the image. According to W.J.T Mitchell "the offensive character of an image is not written in stone but arises out of social interaction between a specific thing and communities that may themselves have varied and divided responses to the object"¹⁹. On viewing, people bring their biography with them including their social status, where they stand in society with respect to race and religion and their beliefs and values, which helps them in judging and evaluating a work. The reason individuals may be offended by specific pictures is because some images represent a relationship and an inherent attachment of love and respect people have with certain objects, norms or beliefs. Seeing those images destroyed, it triggers the sentiment of being violated and repulsed by the act committed.

Our world is made up of images. Everywhere we turn; there is an image glaring back at us. The word image is not limited to only a flat two dimensional representation of space but insinuates more than that, it could be a painting but also a sculpture or an image in the mind.²⁰ In art and the realms of mass media and advertising, the implications of images are unquestionably intentional, for they have been produced with a sense of a priori, which is the insertion of coded messages at the creative level to arouse attention to the image and create understanding for those who interacts with it. According to the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer pronouncing on art, his concept of play becomes an important mode for understanding interaction by which the reality of the work comes out. According to him this interaction becomes successful, once the viewer or in his case the player gets completely absorbed into the work.²¹ In the case of offending images, I would say that once the duration of the absorption is over, reality sets in and people who are offended become entrenched

¹⁸ Mitchell, p.130.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.131.

²⁰ Mitchell, p.2.

²¹ Gadamer, p.103.

into the realisation of the image's offensive nature. Images that inspires the viewer to react to it, as was with *The Holy Virgin Mary* is evidence as to how codified messages are open to interpretation and can be seen in diverse ways; for according to the artist his intention was very different from the reactions it generated²². The way images are perceived depends then again, on the receiving audience, some might see it in one way whereas the other in the complete opposite. An image can be regarded as offensive to some because it threatens their values and it can be seen as not stirring the slightest emotions to those who do not share the same values. Images that do engender harsh reaction are the results of their offensive nature, as seen through the eyes of some.

A person can be offended through a number of different modes and media such as by a text, a speech, music, and images in general. The offending image though in itself inert and lifeless manages to grab the attention of people. The image possesses an innate power asserting an influence and lampooning certain people, stopping them in their track and pounding on them to take notice, evoking strong feelings of having been discriminated against. The people that they seize and shock are those that are vulnerable to the representation of the images where they feel there has been a barrier that has been crossed which evokes the necessity of upholding rules and regulation.²³ Ofili was deemed to have offended the image, being of the Virgin Mary by rendering her in faecal matter which according to the people offended is imbued with life and therefore deserves respect. This led to offending the beholder of the image to whom it is sacred and a signifier of reverence. An offending image therefore offends for it is the representation of something that is regarded in high esteem and the meaning it transfers for people is subjected to basely rendering. These images have been transfigured by the way that they have been depicted, whether it be a picture, a film, a play or a three dimensional object and its meaning altered by the manner that it has been portrayed. Gadamer's concept of 'representation (Vorstellung) and presentation (Darstellung)'²⁴ becomes essential to clearly define how representations, which are the transfigured, influence the interpretation and reading of the offending image referring to the presentation.²⁵ The presentation of an

²² Mitchell, p.135.

²³ Mitchell, p.131.

²⁴ Davey, p.20.

²⁵ The concept of presentation and representation will be dealt with in Chapter 4.1.

idea or a concept therefore is what makes an object or image offending, it is the understanding that takes place when we experience. We do not simply see the work as it is but more than that in the insinuations that we make. Gadamer says that “the notion of *Darstellung* illuminates how aesthetic experience enlivens our understanding”²⁶ but in the case of images that offend, *presentation* illuminates the understanding of the offence.

The offending image acts as fuel to the brewing fire of social instability. It ignites debates and in debates there are two sides, eventually involving having to take sides which wrench people away from each other. These images stir the controversy they do because to those that they do affect, it engenders a sort of psychological play with them, thereby initiating thoughts of morality, social politics or ethics which really helps to establish identity of people. When they feel that their identity is being robbed of the respect that it deserves, it creates social and cultural unrest. Offending images therefore represent or result in social schism, dividing interpretation where underlying vulnerabilities are made to resurface.

²⁶ Davey, p.21.

Vogue Paris October 2009

2.1 The Photography that Offended



Figure 2: Lara Stone in *Vogue Paris*

The *Vogue Paris* October 2009 issue created extensive hype on release due to the controversial nature of a series of fashion photography featuring the Dutch model Lara Stone.²⁷ The photographs had been styled and put together by the editor in chief of *Vogue Paris*, Carine Roitfeld, and shot by American photographer Steven Klein. Lara Stone was supposed to represent an image in favour of more voluptuous models rather than the skinny anorexic ones²⁸. The reason it created such a scandal is because a white model had been blacked- up to give the impression of a black. In order to understand the upsurge of emotions that lies with the usage of painted black faces, it becomes a compulsory pre requisite to trace the ontology of blackface imagery.

2.2 The Blackface

*"I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'sho' good eatin'".*²⁹

The quote above from the essay *The Fact of Blackness* by Franz Fanon, depicts the degrading and humiliating image that was tagged to a number of people of African origin in white dominated worlds. They were singled out and made to feel different because of the colour of their skin. Having a darker pigmentation came to be understood as the representation of every negative characteristics one could possibly have. Fanon proffers that the colour of the black man's skin made him an object of scrutiny and battered under the white gaze. He had to bear the pain of being considered a degenerate because, he was different from the rest; he was the other. This visible difference in their physical appearance compared to the majority in white societies and colonies made them easy prey to a harsh bully attitude.

²⁷ Jenna (NA), 'Oh No They Didn't: French Vogue does Blackface', *Jezebel*, 2009, <<http://jezebel.com/5379708/oh-no-they-didnt-french-vogue-does-blackface/gallery/>>, retrieved 26 March 2010.

²⁸ Julie Saulnier, 'Le Vogue qui fait polemique', *L'Express*, 2009, <http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/le-vogue-qui-fait-polemique_796530.html>, retrieved 29 March 2010.

²⁹ Franz Fanon, 'The Fact of Blackness' in J Evans, S Halls (ed.), *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Sage Publication, London, 1999, p.419.

Blackface is intertwined with the history of blacks in America. The uproar the *Vogue* photographs caused is because of its link to the history of slavery and racial discrimination in which a culture of racist entertainment such as blackface has its roots. In America, the law enabling slavery was established and recognised in 1661 in the state of Virginia, which then led to its implementation in other states. This law also stipulated that anyone who had a drop of black blood in their body was considered as being black.³⁰ The skin colour became a ‘corporeal malediction’³¹ both in the eyes of the blacks who were not accepted as an equal member of society because of their colour and the whites who mocked them for that. It established the ladder of people in society with regards to their place and power having whites as the supreme race and blacks the inferior one. Terms such as ‘nigger’, ‘Negro’ or ‘darkie’ amongst others, were being used for the people of African origin. These words were abominable and derogatory which reflected the initiation of a system of hierarchy³². These terms were initially devised as a form of ruse, to propagate the ethnic difference between the white and black people of the society. It was by restraining and subjecting the blacks to insults, that they could be controlled for slavery, given that the economy was dependant on them. The term slave therefore, became naturally equated with the blacks, as if it was something normal³³. Moreover, in the beginning of the 1800s, in America and Europe research furthered in “craniology, physiognomy and phrenology”³⁴ to establish a dividing line which depended on finer bone structure between the Caucasians and those who were not to be instituted that same superiority. This was an intelligible justification for the whites to assert their power and dominate those who were supposedly biologically and racially of a lower rank.

African Americans had their own culture and they were physically different from the whites due to which, starting from around the nineteenth century onwards, representation of blackness were used for the sake of humour. They were mocked and ridiculed in popular culture. They were assigned certain qualities that became stereotypical for every other black person; they were regarded as one homogeneous group sharing the same attitudes and behaviours. The depictions of the black body

³⁰ Michael D. Harris, *Coloured Pictures, Race and Visual Representation*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2003, p.16.

³¹ Fanon, p.418.

³² Harris, p.3.

³³ Harris, p.23.

³⁴ *ibid*, p.24.

were signs exemplifying a racial society. The *Vogue Paris* photograph seem to have pushed the envelope, with some viewers feeling they continued this racist tradition with the black body while passing it off as inoffensive artistic photographs.

