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## Aesthetics in *Surat al-Mulk*: Mathematical Typology as Metaphysical Mirror

Valerie Gonzalez<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Kur'an 67, *Surat al-Mulk* ('Surat of the Kingdom'), describes the seven heavens in a sharply contoured image. This cosmographic image is one of the few textual icons forming the 'Quranic literary iconography'. The divine light contained in a lamp within a niche in *Surat al-Nur* ('Surat of the Light', 24), or the glass *sarh* of Solomon's palace, in *Surat al-Naml* ('Surat of the Ants', 27), constitute other examples among these icons. This essay argues that, by means of the heavenly description, *Surat al-Mulk* conveys an aesthetic meaning that is pivotal to its religious rhetoric. As a complement, this study includes an examination of the surat's phraseology by the linguist Muhammad Husain Kazi.

### Keywords

*Surat al-Mulk* • Islamic exegesis • Islamic aesthetics • Islamic philology Qur'anic literary iconography

### Mülk Suresinde Estetik: Metafizik Ayna Olarak Matematiksel Tipoloji

### Öz

Kur'an'ın 67. Suresi olan Mülk Suresi yedi cenneti keskin hatlı görüntülerle resmetmektedir. Bu kozmografik görüntü 'Kur'ani edebi tasvir' diye formüle edilen bazı metinsel simgelerin bir tanesidir. Nitekim 24. Sure olan Nur Suresi'nde geçen ve bir oyukta yer alan kandildeki ilahi nur; 27. Sure olan Naml suresindeki Süleyman'ın sarayındaki cam zemin gibi bu simgelere pek çok örnek verilebilir. Bu makale cennet tasvirleriyle Mülk Suresi'nin dini hitabette çok önemli bir estetik anlam taşıdığını iddia etmektedir. Ayrıca bu çalışma, bir dilbilimci olan Muhammed Hüseyin Kazi tarafından yapılan surelerin sözcük seçimi ile ilgili bir değerlendirmeyi de kapsamaktadır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Mülk Suresi • İslam Tefsiri • İslam Estetiği • İslam Filolojisi Kur'ani Edebi Tasvir

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## Introduction: A Quranic Textual Icon in 67:2-5

*B-ismi-llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm*

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيُبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ  
الْغَفُورُ ﴿٢﴾

الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا مَّا تَرَى فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِن تَفَوُّتٍ  
فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَى مِن فُطُورٍ ﴿٣﴾

ثُمَّ ارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ ﴿٤﴾  
وَلَقَدْ زَيَّنَّا السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِمَصَابِيحَ وَجَعَلْنَاهَا رُجُومًا لِلشَّيَاطِينِ وَأَعْتَدْنَا  
لَهُمْ عَذَابَ السَّعِيرِ ﴿٥﴾

“And He is the Almighty, the All-forgiving,

Who created seven heavens one upon another. Thou seest not in the creation of the All-Merciful any imperfection.

Return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure? Then return thy gaze again, and  
Again, and thy gaze comes back to thee dazzled, aweary.

And we adorned the lower heaven with lamps [stars], and made them things  
to stone satans;

And We prepared for them the chastisement of the blaze.”

Qur’an, Surat al-Mulk, Verses 2-5:

In the Qur’an, the description of objects and structures that we may call ‘the sacred analogous to artworks’, and variegated imageries imbued with beauty and other qualities appealing to the sensory faculties, attest to the function of aesthetics as an Islamic mode of knowledge transmission. This Quranic aesthetic content includes the vivid descriptions of the Paradise and its superlative amenities (Qur’an 18:31; 22:23; 35:33; 44:53; 76:12, 21; 22: 23), the image of the divine light contained in a lamp within a niche in *Surat al-Nur* (‘Surat of the Light’, 24), and the description of Solomon’s glass *sarh* by the king-prophet himself in *Surat al-Naml* (‘Surat of the Ants’, 27: 44). Constituting *ayat* sent by God to humankind,

these awe-inspiring Quranic objects, structures, and imageries support the divine speech's rhetoric and participate in the articulation of the relationship between the Creator and the faithful.<sup>1</sup> By extension, these *ayat* confirm that aesthetics is an essential fact of human existence. This essay examines the case of *Surat al-Mulk* ('Surat of the Kingdom', 67) that, alongside the aforementioned Quranic excerpts, relies on aesthetic semantics to build its religious rhetoric.<sup>2</sup>

