

Introduction to part four

- Nicholas Mirzoeff

ONE OF THE DEFINING features of the modern era has been the experience of colonialism and slavery. The colonial efforts that began as soon as Columbus landed in the Caribbean, culminated in 1914 with a staggering 85 per cent of the globe being a colonial possession of one sort or another. The expansion of Europe was made possible in material terms by the Atlantic slave trade which flourished from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, forcibly removing ten to fifteen million Africans and killing many more in the attempt. Slavery was the unspoken guarantor of European racial supremacy. Its abolition led to the growth of 'scientific' racism that claimed to be able to prove the inferiority of other 'races' as a given fact. From the skull researches of Blumenbach in the eighteenth century to recent efforts to define blacks as genetically inferior, all such attempts have failed. It is impossible to create rational sense out of the irrationalities of racism. None the less, the futile quest to visualize racial difference was a key part of Western visual culture throughout the modern period and its effects are only too apparent in contemporary everyday life. Are there non-racialized ways of looking at people? This question has to be considered both within the former colonial powers and in the postcolonial nations themselves. Indeed, the African philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe has argued that the system of nations and colonies constructed by the Great Powers of the nineteenth century has only very recently come to a close. While many nations have had independence for decades, the end of the Cold War and the restructuring of global and local power that has accompanied it, make a truly postcolonial culture now possible for the first time. What will the *postcolony* look like to former colonizers and colonized?

(a) Visual colonialism

The colonial powers always claimed that their role centred on the three Cs enumerated by the missionary David Livingstone: commerce, Christianity and civilization. What the French called the 'civilizing mission' may seem like a mere excuse for the development of trade, but the colonialists took their self-appointed role very seriously. One of the consequences was an immensely productive visual colonialism, ranging from maps, photographs and paintings to collections of indigenous arts and crafts. These objects were assembled in vast collections like that of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the Museum of Mankind in London, the Musée du Congo Belge in Terveruen and so on. Collectively, the visual culture of colonialism had a significant role to play in both explaining and defining the colonial order.

The anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues that conventional anthropology, which grew in direct relation to European colonies, was so visually oriented that 'the ability to "visualise" a culture or society almost becomes synonymous for understanding it' (Fabian 1983). He names this system 'visualism', closely allied to the Enlightenment notion of observational science as defined by John Locke: 'The perception of the mind [is] most aptly explained by words relating to the sight'. For Fabian and other anthropologists, the solution to this problem lies in turning away from an exclusive reliance on visual observation to incorporate the evidence of all the senses. It is hard to agree completely with this conclusion. No researcher can actually function as a purely visual being, disregarding all other sensory information. Blaming the visual aspect to anthropology conveniently ignores that visualism aspired to create a racialized system of distinguishing humans by means of an evolutionary 'ladder' stretching from the 'primitive' to the 'civilized'.

In the extract from his fascinating essay 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order', Timothy Mitchell shows how nineteenth-century anthropological exhibitions were dedicated to displaying what he calls 'Orientalist reality' (Mitchell 1992). Orientalism was the name given to the Western study of the imaginary place known as the Orient that was based on the European colonies in the Middle East and North Africa but corresponded to a notion of the Orient as everything exotic and Other. This Orientalist reality was defined 'as the product of unchanging racial or cultural essences' which were held to be diametrically opposed to those of the 'West'. The Oriental was necessarily marked by an absence of certain Western qualities, which the repeated world's fairs and universal exhibitions of the period constantly sought to display to their visitors. Mitchell uses the accounts of Arab visitors to these exhibitions to argue that 'the world itself [was] being ordered up as an endless exhibition'. Middle Eastern visitors found it curious that Westerners were so obsessed with 'spectacle' – a word for which they could find no equivalent. No effort was spared to render the displays of Oriental life and culture 'realistic' but their value was only to serve as what one catalogue called 'an object lesson'. The lesson taught that, as Mitchell puts it,

objectiveness was a matter not just of visual arrangement around a curious spectator, but of representation. What reduced the world to

a system of objects was the way their careful organization enabled them to evoke some larger meaning, such as History or Empire or Progress.

These disparate meanings were in themselves linked by the discourse of race and racial difference. The exhibitionary order certainly relied on visualism but that was not its goal. It sought to use visual imagery to represent the grand narratives of the imperial world-view both to domestic populations and also to subject peoples.

The exhibitionary order of visual colonialism extended into the everyday lives of both Europeans and indigenous peoples. No product could seem more innocent and everyday than the humble bar of soap. In this extract from her acclaimed book *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock shows that the remarkable growth of soap as a commodity in the nineteenth century was due to its being perceived as the very essence of imperial culture: 'Soap flourished not only because it created and filled a spectacular gap in the domestic market but also because, as a cheap and portable domestic commodity, it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress' (McClintock 1995). A repeated theme in mass advertising of the period showed a black child being washed with soap in the first frame and then becoming white below the neck in the second. Imperialism literally washes away the stains of primitivism and 'the purification of the domestic body becomes a metaphor for the regeneration of the body politic'. Protestantism, commerce and civilization were thus all mobilized by the bar of soap, selling both the product and the political culture of imperialism.

Malek Alloula takes another everyday object – the postcard – and shows how it was a classic locus of Orientalism, which has long been a phantasm of the West: 'There is no phantasm, though, without sex, and in this Orientalism . . . a central figure emerges, the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem' (Alloula 1986). In Arabic *harim* means forbidden and thus also refers to the women's quarters of an Islamic household. Embroidering from four centuries of stories concerning the Imperial harem in Istanbul, the Western imagination had transformed every harem into a hotbed of sensuality and sexuality. France colonized Algeria in 1830, an operation documented by artists like Eugène Delacroix and later Horace Vernet. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the fine art genre of the odalisque, or Oriental nude, was displayed by a flood of popular postcards depicting the *algérienne*, the Algerian woman. Alloula, himself Algerian, studied this mass of now-discarded visual material in his volume *The Colonial Postcard* in which he attempts to 'return this immense postcard to its sender', showing how the veiled Algerian woman was a provocation to the photographer as her white clothing produced a 'whiteout', a technical failure of the photograph. The women's peephole gaze from behind the veil recalls the photographer's own gaze and in a sense 'the photographer feels photographed . . . he is dispossessed of his own gaze'. Perhaps predictably the response is clear: 'he will unveil the veiled and give figural expression to the forbidden'. Thus from the seemingly innocent postcards showing a woman slightly lifting her veil to the popular image of the half-naked Algerian woman there is hardly a step. The colonial gaze must see and make an exhibition of these women. The erotic effect, such as it is, is beside the point, for this is an operation of colonial power.

African art historian Suzanne Preston Blier gives a striking account of how the operations of colonial power transformed one evocative genre of African art, the Fon *bocio* figure (Blier 1995). In this region of West Africa, slavery did not disappear with the end of the Atlantic slave trade but continued domestically in order to supply labour for the palm-oil plantations that supplied the soap industry described by Anne McClintock. By 1900, as many as one-third of the population in the Danhome area were plantation slaves. The violence of slavery was powerfully expressed in the gagged and bound *bocio* figure that was in sharp contrast to the smoothly rounded sculpture produced for the Fon nobility of the period. As Blier explains in this extract from her prize-winning book *African Vodun: Social History and the Slave Trade*, these sculptures 'offered a way of both accepting and refusing the negative by helping their users to "think-through-terror", as [Michael] Taussig would say. . . . Art provides one way of uttering what is otherwise unutterable.' While Alloula regrets that the gaze of the Algerian women is nowhere represented in the postcards, the subaltern experience is given visible expression in the Fon *bocio* figure, as it is in Kongo *minkisi* power figures. As important as it has been to analyse the visual culture of imperial nations, this kind of dialogue with the experience of the colonized themselves has still to be fully developed in scholarly accounts. Disciplinary constraints of language skills and fieldwork experience have been deployed to restrict research into these encounters. These border experiences will be a vital field for visual culture studies.

(b) Visualizing race and identity

In 1735 the Swedish botanist Karl Linnaeus applied the classificatory schemes he had devised for plants to humans. He divided humanity into four separate types: the European, the African, the Asian and the American (meaning the indigenous peoples of the Americas). Ever since, Western culture has sought to visualize these differences, despite the now-overwhelming scientific evidence that there are no essential biological distinctions between peoples. The idea that there were different human types gradually became codified as distinct races, although there was never a consensus as to how race could be defined. At different periods, race theorists looked to the skull, the brain, art, and now the gene to find a visible and permanent mark of race. Often, despite grandiose denials that this was the case, only skin colour could be found to serve as an absurdly imprecise means of categorizing people.

However, despite the consistent failure to explain race biologically, race can also be considered as culture, terms that were virtually synonymous in the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century anthropology redefined culture to mean the entire way of life in a particular society, as in the expression 'Jewish culture', but continued to use it in a racialized context. The question is how and whether race can be kept out of culture. Recent writing on this subject has stressed that culture should not be seen as a given but as something constantly in flux and whose borders are always in dispute. For Antonio Benítez-Rojo: 'Culture is a discourse, a language, and as such it has no beginning or end, and is always in transformation since it is always looking to signify

what it cannot manage to signify.' The essays in this section look at the challenges posed by such an approach both within and without a particular culture.

In his essay on black British art reprinted here, entitled 'Art of Darkness', Paul Gilroy argues from the perspective of cultural studies that in contemporary Britain 'the politics of race has changed' (Gilroy 1993b). He has sought to shift the debate away from narrow anti-racist politics towards the wider complexities of culture and belonging. In a series of publications, perhaps most notably *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy 1993a), Gilroy has explored what it means to be both black and British. Even to ask this question is to expose the fiction that Britishness is somehow natural and reveals it to refer predominantly to (white) Englishness, rather than to the Scots, Welsh or Irish, let alone the many ethnic minorities that make up Britain's past and present population. Gilroy argues that Britain needs to be understood as part of the black Atlantic, a cultural geography created by the forced movement of enslaved Africans and the diaspora of their free descendants, as well as by the routes taken by the commercial products of colonial culture, like sugar, cotton, tea and coffee. Black British artists are participating in this rewriting of history and are moving beyond the first, necessary reclamation of the black experience 'to re-compose understanding of English culture, and their creativity needs to be complemented by a re-reading of that culture's history which places the idea of "race" at the centre rather than the margin.' Gilroy contributes to this re-reading by showing that J.M.W. Turner's famous painting *The Slave Ship*, which depicts the slave ship *Zong* throwing Africans overboard in a storm in order to lighten the load and claim insurance on the deceased, was indeed understood by his contemporaries as addressing the issue of slavery and not just as a beautiful seascape. Gilroy sees Sonia Boyce's painting *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* as a contemporary interrogation of Britain's 'hybrid cultural heritage'. Her painting depicts a young black British woman 'holding up' her family, including her partner, children, and mother, against a non-realistic background incorporating African and Caribbean motifs. For Boyce the question of Englishness is conceptually and compositionally subordinate to the gender politics of everyday life.

