

Architecture, Orientalism and the Aryan Thesis

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I

The publication of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* in 1978, exposed the venerable and long-standing field of Orientalism to the full force of the crisis of representation. The Orient, the long-standing object of inquiry for institutionalized Orientalism, was radically reconfigured as a result. Where it had always been understood to be present out there in some material sense, passively awaiting the scholar's benign and innocent gaze, Said revealed the Orient to be a representational chimera, a fantastical image projected from the Occident. He showed how long-standing and informal geopolitical knowledge of the Orient and its 'basic geographical distinction' from the Occident, was disseminated 'into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts'. In these various discursive contexts the distinction between Orient and Occident was elaborated representationally 'by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description' (Said 1995, 12).

Said's book effectively inverted the most obvious connotations of Orientalism, transforming it, in the words of one historian, 'from dreamy obscurantism to the intellectual Foreign Legion of Europe' (Trautmann 1997, 19). Such an audacious manoeuvre necessarily provoked controversy. *Orientalism* triggered a broad-ranging debate in almost all parts of the humanities, and is credited by some with launching a new discipline — postcolonial studies — which sought to describe and analyse the effects of colonialism and its aftermath.¹ This transmission of Said's conception of Orientalism into more narrowly circumscribed disciplinary spaces in the humanities exposed it to sustained critical scrutiny. Historians argued that Said accepted too readily a simple distinction between Occident and Orient, and in so doing ossified it into a rigid and debilitating binary relation. Furthermore, they argued that, on the one hand, the force of domination across this binary is too often seen to be unidirectional (from West to East), and on the other hand that the moral bulwark that Said imagines to confront this force is portrayed as the exclusive prerogative of the East. Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak for instance have, in different ways, argued to the contrary showing that the colonial experience was never unidirectional, that it had transformative effects on both coloniser and colonised, and that the dominant and subordinate positions within Said's account of Orientalism were never as stable or fixed as he makes them appear.

Cultural critics such as James Clifford have famously taken Said to task for his easy appropriation of certain possibilities within Foucauldian (and post-structuralist) accounts of language without coming to grips with their more radical consequences (Clifford 1988, 17). More

recently, Timothy Brennan (writing in cultural studies and comparative literature) has suggested that Said is drawn to Foucault because he finds in him an attentiveness to materiality that seemingly slips the 'prison-house of language' that governs post-structuralism more generally. For Said, Foucault's philosophy of language has 'its own special history, geography, and spirituality, as well as a corporeality' (Said cited in Brennan 2000, 566). So while Said deployed Foucault's conception of language and discourse to attack the 'radical realism' (Said 1995, 72) of Orientalism — as he puts it, 'at most, the "real" Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it' (Said 1995, 22) — he simultaneously mounted a critique of what he regarded as theory's excessive 'textuality' and its 'retreat' from 'anything that is worldly, circumstantial, or socially contaminated' (Said 1991, 3). This ambivalence produces an unresolved tension in Said's work between representational and material registers — on some occasions Orientalism is figured as a discursive practice that determines imperial practices, while on others it is merely the outcome of imperial practices (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 41). Said, according to this critique, did not so much expose Orientalist scholarship to the full force of the crisis of representation as to merely harass it with a charge of representational inadequacy.

The critical reception of Said's thesis within narrower disciplinary spaces in the humanities is now well summarized in various sources.² I have merely sketched some examples to contextualise my more immediate aim of considering Said's notion of Orientalism from the specific disciplinary perspective of architecture. Said's own rhetoric seems to invite such a consideration, for although the bulk of his thesis is elaborated through analysis of one particular cultural practice, namely literature, he nonetheless assumes his thesis to be valid for all scholarly fields that touch the non-West. While he warns that there can be no 'hard-and-fast rule about the relationship between knowledge and politics', and that 'each humanistic investigation must formulate the nature of that connection [between knowledge and politics] in the specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances' (Said 1995, 15), Said's conception of Orientalism remains quite comprehensive in its ambition. Not surprisingly, this ambition produces difficulties of its own. We are left with the impression that while Said invites possible relations between knowledge and politics within a particular field, such as architecture, the comprehensive design of Orientalism simultaneously forecloses on that possibility. I am interested in what form a post-Saidian scholarship on Asia would take in architecture — given the importance of Said's thesis, it seems to me that this is an unavoidable question. At the same time, in addressing this question, I want to keep in mind those difficulties and tensions that are implied in the formation of Said's conception of Orientalism.