The depiction of the black body in the US can be traced back to the 1812 with a watercolour painting, *A Negro Group in Front of the Bank of Pennsylvania* painted by a Russian diplomat, Pavel Svinin on his visit to America. The painting relates to one of his visit to a black church, where he was apparently frightened with the mannerisms of Blacks praying, he called it the “frights of hell”.³⁵ In the April of 1857, *Harper’s Weekly* had published a chart of the different characters that made up the society and amongst the four men, there was an African. He was termed as The Naturalist, therefore portrayed nude but also caricatured as a savage feeding on the body parts of a white³⁶, which inherently reflects and goes back to Fanon’s quote³⁷ in his description of the black person as being perceived to be a cannibal. The images indicate the general consensus formed or propagated amongst a number of non blacks. In many of those early images the people of African origin were for most part always depicted as the slaves that they were in the white society. They were portrayed being subservient to their masters, either serving, entertaining or being subjected to humiliation. Darktown comics thrived on demeaning representations of blacks and these caricatures were a quick and fast sell, even appreciated by royals of England.³⁸ The drawings were of black people failing at their appropriation of white lifestyles. In *You’ll just ballast de boat, Miss Tiny*, 1896, an African American woman can be seen descending into a boat and because of her well-rounded frame, she jerks the boat up with all the men in it flying into the water.³⁹ The stereotypical image of black women is one that is big and robust which was popularised even more through the most famous African American image of Aunt Jemima.⁴⁰ The questions that came to the fore with the *Vogue* photographs are also regarding the slightly more built frame of Lara Stone which made it all the more pertinent to some; use a curvy model and doll her up in black. What is the statement being made? Keeping all that in mind, it comes as no surprise then that that when they do pull off

³⁵ Harris, p.34.

³⁶ Harris, p.28.

³⁷ The quote from Franz Fanon’s, *The Fact of Blackness* used previously in this thesis on p.15.

³⁸ Harris, p.62.

³⁹ Ibid, p.65.

⁴⁰ Phil Patton, ‘Mammy her life and times’, *American Heritage*, vol 44, no.00028738, 1993, pp 78-85, ELIN@Lund, retrieved 27 March 2010.

a stunt by covering a white model black, it will do more than just raise eyebrows. The photograph brings back the history of black face and minstrelsy which made them all the more offensive where the stereotypical image comes to mind of some.

2.3 Minstrelsy

Minstrelsy was a form of entertainment. Blackface minstrelsy got momentous appreciation from the white dominated society. The nature of this particular type of humour had already been popularised through the print medium, with the comics and caricatures. The origin of the imitation of the blacks was apparently inherited from the white plantation owners, who while living on scattered plantation and far from other fellow whites had no source of amusement except for listening to their slaves singing and dancing. It gave rise to their satirical buffoonery of the blacks. The slaves therefore became their source of primal entertainment.⁴¹ According to Michael Rogin, author of *Blackface, Whiteness: Jewish Immigrant in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, African American blackface minstrelsy was also a way of preventing the blacks from creating an identity for themselves and restraining them to their roles of the invisible slaves performing their duties and entertaining while ‘they were safely in chains’.⁴² This led to a long tradition of demeaning blacks. The white impersonator had to undergo physical transformation to play a particular role and it was done by blacking up the face using burnt cork, exaggerating the lips, making it look brighter and appropriating the black’s vernacular dialect for the amusement of other whites. The ceremonious tradition of the blackface was properly demonstrated according to Mitchell, in Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000), which documented that “it is a dangerous game that burns the flesh and draws a divisive colour line not only around facial features but between persons...”⁴³. The blackfaced subjects in minstrel shows were despised everywhere and as propounded by Robert Toll in *Coloured Pictures*, “they were pictured as lazy, pretentious, frivolous, improvident, irresponsible and immature- the very antithesis of what white men liked to believe

⁴¹ Harris, p.52.

⁴² Michael H. Epp, ‘Raising Minstrelsy: Humour, Satire and the Stereotype in The Birth of a Nation and Bamboozled’, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol 33, no. 1, 2003, pp. 17-36, ELIN@Lund, retrieved 27 March 2010.

⁴³ Mitchell, p.305.

about themselves...”⁴⁴ which in their eyes confirmed that blacks could not play a constructive role in society if given freedom. They were amusement when they professed failure at understanding Shakespeare, when they tried to be trendy but ended up looking ridiculous or when unsuccessfully taking up aristocratic or intellectual demeanour, and the ‘American was entertained’.⁴⁵ They were not characters people liked, but characters which harnessed mockery and people loved to hate as was with Thomas D Rice’s role of Jim Crow. Such characters illustrated the racial segregation that existed.

2.4 *Vogue*



Figure 3: *Vogue Paris* “Special Top Models”

The controversy that the *Vogue Paris* October 2009 issue generated compels an overview of *Vogue* in general with regards to black models on their covers. The cover page of that particular issue read as “Spécial Top Models”, therefore being a special issue with top models in it, but to the surprise of many there were no black models featured in the entire magazine except for the white turned black model. This has been perceived as a humiliation to many people of African origin in the west. French *Vogue* seems selective when it comes to choosing front cover models, there seems to be an obvious

preference for white models over blacks. Taking a look down memory lane and throughout the history of *Vogue*, not so many black models have featured on front covers. There are months and years of difference between them. Issues like colour and race still seems to matter which entails in discriminatory practices. *Vogue Paris*’s most recent use of a black model on the cover is one that has been shot for the March 2010 issue and there is a difference of 8 years between the last one.

⁴⁴ Harris, p.54.

⁴⁵ John Blair, ‘Blackface Minstrels in Cross-Cultural Perspective’, *American Studies International*, vol. 28, no.2, 1990, pp. 52-56, ELIN@Lund. retrieved 27 March 2010.

2.5 Why it Offended?

In an interview with CNN, Carine Roitfeld states that in France she has great freedom with *Vogue*, whereas if she had to work for *American Vogue*, she would be tied to constraints⁴⁶. This statement shows that she is aware of the controversies *Vogue Paris* creates with some of the concepts of its images even though according to CNN, the French *Vogue* commented that they were not aware that the photographs were offensive⁴⁷. Though the images were produced for the French *Vogue*, it went beyond the borders of France, online and created outburst amongst people in many other countries, where articles about the offensive nature of the photographs poured in a number of blogs and papers due to the impact they have had.⁴⁸ As asserted by the editor of *Jezebel.com* in an interview with CNN news host Don Lemon, although blackface is predominantly tied to American history that does not mean others should be insensitive to it because European countries are not foreign to the representation of blacks in a derogatory way.⁴⁹ Furthermore, even countries like South Africa and Australia have had in their history an encounter with blackface performances.⁵⁰

Blackface imagery is deemed insensible in today's day and age. The *Guardian* interviewed Shevelle Rhule who is the fashion and beauty editor for the magazine *Pride* and Nana A. Tamakloe of *Confidence Model Management*, who manages models of different ethnicity. These two people of African origin found the photographs insensitive, offensive and a step backwards rather than progress.⁵¹ The blacking up image of Lara Stone to some, bears scars of survival, scars that remind people of a past that was filled with degraded human conditions that they do not want thrown in their face for the mere pleasure of fashion.

⁴⁶ Hilary Whiteman, 'Roitfeld: American Vogue job 'not for me'', *CNN*, 2009, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/03/13/carine.wintour.vogue/index.html>> retrieved 26 March 2010.

⁴⁷ Errol Barnett, 'Vogues blackface quandary', Video, *CNN*, <<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/living/2009/10/14/barnett.french.vogue.blackface.cnn?iref=allsearch>> retrieved 26 March 2010.

⁴⁸ Barnett, 'Vogues blackface quandary', Video, *CNN*.

⁴⁹ Don Lemon, 'Blackface: Offensive or art?', Video, *CNN*.

<<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2009/10/14/nr.sanchez.blackface.vogue.cnn?iref=allsearch>> retrieved 26 March 2010.

⁵⁰ Blair, 'Blackface Minstrels in Cross-Cultural Perspective', ELIN@Lund.

⁵¹ Hannah Pool, 'Why blacking up is the worst kind of fashion crime', *Guardian*, 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/14/french-vogue-blackening-up>>, retrieved 26 March 2010.

The history of black imagery provides ample support for the reason some people would be offended with the photographs of Lara Stone. The blacked up model in *Vogue* raises the issue of why not just hire a black model instead and it certainly is obvious to some to be an invocation of the blackface minstrelsy, a comment on *Jezebel.com* where the *Vogue* photographs first appeared about the blackface read “She doesn’t have to be standing under a sign saying WELCOME TO THE MINSTREL SHOW for this to be blackface”⁵². In minstrel performance even when black actors were used, they were not accepted as they were that is with their different skin tones, they had to be standardised for their true blackness to exude to their white public which meant they also had to don the black face. The problem of not accepting the blacks as they were in those days somehow seems to be reiterated through *Vogue*’s rejection of having a person of African origin in the special top model number and their lack of acceptance, at least that is what transpires through, from the magazine. There is currently a wave of blackface imagery surging, from a group of Australian performing at a show, to a gig in *Mad Men* to the *Vogue* images⁵³. It is offensive because it brings back to memory the history of the inhumane mockery and taunts the black people had to undergo and bear. *Vogue* resurrected the image of the blackface, seemingly disguised under artistic creativity.