As the tension between Boyce's painting and Gilroy's interpretation suggests, sustaining such discussions is by no means easy. Different groups may approach the same cultural artifact and have very different responses. hooks describes one such case in her reading of Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* (1988), taken from her collection of essays entitled *Yearnings* (hooks 1990). Set in Berlin before the fall of Eastern Europe, many acclaimed the film for its message of hope and compassion; hooks, by contrast, saw it as 'another in a series where postmodern white culture looks at itself somewhat critically, revising here and there, then falling in love with itself all over again.' hooks points out that all the angels are unproblematically portrayed as white, while Berlin's substantial non-white population are relegated to background shots. While Wenders saw his film as reopening a discussion about historical memory, especially that of the Third Reich, hooks notes that 'the film's implied critique of oppressive masculinity is undercut by the re-inscription of sexist male bonding as regards sexual desire'. She shows that Marion, the trapeze artist, is presented as an object for the male gaze, retelling an old story of male

desire for sex, female desire for love. In *Wings of Desire*, 'it is only white people who are angels, only white men who dialogue with one another, only white people who interpret and revise old scripts.' Quoting the artist and theorist Coco Fusco, hooks concludes: 'To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it. Without specifically addressing white ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other.' In the time since this essay was first published, there has been the discussion that Wenders wanted about German history. Whiteness is now a hot academic topic, in part at least because it allows white academics the cachet of working on ethnicity. Yet the mutual construction of otherness by blacks and whites is still a highly charged topic.

Such alterities can arise within ethnic groups as well as across them. In his essay 'The Gangsta and the Diva', the leading cultural studies theorist Andrew Ross argues that black popular culture has 'two current polarities of "ferceness"', one represented by gangsta rappers like Treach of Naughty by Nature and the other by cross-dressing model and singer Ru Paul (Ross 1994). While there is little public acknowledgement of this connection, the 'houses' represented in the film *Paris Is Burning* (see Butler's essay below) can be usefully compared to the familial structures of gangs. The rapper Ice-T has described LA gangland as 'ghetto male love being pushed to its limits'. In both domains, 'realness' is a key aesthetic. For the rapper, realness represents staying true to the ghetto, even at the cost of death, as Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. both discovered. In the cross-dressed world, 'realness' means the ability to pass for whatever category is being imitated, although the imitation must still be recognized as such – 'almost straight but not quite', as Homi Bhabha nearly put it. Ross further argues that hardcore rap is 'just about the only medium in which ghetto life attains something approaching authentic recognition'. When one considers how often the dilemmas of suburban life are replayed on television, it is clear that such representation is central to identity in the atomized postmodern world. The popularity of gangsta rap amongst the children of the suburbs suggests that many such youth are 'propelled by the prospect of their economic redundancy, and thus committed to the ultimate desertion of a white parental culture that can't even offer them a future with the dignity of employment.' The rapper and the drag queen represent different aspects of a conflicted black – and increasingly white – masculinity, whose diversity Ross argues should be the starting-point for a new 'cultural politics of masculinity'. Perhaps the embrace of the cross-dressing basketball player Dennis Rodman by the notoriously racially divided city of Chicago is a sign that this discussion is finally at least possible.

(c) Identity and transculture

As the twentieth century draws to an un mourned close, a striking historical development of its latter years has been the simultaneous globalization and localization of culture and identity. The nation state, so central to politics and identity for the past two centuries, seems to be waning in the face of this joint pressure. New transnational economic power blocs like the European Union and the North

American Free Trade Agreement have substantially limited the nation state. Increasingly, workers in the developed nations have found their negotiating position undermined by the ability of capital to relocate in 'underdeveloped' nations. Labour everywhere has been forced to become migrant, so that the new symbol of the American working class is the Ryder moving truck rather than the shining Thunderbird of the 1950s. One response to this weakening of the national has been an increased attention to what one might call micro-identity, exemplified by the gruesome absurdity of the Balkan War. Artists, critics and intellectuals have tried to resist this new essentialism by seeking to define what Cuban critic Fernando Ortiz called 'transculture', a fusion of old, new and borrowed cultural practices (Ortiz 1947). Transcultural studies concentrates on those places where the carefully defined borders of identity become confused and overlapping, a task that requires both new histories and new means of representation.

In her essay 'Passing for White, Passing for Black', the artist and philosopher Adrian Piper uses her personal difficulties as an African-American who also has European ancestry to consider the interaction of ethnic groups in America (Piper 1992). It so happens that she has light skin, causing many Euramericans to doubt her ethnicity: 'Their ridicule and accusations then function to both disown and degrade you from their status, to mark you not as having *done* wrong but as *being* wrong.' Interspersing her memoir with quotations from a wide range of literature and criticism, Piper shows that the question of 'passing' has been critical to American identity since slavery. Her essay raises the question of how identity is to be defined and what its markers are. To be considered Native American, at least one-eighth of your ancestors must be Native American, while any African ancestry at all will mark you as black. On the other hand, 95 per cent of white Americans have some African ancestry that is unacknowledged because they are not 'visibly' black: 'the primary issue for them is not what they might have to give away by admitting that they are in fact black, but rather what they have to lose.' This dilemma is re-enacted time and time again in American culture from movies like *Jungle Fever* and *A Family Thing* to the controversy over the ethnicity of the golfer Tiger Woods. When he pointed out after winning the 1997 US Masters tournament that he was not simply of African descent but a complicated hybrid of Thai, African and Native American, he caused a storm of controversy. It seems that, despite 500 years of experience to the contrary, the sight of miscegenation is still the ultimate taboo in American culture, to be denied or repressed at all costs.

The construction of a monolithic Euramerican identity has depended on an exotic Other, whose existence has been repeatedly confirmed by the ethnographic display of human beings. To mark the quincentennial of Columbus's voyage to America in 1992, performance artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña created a satirical re-enactment of such displays by placing themselves on display in a cage, labelled as 'Two Undiscovered Amerindians', supposedly hailing from an unknown island in the Gulf of Mexico called Guatinau. As Coco Fusco reports in this extract from her book *English Is Broken Here*, the consequences were not as they expected:

a substantial portion of the public believed that our fictional identities were real ones. . . . a substantial number of intellectuals, artists and cultural bureaucrats sought to deflect attention from the substance of our experiment to the 'moral' implications of our dissimulation.

(Fusco 1995)

Once again, the question of 'realness' and identity displaced all others. While some viewers were simply willing to accept that any such display in a museum or public space must be 'real', others were aware of the performance yet quickly 'felt entitled to assume the role of the colonizer'. Museum curators and other professionals wanted to question only the 'authenticity' of the performance rather than treat it as a piece of theatre. While the performance had been designed as a comment on past relations, Fusco concludes that 'the constant concern about our "realness" revealed a need for reassurance that a "true primitive" *did* exist, whether we fit the bill or not, and that she or he [be] visually identifiable.' The prevalence of such attitudes undercuts both what Fusco calls 'happy multiculturalism' and the denial that ethnicity has any place in the world of art.

The Latin American critic Néstor García Canclini has written extensively about the place of visual culture in the global culture of postmodernism. In his essay 'Remaking Passports' reprinted here, Canclini notes that for many Western critics,

Latin America continues to be interesting only as a continent of a violent nature, of an archaism irreducible to modern nationality, an earth fertilized by an art conceived as tribal or national dreaming and not as thinking about the global and the complex.

(Canclini 1994)

In a context where most art history has been written as the 'history of the art of nations', this has the effect of excluding Latin America from art history except as an example of the primitive or exotic. Canclini emphasizes that not only is this an ignorant account of Latin American culture, it is now an irrelevance in an age in which the globalization of the economy has deterritorialized art. He asserts, in conjunction with the artist Luis Felipe Noé, that art 'doesn't need a passport'. Works like the 'airmail' paintings of Eugenio Dittborn seek to be 'polyglot and migrant, they can function in diverse and multiple contexts and permit divergent readings from their hybrid constitution'. In order to understand such work, we need to turn to the kind of polycentric approach called for by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat in this volume rather than a naïve multiculturalism in which difference is simply subsumed into a vague notion of 'culture'.

In her essay 'Engendering New Worlds', taken from the special edition of *Art and Design* on 'New Art from Latin America', art historian Oriana Baddeley pursues a similar argument to that of Canclini, examining the changing meanings of the sexualized allegory of the 'encounter' between Europeans and indigenous peoples in Latin America: 'Traditionally, the encounter is discussed in ostensibly sexual terms. The eroticised Indian nude greeting the arrival of the Spanish conqueror

with equanimity . . . has functioned as a powerful metaphor within Latin American culture' (Baddeley 1994). While early twentieth-century Latin American art presented the encounter as a rape, more recent renditions see it in more ambiguous terms: 'To put it simply, the definition of what is imposed and what is inherited in cultural terms has shifted. Colonialism is not denied but clearly defined criteria of cultural identity are replaced by a series of questions.' Rather than assume that precolonial Amerindian cultures can still offer a sense of cultural identity in the late twentieth-century in the fashion of the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, contemporary artists have moved away from a binary mode – male/female; colonizer/colonized; evil/good – to explore the complex 'legacy of pain and cruelty' with which the continent has to deal daily. Culture is no longer a source of certainty but the place where the remarkable hybridity of Latin American life can be approached.

