

INTRODUCTION: FANTASY AND THE ARAB-WESTERN  
ENCOUNTER IN IMAGE AND TEXT

by Andrew Long

Andrew Long is guest editor of this issue of *culture critique* and Visiting Assistant Professor in the doctoral program in Cultural Studies at the Claremont Graduate University. He has published articles about politics in the middle east, Orientalism and cultural studies, pamphleteering and modernity, and on authors ranging from Richard Burton to George Orwell. He is currently working on *Reading Arabia*, his book about British Orientalism and the rise of mass culture, 1880 to 1920.

**culture critique**, the online journal of the cultural studies program at CGU, situates culture as a terrain of political and economic struggle. The journal emphasizes the ideological dimension of cultural practices and politics, as well as their radical potential in subverting the mechanisms of power and money that colonize the life-world.

<http://ccjournal.cgu.edu>

© 2009

The idea for a special issue of *culture critique* on Fantasy and the Arab-Western Encounter was hatched over a series of afternoon coffees in Claremont during the summer of 2008. Henry Krips, the founding editor of the journal was interested in my research and thought it topical given the two wars and academic trends. He was especially interested in my emphasis on mass culture and Orientalism at the fin de siècle, then how my take on cultural studies, grounded in both the Frankfurt School and Lacanian psychoanalysis, was the best way to grasp the many issues at hand. We eventually sent out a statement and letter of invitation to various academics and writers, asking them to contribute. Admittedly the letter was doctrinal and undoubtedly turned off some and possibly frightened others. Still, when the current group of contributors agreed and sent in their essays I realized that this was to be more than a special issue.

Now, perhaps the problem with the title and theme of the issue is the keyword, fantasy. In everyday parlance fantasy is not something we take seriously. In another time we might have referred to fantasy as false consciousness, but these days it simply refers to the delusions of the abject and unfortunate. However, this usage, whether in everyday contexts or academic discussions is rooted in a truth discourse. That is, there is a "truth" which fantasy clouds – serious people and significant scholars chase this truth and leave fantasy to the abject and paranoid. Or something like that.

We could not disagree more. For us fantasy is always social and, following Freud, Lacan and others, it is constitutive. Indeed, fantasy is especially constitutive with respect to everyday life in modern times. Whether we know it as the political unconscious, a social imaginary, or whatever, there must be some "idea", and usually not a material "truth" which guides and inspires societies. There is more than force in play today, a point Reich made years ago about the pleasures of fascism. Of course the wars, massacres, torture and occupation which the Arab and Muslim world have recently suffered are all real and the policy of the West and its proxies. This

is undeniable and material. Yet, those photos from Abu Ghraib were uncanny, eerily familiar, the sort of images that the Cannibal Club of the Royal Geographic Society might have passed around over one hundred years ago. Do we have an Orientalist unconscious after all? How is it that soldiers from southern and Midwestern states in the U.S., with little formal knowledge about the Arab and Muslim world, seem to draw on the fantasies of Orientalists from another time and place? And then, these shocking images seem to have disappeared from public discourse. Like those nineteenth century travelers who disliked contemporary Arabs and longed for past populations of legend, as though these real people were squatters and interlopers, so we will not let anything interfere with our Orientalist fantasy.

Yet when we turn to Orientalism, we must bring in Edward Said's work on the topic. And for Said, fantasy does not have an especially prominent place, though he does go out of his way to interpret the individual fantasies of Orientalists such as Richard Burton and T.E. Lawrence. Yet this emphasis is only local and individual, and does not engage the role which fantasy about the Orient plays in the constitution of the West, for itself. This is where Alain Grosrichard's work on Montesquieu and other eighteenth century philosophers comes in, as we noted in our original statement.

Of course, if Said did not emphasize the social and constitutive function of fantasy, he certainly argued that the Orient is a necessary idea for the West. Here more than anywhere else he lays out the special relationship of the idea of the Orient—the "fact" is an elusive matter after all—for the West. He takes a long view, and rightly so, since this discourse is easily traced back to the Crusades and the Bible. And we should not forget that it was in the medieval Islamic world that much of ancient Greek and Roman culture was preserved while Europe went through what we commonly refer to as the Dark Ages.