2.6 Ensuing Stereotypes

“If it is not offending to you then you are probably not black”, said a comment on *Jezebel.com* in response an article about the *Vogue* photograph. The blackface today has become a stereotyped image of the blacks and when used it always stirs some controversy, as it did with the *Vogue* image. “In presenting us with seductive images of what is purportedly real, the artist’s skill tries to persuade us that the representation we see is either real in itself or is of something real”⁵⁴. In the case of Lara Stone it would be the idea of a voluptuous model that seems to have been the intent but the deduction made by those affected was a blackface image that has dwindled into the ever existing stereotype. There exist a certain narcissism that lies with one’s self-image and identity, people are usually proud of who they are and

⁵² ‘Jenna’, ‘Oh No They Didn’t: French Vogue does Blackface’, *Jezebel*.

⁵³ Don Lemon, ‘Blackface: Offensive or art?’, Video, *CNN*.

⁵⁴ Davey, p.18.

what they are. Seeing an image that is representative of one's own self- image transformed into the excessive stereotype becomes unacceptable at times since they are misrepresentation of identity. The stereotype is not a perfected body but always threatened by a lack, exaggerated and depicted in a flawed caricatured way being the reason why a photograph like Lara Stone's is deemed offensive. It is evocative of a period where black people were being unjustly type-casted into the stereotype.

“Look a Negro”⁵⁵, such a phrase sets the ground for stereotypes and by its utterance, we categorise people, we look for the difference in them, we judge and it is this judgement that gives way to all other categorisation and segregation. It leads to the construction of an image of the unknown ‘other’ that eventually paved the way for stereotypical generalisation of all blacks. Homi K. Bhabha talks about the idea of the ‘otherness’, which is relevant for stereotype images, since what emerges from the face of the representation is not what is at stake, but it is the otherness of it.⁵⁶ What can be seen other than the face, what pierces through the face? And that would be the stereotype. The ‘otherness’ is also both an “object of desire and derision”.⁵⁷ It becomes a desire when there is that appetite to view these images while knowing at the same time that they are offensive and should not be allowed our recognition. The images of stereotype are considered negative images, for they block our view from perceiving real identities of people. It creates a prejudiced image in the minds and directs a linear and biased way of conceiving things; the outcome being a wrong interaction between different social groups. The *Vogue* image is the very example, in the online newspaper articles; there are some people who find the images offensive and defamation to their kind, whereas others find it quite appealing. This creates two very different kinds of debates, where one group attacks the other. It exemplifies the idea of “phobia and fetish” paved by the fancies of colonial attitude.⁵⁸ Fanon feels the sort of objectification that black people faced, is a form of ‘dissection’ that occurred under the only accepted gaze at the time of colonialism, which were those of whites.⁵⁹ Skin was and is a dominant factor in the representations of stereotype.

⁵⁵ Fanon, p.417.

⁵⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The *Other* Question: the stereotype and colonial discourse’ in J Evans, S Halls (ed.), *Visual Culture: The Reader*, p.371

⁵⁷ Ibid.,

⁵⁸ Bhabha, p. 373.

⁵⁹ Fanon, p.420.

The photographs of Lara Stone became the very essence of fantasy, for in its fantasy; the blackface image has been passed off as a creative modelling concept. It creates an illusory world with the way the clothes have been put together and the make-up which seems to be French *Vogue*'s apparent reason behind the representation. But what comes through to some people who have been offended by the representation of the photographs is an image with a history of human degradation that has been used for fashion. This further establishes the fact that the stereotyped image utilised "...gives knowledge of difference and simultaneously disavows or masks it"⁶⁰ by inserting what seems to be a coded message and camouflaging it under the creative license. They make people see more than what is shown depending on the knowledge they bring on viewing and to them the other side of the stereotype is reality. People who are offended by portrayals of stereotype most often see the reality side having a greater force than the fantasy. The stereotype becomes a kind of veil that finds its place in between the real and the fantasy. When that veil is lifted, what sets in is the real. According to Mitchell, the stereotype works best when it remains as a mystery, forcing people to question its intent and the metaphorical meaning behind it.⁶¹

The image of the Lara Stone represents a stereotype to some people of African descent in the west, and being a stereotype it therefore comes alive to them. They believe it is aimed at them while mocking and exploiting their identity. Stereotypical images are images that people both love and hate which makes it prone to being produced time and time again throughout history, as with the vogue photography, with the Australian show, African American collectibles or in movies such as *Bamboozled*, amongst others. Basically through the usage of representations the presentation breaks through and proffers up. These images can be seen as enabling the offensive because of the effect of a 'probabilistic truth and predictability'⁶² that reminds one of a past history that is not always welcomed. Lines are what makes an object tangible but with the *Vogue* image, it appears that the colour became the line.⁶³

⁶⁰ Bhabha, p.375.

⁶¹ Mitchell, p.296.

⁶² Bhabha, p.370.

⁶³ Adapted from Mitchell's topic on 'Living Colour' about the film *Bamboozled* in *What Do Pictures Want?*, p.308.

Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société

3.1 The Installation that Offended



Figure 3 & 4: Installation of Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société

The installation piece *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe*, 2009, by the French artist, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou of Moroccan descent, created controversy when it was up for exhibition in Brussels, Belgium, the country where the artist lives and works. The work was exhibited in an empty building at Charles Rogier Passage, visible to the passerby through the window and had to be taken down within three weeks because of its controversial nature.⁶⁴ The installation was made up of thirty rugs that signified the prayer mat used by the Muslims for prayer all facing in the direction of Mecca, the holy place for Muslims. In front of each rug, a pair of men shoes were placed which was supposed to be the symbolic representation of the man during prayer. Amongst these men shoes, the most eye-catching pair that was positioned right in the middle and which stood out from the lot by being emphasised by a spotlight was a pair of shiny red heels evidently representing the presence of a female. The reason it created controversy was because the red heels were placed on the rug which meant the occurrence of a female amidst the males during prayers as depicted within the installation. In Islam, when prayers are being conducted in the Mosque, the women are separated from the men. There are in some mosques, a screened area⁶⁵, behind which they pray. There is no mingling of man and women and to see a representation of that very concept which they are against is a transgression of the Islamic faith. Lahlou with his work was trying to initiate according to him, "... an impossible synthesis with an aphoristic character"⁶⁶, thus the problematic and offensive art work.

3.2 Blasphemy as an Offence

Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société has been deemed as blasphemy in an article by *Islam de France*, where the artist Mehdi-Georges Lahlou has been termed as 'the blasphemer'.⁶⁷ The term blasphemy is used when offending images or anything of

⁶⁴ Bruno Depover, 'Red Heels in Prayer Carpet leading to Death Threats', *Nieuwsblad*, 2009, <http://www.nieuwsblad.be/article/detail.aspx?articleid=T22FOG2D>, retrieved 26 March 2010.

⁶⁵ Timothy Insoll, *The Archeology of Islam*, Blackwell Publishers, UK, 1999, p.32.

⁶⁶ Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, 'Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société', *Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*.

⁶⁷ (NA), 'Un Pseudo-Artiste Français Provoque des Troubles en Belgique', *L'Islam en France*, 2009, <<http://www.lislamdefrance.fr/regions/actu.php?idregion=12&idactu=1347&name=%EElle%20de%20France&actu=Un%20pseudo-artiste%20Fran%20ais%20provoque%20des%20troubles%20en%20Belgique>>, retrieved 26 February 2010.

offensive in nature transgresses religious domain. The definition can also be equated with the word sacrilegious. The English dictionaries offers various meanings for these terms, ranging from, theft committed by someone against the religious institution of the church, destruction of objects which are signs and symbols of god to associating foul languages injuring the name of god.⁶⁸ To people who are part of a religious establishment, the offence of blasphemy would therefore be a retaliation and an attack on what they consider to be sacred. Throughout history the term blasphemy has been associated with words like the ‘obscene, idolatrous, offensive, subversive and taboo’⁶⁹ which as a result appear could have been an easy fit to the definitions of offence on the Thesaurus Map presented in the first chapter.