While it is possible to argue, in the title of Nathan Glazer's 1997 book, that 'we are all multiculturalists now', it is still unclear what real change has been effected. In the art world, it is now fashionable to denounce 'political' art, which of course has the result of remarginalizing work concentrating on issues of gender and race. Television continues to show us the only group of *Friends* living in New York City who do not know any people of colour. *Seinfeld* went so far as to devote an entire episode to George's inevitably unsuccessful search for an African-American friend in order to prove a point at work. At the same time, universities in California and Texas, where affirmative action has been banned, have seen a dramatic drop in applications from black and Latina/o candidates. There is no doubt that diaspora, displacement and hybridity are key factors of contemporary everyday life. What is at stake in much contemporary cultural work of all kinds is whether the move towards transculture is embraced or rejected.

References and further reading

- Alloula, Malek (1986) *The Colonial Harem*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Baddeley, Oriana (1994) *New Art from Latin America: Expanding the Continent*, Art and Design Profile No. 37, *Art and Design*.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio (1996) *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Blier, Suzanne Preston (1995) *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Canclini, Néstor García (1994) 'Remaking Passports: Visual Thought in the Debate on Multiculturalism', *Third Text* 28/29 (Autumn/Winter 1994).
- Fabian, Johannes (1983) *Times and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fanon, Frantz (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove.
- Fusco, Coco (1995) *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, New York: New Press.
- Gilroy, Paul (1993a) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

- (1993b) *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, London: Serpent's Tail.
- hooks, bell (1990) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End Press.
- (1996) *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*, New York: Routledge.
- McClintock, Anne (1995) *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London and New York: Routledge.
- MacGaffey, Wyatt (1993) *Astonishment and Power*, Washington DC: National Museum of African Art.
- Mesquita, Ivo (1993) *Cartographies*, Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery.
- Mitchell, Timothy (1992) 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order', in Nicholas Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Mudimbe, V.Y. (1988) *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ortiz, Fernando (1947) *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, New York: Knopf.
- Pakenham, Thomas (1991) *The Scramble for Africa*, New York: Random House.
- Piper, Adrian (1992) 'Passing for White, Passing for Black', in Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (eds), *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, New York: Icon Editions.
- Read, Alan (1996) *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, Seattle: Bay Press.
- Ross, Andrew (1994) 'The Gangsta and the Diva,' first published in Thelma Golden (ed.), *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, New York: Abrams.
- Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage.
- (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf.
- Shelton, Antony (1995) *Fetishism: Visualizing Power and Desire*, London: South Bank Centre.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1994) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', reprinted in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stocking, George (1987) *Victorian Anthropology*, London: Free Press.
- Vogel, Susan (ed.) (1991) *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, New York: Center for African Art.
- Ware, Vron (1992) *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*, London: Verso.
- Young, Robert J.C. (1995) *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London and New York: Routledge.

(a) Visual colonialism

Timothy Mitchell

ORIENTALISM AND THE EXHIBITIONARY ORDER

IT IS NO LONGER unusual to suggest that the construction of the colonial order is related to the elaboration of modern forms of representation and knowledge. The relationship has been most closely examined in the critique of Orientalism. The Western artistic and scholarly portrayal of the non-West, in Edward Said's analysis, is not merely an ideological distortion convenient to an emergent global political order but a densely imbricated arrangement of imagery and expertise that organizes and produces the Orient as a political reality.¹ Three features define this Orientalist reality: it is understood as the product of unchanging racial or cultural essences; these essential characteristics are in each case the polar opposite of the West (passive rather than active, static rather than mobile, emotional rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered); and the Oriental opposite or Other is, therefore, marked by a series of fundamental absences (of movement, reason, order, meaning, and so on). In terms of these three features – essentialism, otherness, and absence – the colonial world can be mastered, and colonial mastery will, in turn, reinscribe and reinforce these defining features.

Orientalism, however, has always been part of something larger. The nineteenth-century image of the Orient was constructed not just in Oriental studies, romantic novels, and colonial administrations, but in all the new procedures with which Europeans began to organize the representation of the world, from museums and world exhibitions to architecture, schooling, tourism the fashion industry, and the commodification of everyday life. In 1889, to give an indication of the scale of these processes, 32 million people visited the Exposition Universelle, built that year in Paris to commemorate the centenary of the Revolution and to demonstrate French commercial and imperial power.² The consolidation of the global hegemony of the West, economically and politically, can be connected not just to the imagery of Orientalism but to all the new machinery for rendering up and laying out the meaning of the world, so characteristic of the imperial age.

The new apparatus of representation, particularly the world exhibitions, gave a central place to the representation of the non-Western world, and several studies have pointed out the importance of this construction of otherness to the manufacture of national identity and imperial purpose.³ But is there, perhaps, some more integral relationship between representation, as a modern technique of meaning and order, and the construction of otherness so important to the colonial project? One perspective from which to explore this question is provided by the accounts of non-Western visitors to nineteenth-century Europe. An Egyptian delegation to the Eighth International Congress of Orientalists, for example, held in Stockholm in the summer of 1889, traveled to Sweden via Paris and paused there to visit the Exposition Universelle, leaving us a detailed description of their encounter with the representation of their own otherness. Beginning with this and other accounts written by visitors from the Middle East, I examine the distinctiveness of the modern representational order exemplified by the world exhibition. What Arab writers found in the West, I will argue, were not just exhibitions and representations of the world, but the world itself being ordered up as an endless exhibition. This world-as-exhibition was a place where the artificial, the model, and the plan were employed to generate an unprecedented effect of order and certainty. It is not the artificiality of the exhibitionary order that matters, however, so much as the contrasting effect of an external reality that the artificial and the model create – a reality characterized, like Orientalism's Orient, by essentialism, otherness, and absence. In the second half of the article, I examine this connection between the world-as-exhibition and Orientalism, through a rereading of European travel accounts of the nineteenth-century Middle East. The features of the kind of Orient these writings construct – above all its characteristic absences – are not merely motifs convenient to colonial mastery, I argue, but necessary elements of the order of representation itself.

La rue du Caire

The four members of the Egyptian delegation to the Stockholm Orientalist conference spent several days in Paris, climbing twice the height (as they were told) of the Great Pyramid in Alexandre Eiffel's new tower, and exploring the city and exhibition laid out beneath. Only one thing disturbed them. The Egyptian exhibit had been built by the French to represent a street in medieval Cairo, made of houses with overhanging upper stories and a mosque like that of Qaitbay. 'It was intended,' one of the Egyptians wrote, 'to resemble the old aspect of Cairo.' So carefully was this done, he noted, that 'even the paint on the buildings was made dirty.'⁴ The exhibit had also been made carefully chaotic. In contrast to the geometric layout of the rest of the exhibition, the imitation street was arranged in the haphazard manner of the bazaar. The way was crowded with shops and stalls, where Frenchmen, dressed as Orientals, sold perfumes, pastries, and tarbushes. To complete the effect of the Orient, the French organizers had imported from Cairo fifty Egyptian donkeys, together with their drivers and the requisite number of grooms, farriers, and saddlers. The donkeys gave rides (for the price of one franc) up and down the street, resulting in a clamor and confusion

so lifelike, the director of the exhibition was obliged to issue an order restricting the donkeys to a certain number at each hour of the day. The Egyptian visitors were disgusted by all this and stayed away. Their final embarrassment had been to enter the door of the mosque and discover that, like the rest of the street, it had been erected as what the Europeans called a façade. 'Its external form was all that there was of the mosque. As for the interior, it had been set up as a coffee house, where Egyptian girls performed dances with young males, and dervishes whirled.'⁵

After eighteen days in Paris, the Egyptian delegation traveled on to Stockholm to attend the Congress of Orientalists. Together with other non-European delegates, the Egyptians were received with hospitality – and a great curiosity. As though they were still in Paris, they found themselves something of an exhibit. 'Bona fide Orientals,' wrote a European participant in the Congress, 'were stared at as in a Barnum's all-world show: the good Scandinavian people seemed to think that it was a collection of *Orientals*, not of *Orientalists*.'⁶ Some of the Orientalists themselves seemed to delight in the role of showmen. At an earlier congress, in Berlin, we are told that

the grotesque idea was started of producing natives of Oriental countries as illustrations of a paper: thus the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford produced a real live Indian Pandit, and made him go through the ritual of Brahmanical prayer and worship before a hilarious assembly. . . . Professor Max Müller of Oxford produced two rival Japanese priests, who exhibited their gifts; it had the appearance of two showmen exhibiting their monkeys.⁷

At the Stockholm Congress, the Egyptians were invited to participate as scholars, but when they used their own language to do so they again found themselves treated as exhibits. 'I have heard nothing so unworthy of a sensible man,' complained an Oxford scholar, 'as . . . the whistling howls emitted by an Arabic student of El-Azhar of Cairo. Such exhibitions at Congresses are mischievous and degrading.'⁸

The exhibition and the congress were not the only examples of this European mischief. As Europe consolidated its colonial power, non-European visitors found themselves continually being placed on exhibit or made the careful object of European curiosity. The degradation they were made to suffer seemed as necessary to these spectacles as the scaffolded facades or the curious crowds of onlookers. The facades, the onlookers, and the degradation seemed all to belong to the organizing of an exhibit, to a particularly European concern with rendering the world up to be viewed. Of what, exactly, did this exhibitionary process consist?

