

Image Creation as a Problematic

28 to 29 April 2005

Villa Jaffé, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Wallotstr. 10, 14193 Berlin

Convener:

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1. Background:

“We came here to correct the image of Arabs and Islam”, said Amr Moussa, the general secretary of the Arab League, in the opening of the Frankfurt Bookfair. The seminars of the bookfair were resonant with the rhetoric of image, which in itself was not exempt from an apologetic tone. It seems that the West – non West relations, -already built on a long colonial and anti- colonial history of images-, have come down to replacing one image with another.

Strangely enough, it is noted that creating an image of the Arab world is not anymore a task confined to the West, i.e., the white, superior, and civilized culture in colonial terms. It has become the task of the Arab world as well to provide an image about itself. Instead of unveiling and analyzing, scholarly and culturally, the process of mis/representation, some Arab scholars and intellectuals have resorted to consolidating a still image, similar to a fixed photographic cadre that lacks all the dynamics and politics of becoming. The problematic lies in the hegemony of the image to create the sole and only ‘truth’. Therefore, reality is mediated through images where each party relates to the other through certain fixed shots that lack historicity, despite the ample and prolific historical background where relations have been, and still are, formulated. Simplicity also surfaces when the non-West tries to replace the old orientalist negative images with ‘modern’ positive ones, believing that this replacement is a means of resistance. It is of paramount importance here that the Archimedean point of creating those ‘modern’ images is based in Western culture. To explain, the non-West measures its own level of progress according to measures set by the Western philosophy and thought. Therefore, the history of colonization is relegated to the background and the culture of the “other” is stigmatized as “backward”. Hence, the crisis of modernism, as a Western project, and the conflict of the authentic and modern are the preoccupation of Arab scholarship now. Gramsci who advanced and fathomed the concept of hegemony believes that “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an ‘educational’ relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces that comprise it, but in the entire international and world field, between complexes of national and continental civilizations” (Further Selections from the Prison Notebook, p.157). Image production is, thus, taken by some non-Western scholars to be one of the forms of resistance to the hegemonic former colonizing gaze that still exercises a strong presence.

2. Rationale

It has become now the war of images, i.e., whose image will prevail and gain supremacy. Consequently, the international cultural scene has re-fallen into a long series of new binaries: peace/terrorism; democracy/dictatorship; freedom/oppression; tolerance/fanaticism; unveiled/veiled; Semitic /anti-Semitic.... etc. In such binaries one cannot disregard the relation between power, politics and knowledge as well as the politics of knowledge production.

Yet, even if the West's position in the paradigm of power can be balanced or changed, the non Western world's attempt at subverting this powerful position by supplying a constellation of fixed 'images' about itself is doomed to failure. The point is 'images' as fixed still signifiers of the Arab world completely undermine or rather obliterate the perpetual flux of the region along with a consistent denial of 'diversity'. The desire of some Arab scholars to produce a solid homogenous culture leads to the sterility of imagination when it comes to producing alternative ways of "seeing" the world. This zealous process of homogenizing the culture of the Arab world is a slippery ground. Not only it overlooks the richness that usually comes out of diversity, but also it falls into the very trap that it has been trying to avoid, i.e., the Western criteria of modernism. Most of the representations/ images coming from inside the Arab world are mere reactions to the misrepresentations/ images coming from the West, a fact that only consolidates the Eurocentric thought and vision. The result is culturally repulsive; there is no dialogue (a term so much in fashion recently), no exchange of views, no discussion, or mutual recognition. There is only a flat assertion of many positive qualities and features. These assertions, easily made to consolidate images, do not affect the West's claim to an absolute authority in shaping the 'other' and in producing knowledge. The Arab world becomes a silent entity combating the unfair and unjust perceptions of the West through images, whether literary images (ignoring all emergent new literary voices that re-question the history of colonization, and take issue with the concept of a political power that silences any resistance), or women's images (our women are not veiled, denying the rise of fundamentalism and its pressure on women) or social images (we do not ride camels, denying the touristic images) or even verbal images (Islam is the religion of tolerance, denying the assassination of Farag Fuda and the case of Nasr Abu Zaid that both emanated from the refusal of the mainstream religious powers to re-read the Islamic texts and history), as if the paradigm of power is as mono-dimensional and as simple as that.

