
 INTRODUCTION

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**EAST, WEST, AND ORIENTALISM:
THE PLACE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES
IN THE GLOBALIZING WORLD**

A major international conference, “Orientalism / Occidentalism: The Languages of Cultures vs. the Languages of Description”, took place from September 23–25, 2010, in Moscow under the aegis of the Russian Institute for Cultural Research. The goal of the Conference was to discuss the principal aspects of description of the East (first of all Asian but also African cultures) in the Western scholarly discourse as well as in art and literature. The idea of the Conference belonged to the current author who, in the Fall of 2008, enlisted the support of Prof. Kirill Razlogov, Director of the Russian Institute for Cultural Research, as a result of which the Institute played a crucial role in the following two-year preparations.

We received about two hundred proposal, approximately half of which were accepted. About 25 per cent of those who accepted cancelled their participation citing a whole gamut of reasons including, but not limited to, visa problems, schedule conflict, prohibitive cost of travel and broken limbs. Many cancellations were received in the last week or two. Thus, the adjustment of the program was an ongoing process until the very last days. The printed program contained 79 papers.

In the process of receiving the proposals and gathering the pool of potential speakers, I made an interesting observation, one that brings us closer – if humorously – to the East-West dichotomy, if we agree to consider Russia as the East.

I witnessed certain “cultural differences” – the quick and steady flow of proposals from Western scholars (there was even one German Gelehrte who responded within 5 minutes of my posting the call for papers on the Internet), and no Russian responses at all. They finally came – many on the very last day before the deadline and quite a few many months after. (Oh, by the way, that first German enthusiast eventually did not participate.) Which *modus operandi* is more Oriental, which one is more effective? – “Analyze this!”

An analysis of the interpretations of the East by the West (and vice versa) and their historical evolution has emerged as especially important in the light of ongoing globalization, which has triggered the intensification of ideological, religious, economic and cultural differences between the East and the West.

Orientalism, the European interpretation of the East, bears negative connotations in some Asian societies and among certain Western scholars. Occidentalism, or the depiction of the West as seen from the East, often oscillates between excessively enthusiastic and overly critical portrayals of its subject. This Conference’s presentations and discussions were aimed at dis-

tilling a critical understanding of Orientalist / Occidentalist discourses and to question cross-cultural assumptions. The goal was to provide a forum in which old issues, new data and fresh methodological approaches could be discussed and developed.

The subtitle, “Languages of Cultures vs. Languages of Description”, is no less important. It presumes the semiotic usage of the notion of language, meaning that Culture is understood as Text. But this description is being presented in a different language – a language of methodological narrative and the researcher’s own cultural presuppositions. In other words, this description inevitably turns out to be a translation – with all possible mistakes and misperceptions, *ad hominem* or culturally predetermined. But what is lost in translation is no less – and often far more – interesting.

The breadth of the cultural and geographic scope of the program ensured the problematization of the most basic notions of “East” and “West.” Thus, two panels discussed the theme of “Russia and the Balkans as the Orient for Western Europe.” In addition to the “classical Orients” – Near and Far – Russia had and still has its own, The Caucasus, which, for the Russian Romantic mind, played a role similar to that of the Near East in the mythology of European Romanticism. On the other hand, even China could sometimes be perceived as “the West” – as was demonstrated by Keiko Suzuki (Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto) in her paper “When Westerners were Chinese: Visual representation of foreigners in the Japanese popular art of ukiyo-e.” There were even more radical cases of geographic and cultural relativism: a good example was the paper “More Oriental than Japan: Okinawa in Japan’s national discourse” delivered by Rosa Caroli (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice). Thus, it was only natural that the underpinning of the Conference was a discussion of the notion of the multipolarity of the world. Those familiar (and seemingly primeval and convenient) taxons of “east” and “west” seen from the different points of the polycentric world turn out to be culturally determined, fluid, and highly relative concepts. What might constitute a perfect “Oriental” or a one hundred per cent “Occidental”? What kind of lenses and which language should a researcher employ in order to do justice to the other-cultural object of his description?

Using the word ‘Orientalism’ as the subject of our conference, I sought to imply that the broad meaning of this term was either various kinds of fictional narratives or an academic description of the East (Asian and African cultures) in Western art, literature and scholarly research. This understanding of the word “Orientalism” is as far removed as possible from a peculiar **previous** understanding of the term Orientalism (still popular in some circles). (Some of the Conference speakers, such as the first keynote speaker Sergey Serebriany, talked about the metamorphoses and abuse of this term – see “Orientalism: The Good Word Defamed”).

I am referring here to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), a lengthy polemic long since discredited by serious Arabic and Middle East scholars. Some younger academics, apparently feeling the weight of post-colonial guilt, rail against their predecessors who studied non-European cultures, and are only too happy to accuse them of being lackeys of cultural imperialism and accessories

to the crime. This stance remains so popular among the young and the radical that the very term “Oriental Studies” is often considered a term of abuse, offensive to Muslim peoples everywhere.

