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On the Primacy of the Eye

Amplifying Islam, Racism, and the Senses

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During the conference *Race and the Senses*, held in Amsterdam in 2018, an international group of academics came together to discuss ocularcentrism in studies of race and racism, and to move beyond the eye to explore how race is made and unmade through all of the senses. We spoke in a beautiful room in the Allard Pierson Museum, decorated by statues representing Classical Antiquity, which reminded me of the spirit of feminist and archaeologist Nanny de Vries and her husband, the classicist Jan Best.¹ Together, they set up *Thamyris*, which became known as the series *Thamyris / Intersecting, Place, Sex and Race* that published the book *Dutch Racism* (Essed and Hoving 2014). Unfortunately, Nanny did not live to see that volume published, but her husband told me he was very content with its publication, since Dutch racism was something she was deeply concerned with and which he hated

(and still hates). Born during the Second World War, and furiously opposing racism as adults since the 1960s, they believed that archaeology and classics needed to be revised to undo the logic of race. Jan argued that the foundational myth of the Greek language as a splendid source of European civilization, created *ex nihilo*, should be changed by considering a much wider Mediterranean world that included North-Africa and Semitic languages to understand it critically. As archaeologists, they pursued what we now call decolonization, and did so very much from a material perspective, in which language, objects, and the senses are all assumed to co-constitute meaning, and their re-examination and re-interpretation thought to be crucial to any project of unravelling the politics of race. I am not in a position to judge the scientific success of their endeavours, but what matters to me is the spirit of wanting to

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understand the world as entangled and diverse, key strategies to undo ideas about race and purity.²

The stated aim of the *Race and the Senses* conference, the humane desire to unravel the politics of race, is not new, but perhaps we can say that we rely more explicitly on research about the senses. This is certainly the case in art history, religious studies, and the anthropology of religion, which produced many new studies of religion and the senses in the past three decades. When these studies concern religious plurality, and this is often indeed the case, negative encounters with religious others can be summed up by a simple formula: 'the [religious] other offends the senses' (Schmidt 2002: 67). One can go even a step further, as in a recent book on religious affects and animality, and argue that racism shows elective affinities with such religious affects (Schafer 2015). The idea of religion is, in other words, necessary to any project seeking to understand how people judge, categorize, and discriminate each other based on the idea of race. This holds perhaps particularly for the modern concept of religion, which formed through imperial encounters in frontier zones (Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014).

With this background, knowing a little about post-war and more recent Dutch anti-racist thinking and being interested in religion and the senses, I set out to do a Ph.D. research in anthropology in 2011. The thesis was published as *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape* (2017) and concerned Dutch mosques using loudspeakers to sound the *adhan*, the Islamic call to prayer. One of the questions I faced during this anthropological research was whether opposition to amplified Islamic sounds could be interpreted as racist. My answer was affirmative: yes, religious discrimination

and racism involve all of the senses, sounds are no exception. In fact, because sounds can be experienced as intrusive in ways unique to hearing, they constitute red lines of tolerance. Critics of these sounds, who did not necessarily oppose mosque construction, often said that amplified calls went one step too far. I quickly learned that sounds' failure to respect strict boundaries, of private and public, unleashed intense emotions – possibly more so than the sight of an unwanted building (cf. Weiner 2014). This suggests that sounds may teach us something about racism that visuals alone cannot. But is that really so? And how exactly did I argue that resistance to sounds could be linked to racism? What did I assume 'race' and 'racism' to be?

In the book, I explained first that resistance to amplified calls to prayer consisted not merely of complaints about noise, but complaints about Islamic sounds – they were not neutral objections, but had a symbolic dimension that reminded of Mary Douglas' ideas about religion, aesthetics, and pollution boundaries (2002 [1966]). This social construction of noise annoyance and its symbolic significance was obvious in my case study of a Turkish mosque in the small town of Deventer, which argued with its neighbours about a daily amplified call during my fieldwork in 2012.

Because mosque and opponents failed to reach an agreement by themselves, the municipality organized sound tests to determine who was allowed to participate in a poll on these Islamic sounds. While opponents claimed not to object to Islam or Muslims, but only to noise (*herrie, geluidsoverlast*), some revealingly balked at the municipality's choice for an acoustic model that literally and objectively measured and charted sound amplification levels in the neighbourhood. According

to this neutral model, citizens were allowed to protest sounds only if they could be heard in their house's vicinity, thereby disregarding symbolic complaints against Islamic presence.

