

Transmitting Orientalism: Pedagogical Implications

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In *Orientalism*, his seminal study of how geographical sectors such as the “Orient” and “Occident” were essentially “man-made” (5) and thus any distinctions between them ontological and epistemological, Edward Said asks: “How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another?” (15). This question is especially pertinent to those of us who teach courses that concern any aspect of Asian culture, and it becomes a significant pedagogical consideration. For Orientalism does transmit and reproduce itself from one epoch to another, and our students are certainly not immune from the effects of such reproduction and transmission. In teaching Asian or Asian-American literatures, a professor soon becomes cognizant of the fact that a student walks into the classroom trailing images that have attached themselves from a variety of sources. For the current generation of students, those sources are so often visual: cinema and television, computer and video games. But print media remains a perennial source of the production of such images as well.

Let us examine some of the images about India that may be embedded in the minds of students from a variety of media when they come into the classroom. These images are sometimes difficult to dislodge and certainly must be contended with in teaching Anglophone Indian literature. Preexistent images may come up against images in the literature we are reading in the course and the resultant clash is something both student and professor must examine in order to think critically about the material. Of course when images contend with each other the result is not

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inevitably a clash. There can be mutation and modification, adjustment and amendment in a continuing process of intertextuality and the result is a richer understanding of the complexity and composite nature of our imagistic apprehension. Texts exist in contexts, Said reminds us (13). Images do not exist in isolation but network with prior images.

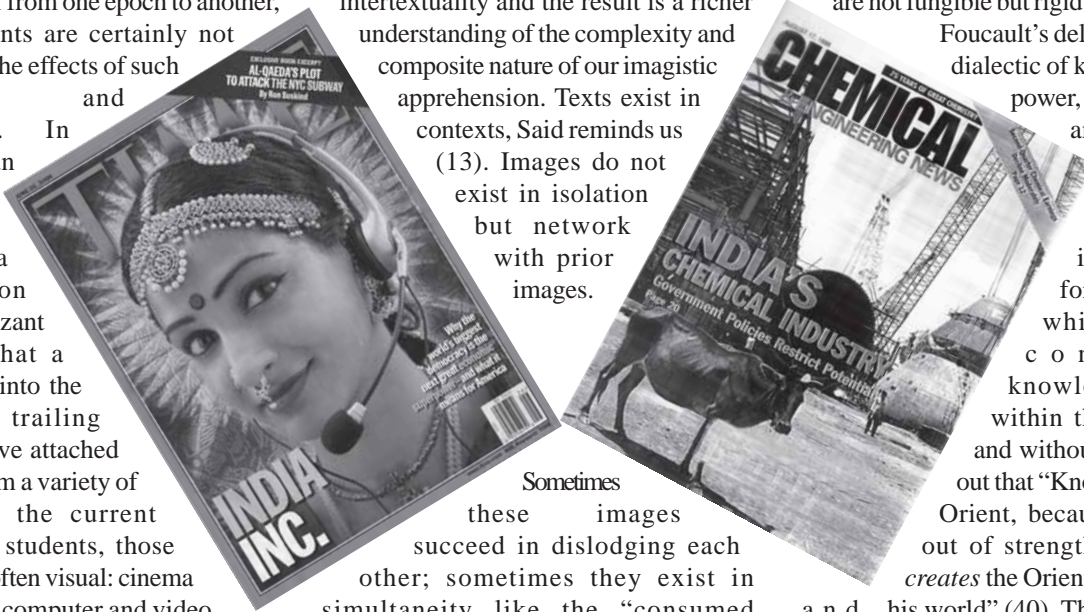
Sometimes these images succeed in dislodging each other; sometimes they exist in simultaneity like the “consumed multitudes...jostling and shoving” that Salman Rushdie describes in *Midnight’s Children* (4).