An object-world

To begin with, Middle Eastern visitors found Europeans a curious people, with an uncontainable eagerness to stand and stare. 'One of the characteristics of the French is to stare and get excited at everything new,' wrote an Egyptian scholar who spent five years in Paris in the 1820s, in the first description of nineteenth-century

Europe to be published in Arabic.⁹ The 'curiosity' of the European is encountered in almost every subsequent Middle Eastern account. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when one or two Egyptian writers adopted the realistic style of the novel and made the journey to Europe their first topic, their stories would often evoke the peculiar experience of the West by describing an individual surrounded and stared at, like an object on exhibit. 'Whenever he paused outside a shop or showroom,' the protagonist in one such story found on his first day in Paris, 'a large number of people would surround him, both men and women, staring at his dress and appearance.'¹⁰

In the second place, this curious attitude that is described in Arabic accounts was connected with what one might call a corresponding *objectness*. The curiosity of the observing subject was something demanded by a diversity of mechanisms for rendering things up as its object – beginning with the Middle Eastern visitor himself. The members of an Egyptian student mission sent to Paris in the 1820s were confined to the college where they lived and allowed out only to visit museums and the theater – where they found themselves parodied in vaudeville as objects of entertainment for the French public.¹¹

They construct the stage as the play demands. For example, if they want to imitate a sultan and the things that happen to him, they set up the stage in the form of a palace and portray him in person. If for instance they want to play the Shah of Persia, they dress someone in the clothes of the Persian monarch and then put him there and sit him on a throne.¹²

Even Middle Eastern monarchs who came in person to Europe were liable to be incorporated into its theatrical machinery. When the Khedive of Egypt visited Paris to attend the Exposition Universelle of 1867, he found that the Egyptian exhibit had been built to simulate medieval Cairo in the form of a royal palace. The Khedive stayed in the imitation palace during his visit and became a part of the exhibition, receiving visitors with medieval hospitality.¹³

Visitors to Europe found not only themselves rendered up as objects to be viewed. The Arabic account of the student mission to Paris devoted several pages to the Parisian phenomenon of '*le spectacle*,' a word for which its author knew of no Arabic equivalent. Besides the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, among the different kinds of spectacle he described were 'places in which they represent for the person the view of a town or a country or the like,' such as 'the Panorama, the Cosmorama, the Diorama, the Europorama and the Uranorama.' In a panorama of Cairo, he explained in illustration, 'it is as though you were looking from on top of the minaret of Sultan Hasan, for example, with al-Rumaila and the rest of the city beneath you.'¹⁴

The effect of such spectacles was to set the world up as a picture. They ordered it up as an object on display to be investigated and experienced by the dominating European gaze. An Orientalist of the same period, the great French scholar Sylvestre de Sacy, wanted the scholarly picturing of the Orient to make available to European inspection a similar kind of object-world. He had planned to establish a museum, which was to be

a vast depot of objects of all kinds, of drawings, of original books, maps, accounts of voyages, all offered to those who wish to give themselves to the study of [the Orient]; in such a way that each of these students would be able to feel himself transported as if by enchantment into the midst of, say, a Mongolian tribe or of the Chinese race, whichever he might have made the object of his studies.¹⁵

As part of a more ambitious plan in England for 'the education of the people,' a proposal was made to set up 'an ethnological institution, with very extensive grounds', where 'within the same enclosure' were to be kept 'specimens in pairs of the various races.' The natives on exhibit, it was said,

should construct their own dwellings according to the architectural ideas of their several countries; their . . . mode of life should be their own. The forms of industry prevalent in their nation or tribe they should be required to practise; and their ideas, opinions, habits, and superstitions should be permitted to perpetuate themselves. . . . To go from one division of this establishment to another would be like travelling into a new country.¹⁶

The world exhibitions of the second half of the century offered the visitor exactly this educational encounter, with natives and their artifacts arranged to provide the direct experience of a colonized object-world. In planning the layout of the 1889 Paris Exhibition, it was decided that the visitor 'before entering the temple of modern life' should pass through an exhibit of all human history, 'as a gateway to the exposition and a noble preface.' Entitled 'Histoire du Travail,' or, more fully, 'Exposition retrospective du travail et des sciences anthropologiques,' the display would demonstrate the history of human labor by means of 'objects and things themselves.' It would have 'nothing vague about it,' it was said, 'because it will consist of an *object lesson*.'¹⁷

Arabic accounts of the modern West became accounts of these curious object-worlds. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, more than half the descriptions of journeys to Europe published in Cairo were written to describe visits to a world exhibition or an international congress of Orientalists.¹⁸ Such accounts devote hundreds of pages to describing the peculiar order and technique of these events – the curious crowds of spectators, the organization of panoramas and perspectives, the arrangement of natives in mock colonial villages, the display of new inventions and commodities, the architecture of iron and glass, the systems of classification, the calculations of statistics, the lectures, the plans, and the guidebooks – in short, the entire method of organization that we think of as representation.

The world-as-exhibition

In the third place, then, the effect of objectness was a matter not just of visual arrangement around a curious spectator, but of representation. What reduced the world to a system of objects was the way their careful organization enabled them

to evoke some larger meaning, such as History or Empire or Progress. This machinery of representation was not confined to the exhibition and the congress. Almost everywhere that Middle Eastern visitors went they seemed to encounter the arrangement of things to stand for something larger. They visited the new museums, and saw the cultures of the world portrayed in the form of objects arranged under glass, in the order of their evolution. They were taken to the theater, a place where Europeans represented to themselves their history, as several Egyptian writers explained. They spent afternoons in the public gardens, carefully organized 'to bring together the trees and plants of every part of the world,' as another Arab writer put it. And, inevitably, they took trips to the zoo, a product of nineteenth-century colonial penetration of the Orient, as Theodor Adorno wrote, that 'paid symbolic tribute in the form of animals.'¹⁹

The Europe one reads about in Arabic accounts was a place of spectacle and visual arrangement, of the organization of everything and everything organized to represent, to recall, like the exhibition, a larger meaning. Characteristic of the way Europeans seemed to live was their preoccupation with what an Egyptian author described as '*intizam almanzar*,' the organization of the view.²⁰ Beyond the exhibition and the congress, beyond the museum and the zoo, everywhere that non-European visitors went – the streets of the modern city with their meaningful facades, the countryside encountered typically in the form of a model farm exhibiting new machinery and cultivation methods, even the Alps once the funicular was built – they found the technique and sensation to be the same.²¹ Everything seemed to be set up before one as though it were the model or the picture of something. Everything was arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere 'signifier of' something further.

The exhibition, therefore, could be read in such accounts as epitomizing the strange character of the West, a place where one was continually pressed into service as a spectator by a world ordered so as to represent. In exhibitions, the traveler from the Middle East could describe the curious way of addressing the world increasingly encountered in modern Europe, a particular relationship between the individual and a world of 'objects' that Europeans seemed to take as the experience of the real. This reality effect was a world increasingly rendered up to the individual according to the way in which, and to the extent to which, it could be made to stand before him or her as an exhibit. Non-Europeans encountered in Europe what one might call, echoing a phrase from Heidegger, the age of the world exhibition, or rather, the age of the world-as-exhibition.²² The world-as-exhibition means not an exhibition of the world but the world organized and grasped as though it were an exhibition.

The certainty of representation

'England is at present the greatest Oriental Empire which the world has ever known,' proclaimed the president of the 1892 Orientalist Congress at its opening session. His words reflected the political certainty of the imperial age. 'She knows not only how to conquer, but how to rule.'²³ The endless spectacles of the

world-as-exhibition were not just reflections of this certainty but the means of its production, by their technique of rendering imperial truth and cultural difference in 'objective' form.

Three aspects of this kind of certainty can be illustrated from the accounts of the world exhibition. First there was the apparent realism of the representation. The model or display always seemed to stand in perfect correspondence to the external world, a correspondence that was frequently noted in Middle Eastern accounts. As the Egyptian visitor had remarked, 'Even the paint on the buildings was made dirty.' One of the most impressive exhibits at the 1889 exhibition in Paris was a panorama of the city. As described by an Arab visitor, this consisted of a viewing platform on which one stood, encircled by images of the city. The images were mounted and illuminated in such a way that the observer felt himself standing at the center of the city itself, which seemed to materialize around him as a single, solid object 'not differing from reality in any way.'²⁴

In the second place, the model, however realistic, always remained distinguishable from the reality it claimed to represent. Even though the paint was made dirty and the donkeys were brought from Cairo, the medieval Egyptian street at the Paris exhibition remained only a Parisian copy of the Oriental original. The certainty of representation depended on this deliberate difference in time and displacement in space that separated the representation from the real thing. It also depended on the position of the visitor – the tourist in the imitation street or the figure on the viewing platform. The representation of reality was always an exhibit set up for an observer in its midst, an observing European gaze surrounded by and yet excluded from the exhibition's careful order. The more the exhibit drew in and encircled the visitor, the more the gaze was set apart from it, as the mind (in our Cartesian imagery) is said to be set apart from the material world it observes. The separation is suggested in a description of the Egyptian exhibit at the Paris Exhibition of 1867.

A museum inside a pharaonic temple represented Antiquity, a palace richly decorated in the Arab style represented the Middle Ages, a caravanserai of merchants and performers portrayed in real life the customs of today. Weapons from the Sudan, the skins of wild monsters, perfumes, poisons and medicinal plants transport us directly to the tropics. Pottery from Assiut and Aswan, filigree and cloth of silk and gold invite us to touch with our fingers a strange civilization. All the races subject to the Vice-Roy [*sic*] were personified by individuals selected with care. We rubbed shoulders with the fellah, we made way before the Bedouin of the Libyan desert on their beautiful white dromedaries. This sumptuous display spoke to the mind as to the eyes; it expressed a political idea.²⁵

The remarkable realism of such displays made the Orient into an object the visitor could almost touch. Yet to the observing eye, surrounded by the display but excluded from it by the status of visitor, it remained a mere representation, the picture of some further reality. Thus, two parallel pairs of distinctions were maintained, between the visitor and the exhibit and between the exhibit and what it

expressed. The representation seemed set apart from the political reality it claimed to portray as the observing mind seems set apart from what it observes.

Third, the distinction between the system of exhibits or representations and the exterior meaning they portrayed was imitated, within the exhibition, by distinguishing between the exhibits themselves and the plan of the exhibition. The visitor would encounter, set apart from the objects on display, an abundance of catalogs, plans, signposts, programs, guidebooks, instructions, educational talks, and compilations of statistics. The Egyptian exhibit at the 1867 exhibition, for example, was accompanied by a guidebook containing an outline of the country's history – divided, like the exhibit to which it referred, into the ancient, medieval, and modern – together with a 'notice statistique sur le territoire, la population, les forces productives, le commerce, l'effective militaire et naval, l'organisation financière, l'instruction publique, etc. de l'Egypte' compiled by the Commission Impériale in Paris.²⁶ To provide such outlines, guides, tables, and plans, which were essential to the educational aspect of the exhibition, involved processes of representation that are no different from those at work in the construction of the exhibits themselves. But the practical distinction that was maintained between the exhibit and the plan, between the objects and their catalog, reinforced the effect of two distinct orders of being – the order of things and the order of their meaning, of representation and reality.

