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Diplomatic Representation in the Public Sphere: Performing Accreditation¹

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Presentable. Adjective: Clean, smart, or decent enough to be seen in public

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/presentable>

Example 2: 'you'd better make yourself presentable'

Synonyms: smartly dressed, tidily dressed, smart, tidy, of smart appearance, well groomed, dapper, elegant, trim, spruce

informal: natty

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/presentable>

Abstract

Part of diplomatic work is public, which means that a diplomat has to be presentable, that is 'lean, smart, or decent enough to be seen in public' (Oxford English Dictionary). Part one recognizes the recent spate of work on aesthetics and representation in the social sciences and diplomacy studies, and asks why it was so late in coming when representation has always been constitutive of diplomacy. In answer, it points to the enlightenment's distrust of visuals and particularly to the twentieth-century reaction against Nazi aestheticizing of politics. Part two sets out what it takes to stage a successful visual performance and points to three factors: the agent's own preparations, audience assessment and mediation to broader public. Part three analyzes two particularly successful performances of accreditation and highlight how they succeed because they were deemed to be particularly presentable by being particularly smart and decent, respectively. In conclusion, I argue that smartness trumps decency. This offers female diplomats more options than males, but also incurs greater risks.

Keywords: VISUAL DIPLOMACY, PERFORMATIVITY, FEMALE DIPLOMATS, PUBLIC SPHERE, IRAN, JAPAN

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Diplomatic Representation in the Public Sphere

Representation is one of three key tasks for a diplomat (with the other two being information-gathering and negotiation). In order to represent, you not only have to stand in for your Queen and Country, that is, be present where the country itself is absent (Constantinou 1994; Constantinou 1996; Hennings 2011). You also have to be presentable, that is, ‘lean, smart, or decent enough to be seen in public’, as the Oxford English Dictionary has it. It would not be an exaggeration to say that diplomacy, as generally understood, is not only the mediation of estrangement (Der Derian 1987), but also a prolonged exercise in embodied representation, which must include presentability. To be presentable boils down to having a pleasing comportment, a measured body language, a well-groomed appearance, a decent sartorial profile and a pleasant manner of speaking. ‘The presentable’ concerns the aestheticized aspect of the diplomat, and of any person for that matter. It takes one or more audiences to be presentable, so presentability always has to be performed. Performance demands a sphere. Some of these spheres are public.

An inquiry into the specifics of how presentability works can lean on rich groundwork on aesthetics and diplomacy (Bleiker 2001, 2009; Butler and Bleiker 2016; Campbell 2003; Cohen 1987; Constantinou 2016, 2018; Edkins and Keir 2013; Hansen 2011, 2016; Williams 2003). General historical overviews are in place (Assmann 2011; Neumann 2006; Roosen 1980; also Wang 1971). So is work on the importance of diplomatic signaling (for overviews, see Jönsson and Aggerstam 1999; Kinne 2014), mediatisation (Fitzpatrick 2007; Cross and Melissen 2013; Pamment 2014) the sociological microfoundations of diplomatic representation (Holmes 2013; Faizullaev 2013, Cornut 2015). However, with some notable exceptions (Neumann 2006, Kuus 2015, McConnell 2018, Nair 2019), the actual performance of diplomatic representative work has not yet been that much studied. The first part of this paper asks why it took so long for diplomatic representation to receive the attention it now has. I suggest that part of the answer lies in how, after the Second World War, intellectuals came to blame some of Fascism’s success on its successful aestheticisation of politics. Many proceeded to deny the importance of aesthetics in favour of deliberation. I then go on to tie the analysis to the literature on performativity, and suggest that three factors determine the degree of success of a diplomatic performance. These are the presentability factor (body capital, work on envincing the presentability of the body), the media factor (the degree in which the performance will be distributed and received) and, finally, the audience factor (the degree in which a favourable reception emerges in traceable form).

