

Orientalism Redeployed: art as self-representation and self-critique

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Abstract

Museum curatorship is not a neutral scientific practice. It is embedded in and shaped by the academic, public and political discourses surrounding it. In turn, curatorial activism may respond to these forces through intervention in wider debates occurring beyond the museum or gallery. Taking as our theoretical context the legacy of Edward W. Said's study, *Orientalism* and its call for 'Western' reflexivity in the politics of representation of the Islamic Near East, we have argued elsewhere (Bryce and Carnegie, 2013) that institutions and their staff do inhabit and act upon a discursive field that corresponds to that book's priorities and agenda. This previous work focused upon nationally legitimated UK museums' presentation of cultural objects produced in the Middle East to a 'Western' audience and demonstrated institutions' counter hegemonic responses to discourses surrounding the so-called 'war on terror'. The second phase of this research, presented in this paper, looks at beyond the museum to galleries, which, since 2001, have mounted special exhibitions of so-called 'Orientalist' art produced largely in the 'West' in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This genre depicted the Islamic 'East' from various perspectives, variously romantic, erotic, violent and anthropological, sometimes sympathetic, but always as an exotic 'elsewhere' with little sense of the cultural and religious continuities the West shared with it. This, then, was art produced by and for the 'West' in the early stages of its imperial interest in the Middle East. We argue that amidst the current contested discourses circulating in the 'West' concerning intervention in the Middle East, that this art is being deployed instrumentally as a lens through which 'Western' visitors might reflect on the problematic power relations present in the art itself at the time of its production and initial reception. This, in turn, is intended by gallery curators to elicit a cultural self-critique amongst visitors, not simply in historical terms, but also in ethical terms related to the policies of their current governments. Thus, the national or nationally sanctioned gallery can act as a space that both constructs realities and contradicts or challenges a society's seemingly fixed point of reference.

Latent and Manifest Orientalism

As a praxis for the generation of knowledge about the Orient, Said argues, Orientalism played a vital role, not only in the discursive appropriation of the Orient (since only the rational Western subject could decide *what* should be known about the Orient and *how* that knowledge should be generated and articulated), but also its (the Orient's) material appropriation. Said (1978: 206) argues that two types of Orientalism exist: a *latent* set of assumptions taking the form of 'an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity', and a *manifest* set of stated views about the history, languages, religions etc of the Orient. He goes on to identify a conjunction between latent and manifest enabled by the material reality of expanding Western power in the Orient . Until the nineteenth century, the academic practise of Orientalism (as distinct from the wider discursive formation that Said later identifies), consisted of a largely hermeneutical relation between the Orientalist and the object of his study. The task was to stand at some remove from the Orient and to reduce its obscurity 'by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard to reach object'. Yet, as the nineteenth century progressed, this distance was reduced materially through expanding 'commercial, political and other existential encounters between East and West'. This conjunction, Said tentatively claims, resulted from the advisory role undertaken by some Orientalists with respect to Western governments' material engagements with the Orient. The Orientalist's hermeneutic relationship with the Orient moved to one in which 'the Orientalist could be regarded as the special agent of Western power as it attempted policy vis-à-vis the Orient' (Said: 1978; 222-223).

However, the diffuse, decentred, manifestations and operations of power, in the Foucauldian tradition, Bhabha (1994: 102) argues, do not sit completely at ease with Said's notions of *latent* and *manifest* Orientalisms. Bhabha conceives of the former as the 'unconscious repository of fantasy,

imaginative writings and essential ideas' and the latter is 'the historically and discursively determined, diachronic aspect'. He (*ibid*: 103), sees a 'problem with Said's use of Foucault's concepts of power and discourse' when Orientalism seems to be constructed as a more 'symmetrical or dialectical relation' in which the dominant and dominated parties are more apparently recognisable (and recognise themselves) as such. Yeğenoğlu, (1998: 23) emphasises the importance of *latent* Orientalism in providing the 'enunciative capacity' upon which discrete instances of *manifest* Orientalism depend. She states that, 'this permanent, consistent, systematic, and articulated knowledge of Orientalism establishes a discursive field ... through which any concrete Oriental detail could be made sense of' (*ibid*). What Said's dual notion of latent and manifest Orientalism draws attention to is the importance of the *subjective position* that must be occupied before a given Orientalist statement or representation may be made. Yeğenoğlu (1998: 3) calls this the sovereign position of the Western subject, but qualifies this to emphasise that she is not conceiving of a pre-discursive 'essence or uniformity nor to a metaphysical self-presence ... but the *process of constitution of identity* ... a process of coming into being, of invention and of fashioning of a place called "Western" in the Foucauldian sense of 'subjectivation'(emphasis added). Therefore, I now wish to focus attention on the formation and historical location of that particular subjective position.