II

There have been various attempts to address the question of architecture and Orientalism through historical studies in recent times. This work can be represented, for instance, by Metcalf's (1989) review of British architecture in colonial India, and by Crinson's (1996) discussion of architecture of the Victorian period and its relation to Orientalist themes, styles and influences. In each case the relation between Said's Orientalism and architecture is articulated only in fleeting and implicit ways. Metcalf (1989) goes along with Said and sees architecture in the context of colonial India as being 'concern[ed] with political effect' (Metcalf 1989, 2). 'In the public buildings put up by the Raj it was essential always to make visible Britain's imperial position as ruler, for these structures were charged with the explicit purpose of representing empire itself' (Metcalf 1989, 2). For Metcalf, architecture 'was but one manifestation of an interconnected structure of power and knowledge that informed colonialism everywhere' (Metcalf 1989, 8). Crinson is more skeptical of the relation between power and knowledge embodied in colonial architecture, while he acknowledges Said's importance in politicizing cross-cultural knowledge production. Yet, on the more broader issue of architecture's place within Orientalism, both Metcalf and Crinson tend to concur: architecture is understood as a kind of representational media through which colonial imperatives are inscribed.

This implicit understanding is developed in a more complex way in work by Çelik (1992a; 1992b) and Mitchell (1988). Each these authors deals in different ways with the architectural representations of Islamic cultures in European and American World Expositions of the nineteenth-century. Çelik threads Saidian insights and terminology throughout her work without setting out an explicit account of Orientalism and architecture. Neither Çelik nor Mitchell present analyses of Orientalist-inflected architecture, but each explores the ways in which Orientalism — as a larger epistemological and political project — against its own 'will' produces certain modernizing and progressive effects outside the West. In this regard, Çelik and Mitchell's work is quite different from either Crinson (1996) or Metcalf (1995), and represents a more fully developed postcolonial attitude towards the legacy of colonialism in architecture. The point at which these otherwise quite different works do approach each other is around a generally held view of architecture as a type of representational media.³ This is a view that subsumes architecture within the theoretical framework of Said's project; architecture in each case is understood as a kind of discourse that materializes colonial imperatives.

John MacKenzie's book *Orientalism: History, theory and the arts* (1995) is distinctive in the field because it explores more directly a grounds for contact between Said's critique of Orientalism and architecture as a distinctive discipline. MacKenzie's discussion of Orientalism is premised on the distinctiveness of the arts, and as he attempts to translate Said's insights into the various arts, his work is especially useful for my purposes. His is a comparative study that focuses on art, architecture, design, music, and theatre in order to 'examine the extent to which the Orientalist thesis can be revised in more positive and constructive ways by escaping the literary obsession and to consider the relationships among different cultural forms, both elite and popular in character' (MacKenzie 1995, xiv).

For MacKenzie — taking up a critique first made by Bhabha — 'Orientalist' interpretation is ill-equipped to handle what he describes as the hybrid products of western representations and adaptations of the cultural artifacts of the East. Furthermore, he says, Orientalism 'takes disturbingly ahistorical forms', so much so that 'we find moral condemnation befogging intellectual clarity and at times negating the essential characteristics of the critical faculty' (MacKenzie 1995, xvii). In this Said is admonished for not being prepared to acknowledge the 'benefits' of Orientalist scholarship. MacKenzie's central thesis hinges on his contention that 'the arts and dominant political ideologies tend to

operate in counterpoint rather than conformity'. He suggests that because Said 'fails to recognise' this, he cannot concede the possibility that '[i]t is from the arts that a counter-hegemonic discourse invariably emerges' (MacKenzie 1995, 14). Where Said would, almost automatically, allocate a place for the arts within an over-arching Orientalist logic of domination, MacKenzie would ask us to imagine them as emancipatory cultural practices that broach cross-cultural sympathies if not understandings.⁴ This is a novel argument on the terrain of Orientalist writing in architecture and the arts, and is an interesting feature of MacKenzie's book.