Despite the careful ways in which it was constructed, however, there was something paradoxical about this distinction between the simulated and the real, and about the certainty that depends on it. In Paris, it was not always easy to tell where the exhibition ended and the world itself began. The boundaries of the exhibition were clearly marked, of course, with high perimeter walls and monumental gates. But, as Middle Eastern visitors continually discovered, there was much about the organization of the 'real world' outside, with its museums and department stores, its street facades and Alpine scenes, that resembled the world exhibition. Despite the determined efforts to isolate the exhibition as merely an artificial representation of a reality outside, the real world beyond the gates turned out to be more and more like an extension of the exhibition. Yet this extended exhibition continued to present itself as a series of mere representations, representing a reality beyond. We should think of it, therefore, not so much as an exhibition but as a kind of labyrinth, the labyrinth that, as Derrida says, includes in itself its own exits.²⁷ But then, maybe the exhibitions whose exits led only to further exhibitions were becoming at once so realistic and so extensive that no one ever realized that the real world they promised was not there.

The labyrinth without exits

To see the uncertainty of what seemed, at first, the clear distinction between the simulated and the real, one can begin again inside the world exhibition, back at the Egyptian bazaar. Part of the shock of the Egyptians came from just how real the street claimed to be: not simply that the paint was made dirty, that the donkeys were from Cairo, and that the Egyptian pastries on sale were said to taste like the real thing, but that one paid for them with what we call 'real money.'

The commercialism of the donkey rides, the bazaar stalls, and the dancing girls seemed no different from the commercialism of the world outside. With so disorienting an experience as entering the façade of a mosque to find oneself inside an Oriental café that served real customers what seemed to be real coffee, where, exactly, lay the line between the artificial and the real, the representation and the reality?

Exhibitions were coming to resemble the commercial machinery of the rest of the city. This machinery, in turn, was rapidly changing in places such as London and Paris, to imitate the architecture and technique of the exhibition. Small, individually owned shops, often based on local crafts, were giving way to the larger apparatus of shopping arcades and department stores. According to the *Illustrated Guide to Paris* (a book supplying, like an exhibition program, the plan and meaning of the place), each of these new establishments formed 'a city, indeed a world in miniature.'²⁸ The Egyptian accounts of Europe contain several descriptions of these commercial worlds-in-miniature, where the real world, as at the exhibition, was something organized by the representation of its commodities. The department stores were described as 'large and well organized,' with their merchandise 'arranged in perfect order, set in rows on shelves with everything symmetrical and precisely positioned.' Non-European visitors would remark especially on the panes of glass, inside the stores and along the gas-lit arcades. 'The merchandise is all arranged behind sheets of clear glass, in the most remarkable order. . . . Its dazzling appearance draws thousands of onlookers.'²⁹ The glass panels inserted themselves between the visitors and the goods on display, setting up the former as mere onlookers and endowing the goods with the distance that is the source, one might say, of their objectness. Just as exhibitions had become commercialized, the machinery of commerce was becoming a further means of engineering the real, indistinguishable from that of the exhibition.

Something of the experience of the strangely ordered world of modern commerce and consumers is indicated in the first fictional account of Europe to be published in Arabic. Appearing in 1882, it tells the story of two Egyptians who travel to France and England in the company of an English Orientalist. On their first day in Paris, the two Egyptians wander accidentally into the vast, gas-lit premises of a wholesale supplier. Inside the building they find long corridors, each leading into another. They walk from one corridor to the next, and after a while begin to search for the way out. Turning a corner they see what looks like an exit, with people approaching from the other side. But it turns out to be a mirror, which covers the entire width and height of the wall, and the people approaching are merely their own reflections. They turn down another passage and then another, but each one ends only in a mirror. As they make their way through the corridors of the building, they pass groups of people at work. 'The people were busy setting out merchandise, sorting it and putting it into boxes and cases. They stared at the two of them in silence as they passed, standing quite still, not leaving their places or interrupting their work.' After wandering silently for some time through the building, the two Egyptians realize they have lost their way completely and begin going from room to room looking for an exit. 'But no one interfered with them,' we are told, 'or came up to them to ask if they were lost.' Eventually they are rescued by the manager of the store, who proceeds to explain to them how

it is organized, pointing out that, in the objects being sorted and packed, the produce of every country in the world is represented. The West, it appears is a place organized as a system of commodities, values, meanings, and representations, forming signs that reflect one another in a labyrinth without exits.

[. . .]

Notes

This is a revised and extended version of 'The World as Exhibition,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, (2) (April, 1989): 217–36, much of which was drawn from the first chapter of *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). I am indebted to Lila Abu-Lughod, Stefania Pandolfo, and the participants in the Conference on Colonialism and Culture held at the University of Michigan in May, 1989, for their comments on earlier versions.

- 1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 2 Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex,' *New Formations* 4 (Spring, 1988): 96. Unfortunately, this insightful article came to my attention only as I was completing the revisions to this article.
- 3 See especially Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); see also Bennett, 'Exhibitionary Complex,' *op. cit.*
- 4 Muhammad Amin Fikri, *Irshad al-alibba' ila mahasin Urubba* (Cairo, 1892), 128.
- 5 Fikri, *Irshad*, 128–29, 136.
- 6 R.N. Crust, 'The International Congresses of Orientalists,' *Hellas* 6 (1897): 359.
- 7 *Ibid.*: 351.
- 8 *Ibid.*: 359.
- 9 Rifa 'a al-Tahtawi, *al-A'mal al-kamila* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 1973), 2: 76.
- 10 Ali Mubarak, *Alam al-din* (Alexandria, 1882), 816. The 'curiosity' of the European is something of a theme for Orientalist writers, who contrast it with the 'general lack of curiosity' of non-Europeans. Such curiosity is assumed to be the natural, unfettered relation of a person to the world, emerging in Europe once the loosening of 'theological bonds' had brought about 'the freeing of human minds' (Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* [London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982], 299). See Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 4–5, for a critique of this sort of argument and its own 'theological' assumptions.
- 11 Alain Silvera, 'The First Egyptian Student Mission to France under Muhammad Ali,' in *Modern Egypt: Studies in Politics and Society*, ed. Elie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (London: Frank Cass, 1980), 13.
- 12 Tahtawi, *al-A'mal*, 2: 177, 119–20.
- 13 Georges Douin, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl* (Rome: Royal Egyptian Geographical Society, 1934), 2: 4–5.
- 14 Tahtawi, *al-A'mal*, 2: 121.
- 15 Quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, 165.
- 16 James Augustus St John, *The Education of the People* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), 82–83.

- 17 'Les origins et le plan de l'exposition,' in *L'Exposition de Paris de 1889*, 3 (December 15, 1889): 18.
- 18 On Egyptian writing about Europe in the nineteenth century, see Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Anouar Louca, *Voyageurs et écrivains égyptiens en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Didier, 1970); Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 7–13, 180 n. 14.
- 19 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1978), 116; on the theater, see, for example, Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, *Hadith Isa ibn Hisham, aw fatra min al-zaman*, 2nd edn (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 1911), 434, and Tahtawi, *al-A'mal*, 2: 119–20; on the public garden and the zoo, Muhammad al-Sanusi al-Tunisi, *al-Istitla 'at al-barisiya fi ma'rad sanat 1889* (Tunis: n.p., 1891), 37.
- 20 Mubarak, *Alam al-din*, 817.
- 21 The model farm outside Paris is described in Mubarak, *Alam al-din*, 1008–42; the visual effect of the street in Mubarak, *Alam al-din*, 964, and Idwar Ilyas, *Mashahid Uruba wa-Amirka* (Cairo: al-Muqtataf, 1900), 268; the new funicular at Lucerne and the European passion for panoramas in Fikri, *Irshad*, 98.
- 22 Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture,' in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- 23 International Congress of Orientalists, *Transactions of the Ninth Congress, 1892* (London: International Congress of Orientalists, 1893), 1: 35.
- 24 Al-Sanusi, *al-Istitla 'at*, 242.
- 25 Edmond About, *Le fellah: souvenirs d'Égypte* (Paris: Hachette, 1869), 47–48.
- 26 Charles Edmond, *L'Égypte à l'exposition universelle de 1867* (Paris: Dentu, 1867).
- 27 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 104. All of his subsequent writings, Derrida once remarked, 'are only a commentary on the sentence about a labyrinth' ('Implications: Interview with Henri Ronse,' in *Positions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 5). My article, too, should be read as a commentary on that sentence.
- 28 Quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 146–47.
- 29 Mubarak, *Alam al-din*, 818; Ilyas, *Mashahid Uruba*, 268.

Anne McClintock

SOFT-SOAPING EMPIRE

Commodity racism and imperial advertising

Soap is Civilization.

(Unilever company slogan)

Doc: My, it's so clean.

Grumpy: There's dirty work afoot.

(Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs)

Soap and civilization

AT THE BEGINNING of the nineteenth century, soap was a scarce and humdrum item and washing a cursory activity at best. A few decades later, the manufacture of soap had burgeoned into an imperial commerce; Victorian cleaning rituals were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain's evolutionary superiority, and soap was invested with magical, fetish powers. The soap saga captured the hidden affinity between domesticity and empire and embodied a triangulated crisis in value: the *undervaluation* of women's work in the domestic realm, the *overvaluation* of the commodity in the industrial market and the *disavowal* of colonized economies in the arena of empire. Soap entered the realm of Victorian fetishism with spectacular effect, notwithstanding the fact that male Victorians promoted soap as the icon of nonfetishistic rationality.

Both the cult of domesticity and the new imperialism found in soap an exemplary mediating form. The emergent middle-class values – monogamy ('clean' sex, which has value), industrial capital ('clean' money, which has value), Christianity ('being washed in the blood of the lamb'), class control ('cleansing the great unwashed') and the imperial civilizing mission ('washing and clothing the savage') – could all be marvelously embodied in a single household commodity. Soap

advertising, in particular the Pears soap campaign, took its place at the vanguard of Britain's new commodity culture and its civilizing mission.