The second part of the paper turns to two case studies of successful diplomatic presentability. They have been chosen with a view to maximizing cultural distance between established states, and also because they were both deemed successful by mainstream audiences involved and were widely publicised, but for different reasons. The fact that the cases stand out as particularly successful, means that they are chosen for their exemplarity, not for their representativity. They both belong to the genre of accreditation, that is, the ritual whereby ambassadors of a sending state deliver and have accepted their credentials to the head of the receiving state. The first performance, of how an American ambassador to Tokyo delivered her credentials to the Japanese head of state, was successful because the ambassador was held to be presentable in the sense of being lean and smart. The second performance, of how a Norwegian ambassador to Tehran delivered her credentials to the Iranian head of state, was held to be presentable in the sense of being decent. I decode the different ways in which these performances were deemed to be presentable by drawing on art historian Erwin Panofski (1988: 28-30; compare Heck and Schlag 2013), and think of diplomacy as a particular kind of iconography. Panofski suggests that we conduct iconographic analysis in terms of three layers of consecutively more context-dependent signs. The primary layer consists of objects that most humans living in large-scale societies will immediately recognise, such as a human body. The secondary layer consists of conventional subject matter, which may be widely understood due to its function, but not so widely as natural objects, say a necklace. Tertiary objects are those whose meaning is intrinsic to the cultures that produce them, such as a national dress.

In conclusion, I highlight that it is not a coincidence how my two chosen exemplary examples of successful diplomatic performance in the public sphere both involve Western female diplomats. Western hegemony and Western media dominance mean that interest in Western dress, and how Westerners dress, is still more pervasive than interest in other sartorial traditions. Female diplomats have a wider palette from which to choose when staging a performance, even in the one state whose laws lay down rules for how to dress (Iran). Wider freedom of choice, however, also comes with a higher risk of failure.

Performing (in) the Public Sphere

Presentability is an aspect of a performance, in both its senses. It is performative in the sense of being an enacting intended to make an impression (Alexander 2011; Ringmar 2015), and it is performative in the sense of creating the phenomenon that it enacts (Weber 1995). Another way of saying this is that performances are constitutive of public spheres.

Given that diplomatic representation in public spheres has been with us since the dawn of complex polities (Assmann 2011), one might have expected the question of presentable performances to have been thoroughly studied by students of politics and diplomacy. If spectacle, pomp, ritual is central to politics and diplomacy, then we must ask how it came to be occluded. One answer is well known from other analytical contexts: since the Enlightenment, reason has done its best to occlude the study of other phenomena, such as aesthetical orders. The attack on the motor behind these orders, beauty, fell into two phases. First, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the category of beauty was bifurcated into sublimity and beauty, and sublimity seemingly made off with all the action: it was sinister where beauty was sunny, Northern to beauty's Southern, etc. etc. (Neumann 2006). This move also had a gendered aspect, since sublimity was supposed to be male, whereas beauty was female (Etcoff 1999; Scarry 1999; Neumann 2017). What was now referred to as beauty – basically that which gives pleasure and satisfaction (as opposed to shock and awe, which now became something sublime) -- was left by the wayside as politically irrelevant.

There is an added reason why visual and performative aspects of politics and diplomacy are less studied than what the phenomenon's antiquity would have us expect, which is to do with the powerful and successful ways in which totalitarian movements were able to aestheticise politics in the interwar period. The Frankfurt School famously tried to debunk the visual as a legitimate political phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention. This tendency came to a head with Jürgen Habermas's ([1962] 1989) studies of the public sphere. Habermas argued that 'the better argument' and 'the ideal speech situation' should be (should be – not is) the focus of politics in general, and of scholarly attention particularly. Anything that stood in the way of this ideal should be abolished, as a phenomenon, and certainly as a focus of scholarly study. Habermas's move was also cleverly historicizing, for it turned on his definition of the public sphere as being a specifically modern phenomenon. It was made possible by the coming of modernity and the specific idea that the relationship between the king and his subjects should allow for politically relevant conversations between the latter.² So, by a sleight of hand, everything that had constituted public spheres before the coming of modernity, such as the visual, was simply chopped off and left behind as irrelevant.

