Re-orienting the Orientalist Gaze

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It is the job of media to construct images of people, events, and settings; it is the industry of media to do so in ways that reflect the political interests and economic parameters of the governing class. The result? Consistently narrow and misleading portrayals of social and cultural "others." These characterizations become particularly problematic in relation to international and intercultural communities when the groups being constructed are not culturally proximate with those administering the media industries.

With regard to US media representations of the "Orient" – a category that encompasses the geography, peoples, and cultures of the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia – these representational strategies can have devastating consequences. For the majority of those within the US, ignorance of important cultural histories, as well as of global situations with direct domestic implications, may result. For others within the US who exhibit characteristics of cultural otherness associated with the "Orient," discrimination, abuse, and misunderstandings may result. And for those within countries associated with the "Orient" outside of the US, military conflict, political intervention, and economic dominance may result. Media participate at each of these levels, whether in terms of civil harmony or international conflict,

perpetuating problematic stereotypes that serve as justification for humiliating interpersonal dynamics as well as misguided superpower intervention.

In this work, we consider how one might re-orient an Orientalist gaze, extending this theoretical approach across cultural contexts, both in terms of the agency constructing this gaze as well its subject. Drawing from Edward Said's classic theory of Orientalism, we begin by examining how media institutions participate in constructing Orientalist representations of Asian countries, cultures, and peoples. Briefly reviewing how US media portray the Middle East, we explore potential connections between these representations and those of East Asia. In so doing, we consider the viability of extending Said's original focus on the Middle East to other cultural contexts associated with the Orient. Next, we ask whether we must continue to situate the agency of domination in a territorially defined West, given other pertinent considerations such as access to resources and the emergence of other powerful agencies, such as Japan. What we may be left with then is a theory of power in contemporary cultural production, grounded in Said's original notion of Orientalism but extending its geographical and theoretical reach.

Orientalism as Theory

Said's notion of "Orientalism" offers a particularly useful framework for understanding how western media engage in constructing eastern cultures. Orientalism can be thought of on two levels: first, as a theoretical structure that helps us understand the mediated production of cultural texts; and second, as an explanation for a specific set of power dynamics in particular historical contexts.

As a theory, Orientalism suggests that media, along with other central societal institutions, are able to dominate, reshape and have "authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 3). Key here is the understanding that the relationship between the Occident, in its capacity of media production, and the Orient, as a subject of that production, is one of power. Moreover, while manifest Orientalism, referring to explicitly stated views, may be subject to shifts over time, the more enduring latent Orientalism is much more

Jane Park, University of Oklahoma
Karin Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin
April, 2005

consistent, and much less subject to change. The latent Orientalism is the more problematic of the two, being accepted and unquestioned as conventional wisdom.

Although many modern institutions participate in this structuring of knowledge over the Orient, media are particularly critical in this process, not just as central institutions in the distribution of knowledge, but as integrally linked to military, political and economic agencies that benefit from a limited view of the Orient as a problem in need of a western, technological fix. As Said explains, "Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined" (1978, p. 207). Through this process of Orientalism, large groups of people with diverse histories become oversimplified into one monolithic, subordinate and ahistorical category. These problematic constructions are perpetuated through visual images, verbal descriptors, and the selection of experts within the media. While Orientalism describes how western media, and other institutions, dominate through the cultural production of the eastern other, this reflexive process also means that the West defines its own culture, and sense of dominance, in relation to this constructed, subordinate "Orient."

While the theory of Orientalism offers an important, nuanced approach toward understanding the role of media in intercultural and international constructions, it is important to remember that Said's central analysis (1978) in this area largely centered on an analysis of literary texts, more focused on European than American processes of imperialism and domination. His later work (1993; 1997) did recognize the importance of other forms of media, and of the US as a particularly important agent in the world power structure. However, Media Studies has not yet addressed in formal terms the possibility of extending this argument to western constructions of East Asia, as have other disciplines such as literary studies, history, and performance studies. This possibility will be considered following a brief review of the social science literature on western media constructions of the Middle East.