Blasphemy can be described as speaking or acting out against God or the sacred; the definition takes shape from Greek which means ‘evil speech’⁷⁰ which eventually constitute of an action against that which is adored and loved by people of that particular faith. Offence against God and therefore religion is one of the oldest of offences, and considered a subject of great seriousness during a certain period in time. As early as in ancient Greece people were being prosecuted, Phidias who was a sculptor was put on trial for having carved his own image on the shield of the massive sculptures of Athena.⁷¹ In Sweden, blasphemy was also considered a very grave offence by the law and religious scholars until around the mid 1800s where people were being sent to the gallows if there was an infringement of that law.⁷²

Images can have a very strong hold; some pictures seem to have the power to hypnotize people into taking drastic actions even though they are inert and lifeless. Those who are affected by blasphemous images feel that it is morally wrong to allow such representation that offends for it is an attack on their fundamental values and principles. Images and works that have been a at the centre of controversy regarding religious matters are many, including, Andre Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1988), the images of the Prophet Muhammad in *Jyllands-Posten* (2005), or the ones of Lars Vilks amongst others. The reactions to

⁶⁸ S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy, Art that Offends*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2006, p.33.

⁶⁹ Plate, p.34.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.36.

⁷¹ Anthony Fisher, Hayden Ramsay, ‘Of Art and Blasphemy’, *Ethical Theory & Moral Practice*, vol 3, no. 2, 2000, pp. 137-167, ELIN@Lund, retrieved 2 April 2010.

⁷² Maria-Soili Olli, ‘Blasphemy in Early Modern Sweden – An Untold Story’, *Journal of Religious History*, vol 32, no.4, 2008, pp 457-470, ELIN@Lund, retrieved 2 April 2010.

these images has not only been violent incitation but has also led to a violent repercussion.

According to the Islamic faith, the term blasphemy is related to the word “...*kufr* which connotes ingratitude of not attributing to God what should be”⁷³ which is dealt with, throughout the Quran. Viewing *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* from the perspective of some Muslim individuals, it is not very difficult therefore to understand why it offended and is an example of blasphemy. According to them, since there has been a transgression of what they believe to be sacred. The actions that it drove to, which was pelting the gallery window with stones where the exhibition was being held and the fact that the artist received death threats, testifies to the offence and uproar it caused amongst some people of the Muslim community in Belgium.⁷⁴

The UN Human Rights Council had put in place a ruling in March 2009 against religious insult. It stated that “defamation of religion is a serious affront to human dignity which can restrict the freedom of those who are defamed and can lead to the incitement of violence”⁷⁵. When dealing with religious issues, it is always a matter of great sensitivity. Religion and its ideology is what make the term blasphemy relevant, for without religion there would have been no blasphemy as such.

3.3 *Islam and Art*

The origin of Islam goes back to the 7th century, when the Prophet Muhammad, who was an Arab trader from Mecca, received the teachings of God from the angel Gabriel.⁷⁶ These sermons came to be known as the Quran which when translated means the unquestionable word of God. The teachings of the Quran is the foundation of the Islamic faith with the *shariah* that is the Islamic law being the

⁷³ Plate, p.58.

⁷⁴ Bruno Depover, ‘Red Heels in Prayer Carpet leading to Death Threats’, *Nieuwsblad*.

⁷⁵ (NA), ‘The Meaning of Freedom’, *Economist*, vol 390, issue 8625, 2009, ELIN@Lund, retrieved 2 April 2010.

⁷⁶ Insoll, p. 17.

words uttered and the deeds carried out by Muhammad laying grounds for the traditions, *hadith*, which have to be upheld by every Muslim.⁷⁷

In order to understand the reason why certain representations according to the Islamic faith are not accepted or tolerated, one should get an insight into what is in their eyes accepted when it comes to artistic undertakings. Islamic art started out in aristocratic cultural decorum which eventually was adapted within the different confines of their culture.⁷⁸ There is no definite start to Islamic art. Islamic culture imbibed the aesthetics of cultures before them, such as the ‘Classical, Byzantine, Sasanian and even Central Asia’.⁷⁹ The nature of their aesthetic convention had a dual significance, that of being decorative but also useful, whereby they both satisfied the criteria of the other. Art within the Islamic world extends from North Africa to South East Asia each developing their own specific style dependant on the different regions.⁸⁰ Religion then is not simply limited to a culture but becomes a way of life, where art is a representation of that way of living. Religion has a strong influence on Islamic art which comprises of the art of writing, specifically calligraphy used for Quranic writing, and geometric designs or ornaments known as the arabesque which comes from vegetal motifs used as repeated patterns. The geometric designs are emphasised in the majestic architectures of Islam.⁸¹

Islamic art is often described as art conceived merely for religious purpose with a lack of figural representation. The fact is that they have also been created at times for more mundane requirements, lying in material satisfaction such as for mere decorations. Having said that, we cannot disregard the fact that it is difficult to find figural representation within Islamic art, even more so within religious environments. The amendments of Islam which forbade the use of figural representation were instituted by the end of 600 B.C by Abd al-Malik. The intention was to establish a unique identity of the religion which rejected idol worship but also to avoid its comparison with ‘Christianity and later on with Buddhism or the pagans’.⁸² The amendments therefore encouraged the usage of calligraphy and organic motifs as a

⁷⁷ Insoll, p.18.

⁷⁸ Insoll, p.135.

⁷⁹ Ibid.,

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Siddiqui, *Islamic Art*, <http://www.colostate.edu/orgs/MSA/find_more/islart.html>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

⁸¹ Ibid.,

⁸² Insoll, p.136.

means of expressing art through the basis of religion which was coincidentally a tenant of the *hadith*. The *Sunni* and *Shiah*⁸³ therefore legalised this Islamic tradition by the end of 800 B.C.⁸⁴ This reinforces the reason as to the trepidation that occurs whenever Muslim imageries are represented in an unreligious fashion.

3.4 Offence Against Islam?

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou uses notorious subject matters in his art, frequently causing controversy.⁸⁵ His works quite often deals with the ambiguous nature of identities through his 'burlesque imageries'⁸⁶. The art work or installation that he creates normally comprises of 'religious symbols' where he questions taboos related to the Islamic faith.⁸⁷ On the blog *Mejliss el Kalam*, a comment left by a person calling himself Anoual about Lahlou's work read, 'that this is again the work of some frustrated artist'.⁸⁸ This comment also depicts frustration of the viewer who was offended. When artist attempts imageries or a representation which deals with religious issues it quite often is taken as an attack on the particular group of individuals who follow the said religion.

It has been observed that whenever Islam has been offended through negative depictions of what the religion holds sacred, it has always provoked heated reactions. With regards to the 2007 appearance of some offensive images of Islam's sacred figure the Prophet Muhammad in Sweden, more than 5000 Swedish websites were attacked by Turkish hackers.⁸⁹ The reaction pertinently exemplifies the offence caused. As with *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe*, the window of the gallery

⁸³ (NA), 'Sunni and Shi'a', *BBC*, 2009,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia_1.shtml>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

⁸⁴ Insoll, p.137.

⁸⁵ Some examples are *Sans titre, bas* (2009), *Ceci n'est pas une femme musulmane* (2009), *Coran Vs Anita Reyes- Les deux dernieres nuit* (2008).

⁸⁶ Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, 'Intro', *Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*, <<http://mehdi-georges-lahlou.e-monsite.com/rubrique,intro,77897.html>>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁸⁸ Anoual (NA), 'Provocation: Talons aiguilles dans une mosquee', *Mejliss el Kalam*, 2009, <<http://www.mejliss.com/showthread.php?t=482541>>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

⁸⁹ Baron Bodissey, 'Muslims Provoked by Art', *The International Free Press Society*, 2009, <<http://www.internationalfreepressociety.org/2009/09/france-gallery-takes-down-exhibit-due-to-offended-muslims/>>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

where the work was exhibited was scratched and pelted therefore causing the window to be blocked with a black covering to prevent viewing.⁹⁰ A Muslim individual was interviewed by the online Belgian news site, *Nieuwsblad*, who said that since the work was exhibited during Ramadan, it is understandable according to him, why some Muslims would be offended.⁹¹ Very often when religion is violated, to the people who are offended it is unreasonable and beyond explanation. That is why it generates all the hype. *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe* is an example of a piece that deals with a sensitive issue leading to violent repercussions. It is the juxtaposition made by the artist that was not well appreciated and received.

3.5 The Red Heels and the Prayer Rug

The colour red often expresses symbolical meanings. It sometimes connotes a positive idea; the red light for instance signals of danger and acts as a warning on the streets, however, the colour red can also be used to assume the exact opposite. It becomes suggestive depending on the mode, manner and juxtaposition made. The red colour can also be identified with negative images, the very nemesis of safety



Figure 6: *The Devil Wears Prada Heels*

and optimism. Women with red hair were considered as ‘witches or whores’ and it was considered the colour of evil.⁹² In Christianity the red colour was associated with sexuality and the demon as well.⁹³ Images of the devil in our visual world are literally always in red, with horns and a pitchfork. This image of the devil inferring to evil is properly juxtaposed with the image of the red shoes in the posters of the movie *The Devil wears Prada*⁹⁴, which reflects the idea of negativity tied and linked with the red heels, as the title so explicitly confirms.

