Television and Orientalism

Orientalism, proposed by Edward Said (1995), refers to the network of interlocking discourses about the “orient” constructed in western civilization. The orients, in western conceptions, are stereotypically inflated others drastically different from the collective imagination of the civilized West. Said’s argument was initially focused more on Europe and Islamic Culture, but has been applied to the general cultural dynamics between developed countries and the rest of the world (Hall, 1992). For Said, the sites of discursive production of Orientalism include academic and creative institutes that generate a web of historical and intertextual archive of academic knowledge, popular culture, and common sense.

The thesis of Orientalism assumes that the orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there for the West to examine. The orient, within the discursive system of the West, is a construction and an imagination. However, this anti-essentialist claim has a material base. “The orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines…” (Said 1995: 2) It is supported by the political economy of institutions and the power differential between the West and the rest. Said’s thesis has been appropriated by nationalists as ammunition for essentializing and demonizing the West in the reverse. It has also been criticized for being too totalistic, as if any rupture within Orientalism is impossible (Sardar, 1999). However, his thesis provides us with a sharp theoretical lens to examine the discursive divide in the representation of otherness in global cultural oppositions.

In this section, I will analyze a few selected American popular TV dramas featuring Chinese characters. For many years, the flow of cultural products is mostly from the America to the East, but there are signs of some “reverse flow” in recent years (Baker, 1999). There have been more exchanges between Chinese and American movie directors and talents. Entertainment films, when compared to television, tend to travel across cultural boundaries more easily, while television, because of its domesticity, tends to be more localized and closer to the discursive perspective of the local. Can the thesis of Orientalism be applied to television? Is the domestic medium of television a discursive site of Orientalist discourse? Can the stereotypes of the orient be rehabilitated in this age of intensive global exchange? These questions touch on the theoretical perspectives of
media imperialism, globalization, postmodern hybridization and the role of television in
these processes.

X-Files, started off more or less as cult television in 1993, have entered the mainstream
as a complex, trend setting and stylistically hybridized television drama. It has also
attracted followers among the Chinese communities in Hong Kong and other Asian
countries (X-Files has not been released in Mainland China). Imploding the relatively
stable them/us boundary of the cold war binary, X-Files has reworked the discourse of
otherness as the enemies from within the United States Government and from the world
of aliens in outerspace and in the rest of the world. Drawing on abduction narratives and
earlier conspiracy genres (Graham, 1996), X-Files suggests the incredible charge that the
US government is involved in a vast conspiracy with former Nazi and Japanese scientists
to assist alien beings in performing experiments and genetic hybridization on American
citizens. It has mobilized the public sentiments of mistrust of authority and what Morley
But its high speed modernization has destabilized its discursive position as an inferior
orient. In term of technological advances, it seems to be catching up or even competing
with west. This cultural instability and anxiety may be one of the undercurrents that fuel
the depiction of lethal Japanese technocrats in western popular culture. Besides, in the
X-Files, immigrants from outside America are often depicted as genetic mutants, agents
of conspiracies, or carriers of infectious disease.

In the post-cold war period, the them/us binary is more fluid, multiple and unstable. In
the X-Files, the American West, embodied in the characters of FBI agent Mulder and
Scully, is somewhat incorporating alternative paradigms such as the paranormal and the
meta-scientific. But in this body of hybridized and ambiguous televisual text, the
discursive space available for Chinese characters is still very limited. In episode XXX,
the narrative hinges on the underground connection between Hong Kong, China and the
Chinese immigrant society in the States. The episode struck Hong Kong audience by its
depiction of Chinese as traditional, superstitious, malicious, and bloodthirsty. In the story,
a Chinese immigrant family in the States has fallen into the trap of a Chinese secret
society which organizes underground gambling and trades fresh human organs. The
Chinese are living in a world of murder, torture and exploitation. Built around this
textual Chinese underworld are incomprehensible Chinese characters, repulsive Chinese
medicine, secretive rituals, and mysterious philosophies of filial piety, death and afterlife.
These signs and icons serve good narrative functions for X-Files as a
horror/action/police/science fiction. This hybridized SFgenre predisposes the
representations of most X-files characters other than the heroes and the heroines to the
mysterious world of the unknown and horror. X-Files is not a straightforward
demonization of the “non-west”. In fact, bits and pieces of floating signs in this textual world are intertextually connected to other fictional and non-fictional media representations. Far from being merely fabrications, these representations have strong links with previous creative depictions of the Chinatown and news stories about illegal immigration and the trading of human organs in China. However, taken all these generic and intertextual pre-depositions into account, the thesis of Orientalism still provides an insightful perspective for seeing through the binary of the West and the oriental. Chinese culture is projected as traditional, with a timeless history, yet uncivilized, barbaric and mysterious.