Habermas and his precursors in the so-called Frankfurt School had their reasons. Working under the growing shadow of Nazi aesthetization, the first generation of the Frankfurt School had made it a concern to warn against the aesthetization of politics (the *locus classicus* is Benjamin [1936] 1968) and the various forces that made for what was rightly seen as inauthenticizing aesthetics (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002; Jay 1992; Wiggershaus 1994). Fascist regimes everywhere demonstrated the prescience of these warnings. Habermas's answer to the experience of Fascist aesthetisation was to wage a normative campaign against it, a campaign that included an insistence on banishing the study

² As Mah (2000: 166) points out, this argument hangs on Habermas's insistence that earlier publics cannot be public spheres because people did not meet there on an equal footing, but as socially ranked individuals, with the result that the meeting ground could not construct itself 'as a unified entity'.

of how aesthetics is imbricated with any politics, be that Fascist politics or otherwise. There are a number of reasons to join this political critique of aesthetisation, and not only in its Communist and Fascistappings. Political rallies orchestrated by contemporary politicians who otherwise differ widely, say Erdogan, Morsi, le Pen, Putin and Trump, unquestionably draw on some of the same visual tropes as did interwar politicians. From an ontic point of view, however, Habermasians simply overlook that beauty is a basic motivating fact of social life and so is inherently relevant to political action and analysis. From a scholarly point of view, Habermas's and Habermasian understandings of public spheres are therefore inadequate, for it simply denies the existence of visual phenomena that are not only in clear view in rallies organized by authoritarian politicians, but in all politics (Jay 1994; Hansen 2011).³

We need a more power-sensitive and historically attuned understanding of the public sphere than the one presented by Habermas and the Habermasians. For an alternative, let us turn to Hannah Arendt. Arendt sees the public sphere as a frail construction, fully dependent on the state's willingness to uphold it, where there may be room for debate and creativity, but where participants are also subject to 'innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement' (Arendt 1957: 40). For social analysis, then, the main importance of the public sphere does not lie in a celebration of deliberation, but 'in its potential as a mode of social integration' (Calhoun 1992: 6).

The public sphere is a place not only of deliberation, but also of representation, of architecture (Loeffler 1998), monuments (Neumann 2018) and ritual (Callahan 2017), of spectacle (Debord 1983). Performances will be staged in the sense that they will draw on all these (Neumann 2013). The one discipline that has specialized in studying such performances, is ethnology. That discipline has also come up with an understanding of performativity that is highly useable for diplomatic studies. Ethnologist Richard Bauman defines performance as:

a mode of communicative display, in which the performer signals to the audience, in effect, 'hey, look at me! I'm on! Watch how skillfully and effectively I express myself'. That is to say, performance rests on an assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative virtuosity, highlighting the way in which the act of discursive production is accomplished, above and beyond the additional multiple functions the communicative act may serve. In this sense of performance, then, the act of expression itself is framed as display (Bauman 2004: 9).

For our purposes, this focus on the individual performance is useful. The individual performance is not only a audial, but also a visual affair. The agents will use what they have. A successful performance will involve high body capital (a presentable body that is 'lean, smart, or decent enough to be seen in public'), the right clothes and accoutrements, and the right body comportment.

The rub where diplomacy is concerned, is that general cultural distance between polities will usually also spell aesthetic cultural distance. As experienced by diplomats who plans a performance, this will mean that they have to dress and act in a way that is seen as presentable *both* by their sending and hosting states. The success of any one performance, then, will hang on three commonsensical factors. The first factor is the body capital, the envicledness and the work that goes into making a diplomat presentable. This is the presentability factor. The second factor is the degree in which the performance will be distributed to and received by audiences that are not physically present. This is the media factor. The third factor is the degree in which the various audiences involved will find the performer and the performance to have been presentable. This is the audience factor.

Performing the smart and lean diplomat

³ I would agree with Villa (1992: 716), who finds that the general approach 'conceals the disciplinary underside of "acting together" and covers over the antagonistic, antiinitiatory implications that flow from the regularization of moves in any language game'.

In the morning of 19 November 2013, the Japanese Prime Minister's office sent a *zagyoshiki* -- a horse-drawn 'state carriage' -- to the American Residence to fetch the new American ambassador, who was scheduled to present her credentials to the Emperor of Japan later that day. On its way back, the horse-driven cortege was greeted by thousands of Japanese lining the route.⁴ The event was broadcast live on NHK, the major state television channel, where it was followed by millions more.⁵ The arrival of Her Excellency Caroline Kennedy was a major public event in Tokyo.