⁹⁰ Bruno Depover, ‘Red Heels in Prayer Carpet leading to Death Threats’, *Nieuwsblad*.

⁹¹ Bruno Depover, ‘Red Heels in Prayer Carpet leading to Death Threats’, *Nieuwsblad*.

⁹² (NA), ‘Pigments through the Ages: Colour or Power’, *Webexhibits*, <http://www.webexhibits.org/pigments/intro/reds4.html>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

⁹³ Ibid.,

⁹⁴ David Frankel, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Perfs. Anne Hathaway, Meryl Streep, Stanley Tucci, 20th Century Fox, 2006.

According to Suzanne Moore and Lisa Allardice, the authors of the article *Sex and the Stiletto*, women wear high heels to evoke airs of femininity when they are in position of high power in order to refrain from being branded as being too masculine.⁹⁵ It helps them create their identity, which is that of being a woman and feminine. Lahlou's explanation for the representation of the red shoes equally signals his quest for identification; a sexual quest represented by the red heels amongst the pair of man shoes laid out in *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe*. Having the red pair of heels amongst the man shoes was supposed to translate into the idea of him as a transvestite.⁹⁶ Red heels are primarily and most importantly associated with and a signifier of sexuality. *Sex and the Stiletto* describes the image of the shoes as being undoubtedly sexual, for it does suggest that the shoes are being perceived "... as phallic replacement or to attract the opposite sex...", which clearly insinuates that the shoe is in fact a sexual object and it should not be according to the magazine, but rather signify more than that for the woman⁹⁷. Some other instance where the red shoes allude to sexuality are through these lines: "Put on your red heels, your silk bra, your garter and your smoking stockings, Julian whispers. Get dressed for me"⁹⁸, this is a line from the book *Love Me Tender* by Catherine Texier. Here again the red heels connote sexuality. It is both a visual and a sensual object worn in some cases to make a statement or to lure the opposite sex, being the reason why some Muslims perceived as a reference to 'prostitutes'⁹⁹, the epitome of sexuality.

The green rug in *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe*, on the other hand, depicts the very opposite meaning of the red heels. The green rug is not just any rug but a prayer mat used by Muslim people for prayer. Green is a sacred colour in Islam and it is a good omen to use it for dressing and in flags as propounded by Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰⁰

In Islam the erection of a four sided wall area is not compulsory and as essential or fundamental for prayer. Prayer can be practiced anywhere one deems fit. Initially,

⁹⁵ Suzanne Moore, Lisa Allardice, 'Sex and stiletto', *New Statesman*, vol 132, issue 4625, pp 40-42, 2003, ELIN@Lund, retrieved 2 April 2010, p.41.

⁹⁶ Belga (NA), 'A Place of Prayer Fictitious Angering Muslims', *Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*, 2009, <<http://mehdi-georges-lahlou.e-monsite.com/agenda-voir-60366.html>>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

⁹⁷ Moore, Allardice, p. 41.

⁹⁸ Catherine Texier, *Love me Tender*, Paladin, 1989, p.2.

⁹⁹ Belga (NA), 'A Place of Prayer Fictitious Angering Muslims', *Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*.

¹⁰⁰ Insoll, p.18.

the first surfaces for prayers were the bare ground with a form of boundary demarcating it.¹⁰¹ This was a symbolic gesture which provided a temporary mosque for reverence of God. The prayer rugs also provide this ephemeral idea of the mosque and could also be called a portable mosque, since it is easily carried from one place to the other. The size are also kept relatively small for individual worship and for the purpose of transportation but there are bigger ones for multiple user at the same time.¹⁰² The rugs offer a readily available place of worship. During the making process of the praying mats, the weavers weave from the top first carrying their way to the bottom, for if it was the other way round after having completed the bottom, it would have been prone to dust and the weavers might have sat on it.¹⁰³ The key importance was to have a clean area for prayer, which is the reason why Muslim people remove their shoes before entering the mosque. There is heavy stress on cleanliness in the Islamic religion as in all religions. This is why places of worship are kept clean, but in Islam the fact that the devotees have to prostrate in veneration of god and kneel down, makes it all the more pertinent to have a clean area. At times there are certain indication on the rugs such as the *mihrab*¹⁰⁴, which indicates the position to be taken when praying.¹⁰⁵ There are even imprints of hands and feet, to indicate where to place hands and feet while praying. Sometimes the rugs contain designs of light which signifies the light of Allah, whom Muslim people revere as god. Other details that might be included are a comb or a water pitcher which again signifying the importance of keeping clean while praying.¹⁰⁶ As a result when Muslims feel there is a disrespect of objects they place in the highest regards, they are revolted, being people who are very much passionate about their religion.

Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe's red heels and the prayer rug therefore are the very example of two objects which when placed together provokes consternation. People of Islamic faith perceive it as being a blasphemous representation where the sacred and profane are placed in the same space when they are actually two opposite ends of a pole that do not and should not meet.

¹⁰¹ Insoll, p. 46.

¹⁰² Insoll, p.48.

¹⁰³ Maggie Oman Shannon, *The Way We Pray: Practices from Around the World*, Conari Press, California, 2001, p.146.

¹⁰⁴ Insoll, p.30.

¹⁰⁵ Shannon, p.147.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.,

3.6 *The Sacred and the Profane*

The sacred and the profane established within the confines of religion can be summed up in simple terms as being the *good* as opposed to the *bad*. According to Emile Durkheim, the world we live in is separated into these distinct parts of which are firstly the sacred and secondly the profane.¹⁰⁷ The categorisation of the sacred and the profane is based on ‘beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends’ which creates the division between the representation and objects of this world.¹⁰⁸ The sacred is identified with God, piety, the holy, thus having positive characteristics. The profane has to do with the secular and anything that is non-religious. The fact remains though, that both the sacred and profane needs one another for their survival, for if there were no sacred, there would have been no relevance of the idea of profanity. The religious affiliation of the sacred is reserved to, images of god-like figure such as Jesus Christ or Prophet Muhammad, special places of worship like the Mecca or Churches, objects of divination like the cross or the Muslim prayer rug and even mere mortal beings such as the Pope or prophets and saints that have come and gone.¹⁰⁹ Durkheim claims that there is a hierarchy of things that exists. The sacred naturally occupies a superior status as does the prayer rug in *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* in comparison to the profane red heels and as a result one is subordinated to the other.¹¹⁰ Living in this world, we are witnesses to the fact that there is a common principle in all the religions, where it can be observed, that the profane does not come close or touch the sacred. When the holy meets the ordinary, the image represented is not always digested properly.

The red heels represent the profane, the prayer rug represents the sacred, and the two being put together was deemed as an abomination to some people of the Islamic faith. That is the reason why stone were being thrown at the window where the exhibition was being held. The pair of red heels in *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* is rich with sexual metaphors and is a symbol of a fetish object. According to Mitchell, who traces the meaning of fetish back to the 1600s, states that the people from Europe were both drawn to and at the same time repelled by the fetish.¹¹¹ The

¹⁰⁷ Durkheim, p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ Durkheim, p.51.

¹⁰⁹ Plate, p.37.

¹¹⁰ Durkheim, p.52.

¹¹¹ Mitchell, p.160.

idea of the fetish also forms part of Sigmund Freud's studies in the human sciences. He applied the term fetish to express how humans identify with 'material objects'.¹¹² The fetish object in Lahlou's work has been labelled as being a prostitute by some Muslims. According to Freud, a real object gains an unreal characteristic when it acts as 'an agent of sexual arousal'.¹¹³ In this sense the shoes reflects the fetish which is 'connected to the person for whom they substitute'.¹¹⁴ The definition rings true and in the present situation of Lahlou's work, the heels shocks and angers because of the meaning that flows from it. Some individuals of the Islamic faith who were offended saw only the profanity of *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* that was linked to sexuality than the aesthetics of an art work. This was mere defamation of their religion. As perceived by the people offended, the shoes represent a woman. The woman is physically absent from the installation but the heels projects the idea of the female or, a transvestite as stated by Lahlou, in both cases what is understood as being a representation of human beings exudes through the representation of the shoes. It essentially is the object of fetish juxtaposed with the prayer rug that summons the clash between sacred and profane. The merging of these two positions is impossible: the juxtaposition of the heels which disrespect the importance of cleanliness while praying but also more importantly the reference made to the occurrence of a female and the rug is an impossible combination for the people who were offended. The sacred and the profane are the only binary terms that have no basic common ground like "good or bad" which are the two opposite sides of morals, or "sickness and health" being the two constituents of life, for there is nothing between them that can tie them together.¹¹⁵

A person passing by the window of where the installation was held said in an interview with *Tv-Brussels* that man and woman are separated during prayers and such a representation 'brings misfortune'.¹¹⁶ This echoes Durkheim's assertion of even man being profane, in the sense that here the female is seen in light of a profane object, for if she were amidst the man in red heels in prayers; it would have been blasphemy and an intrusion into the sacred. It is the values and rules that has to be

¹¹² Tim Dant, 'Fetishism and the social values of objects', *Sociological Review*, vol 44, no. 00380261, 1996, pp 495-517, Elin@Lund, p.496.