MacKenzie is keen to demonstrate the 'counter-hegemonic' potential of the arts, and to reveal an Orientalism that was more 'productive and constructive' than Said allowed. He achieves this by presenting numerous examples of a kind of interaction, hybridization and 'continuity' between the arts of the Occident (i.e. Britain) and the Orient. This is made clear in the following passage that concludes his chapter on architecture.

Perceived oriental forms, however misinterpreted, were a repeated source of inspiration, offering new routes out of architectural reaction. What emerged were not copies, the constant bugbear of the architectural commentator, but new styles infused by the design values and sometimes the spirit of another age or culture. With an architect like [Alexander] Thomson or a commentator like [James] Fergusson, there is no doubt that oriental forms, albeit 'dead' ones, were being handled with sensitivity and respect, as major lessons and opportunities for modern architects. As with art, architecture offers very little evidence of a monolithic binary discourse, separating Self from Other through inimical cultural statement (MacKenzie 1995, 101-02).

For MacKenzie, Orientalism does not so much function as the cultural accomplice of colonial power as offer 'new routes', 'inspiration', 'lessons and opportunities' for architecture in the West.

But what does MacKenzie sacrifice in making this conclusion? First, he blurs the fundamental distinctions between the arts. While architecture is not immediately understood as a media for the representation of larger political and epistemological imperatives, it does reduce architecture so that it is treated primarily through the conceptual frame of style. A consequence of this is that he avoids Said's most demanding thesis: that orientalist cultural forms operate as a kind of self-confirming 'evidence' of otherness that serves the ends of colonialism. Without addressing architecture more broadly, as a complex evidentiary field entangled in the politics of empire, then MacKenzie remains indebted to the Orientalist paradigm that Said is so critical of. In the end this chapter on architecture becomes a comprehensive catalogue of Orientally-inflected buildings in the West, Britain in particular. The central argument that MacKenzie makes in presenting this architectural catalogue is that there are continuities, or at least certain hybridities, between East and West, where Said posits only irreconcilable difference. The deluge of discipline-specific detail in the form of architectural examples, seems to cloud rather than clarify, translate or extend, Said's critical innovation. We are left with the impression that this weight of architectural evidence, rather than refuting Said's central thesis, precisely proves it. It is architecture in the West, in MacKenzie's description, that gains much through the contact with Orientalism — new stylistic inspirations etc. In his haste to bridge the chasm Said opens up between Self and Other, West and East, he inadvertently confirms only the western Self: in his analysis it is the West that benefits from cultural enrichment.

III

How might this theme of evidence be inspected more closely? One of the architectural writers MacKenzie cites opens up an intriguing moment in a more general orientalist history that offers another

approach to this question. MacKenzie refers to James Fergusson's description of Indian architecture as a 'stone book', 'a means whereby Indian history could be unlocked and elucidated' (Fergusson cited in MacKenzie 1995, 95). MacKenzie goes on to suggest — along the lines we are already familiar with — that Fergusson is alluding to a set of possible architectural 'lessons' in the 'underlying principles of eastern architecture' that could assist the West to 'escape from the groove of the classical and the Gothic' (MacKenzie 1995, 96). I want to adopt MacKenzie's concern for the distinctiveness of each of the arts, his interest in reconfiguring the binary between Occident and Orient, and his interest in developing a productive account of Orientalism. But I also want to put to one side his substantive conclusions, and examine more closely this emergence of this idea of the stone book.