It is a mistake to draw out a seamless connection, a kind of Orientalist tradition, without acknowledging breaks and ruptures. So, our emphasis in this issue is to show how Orientalism is

critical for our, Western engagement with Modernity. First, the Orient is understood, as Said reminds us many times, as a timeless place. Timeless yet pre-modern. Nothing ever changes. So against this idea the West proposes itself as modern and future looking. Perhaps this point seems too simplistic, but it is far too prevalent in everyday political and academic discourse in the U.S. these days. A couple of other points need to be made. Clearly the West and the Orient are binaries and a way of not only seeing but actively structuring the world population. Still a meaningful critique must be immanent and understand Orientalism in its own terms. What we learn from such close reading or immanent critique is that the Orient is not only a determinate negation—this is what the West is not—but also, a space onto which are displaced many social issues and problems of the West. It is not just that the East is a career (*Tancred*) or that the plot dilemma of *Great Expectations* is resolved on one page when Pip goes to work in Cairo. It is as though the common anxieties of the modern world, everyday life under global capitalism, are resolved in, alternately, the languor and furor of life in the Orient. Thus the alienation and existential angst of Doughty's desert finds poetic form in Eliot's *Wasteland* and *Unreal City*, while the teeming masses of Western slums are relocated to the streets of Damascus, Beirut and Cairo, either as scenic types—the water seller, the musician, the prostitute—or as sectarian massacre. In so many ways Bedouins and Street Arabs are true moderns in different dress.

The essays in this issue address Orientalism in several forms, from text to image, and even song. The point is that Orientalism works in all these forms today as it has for over a century. Taking up this position, and in a brilliant and wide ranging interview Ali Behdad lays out the case for the study of Orientalism in literary and cultural studies, while also emphasizing its importance with respect to post colonial studies. His current interest and research concerns Orientalist photography, which he was pursuing as a Getty Fellow when this interview was conducted. Working with the recently acquired Jacobson collection of photographs he noted several times just how important the image of the Orient has been. Indeed, at one point he notes

that shortly after the mass production potential of the Daguerreotype was realized some wrote that this was most useful for documentation of the Orient. With reference to postcards, *carte de visites*, studio posed photographs and pseudo-ethnographic images, Behdad argues that the image supplanted the text—in this instance the texts were the Galland and Burton translations of *One thousand and One Nights*—and then shifted again as the image became a moving image.

To that end Todd McGowan argues that recent Orientalism, whether in the form of the Abu Ghraib photographs or in various Hollywood films, represents a break with previous forms of the discourse. McGowan points to examples in early to late 20<sup>th</sup> century film, beginning with Valentino's *The Sheik*, where the Arab is, well, an active and lusty male figure, desirous and dangerous. With the second Iraq war, and in contemporary films such as *Iron Man*, *The Kingdom* and the TV series *24*, he tells us, there is a break as the Arab male is now passive, perversely the object of our desire. Taking his argument further, McGowan points out that this new Arab of Western fantasy is a kind of naïf, one who is scandalized if not threatened by Western women and their sexuality. He understands this to be a development of the older paradigm, where we—the West—enjoyed vicariously, triangulated through the Arab/Muslim who enjoys. Now, anesthetized towards our own paradigms of sexuality and pleasure, we can only enjoy through an Arab/Muslim who finds Western sexuality to be new and dangerous. Following Grosrichard and Dolar's understanding of the dual (dominant and submissive/potent and impotent) character of the Oriental Despot, McGowan shows us that once again we need this Oriental Fantasy Man, whether he is active or passive.

Yet it is the "Arab" woman, with her sensuality and over the top erotic appeal, who has so haunted and featured in western fantasies. Of course in legend there was Jezebel and Dido, both women of Tyre, and even Venus who emerged from the sea on the eastern coast of Cyprus but in modern times we have fixated on the harem and the Oriental despot. In particular the West has taken pleasure in fantasies of ravishment and rape as in the erstwhile early 19<sup>th</sup> century porn

novel *The Lustful Turk*, and in the more palatable melodrama of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as *The Garden of Allah*, *The White Prophet* and the oft-filmed *Four Feathers*. And in mass culture there were the numerous and anonymous Arab women's faces and exposed bodies on postcards and in photographs sold across Europe and Great Britain in the hundreds of thousands. In her essay on fantasy and the "Eastern" and "Western" woman Ellie Ragland explains the constitutive function of fantasy according to Lacanian theory and then explores how this mediates the fantasy from the standpoint of each. Her point is that there is an "Eastern" woman's fantasy about "Western" women, and as different and contrary as it might seem, there is finally a common position within which both are boxed. Both fantasies are, as she writes, finally ways of structuring the real from the standpoint of woman, she who must find her way on her own. As Ragland states, the differences between women, Arab or "White" American must finally be the basis of equality. Moreover these differences are, in the last instance, differences of class, both here and there.