The spectacle of the ambassador of a foreign King (or in this case, President) who is arriving in style and is being brought to see the local King while being gawked by the crowds is a practice (that is, a socially recognised type of action that may be performed well or badly) that harks back to the beginning of complex polities. In the Asian and European Middle Ages, this was a regular, if not highly frequent, occurrence, for which trinkets were distributed, pamphlets printed and high art produced (Um and Clark 2016). With the spread of permanent representation throughout Europe from the 16th century onwards, the meaning of 'ambassador' changed from being the head of an embassy understood as a group on a peripatetic mission, to the head of an embassy understood as a permanent structure locally located (also, and to underline the continuity, called 'a mission'). Permanently settled or not, ambassador still have to arrive. There have been important technological changes in what 'public' means. In addition to in-the-flesh encounters, historical extras like printed media, television and the world wide web keep appearing and making for public spheres that exceed face-to-face encounters. Still, *mutatis mutandis*, the scene that played out in Tokyo on 19 November 2013 was an instantiation of a practice that had constituted international and transnational public spheres for millennia, where visiting ambassadors shows off the splendor of the polity they represent, and hosting rulers show off to an audience of awed subjects how other rulers come and pay they respect.



Picture 1: Media representation of Caroline Kennedy's accreditation. *New York Post*, 20 November 2013.⁶

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqR2-CsRQoc>, retrieved 29 February 2016. For the route, which is standardized when it does not rain, see <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-about/kyuchu/shinninjo/basha.html>; retrieved 3 April 2019.

⁵ See <http://news.yahoo.com/us-envoy-caroline-kennedy-meets-japans-emperor-100234814.html>, retrieved 2 March 2016. I thank Wrenn Yennie Lindquist for explaining Japanese context and terminology.

⁶ See https://www.google.com/search?site=&tbm=isch&source=hp&biw=1280&bih=932&q=caroline+kennedy+tokyo+credentials&oq=caroline+kennedy+tokyo+credentials&gs_l=img.3...2047.9694.0.9993.34.34.0.0.0.227.2970.26j6j1.33.0...0...1.1.64.img..1.18.1727.OPeDKBhIkn#imgsrc=6ne5EdiCPYS3YM%3A, retrieved 29 February 2016.

Picture one is taken as the horse-carriage has just arrived at its destination and Kennedy is making her appearance. A liveried servant has already let out Kennedy's entourage. The Imperial servant, assistant to Head of Protocol Nobutake Odano, smiles her welcome and gets ready to escort Kennedy to shake hands with her boss. Kennedy's hair is styled and fluffy. She wears a pearl necklace and a tight-fitting black number that leaves a bit of décolleté visible and stops above the knee, and is negotiating the rather short steps in heels. The clutch is not her usual Chloe Edith, but something more sensible when documents are involved – a shoulder bag.⁷

Back at the electronic public sphere which is the World Wide Web, a YouTube clip of Kennedy's arrival shows a relaxed, measured comportment and a practiced wave for the crowd – she has obviously made the renowned slowness of the European aristocracy her own.⁸ The coming out of the carriage onto the square happens in one, smooth motion. This is not an easy thing to do, particularly in a tight dress and heels. There is a general point to be made about presentability here: it is certainly about being at ease, being smart and so on, but it is also, rather like high diving, about avoiding faux pas. There is also a point to be made about how successful performance lives down potential disasters here.⁹

Kennedy fulfilled diplomats' expectations of an ambassador, and she fulfilled the Japanese public's expectations of glamour. The afterglow included some debate about the gendered aspects of the performance, with some arguing that wearing a shoulder bag and such a short skirt was *shitsurei* – impolite bordering on rude. The only discontented audience in view, then, was a small group that did not find the presentation quite decent enough to be presentable. However, in societies where the state allows the public sphere to include debate, such differences of opinion are inevitable and, if the point is social integration beyond what may be reached by shock and awe, necessary. More to the point here, this conversation is constitutive of the public sphere in Japan, just as this instantiation of an ambassador's accreditation was constitutive of a transnational public sphere.