These symbolic complaints were, for instance, that the Arabic call to prayer was foreign to the Dutch soundscape, or that local Muslims spoke the Turkish language with each other rather than Dutch. However, I did not sufficiently explore this linguistic connection. To prove to my readers that racism was involved in resistance to the Islamic call to prayer, I relied much more on the economic background of Turkish migration to the Netherlands, and on tracing a discriminating discourse that shows a visual understanding of race.

While it was not my intention to produce yet another study about the history of labour immigration to the Netherlands, I quickly realized that this background was unavoidably relevant to grasp longstanding local sensitivities. In our time, it is easy to forget or qualitatively underestimate the poverty in which the Dutch working classes lived shortly after the Second World War. Fascinating film footage collected by Paul Scheffer and René Roelofs, in their 2013 documentary *Land of Promise*, shows the poor living conditions of migrant workers in the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden, who had left behind even more abominable situations in Turkey, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Morocco, among others. The film's power lies in the shocking footage of small and dirty guest worker pensions as well as examples of explicit racist comments and abuse. Images of the denigrating hiring experiences of guest workers from Morocco bound for the Netherlands, being treated like cattle by Dutch contractors and local bureaucrats, speak

against Scheffer's voiceover narration about migration, which attempts to somewhat relieve feelings of historic guilt in the contemporary Netherlands.

By portraying migration as essentially painful and diversity as a natural cause of social melancholy, resulting from a sense of loss both on the part of migrants longing for home and the people of the host nation longing for a simpler past, the film aims to take into account multiple sides of the story of migration. Scheffer thus prepares the shocking images of blatant racism and violence to make them palatable to a general public that finds it hard to swallow the word racism. He does not criticize the European obsession with national culture or the idea that postcolonial migrants are viewed as the cause of an imperilled 'Englishness', 'Dutchness', 'Frenchness' and so on (cf. Gilroy 2005: 115-118). Nonetheless, his collected footage is a sober reminder that guest workers encountered unabashed racism in their land of promise during the 'live and let live' 1960s and 1970s.

We get an impression of the circumstances from a study conducted in the 1980s. A personnel chief of the company Thomassen & Drijver-Verblifa, a manufacturer of cans, who had been personally responsible for hiring workers from Spain, and subsequently from Turkey, was interviewed about how the concept of the guest worker (*gastarbeider*) came into existence in places like Deventer:

... we said [in the 1960s], and I think that r&d [the company] can in general be proud [of this], that if we begin such a phenomenon, we must do so with a policy. ... That policy can be summed up by saying: they are the guest workers. If we are the host, then

we want to house these people in company pensions, in fact, to ensure hygiene, medical assistance ... so that we have the feeling that we are doing this in a responsible manner. Then we began hiring in Turkey, those were indescribable scenes. ... The attaché was in Ankara, and in Trabzon, those were the two places where the hiring effectively took place. But that meant that there, somewhere in Ankara, they had gathered a hundred people there, while we usually talked of hiring a group of fifty to sixty men. These people had often travelled two or three days; they would arrive in Ankara two days earlier; yes, it was terrible. One does not need to be very sentimental or emotional to think so; in a small space ... a hundred people were crammed, standing stiff against each other, with a bundle or a package or a small plastic bag, with god knows what ...; almost all of them from the countryside ... Then you would select from this group. It was a given that you should not be impressed by the medical check, which proceeded like assembly line work; ... Anyway, the people came in, a sad bunch ... They would be given a piece of newspaper that they had to read. One would get the impression that the majority were illiterate. On top of that there was the insane situation that selectors from other companies said that in Turkey many people suffer from varicose veins, and those selectors said: you have to have their trousers lifted to see if they have varicose veins ... It was really beastly, it was a kind of slave trade. Once we had seen them, those people were driven back into that small space and at the end of the day you had to select sixty of those guys ... In itself that would lead to the most horrible scenes: guys who wanted to

thank you, offer gifts or whatnot, others who would come in crying and asking whether they could not try to join us. Three weeks later they would arrive at Schiphol Airport, totally alienated people who had no clue; ... when you would see them on the escalator ... those people entered a different world (my translation, cited in Tamimi Arab 2017: 125-126).