Owing to its eschatological content, the surat's aesthetics revolves more precisely around cosmographic themes. Verses 2-5, in particular, deliver a rapturous picture of the seven heavens whose straightforward isotropic configuration allows the Qur'an's reader/auditor to visualize mentally. As it is known, in Islamic cosmography the earthly and celestial planes are configured in ascending successive strata subtended by the organizational scheme of the seen and the unseen. At the unseen superior level of this cosmogony sits the sublime superstructure of the seven heavenly spheres, one stacked upon the other in a perfect geometric order. Like the divine lamp, Solomon's *sarh* and other images of structures in the Qur'an, this polyspherical construction forms a textual icon in what can be called 'the Quranic literary iconography'.<sup>3</sup> This image/icon, I argue, has the double function of rhetorical purveyor of the text's eschatology and of aesthetic paradigm in Islamic artistic creation. The argumentation supporting this statement will unfold along four lines of inquiry:

- 1) The definition of the surat's aesthetic phenomenology<sup>4</sup>;
- 2) The contextualization of the surat in the Quranic rhetoric of autoreferentiality;
- 3) The linguistic strategies employed by the surat to shape its rhetoric;
- 4) The surat's power of artistic semantization in the aesthetic form of

1 See the multiple meaning of the term '*aya*' (singular), '*ayat*' (plural), in Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même. Vocabulaire et argumentation du discours coranique autoréférentiel* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014).

2 About the broad subject of Quranic rhetorics, see Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Styles* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001); Rosalind W. Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an* (London and New York: Routledge, Curzon, 2004); Issa J. Boullata, ed., *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Michel Cuypers, "Structures rhétoriques des sourates 92 à 98", *Annales Islamologiques* 34 (2000): 95–138.

3 See the author's aesthetic exegesis of 27:44 (*Surat al-Naml*) in Valerie Gonzalez, *Le piège de Salomon, La pensée de l'art dans le Coran* (Paris: Albin Michel, Collection Chaire de l'IMA (Institut du Monde Arabe), 2001), and *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics of Islamic Art and Architecture* (London, New York: IBTauris, 2001).

4 In its broader sense, aesthetic phenomenology refers to the mode of appearing of things and the experience they induce via perception. Concerning phenomenology and the arts, see Paul Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); and Joseph Pary, ed., *Art and Phenomenology* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

calligraphy in an architectural context: The Comares Hall in the Nasrid palaces of the Alhambra, Spain (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries).

### ***Suprematist Phenomenology of the Quranic Seven Heavens***

At the level of the text's apparent semantic, namely the literal meaning of the verses as it is expressed by the terminology, 67:2-5 depicts the Islamic heavenly cosmography as a mathematical topology, namely the aforementioned seven spheres in vertical arrangement. To the contemporary interdisciplinary and transcultural mind, this ultra-minimalist icon conjures up, in both terms of forms and spirit, Kasimir Malevitch's early twentieth-century Suprematist tableaux of floating squares, circles and rectangles.

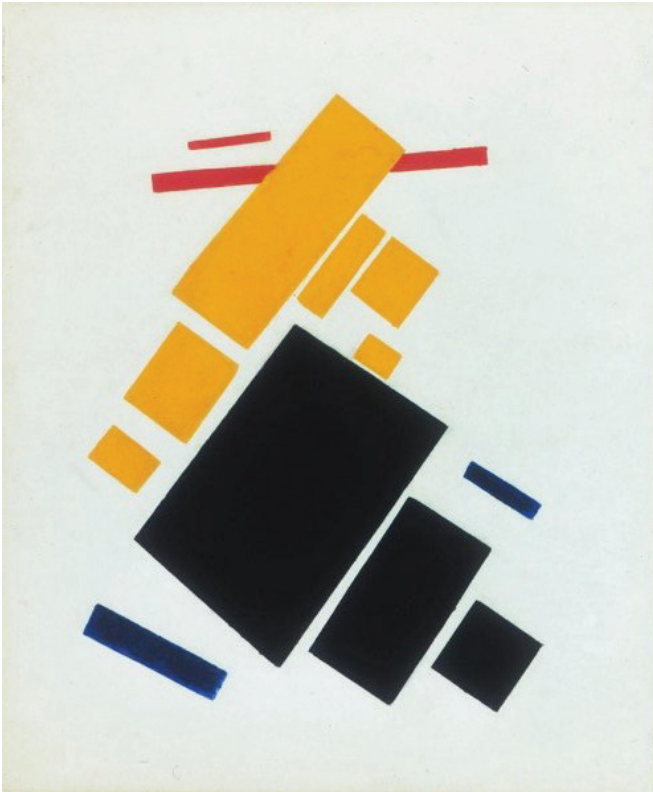


Figure 1

*Kazimir Malevich. Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying, 1915 (dated on reverse 1914). Oil on canvas. 22 7/8 x 19" (58.1 x 48.3 cm). MoMA, New York. Object number 248-1935. 1935 Acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange). ©2018The museum of Modern art. URL: <http://www.moma.org>.*