If we muster a historicising gaze on this performance, two things immediately stand out. Consider, first, the horse-drawn state carriage. Before the Meiji restoration, there were no horse-drawn carriages in Japan. Far from being an old Japanese court accoutrement, then, the *zagyoshiki* is a hybridized phenomenon. Then consider the person who is welcoming the new ambassador. Her attire is western. That would have been an impossibility before 1905. In that year, a Japanese court delegation, dressed in their traditional silk kimonos, went to New Hampshire in order to negotiate a peace treaty following the Russo-Japanese War. The attire caused a stir and was ridiculed by the American press, and the Japanese reacted by shelving it in favour of Western attire. Picture one, then, displays among other things how the Japanese aesthetic order is a result, among other things, of hegemonically conditioned hybridization with what we may inaccurately call a Western aesthetic order. There are clear political and aesthetic reasons why a Japanese public is readily amenable to a Western performance like Kennedy's arrival.

That goes some way to explain why, of all the hundreds of ambassadorial accreditations that involve Westerners to non-Western states, an accreditation of a Western ambassador to Tokyo should instantiate a transnational public sphere. However, earlier American ambassadors to Tokyo did not cause this kind of stir, so why should the 2013 accreditation of Caroline Kennedy? While it is true that tensions in the Chinese-Japanese relationship would make the US ambassador an even more important person in Tokyo compared to recent years, this is hardly enough to explain the commotion, either. I

⁷ See <http://forum.purseblog.com/handbags-and-purses/what-bag-is-caroline-kennedy-carrying-61968.html>, retrieved 1 March 2016.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euTisiwA3IA>, retrieved 2 March 2016. See also McConnell 1918.

⁹ The feeling of relief when a disaster is averted was key to Edmund Burke's (1990) discussion of the sublime, which was a category that he carved out of what was until then simply called beauty. As we can see from this example, however, even by Burke's own definition of the beautiful (as opposed to his definition of the sublime), this feeling of relief may be present. I will return to the need to dedifferentiate the sublime and the beautiful below.

would argue that the answer is to do with how beauty interacts with other forms of power, which brings us right back to beauty's importance for politics in general.

Consider Caroline Kennedy's family history, which is indexed in *The New York Post's* coverage. The headline reads: 'CAMELOT LIVES 50 years after JFK, Caroline represents US in a gilded carriage'. Caroline Kennedy drew the crowds among other things because her family background gave her an aura – that is, a unique manifestation of distance, no matter how far away the phenomenon is (see Shiff 2003: 63-70; Neumann 2012). In this case, the aura is partly that of her father JFK and Camelot, which are explicitly referenced in the caption, but it is also that of her mother the fashion icon. Not surprisingly, Caroline Kennedy dresses in the style that is known in the US as 'Jackie O', short for Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy Onassis; that is, in the style of her mother.¹⁰ To draw on Panofsky's terms, Caroline Kennedy's aura does not only emanate from showing off the primary object that is her body. Some of it is inherited.¹¹ In Panofsky's term, Caroline Kennedy puts secondary objects of beauty – the Jackie O necklace, the Jackie O dress, the Jackie O *je ne sais quoi* – to such good use that the performance succeeded in invoking not only a political dynasty, but an entire era. The Tokyo instantiation of an international public sphere was made possible by and suffused by a type of presentability that had been put to good political use over generations.

To sum up, Caroline Kennedy's score was very high on all three success criteria. The presentability factor was high: with her high body capital, her iconic sartorial style and her measured habitus, she looked exceedingly smart. The media factor was high: national TV covered her journey, a pool of photographers documented her arrival and went on to disseminate their photos globally. The audience factor was high: multiple audiences picked up on the event, not least because of the Kennedy family aura that suffused it. There were discontents, most pronouncedly Japanese viewers who did not find the performance decent enough (*shitsurei*), but this just goes to show that even the most successful performance will be inevitably contested.