Fergusson's idea of Indian architecture as a stone book takes us back to an inaugural moment in modern Orientalism. Fergusson's writing on Indian architecture drew on the work of William ('Asiatic') Jones, a figure associated with the launching of Orientalism as a proper field of academic investigation in the late-eighteenth-century — some ninety years before Fergusson was writing. The interesting thing about this intellectual link is that it was forged along architectural lines. Architecture was already centrally placed within Jones' work, so Fergusson was not interpreting older Orientalist scholarship, rather he was developing architectural themes already present within it. Architecture could be said to be present at the very inauguration of Orientalism. Let me elaborate this point by describing Jones' Orientalist project.

William Jones was a British administrator with a particular talent for foreign languages. Jones's most innovative theoretical contribution was what he called the Indo-European concept, or the Aryan thesis. On the basis of this, he is often described as 'the Father of Indology' (Mukherjee 1968, 91). This thesis was elaborated in an paper delivered to the Asiatic Society (which Jones himself founded) in Calcutta in 1786 — the paper was later published in the Society's journal *Asiatick Researches*. One particularly famous and often-cited passage encapsulates Jones's thesis:

The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtick, though blended with a different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of Persia (Jones 1806, 422-23).

Jones proposed a common source for the languages of Europe and India, and so implied a common ancestral culture too. He proposed that 'the Persians, Indians, Romans, Greeks, Goths, and ancient Egyptians or Ethiopians spoke the same language and professed the same popular religion' (Trautmann 1997, 50). Jones's form of Orientalism shockingly eclipsed an older Orientalism based on travellers' and missionary writings that routinely characterized Indian culture as heathen and savage. For many commentators — those who do not subscribe to Said's critique of Orientalism — Jones's thesis was built on a 'brilliant perception' that marks 'the starting point of modern comparative philology' (Feldman and Richardson 1972, 269).⁵ They point to Jones' concern to demonstrate the sophistication of Indian civilization in European terms. A consequence of Jones' work was that Europe quite suddenly became aware of an ancient culture that seemed to rival, if not transcend, the civilizational standards of more familiar biblical and classical periods (Feldman and Richardson 1972, 268-69). This served to renew belief in the long-held

biblical doctrine — as given in the book of Genesis — of a single source of human civilization. Jones' work effectively triggered an explosion in interest in Indic studies in Europe.

Said too acknowledges the importance of Jones' work. But for him it represents not so much an enlightened appreciation of a different culture, as the 'refinement' of 'techniques for receiving the Orient' in the West, and the expansion in scope of the coercive and repressive powers of Orientalism (Said 1995, 22). Almost as soon as Jones arrived in India, Said says, he 'began the course of personal study that was to gather in, to rope off, to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning' (Said 1995, 78). For Said, Jones was driven by 'an irresistible impulse always to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient to "a complete digest" of laws, figures, customs, and works' (Said 1995, 78).

Said cites precisely that same famous passage from Jones on Sanskrit as a common Indo-European source language. But what he does not discuss is the specific methodology that Jones developed to 'codify' and 'domesticate' the evidence of cultural difference he confronted. There are two things to note in this regard. First, although Jones believed language to be indispensable for proper Orientalist scholarship, he was skeptical about the powers of language to access Indian cultural knowledge: 'I have ever considered languages as the mere instruments of real learning, and think them improperly confounded with learning itself' (Jones 1806, 424). Second, as I have suggested, the interesting thing about Jones' Orientalist project is that architecture features quite centrally in it. Jones sees architecture as one of four basic sources of evidence with which to assemble a proper and authoritative account of Indic civilization. Temple architecture, furthermore, features in his promotion of the relative merits of Indian culture. So the famous passage cited above is not a stand-alone encapsulation of Orientalism (whether 'good' or 'bad') but rests within a much larger system of proof. This system relies, in Jones' words, on 'four general media' for 'satisfying our curiosity' concerning Indian history. This particular methodology is required because, in Jones' view, Indian history 'is involved in a cloud of fables', and that knowledge of local language by itself is inadequate to the task. The four media are: 'first, their *Languages* and *Letters*; secondly their *Philosophy* and *Religion*; thirdly, the actual remains of their old *Sculpture* and *Architecture*; and fourthly, the written memorials of their *Sciences* and *Arts*' (Jones 1806, 421). Jones outlines each source of evidence in turn. This is his discussion of architecture:

The remains of Architecture and Sculpture in India, which I mention here as mere monuments of antiquity, not as specimens of ancient art, seem to prove an early connection between this country and Africa. The pyramids of Egypt, the colossal statues described by Pausanias and others, the Sphinx, [...] indicate the style and mythology of the same indefatigable workmen who formed the vast excavations of Canárah, the various temples and images of Buddha, and the idols which are continually dug up at Gayá, or in its vicinity. The letters on many of these monuments appear, as I have before intimated, partly of Indian, and partly of Abyssinian or Ethiopick, origin; and all these indubitable facts may induce no ill-grounded opinion, that Ethiopia and Hindustan were peopled or colonized by the same extraordinary race; in confirmation of which, it may be added, that the mountaineers of Bengal and Bahár can hardly be distinguished in some of their features, particularly their lips and noses, from modern Abyssinians, whom the Arabs call the children of Cúsh (Jones 1806, 427).

Jones' Orientalism is grounded in a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit, but he sees the limitations of language and turns to evidence with more longevity. Language and architecture are intersected to produce a quite literal 'stone book'. In this instance Jones uses architectural and racial evidence to demonstrate relations between India and Egypt — regarded as the cradle of European civilization.

This position is immediately sanctioned in a discipline-specific way. Precisely the same arguments are taken up by the architect William Chambers who published alongside Jones in the same volume of *Asiatick Researches*. Chambers also puts weight of proof on architecture, and at the same time rehearses Jones' suspicion of myth, poetry and language. In one passage he gives an account of the origins of the Mahabalipuram temple complex as it is described in the Hindu epic the Mahabharata. Having cited a long section from the Mahabharata, Chambers then discusses the reliability of this literary evidence.

It is not, however, improbable, that the rest of this history may contain, like the mythology of Greece and Rome, a great deal of real matter of fact, though enveloped in dark and figurative representations. Through the disguise of these we may discern some imperfect records of great events, and of revolutions that have happened in remote times; and they perhaps merit our attention the more, as it is not likely that any records of ancient Hindoo history exists but in this obscure and fantastic dress. Their poets seem to have been their only historians, as well as divines; and whatever they relate, is wrapped up in this burlesque garb, set off, by way of ornament, with circumstances hugely incredible and absurd, and all this without any date, and in no other order or method, than such as the poet's fancy suggested, and found most convenient. Nevertheless, by comparing names and grand events, recorded by them, with those interspersed in the histories of other nations, and by calling in the assistance of ancient monuments, coins, and inscriptions, as occasion shall offer, some discoveries, may, it is hoped, be made on these interesting subjects (Chambers 1806, 157-58).

Architecture, then, functions as a kind of indispensable form of evidence in this nascent Orientalism. Where 'poets [are the] only historians', and where 'history exists [only in an] obscure and fantastic dress', then the Orientalist — including Jones and Chambers — must turn to architecture as a basis for authoritative statements on India. Preserved in the ancient monuments are the truths of Indo-European civilization.

IV

I have figured the question of Orientalism and architecture as one of translation. But a closer scrutiny of certain key Orientalist texts shows that architecture was already central to the enterprise. So the question of architecture's relation to Orientalism cannot simply be understood in terms of a translation between two distinct entities. But what proves more interesting than this observation, is that we find architecture is deployed as a means of circumventing the frailties of representation in that canonical cross-cultural scene. Architecture's all-too-evident materiality leads Jones, Chambers and, later, Fergusson to believe that it is not subject to the same ephemerality or drift of signification that was, later still, identified as the catalyst for the crisis of representation. It is as if this architectural 'text', so self-evidently wrought in stone, was deployed as ballast in the space of representation in which an irreducible and knowable origin point for Indo-European civilization might be authorized. This is an instance of the 'radical realism' that Said identifies at the heart of Orientalism. In turn, it is this insight that leads most of the literature on architectural Orientalism to fully endorse a representational view of architecture in order to counter the temptations of such realism. But I want to suggest that this view of architecture privileges Said's account of Orientalism without properly accounting for the ways in which architecture and Orientalism were already entangled. While we can no longer go along with the Orientalist understanding of architecture as a convenient and authoritative form of evidence for Indo-European civilization, nor can we simply figure it as functioning subserviently within some larger Orientalist logic, smoothly transposing imperialist discourse into material form.