Sometimes they take the polemic further east, and impose the post-colonial interpretation of Middle Eastern politics onto Japan. A few years ago there was a lavishly published tome, a patronizing rebuke to traditional Japanese studies in America. For example, at the end of the 19th century Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), a passionate enthusiast of Japanese culture, bought up a great deal of classical Japanese art when the Japanese themselves, in the throes of modernization, were perfectly willing to throw it away, and thus founded an incomparable collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; however, he is dismissed as a “pre-Saidian Asiaphile who did not share our discomfort at colonial expropriation...”¹ The work of Jon Carter Covell (1910–1997), the first American scholar to be awarded a doctoral degree on Japanese art (Columbia University), is likened to “colonial writings”.² This is very sad, partly because it is reminiscent of the assessments of writers and artists of “the pre-Marxist era” offered by the “socially engaged” Soviet authors of the 1920s and 1930s. (This rather peculiar link with present-day “anti-Orientalists” had been discussed by Vera Tolz in her presentation “Post-colonial scholarship as a “descendant” of Russian oriental studies of the early 20th century”).

Much more epistemologically cognizant and methodologically correct is Bernard Faure who, in contrast to the position taken up by the “penitent intelligentsia”, believes, after Bakhtin, that “exotopia”, or “outsidedness”, “is a powerful factor in understanding another culture”³. Also, Faure wrote about Said’s methodological naiveté and ideological narrowness, attesting that the latter’s Orientalism is not only an example of reversed ethnocentrism but also fails to notice that the post-Orientalist vision has its own blind spots.⁴ This idea – how heuristic and revelatory the vision of the Other could be – is well demonstrated by the case of Nikolai Nevsky, the Russian scholar who became one of the founders of Japanese cultural anthropology. Nevsky was the subject of one of the sections of the Conference. Thus, serious scholars no longer consider Orientalism in the Saidian terms of “power” and “domination”;⁵ furthermore, the Far East, and especially Japan, cannot be squeezed into the Procrustean bed of Orientalism à la Said.⁶

The first two keynote lectures dealt with the terminological and methodological repercussions of Orientalism. Sergey Serebriany (Institute of Higher Studies on the Humanities, Moscow) said that, although Said’s book was hope-

¹ Levine, Gregory. *Daitokuji: The Visual Cultures of a Zen Monastery*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005, p. 305.

² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

³ Faure, Bernard. *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991., p. 8.

⁴ See *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

⁵ See Clarke, John. *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 8.

⁶ See Cox, Rupert A. *The Zen Arts: An Anthropological Study of the Culture of Aesthetic Form in Japan*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p. 31.

lessly inadequate, it touched on some very real and very important problems of intercultural communication. “Roughly speaking, Said was wrong in his central thesis which claimed that the study of the “Orient” in the 18th – 20th centuries was only part of colonialist politics of the West. Said was also wrong in most of his specific factual statements (at least as far as India and Indology are concerned). But he forcefully drew attention to a real and complicated issue: studies of cultures other than one’s own are almost inevitably marked by the presuppositions and even prejudices of one’s own culture. This was especially the case with Soviet oriental studies, because the Soviet ideology, being a simplified and dogmatized version of certain Western ideas, complacently considered itself universally valid and conspicuously lacked self-reflection and self-criticism.” The speaker offered some examples of this not yet fully extirpated Soviet legacy and stressed that, surprisingly, some scholars in “the free Western world” fell into the trap of these ideological delusions.

Vera Tolz (the University of Manchester, UK) revealed some rather unexpected points of departure in Said’s concept. By analyzing how intellectuals in early twentieth-century Russia offered a new and radical critique of the ways in which Oriental cultures were understood at the time, Prof. Tolz demonstrated the major source of inspiration for Said. “Out of the ferment of revolution and war a group of scholars in St. Petersburg (Petrograd, Leningrad) articulated fresh ideas about the relationship between power and knowledge and about Europe and Asia as mere political and cultural constructs, which anticipated the work of Edward Said and post-colonial scholarship by half a century. The similarities between the two groups were, in fact, genealogical. <...> Said was indebted – via Arab intellectuals of the 1960s who studied in the Soviet Union – to the revisionist ideas of Russian Orientologists of the *fin de siècle*.”

The next two presentations transferred the geography of Orientalism from the Near to the Far East. Shigemi Inaga (International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto) talked about a special ideological project in Manchugou that looked as a factual conflation of Orientalism and Occidentalism (“Crossing Axes: Occidentalism and Orientalism in Modern Visual Representations of Manchukuo”). While the two often overlap in modern visual representations of Asia, one of the most typical and extreme cases may be detected in Manchugou, “a puppet monarchy to which the Japanese overseas expansionism gave birth in the Northeastern part of China (1931–1945).” Prof. Inaga discussed the geopolitical conditions in which visual symbols of historical deeds and events of the region were highlighted. “The Western Orientalism dwelt in Japanese colonial mentality, whereas a typical Occidentalism also took shape in Japan’s approach to Asia.” As a result, there was an interesting case of the crossover of the two axes in the so-called “Asianism” which aimed to realize “the Greater Co-Prosperity Zone” during the period of the Sino-Japanese War.