In the eighteenth century, the commodity was little more than a mundane object to be bought and used – in Marx's words, 'a trivial thing.'¹ By the late nineteenth century, however, the commodity had taken its privileged place not only as the fundamental form of a new industrial economy but also as the fundamental form of a new cultural system for representing social value.² Banks and stock exchanges rose up to manage the bonanzas of imperial capital. Professions emerged to administer the goods tumbling hectically from the manufactories. Middle-class domestic space became crammed as never before with furniture, clocks, mirrors, paintings, stuffed animals, ornaments, guns, and myriad gewgaws and knick-knacks. Victorian novelists bore witness to the strange spawning of commodities that seemed to have lives of their own, and huge ships lumbered with trifles and trinkets plied their trade among the colonial markets of Africa, the East, and the Americas.³

The new economy created an uproar not only of things but of signs. As Thomas Richards has argued, if all these new commodities were to be managed, a unified system of cultural representation had to be found. Richards shows how, in 1851, the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace served as a monument to a new form of consumption: 'What the first Exhibition heralded so intimately was the complete transformation of collective and private life into a space for the spectacular exhibition of commodities.'⁴ As a 'semiotic laboratory for the labor theory of value,' the World Exhibition showed once and for all that the capitalist system had not only created a dominant form of exchange but was also in the process of creating a dominant form of representation to go with it: the voyeuristic panorama of surplus as spectacle. By exhibiting commodities not only as goods but as an organized system of images, the World Exhibition helped fashion 'a new kind of being, the consumer and a new kind of ideology, consumerism.'⁵ The mass consumption of the commodity spectacle was born.

Victorian advertising reveals a paradox, however, for, as the cultural form that was entrusted with upholding and marketing abroad those founding middle-class distinctions – between private and public, paid work and unpaid work – advertising also from the outset began to confound those distinctions. Advertising took the intimate signs of domesticity (children bathing, men shaving, women laced into corsets, maids delivering nightcaps) into the public realm, plastering scenes of domesticity on walls, buses, shopfronts, and billboards. At the same time, advertising took scenes of empire into every corner of the home, stamping images of colonial conquest on soap boxes, matchboxes, biscuit tins, whiskey bottles, tea tins and chocolate bars. By trafficking promiscuously across the threshold of private and public, advertising began to subvert one of the fundamental distinctions of commodity capital, even as it was coming into being.

From the outset, moreover, Victorian advertising took explicit shape around the reinvention of racial difference. Commodity kitsch made possible, as never before, the mass marketing of empire as an organized system of images and attitudes. Soap flourished not only because it created and filled a spectacular gap in the domestic market but also because, as a cheap and portable domestic commodity, it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress.

Commodity racism became distinct from scientific racism in its capacity to expand beyond the literate, propertied elite through the marketing of commodity spectacle. If, after the 1850s, scientific racism saturated anthropological, scientific and medical journals, travel writing, and novels, these cultural forms were still relatively class-bound and inaccessible to most Victorians, who had neither the means nor the education to read such material. Imperial kitsch as consumer spectacle, by contrast, could package, market, and distribute evolutionary racism on a hitherto unimagined scale. No pre-existing form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a mass of the populace. Thus, as domestic commodities were mass marketed through their appeal to imperial jingoism, commodity jingoism itself helped reinvent and maintain British national unity in the face of deepening imperial competition and colonial resistance. The cult of domesticity became indispensable to the consolidation of British national identity, and at the center of the domestic cult stood the simple bar of soap.⁶

Yet soap has no social history. Since it purportedly belongs in the female realm of domesticity, soap is figured as beyond history and beyond politics proper.⁷ To begin a social history of soap, then, is to refuse, in part, to accept the erasure of women's domestic value under imperial capitalism. It cannot be forgotten, moreover, that the history of European attempts to impose a commodity economy on African cultures was also the history of diverse African attempts either to refuse or to transform European commodity fetishism to suit their own needs. The story of soap reveals that fetishism, far from being a quintessentially African propensity, as nineteenth-century anthropology maintained, was central to industrial modernity, inhabiting and mediating the uncertain threshold zones between domesticity and industry, metropolis and empire.

Soap and commodity spectacle

Before the late nineteenth century, clothes and bedding washing was done in most households only once or twice a year in great, communal binges, usually in public at streams or rivers.⁸ As for body washing, not much had changed since the days when Queen Elizabeth I was distinguished by the frequency with which she washed: 'regularly every month whether she needed it or not.'⁹ By the 1890s, however, soap sales had soared. Victorians were consuming 260,000 tons of soap a year, and advertising had emerged as the central cultural form of commodity capitalism.¹⁰

Before 1851, advertising scarcely existed. As a commercial form, it was generally regarded as a confession of weakness, a rather shabby last resort. Most advertising was limited to small newspaper advertisements, cheap handbills, and posters. After midcentury, however, soap manufacturers began to pioneer the use of pictorial advertising as a central part of business policy.

The initial impetus for soap advertising came from the realm of empire. With the burgeoning of imperial cotton on the slave plantations came the surplus of cheap cotton goods, alongside the growing buying power of a middle class that could afford for the first time to consume such goods in large quantities. Similarly, the sources for cheap palm oil, coconut oil, and cottonseed oil flourished in the

imperial plantations of West Africa, Malay, Ceylon, Fiji, and New Guinea. As rapid changes in the technology of soapmaking took place in Britain after mid-century, the prospect dawned of a large domestic market for soft body soaps, which had previously been a luxury that only the upper class could afford.

Economic competition with the United States and Germany created the need for a more aggressive promotion of British products and led to the first real innovations in advertising. In 1884, the year of the Berlin Conference, the first wrapped soap was sold under a brand name. This small event signified a major transformation in capitalism, as imperial competition gave rise to the creation of monopolies. Henceforth, items formerly indistinguishable from each other (soap sold simply as soap) would be marketed by their corporate signature (Pears, Monkey Brand, etc.). Soap became one of the first commodities to register the historic shift from myriad small businesses to the great imperial monopolies. In the 1870s, hundreds of small soap companies plied the new trade in hygiene, but by the end of the century, the trade was monopolized by ten large companies.

In order to manage the great soap show, an aggressively entrepreneurial breed of advertisers emerged, dedicated to gracing each homely product with a radiant halo of imperial glamor and racial potency. The advertising agent, like the bureaucrat, played a vital role in the imperial expansion of foreign trade. Advertisers billed themselves as 'empire builders' and flattered themselves with 'the responsibility of the historic imperial mission.' Said one: 'Commerce even more than sentiment binds the ocean-sundered portions of empire together. Anyone who increases these commercial interests strengthens the whole fabric of the empire.'¹¹ Soap was credited not only with bringing moral and economic salvation to Britain's 'great unwashed' but also with magically embodying the spiritual ingredient of the imperial mission itself.

In an ad for Pears, for example, a black and implicitly racialized coalsweeper holds in his hands a glowing, occult object. Luminous with its own inner radiance, the simple soap bar glows like a fetish, pulsating magically with spiritual enlightenment and imperial grandeur, promising to warm the hands and hearts of working people across the globe.¹² Pears, in particular, became intimately associated with a purified nature magically cleansed of polluting industry (tumbling kittens, faithful dogs, children festooned with flowers) and a purified working class magically cleansed of polluting labor (smiling servants in crisp white aprons, rosy-cheeked match girls and scrubbed scullions).¹³

None the less, the Victorian obsession with cotton and cleanliness was not simply a mechanical reflex of economic surplus. If imperialism garnered a bounty of cheap cotton and soap oils from coerced colonial labor, the middle-class Victorian fascination with clean, white bodies and clean, white clothing stemmed not only from the rampant profiteering of the imperial economy but also from the realms of ritual and fetish.

Soap did not flourish when imperial ebullience was at its peak. It emerged commercially during an era of impending crisis and social calamity serving to preserve, through fetish ritual, the uncertain boundaries of class gender and race identity in a social order felt to be threatened by the fetid effluvia of the slums, the belching smoke of industry, social agitation, economic upheaval, imperial competition, and anticolonial resistance. Soap offered the promise of spiritual

salvation and regeneration through commodity consumption, a regime of domestic hygiene that could restore the threatened potency of the imperial body politic and the race.

The Pears' campaign

In 1789 Andrew Pears, a farmer's son, left his Cornish village of Mevagissey to open a barbershop in London, following the trend of widespread demographic migration from country to city and the economic turn from land to commerce. In his shop, Pears made and sold the powders, creams, and dentifrices used by the rich to ensure the fashionable alabaster purity of their complexions. For the elite, a sun-darkened skin stained by outdoor manual work was the visible stigma not only of a class obliged to work under the elements for a living, but also of far-off, benighted races marked by God's disfavor. From the outset, soap took shape as a technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semi-otics of imperial racism and class denigration.

In 1838 Andrew Pears retired and left his firm in the hands of his grandson, Francis. In due course, Francis' daughter, Mary, married Thomas J. Barratt, who became Francis' partner and took the gamble of fashioning a middle-class market for the transparent soap. Barratt revolutionized Pears by masterminding a series of dazzling advertising campaigns. Inaugurating a new era of advertising, he won himself lasting fame, in the familiar iconography of male birthing, as the 'father of advertising.' Soap thus found its industrial destiny through the mediation of domestic kinship and that peculiarly Victorian preoccupation with patrimony.

Through a series of gimmicks and innovations that placed Pears at the center of Britain's emerging commodity culture, Barratt showed a perfect understanding of the fetishism that structures all advertising. Importing a quarter of a million French centime pieces into Britain, Barratt had the name Pears stamped on them and put the coins into circulation – a gesture that marvelously linked exchange value with the corporate brand name. The ploy worked famously, arousing much publicity for Pears and such a public fuss that an Act of Parliament was rushed through to declare all foreign coins illegal tender. The boundaries of the national currency closed around the domestic bar of soap.