The discourse of Orientalism, which, Said, drawing upon Foucault, reminds us is always a corollary of power, remains operative. This is hardly surprising since power still slopes from west to east, even if its points of equilibrium have shifted. For students this discourse operates in two important ways. First it reinscribes the

positional superiority that underlay the building of vast empires. Second, it succeeds in sustaining the binary divisions on which this superiority is premised. Thus it remains a system of knowledge that insists upon an essential distinction between us and them, a distinction that is both discursive and durable. Samuel Huntington’s famous or infamous treatise on the clash of civilizations: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, far from being original, is another laying out of the boundary lines, lines that are not fungible but rigid and fossilized.

Foucault’s delineation of the dialectic of knowledge and power, of information and control, to which Said refers, has profound implications for the ways in which students construct knowledge, both within the classroom and without. Said points out that “Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” (40). The construct of Orientalism, as Said applies it, refers to a wide swath of geopolitical territory that comprises India and the biblical lands and not just the Far East, which is the more usual and circumscribed American understanding of the term “Orient.” Orientalism’s impetus is an essentializing one, reducing disparate and complex

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cultures to an essential set of characteristics. One of these characteristics is the unchanging nature of “Oriental” societies, the “timeless eternal” as Said terms it (72). “Oriental” cultures don’t progress; they stay still and stagnant. Leaving aside the problematics of definition for the purpose of this article, when ‘progress’ such as modernization and industrialization is evident and cannot be disaffirmed, it is often undercut representatively by overlaying reminders of the past.



For instance, the August 17, 1998 issue of *Chemical & Engineering News* features a cover story on “India’s Chemical Industry.” The cover portrays a modern steel and concrete chemical plant but foregrounds it with a picture of a somewhat skinny and indolent looking cow. The message is clear: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Inside the article is a picture of a labourer carrying a computer in a woven reed basket. The caption reads “In Bangalore, part of India’s new Silicon Valley, a laborer carries a new computer to a customer across town.” That this is factual, that labourers might actually carry computers in woven baskets is not being argued here. The point is that the

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cobra.

Now that the image of India is undergoing a transformation as it becomes a player in the global market, there are signs that this Orientalist mindset may finally be fading away. The March 20, 2006 issue of *Chemical & Engineering News* illustrates its cover story on “India: Scientific Powerhouse in the Making” with a picture of a lab worker in his state of the art lab. No sacred cow obtrudes. On the other hand, one cannot be too optimistic. The cover story of the March 6, 2006 issue of *Newsweek* is captioned “The New India: Asia’s Other Powerhouse Steps Out” and uses as its cover illustration not something new at all, but something quite stereotypically Orientalistic, not a high tech Call Centre nor a computer station, but an exoticized, sensual Indian woman, the actress and model Padma Lakshmi. Dressed in red and gold with flowing hair and mesmerizing

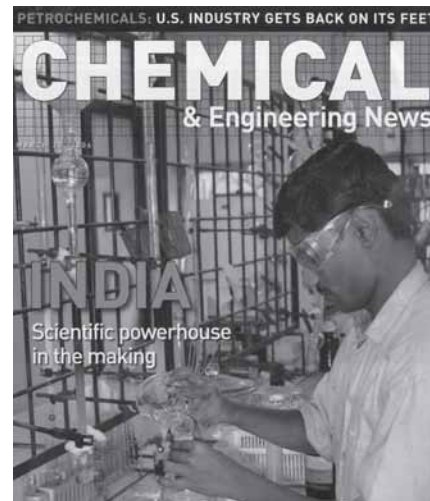
eyes, her bejewelled hands are folded in greeting. *Time*, on the other hand, in its June 26, 2006 issue, where the cover story is “India, Inc.,” juxtaposes both centuries and perceptions. On the cover is a head shot of a fully costumed Bharata Natyam dancer, practitioner of a dance style that goes back 2000 years at least, but updated by a pair of speaker phones around her

Roland Barthes calls “a familiar repertory of gestures” or a “gestuary” (1953, 13). As Said says, “Each work affiliates itself with other works” (20). A cartoon about U.S. civil nuclear technology depicts George Bush as a snake charmer and India as the

