Eyewitnessing

The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence

Peter Burke

‘If you would like to understand . . . history . . . you should look carefully at portraits. In people’s faces there is always something of the history of their time to be read, if one knows how to read it.’

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Introduction: The Testimony of Images

Ein Bild sagt mehr als 1000 Worte [A picture says more than a thousand words].

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This book is primarily concerned with the use of images as historical evidence. It is written both to encourage the use of such evidence and to warn potential users of some of the possible pitfalls. In the last generation or so, historians have widened their interests considerably to include not only political events, economic trends and social structures but also the history of mentalities, the history of everyday life, the history of material culture, the history of the body and so on. It would not have been possible for them to carry out research in these relatively new fields if they had limited themselves to traditional sources such as official documents, produced by administrations and preserved in their archives.

For this reason, increasing use is being made of a broader range of evidence, in which images have their place alongside literary texts and oral testimonies. Take the history of the body, for example. Pictures are a guide to changing ideas of sickness and health, and they are even more important as evidence of changing standards of beauty, or the history of the preoccupation with personal appearance on the part of men and women alike. Again, the history of material culture, discussed in Chapter 5 below, would be virtually impossible without the testimony of images. Their testimony also makes an important contribution to the history of mentalities, as Chapters 6 and 7 will try to demonstrate.

The Invisibility of the Visual?

It may well be the case that historians still do not take the evidence of images seriously enough, so that a recent discussion speaks of ‘the
invisibility of the visual’. As one art historian puts it, ‘historians … prefer to deal with texts and political or economic facts, not the deeper levels of experience that images probe’, while another refers to the ‘condescension towards images’ which this implies.¹

Relatively few historians work in photographic archives, compared to the numbers who work in repositories of written and typewritten documents. Relatively few historical journals carry illustrations, and when they do, relatively few contributors take advantage of this opportunity. When they do use images, historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in the text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions.

Why should this be the case? In an essay describing his discovery of Victorian photographs, the late Raphael Samuel described himself and other social historians of his generation as ‘visually illiterate’. A child in the 1940s, he was and remained, in his own phrase, ‘completely pre-televisual’. His education, in school and university alike, was a training in reading texts.²

All the same, a significant minority of historians were already using the evidence of images at this time, especially the specialists in periods where written documents are sparse or non-existent. It would be difficult indeed to write about European prehistory, for instance, without the evidence of the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux, while the history of ancient Egypt would be immeasurably poorer without the testimony of tomb paintings. In both cases, images offer virtually the only evidence of social practices such as hunting. Some scholars working on later periods also took images seriously. For example, historians of political attitudes, ‘public opinion’ or propaganda have long been using the evidence of prints. Again, a distinguished medievalist, David Douglas, declared nearly half a century ago that the Bayeux Tapestry was ‘a primary source for the history of England’ which ‘deserves to be studied alongside the accounts in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and in William of Poitiers’.

The employment of images by a few historians goes back much further. As Francis Haskell (1928–2000) pointed out in History and its Images, the paintings in the Roman catacombs were studied in the seventeenth century as evidence of the early history of Christianity (and in the nineteenth century, as evidence for social history).³ The Bayeux Tapestry (illus. 78) was already taken seriously as a historical source by scholars in the early eighteenth century. In the middle of
the century, a series of paintings of French seaports by Joseph Vernet (to be discussed below, Chapter 5), was praised by a critic who remarked that if more painters followed Vernet’s example, their works would be useful to posterity because ‘in their paintings it would be possible to read the history of manners, of arts and of nations’.4

The cultural historians Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) and Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), amateur artists themselves, writing respectively about the Renaissance and the ‘autumn’ of the Middle Ages, based their descriptions and interpretations of the culture of Italy and the Netherlands on paintings by artists such as Raphael and van Eyck as well as on texts from the period. Burckhardt, who wrote about Italian art before turning to the general culture of the Renaissance, described images and monuments as ‘witnesses of past stages of the development of the human spirit’, objects ‘through which it is possible to read the structures of thought and representation of a given time’.