¹¹³ Dant, 496.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.500.

¹¹⁵ Durkheim, p.53.

¹¹⁶ Baron Bodissey, 'Muslims Provoked by Art', *The International Free Press Society*.

followed and when there is an infringement by impure mixing, where the sacred are made profane. The sacred is kept pure by restrictions and by upholding them, the profane is kept isolated from the latter.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Durkheim, p.56.

Seeing Through their Eyes

4.1 Interpreting Presentation from Representation

The *Vogue* photography of Lara Stone and *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe* are examples of images that have offended certain viewers because of how they have interpreted those images. Interpretation takes place when viewers are engaging with a work and trying to build an understanding of it. We give images meanings once we start interpreting them. The process of interpretation makes the viewer question the images, with the two most basic questions being; what is seen? And what is understood?

Offending images are just like art works where if the viewers show an interest, they are absorbed and pulled into the work. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, art absorbs the viewers allowing other aspects of the work to elucidate itself.¹¹⁸ This is applicable to the offending image, for when it stings, it captures attention and offers other meanings than the outer facade of what is blatantly in front of the eyes. The meanings come to fruition or interpretation is realised through the concept of play which takes place between the thing being viewed and the person viewing. When employing play within the domain of art, the viewer brings about ‘meaningful allusion’¹¹⁹ tied to the interpretation. This is relevant to the offending image, since it is being read and taken as offence by an embodied spectator, where the individual’s culture and tradition supports the way of seeing. Hence, when viewing an offending image it becomes difficult for the spectators who are affected by it to disburden themselves from their identity, for the images come alive through ties and attachment one has which affects interpretation. When interpreting, the viewers perceive the representations which are the objects that make up the work but it is the presentation of the idea it represents that gives meaning to what they see and absorbs them.¹²⁰

The idea of presentation and representation has been touched upon throughout the thesis but here I will deal with it in a little more detail here. The representation of

¹¹⁸ Davey, p.18.

¹¹⁹ Gadamer, p. 108

¹²⁰ Gadamer, p.109.

Lara Stone covered in black make-up reminds some of blackface imagery which is a presentation for them of the long history of discrimination the black people had to undergo in America or Britain¹²¹ whereas the representation of the red heels on the prayer rug in Lahlou's works according to some Muslims is the presentation of an attack on their religion by Islamophobes¹²². What people who are offended interpret from what they see is not merely based on the representation but more importantly the idea the images presents and therefore the significance of what has been represented. The colour black and the white model, the red heels and the prayer rug are all representations but they are given meaning through the way they are juxtaposed and presented. The *Vogue* image represents a model covered in black whereas *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe* represents a pair of heels on a rug but what comes through from the former is the presentation of the usage of blackface and from the latter is the notion of blasphemy as mentioned above. Therefore presentation is understood quite differently from its representation once interpretation occurs. Representation and presentation changes the way people perceive. They might not be conscious that this is how understanding is constructed, but it is a systematic way of reaching to interpretation. The play that takes place with the images, 'presents or offers up'¹²³ something that is more than the representation and which emanates from within.¹²⁴ The images in question represent the essence of offence to people offended through presentation. When the viewers are trying to work out what has been perceived by them, there is a detachment from the representation with more concentration on what they have come to understand, and that would be the idea of the offence that leads them to the fact that it is denigration of their religion or of their ethnicity. As a result what has been seen through the representation of the images evolves into other meaning and takes the form and embodies that other meaning. It no longer is the beautiful Lara Stone in *Vogue Paris* but a down-grading image or it no longer portrays a respect to the prayer rug but disrespect. What now exists becomes the truth to the viewer; it becomes the truth of the image with the presentation seething through.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Don Lemon, 'Blackface: Offensive or art?', Video, *CNN*.

¹²² Souad2 (NA), 'Provocation: Talons aiguilles dans une mosquee', *Mejliss el Kalam*, 2009, <<http://www.mejliss.com/showthread.php?t=482541>>, retrieved 3 April 2010.

¹²³ Davey, p.19.

¹²⁴ Gadamer, p.110.

¹²⁵ Gadamer, p.111.

In the *Vogue Paris*'s photography there was the presence of a body which pertinently but metaphorically conveyed the idea of blackface imagery to some people of African origin in the west who have a history with that tradition. The representation of the body of Lara Stone reminded those offended of the idea presented in their eyes, which is the concept and history of blackface. According to the creators of the image they claim to be unaware of the scandal the image would cause. The big mystery and question remains as to what was the concept presented through the representation of Lara Stone, for *Vogue Paris* failed to give an explanation. Therefore its metaphorical statement of blackface imagery was stronger to those affected than just an artistic creation¹²⁶. Within Lahlou's installation there was an absence of a body, but nevertheless the representation of the shoes in Lahlou's work metaphorically conveys the presentation of a female body. Lahlou's intent was that the red heels were meant to depict a transvestite, which was questioning his identity but according to the interpretation of some Muslim people offended it was a reference to the occurrence of a prostitute or a woman within a sacred space which is not allowed.¹²⁷ Mehdi-Georges Lahlou was aware that his work would provoke, maybe not to the degree that it did, where some people tried to break the gallery window, but it was clearly his intention to pass his representation as the presentation of an idea related to Islam. Someone who is not an African American or a Muslim, these representations in themselves might have a different meaning and impact altogether. But to some black people in America, Britain, France or to some Muslims, these representations presents full of meaning. It presents the idea of racial discrimination or religious discrimination to those who have been offended. It is a cliché that images speak a thousand words and it is probably more for the offending image, since the viewers offended asks of the image, what the representation actually means and tend to be very analytical and critical of it once it stings and wounds the viewer.

The offending image hurt and affects people because of a certain reality that they perceive of the image which exudes through their interpretation of it. What the viewer sees on a first hand basis is the representation and what is understood is derived through its presentation, which are the resulting conclusion people who are offended make of the images. These results and meanings are their truth, supported

¹²⁶ Gadamer, p.113.

¹²⁷ Belga (NA), 'A Place of Prayer Fictitious Angering Muslims', *Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*.

by the involvement of their cultural construction which is embraced by people who share the similar sets of cultural values and beliefs.

4.2 Cultural Identity

One's cultural identity is of great importance when reading and interpreting offending images. Culture is what affects the judgements some people make. For that reason, it becomes relatively comprehensible when looking at the offending images through the cultural lens. The implication of culture is imprinted upon the image once it is deemed offensive or unacceptable. It therefore becomes critically important to take the viewers cultural construction under consideration when trying to understand the meanings attributed to images, especially the ones that offend.

There is no definite classification of culture; it could be a 'community, nation or social group'.¹²⁸ Then there naturally is the implication of culture which made certain individuals vulnerable to the French *Vogue* photography and *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société*. Culture becomes rightly so, a sort of indexical print on the images that offended. People who rally for their claim of having been violated by imageries do most of the time take support from their culture in saying that there has been a lack of respect shown to their community. People's cultural construction is very important in the way they identify to images. The *Vogue Paris* photograph and the installation by Mehdi-Georges Lahlou offended because they seemed to mock and ridicule certain cultural identity. According to Stuart Hall, the definition of culture would be the very essence and the gist that constitute a society.¹²⁹ Culture becomes a form of kinship identification to a common idea shared. The involvement of culture is appropriate within the topic of offending images. The cultural backgrounds of individuals construct their identity and are the core of their being. It also becomes a norm that is followed, thereby becoming instrumental in the way people look at things.