Art museums and the culture of aesthetics

Fraser notes how art from the 19th century onwards became dominated by aesthetics. She determines that 'the aesthetic discipline institutionalised in the museum has been exemplified by the aestheticism, silence and stillness associated with art museums until very recently'. In this way art was different from the objects of everyday life and indeed the role of art museums was to create spaces where such objects could be safe from the noise of everyday life in an increasingly industrialised society (2006:142). Art museums and the art they

contained were initially intended to be understood on aesthetic terms by those visitors able to access their meanings (Bourdieu 1984). Bennett (2006) argues that 'exhibition practices of Western Art museums have functioned as mechanisms of social triage - that is sorting people into different groups and arranging them hierarchically - they have also operated along racial lines as well as class lines'. At the same time he notes that 'in other kinds of museums' 'the Western or white self' is not concerned with class distinction but is defined against the other cultures being represented (p55). While he argues 'that different types of gallery and museums are best understood as distinctive cultural machineries, through the tension they generate within the self, have operated as a means for balancing the tensions of modernity', art museums were founded with different intentions and for different audiences than 'historymaking' or other kinds of artefact-led museums (p56).

Much of Orientalist art under consideration in this article can be viewed as a product of such thinking albeit it represents Western artists journeys of selfhood explored through the frame of other cultures. King (1999:13) highlights the Eurocentric bias of much Orientalist Historiography, which makes interpretation of work they produced problematic in the present although he later argues that the 'expunging or exorcizing the mystical aspects of Western culture post-Enlightenment thought has also tended to project these same characteristics onto 'the Mystic East.' (p. 33) and it can be argued that this manipulation of the East as muse offered artists a way to rise above the 'boundedness' and constraints of rational Western culture.

Art museums and changing attitudes to 'high culture'

In contemporary society visual representation is 'increasing influential in shaping our views of the world' (Chaplin 1994:1) and Hackford-Jones and Roberts (2005) determine that 'changing definitions of the self (of both the individual and the state)...find expression in visual culture (p4). The predominance of visual forms is not confined to those areas previously deemed 'high culture' but is evident within popular culture and its expressive forms of film and television, media and increasingly the internet. Within this fast changing society Hanquinet and Savage (2012) note that 'art museums have shifted from being central bastions of 'high culture' to become part of a post-modern commercial complex offering an 'experience' (p42). Such art experiences are now commonplace in major cities as governments invest in gallery spaces and are increasingly seeking to focus on global markets.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) determines that the Guggenheim Bilbao, signalled a sea-change in inter-governmental global art relationships when:

‘instead of recycling a dead industrial economy as heritage by making it into an exhibition of itself, the city purchased a Guggenheim franchise and became a Guggenheim outpost along with Venice, Berlin, and Las Vegas...Now on the map of World Cities and part of the grand tour of our time. Guggenheim Bilbao remaps not only the museum but its political economy (p37).

While the ‘Guggenheim affect’ remains subject to debate, the development of major new art gallery and museum complexes worldwide continues unabated. At the time of writing the Finish Government are again in talks with Guggenheim to set up a waterfront outpost in Helsinki (2014). Elsewhere, as a consequence of inter-governmental relationships, the forthcoming Louvre Abu Dhabi is being described as:

‘a universal museum in the Arab world. Its very name is testament to what is an unprecedented alliance between the United Arab Emirates and France, through one of the highest level of cultural cooperation ever created between two sovereign countries’(<http://louvreabudhabi.ae/en/collection/Pages/a-universal-museum-.aspx>).