Like in the ultra-minimalist Quranic celestial depiction, in Suprematism fundamental geometry presents itself as the sensible vector of a superior order of things, thus translating a pure essence in tangible concrete forms.<sup>5</sup> The choice of mathematical topology in the Qur'an and of elementary shapes in the Russian artist's Suprematist artworks have a power of transcendental reduction that drives consciousness to the most extreme confines of thought, in the region of the sublime.<sup>6</sup> However, while in non-Islamic contexts, and a fortiori in the context of Russian avant-garde, the sublime and this notion of order may be variously conceptualized, in Islam these metaphysical concepts refer to the divine essence and creation in the absolute.<sup>7</sup> The textual image of the seven spheres also possesses the unique ontological specificity of being the exact reflection, by means of verbal description, of something that exists in the sacred cosmogony of Islam, whereas Suprematist constructions only exist within the mundane reality of their own artistic forms and their human-social background.

This parallel between a scriptural depiction such as the heavenly picture of Qur'an 67:2-5 and man-made visual constructs makes further sense as, throughout His message, God renders accessible and tangible His unattainable truths by humanly graspable means, be they parables, metaphors or visualizing imageries inscribed in the human life condition. Whether the Holy Book describes Paradise in the imaginable material terms of an idyllic landscape, the divine presence in the

5 The attributive adjective "ultra minimalist" alludes to the specific perceptual qualities presented by the works of the twentieth-century Western artistic movements of 'Minimalism', 'Suprematism' and 'Constructivism'. These works are 'detached from utilitarian purposes and removed from the ideological function of representation', quoted from 'Minimalism', excerpted from Nikos Stangos, ed., *Concepts of Modern Art, From Fauvism to Postmodernism* (London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 244. The famous Russian painter Kasimir Malevitch is the founder of the minimalist current, after Cubism. He created the radically abstract movement called 'Suprematism'. His picture of a black square on a white background is the emblem of Suprematist art. See Matthew Drutt, *Malevitch, Kazimir: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), and Tanya Sirakovitch, ed., *Victory over the Sun, Russian Avant-Garde and Beyond*, catalogue of the exhibition (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Winter 2018-Spring 2019).

6 See Rudolf Bernet, "Phenomenological Reduction and the Double Life of the Subject," in *Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in His Earliest Thought*, ed. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 245-68; and Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern, and Eduard Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993). See also this website: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/phen-red/>

7 On Islamic metaphysics see: Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *Universal Science: An Introduction to Islamic Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); and as an example of mystic text see Mulla Sadra, *Metaphysical Penetrations: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Seyyed, Hossein Nasr (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

form of an eternal flame shining through a glass lamp, or the heavenly kingdom in the scientific terms of a geometric application, this literary iconography is endowed with the approachability of the sensible. It projects what I would call the Islamic incommensurable unseen ‘meta-reality’ in the familiar mirror of the phenomenal world.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the Quranic icons function as Islamic metaphysical mirrors.

Being the truthful description of the Islamic meta-reality of the heavens, the seven spheres’ flawless geometric topology in *surat al-Mulk* epitomizes, manifests and visualizes the structural perfection of God’s edifice, the universe, praised and described in concrete terms throughout the Qur’an. This structural perfection itself echoes the ethical perfection of the divine prescriptions and commandments whose fulfillment or non-fulfillment will determine Man’s fate in the afterlife, as the surat amply expounds it. Consequently, the heavenly icon is instrumental to the semantic transitive relationship between cosmology, deontology and eschatology that shapes the rhetoric of Qur’an 67.

