Orientalism Self-Help Guide

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In conjunction with CMSMC Foundations Lectures Series

Coalition of Master’s Scholars on Material Culture

# Orientalism – Lecture Takeaways

## Introduction

Orientalism – the assumption that there exists a binary between East-Asia/Middle East/North Africa-Orient and West-Europe-Occident, and the juxtaposition of these two so that the East appears as inferior-Other and the West appears as superior-Self.

* Orientalism is a *specific kind of racism* targeting people of Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African etc. descent, and Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish etc. peoples.

Orientalism as three things:

1. A style of thought, based upon the above definition.
2. A modern, academic discipline concerning the Orient.
3. A hegemony; a Western means of dominating the Orient epistemologically (through knowledge) and imperial-colonial efforts.

## Orientalism as a Style of Thought

Orientalism – a system of representations of the Orient.

Orientalization (to Orientalize; Orientalizing; Orientalized) - imagining, creating, making representations of the Orient and Oriental people, typically by European/white people, that juxtapose the Orient and the West so that the West appears superior-Self, and the East appears inferior-Other.

* **Oriental characteristics** according to Orientalist thinking: lowly, degenerated, decrepit, ancient, undeveloped, desolate, lackluster, moribund, dead, helpless, decline, stagnant, fake, deceitful, primitive, mysterious, exotic, dangerous, magical, devilish, distant, superstitious, ignorant; glorious in the past, degenerated in the present…
* **Occidental characteristics** according to Orientalist thinking: high, civilized, advanced, developed, scientific, logical, rational, safe, secure, intelligible, near, close, secular, true, honest, contemporary, modern, futuristic, consistent, glorious, great, excellent, fine, helpful, powerful, righteous, knowing, promising…

The Orient – the stage upon which representations are created. Less a real place, and more what the European subject imagines Asia, the Middle East, North Africa etc. to be.

* Each representer’s Orient is different; More appropriate to say plural *Orients* than singular *Orient*.

Imaginative geography – the physical implications of Orientalism. The West is its own world, and the East is its own world; imagined border between Occident and Orient.

* Geographical attributes of Orientalization: Near, Far, Islamic, Buddhist etc. Orients, and the generalizations about these geographical categories that accompany them.

## Orientalism as a Discipline

Orientalism – modern, academic discipline concerning all things related to the Orient; producing and being produced by the Orientalist system of representations; *Material* manifestation of Orientalist thought.

Orientalization as an active action – writing about, editing, translating, drawing, painting, sculpting, interpreting, representing, displaying, exhibiting, publishing, archiving, collecting, categorizing, photographing, filming… the Orient for European audience.

Modern Orientalism, 18th-19th centuries:

* Three main contexts:
  + Orient increasingly accessible through European colonial-imperial endeavors.
    - Thus, Europe was always in a position of superiority.
  + Other disciplines like ethnology, history, science etc. were secularizing, scientizing, and solidifying.
* Orientalist pedagogy – Orientalist extracts and translates texts for student to receive.
  + Orientalist maker and transmitter; cannot be challenged.
* Orientalist method – observe; record; compare; evaluate/criticize; categorize…
  + Viewed as scientific, objective, secular, rational, logical, and modern.

Orientalist in the Orient – often demystified and disappointed that the Orient is not like the texts.

* Orientalism primarily based on ancient Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese etc. texts in translation was disconnected from contemporary, *real* Orient.

Three Styles of Orientalist Writing:

1. Writer whose personal observations are completely presented as objective, scientific information. Not much ego shines through.
2. Writer who attempts to present personal observations as objective, scientific information, but cannot help offering personal sentiments. Ego comes through, but reader has to pay attention.
3. Writer whose work is highly stylized, personal, critical, and even aesthetic. Although the ego is obvious, contemporary readers still considered it true about the Orient.

* The three writing styles often show up at different points in singular literary works.
* Oriental enthusiasts – writers who are not scholarly Orientalists, but still produced literature about the Orient.

Institutionalization of Orientalism:

* Orientalist institutes and organizations began to form in the early 19th century, and continued to form through the 20th century.
  + They connected Orientalists to one another to support and validate each other’s research.
* Existing institutes of research or education developed Orientalism programs and employed Orientalists, starting in the 19th century and continuing until today (although under different names).

## Orientalism as a Hegemony

Orientalism – a Western means of dominating the Orient, particularly through imperialism.

Knowledge and power: cyclical/reproductive relationship.

* knowledge about the Orient supports Western power.
* Western power provides knowledge about the Orient.