Jane Park, University of Oklahoma
Karin Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin
April, 2005

Orientalist Gaze on the Middle East

Scholarship chronicling the construction of the Middle East, of Arabs, and of Islam consistently document the very images described by Said, all confirming the same problematic stereotypes. In essence, media offer narrow, essentialized characterizations of Arabs and Muslims in film (Shaheen, 2001; Wilkins & Downing, 2002) and in other US media. Arabs and Muslim communities are typically conflated in public discourse (Naber, 2000).

Consistent with Said's vision of Orientalism, these problematic portrayals are entrenched in a Euro-American ideological perspective, rooted in a historical context of conquest and domination (Said, 1978). Many analyses confirm these negative and limited discourses of Arabs and Muslims in US entertainment programs (Kamalipour, 1995; Shaheen, 1997, 2001). The intersection between the production of news and of popular culture, particularly in terms of the creation of problematic stereotypes, needs to be recognized. Each industry builds a sense of setting and character from a fairly narrow set of narratives that have cultural resonance (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Steet, 2000) within a particular cultural context.

The US news media participate in the construction of this narrow discourse on the Middle East (Kamalipour, 1995; Noakes & Wilkins, 2002; Suleiman, 1988; Wolfsfeld, 1997). US news media marginalize international coverage, focusing on events in territories with geographical, political and cultural proximity to the US (Chang, 1997; Wall, 1998). As a result, historically there has been very little coverage of the Arab world unless US citizens have been involved or US economic interests in the region have been threatened (Said, 1997; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995). Previous studies of US news coverage of Palestinians and Arabs suggest that these media constructions of Arabs reflect the political and cultural contexts in which they are produced. In terms of visual images, US comic books are more likely to portray male Arab characters as treacherous villains or passive bystanders than as heroes (Shaheen, 1994), while US news photographs of Middle Eastern women are more likely to emphasize passive and

traditional characteristics through a metaphor of dress and veiling, without naming visual subjects

(Wilkins, 1995).

Although overall these mediated characterizations are quite problematic, it is worth noting those moments

when organized political and social groups are able to shift manifest discourse on these topics, such as

through organized protests (Wilkins & Downing, 2002). Several observers believe that changes in the

Palestinian movement may have led to changes in US news media (Noakes & Wilkins, 2002). Gilboa

(1993) and Said (1994) point to the rise of the first intifada as an impetus to changes in US coverage. This

Palestinian resistance may have raised the legitimacy of the PLO and the Palestinian quest for

sovereignty, at least temporarily. After examining US television news of this intifada, Daniel (1995)

agreed that the most prominent interpretation of Palestinians was as oppressed human beings in a

legitimate struggle rather than as terrorists. Whether the current intifada has revitalized any sympathetic

framing is another matter, worthy of investigation.

These stereotypes are particularly problematic in the case of cultural others, as overgeneralized and

narrow portraits in both news and popular culture become accepted as conventional wisdom. This limited

knowledge constrains our abilities to understand and communicate with other communities, as well as

harming those who inevitably face harassment, discrimination and worse.

Orientalist Gaze on East Asia

Although Orientalism, as articulated by Said, was intended to focus on the geographical Orient of the

Middle East, some scholars in Asian American Studies have used his argument to look at Western

representations of East Asia (Wong, 1978; Marchetti, 1993; Morley and Robins, 1995; Lowe, 1996, 2000;

Lee, 1999; Tchen, 1999; Ma, 2000; Nakamura, 2002; Klein, 2003). These studies show that US media

have as much trouble offering nuanced and comprehensive representations of Japanese, Chinese, and

Korean communities, for example, as they do of Arab communities in Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan. In

Jane Park, University of Oklahoma
Karin Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin
April, 2005

interpretations of both regions, news and popular media tend toward reductive portrayals of "Orientals" – as villainous at worst and subservient at best. Furthermore, these representations often are placed in sensationalist rather than historically contextual settings.