The Suprematist phenomenology of the heavenly icon is more broadly significant of the fluidity of the Islamic order of things, despite the absolute abstraction of God in Islamic ontotheology.<sup>9</sup> Without masking the cosmogonic hierarchical organization and its partition between the seen and the unseen, this phenomenology signals, through the apprehensible configuration of elementary geometric forms, that the mundane reality is coextensive of the divine creation’s ungraspable meta-reality, and concreteness consubstantial with the sublime. The cosmographic iconography thus plays a key part in the *ayat*-based binding contract of faith instituted by the Qur’an, whereby God’s unimagability and unrepresentability does not engender an abysmal feeling of human loneliness. For this reason, the icon in question as well as the whole of the Quranic aesthetic-artistic imagery constitute what is called in new aesthetics ‘relational forms’.<sup>10</sup> As such, they also have the status of aesthetic paradigm both in the Muslim aesthetic consciousness and in the factuality of Muslim artistic creation.

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8 I use this well-known philosophical word ‘meta-reality’ in thinking about the Argentinian writer Jorge-Luis Borges who invented the term ‘irreality’ to describe the imagined reality in poetic works. See, for example, Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings* (London: Penguins Classics, 2000).

9 Ontotheology in philosophy is both the ontology of the divine and the theology of being.

10 About ‘new aesthetics’, a branch of aesthetic philosophy that emerged in the eighties, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998); Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

### **The Icon of the Seven Spheres as Aesthetic Paradigm**

Although their divine origin confers upon the Quranic imageries the sacred status of inimitable aesthetic entities, they do function as paradigms for the arts. They do so in the double sense that they forge a system of aesthetic norms and values, while inspiring and stimulating, not an imitation or representation of these imageries, but the creation of analogous visual forms in the human realm.<sup>11</sup> An exception to this rule is the literal representation of Surat al-Nur's lamp image on various media, carpets, tombstones, etc.

Thus, the textual picture of the seven spheres posits the infallibility of the mathematic order and its applications as supreme Islamic aesthetic norm of beauty and perfection. This norm, promoting the intertwinement of science and art, has evidently governed the artistic practice at all periods and in all the geopolitical spaces of Islam. The systematic use and research in applied mathematics for the purpose of art-making have notably produced the unique geometric aesthetic of the *muqarnas*.<sup>12</sup> The quality of isotropy, the sense of proportion and symmetry, and the geometric deductive system that generates infinitely variegated designs, all these features undoubtedly establish a metaphysical linkage to this Quranic concept of a mathematically organized construction as a proof of the incommensurable impeccability of the divine order.

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11 A discussion of this crucial point about the non-representational property of Islamic artistic creation would take us too far from the present topic of inquiry, yet it is essential to make the statement and underscore the fundamental difference between imitation or representation and the creation of analogous to models/paradigms.

12 For the most scientific reading of geometric designs in Islamic art see Peter Lu, and Paul J. Steinhardt, "Decagonal and Quasicrystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture," *Science* 315 (February 2007): 1106-10. DOI: 10.1126/science.1135491.

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/315/5815/110>



Figure 2

*Sultan Han, caravanserai, porch of the main entrance, Seldjuk art, 13<sup>th</sup>-century, Aksaray province, Turkey. Photo in the public domain.*

### *The Aesthetic Act of Scrutinizing in Surat-al-Mulk*

Another key element in the surat reinforces its paradigmatic quality in relation to the artistic practice, namely the engagement of seeing as both a bodily act and exercise of consciousness. The summoning of the faithful 's gaze in the surat anchors its aesthetic rhetoric more deeply in empiricism:

“Return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure? Then return thy gaze again, and again, and thy gaze comes back to thee dazzled, weary.”



The gaze in Islam is the polyvalent instrument of perception and consciousness.<sup>13</sup> In the surat, it is called upon to exert its inseparable carnal and mental cognitive capacities in order to acknowledge the wonder of the universe crowned by the sublime seven-sphere superstructure. This phenomenology of the gaze activated by divine summation constitutes a consciousness-awakening rhetorical device. It gives access, through the ecstatic visualization and cognizance of the heavens' hyper lucid mathematical constitution, to the surat' metaphysical pronouncements about God's agenda for humankind in the afterlife. Consequently, the text's force of persuasion resides not only in the powerful cosmographic icon itself, but also in the prescription concerning the exact manner of visual perception this icon requires in order to be fully understood as an aesthetic entity bearing religious meanings. That manner indeed is not a simple act of gazing, but an intense scopic scrutinization.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, *Surat al-Mulk*, Verses 2-5 and *Surat-Al-Naml*, Verse 44 are very similar, as they share this strongly empirical feature appealing to the human carnal reality of aesthetic experience.