Modern Orientalism, 19th-20th centuries

* Orientalists serve as advisers to imperial endeavors.
* Imperialism
  + Inspired by previous East-West relationships.
  + Actively seek and create knowledge.
    - Orientalist institutes and publications.
* Attempt to rule ideologically, not just by force.

Contemporary Orientalism, post-WWII-21st century

* United States as center.
* Asia and Middle East as anti-capitalist and anti-democratic in addition to previous tropes.
* Popular visual culture (film and television) spreads Orientalized representations.
  + US American military as “good guy,” or “true victim.”
  + Oriental mysticism, and other stereotypes.
  + Asian and Middle Eastern descended characters as peripheral or antagonists to white characters.
* Academia and state distant from one another.
  + “Orientalism” is taboo.
    - Area studies
  + Scholars rarely specifically support Western military efforts in Asia and the Middle East through research.

# Questions for Interrogating Orientalism

When you are not sure if something that you are reading is Orientalizing, here are some questions to help:

* Who wrote this?
  + Describe the author as in-depth as possible. Think about race, gender, class, discipline, locale, politics etc. You may need to do some research. Consider how I describe my aunt in the introductory section.
* Why did they write this?
  + Remember that what an author wants to do and what they actually do are not necessarily the same. Were they wanting to illuminate an issue heretofore undiscussed? Or, just were they just looking to make a space for themselves within an existing discourse? They will likely express this in the introductory sections, but you may need to do some research.
* To whom did they write this?
  + Again, authors often express this in introductory sections. You can also tell by what journal or company published the work. What kind of people typically interact with these platforms? Are these the people who *actually* read it? Would these people already know about this topic? Or, would they be mostly ignorant, and therefore unable to critically think through the work. If the platform audience and the subject are disjunct, the author likely considered this and may have used it to their advantage.
* Who is the subject in this writing?
  + The author? A person or people? The objects? The “country”? A mixture? This indicates what the author was truly intending to argue in the work. If the subject is generalized, such as an abstract group of people, or a country, they are likely employing a lot of assumptions about those people or that place. If they are talking about their personal experience, but not admitting that it is their personal experience and therefore completely subjective, they are likely relying on a lot of assumptions.
* Do they ever rely on an assumption without clarifying that assumption?
  + Sometimes authors will make claims and not provide clarification or evidence for it, especially in arts and humanities writing. This does not apply to general historical facts such as dates, unless the date is contested, or people who we basically understand really did do whatever it is. Instead, it is more like offering a generalized statement about a person, people, or place, without clarifying.
    - Ex: the author says something like “because Korea is a Confucian society…” without clarifying what “Korea” is/means/does or what a “Confucian society” is/means/does.
* Do they compare the subject at-hand with either a white-Western counterpart or another categorically “Asian” counterpart?
  + This happens often mostly to provide a frame of reference to audiences unfamiliar with the topic. However, this is probably the most Orientalizing method that also relies on unclarified assumptions. It is rarer to see East-West comparisons in contemporary literature, but it still occurs. Instead, categorically “Eastern” things are often compared to each other, in order to determine who was “first,” or who did it “best.”
    - Ex: “While Islamic art is decorative, Western art is representational…”
      * There are obvious exceptions to these essentializations. Note also that they are likely not going to clarify what “Islamic art” or “Western art” is/means/does.
    - Ex: “China was the first to develop the firing technique, but Korea learned it and improved it, as evidenced through Goryeo celadon.”
      * Although it is historically true that China “was first,” the statement becomes a comparison to emphasize who was “the best.” Of course, being “the best,” is completely an opinion. Also note how premodern places are referred to with contemporary terms (China stands in for North Song Dynasty, and Korea stands in for Goryeo).
* Do they insert subjective evaluations throughout the writing alongside “objective observations?”
  + This can be positive or negative. It is rarer in contemporary literature. There is nothing wrong with inserting a personal sentiment into writing, but the problem comes when it is not acknowledged as such, or construed as fact.
    - Ex: “Because traditional Indian clothing incorporates a lot of colors, it is decadent…”
      * This type of statement was common in the early 20th century from Westerners who hated the decadence movements. It is true that there are a lot of colors in South Asian clothing traditions, but it being “decadent” is just an opinion.
    - Ex: “Because contemporary Chinese painting has maintained tradition, it is much more beautiful and natural than the abstract art of the West today…”
      * This type of statement seems positive, but it also Orientalizes Chinese painting as ancient and static, which is not true – modern and contemporary Chinese painting rooted in tradition has undergone a century of reform and evolution. Obviously, Chinese painting being “more beautiful and natural” than abstract Western art is an opinion.

# Further Reading

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