Georg Lukács points out that the commodity lies on the threshold of culture and commerce, confusing the supposedly sacrosanct boundaries between aesthetics and economy, money, and art. In the mid-1880s, Barratt devised a piece of breathtaking cultural transgression that exemplified Lukács' insight and clinched Pears' fame. Barratt bought Sir John Everett Millais' painting 'Bubbles' (originally entitled 'A Child's World') and inserted into the painting a bar of soap stamped with the totemic word *Pears*. At a stroke, he transformed the artwork of the best-known painter in Britain into a mass-produced commodity associated in the public mind with Pears.¹⁴ At the same time, by mass reproducing the painting as a poster ad, Barratt took art from the elite realm of private property to the mass realm of commodity spectacle.¹⁵

In advertising, the axis of possession is shifted to the axis of spectacle. Advertising's chief contribution to the culture of modernity was the discovery that

by manipulating the semiotic space around the commodity, the unconscious as a public space could also be manipulated. Barratt's great innovation was to invest huge sums of money in the creation of a visible aesthetic space around the commodity. The development of poster and print technology made possible the mass reproduction of such a space around the image of a commodity.¹⁶

In advertising, that which is disavowed by industrial rationality (ambivalence, sensuality, chance, unpredictable causality, multiple time) is projected onto image space as a repository of the forbidden. Advertising draws on subterranean flows of desire and taboo, manipulating the investment of surplus money. Pears' distinction, swiftly emulated by scores of soap companies including Monkey Brand and Sunlight, as well as countless other advertisers, was to invest the aesthetic space around the domestic commodity with the commercial cult of empire.

Empire of the home: racializing domesticity

The soap

Four fetishes recur ritualistically in soap advertising: soap itself, white clothing (especially aprons), mirrors, and monkey. A typical Pears' advertisement figures a black child and a white child together in a bathroom (Fig. 26.1). The Victorian bathroom is the innermost sanctuary of domestic hygiene and by extension the private temple of public regeneration. The sacrament of soap offers a reformation allegory whereby the purification of the domestic body becomes a metaphor for the regeneration of the body politic. In this particular ad, a black boy sits in the bath, gazing wide-eyed into the water as if into a foreign element. A white boy,

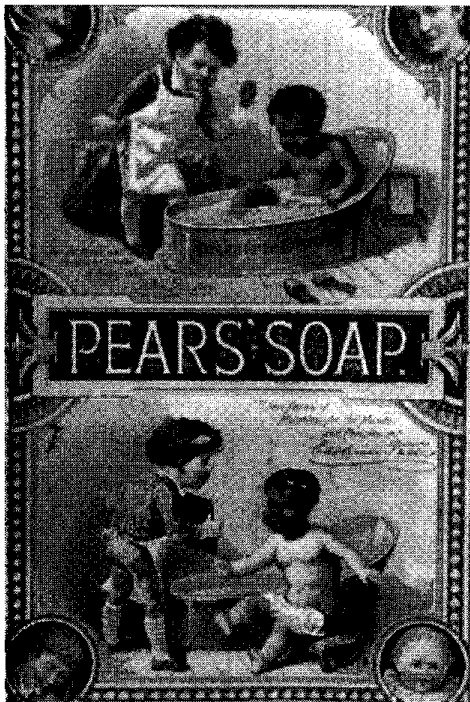


Figure 26.1 Advert for Pears' soap, 1880s

clothed in a white apron – the familiar fetish of domestic purity – bends benevolently over his ‘lesser’ brother, bestowing upon him the precious talisman of racial progress. The magical fetish of soap promises that the commodity can regenerate the Family of Man by washing from the skin the very stigma of racial and class degeneration.

Soap advertising offers an allegory of imperial progress at spectacle. In this ad, the imperial topos that I call panoptical time (progress consumed as a spectacle from a point of privileged invisibility) enters the domain of the commodity. In the second frame of the ad, the black child is out of the bath and the white boy shows him his startled visage in the mirror. The black boy’s body has become magically white, but his face – for Victorians the seat of rational individuality and self-consciousness – remains stubbornly black. The white child is thereby figured as the agent of history and the male heir to progress, reflecting his lesser brother in the European mirror of self-consciousness. In the Victorian mirror, the black child witnesses his predetermined destiny of imperial metamorphosis but remains a passive racial hybrid, part black, part white, brought to the brink of civilization by the twin commodity fetishes of soap and mirror. The advertisement discloses a crucial element of late Victorian commodity culture: the metaphoric transformation of imperial *time* into consumer *space* – imperial progress consumed at a glance as domestic spectacle.

The monkey

The metamorphosis of imperial time into domestic space is captured most vividly by the advertising campaign for Monkey Brand Soap. During the 1880s, the urban landscape of Victorian Britain teemed with the fetish monkeys of this soap. The monkey with its frying pan and bar of soap perched everywhere, on grimy hoardings and buses, on walls and shop fronts, promoting the soap that promised magically to do away with domestic labor: ‘No dust, no dirt, no labor.’ Monkey Brand Soap promised not only to regenerate the race but also to erase magically the unseemly spectacle of women’s manual labor.

In an exemplary ad, the fetish soap-monkey sits cross-legged on a doorstep, the threshold boundary between private domesticity and public commerce – the embodiment of anachronistic space (Figure 26.2). Dressed like an organ-grinder’s minion in a gentleman’s ragged suit, white shirt, and tie, but with improbably human hands and feet, the monkey extends a frying pan to catch the surplus cash of passersby. On the doormat before him, a great bar of soap is displayed, accompanied by a placard that reads: ‘My Own Work.’ In every respect the soap-monkey is a hybrid: not entirely ape, not entirely human; part street beggar, part gentleman; part artist, part advertiser. The creature inhabits the ambivalent border of jungle and city, private and public, the domestic and the commercial, and offers as its handiwork a fetish that is both art and commodity.

Monkeys inhabit Western discourse on the borders of social limit, marking the place of a contradiction in social value. As Donna Haraway has argued: ‘the primate body, as part of the body of nature, may be read as a map of power.’¹⁷ Primatology, Haraway insists, ‘is a Western discourse . . . a political order that works by the negotiation of boundaries achieved through ordering



Figure 26.2 Advert for Monkey Brand Soap, 1880s

differences.¹⁸ In Victorian iconography, the ritual recurrence of the monkey figure is eloquent of a crisis in value and hence anxiety at possible boundary breakdown. The primate body became a symbolic space for reordering and policing boundaries between humans and nature, women and men, family and politics, empire and metropolis.

Simian imperialism is also centrally concerned with the problem of representing *social change*. By projecting history (rather than fate, or God's will) onto the theater of nature, primatology made nature the alibi of political violence and placed in the hands of 'rational science' the authority to sanction and legitimize social change. Here, 'the scene of origins,' Haraway argues, 'is not the cradle of civilization, but the cradle of culture . . . the origin of sociality itself, especially in the densely meaning-laden icon of the family.'¹⁹ Primatology emerges as a theater for negotiating the perilous boundaries between the family (as natural and female) and power (as political and male).

The appearance of monkeys in soap advertising signals a dilemma: *how to represent domesticity without representing women at work*. The Victorian middle-class house was structured around the fundamental contradiction between women's paid and unpaid domestic work. As women were driven from paid work in mines, factories, shops, and trades to private, unpaid work in the home, domestic work became economically undervalued and the middle-class definition of femininity figured the 'proper' woman as one who did not work for profit. At the same time, a *cordon sanitaire* of racial degeneration was thrown around those women who did work publicly and visibly for money. What could not be incorporated into the industrial formation (women's domestic economic value) was displaced onto the invented domain of the primitive, and thereby disciplined and contained.

Monkeys, in particular, were deployed to legitimize social boundaries as edicts of nature. Fetishes straddling nature and culture, monkeys were seen as allied with the dangerous classes: the 'apelike' wandering poor, the hungry Irish, Jews, prostitutes, impoverished black people, the ragged working class, criminals, the insane, and female miners and servants, who were collectively seen to inhabit the threshold of racial degeneration. When Charles Kingsley visited Ireland, for example, he lamented:

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. . . . But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.²⁰

In the Monkey Brand advertisement, the monkey's signature of labor ('My Own Work') signals a double disavowal. Soap is masculinized, figured as a male product, while the (mostly female) labor of the workers in the huge, unhealthy soap factories is disavowed. At the same time, the labor of social transformation in the daily scrubbing and scouring of the sinks, pans and dishes, labyrinthine floors and corridors of Victorian domestic space vanishes – refigured as anachronistic space, primitive, and bestial. Female servants disappear and in their place crouches a phantasmic male hybrid. Thus, domesticity – seen as the sphere most separate from the marketplace and the masculine hurly-burly of empire – takes shape around the invented ideas of the primitive and the commodity fetish.

In Victorian culture, the monkey was an icon of metamorphosis, perfectly serving soap's liminal role in mediating the transformation of nature (dirt, waste, and disorder) into culture (cleanliness, rationality, and industry). Like all fetishes, the monkey is a contradictory image, embodying the hope of imperial progress through commerce while at the same time rendering visible deepening Victorian fears of urban militancy and colonial misrule. The soap-monkey became the emblem of industrial progress and imperial evolution, embodying the double promise that nature could be redeemed by consumer capital and that consumer capital could be guaranteed by natural law. At the same time, however, the soap-monkey was eloquent of the degree to which fetishism structures industrial rationality.

The mirror

In most Monkey Brand advertisements, the monkey holds a frying pan, which is also a mirror. In a similar Brooke's Soap ad, a classical female beauty with bare white arms stands draped in white, her skin and clothes epitomizing the exhibition value of sexual purity and domestic leisure, while from the cornucopia she holds flows a grotesque effluvium of hobgoblin angels. Each hybrid fetish embodies the doubled Victorian image of woman as 'angel in the drawing room, monkey in the bedroom,' as well as the racial iconography of evolutionary progress from ape to angel. Historical time, again, is captured as domestic spectacle, eerily reflected in the frying pan/mirror fetish.

In this ad, the Brooke's Soap offers an alchemy of economic progress, promising to make 'copper like gold.' At the same time, the Enlightenment idea of linear,

rational time leading to angelic perfection finds its antithesis in the other time of housework, ruled by the hobgoblins of dirt, disorder, and fetishistic, nonprogressive time. Erupting on the margins of the rational frame, the ad displays the irrational consequences of the idea of progress. The mirror/frying pan, like all fetishes, visibly expresses a crisis in value but cannot resolve it. It can only embody the contradiction, frozen as commodity spectacle, luring the spectator deeper and deeper into consumerism.