Another means of exporting images to the West in the feverish struggle of the power of image creation is what is called 'the culture of hiding and denial'. That is to say, instead of developing the faculty of self-critique, self-analysis, and a thorough examination of the infra-epistemological structures, most Arab intellectuals usually resort to hiding and denying any flaws. The more such denials are made by one party, the more routinely they are confirmed by the other. The lack of any institutional self-critique is not without consequences. Edward Said has noticed that "the irony is that far from endowing the Western ethos with the confidence and secure 'normality' we associate with privilege and rectitude, this dynamic imbues "us" with a righteous anger and defensiveness in which "others" are finally seen as enemies, bent on destroying our civilization and way of life" (Culture and Imperialism, p.310).

The diverse politics of identity are, thus, reduced to fixed homogenous images. In the Arab world, any attempt at deconstructing those exported images in order to unveil the complex diversity of the region is perceived as betrayal and compliance with the West. On the other

hand, the West is not to be disturbed with perceptions that stand in stark opposition to its own secure niche through which the Arab world has always been shaped, perceived, and dealt with - a problematic that involves stereotypes, orientalist scholarship, the rise of postcolonial studies, the mushrooming of the concept of empire, Huntington's theory and the recent violence all over the world with the name of 'al Qaida' in the center.

3. Aim and Format of the Workshop

This workshop aims at problematizing the concept of image as formulated by the West and East by focusing on various scholarships and their influence on the cultural scene. Images will be examined through a wide interdisciplinary spectrum, of which the point of departure is TEXTS, to reveal their hegemony and dominance over the representation of the "other". The problematic is to be tackled from two perspectives:

I - Strategies of Knowledge Production:

- - The relation between theory and practice.
- - "Third Worldism" as a term that designates disciplines' de/construction.
- - Lack of/absence of non-Western critical scholarship in the Western process of knowledge production.
- - Western criteria of canonizing the knowledge of the "other".

II - Texts:

- Image production of the "other" in/via/through literary texts, media, arts, visual culture.

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During two days the workshop will deal with the problematic of image production from an interdisciplinary point of view. Abstracts (one page length) will be circulated in advance. Presentation/Lectures should be no longer than 35-40 minutes followed by a discussion. The main language of communication is English. The presented papers will be collected in book, which is to be the final output.

4. Program: Image Creation as a Problematic

Thursday, 28 April

10.00-12.30 Session 1

Introduction and Moderation: Shereen Abou El Naga (Cairo University, Fellow of the Working Group Modernity and Islam 2004/5)

W.J. Thomas Mitchell (University of Chicago, Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 2004/5), Cloning Terror

Khalid Hroub (Cambridge), 'American Democratisation of the Arab World': Images versus Paradoxical Realities

12.30-14.00 Lunch

14.00-17.00 Session 2

Moderation: Friederike Pannewick (Free University Berlin)

Monika Flacke (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin), *Images and the Myths of Nations in Europe*

Shereen Abou El Naga, Politics of Interpretation: From the Image of the Harem to the Image of the Veil

Friday, 29 April

10.00-12.30 Session 3

Moderation: Samah Selim (Marseille, Fellow of the Working Group Modernity and Islam 2004/5)

Marie-Therese Abdel-Messih (Cairo University), The Image of the 'Egyptian' in Art: Local and Global Encounters

Faisal Darraj (Damascus), The Arabic Novel and its External Birth

12.30-14.30 Lunch

14.30 – 16.30 Session 4

Moderation: Richard Tapper (SOAS, London)

Viola Shafik (American University in Cairo), Film Images: America and the Arab World

Ziba Mir-Hosseini (London, Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 2004/5), Challenging Images of Muslim Women

16.30-17.00 Closing Session

Moderation: Shereen Abou El Nagga