Orientalist imagery, iconography, and themes have existed in US popular culture since the founding of the nation (Tchen, 1999). However, stereotypes of East Asians and the Chinese in particular as subhuman foreigners incapable of assimilation became popular during the late nineteenth-century; they helped facilitate the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which kept the number of Asian immigrants in the US extremely low until the Immigration Act of 1965 (Lee, 1999). Stereotypes of East Asians from this period continued to surface in "yellowface" performances by white Hollywood actors. Examples include Luise Rainer's role as the suffering Chinese wife in The Good Earth (1937), Mickey Rooney's role as the comic, buck-toothed Japanese neighbor in Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961), and David Carradine's role as a wandering Shaolin monk in the Western television series Kung Fu (1972). When actors of East Asian descent such as Anna May Wong, Sessue Hayakawa, Nancy Kwan, and Pat Morita occasionally appeared on the big screen, they were almost always marked as foreign "others" through various forms of orientalized costume, speech, and behavior. Furthermore, like other minority groups in the US, Asian and Asian Americans were usually given supporting rather than central roles (Wong, 1978; Marchetti, 1993).

While such blatant forms of stereotyping and discrimination continue to exist, they have been joined in recent years by more celebratory depictions of East Asians and a growing number of Asians and Asian Americans working both behind and in front of the camera. This change can be attributed to several social, political, and economic developments, including the following: first, the population growth of Asian Americans following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, from .3 percent in 1900 to 4 percent in 2000 (Zhou and Gatewood, 2000); second, the rising economic power of Newly Industrialized Countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea based in large part on the successful export of consumer technologies since the early 1980s; third, a general move toward niche-marketing and

the development of multicultural and "ethnic" media marketing in the 1990s; and finally, the popularity

and incorporation of East Asian entertainment media in the US, especially Hong Kong action movies,

Japanese animation, and Japanese videogames in the 1990s (Park, 2004).

Even as these developments have led to the increasing visibility of Asiatic faces on film, television, and

the Internet, disembodied and decontextualized forms of East Asian cultures such as martial arts

choreography, aesthetics derived from anime and videogames, and East Asian influenced fashion have

become a part of US popular culture. One might point to these current trends and fashions as indicative of

the popularity of an East Asian aesthetic. The cost of this popularity, however, is a consistent flattening

and exoticization of Asiatic people, places, and cultures in films such as Charlie's Angels (2000), Kill Bill

Volumes 1 and 2 (2003, 2004), and The Last Samurai (2004), which resemble the stereotyping patterns of

the past with a more self-conscious and politically liberal twist.

Questioning Whose Gaze

Having considered the potential similarities between media interpretations of the Middle East and of East

Asia as indicative of the "Orient," it is worth revisiting the theory of Orientalism. Although Said's work

focuses particularly on the Middle East, one can extend the argument toward subordination of the Orient

to an articulation of how East Asia fares in this same process. Similarly, one might question the

identification of the agency enacting this domination. The argument made here is that Said's articulation

of the role of power in the process of cultural production holds value across historical contexts.

Said shifts his framework, from one in which western European nations engage in Orientalism, to the

importance of recognizing the role of the US as a dominant power in the current global context. Further,

we suggest that what matters is not necessarily the territorial place, but instead the connection to

resources that matters in this power struggle. We also recognize the importance of regional dynamics,

particularly noting Japan's role in this process.

Jane Park, University of Oklahoma
Karin Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin
April, 2005

In Said's delineation of dominant and subordinate groups, a western means of knowledge production is juxtaposed with an eastern, specifically Middle Eastern, subject. While the particular historical conditions of this relationship are critical toward understanding this dynamic, what is key here is the relationship of power. And while historically imperialism has been tied to direct intervention in physical territory, increasingly this ability to dominate is less rooted in a particular place, and instead, associated with a space, in terms of access to critical resources.

