
Panopticism And Orientalism

Said claims “The orientalist surveys the orient from above” which implies the European gaze upon the East as Panoptic. I intend to broadly discuss ideas of the orient and Orientalism, as a hegemonic discourse of imperialism, as well as Bentham’s Panopticon. In particular, I would like to focus on bridging the gap between the two and exploring in what ways the panopticon and the orient identify with each other. I will discuss the photograph “Two Kurds with an Armenian Orthodox priest”, an illustration from the book, *Popular Costumes in Turkey*, 1873, about Orientalism.

The panopticon is most commonly associated with prisons, however, Bentham intended the panopticon model to be used in institutions such as schools and hospitals. It is used as a tool of discipline reliant on a central ‘watch tower’ that observes the inmates and simultaneously cannot be seen by anyone. This draws parallels to the observing and invisible eye of the West upon the orient. The Panopticon is a machine that ensures the disassociation between the two which automatizes and deindividualises power. There is a dramatic effect of discipline upon the individual despite there being no other physical instrument apart from the simplicity of the design of geometry. This also means the number of people exercising this power can be reduced and those being enforced by them can be increased. It also allows the watchman to remain anonymous, meaning anyone can operate this system. And so, this concept moves away from just being an architectural structure into an ideological metaphor that can refer to a silent watchful eye that keeps surveillance over a society.

Bentham’s model of the Panopticon was popularised by Michel Foucault in his book “Discipline and Punishment” and examines the idea of a “faceless gaze” to discipline a social body. The functionality of this power relies wholly on a “permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible.” This ‘panoptic eye’ subconsciously controls all aspects of life. Foucault’s disciplinary model digests people down to just their bodies. The docility of these bodies and their lack of individualism is what hierarchal powers rely on to maintain discipline.

The power of the panoptic system lies in the constant pressure and fear placed on the prisoners, of being seen and exposed to a watchful guard. This pressure is why Edward Said says that “the whole orient can be seen panoptical”. Within the Orient, there is this constant fear of being watched by a dominating European gaze. This gaze objectified anything different from Western conceptions as an article of curiosity and a way to consolidate Western ideals as superior over anything Eastern, amplifying the divide of ‘us’ (West) and the alien ‘them’ (East).

‘Two Kurds with an Armenian Orthodox priest’ is photographed by Pascal Sebah in his studio, found in the book “popular costumes in Turkey”, 1873. The costume has the connotations of dressing up, as if for fun which is disrespectful. The focus here is entirely not their clothing. The men are posed in a studio, deindividualised just as an inmate in the panopticon, they have been stripped down into a spectacle and material interest for western viewers. The 19th century, in the West, marked the start

Two Kurds with an Armenian Orthodox priest, illustration from the book, *Popular Costumes in Turkey*, 1873 of a new passion for cataloguing, collecting, and exhibiting because of new theories such as Darwin's theory of evolution and new development in photography. This photograph perfectly epitomises such Western interest in exoticism in the East. These kinds of photographs were popular in the west for their 'other worldliness' which reinforces the relation of power between such a binary opposition, in this case, with the West/East. This power dynamic ensures "The West possesses a monopoly over how the Orient may be represented".

Another example of this Western curiosity of the east is the 'Rue du Caire' at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, 1889. A reconstruction of the streets of Cairo was carefully curated to replicate and exhibit the hustle and bustle of Cairo. The street was arranged as a Bazaar where French men dressed as Orientals selling perfumes and various goods, even Egyptian Donkeys were imported in. Egyptian visitors were disgusted by this all but the worst of it all was what appeared to be a mosque, as life-like as the rest of the street. "Its external form was all that there was of a mosque. As for the interior it has been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls performed dances with young men". Is everything authentically Egyptian was offered up as an exhibition to feed western curiosity which as Timothy Mitchell points out in his essay 'The World as Exhibition', where does the exhibition end? For example, at the Stockholm Congress, some Egyptians were invited to attend as scholars, but when they spoke their own language they found themselves at the centre of European curiosity and just another spectacle within the exhibition. Mitchell argues that instead of there being exhibitions about the world the whole world was offered up as an exhibition. This objectification of the European gaze had not yet infiltrated the East. Europeans were obsessed with recording an accurate image of the East through photography or literature, starting with Lane in 1825 when he used the new invention the 'camera Lucida' to project an exact copy of the object to the paper. Westerners found it hard to get a picture of the East without standing back finding a 'viewing platform' and obsessing over the point of view which is a notion very much interwoven with how one would view an exhibition. This was the "Western-style for dominating, reconstructing, and having authority over the orient." The Great Pyramid of Giza had been appropriated into a viewing platform so that westerners could observe a view and so separate themselves from the real world and offer it up as an "object of representation". This invasive European gaze is present and runs parallel with photography. The photographer hides behind a black cloth and camera, seeing but not being seen, the desired position for the European in the Orient whether as a tourist or equally, a colonial power.

This obsession with recording and documenting in the East as well as the elements of this seeing but hidden presence is directly relatable to the Panopticon. The view through a lens is one of a dominating and imposing Western eye. Additionally, the importance of point of view and the viewing platform shows the preference of condensing a place into a photo-like or exhibition totality, being able to see everything at once from a 'watchtower' of sorts. Tony Bennett's essay 'Exhibitionary complex', describes the construction of the Eiffel tower in 1889 as another viewing position, a way to survey and also always be under surveillance, and ever watching presence from above. Bennett writes that the ideals of panopticism transform "the crowd into a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating, and, as the historical record suggests, consistently orderly public - a society watching over itself." This Western way of seeing had permeated the East in a culture where objectivity was not yet built-in. Panopticism within the exhibitionary complex can also be seen in the 'Rue du Claire' exhibition where the facade of the mosque was built. The aspect of the mosque being a facade is symbolic in that the exterior is misleading to what the interior holds. The Panopticon similarly is a facade, the

watchtower is made so that those on the outside never know if anyone is inside watching just as the facade of the Mosque which is misleading to what is really inside