Despite the tendency for this and other developments to be termed ‘outposts’, these modern museum complexes, while a testament to cultural diplomacy, with their aims to be ‘universal’ in scope and vision, are forcing reappraisals of ‘domestic’ art in the modern world and indeed shaping the potential for ‘global’ art. This constitutes a power shift evidenced from the onset by the Arab world funding these ventures on their terms. It is in the context of these costly and showcasing developments that we consider how this shift impacts on Orientalist art both within the nations that the artists under scrutiny here represent, and also within these emerging complexes.

Contemporary debates in object ownership and access

As museums and galleries increasingly focus on facilitating ‘cross-cultural exchange’...according respect and recognition to previously marginalised or prepressed histories and cultures’ (Bennett 2006:59), this has inevitably led to discussions about ownership of objects and repatriation of objects rather than the conditions under which such works were created (p59). This is evident in ‘Museums Serve Every Nation’ debates which, make it clear that whilst ‘objects and monumental works were installed decades and even

centuries ago in museums through Europe and America were acquired under conditions that are not comparable with current ones' (p247-8) their continued existence within the cultural institutions that housed them over this time means they have strong associations with the heritage of those nations. The above words drawn from the Declaration of European and American Museums directors and printed in full in *Museum Frictions* (2007:247-8) go onto argue that 'their ' museums offer a valuable context for displaced objects.

This is an important point in the context of this paper for a number of reasons. Despite the 'tactical museology' (Kratz and Karp 2005:25) of the statement which in itself has courted controversy, the arguments that objects are defined, interpreted and understood within the context of the museums and galleries, and by extension cultures that 'own' them suggests that Orientalist Art here understood as Western generated images of the East can be interpreted within the European context in-situ and can be 'owed' and reappraised and re-envisioned within the emerging 'Orientalist' museums in the Near East. Can these arguments about ownership equally be applied to 'the East'? Does the possession of these works within the context of for example the Orientalist Art Museum, Qatar, allow overtime for their meaning to be changed, their context understood not as trophies of the East, that fulfilled a Colonial artistic imaginary where the East was muse to the masculine gaze, but as interesting reflections on place created not of the 'other' but by the 'other' where artist becomes object? If so it suggests that 'ownership' is claimed not just by physically holding works but, by having the power to exercise in order to interpret to reflect and create 'new' dominant narratives (Bennett 1995). In this way can 'visual repatriation' (MacDonald 2005:173) can be achieved. This reappraisal of works previously understood within a particular context ie as essentially British works of art can be reassessed on the basis of new knowledge that arises from the changing context.

Grincheva (2013:40) drawing on Bennett (1995) argues that museums have always had, and indeed *exercised* the power to interpret and create meanings for the objects in their care. In the case of nationally funded or endorsed museums, fear that misrepresentations of other cultures 'can distort meanings and alter facts, encouraging dangerous and destructive attitudes in the national community towards the other cultures' can make staff wary. For this reason, Crang and Tolia-kelly argue that the nationally funded and internationally significant British Museum 'appeals to a putatively de-ethnicised sense of identity'(2010:2316) which can function as a meeting point of institutional and community values, merged with those of curatorial staff (Bryce and Carnegie 2013).

Reappraising orientalist art within the UK

Despite this apparent willingness for museums and galleries to address contemporary issues and debates within society, see for example exhibitions devoted to the holocaust or more recently the reframing of slavery, Edwards and Mead (2013) note that colonialism remains more problematic simply because of the extent to which the colonial past has shaped contemporary Britain and France. They argue that ‘the narrative of the colonial past lacks discursive unity, apart closure and moral certainty’....’Above all the ‘colonial’ cannot be safely contained in the past (p20). Therefore, it is interesting to observe that in recent years, attempts to reclaim Orientalist art from the stores to create self-conscious exhibitions acceptable to gallery, curatorial and art critics sensitivities around artistic quality, and amidst embarrassment of what such works might stand for within colonial history, is happening seemingly in tandem with such developments overseas.

There is almost a cliché that Orientalist art has been viewed as ‘bad art’ which in part serves to explain the banishment to the basement of collections although it is evident in reviews of ‘The lure of the East’ (2008) that being able to label it as such makes it easier to deal with the problematics of subject matter and the colonial gaze. Thus it is twice damned but reviewers while paying lip service to these tropes, thereafter feel free to contract them as they appraise the art afresh. The Socialist Review for example draws on the context and content to see them as flawed historic documents: ‘The Lure of the East includes dozens of paintings from this period, none of them great works of art, but fascinating none the less as a document of British attitudes to "the Orient"’.