As for Huizinga, he gave his inaugural lecture at Groningen University in 1905 on ‘The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought’, comparing historical understanding to ‘vision’ or ‘sensation’ (including the sense of direct contact with the past), and declaring that ‘What the study of history and artistic creation have in common is a mode of forming images.’ Later on, he described the method of cultural history in visual terms as ‘the mosaic method’. Huizinga confessed in his autobiography that his interest in history was stimulated by collecting coins in his boyhood, that he was drawn to the Middle Ages because he visualized that period as ‘full of chivalrous knights in plumed helmets’, and that his turn away from oriental studies towards the history of the Netherlands was stimulated by an exhibition of Flemish paintings in Bruges in 1902. Huizinga was also a vigorous campaigner on behalf of historical museums.5

Another scholar of Huizinga’s generation, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), who began as an art historian in the style of Burckhardt, ended his career attempting to produce a cultural history based on images as well as texts. The Warburg Institute, which developed out of Warburg’s library, and was brought from Hamburg to London after Hitler’s rise to power, has continued to encourage this approach. Thus the Renaissance historian Frances Yates (1899–1981), who began to frequent the Institute in the late 1930s, described herself as being ‘initiated into the Warburgian technique of using visual evidence as historical evidence’.6

The evidence of pictures and photographs was also employed in the 1930s by the Brazilian sociologist-historian Gilberto Freyre
(1900–1987), who described himself as a historical painter in the style of Titian and his approach to social history as a form of ‘impressionism’, in the sense of an ‘attempt to surprise life in movement’. Following in Freyre’s tracks, an American historian of Brazil, Robert Levine, has published a series of photographs of life in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a commentary that not only locates the photographs in context but discusses the major problems raised by the use of this kind of evidence.7

Images were the starting-point for two important studies by the self-styled ‘Sunday historian’ Philippe Ariès (1914–1982), a history of childhood and a history of death, in both of which visual sources were treated as ‘evidence of sensibility and life’, on the same basis as ‘literature and documents in archives’. The work of Ariès will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. His approach was emulated by some leading French historians in the 1970s, among them Michel Vovelle, who has worked both on the French Revolution and the old regime which preceded it, and Maurice Agulhon, who is especially concerned with nineteenth-century France.8

This ‘pictorial turn’, as the American critic William Mitchell has called it, is also visible in the English-speaking world.9 It was in the middle of the 1960s, as he confesses, that Raphael Samuel and some of his contemporaries became aware of the value of photographs as evidence for nineteenth-century social history, helping them construct a ‘history from below’ focusing on the everyday life and experiences of ordinary people. However, taking the influential journal Past and Present as representative of new trends in historical writing in the English-speaking world, it comes as something of a shock to discover that from 1952 to 1975, none of the articles published there included images. In the 1970s, two illustrated articles were published in the journal. In the 1980s, on the other hand, the number increased to fourteen.

That the 1980s were a turning-point in this respect is also suggested by the proceedings of a conference of American historians held in 1985 and concerned with ‘the evidence of art’. Published in a special issue of the Journal of Interdisciplinary History, the symposium attracted so much interest that it was quickly republished in book form.10 Since then, one of the contributors, Simon Schama, has become well known for his use of visual evidence in studies ranging from an exploration of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, The Embarrassment of Riches (1987), to a survey of western attitudes to landscape over the centuries, Landscape and Memory (1995).

The ‘Picturing History’ series itself, which was launched in 1995,
and includes the volume you are now reading, is further evidence of the new trend. In the next few years it will be interesting to see how historians from a generation which has been exposed to computers, as well as television, virtually from birth and has always lived in a world saturated with images will approach the visual evidence for the past.