X-Files producer Chris Carter has also produced another SF/police drama series the Millenium. In this series, the FBI veteran has the specialty in apprehending homicidal psychopaths. This in fact can be seen as the loosening up of the rational/scientific ideal of modernity. One interesting episode features a Japanese scientist experimenting with genetic engineering but contracting fatal infection himself. His hand and face are deformed gradually under the close and prolonged examination of the television camera. Three points can be said about the configuration of Orientalism in this small piece of text. First, as discussed above, the textual world of the orient in this episode is saturated with traditional, religious and cultic motifs. Second, within this mysterious pre-modern oriental world there is a modern oriental scientist with a PhD. This echoes with the techno advances in Asia and the migration of intellectuals from the East to the West. But this smart orient invents fatal diseases and he dies a horrible death. The narrative is another textual expression of Japan panic and techno-phobia on the part of the orientalist. Third, the difference between the West and the East is marked and inflated, while the differences within the East are collapsed and obscured. In this episode, Japanese and Chinese icons and characters are hybridized to such an extent that the Japanese are replaceable by the Chinese. Through western eyes, different orients are often hybridized, decontextualized and over-generalized.

The above two cases seem to fit nicely into the discourse of Orientalism. However, in today’s world of global exchanges, the representation of the orient is complicated by diverse and reverse cultural flows between the East and the West. Another recent American TV action drama series, Martial Law, features Hong Kong Chinese actor Sammo Hung as a kung fu master and veteran police who is sent to America as an exchange from the Shanghai police force. Sammo is a positive character who can hardly be seen as a derogatory stigmatization of the orient. He outsmarts bad guys and some of his American partners by his charming and surprisingly athletic martial arts. Producer Lee Goldbery explicitly indicated that Martial Law is doing what TV does best – escapism. The joke of the show is mostly about the 5-foot-7, 230-pound, 44-year-old
Sammo kicking and flipping like Jackie Chan. The story moves along the political correct line of Sino-American co-operation, while the Chinese characters are built on the long tradition of western imagination of Chinese kung fu and philosophies. Bruce Lee on the big screen has been a key model of this. On the TV screen there was David Carradine who played the lead role in the long running series Kung Fu in the early 1970s. Carradine as a Caucasian recycled Orientalist imagery in the positive mode, highlighting the wisdom and physical strength of Shaolin philosophy and Martial arts. Now Sammo, a Hong Kong stunt man rather than a Caucasian, plays a lead role in domestic American television. However, there are still traces of orientalist discourse. Sammo burns incense, performs impossible kung fu kicks and teaches his partners Chinese wisdom and Tai Chi philosophy. These are marked differences which distinguish the pre-modern from the modern, the intuitive from the rational, and the power of the fist from the power of the mechanisms. Sammo drinks diet coke, speaks English and tells his partner that he learns from the Discovery Channel. Of course there are occasions for mutual learning: the Americans learn from the legendary oriental and the Chinese learn from the scientific West. The orients in the X-Files appear in the esoteric/negative mode, while in Martial Law, they are depicted in the exotic/positive mode. But both are discursive forms of stereotypical dualism of the modern West and the traditional rest.