Mirrors glint and gleam in soap advertising, as they do in the culture of imperial kitsch at large. In Victorian middle-class households, servants scoured and polished every metal and wooden surface until it shone like a mirror. Doorknobs, lamp stands and banisters, tables and chairs, mirrors and clocks, knives and forks, kettles and pans, shoes and boots were polished until they shimmered, reflecting in their gleaming surfaces other object-mirrors, an infinity of crystalline mirrors within mirrors, until the interior of the house was all shining surfaces, a labyrinth of reflection. The mirror became the epitome of commodity fetishism: erasing both the signs of domestic labor and the industrial origins of domestic commodities. In the domestic world of mirrors, objects multiply without apparent human intervention in a promiscuous economy of self-generation.

Why the attention of surface and reflection? The polishing was dedicated, in part, to policing the boundaries between private and public, removing every trace of labor, replacing the disorderly evidence of working women with the exhibition of domesticity as veneer, the commodity spectacle as surface, the house arranged as a theater of clean surfaces for commodity display. The mirror/commodity renders the value of the object as an exhibit, a spectacle to be consumed, admired, and displayed for its capacity to embody a twofold value: the man's market worth and the wife's exhibition status. The house existed to display femininity as bearing exhibition value only, beyond the marketplace and therefore, by natural decree, beyond political power.

An ad for Stephenson's Furniture Cream figures a spotless maid on all fours, smiling up from a floor so clean that it mirrors her reflection. The cream is 'warranted not to fingermark.' A superior soap should leave no telltale smear, no fingerprint of female labor. As Victorian servants lost individuality in the generic names their employers imposed on them, so soaps erased the imprint of women's work on middle-class history.

Domesticating empire

By the end of the century, a stream of imperial bric-a-brac had invaded Victorian homes. Colonial heroes and colonial scenes were emblazoned on a host of domestic commodities, from milk cartons to sauce bottles, tobacco tins to whiskey bottles, assorted biscuits to toothpaste, toffee boxes to baking powder.²¹ Traditional national fetishes such as the Union Jack, Britannia, John Bull, and the rampant lion were marshaled into a revamped celebration of imperial spectacle. Empire was seen to be patriotically defended by Ironclad Porpoise Bootlaces and Sons of the Empire soap, while Henry Morton Stanley came to the rescue of the Emin of Pasha laden with outsize boxes of Huntley and Palmers Biscuits.

Late Victorian advertising presented a vista of Africa conquered by domestic commodities.²² In the flickering magic lantern of imperial desire, teas, biscuits, tobaccos, Bovril, tins of cocoa and, above all, soaps bench themselves on far-flung shores, tramp through jungles, quell uprisings, restore order and write the inevitable legend of commercial progress across the colonial landscape. In a Huntley and Palmers' Biscuits ad, a group of male colonials sit in the middle of a jungle on biscuit crates, sipping tea. Moving toward them is a stately and seemingly endless procession of elephants, loaded with more biscuits and colonials, bringing teatime to the heart of the jungle. The serving attendant in this ad, as in most others, is male. Two things happen in such images: women vanish from the affair of empire, and colonized men are feminized by their association with domestic servitude.

Liminal images of oceans, beaches, and shorelines recur in cleaning ads of the time. An exemplary ad for Chlorinol Soda Bleach shows three boys in a soda box sailing in a phantasmic ocean bathed by the radiance of the imperial dawn. In a scene washed in the red, white, and blue of the Union Jack, two black boys proudly hold aloft their boxes of Chlorinol. A third boy, the familiar racial hybrid of cleaning ads, has presumably already applied his bleach, for his skin is blanched an eerie white. On red sails that repeat the red of the bleach box, the legend of black people's purported commercial redemption in the arena of empire reads: 'We are going to use "Chlorinol" and be like de white nigger.'

The ad vividly exemplifies Marx's lesson that the mystique of the commodity fetish lies not in its use value but in its exchange value and its potency as a sign: 'So far as "the commodity" is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it.' For three naked children, clothing bleach is less than useful. Instead, the whitening agent of bleach promises an alchemy of racial upliftment through historical contact with commodity culture. The transforming power of the civilizing mission is stamped on the boat-box's sails as the objective character of the commodity itself.

More than merely a *symbol* of imperial progress, the domestic commodity becomes the *agent* of history itself. The commodity, abstracted from social context and human labor, does the civilizing work of empire, while radical change is figured as magical, without process or social agency. Hence the proliferation of ads featuring magic. In similar fashion, cleaning ads such as Chlorinol's foreshadow the 'before and after' beauty ads of the twentieth century: a crucial genre directed largely at women, in which the conjuring power of the product to alchemize change is all that lies between the temporal 'before and after' of women's bodily transformation.

The Chlorinol ad displays a racial and gendered division of labor. Imperial progress from black child to 'white nigger' is consumed as commodity spectacle – as panoptical time. The self-satisfied, hybrid 'white nigger' literally holds the rudder of history and directs social change, while the dawning of civilization bathes his enlightened brow with radiance. The black children simply have exhibition value as potential consumers of the commodity, there only to uphold the promise of capitalist commerce and to represent how far the white child has evolved – in the iconography of Victorian racism the condition of 'savagery' is identical to the condition of infancy. Like white women, Africans (both women and men) are figured not as historic agents but as frames for the commodity, valued for *exhibition* alone. The working women, both black and white, who spent vast amounts

of energy bleaching the white sheets, shirts, frills, aprons, cuffs, and collars of imperial clothes are nowhere to be seen. It is important to note that in Victorian advertising, black women are very seldom rendered as consumers of commodities, for, in imperial lore, they lag too far behind men to be agents of history. Imperial domesticity is therefore a domesticity without women.

In the Chlorinol ad, women's creation of social value through housework is displaced onto the commodity as its own power, fetishistically inscribed on the children's bodies as a magical metamorphosis of the flesh. At the same time, military subjugation, cultural coercion, and economic thuggery are refigured as benign domestic processes as natural and healthy as washing. The stains of Africa's disoblighingly complex and tenacious past and the inconvenience of alternative economic and cultural values are washed away like grime.

Incapable of themselves actually engendering change, African men are figured only as 'mimic men,' to borrow V.S. Naipaul's dyspeptic phrase, destined simply to ape the epic white march of progress to self-knowledge. Bereft of the white raiments of imperial godliness, the Chlorinol children appear to take the fetish literally, content to bleach their skins to white. Yet these ads reveal that, far from being a quintessentially African propensity, the faith in fetishism was a faith fundamental to imperial capitalism itself.

[. . .]

Notes

- 1 Karl Marx, 'Commodity Fetishism,' *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 163.
- 2 See Thomas Richards' excellent analysis, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian Britain: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (London: Verso, 1990), especially the introduction and ch. 1.
- 3 See David Simpson's analysis of novelistic fetishism in *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
- 4 Richards, *The Commodity Culture*, p. 72.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 6 In 1889, an ad for Sunlight Soap featured the feminized figure of British nationalism, Britannia, standing on a hill and showing P.T. Barnum, the famous circus manager and impresario of the commodity spectacle, a huge Sunlight Soap factory stretched out below them. Britannia proudly proclaims the manufacture of Sunlight Soap to be: 'The Greatest Show On Earth.' See Jennifer Wicke's excellent analysis of P.T. Barnum in *Advertising Fiction: Literature, Advertisement and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- 7 See Timothy Burke, '“Nyamarira That I Loved”: Commoditization, Consumption and the Social History of Soap in Zimbabwe,' *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Collected Seminar Papers*, no. 42, vol. 17 (London: University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1992), pp. 195–216.
- 8 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class* (London: Routledge 1992).
- 9 David T.A. Lindsey and Geoffrey C. Bamber, *Soap-Making. Past and Present. 1876–1976* (Nottingham: Gerard Brothers Ltd, 1965), p. 34.

- 10 Lindsey and Bamber, *Soap-Making*, p. 38. Just how deeply the relation between soap and advertising became embedded in popular memory is expressed in words such as 'soft-soap' and 'soap opera.' For histories of advertising, see also Blanche B. Elliott, *A History of English Advertising* (London: Business Publications Ltd., 1962); and T.R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain. A History* (London: Heinemann, 1982).
- 11 Quoted in Diana and Geoffrey Hindley, *Advertising in Victorian England, 1837–1901* (London: Wayland, 1972), p. 117.
- 12 Mike Dempsey (ed.) *Bubbles: Early Advertising Art from A. & Pears Ltd.* (London: Fontana, 1978).
- 13 Laurel Bradley, 'From Eden to Empire: John Everett Millais' Cherry Ripe,' *Victorian Studies* vol. 34, no. 2 (Winter 1991), pp. 179–203. See also, Michael Dempsey, *Bubbles*.
- 14 Barratt spent £2,200 on Millais' painting and £30,000 on the mass production of millions of individual reproductions of the painting. In the 1880s, Pears was spending between £300,000 and £400,000 on advertising alone.
- 15 Furious at the pollution of the sacrosanct realm of art with economics, the art world lambasted Millais for trafficking (publicly instead of privately) in the sordid world of trade.
- 16 See Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fiction*, p. 70.
- 17 Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 10.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
- 20 Charles Kingsley, Letter to his wife, 4 July 1860, in *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*, Frances E. Kingsley, ed., (London: Henry S. King and Co., 1877), p. 107. See also Richard Kearney (ed.) *The Irish Mind* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985); L.P. Curtis Jr, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport: Conference on British Studies of University of Bridgeport, 1968); and Seamus Deane, 'Civilians and Barbarians,' *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 33–42.
- 21 During the Anglo-Boer War, Britain's fighting forces were seen as valiantly fortified by Johnston's Corn Flour, Pattison's' Whiskey and Frye's Milk Chocolate. See Robert Opie, *Trading on the British Image* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1985) for an excellent collection of advertising images.
- 22 In a brilliant chapter, Richards explores how the imperial conviction of the explorer and travel writer, Henry Morton Stanley, that he had a mission to civilize Africans by teaching them the value of commodities, 'reveals the major role that imperialists ascribed to the commodity in propelling and justifying the scramble for Africa.' Richards, *The Commodity Culture*, p. 123.