Similarly, Johnathon Jones, in a rare 5* review in the Guardian, determines that:

‘None of these painters is a great artist, and yet the exhibition is full of great art’. In Holman Hunt's view of the Sphinx at Giza, he shows us the famous ancient Egyptian sculpture from behind. We do not recognise it; we are just looking at a strange geological formation, sculpted perhaps by windblown sand. A familiar view of power relationships in art - the idea that representing the "other" is necessarily oppressive - becomes unrecognisable here’ (<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/jun/04/art.tatebritain>).

And

‘At first glance, you might conclude that when a Victorian artist like William Holman Hunt visited the Middle East, what he saw was indeed predetermined by imperial fantasy. In his painting of a Cairo street scene, a young man playfully tries to pull away a young woman's veil - it is a somewhat shallow view of Islam. And yet spend a little time in this show, and you will find these Victorians surprisingly sensitive travelling companions’ (<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/jun/04/art.tatebritain>).

What is clear is the degree of uncertainty felt by contemporary critics and indeed academics, curators about how they should feel when reappraising works that so fully reflect a period in history that Edwards and Mead (2013) agree remains problematic in the ‘colonial present’. Interestingly, Jones (2008) praises this exhibition because ‘Of all the attempts by Britain's museums to take on the divisive issues of world culture, this is the best, because it is the least platitudinous. It provokes a complex response to a complex history’. This complexity that is easily reduced to cultural stereotyping is challenged by Hackford-Jones and Roberts (2005) in the *New Interventions in Art History* as they argue against ‘the stasis and fixidity of the colonial stereotype to examine the processes of translation that occur as artists, artworks, and iconic conventions shift across the boundaries between East and West (2005: 1). They argue that:

‘in recent years there has been a major shift, as Western Orientalist visual culture is resituated within an expanded field that encompasses non-Western artists and patrons. A reassessment of the Central terms in the Orientalist debate has gone hand in hand with this crucial project of historical recovery’ (p2).

They go on to note that these reassessments encompass not just art but are evidenced across visual cultures including photography, architecture, urban geography and museology mapping aspects of the colonial encounter and resulting in emerging body of work that creates new dialogues between ‘colonial’ institutions in contemporary society and local responses to works. This reappraisal of art created by Western artists that suggests that it can be viewed not just as expressions of European Colonial authority but as a ‘vehicle for indigenous self-expression’, (p2) offers a context for the interplay between the Orientalist art and exhibitions and institutional authority held in Western museums and galleries and that being re-framed within the contemporary and emerging galleries in the Near East.

The Embedding of ‘Saidian’ Discourse in Exhibition Promotion and Curatorial Practice

Hussein (2004, 231) wonders whether the legacy of Said’s writing, particularly *Orientalism*, ‘has any relevance beyond a limited audience of professors and graduate students – the mythical three thousand who read each other’s books’. This aligns with our question about whether the field of Saidian critique constitutes a self-perpetuating and self-referential academic ‘guild’ or whether its insights have percolated into the very organisational and institutional practises, such as museology, where the more widely distributed effects of representation and associated choices take place.

Certainly, we have found that direct association with Said’s work or the specific deployment of elements of the critique of Orientalism rarely emerges in explicit terms. However, the effects of that broad critique do seem present insofar as they have emerged in a shifting discursive framework within which the Orient ‘must’ be represented in the West and to a Western audience in a reflexive manner. This representational frame acknowledges the problematic history of such practises as well as contemporary political conditions, which give their appearance particular urgency and resonance.