Performing the decent diplomat

A year after Kennedy's accreditation, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran prepared for his accreditation ceremony of four new ambassadors, from Belgium, Italy, Norway and Turkey, respectively, one of whom was a woman. Iran has no specific sartorial rules for the occasion, but it is the only state in the world to legalize attire on a general basis. In Iran, it is the law that people have to be presentable, in the sense of being decent. More specifically, there are clear rules about what part of the body that have to be covered. These rules are formally implemented by a uniformed state Moral Police force and also, as we shall see, informally, by people in position. In Iran, the accreditation of ambassadors is regularly covered by the media, and so it is a well-rehearsed genre. However, it was only the second time in the Republic's history that a female diplomat had received agrément, which means that she had been cleared to arrive in the country and to present her credentials to the head of state, so the occasion was a bit out of the ordinary. There was little glamour, though. The President's cars picked up the four ambassadors. An attaché from the Iranian Foreign Ministry accompanied them to the palace, where the ceremony was rehearsed. The press was there to take their photos, but there was no international photo pool, no TV crews. Picture two reproduces the official photo that was put on the Iranian President's website. Nobody expected that this would go on to be the Iranian newsday's major media event.

¹⁰ During the swearing in as Ambassador back in Washington, the Jackie O style was also on display, see <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2013/11/12/caroline-kennedy-sworn-in-as-ambassador-to-japan/>, retrieved 1 March 2016.

¹¹ I refer here to first and foremost to performance in its everyday meaning as staging (Alexander 2011; Ringmar 2015), as distinct from its Foucauldian meaning as an iteration that is productive of the phenomenon itself. Note, however, that this is a question of emphasis – every staging is constitutive of an emergent phenomenon, and fame and diplomacy are definitely such.



Picture 2. Official representation (home page of the Iranian Head of State), Norwegian ambassador to Tehran Aud Lise Norheim hands over her credentials to the President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, 4 November 2014.¹²

Against a background of upholstered chairs and a large Persian carpet, an avuncular-looking Imam is smiling down benignly at a discreetly smiling ambassador who is clutching her credentials to her chest. She is dressed in what the culturally initiated will recognize as a Norwegian national attire (*bunad*) specific to the county of Hedmark. Like all Norwegian national attires, it was invented at the end of the nineteenth century as a sartorial contribution to nation-building. These national attires cover the entire body. Since they are intended for all-year use in a cold climate, they are made of a sturdy material that also has the effect of smoothing out body curves. The result is that the female body loses most of its litheness and specificity relative to the male body, and that the individual female body is de-individualised by becoming one in a series of nationalised bodies. In Panofsky's terms, a first-level object, the body, is partially smothered by a third-level object, the national attire, so that what is denoted is the nation first, the person second. However, to the culturally initiated Norwegian spectator, something is off with this picture. While a number of national attires come with headgear, the Hedmark attire does not. As per Iranian law, Norheim has added a local third-level object, a matching hijab, to the attire. The effect of this performance on the Iranian newsdesks and, judged by anecdotal evidence, also on the Iranian public, was highly favourable. As Norheim herself reports:

Iranian media always cover accreditations, but this was exceptional. I was everywhere. The Iranians were enthusiastic because they liked the attire and also because I was so covered. [...] I do not care too much for the Norwegian folk costume (*bunad*), but I own one and thought that it would do the job perfectly. I just needed to buy a hijab to match.¹³

Given that this sartorial choice was considered to be both novel and decent and so highly presentable in the receiving state, it was a lucky choice. It was also successful in the sense that Norheim stole the

¹² See <http://president.ir/fa/82083>, accessed 28 January 2019.

¹³ Interview with Aud Lise Norheim, Norwegian ambassador to Tehran 2014-2016, 30 January 2019, Grand Cafe, Oslo, Norway. All subsequent Norheim quotes are taken from this interview.

show from her three colleagues who were accredited at the same time, who she reported to have been ‘humorously miffed’. The rest of the Tehran corps diplomatique also approved, as did Norheim’s Norwegian diplomatic colleagues. Furthermore, Norwegian journalists picked up and ran with the story. Their angle was overwhelming the typical small-state one, that a larger country had noticed the smaller country. Picture three reproduces the illustration from the story that went on to become the source for most subsequent non-Iranian press coverage.