By implication, the north/south and west/east divisions conventionally understood as the way to organize national settings within a global system are now less relevant. A dominant geometry of development (Shah & Wilkins, 2004), divides countries along political (communism in east vs. democracy in west), economic (industrialized north vs. agricultural south), cultural (modern vs. traditional), and hierarchical (first =west; second =east, and third=south) lines.

However, the validity of these regional distinctions should be questioned. This model has been critiqued for its ethnocentric and arrogant vision, collapsing diverse communities with a wide range of cultural histories into monolithic groups. More often than not, the interests of domestic elites in poorer countries are identical to the interests of the elite in the wealthier countries. These categorizations, such as West/East, are problematic, given rapidly shifting political-economic contexts involving changing patterns of political and economic dominance among national actors, the strengthening of regional institutions and identities, the globalization of economic and communication systems, and the privatization of industries (Hagopian, 2000; Schuurman, 2000).

New global categorizations may need to focus on access to resources, whether economic, political, social or cultural, within and across geopolitical territories. Inequity in terms of access to resources then becomes the overarching concern (Schuurman, 2000). Although we need to foreground tangible issues related to basic human needs, the broader concern with access to resources addresses the intangible as well, touching on social, cultural, political and spiritual resources (Steeves, 2002). Access to resources

builds from one's position within a socio-political network. This vision offers a more nuanced framework of power, in which networks offer the possibility for some to reach certain goals, such as employment, education, media production, policy making, and more. Power is not only activated within state and corporate institutions, but also within social groups, though these networks tightly intersect.

While issues of territory are still relevant, particularly when clearly many groups, such as Palestinians, are struggling for a sovereignty rooted in place, and nation-states are still critical actors in the global sphere (Morris & Waisbord, 2001), we need to rethink relationships of power as partly connected with spatial arrangements (Escobar, 2000; Escobar et al., 2002), and not just in terms of place. And when we do consider place, we may need to attend to the critical role of regional actors and not just the US.

In most discussions of global power, the US is positioned as a prominent, central actor. Although this may be an accurate portrayal of current conditions, other political and economic agencies and institutions need to be recognized as well. In the case of East Asia, we need to appreciate the central importance of both multinational corporations and of Japanese institutions, as intersecting and divergent economic and political entities.

Within a global as well regional context, Japan has a powerful role. From 1989 until 2001, Japan was the largest bilateral donor agency in the world (JICA, 2002). Japan's emergence as a global economic leader meant increasing attention to its role as a global actor in the field of development (Fukushima, 1999). By the 1990s, Japan's contributions accounted for almost one-quarter of all bilateral aid. Although Japan's overall allocation may have dropped relative to its previous contributions, its ODA is still quite high relative to most other bilateral donors.

Recognizing diversity among powerful countries is not meant to suggest that power is decentralized within the global arena, but to articulate points of negotiation within that power elite. Japan is but one illustration here, but critical in emphasizing the lack of validity to east/ west and north/south distinctions.

Jane Park, University of Oklahoma
Karin Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin

Understanding the importance of Japan also brings new insight into the production of knowledge about the Middle East itself, complicating notions of a primarily western subjugation of eastern cultures.

Japanese media and other public forms of discourse offer their own problematized visions of Arabs, of Islam, and of the Middle East. While compared to the US media, Japanese narratives may be less likely to characterize villains as Muslim and as Arab, and to portray settings in which violence seems commonplace as somehow Middle Eastern, conventional wisdom in Japan still positions Japanese culture as superior and modern, against a perceived traditionalism within Middle Eastern culture.

To illustrate, in discussions of international development projects concerning issues of women and gender, Japanese discourse privileges East Asian women in more active roles, warranting attention to their needs for political and economic participation (Wilkins, this volume). Women in South Asia and the Middle East, however, are more likely to be characterized in passive roles emphasizing their sexuality, targeted through interventions that attempt to control their fertility. Moreover, women in Muslim countries are believed to be more deserving of development assistance than women in other countries, given a perception that these women are victims of traditional cultural values.