Cultural diversity emerges, for example, not in the Orientalist tradition of the sovereignty of the active, discerning and unidirectional Western gaze, but in a manner in which the agency and voice of the Orient is often foregrounded. ‘Cultural diversity is a source of richness for all nations. This exhibition comes at a most propitious time, as Turkey’s aspirations towards membership of the European family of nations in the European Union are centre stage’, announces the foreword to the ‘Turks’ catalogue in remarks attributed to Turkey’s Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip *Erdoğan* (Roxburgh, 2005,

9). This is bracketed on the same page by comments attributed to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, commenting that 'their [Turks'] long and complex journey through Central Asia, the Middle East and, of course, Europe is something we should understand and reflect upon' (*ibid*). Here the claim of a national narrative is intertwined with contemporary European institutional aspirations and legitimised by two of its leading political proponents, representing the source of the loan objects and the location of their presentation respectively. The function of the exhibition, in this respect, is stated in explicit terms by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, President of the Royal Academy: 'Now in 2005, as the important and positive international debate concerning Turkey's relationship with the European Union continues, the Royal Academy is proud to offer to the British and international public an ... extraordinary experience'. (*ibid*: 11). This is reinforced once more in remarks attributed to the exhibition's corporate sponsors, Jim Leng, Chairman of Corus: 'Turkey is on the brink of a new chapter of its history and could soon be part of Europe. It is fitting that a country whose borders have expanded and contracted over the last millennium is being celebrated in a major European city at a time when our cultural ties are growing ever stronger' (*ibid*, p 14).

Here, both the Orient and the grateful Western recipient of the loan of its cultural wealth can be seen to support the former's claim of 'right' (Bryce, 2009) to the very European subjectivity or cultural area that so long held it in abeyance, through the prism of Orientalism, as a distant object of scrutiny. Said (1978, 44) notes that a key feature of Orientalist discourse is not only the spatial division of West from Orient, but the unidirectional nature of cultural intercourse between the two where, 'the Westerner's privilege [is to] penetrate ... give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery'. Yet, in the case of the Turks' exhibition, a Turko-centric 'grand narrative' is

referred to in which Europe becomes but one stage, rather than a necessary diversion away from an Oriental past to Western 'reason and modernity'.

'The thousand year journey of the Turks from Central Asia to the shores of the Bosphorus and into Europe ... the objects selected emphasise the adaptability and sensitivity of the Turks to other cultures', declares another corporate sponsor, Ergun Ozen, President and CEO of Garanti Bank (*ibid*: 15). Here, we see not only the agency of the Orient in setting the conditions in which its cultural wealth is loaned and displayed, but in articulating the spatial and teleological narratives that such representational practice announces. That this takes place in, and is endorsed by, a Western institution and its political establishment may not be a direct response to Said's call for sympathy, dialogue and cultural symmetry between Occident and Orient, or indeed the erasure of that very binary, but it perhaps pays its symbolic respects to the discursive conditions made possible by that critique.

We find 'Turks' to be distinct from the other exhibitions considered here because of the close and explicit alignment between the aims and values of the exhibition and institution, as reflected in its own published material proffered for public consumption, and a political project supported by both the lending and host countries' governments. This close association is not as explicit in the other exhibitions. Indeed, the discourse articulated within them appears to reflect ambivalence towards, if not outright opposition to, political relationships between the host exhibiting country and the locations, cultures and histories represented.

The Orientalist apprehension of historical events and the use made of them as an explanatory function for its reductive binary is recognised, and responded to, in the justification for mounting the Forgotten Empire exhibition. Neil MacGregor states that,

'the exhibition clearly gives the lie to the common western perception that the Achaemenid Empire was a nest of despotism and tyranny that was swept away by Alexander' (Curtis and Tallis, 2005, 6). The perspective of the lending institution is articulated by Mohammad-Reza Karga (*ibid*), Director, National Museum of Iran, and is aligned with the political discourse related to culture emerging from the liberal regime of President Mohammad Khatami (Baum and O'Gorman, 2010), in power when negotiations between the British museum and the Iranian government pursuant to the 'Forgotten Empire' exhibition began, associating this with an aspirational call for certain generally held institutional values. The Director states that the museum,

possesses examples of the culture and art of ancient Iran dating from the period discussed by Samuel Huntington in his bestselling book *Clash of Civilisations*. The National Museum has tried to develop a new dialogue between civilisations at the beginning of the third millennium AD...we hope that the results of these endeavours will reflect the role of museums today.

Moreover, the exhibition is presented as a response to what the interviewee (S4) called a

Western image of ancient Persia filtered through an Ancient Greek lens – using Greek sources ... this wider Western world view favours the ancient Greek past. So the purpose of this exhibition was to let ancient Persia speak on its own terms.