Sources and Traces

Traditionally, historians have referred to their documents as ‘sources’, as if they were filling their buckets from the stream of Truth, their stories becoming increasingly pure as they move closer to the origins. The metaphor is a vivid one but it is also misleading, in the sense of implying the possibility of an account of the past which is uncontaminated by intermediaries. It is of course impossible to study the past without the assistance of a whole chain of intermediaries, including not only earlier historians but also the archivists who arranged the documents, the scribes who wrote them and the witnesses whose words were recorded. As the Dutch historian Gustaaf Renier (1892–1962) suggested half a century ago, it might be useful to replace the idea of sources with that of ‘traces’ of the past in the present. The term ‘traces’ refers to manuscripts, printed books, buildings, furniture, the landscape (as modified by human exploitation), as well as to many different kinds of image: paintings, statues, engravings, photographs.

The uses of images by historians cannot and should not be limited to ‘evidence’ in the strict sense of the term (as discussed in particular detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Room should also be left for what Francis Haskell has called ‘the impact of the image on the historical imagination’. Paintings, statues, prints and so on allow us, posterity, to share the non-verbal experiences or knowledge of past cultures (religious experiences, for example, discussed in Chapter 3 below). They bring home to us what we may have known but did not take so seriously before. In short, images allow us to ‘imagine’ the past more vividly. As the critic Stephen Bann puts it, our position face-to-face with an image brings us ‘face-to-face with history’. The uses of images in different periods as objects of devotion or means of persuasion, of conveying information or giving pleasure, allows them to bear witness to past forms of religion, knowledge, belief, delight and so on. Although texts also offer valuable clues, images themselves are the best guide to the power of visual representations in the religious and political life of past cultures.

This book will therefore investigate the uses of different kinds of
image as what the lawyers call ‘admissible evidence’ for different kinds of history. The legal analogy has a point. After all, in the last few years, bank robbers, football hooligans and violent policemen have all been convicted on the evidence of videos. Police photographs of crime scenes are regularly used as evidence. By the 1850s, the New York Police Department had created a ‘Rogue’s Gallery’ allowing thieves to be recognized. Indeed, before 1800, French police records already included portraits in their personal files on major suspects.

The essential proposition this book seeks to support and illustrate is that images, like texts and oral testimonies, are an important form of historical evidence. They record acts of eyewitnessing. There is nothing new about this idea, as a famous image demonstrates, the so-called ‘Arnolfini portrait’ of a husband and wife in the National Gallery in London. The portrait is inscribed *Jan van Eyck fuit hic* (Jan van Eyck was here), as if the painter had acted as a witness to the couple’s marriage. Ernst Gombrich has written about ‘the eyewitness principle’, in other words the rule which artists in some cultures have followed, from the ancient Greeks onwards, to represent what – and only what – an eyewitness could have seen from a particular point at a particular moment.

In similar fashion, the phrase ‘the eyewitness style’ was introduced into a study of the paintings of Vittore Carpaccio (*c.* 1465–*c.* 1525), and some of his Venetian contemporaries, in order to refer to the love of detail these paintings display and the desire of artists and patrons for ‘a painting that looked as truthful as possible, according to prevailing standards of evidence and proof’. Texts sometimes reinforce our impression that an artist was concerned to give accurate testimony. For example, in an inscription on the back of his *Ride for Liberty* (1862), showing three slaves on horseback, man, woman and child, the American painter Eastman Johnson (1824–1906) described his painting as the record of ‘a veritable incident in the Civil War, seen by myself’. Terms such as a ‘documentary’ or ‘ethnographic’ style have also been used to characterize equivalent images from later periods (below pp 19, 130, 138).