Picture 3. Media representation of Aud-Lise Norheim’s accreditation, Anders Tvegård: ‘Norwegian National Attire Feeds Media Frenzy in Iran: Norway Gets Its First Poster Girl in Iranian Media and a National Attire from Hedmark Becomes a Talking Point’ (in Norwegian), posted on the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s Home Page, 1 November 2014.¹⁴

With regard to picture three, note that all three Iranian newspapers use the same picture. It is from the same series as picture three reproduced above, but the protagonists are standing closer together, and are leaning in rather than back. They are also tied together by the document they are both holding, and their poses and smiles are less contrived and more mirroring. This all makes for a more relaxed atmosphere than the one that emanates from picture three. Norheim herself singled out this picture and the Norwegian internet article that accompanied it as being pivotal to the Norwegian reception of her performance:

My favourite was the journalist from N[orwegian] B[roadcasting C[orporation], who called me a poster girl (*forsidepike*). Not bad for a 60-year-old (laughs). He told me later that he had taken a lot of flak from [Norwegian] feminists who objected on principle to women being talked about that way. The [Norwegian] embassy [to Tehran] also received a fair share of mail, so much so that we had to react. One group, mostly Iranians in exile, accused me of being the regime’s stooge. The other negatives were [Norwegian] women who policed the use of the national costume (*bunadspolitiet*). They saw the hijab as being out of place.

¹⁴ Norsk bunad skapte kommentar-storm i Iran
 Norge har fått sin første forsidepike i iranske medier og en hedmarksbunad har blitt «snakkis».
<https://www.nrk.no/urix/norsk-bunad-skapte-kommentar-storm-i-iran-1.12019782>, accessed 28 January 2019. Reproduced here with permission of Anders Tvegård and the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. For an English-language report, see e.g. See <https://thornews.com/2014/11/05/iranian-media-praise-female-ambassadors-proper-folk-costume/>, retrieved 28 January 2019.

Norheim points to three groups of discontents here. Two of them – critics who saw the performance as pandering to an authoritarian regime and as diluting the pureness of the nation, respectively – objected to the performance itself, while a third – those that Norheim calls ‘feminists’ – objected to an aspect of the Norwegian reception of the performance.¹⁵ However, there was also a fourth discontent, hidden from the public eye. Despite having pulled off a surprisingly successful performance, and despite being content and even happy about its reception, the performer herself was not altogether happy. Interestingly, the reason for the unhappiness was the same as the reason that grounded the performance’s success, namely its decency in an Iranian setting. Norheim reflected about her presentability in an Iranian setting that:

I had to wear thigh-long dresses in public at all times [that is, not in Embassies or residences...]. The hijab was the worst. I have tried to avoid using headwear ever since. It interfered with my side view, particularly when I was driving. It was hot. Nordic hair tends to be too slippery to sustain it, so it was forever coming apart. My Iranian female friends tipped me off about fastening the hijab with hairpins, but I said no, I wanted these men to know that it was a hassle. The [Iranian] men always wanted reassurances from me that I was treated well, and I always answered, well, why don’t we swap places for a day and then *you* can wear the hijab. That shut them up.

As a diplomat, Norheim did her best to be presentable in the eyes of as many audiences as possible, and she generally succeeded, in the case under discussion here even spectacularly so, but her own experience of it all was that the emotional work that it took to pull it off was overwhelming. She was certainly presentably, and, as a diplomat and trained performer, she managed to be so even without being physically at ease. Two side remarks made during the interview further underlined this point. First, Norheim directed a dig at her colleague, the Swedish ambassador, by telling me how he made a big Schpiel out of defending his local employees’ right to wear a tie when they came under pressure from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take them off (in an Iranian contexts, the word for tie is *focoli*, which may also mean a decadent, Westernised Iranian). And then she added: ‘I told him I’d be impressed the day he stood up for me getting rid of my hijab’. Secondly, she also remarked on how, following an official meeting with an allegedly liberal leader, the same leader had instructed his secretary to call Norheim’s female Iranian secretary so that she could tell Norheim that she had not been adequately covered during their meeting. What we see here is that, in Iran, the formal policing of sartorial laws is further strengthened by informal policing by political leaders, and that this policing includes female diplomats. Informal policing of decency of feminine attire has a very long history in Iran. Policing of the female body was a major concern during the 1979 revolution that brought the present regime to power. If there were solid historical reasons why Japanese audiences were particularly amenable to a typical Western performance like Kennedy’s, the historical reasons why a performance of Western 19th-century nation-building decency was successful in Iran, is equally well historically founded.