¹²⁸ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage, London, 1997, p.2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*,

Culture can be understood through the idea of the totem as propounded by Durkheim, in which the nature of his study on people and the supernatural echoes the system of people and community. His writings on the totem refer to a primitive society and were carried out in early 20th century whereas the Vogue image and Lahlou's installation form part of a modern 21st century society. Nevertheless, Durkheim's concept of the totem is about a boundary and a form of organization that held the clans together. These clans were different collective groups, each having a sign or symbol known as the totem'¹³⁰. This boundary created by the totem is still prevalent in today's society and reflects the reality and organization in society that binds people together under the guise of their cultural identity and affiliations. The idea of the totem is very relevant in understanding the way people are bounded to their culture, reacting and sharing the same understanding and approach to the world which has not changed much from the modern society of today. This is exemplified by the vociferous reactions to protect what is considered a staple of one's identity. The reactions that the Vogue image stirred amongst some African-American people or the reactions Lahlou's installation provoked amongst some Muslims causing his exhibition to be cut short is a proof that people are attached to "their totem". The totem was a structure of identity that was conferred to groups of people that shaped their identity.¹³¹

Durkheim explains that being part of a clan does not mean that people are from the same family or are genetically related but merely the fact that they share the same name.¹³² It is the same name being shared by all people of Islamic faith, known as Muslims or most of the people from African continent known as the black people. These individuals are not tied together by blood but by their commonality and sense of belonging to the cultural aspect of the group. The totem, an emblem in most cases either of an animal or plant acted as a bond that held the clans together.¹³³ People in today's society are tagged according to their cultural affinities and associations and these groupings form a contemporary totem, where they each have certain assets that denote their uniqueness. To some African American people, their past history of discrimination because of their colour marks the common element between them and

¹³⁰ Durkheim, p.123.

¹³¹ Ibid.,

¹³² Durkheim, p.122.

¹³³ Durkheim, p.124.

to some Muslim people, their belief in the Islamic faith that shapes their way of life. These common elements become a point of reference or simply an emblem and identity in similar ways as the idea of the totem. People within same groups normally develop certain empathy between themselves. This is clearly exemplified in their stance against the images of Vogue Paris and Lahlou's installation that are respectively considered offensive. The reactions the people manifested as indicated by newspaper articles demonstrate how these groups come together in attacking such representations. The people who were affected by the images were spread out. They had the same totem, that is the same sense of rootedness but were not from the same geographical locations just like clan people; with the Lara stone photography, it affected not only African American but to a certain extent people in France and as well as Britain. As one comment in response to an article about the Vogue image on *msnbc* read "as a black person living in the UK, I find these images disturbing...there were blackfaces on British television and it was known that they were offensive then as they are offensive now"¹³⁴. The magazine is a *Vogue Paris* edition but it affected some black people beyond the border of France. These people are spread out but share the same totem that is the history of having being discriminated against. The installation Lahlou, affected not only some Muslims in Belgium but also in France who share the same totem of Islam that is the reason why on *L'Islam en France*, Lahlou was considered a 'blasphemer'¹³⁵. The respective people having similar totem share the same values and beliefs. The different objects that come under these totems also becomes aptly important since they are related and branches of that same totem, just as the prayer rug was sacred or a stereotype image of the totem would become an offence. There are certain restrictions by which certain totemic organizations follow and abide by¹³⁶ which reflects the principles that form the basis of certain cultures even today, there are norms that they do not transgress, if and when it happens, causes great distress amongst those of that particular culture. Culture therefore is a denoting factor of one's identity like the totem. It is not only a representational object but it also is an ideological concept. The totems are not merely a emblem but it insinuated more than that; the primitive clan people "...put it

¹³⁴Bobby Thomas, 'Did French Vogue Cross Line with Blackface photos?', *msnbc*, 2009, <<http://allday.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2009/10/14/2098358.aspx>>, retrieved on 5 May 2010.

¹³⁵(NA), 'Un Pseudo-Artiste Francais Provoque des Troubles en Belgique', *L'Islam en France*.

¹³⁶ Durkheim, p.151

upon their person, they imprint it upon their flesh, it becomes a part of them...¹³⁷, it evolved into something personal, an identity and the importance of who they were. This reiterates the attachment that lies with preserving one's identity.

The people who form part of a culture assign meanings according to what they have absorbed from their culture which forms the basis of their identity which they hold in a high esteemed position. Objects and images do not have meaning in themselves but they are given meaning due to the level of importance we attach to them.¹³⁸ They gain meaning only from our understanding of the meaningful. The totem has importance only to the group it serves and to none other.¹³⁹ In the same way the prayer mat in Lahlou's installation or the blacked up model in the Vogue carries a different meaning for those who are not from the same culture or who do not share the same set of values. Another person's comment on MSNBC about the Lara Stone image stated that "I'm an artist AND a Black woman who has lived here in the US and in Europe. The idea that these photos are not offensive is crazy. First of all...unless you are someone of color who has had to fight stereotypes for a lifetime you really don't have a case to defend the photos as art..."¹⁴⁰. It reflects the frustration felt by someone affected by the photography, seen as an offence to her culture. A comment left by an individual, calling himself Souad2, on the blog site *Mejliss el Kalam*, who was clearly offended by Lahlou's work said that the latter's work was just another opportunity for the haters of Islam and Muslims to enjoy.¹⁴¹ This installation to him was clearly an incentive for the artist to create controversy and gain fame and recognition by belittling Islam and this is what Islamophobes do he says.¹⁴² Both the images of Vogue Paris and Lahlou are assigned meanings and are considered offensive due to some people's cultural conviction and commitment.

Culture is used to strengthen one's uniqueness when it comes to identity. Offending images are perceived being filled with cultural codes, the blacked up model reminiscent of minstrelsy or the red heels alluding to sexuality with a sacred object, and when these codes are deciphered, they anger people. People's culture acts as an

¹³⁷ Durkheim, p.136.

¹³⁸ Hall, p.3.

¹³⁹ Durkheim, p.170.

¹⁴⁰ Bobby Thomas, 'Did French Vogue Cross Line with Blackface photos?', *msnbc*.

¹⁴¹ Souad2 (NA), 'Provocation: Talons aiguilles dans une mosquee', *Mejliss el Kalam*.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*,

identity shaping their perception. Culture definitely helps to organise our lives, it sets certain code of conduct and norm in people's lives by which they abide, by a mark of principle, not because they are scared. People sharing the same culture have the same sort of world view, they share the ways in which they perceive the world which also is an onset of emotions. Emotions are involved, when offending images are given meaning by the people it provoked through the medium of interpretation.

4.3 Culture Encapsulating Emotions

Stuart Hall states that “culture is about feelings, attachments, and emotions as well as concepts and ideas”¹⁴³. As a result it not only has significance when constructing and moulding one's identity but culture also plays an important role in structuring emotions. Play dough might be colourful but it has no form until someone moulds it and gives it an identity. In the same way human beings at birth are like untouched play dough, undoubtedly born with emotions, but these emotions evolve making the individuals conscious of their identity by knowledge gained through their surroundings. As a result it can be construed that our emotion gives form to our being which is regulated by external factors such as our cultural upbringing and historicity.¹⁴⁴ That is the reason why people are emotionally sensitive when their culture are being targeted and attacked. Emotions are not only an individual private matter but they can also be feelings that are collectively shared due to common beliefs and values within cultural groups.¹⁴⁵ Emotions are first felt with the pang that one gets instantly when viewing the offending image. This immediate impact of emotion is very similar to what Roland Barthes calls the punctum.

The punctum is not a happening that one searches for but it is that which strikes with a sudden blow, Barthes compares it to an ‘arrow that pierces and wounds’.¹⁴⁶ The attribute of the punctum that will be essential to the offending image is its quality of evoking an emotional shock factor. The idea of the punctum is very similar and conveys the emotions that are felt when viewing the offending image. The word

¹⁴³ Hall, p.2.

¹⁴⁴ Jennifer Harding, E. Deidre Pribram, Emotions, A Cultural Studies Reader, Routledge, New York, 2009, p.7.

¹⁴⁵ Harding, Pribram, p.2.

¹⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, Vintage Classics, London, 1982, p. 26.

comes from Latin, and also alludes to punctuation; therefore it acts as the quality of the image that performs instantly.¹⁴⁷ Particular characteristics of offending images wound people's feelings because of their cultural baggage and hence emotions and feelings are assets of the baggage which forms the way some people perceive certain facts. In the case of the Lara Stone in *Vogue Paris*, it was her colour that stung the viewer and in *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Societe*, some Muslim people could not accept the fact that the red heels were touching the sacred rug. The viewers, who were wounded by these images, were affected because of their cultural sensitivity. When the viewer comes to terms with the image's cultural significance, then the concept of punctum changes to studium since the viewer becomes aware of the bigger picture thereby starting to question the image.¹⁴⁸ I would argue that in the case of offending images, the punctum and studium both have their respective places. Certain meanings are realised in human beings because of their culture, and emotions are moulded on the basis of culture, therefore it is obvious that when some people come to face with offending images, there will be details in them that will 'wound', 'sting', 'bruise' and found 'poignant'¹⁴⁹. In the same way, it will anger them and they would want to know more about the studium of the image. Therefore the reason images offend can only be salvaged by those whose emotions have been hurt and injured. Emotions and feelings arise through attachment and bond people have with things they call theirs and when these cherished possessions are violated; they will undoubtedly provoke people's strong reactions.