There are reasons for this mixing of the esoteric/negative and the exotic/positive. First, the world is now having shifting ethnoscapes where diverse cultural narratives have been absorbed into the dynamic of global/local hybridization. Intensive global migrations and tourism characterize these shifting ethnoscapes. Because of the implosion of boundaries between the eastern and western ethnoscapes, previous inflated international stereotyping may sometimes be rehabilitated. In the case of Martial Law, the influx of Hong Kong and Chinese artists into the United States helps to bring about changes. John Woo, Sammo Hung, Jackie Chan, and Yuen Wu Ping (the martial arts director of the movie The Matrix) were all closely connected peers in Hong Kong. Together they bring the practices of Hong Kong action movies and TV dramas into the States. Second, the market logic of mass production leads to standardization and disenchantment. In order to “re-enchant” cultural products and stimulate consumption, there is a strong tendency for American popular culture to absorb exotic cultures from all over the world to re-energize itself. Third, the increasing number of Chinese immigrants and the strengthening of their political power within America may add pressure for political correct media representation.

Orientalism can be exported to and reproduce itself in the rest of the world. It is argued that Orientalism is so powerful and encompassing that some people from the East may see themselves through the discursive web of Orientalism. In other words, the orients
can be orientalized by Orientalism. This leads to the question of transnational discursive effects which are often assumed in various theoretical forms of media imperialism. However, transnational discursive effects are problematized in recent globalization theories (Baker, 1999). On the textual level, as indicated in the above, Orientalism may oscillate between the esoteric/negative and the exotic/positive modes. On the reception level, it is relatively easier for transnational viewers to discern the discrepancies between Orientalist discourse and everyday practices. Contextual interpretations can also be injected when Orientalist texts travel across nations (Liebes & Kayz, 1992). I tend to agree with Lodziak (1986) who argues that the ideological effect of television works better for the dominant groups rather than the subordinate. Extending this argument to the transnational context, Orientalism works better in reinforcing Chinese stereotypes among domestic American audience, but is less powerful in “orientalizing” Chinese audiences in their own contexts. However, one obvious transnational effect of Orientalism may be the construction of an essentialized West in the reverse, or what is called “Occidentalism”. Through subtle stereotypical dualism, Orientalism triggers the imagination of the West as a unified and modernized whole, no matter whether the orient is depicted in the esoteric/negative mode as in the X-Files or the exotic/positive mode as in Martial Law. It is found that the discourse of Occidentalism (Carrier, 1995) can be and has been mobilized to intervene local and global cultural politics in the East; but this is a subject far beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Grey Box

Kung Fu (1972- 1975)

Kung Fu, a TV series produced by Ed Spielman in the 1970s, is a sort of an Eastern Western in which a Shaolin priest, played by David Carradine, is wandering in the middle of the decidedly unenlightened Old West. Martial arts star Bruce Lee was, for a time, considered to play the lead role grasshopper Kwai Chang Caine. The show was never a tremendous rating success in the States, but it attracted a loyal legion of fans who were interested in eastern culture. In the show, Chinese culture is represented in a restricted range of kung fu tricks and quasi-Chinese philosophy. Caucasian actor David Carradine playing the role of a Chinese can be appropriately seen as a representation of a representation. Kung Fu was enthusiastically received in Hong Kong in the 1970s. Arguably, it can be said that this American TV show was having some orientalistic effects by telling highly urbanized Hong Kong Chinese what Chinese culture was through Orientalist eyes. However, imported American TV programs were quickly removed from the prime-time hours. Hong Kong prime-time television has been filled up
with local programming since the mid-1970s. The argument of media imperialism and orientalization seems problematic in the case of Hong Kong (Ma, 1999).

**Suggested Video Clip**

**X-Files**

The ending scene in which agent Mulder and Scully break into the Chinese underground society is a typical case for illustrating a wide range of Orientalist imageries. In this video clip, the “orient is passionless and fanatic; disciplined in the arts of cruelty and licentious and effete; built on family and filial duty and lacking emotional warmth in intimate human relations.” (Sardar 1999: 114)

**Recommended Reading**


**Further Reading**


Graham, Allison (1996) ‘“Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?”: Conspiracy Theory and the X-Files’ in Lavery, David et al. (eds.), “Deny All Knowledge”: Reading the X Files, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.