*Aesthetic Experience in Qur'an 67 and 27*

Qur'an 27: 44: "She was invited to enter the court.

When she saw it, she took it for a sheet of water,  
and uncovered her legs.

Solomon told her: 'this is a court paved with tiles of glass.'

'O Lord', she said, 'I have wronged myself,

and I submit to the Lord of all the worlds with Solomon'''.<sup>15</sup>

Both surats signify complex religious ideations through the powerfully eloquent description of an aesthetic object, and both provide the phenomenological scenario of the experience this object induces and/or requires. While, in *Surat al-Mulk*, God's order to scrutinize twice the compound of spheres in the vain goal of detecting a flaw conveys eschatological meanings, in *Surat al-Naml*, the Queen of Sheba's optical illusion in Solomon's glass palace (she sees water instead of glass) metaphorizes the fallacy of idolatry and the triumph of the true religion,

13 This is amply discussed in the *falsafa*, notably by al-Ghazali. See José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought from Pre-Islamic Arabia through Al-Andalus* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

14 Reza-Shah Kazemi, "Divine Beatitude: Supreme Archetype of Aesthetic Experience," in ed. Barry McDonald, *Seeing God Everywhere: Essays on Nature and the Sacred* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 215-26.

15 *Qur'an*, trans. Ahmed 'Ali (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1989). See Valerie Gonzalez, "The Aesthetics of the Solomonic Parable in the Qur'an," in *Beauty and Islam*, 26-42, and *Le piège de Salomon, la pensée de l'art dans le Coran* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

Islam. Furthermore, in both Quranic excerpts an extraordinary masterpiece of geometric construction commands the narrative: the towering seven spheres and the isotropic crystalline decoration of glass pieces in the Solomonic abode (*sahr*). Consequently, it can be asserted that the two Quranic excerpts promote geometric design as an ideal mode of art making. The turning of mathematical typologies into an Islamic art form attests to the application of this ideal.

This is not to say, again, that the Islamic geometric designs ‘represent’ or ‘symbolize’ the divine order underlying the Quranic descriptions of sacred aesthetic constructs. Against the Eurocentric mainstream scholarship that still endorses representational modes of reading Islamic art, I assert that the process of Quranic aesthetic exemplification instead operates at a purely inspirational and conceptual level. It is of utter importance, it seems to me, to grasp this non-representational nature of artistic intentionality in Islam, as these designs forge a humanly created aesthetic space for the purpose of fulfilling human needs of expression, on the basis of a hyper-conscious separation between human and divine creation. This metaphysical separation severely stifles any desire to replicate the Quranic imagery, to some exceptions such as the commonly pictured lamp in a niche motif, for reasons to be figured out. On the other hand, this separation allows for a profoundly meaningful connection between the two creations that I would describe in terms of ‘resonance’.

In sum, although the Islamic geometric aesthetic materialities are essentially a mute art form free of symbols and discourse, they constitute ‘applications’ of the Islamic principles, norms and values established by the Quranic aesthetic narratives. As such, they are ‘Islamic’ and operate in the domain of spirituality as anagogical stimuli. To frame this statement in the current context of ‘new religious studies’, Islamic geometric ornament falls under the sign of ‘religious materialism’.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Aesthetic Argument as Strategy of Quranic Autoreferentiality**

The studies have unraveled one of the Qur’an’s main literary ipseitic traits, namely autoreferentiality or reflexivity.<sup>17</sup> The Holy Book of Islam is autoreferential

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16 About the new material turn in religious studies in general, see Tamsin Jones, “New Materialism and the Study of Religion,” in ed. Joerg Rieger and Edward Waggoner, *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1-23. <https://link.springer.com>

17 Among numerous books and articles on this subject, see Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur’an’s Self-image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), the most recent monograph (cited above) being Anne-Sylvie Boisliveau, *Le Coran par lui-même*.

inasmuch it defines its own cognitive status and sacred ontology as supreme authoritative religious scripture. It does so by means of rhetorical devices and processes of its own choice. This rhetorical apparatus consists of a specific lexicon including, among others highly polysemic words, *ayat*, *dhikr*, *kitab* or *qur'an*, and of diverse argumentative strategies. For example, the systematic use of binaries posits unambiguously the true and the good in and of the Qur'an, as opposed to the false and the wrong of its detractors' claims and objections. This scheme of dualities notably supports the articulation of the recurrent accusative discourse about the alteration of Judeo-Christian scriptures versus the ultimate pure truth of the Qur'an. Another rhetorical and autoreferential strategy is the 'metatext' within the text. This metatext consists of disseminated commentaries throughout the Qur'an that are exclusively dedicated to the demonstration of its message's divine origin.