This comment was a reiteration of remarks from the foreword to the associated exhibition catalogue (Curtis and Tallis, 2005, 9), which states,

These accounts are inevitably written from a Greek rather than a Persian perspective, and it is because of them that the conflict is often represented as a contest between freedom and democracy on the one hand, and tyranny and despotism on the other. One of the aims of the exhibition will be to redress this negative Eurocentric view of the ancient Persians.

The subject, when probed on the question of interpretation of objects both explicitly in the presentation and captioning in the exhibition space and associated publications, and implicitly in the choices made about which objects to present, in which order and association, claimed that no deliberate framework for interpretation was in place. We find this difficult to support, however. The fact that an effort was made to move away from a Western-centric (insofar as the West appropriates the Greek past and sources) mode of representation and to let the 'objects [Orient] speak for themselves' indicates an approach to curatorship that is at least informed by the general diffusion of Saidian ideas into professional practice.

This indirect engagement with Said's ideas was also articulated by (S1), working on the 'Beyond the Palace Walls' exhibition at the National Museums of Scotland. The binary problematic at the core of Orientalism was reflected by Mikhail B. Piotrovsky, Director of the State Hermitage Museum, the lending institution, who stated that 'the world has never truly been divided, and today's primitive, one-sided globalisation is just one of many historical trends' (Piotrovsky and Pritula, 2006: xv). Yet, one interviewee from this exhibition (S2) recalled that, 'objects were chosen in collaboration with Russian colleagues who were adamant that this was not an exhibit on Islam but just about art itself'. Nonetheless, (S2) 'insisted that some explanation about Islam was necessary and,

therefore, art history was related to some limited explanation of Islam itself'. The interesting dimension here, that might merit further exploration, is the dynamics and possible tension related to representational narrative between two institutions, neither located in the Muslim world, lending and receiving Islamic cultural objects.

Subject (S1) stated that 'I did not read anything... don't like being influenced by other things that people have written. Makes you fearful - not healthy'. Yet the subject also iterated an aim that is consistent with Said's ideas, that the exhibition, 'wanted to show parallels with Europe - show civilisations' ability to absorb, communicate and be influenced by other cultures'. In this sense, the subject articulates the very Saidian call in *Orientalism* for an understanding of Islamic cultures as fluid, dynamic, porous and historically active rather than static, impervious to the absorption and self-generation of the conditions for historical agency.

Interestingly, interviewee (S2) offered particularly rich insights based upon the comparative experience of subsequently working at a museum of Islamic art in the Gulf region. This interviewee did have some direct familiarity with Said's work and was able to relate this to individual experience as a member of an expatriate community where, 'creating "the other" in their own image' often seemed to be a response to the culture of the Gulf region and the wider Arab-Islamic milieu. In professional terms, (S2) noted 'neo-orientalist methodologies at work in museums in the West but more especially in the Islamic world itself – a result of importation of western expertise' in the museological field. This may emerge, as in Guague's (2001) analysis of post-independence museums in Africa, in different but equally essentialist tropes that claim a timeless, ahistoric virtue for the represented/representing culture and nation-state. (S2)'s own response was to 'ask how can that kind of Orientalism be avoided in my own

approach? ... try to be reflective and self-aware of perception of my own cultural position ... be open and sympathetic to the present of the region not simply its past'. To illustrate this point (S2) related an episode of meeting a Western Egyptologist 'who hated modern Egypt! Orientalism is alive and kicking in many ways!'

(S2) noted that the exhibition in Edinburgh, while not specifically timed as such, 'was well received given the contemporary context' (an allusion to the 'post 9/11/War on Terror' discourse circulating at popular and political levels) and that it 'did provide a useful forum for discussion considering media images about Islam at the time'. Indeed, given this contextual opportunity, (S2) expressed regret that 'it [the exhibition] had not been risk taking enough – could have been even more so!'.

Perhaps the least explicitly politically 'engaged' exhibition in discursive terms was 'Shah Abbas'. In the Director's Foreword in the British Museum's accompanying catalogue, Neil MacGregor stated that '... it has been of the greatest importance to Europeans to study and understand the history and culture of Iran. This exhibition will, we hope, contribute to that process' (Canby, 2009, 3). In terms of the reception of Said's ideas, purchase was similarly uncertain. The influence of Said's work seemed to be 'felt', if not always directly engaged with deliberately. (S3) associated with 'Shah Abbas' noted that 'Said and his legacy were not a major influence' although she knew the work and 'was already working in this way prior to learning about Said'. What this indicates is a general discursive frame inhabited by Said's ideas. An outline of Said's critique was not offered to the subject, yet (S3) felt able to claim both no direct engagement with the actual book while yet working in a fashion consistent with its ideas in terms of the aims and ethics of representation.