Needless to say, the use of the testimony of images raises many awkward problems. Images are mute witnesses and it is difficult to translate their testimony into words. They may have been intended to communicate a message of their own, but historians not infrequently ignore it in order to read pictures ‘between the lines’, and learn something that the artists did not know they were teaching. There are obvious dangers in this procedure. To use the evidence of images safely, let alone effectively, it is necessary – as in the case of other kinds of
source – to be aware of its weaknesses. The ‘source criticism’ of written documents has long formed an essential part of the training of historians. By comparison, the criticism of visual evidence remains undeveloped, although the testimony of images, like that of texts, raises problems of context, function, rhetoric, recollection (whether soon or long after the event), secondhand witnessing and so on. Hence some images offer more reliable evidence than others. Sketches, for example, drawn directly from life (illus. 1, 2), and freed


2 Constantin Guys, Watercolour sketch of the Sultan going to the Mosque, 1854. Private collection.
from the constraints of the ‘grand style’ (discussed in Chapter 8 below), are more trustworthy as testimonies than are paintings worked up later in the artist’s studio. In the case of Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), this point may be illustrated by the contrast between his sketch, Two Seated Women, and his painting, The Women of Algiers (1834), which looks more theatrical and, unlike the original sketch, makes references to other images.

To what extent, and in what ways, do images offer reliable evidence of the past? It would obviously be foolish to attempt a simple general answer to such a question. A sixteenth-century icon of the Virgin Mary and a twentieth-century poster of Stalin both tell historians something about Russian culture, but – despite certain intriguing similarities – there are obviously enormous differences both in what these two images tell us and in what they omit. We ignore at our peril the variety of images, artists, uses of images and attitudes to images in different periods of history.

**Varieties of Image**

This essay is concerned with ‘images’ rather than with ‘art’, a term which only began to be used in the West in the course of the Renaissance, and especially from the eighteenth century onwards, as the aesthetic function of images, at least in elite circles, began to dominate the many other uses of these objects. Irrespective of its aesthetic quality, any image may serve as historical evidence. Maps, decorated plates, ex-votos (illus. 16), fashion dolls and the pottery soldiers buried in the tombs of early Chinese emperors all have something to say to students of history.

To complicate the situation, it is necessary to take into account changes in the kind of image available in particular places and times, and especially two revolutions in image production, the rise of the printed image (woodcut, engraving, etching and so on) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the rise of the photographic image (including film and television) in the nineteenth and twentieth. It would take a large book to analyse the consequences of these two revolutions in the detail they deserve, but a few general observations may be useful all the same.

For example, the appearance of images changed. In the early stages of the woodcut and the photograph alike, black and white images replaced coloured paintings. To speculate for a moment, it might be suggested, as has been suggested in the case of the transition from oral to printed messages, that the black and white image is, in
Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, a ‘cooler’ form of communication than the more illusionistic coloured one, encouraging greater detachment on the part of the viewer. Again, printed images, like later photographs, could be made and transported much more rapidly than paintings, so that images of current events could reach viewers while the events were still fresh in the memory, a point which will be developed in Chapter 8 below.

Another important point to bear in mind in the case of both revolutions is that they made possible a quantum leap in the number of images available to ordinary people. Indeed, it has become difficult even to imagine how few images were in general circulation during the Middle Ages, since the illuminated manuscripts now familiar to us in museums or in reproductions were usually in private hands, leaving only altarpieces and frescos in churches visible to the general public. What were the cultural consequences of these two leaps?

The consequences of printing have commonly been discussed in terms of the standardization and the fixing of texts in permanent form, and similar points might be made about printed images. William M. Ivins Jr (1881–1961), a curator of prints in New York, made a case for the importance of sixteenth-century prints as ‘exactly repeatable pictorial statements’. Ivins pointed out that the ancient Greeks, for instance, had abandoned the practice of illustrating botanical treatises because of the impossibility of producing identical images of the same plant in different manuscript copies of the same work. From the late fifteenth century, on the other hand, herbals were regularly illustrated with woodcuts. Maps, which began to be printed in 1472, offer another example of the way in which the communication of information by images was facilitated by the repeatability associated with the press.\footnote{16}