In addition to parables, metaphors and stories with double semantic structure, the rich Quranic imagery like the geometric icons in *Surat al-Mulk* and *Surat al-Naml*, forms a substantial part of this unprecedented autoreferential apparatus meant to single out the Quranic discourse within the chain of the divine messages sent to Man through the intermediary of the prophets, from Adam to Muhammad. In other words, another function of *Surat al-Mulk*'s aesthetic rhetoric is to assert the Qur'an superiority as the final *ayat*. A thorough aesthetics-focused comparison between the aesthetic imagery in the Torah, the Christian Bible and the Qur'an is certainly needed to support this point. To my knowledge, such a comparison is yet to be made. However, I believe it is important to inscribe this and any Quranic aesthetic exegesis in the framework of the Qur'an as a unique sacred scriptural construct with a complex background, whose reflexive feature constitutes a fundamental ontological determinant.

### **Muhammad Husain Kazi's Philological Study of *Surat al-Mulk***

Special credit must be given to Muhammad Husain Kazi who provided me with his study of the rhetoric (*balagha*) of verses 1-5, as I was preparing this essay on *Surat al-Mulk*.<sup>18</sup> The following account is a summary of this study.

Thus, in 67: 1-5, Kazi detects two chief features that beautify the text. The first feature is the shift of 'text voicing', if we may say. In a clear instance of autoreferential authorship, in the first three verses God speaks about Himself in the third person, using pronouns without introducing Himself by name. In the

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<sup>18</sup> To my knowledge, Kazi's analysis remains unpublished. It was indeed initially given to me to supplement this aesthetic study of *Surat al-Mulk*. I am most grateful for his contribution.

middle of the third verse, the pronoun yields to one of God's names, *al-Rahmān*. This change highlights His bestowing of His *rahmat* upon His human creation, thus emphasizing what was stated in the opening verse, namely the correlation between God's *barakat* and His kingship and ownership over His dominion, as well as His omnipotence. Within this frame, the reader/auditor are repeatedly told about God's omnipotence, while being intermittently addressed individually in a direct manner so as to be informed and firmly reminded about the purpose of existence in this world and in the life to come.

Another shift occurs in the fifth verse, this time from the third person to the first person, as God now uses the regal 'We', following the presentation of His divine status in the preceding verses, marked by the assertion about His magnificence and perfection. In the third verse, the 'We' is then again replaced by the second person singular.

The second chief feature lies in the subtle manner with which God interacts with every addressee in order to convince him or her of the Qur'an's truthfulness and authenticity. The semantic manipulation that crafts this relationship between God and humankind rests upon a skillful linguistic organization of the text, and a particular choice of terminology and phraseology. To begin, the theme of *Surat al-Mulk* itself is declared in the opening verse:

67:1: "Blessed is He in whose hand is dominion, and He is over all things competent."

The ensuing twenty-nine verses appear fluidly branching out from this first declarative statement. Then, the second and third verses begin with self-descriptions of God variously phrased, notably by means of relative pronouns. 'Tabāraka is the One who [...]; who [...]; who [...].' The repetition of the relative pronoun 'who' reinforces the hyperbolic verbal form 'tabāraka', as well as the sonic quality of the text.

*Tabāraka* is one of the terms with which God designates Himself in the Qur'an. It means 'the one who is the absolute king reigning over the entire dominion that is the universe, and the one to whom belongs ownership of everything within this dominion'. He, God, is thus free to do as He pleases with His property, and our experience of life manifests His being *tabāraka*. Consequently, *tabāraka* suggests that God is, in the absolute, the one and only source of all goodness and blessings, and by inference, the almighty giver of life and death. This principle underlies the surat's eschatology explained in detail throughout the verses, although the single word '*mulk*' encompasses all these ideas revolving around the trope of divine omnipotence.

Mirroring the entire Qur'an itself in this regard, Surat al-Mulk aims to neutralize any doubt about these claims of divine omnipotence. To do so, it resorts to the incessant reiteration of the general principle proclaimed in the phrasing, 'And He alone, is over each and everything, omnipotent.' Here, the preposition emphasizes God's mighty power over each and every thing, while the hyperbolic form of '*Qādir*' suggests that this omnipotence is also timeless. The being that is *tabāraka* is thus not introduced by name, but rather by a powerful description using this relative pronoun 'who'.