Access was granted to an evaluation report on 'Shah Abbas' commissioned by the

British Museum. From this, interesting visitor insights were gleaned that were not available to us in relation to the other exhibitions. These seemed to indicate the expectation of a more overtly political stance and content than the material offered above. For example, 'visitors wanted more modern-day context and some were surprised by the apolitical tone ... a significant proportion of the audience was motivated to gain a better understanding of modern-day Iran, particularly in light of the country's recent history ... Many visitors were driven to the exhibition by a wish to understand the modern-day political situation of Iran, obviously a fairly topical issue at present. There was, thus, a feeling of frustration that the exhibition did not relate more of its content to the modern-day context' (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2009). This indicates an expectation amongst visitors of association with current discursive conditions related to Iran and that museums, under certain circumstances, should be overtly 'political' spaces in both presentational and experiential senses.

Concluding Remarks

We maintain that these exhibitions were of specific associated importance in terms of their content and the political discourses circulating in the period in which they were mounted. Visitor figures were not available to us but, based upon comments by interviewees (S1, S2 and S3), we know they were lower than for other exhibitions constructed as a series of reviews of world cultures and great rulers, such as the British Museum's 'First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army' in 2008, which seemed to capture the public imagination differently and were perhaps apprehended in a different discursive context. Sight, after all, should not be lost of the fact that Said (1978) specifically associates Orientalism with a European spatial and cultural anxiety about Islam and the Near East. Therefore, these exhibitions were perhaps not mounted to be,

or expected to be, unproblematically received public 'successes'. We do, however, exclude the 'Turks' exhibition from that conclusion since access to interview or visitor impact data was not available to support it. Interviews with British Museum and National Museums of Scotland staff did indicate that other factors related to the timeliness and ethical importance of mounting such exhibitions at a given time and in problematic discursive conditions vis-à-vis Islam and the Near East have been at play. Long lead in times also show a commitment to the subject matter of exhibitions which could have been cancelled at any time given changes in the political climate, yet were not.

We have argued that museums, and in particular nationally funded museums that ostensibly reflect societies' wider aims and cultural values, have experienced a culture change which is evident within the interpretation, representation and choice of exhibition topics, partners and, indeed, timing of the events themselves. In this sense, these institutions are historically mobile and responsive spaces with all of the potential for ideological complicity as well as contestation that implies. We determine that the 'democratic imaginary', is valorised, at least discursively, within museums in general, and the British Museum in particular (O'Neill 2004). This is expressed as both a willingness to openly engage with the often problematic present of cultures under scrutiny and, crucially, the problematic present of the *representing* culture and polity in which the institution is embedded. In this way such exhibitions can be seen to fit the wider remits of these nationally sanctioned spaces, where organisational remits and the principles of democracy are reflected back onto the cultures showcased therein.

We argue that Said's influence is wide reaching and has impacted on and changed, or at least influenced, the organisations' cultures despite, or indeed because of, the wider

political environment. Sometimes this influence seems more evident within the wider profession than is borne out at the level of individual comment from curatorial and management staff interviewed or interpreted within this paper. This, we suggest, offers evidence that the cultural change was foregrounded by Said and that the level of theoretical engagement varies according to role and seniority. These museums and their exhibitions function as overtly political spaces and yet are also able to construct visions and versions of cultures and peoples, from historical, even a-historical perspectives, that celebrate and showcase arts and crafts and highlight their contribution to civilisation. Mamdani (2002) maintains, the contingency of a situation, such as '9/11' or the 'War on Terror', emerging from actual historical conditions is subordinated to notions of the 'essence' of Islam (valorised or otherwise). This, then, is the power of a discourse in which Islam and the Near East as a politico-cultural context, becomes an 'essential' object of concern, whether in hostile or sympathetic terms, for a Western-identified subjectivity captivated by either its self-valorisation or self-critique.

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