In the age of photography, according to the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) in a famous essay of the 1930s, the work of art changed its character. The machine ‘substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence’ and produces a shift from the ‘cult value’ of the image to its ‘exhibition value’. ‘That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.’ Doubts may be and have been raised about this thesis. The owner of a woodcut, for example, may treat it with respect as an individual image, rather than thinking of it as one copy among many. There is visual evidence, from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of houses and inns, for example, showing that woodcuts and engravings were displayed on walls just as paintings were. More recently, in the age of the photograph, as Michael Camille has argued, reproduction of an
image may actually increase its aura – just as repeated photographs add to the glamour of a film star rather than subtracting from it. If we take individual images less seriously than our ancestors did, a point that still remains to be proved, this may be the result not of reproduction in itself, but of the saturation of our world of experience by more and more images.\(^{17}\)

‘Study the historian before you begin to study the facts,’ the author of the well-known textbook, *What is History?*, told his readers.\(^{18}\) In similar fashion, one might advise anyone planning to utilize the testimony of images to begin by studying the different purposes of their makers. Relatively reliable, for example, are works that were made primarily as records, documenting the remains of ancient Rome, for instance, or the appearance or customs of exotic cultures. The images of the Indians of Virginia by the Elizabethan artist John White (fl. 1584–93), for example (illus. 3), were made on the spot, like the images of Hawaiians and Tahitians by the draughtsmen who accompanied Captain Cook and other explorers, precisely in order to record what had been discovered. ‘War artists’, sent to the field to portray battles and the life of soldiers on campaign (Chapter 8) and, active from the emperor Charles V’s expedition to Tunis to the American intervention in Vietnam, if not later, are usually more reliable witnesses, especially in details, than their colleagues who work exclusively at home. We might describe works of the kinds listed in this paragraph as ‘documentary art’.

All the same, it would be unwise to attribute to these artist-reporters an ‘innocent eye’ in the sense of a gaze which is totally objective, free from expectations or prejudices of any kind. Both literally and metaphorically, these sketches and paintings record a ‘point of view’. In the case of White, for instance, we need to bear in mind that he was personally involved in the colonization of Virginia and may have tried to give a good impression of the place by omitting scenes of nakedness, human sacrifice and whatever might have shocked potential settlers. Historians using documents of this kind cannot afford to ignore the possibility of propaganda (Chapter 4), or that of stereotyped views of the ‘Other’ (Chapter 7), or to forget the importance of the visual conventions accepted as natural in a particular culture or in a particular genre such as the battle-piece (Chapter 8).

In order to support this critique of the innocent eye, it may be useful to take some examples where the historical testimony of images is, or at any rate appears to be, relatively clear and direct: photographs and portraits.
Stereotypes of Others

Christians are right and pagans are wrong.

*THE SONG OF ROLAND*

East is East and West is West, and never the twain will meet.

*RUDYARD KIPLING*

It is only relatively recently that cultural historians have become interested in the idea of the ‘Other’, with a capital O – or perhaps with a capital A, since it was the French theorists who led the way in discussions of *l’Autre*. It might be more illuminating to think of people different from oneself in the plural rather than turning them into an undifferentiated Other, but since this process of homogenization is so common, cultural historians need to study it. This new interest of theirs runs parallel to the rise of concern with cultural identity and cultural encounters, just one example among many of present preoccupations, such as the debate over multiculturalism, prompting scholars to ask new questions about the past.

In the case of groups confronted with other cultures, two opposite reactions recur. One is to deny or to ignore cultural distance, to assimilate others to ourselves or our neighbours by the use of analogy, whether this device is employed consciously or unconsciously. The other is viewed as the reflection of the self. Thus the Muslim warrior Saladin was perceived by some Crusaders as a knight. The explorer Vasco da Gama, entering an Indian temple for the first time, interpreted a sculpture of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as an image of the Holy Trinity (just as the Chinese, a century or so later, would interpret images of the Virgin Mary as representations of the Buddhist goddess Kuan Yin). The Jesuit missionary St Francis Xavier, encountering Japanese culture for the first time in the middle of the sixteenth century, described the emperor (who had high status but little power) as an oriental ‘pope’. It is by means of analogy that the exotic is made
intelligible, that it is domesticated.