Verse 3 features the first instance of one of God's beautiful names in the surat, namely *al-Rahmān*, the most compassionate and merciful, the only name that He uses as a substitute to Allah. The locution, 'the creation of *al-Rahmān*', implies that His *rahmat* (His mercy), like *tabāraka* earlier in the surat, flows throughout His creation.

Then, to prove the perfection of His/The creation, God commands the addressee to 'look at' it very carefully. This command is meant to dissipate any doubt the addressee might harbor, and to unsettle the obstinate disbelievers of Mecca who have been hostile to Prophet Muhammad's transmission of the divine message at the time of the surat's revelation. God insists and heightens the challenge by commanding to look again, 'Do you see even the slightest crack?', thereby forcing the doubtful or disbeliever to acknowledge their failure. The metaphorical terminology of Verse 4 to signify this double act of seeing deserves particular attention.

The term '*karratayn*', derived from the root word '*karr*', is often used to describe someone who retreats from a battle, only to charge and lay assault once again. In the Quranic context, this word paints a lively metaphorical image of the addressee laying assault on the creation of *al-Rahmān*, retreating, and then returning once again upon God's command. The fair outcome of these continuous assaults depend on the human faculty of *basar*, namely the cognitive faculty that allows one to lucidly see the reality of things. After attempting to challenge the truth of this reality, the addressee will necessarily coil back, perplexed, chidden and driven away like an animal, as the word *khāsi*' implies by connotation. The defeated gazer will be extremely fatigued and exhausted like a camel; an animal capable of traveling for days in the desert, but that slowly loses its energy during the long journey, eventually ending up unable to move.

In Verse 5, God speaks in the first person in using the 'regal We' that commands veneration and respect. Having established the flawless nature of His creation, He now turns the addressee's attention toward another example of His

omnipotence in a poetic manner, by pointing to the observable beauty of the celestial domain:

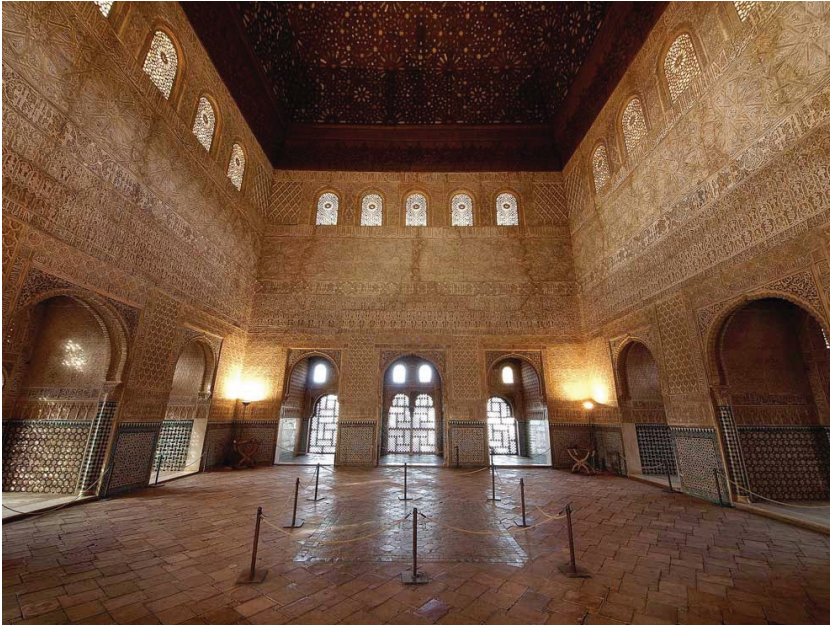
“And indeed, without doubt, We, the Magnificent, have adorned the lowest and nearest heaven with countless lamps.”

Here God likens the stars to lamps, thereby alluding to the beautiful objects with which traditionally Arabs love to adorn their homes. The stars’ light has also the highly poetic and awe-inspiring ability to pierce the dark night without eliminating darkness. The broken plural form in the verse signifies that the stars are countless, while the indefinite form refers to the uniqueness of these celestial lamps occupying the space of the nearest heaven. Furthermore, the verse indicates that the stars-lamps have the ability to ward off the devils. It skillfully weaves the evocation of this superpower with the stipulation about the life to come, thus inspiring further awe and devotion.