To sum up, Aud-Lise Norheim’s score was high on all three success criteria. The national dress plus hijab concept was an instant hit in the receiving state, and audiences in the sending state were happy because audiences in the receiving state were happy. Norheim came across as unusually decent for a Western woman, and this made for a high score on the presentability factor. The media factor was high: front-page coverage in the receiving state, good uptake in the sending state. The audience score was high, with a number of favourable groups and also three vocal groups that contested the performance: Iranian exiles, Norwegian nationalist purists, Norwegian feminists

Conclusion

¹⁵ The e-mails that the Embassy received are allegedly deleted, and so not available. Norheim reports some of them to have been threatening, so much so that her staff had avoided showing them to her.

In both East Asia and in Europe, diplomatic performance has been a constitutive element of transnational public spheres for centuries. As demonstrated by Caroline Kennedy's accreditation, the ensuing knowledge of and hybridization of previously discrete aesthetic standards have aligned these standards somewhat. Kennedy was certainly presentable, in the sense of performing smartness. All implied audiences save one were favourable. The exception was a small Japanese audience that did not find the performance decent enough. The photographers, the Japanese media and an international, US-based photo pool saw to it that her accreditation became a highly successful global event.

By contrast, Aud Lise Norheim's accreditation, which was overall successful in the sending and receiving states both, also points up the limits of visual globalization. Due to national Iranian traditions and laws, Norheim did not have the same broad choice in how to be presentable, and was constrained to choose decency, as opposed to smartness, as her way of being presentable. In a global context, decency cannot compete with smartness as a media strategy. Smartness travels, decency does not. Norheim's choice of going for decency, which proved to be a successful one nationally, seems in and of itself to have cut off the possibilities for success globally. In the degree that there was third-country coverage of her presentation, the news was not decency, but quaintness.

Lingering Western cultural hegemony means that certain Western styles, like Jackie O, has an aura that makes it successful in many, but not all, non-Western settings. The structure of global media, which remain dominated by Western platform and visual media companies, further strengthens such hegemony. If we think with Panofski, however, we may add another possible reason why Kennedy's performance was so media-friendly. It included showing off a primary object – her body – and was further enhanced by accoutrements that together made for a secondary object – a widely recognizable style that arguably indexes an entire era. Norheim's performance, on the other hand, was grounded in tertiary objects – sartorial references to stuff so local it cannot possibly be known to outsiders – which by definition are less readable to non-initiated audiences. We may speculate, then, as to whether the striking global success of Kennedy's performance may be rooted not only in Western hegemony, but also transhistorically.

It is no coincidence that the two exemplary examples of performance that I have given here both involve female diplomats. Historically, male unease of presentability due to sartorial factors is largely a thing of the past. During the European eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, diplomatic uniforms solved most potential problems. The unease of Japanese male diplomats in being considered non-presentable while abroad was put paid to over a century ago. With the normalization of national attire as diplomatic dress that began in Europe in the 1930s and came to a head with the decolonization of the 1950s and '60s, sartorial choices were largely standardized as being either some kind of suit or national attire. Women, on the other hand, while always present where diplomacy has played itself out (Hochschild 1969; McCarthy 2014; Cassidy 2017; Aggestam and Towns 2019), are relative newcomers as professional diplomats. As we have seen here, female diplomats still have a wider sartorial choice, which also means that there is more potential unease in sartorial choices. Wider and at the same time more discerning visual standards for female than for male diplomats open a wider room for visual performance, but this also adds a burden of unease that may easily come to constrain successful performances. Female diplomats have a wider palette in choosing how to present themselves than do their male colleagues. The trade-off is that the wider choice also incurs a larger potential for error. When it comes to presentability, it is riskier to be a female diplomat than a male one.

Diplomatic work is more than work with words. It also involves the visual work of manipulating cultural visual codes, in the receiving state, in the sender state, and ultimately globally. The more presentable the diplomat, the higher the visibility, and the higher the visibility, the larger the room for manoeuvre regarding other work.

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