The second common response is the reverse of the first. It is the conscious or unconscious construction of another culture as the opposite of one’s own. In this fashion, fellow-humans are ‘othered’. Thus the Song of Roland described Islam as a diabolical inversion of Christianity, and presents an image of Muslims as worshipping an infernal Trinity, composed of Apollo, Muhammad and a certain ‘Termagant’. The Greek historian Herodotus presented an image of ancient Egyptian culture as the inverse of the Greek, noting that in Egypt people wrote from right to left instead of from left to right, that men carried burdens on their heads rather than their shoulders, that women made water sitting down instead of standing up, and so on. He also described the Persians and the Scythians as in some ways the antithesis of the Greeks.

In the last paragraphs the term ‘image’ was used in the sense of an image in the mind and the evidence came from texts. To recover or reconstruct these mental images, the testimony of visual images is obviously indispensable, despite all the problems of interpretation that pictures raise. Where writers can hide their attitudes behind an impersonal description, artists are forced by the medium in which they work to take up a clear position, representing individuals from other cultures as either like or unlike themselves.

Two vivid examples of the first process described above, the assimilation of the other, both come from seventeenth-century Dutch engravings. In one, a Brazilian Indian was fitted out with a classical bow and arrows. In this way the Indians were identified with the barbarians of the ancient world, more familiar to the artist and the viewer alike than the peoples of the Americas. In the other engraving, illustrating an account of the Dutch East India Company’s embassy to China, a Tibetan lama was represented as a Catholic priest and his prayer beads as a rosary (illus. 64). The accompanying text goes even further in the direction of assimilation, the English version describing the lama’s hat as ‘much like a cardinal’s, with broad brims’, while the French version, aimed at a Catholic audience, also compares the lama’s wide sleeves to those of a Franciscan friar and his ‘rosary’ to those of the Dominicans and Franciscans. The hat represented in the engraving, incidentally, differs from the traditional pointed cap of the lamas, which an Italian traveller of the early eighteenth century, in another attempt to assimilate the unknown to the known, compared to a bishop’s mitre. Unlike some other images of distant cultures illustrated here (illus. 3, for example), the engraving appears to have been based on the written text rather than on sketches made from life.
In other words, when encounters between cultures take place, each culture’s images of the other are likely to be stereotyped. The word ‘stereotype’ (originally a plate from which an image could be printed), like the word cliché (originally the French term for the same plate), is a vivid reminder of the link between visual and mental images. The stereotype may not be completely false, but it often exaggerates certain features of reality and omits others. The stereotype may be more or less crude, more or less violent. However, it necessarily lacks nuances since the same model is applied to cultural situations which differ considerably from one another. It has been observed, for example, that European pictures of American Indians were often composite ones, combining traits from Indians of different regions to create a simple general image.

In analysing such images, it is difficult to do without the concept of the ‘gaze’, a new term, borrowed from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), for what would earlier have been described as ‘point of view’. Whether we are thinking about the intentions of artists or about the ways in which different groups of viewers looked at their work, it is useful to think in terms of the western gaze, for example, the scientific gaze, the colonial gaze, the tourist gaze or the male gaze (below, pp. 136ff.). The gaze often expresses attitudes of which the viewer may not be conscious, whether they are hates,
fears or desires projected on to the other. The case for psychoanalyti-
cal interpretations of images – an approach to be discussed in more
detail in Chapter 10 – receives some of its strongest support from
images of aliens, abroad or at home.

Some of these stereotypes are positive, as in the case of the ‘noble
savage’, a phrase used in 1672 by the English poet and playwright
John Dryden. The image was a classical one which was revived in the
sixteenth century and developed alongside its opposite, the image of
the cannibal. Pictures, including the woodcuts in the French Protes-
tant missionary Jean de Léry’s History of a Voyage to Brazil (1578),
illustrated this concept. The high point of the idea of the noble
savage was the eighteenth century. It was at this time that the culture
of Tahiti, for example, was seen as a survival of the golden age. The
inhabitants of Patagonia and Polynesia in particular were viewed by
European travellers through the spectacles of the classical tradition as
‘modern exemplars of the austere virtuous lives led in classical times
by such peoples as the Spartans and the Scythians’.