Said's own hesitation on the question of representation offers a way into this issue. Said articulates his own methodology as involving 'analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in culture at large' (Said 1995, 20). Critical cross-cultural scholarship, for Said, means paying attention to the materializing or hardening of certain texts. Here Said seems to be invoking Foucault's notion of the 'repeatable materiality' (Foucault 1972, 104) of discursive statements. Foucault uses this phrase to refer to the means by which discursive statements acquire a material reality, and, at the same time, become highly mobile and transmissible entities able to shift from one institutional space to another. For Foucault the discursive statement has a 'repeatable materiality' that sits on the cusp between ideal form and unique event. Yet, in Said's hands this paradoxical and ambiguous quality takes on a more black-and-white quality. He reads Orientalist representations as theatrical costumes that cover actual material conditions. The representations of Orientalist scholars, he argues, 'are to the actual Orient [...] as stylized costumes are to characters in a play; they are like [...] the particolored costume worn by Harlequin in a *commedia dell'arte* play (Said 1995, 71). The understanding of representation as a form of theatrical dress camouflaging a more substantial reality is invoked repeatedly and consistently throughout *Orientalism*. The telling thing about this is that Said's characterization of representation resonates quite precisely with Jones' and Chambers'. For them, historical representations in India are 'involved in a cloud of fables' (Jones), are 'wrapped up in [...] burlesque garb' (Chambers 1806, 157), and 'exist [...] in obscure and fantastic dress' (Chambers 1806, 157). As we have seen, these Orientalists have recourse to architecture precisely to circumvent the unreliability of representations such as these. While Said critique's this kind of realism, his own account of representation is indebted to the same logic.

Architecture, then, is configured in a surprisingly consistent way here. It appears as the bed-rock of authenticity on two, diametrically-opposed sides of an argument. It is architecture's peculiar status with regard to representation that produces this anomaly. Architecture has always quivered between material and representational worlds without ever settling for one or the other. Understood in this way, architecture is not so amenable to being translated into Saidian terms. Rather than being an efficient medium for translation, architecture forms a kind of blockage in Said's project, such that its broader inter-disciplinary ambitions become convoluted. The existing scholarship on architecture that does deploy Said in a relatively immediate way remains important in the task of configuring a contemporary approaches to cross-cultural scholarship in this field. But, at the same time, this brief foray into *Orientalism* suggests that cross-cultural scholarship in architecture also requires another register, one that pays attention to the peculiar status of architecture within the larger system of cultural production.

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NOTES

- ¹Brennan (2000) has argued against the idea of Said as the progenitor of postcolonial studies. He suggests that although it has come to seem almost common-sensical, the basic differences between Said's work and that of postcolonial studies more generally are so marked that it cannot be sustained.
- ²See for example: Moore-Gilbert (1997), Gandhi (1998), and Turner (1994).
- ³In her discussion of Le Corbusier's Algiers projects, Çelik quite directly transposes architecture into Said's vocabulary: 'these projects epitomize a culmination of the long history of French interventions "to represent, to inhabit, and to possess" a territory' (Çelik 1992b, 74).
- ⁴Relatedly MacKenzie argues that it is popular art in particular which is most likely to produce this 'counter-hegemonic discourse'. Said is also seen to be limited on this count as 'he concentrates almost exclusively on elite texts' (MacKenzie 1995, 14).
- ⁵See also for example: Mukherjee (1968), and Trautman (1997).