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The basic though constructed difference between East and West becomes the foundation for a series of binary distinctions, one of the most tenacious of which is the positing of rational knowledge against superstitious beliefs. In a series of articles about India’s new highway system, *New York Times* correspondent, Amy Waldman, does not begin by discussing this ambitious infrastructure project but by describing the temple that sits under a peepul tree in the middle of the highway. After all, for Hindus, “trees are sacred,” we are told. Either the highway must go around it or risk the ire of Kali, Hindu goddess of destruction. So Waldman lays it out in a



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set of binary oppositions taken, it would seem, from some Orientalist primer: “Goddess versus man, superstition versus progress, the people versus the state—mile by mile, India is struggling to modernize its national highway system, and in the process, itself.” The article ends with a reference to the goddesses Durga and Saraswati, and lest we miss the significance, a reference to “idol-makers” clearly contextualizes the goddesses as belonging to a more primitivistic religion, one that stands in clear contrast, in Waldman’s prose, to the “highway overpass” and “the sound of speeding cars.” (*New York Times*, December 4, 2005).

Again, whether the details are accurate or not is not the question. Such representations become tropes, part of the politics of representation: “knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently, without comment, from one text to another” (Said, 116). From a pedagogical point of view, such representations constitute a “second-order knowledge” (Said 52) that serves a hermeneutical function. Some images may have been embedded in students’ minds since childhood. Disney of course is one of the worst perpetrators of neo-Orientalism. “Aladdin” opens with Arabian Nights music that sounds almost like a spoof of itself. An image superimposed on flames would suggest either a sinuous woman or a snake. Protests from Arab American groups forced the producers to eliminate the original version of the fourth line of the song: “Where they cut off your ear/ if they don’t like your face,” but the line “It’s barbaric, but hey it’s home” was left in. All the “bad guys” have dark skins and accents that veer between South Asian and Middle Eastern, while Aladdin and Jasmine

who, surely, are of the same ethnicity, have light skins and American accents instead. Aladdin becomes familiar Al and has Caucasian features, having been spared the huge Semitic noses the villains sport. Other stock Orientalist figures in the film include aggressive salespeople, avaricious shopkeepers, fakirs lying on beds of nails or traversing hot coals. Such stereotypical characters are especially pernicious post 9/11, when even the most tenuous resemblance might provoke random attacks. Disney did not even think it necessary to use actual Arabic script instead of meaningless scribble. Important Indian characters on children’s TV shows are often highly caricatured or Orientalized with exaggerated accents and behaviour. Even “Sesame Street” is not immune—on older shows there would be the inevitable snake charmer blowing letters of the alphabet out of his pipe. One hopes they have moved on since! “The West moistens

everything with meaning,” Barthes states in *Empire of Signs* (1982,70). Such meanings can be metonymic, syllogistic and signifiatory. Such meanings come into the classroom just as surely as the folders, notebooks and pens that students bring with them. ●

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Hangzhou, before flying back to America from Shanghai. As students walk along the paths of Suzhou gardens, and meander on bridges over water, the scene unfolds before them, like a scroll, gradually. They also see the buildings and trees reflected in the water. The colors of the flowers, the feel of pebbles underfoot, the scents around them, and the imaginative use of compressed space—all are part of this experience.

In Hangzhou, we were able to arrange a one-day class on traditional and contemporary Chinese art at the *Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan* (China Art Academy)—previously the *Zhejiang Meishu Xueyuan*. Students toured this impressive campus and gallery; and more, they practiced painting mynah birds and writing calligraphy (such as the word *jian* “to see”) with a Chinese brush. We were amazed at the two-storey calligraphy of Zhuangzi’s Daoist text *Xiaoyao you* (freely flying) recently painted by an art professor at the campus (see fig. 3). The flowing line of the calligraphy, and the Daoist significance of the text, suitably returned us to some of the key themes of our course. ●



Figure 3: Giant rendition of Zhuangzi text at the China Art Academy in Hangzhou