The lecture by Timon Screech was devoted to cultural contacts between the West and Japan in the 18th century, specifically to the activity of Carl Peter Thunberg, a physician and scholar in the service of the Dutch United East India Company. Thunberg’s activities and extensive collections were widely commented on by Japanese scholars and artists-writers, often in a satirical mode,

when Western science was refurbished in Japan in the spirit of the culture of the floating world, ukiyo-e.

The second day of the Conference was filled by the work of various panels – twenty in total, with four (in a few cases three) papers in each. For the most part discussions followed the major themes designated in the call for papers. The classical Orientalism of the 18th–19th centuries had been analyzed along the following lines:

- The Orient of the Romantics from the Maghreb to the Caucasus
- Academic Orientalism: an exotic entourage and the “eternal laws of beauty”
- The erotic myth of the East as sublimation of Western sexual complexes
- The world of wild and cruel passions in Oriental decorations
- The world of Islam seen through the prism of Orientalism
- Chinoiserie and Japonisme

In the 20th century, the problems and angles of discourse changed. The accent was placed on the notion of the East as “The Other” in the Western mind of the 20th century. Amongst the topics were Cubism’s Africanism, Surrealism and the “Primitive,” Avant-gardism and the “Natives” in mass culture, and the like. Besides these panels, where the different “east” and “west” and their interrelationships were treated, there was also a semi-autonomous section organized by the International Association of Ryūkyūan / Okinawan Studies, IAROS (personally by Evgeny Baksheev and Rosa Caroli): “The Ryūkyū Triangle: Okinawa, the East, and the West.” The four panels of this section discussed the unique position of Okinawa as the recipient of the cultural impact of China, Japan, and the Western world. Several of the papers were dedicated to the role of Nikolai Nevsky, a researcher who made bridges between the East and the West and who was one of the first scholars to begin linguistic and cultural anthropological fieldwork on the Ryūkyū Islands.

Three fruitful days of discussions and debates revealed the whole gamut of approaches and theories to the problem of East-West mutual description. During the final general meeting, one or two participants expressed their surprise that Said and his special *Orientalism* were not mentioned at all in the majority of presentations. These die-hard “post-colonial” scholars tried to make up for the “colonial discourse,” but without much interest from the audience. As the chairman of the session, the present author mentioned that he was glad that Saidism had evidently ceased to be sufficiently important to warrant ritual references to it.

Much more fruitful and heuristically interesting is the understanding that Orientalism seen in broad terms was a European form of the quest for cultural difference. I suggest that European Orientalism in art and letters be seen as a multifaceted expression of globalization. In the guise of Orientalism, it appeared as the beginning of the systemic crisis of the Occidental civilization that was starting to perceive the limits of its own self-sufficiency (on the cultural, artistic, religious, philosophical and economic levels). The West needed its

Other. The early stage of Orientalism was Romantic and Academic (which was Orientalism in the narrow historical sense): largely, it was exotic Oriental motifs and subjects depicted with the help of Western pictorial idioms. In other words, the traditional European formal language had not been basically changed.

The next wave – the Japonisme of Impressionism and Art Nouveau – has been a much more advanced transcultural phenomenon. It can be called a tectonic shift – when not only motifs or subjects, but also formal means of expression were borrowed, *mutatis mutandis*, from the East. Later on came the Primitivism of the Avant-garde and of Surrealism with their interest in and appropriation of African and tribal art. Still later, after the Second World War, the marginalization of the Western artistic discourse was inspired and fed by the language of expression of liminal groups, such as “naïve art” or the art of mentally challenged persons. Together, all this can be seen as successive stages in the broadening (shattering and at the same time infeeding) of the European cultural paradigm – which paved the ways to globalization of the Western world-view and cultural practices. Orientalism can be viewed as the Ur-phenomenon of globalization, or as the process of making the West less Western.

Parallel to this, for about a century, there has been an opposite process: the non-Western parts of the globalized world have witnessed a growing local exclusionism and cultural protectionism. These forces – the champions of home-grown specificity and adversaries of integration – chose Orientalism as a bugaboo of colonial and cultural expansion. (This is, in fact, entirely what Said’s pamphlet is about.) And one of the academic results of this Conference is that, by examining many Orientalisms against the background of various Easts and Wests, the participants succeeded, to a certain degree, in cleansing this term of its political and ideological connotations and moving forward to a better understanding of our interconnected and multipolar world.