Now let us imagine and analyze the cognitive effects that surat al-Mulk produces in the aesthetic context of a lavishly decorated masterpiece of Islamic architecture.

### **The Architectural-Calligraphic Staging of *Surat al-Mulk* in the Alhambra’s Comares Hall**

A calligraphic band formulating the entire *Surat al-Mulk* adorns the square basis of the Comares Hall’s domed ceiling in the Nasrid palace of the Alhambra, Granada, fourteenth-century, Al-Andalus.



Figures 3-4

*The Comares Hall, Alhambra, art Nasrid, fourteenth-century, Granada, Spain. Photos in public domain.*

The primal intention of inscribing this particular surat on the walls of the audience room was obviously to produce a political-religious discourse centered on the trope of kingship. In this context, the surat function as a reminder about the

nature of power. As grand as the Nasrid dynasty may present itself to the world, as Muslims they remain the humble servants of God. In this sense, the surat's presence in this location posits the Andalusī rulers as the most trustful Muslim guardians of God's message.

In aesthetic terms, this presence turns the reception of the Quranic excerpt into a 'total' experience of a 'total art' or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as Richard Wagner, the inventor of this concept, described multisensory aesthetic configurations involving the multiple cognitive faculties of hearing, reading, seeing and feeling.<sup>19</sup> Framed by the profuse architectural geometric décor, the calligraphy amplifies the surat's aesthetic dimension and expands the terrain of experience of its textual phenomenology to the sensory concreteness of art. As the viewers are thus bodily induced to encounter the truth of God through the awesome perception of the man-made artistic-visual scenography, they become the living recipient of this Islamic aesthetic 'resonance' between the world of words and the world of forms.<sup>20</sup> Precisely, while making of God's message an experience at both the noetic and perceptual level, this resonance still maintains the metaphysical separation between the human and divine realm. Although the surat's calligraphy is not directly legible due to its placement high above eye level, the architectural project was purposely designed to produce these multiple cognitions in resonance with one another; the awareness of the surat's presence on the walls and/or the actual recitation of the text within the premises would suffice for these interactive cognitions to occur. A simple sketching of this 'total phenomenology' will make the point clear.

The sensory stimulation effected by the architectural space and its mathematical typologies, to which the calligraphic linear forms fully contribute, intensifies the visualizing mental stimulation provoked by the surat's iconography and the

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19 'Total' refers to the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, 'total art', that the German composer Richard Wagner invented in his 1849 aesthetic essays. In his vision of opera, all the arts, musical, visual and performative, would be united for a total spectacle. See Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, ed., *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

20 Although Islamic art historians tend to confuse metaphorical projection by the viewer with the actual representation in the forms, it must be noted that these two modes of visual expression do not operate in the same way. In the Alhambra, nothing indicates that the Comares' ceiling represents the seven heavens described in 67: 2-5. See my argumentation on this very important point in: Valerie Gonzalez, "The Hermeneutics of Islamic Ornament: The Example of the Alhambra," in ed. Sabine Schmidtke, *Studying the Near and Middle East at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton 1935-2018* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018), 375-88; Chapter 3, *Beauty and Islam*; and "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space that Sees: A comparison of Aesthetic Phenomenology," *Muqarnas* 20 (2003): 253-78.



divine summation to scrutinize the heavenly superstructure. In adding to these stimulations the Quranic recitation's power of voice and sound, the aesthetic configuration in the Comares Hall becomes like a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a 'total artwork' for a spiritual and noetic awakening through sensory ecstasi. The surat itself then becomes the center of a complex verbal and visual multidirectional phenomenology of mystic elevation and anagogical elation.

### Conclusion

A last reflection on *Surat al-Mulk* will serve as a conclusion to this essay. As the conveyor of a powerful Quranic icon and sacred inspirational model for geometric design in the arts, this surat raises the broad question of the workings and meaning of Islamic ornament, characterized by sophisticated geometric layouts and networks. Could not we argue that, similarly to the minimalist depiction of the seven heavens, ornamental expression in Islam offers a non-discursive albeit participatory and highly cognitive experience? My view is that the Islamic geometric designs mainly address sense perception, in the same way as the Quranic heavenly icon that suspends the surat's explanatory discourse to displace the attention on its forms as another mode of knowledge acquisition, a cognitive mode of empirical order. Through the felt space of geometric ornament, like through the scrutinized space of the seven spheres in *Surat al-Mulk*, it is indeed the conscious relationship to God that constructs itself.

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