Raymond Williams' phrase "structure of feeling" is apt in this discussion. It is both a theory on Williams's part, and a hermeneutic tool. In his essay on Orientalism in twentieth century theater Robert Myers quotes Williams and explains that this phrase is the totality which the artist draws upon for her or his part. Briefly stated this means the vision of the artist where that vision might be understood as a recognizable whole with limits and contours which the reader or interpreter might discern. Moreover, as a structure and as a feeling—a kind of paraphrase of Wordsworth's "thought as feeling and feeling as thought"—we clearly grasp that for Williams this vision is operative. In another context we see it as constitutive. Myers plays out this idea to show how Orientalism has functioned in various well known plays, both British and American, in big and small ways. His examples are from the work of Tennessee Williams, Kenneth Anger, George Bernard Shaw, and Lorraine Hansberry, a range of different writers from different social experiences in different times. Myers demonstrates just how ingrained these ideas

are, as simply an epithet here or an “Othello” there, and the result is a convincing argument that we do not have to look to stated examples to find Orientalism. And as with our statement, Myers argues that these references have more to do with American and British cultural self definition than, say North Africa, Egypt, or Syria.

In his piece on contemporary images which concern the Arab and Muslim world Daniel Drennan sets out to try to see from the “other side”, not as a discourse of “truth” but as a tactic. He does so using a methodology of mediation, in the tradition of Raymond Williams work in *Marxism and Literature*, in order to upend not only those who present these images, but then those who speak for the “other”. He calls the latter group a Voice, and one we know well as that of American liberalism. Drennan wants to know just what resistance really is with these variables in mind, and then how the oppressed on earth might go about resisting. His answer is not direct, as he would have it, but he tells us it is finally to be found in the creative act and what this means for a communal or collective, and most of all a living culture, not the commodities which are sold under the aegis of liberal notions of resistance. Drennan takes up some interesting cases from mass culture—and appropriately so—for his argument, including that of the shoe throwing Iraqi journalist, the recent cover of the New Yorker, and Rachel Ray’s fashion accessories.

If we have focused on the fantasy of the West about the East, that is deliberate. Analysis must start at home, after all. Indeed, common and well meaning notions of postcolonial studies only replicate the very same racism which they place in the dock, albeit in “nicer” ways and forms. Too often we still seek native informants and the “truth” of the non-West when there is no way that we might think outside the same tainted language and thought forms. In part to address this dilemma Huda Fakhreddine tells us just how one of the two divas of the Arab world, Umm Kulthoum (the other diva is Lebanon’s Fairouz), drew simultaneously on modern means of production and distribution, the Arab pop music industry, and then pre modern sources for her

work. In particular Fakhreddine unpacks just how Umm Kulthoum interpreted and produced a classical Arabic poem, “Nahj al Burdah”, by Ahmad Shawqi. Her close reading of the song and the text is brilliant and most insightful when we consider its context, that of Nasser’s Egypt and the Pan-Arab nationalist movement of the Cold War era.

I believe this issue is the start of something good, that is the joining of cultural studies and the critique of Orientalism. Of course this must extend to literary studies and to area studies as well, and that is my hope. Again, the analysis of the fantasy must start at home, within English and French literature programs, and classes on Hollywood cinema.

I am especially grateful to my colleagues in Cultural Studies at the Claremont Graduate University, Eve Oishi and Henry Krips, for trusting me and providing support during the organization and production of this issue. Of course this issue would have been impossible without the production assistance provided by editorial collective members, Derik Casper and Kevin Riel who were professional and engaged. And I was very lucky to work with the most talented Tamar Salibian—her top film and editing skills are apparent in the high quality of the interview tape. Finally, many thanks to the authors for their effort and most of all their patience. This issue took some time to produce, but I feel strongly that it was worth it.