An underlying tenet of Orientalism suggests that the agent activating a particular gaze on another community holds a critical resource, through the ability to focus and shape those images. It is worth questioning whose gaze becomes part of this process. For Said, it was western Europe and then the US. For East Asia, while the US is still a dominant agent in the production of global media products, so is Japan. Our mapping of this power structure then needs to be shaped accordingly.

Reorienting Orientalism

Said's articulation of Orientalism, as a process through which some groups have the power to produce knowledge over others in a way that is detrimental to both dominating and subjugated classes, offers a particularly useful framework for understanding the production of media texts across cultural domains.

Said's theory is grounded in a specific understanding of how western agencies are able to dominate

Middle Eastern cultures. It is worth questioning whether it is indeed appropriate to move beyond the

particular historical context in which his theory is situated.

Considering Orientalism as a theoretical guide, unbound by the specifics of the context in which this

framework was inductively created and deductively tested, we can extend these ideas first to the domain

of East Asia. In some senses, US media offer as problematic a sense of East Asia as they do of the Middle

East, in that diversity within these regions is obscured, in favor of more generalized composite images of

these settings. However, there are critical differences between the representation of these two regions by

the US as well: current fascination in the US with an East Asian cultural aesthetic indicates a different

type of dynamic than one in which cultural aspects of the Middle East are seen as "traditional" and

therefore inferior. These variations suggest that these regions operate quite differently in the US cultural

imaginary.

Despite being regions with overwhelmingly distinct political histories, economic circumstances, and

cultural contexts, East Asia and the Middle East both suffer from the way that US media manufacture the

cultural "other" in conventional modes of fictional as well as informational narratives. Critical

distinctions within these regions, separating victors from the defeated in military conquests, wealthy,

multilingual and mobile global elites from poverty and disease-stricken masses, men with unquestioned

power from women in various stages of resistance, and more, are glossed over in favor of composite

images of the Orient, whether it be of the Middle East or East Asia.

As a point of potential difference, one might expect the consequential wealth of Japan to become

translated into more sympathetic media images, as global elites become more aligned across class and less

fragmented across territorial boundaries. However, the wealth of some Japanese and Arab groups has not

helped to disentangle the tropes of Orientalist discourse in this instance. Whether economic privilege may

Jane Park, University of Oklahoma
Karin Wilkins, University of Texas at Austin
April, 2005

eventually dislodge the weight of latent Orientalist discourse in US media is worth careful observation

and documentation over time.

The current difference in US media treatment of East Asian and Middle Eastern elites may stem from

several factors. One such factor might be the origin and nature of the resources that have helped to create

these elite groups in the Middle East and East Asia -- namely, oil, a land-based resource for the former

and post-industrial, labor- based technology for the latter. Depictions of these regions in US media reflect

the difference in perceptions of each region's source of wealth: the Middle East tends to be represented by

underdeveloped, desert lands whereas "Far" East is usually depicted as crowded, overdeveloped cities.

According to David Morley and Kevin Robins's (1995) concept of "techno-orientalism," Japan

specifically and East Asia generally are being represented more and more as epitomizing a highly

technologized future. In contrast, we might note that the Middle East, like Africa and South America,

continues for the most part, to be equated with the traditional attitudes, behaviors, and landscapes of a

pre-industrial past.

In addition to considering the way Orientalism might incorporate attention to East Asia as a subject of

media revisionism, we might also reconsider how we conceptualize who holds the power of the gaze.

Although we need to recognize the importance of the US as a powerful actor in the global sphere, we

should also understand the importance of commercial corporate agencies and of Japan as powerful actors

as well. In this case, Japan acts as a central figure in media production both within the East Asian region

and in the world.

In sum, it is an institution's or group's relationship with sources of power, in terms of access to political,

economic, social, cultural and other resources, that determines relative capacity either to enact the gaze of

media production or to be subject to that conquering stare. The root of misunderstanding is not fixed in

geography, but in structural and social distance. If we would like to move beyond our lack of

understanding of cultural "others," then we must rethink how we organize access to the means of media

and cultural production, offering a more participatory and shared experience across cultural domains.

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