By the time I began my fieldwork, these men and their sons, former guest workers and ‘allochthons’ (*allochtonen*) who sent their children to ‘black schools’ (*zwarte scholen*), were demanding an amplified call to prayer, and they were criticizing resistance to their visual and aural presence as anti-Muslim racism.

As one young man put it, in defence of amplifying Islam: ‘Apparently, my appearance is also sometimes experienced as provocative. I think I need to look more Dutch’. In hindsight, we can say that such remarks seek to prove the racism of considering Islamic sounds as ‘out of place’ by referring to a phenotypical understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, exclusion of sounds based on the idea of culture can be connected to racism, because culture is in everyday life read off the body, visually, by the eye of the beholder.

My book does not focus only on race or racism, but to further argue for the crucial thesis that resistance to the amplified call to prayer was more than neutral objecting to noises, or more than justified criticism of religion and Turkish nationalism, I did present other examples of visual discourse about colour. I cited a local newspaper which reported at the time of the mosque’s construction, around 2000, that residents feared the attraction of ‘even more allochthonous residents’ and that the ‘balance between “white” (*blank*) and “dark”

(*donker*) will be lost' (Tamimi Arab 2017: 129). Another example is a conversation I had with one of the mosque's irritated neighbours, who said that amplifying Islam made her resent Muslims. She told me that because of these intrusive sounds, she now avoided being assisted by a veiled Muslim cashier at the nearby supermarket, preferring to stand in a different line, even if it was longer, to avoid contact. Another man said that amplifying Islam made him no longer willing to eat with Muslim neighbours. In Dutch, as critic Shervin Nekuee once put it: '*het probleem is niet dat ze elkaar niet kennen, maar juist dat ze denken elkaar te kennen en elkaar niet meer lusten*'. (The problem is not that they do not know each other, but that they believe they do, and cannot stand 'tasting each other'). My interpretation of racism was therefore based on linguistic differences, on discourse about the body's colour, on perceptions of sartorial and dining practices, and combined with an interpretation of economic history, inequality, and possibilities for social mobility.

Economic emancipation did accompany the construction of the mosque and then in the confident push for a daily call to prayer, by people like the mosque chairman who ran a successful IT business. I reasoned, however, that the visceral experiences and memories of racism would not simply disappear with improved economic conditions. This is argued for on a much greater scale by Achille Mbembe, who believes that racism is not merely an epiphenomenal reflection of economic inequality, but a shapeshifting force that persists despite social mobility (Mbembe 2017 [2013]).

To conclude, in my past research on amplifying Islam, the fact that a logic of race was involved was 'proven' by documenting visual discourse referring to

the body and by observing changing compartments towards the Muslim other who offends the senses. My research, then, even though it focused on the ear, did not escape the primacy of the eye. This should also be contextualized, because I was influenced by Dutch public debates, in which even phenotypical forms of racism were often denied. In any case, the visual idea of race remains crucial, even as studies of the sonic or olfactory logics of race can add to our understanding of the phenomenon. This is strongly so in Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, in which he describes race as the result of an optical effect and as a technique of consolidating and reinforcing power. Race is, he writes, 'above all a specular reality and impulsive force. For it to operate as affect, impulse, and speculum, race must become image, form, surface, figure, and – especially – a structure of the imagination. And it is as a structure of the imagination that it escapes the limitations of the concrete, of what is sensed, of the finite, even as it participates within and manifests itself most immediately through the senses' (2017: 32).

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Notes

- 1 This text is based on a presentation (partially adapted from Chapter four of *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape*, which is available Open Access on www.bloomsburycollections.com) given at the conference Race and the Senses, which was organized by the University of Amsterdam and the Meertens Institute. It took place on 24-09-2018 at the Oude Turfmarkt 129, Nina van Leerzaal (Bijzondere Collecties and Allard Pierson Museum).
- 2 At Utrecht University, our research project called Religious Matters in an Entangled World, led by Birgit Meyer, follows such a train of thought. See www.religiousmatters.nl

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