Emotions cannot be taken as an abstract idea and in order to be understood properly they have to be grounded within cultural discourse¹⁵⁰. Offending images are unequivocally directly related to emotions and very relevant in showing why people react the way they do when faced with certain imageries. Then again, the notion of Barthes intensifying punctum which manifest itself through instantaneous emotions becomes a relevant offset of cultural implication. Emotions therefore are not "...presocial and instinctive responses, determined by our biological constitution"¹⁵¹ but they are modelled according to the culture we form part of. People are shocked,

¹⁴⁷ Barthes, p.27

¹⁴⁸ Barthes, p.26.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.27.

¹⁵⁰ Alison, M. Jaggard, 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology' in J Harding, ED Pribram (ed.), *Emotions, A Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p.52.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.54.

stunned or stung by the image of *Vogue*'s blacked up Stone and the sacrilegious juxtaposition of Lahlou's installation because their emotions are the result of their cultural construction where certain things become unacceptable. It is very similar to the codes of conduct people are brought up with, for example eating with the hands might be considered a norm in certain cultures and the same thing might be considered disgusting or rude in another. People react in certain ways since it is what their culture has characterised as being acceptable and appropriate. It shapes their emotions of feeling disgust at things that are inadmissible in their view. The black colour on the white model and the red heels touching the prayer rug is deemed immoral and offensive to the viewers because they are hurt by the representation. They have a relationship with these images and their emotions have been channelled to feel hatred when these same images have been subjected to a degrading act. The representation of the model stings and so does the juxtaposition of the profane against the sacred which are the viewers' punctum. This instinctively summons a moral judgement.

Once feelings are evoked when viewing an offending image because of the strong cultural envelope some people have around them, they tend to make moral judgements. It forces one to look at the bigger picture and connecting the dots as to the cultural reason that the images offend, echoing the relevance of the studium. In Latin the studium means an application to something and Barthes uses the concept to categorise images based on their subjects.¹⁵² On looking at the offending image, one ultimately becomes aware of the subject which forces judgements. These judgements come with the feelings and emotions of being stung at first and are 'essential to morality'.¹⁵³ People who are offended by offending images judge it as being wrong. Emotions are always at the core of affirmations that people make with the notion of 'right and wrong'.¹⁵⁴ Images that are degrading and violates people, images that are considered blasphemous or attacks a painful historical past, are judged based on moral concepts that people have. These moral concepts have culture as a back bone and are the results of epistemic emotions.¹⁵⁵ The epistemic emotions are *a priori* that people have, whether individually or as a collective whole. It has

¹⁵² Barthes, p.26

¹⁵³ Prinz, p.13.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.16.

¹⁵⁵ Prinz, p.17.

been appropriated and it oozes out when deciphering the right or wrong.¹⁵⁶ These emotions are what make people react, it motivates a reaction, that is why comments are flooding in personal blogs on the internet or the reason it pushes people to violent behaviours such as throwing stones at an art exhibition. This is a form of motivational internalism¹⁵⁷ where their culture shapes the emotions therefore interpreting some images as being wrongful and acting against it. These responses, we can say have been incited by the punctum that is it all begins with the sting from the image.

In making moral judgements, the viewers of the offending images generally condemns the creators of the images. When the blacked up Lara Stone was viewed, it was *Vogue Paris* and Carine Roitfeld that people targeted as was Mehdi Georges Lahlou for the installation. People normally direct their anger at the source of these images that is how emotions influence judgement. Images that go against religion, or are racially denigrating haven been ‘emotionally tagged’¹⁵⁸. They are bound to evoke emotions and it goes without saying. The punctum that one sees and feels when in contact with an offending image forces them to morally condemn those images. When values and beliefs that are cherished within certain cultures are violated, then it naturally is perceived as being morally wrong and anger is the obvious consequence.¹⁵⁹ The concept of morality comes back to emotions, for the former is grounded by the latter.

Emotions and therefore culture are important tools in the way people react to certain images. In the realm of offending images the punctum makes them aware of the central representation of the image and the studium the general presentation of the subject which is generated by cultural construction of emotions. The emotions felt by certain people when viewing the offending image, becomes something that is beyond their control. Emotions are therefore aptly at play most of the times when people react to offending images.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵⁷ Prinz, p.18.

¹⁵⁸ Prinz, p.31.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.70.

Conclusion

The purpose of my study was to create a structure of how images metamorphose into the offensive for certain. Research into this topic began with the two empirical materials, which are *Vogue Paris*'s image of blacked-up Lara Stone and *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* as a focus point. As per the deductive and inductive methodology used, I concentrated on the deductive first, which constituted in the amassing and reviewing of articles and comments on online newspapers and blogs to get an overview of the reception of those images. It was from these comments that their nature of being offensive came through and with it the interest of looking at the images from the perspective of the people who have found them offensive. This was carried forward through the inductive method that is, researching theoretical frameworks and adapting them to ground the two offending images.

Culture has been of paramount importance within my work and it has been stressed upon throughout by situating both the empirical materials within its envelope. I believe it acts as a mode to establish a reasonable understanding of the reactions caused. That is also why it becomes relevant to trace the cultural roots and implications of using certain representations that have a tendency to cause profound offence. The French *Vogue* allowed me to undertake studies on blackface imagery by going to its origin and compiling some examples of it which depicted the humiliation and pain they harness. The photography of Lara Stone proves that this memory still holds fresh even today amongst some black people in America, Britain or France, evidenced by the controversy and comments that poured. Lahlou's installation provoked relatively the same kind of reactions and emotions. I have tried to deconstruct the image, by separating the red heels from the prayer mat and therefore the sacred from the profane in order to show their aversions toward each other and to underpin the offence. It permitted introspection into the Islamic culture and an understanding of the sensibilities that comes with the religion. Religion sets rules and regulations on people by which some take seriously and abide. Rather than taking it as a constraint, they take it as being unquestionable and irrevocable. That is why when these rules are broken they cause offence. My efforts with both the offending images have been not to question or make judgements of the group of people offended but empathetically ally myself with them to enhance our understanding with their way of perceiving.

In order to fathom their reactions we have to look at ourselves and think what would be our reaction if something we cherish and love would be subjected to offence. How would we react if our mother's photo was strewn about with obscenities and displayed? Should we abide by the principles of certain artists like William Blake who stated that "...you must leave Fathers & Mothers & Houses & Lands if they stay in the way of Art"¹⁶⁰? It undoubtedly will make some people question the *raison d'être* of artistic endeavours if they leave one bitter and estranged. The blacked up Lara Stone and the juxtaposition of the red heels on the prayer rug are both examples of the exercising of freedom when it comes to using certain imageries in the name of creativity and the results of their ramifications are bitterness and a sense of estrangement on the part of some. These offending images act as disturbances in the societal landscape as evidenced by their outcomes. They shake cultural pillars which are the basis of some people's foundation. Being free to express oneself should not mean that some others have to be prepared to endure insult, scorn and mockery.

The *Vogue Paris* image and *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société*, are images of multi cultural societies, therefore it becomes important in today's world to know about the other, about the person we are living next to rather than indifferently raising our noses to difference. With respect to this study, therefore I would say it becomes important to instruct ourselves about cultures that are foreign to us. I do believe that the result of this study has paved the way for a fresh approach on the topic of offending images by prioritising and emphasising the role of cultural identities. The two images, *Vogue Paris*'s photography of Lara Stone and *Cocktail ou Autoportrait en Société* by Mehdi-Georges Lahlou are understood to have offended respectively some people of two different cultural background and identity. They allowed me to widen the scope of research gaining knowledge not only about the racial discrimination that some black people had to go through but also an understanding of the Islamic faith and culture.

It is believed that our world of visuals has 'numbed our surface sensibilities'¹⁶¹, since people have become acquainted with certain imageries by being subjected to them time and time again. But as evidenced through my work, images of racial discrimination and blasphemy go back far in time and some people have still not

¹⁶⁰ Anthony Julius, *Transgressions, The Offences of Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2002, p.100.

¹⁶¹ Harris, p.251.

gotten around to having such depictions. I therefore am in the opinion that there has to be an awareness of the consequences of offending images because there are many examples where the magnitudes of the repercussions have been quite serious. Having said that, the significance of my work has essentially been to present the situation of those offended as objectively as possible and not to find a solution to the problem of offending images and the best way has been by *Seeing Through their Eyes*.

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