Unfortunately, most stereotypes of others – the Jews as seen by the
Gentiles, the Muslims by the Christians, blacks by whites, peasants by
townpeople, soldiers by civilians, women by men, and so on – were
and are either hostile, contemptuous or, at the very least, condescend-
ing. A psychologist would probably look for the fear underlying the
hatred and also for the unconscious projection of undesirable aspects
of the self on to the other.

It is perhaps for this reason that the stereotypes often take the form
of inversions of the viewer’s self-image. The cruder stereotypes are
based on the simple assumption that ‘We’ are human or civilized
while ‘They’ are little different from animals such as the dogs and
pigs to whom they are frequently compared, not only in European
languages but also in Arabic and Chinese. In this way others are
turned into ‘the Other’. They are exoticized, distanced from the self.
They may even be turned into monsters.

The Monstrous Races

The classic as well as the classical example of this process is that of
the so-called ‘monstrous races’, imagined by the ancient Greeks as
existing in faraway places such as India, Ethiopia or Cathay. These
races included the dog-headed people, (Cynocephali); those lacking
heads (Blemmyae); the one-legged (Sciopods); cannibals (Anthrop-o-
phagi); Pygmies; the martial, one-breasted race of women (Amazons) and so on. The Natural History of the ancient Roman
writer Pliny transmitted these stereotypes to the Middle Ages and beyond. For instance, the reference in *Othello* to the people ‘whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders’ is clearly to the Blemmyae.

The monstrous races may have been invented to illustrate theories of the influence of climate, the assumption being that people who live in places which are too cold or too hot cannot be fully human.\(^4\) All the same, it may be illuminating to treat these images not as pure invention but as examples of the distorted and stereotyped perception of remote societies. After all, the pygmies still exist and some peoples eat human flesh on certain occasions. As India and Ethiopia became more familiar to Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and no Blemmyae, Amazons or Sciopods could be found, the stereotypes were relocated in the New World. For example, the Amazon river takes its name from the belief that Amazons lived there. Remote peoples were viewed as morally as well as physically monstrous, as in the case of the cannibals believed to live in Brazil, Central Africa and elsewhere.\(^5\)

For a vivid image of cannibalism, expressing and doubtless also spreading the stereotype, we may turn to a famous woodcut which was circulating in Germany about six years after the Portuguese first landed in Brazil in the year 1500 (illus. 65). In the centre of the print

65 ‘The island and people which were discovered by the Christian king of Portugal or his subjects’, German woodcut showing Brazilian cannibals, c. 1505. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich.
we see fragments of a mutilated human body hanging from a branch, while the savage at the extreme left tucks into a human arm. This example throws some light on the process of stereotyping. The statement it makes is not exactly false. Some of the Brazilian Indians, the adult males of the Tupinambá for example, whose customs were described in detail by some European travellers later in the sixteenth century, did eat some human flesh, notably that of their enemies, on some ritualized occasions. But the print gives the false impression that human flesh was normal everyday food for all the Indians. It helped to define the inhabitants of a whole continent as ‘cannibals’. In this sense it made a contribution to what has been called the ‘man-eating myth’, to the process in which one culture (not always the western) dehumanizes another by claiming that its members eat people.

Today, readers may find it difficult to take the idea of the monstrous races seriously, to recognize that our ancestors believed in their existence or at least in the possibility of their existence somewhere. Such scepticism is somewhat paradoxical, given the many current images of aliens from outer space, which should perhaps be seen as the ultimate displacement of Pliny’s stereotype. Come to that, we continue to view groups culturally distant from ourselves in stereotyped terms. An obvious example is that of the ‘terrorist’, a term which currently conjures up an image of extreme and mindless violence. If these ‘terrorists’ – Irish, Palestinian, Kurdish, and so on – are redescribed as ‘guerrillas’, they recover their human faces together with intelligible motives, not to say ideals. Images of Muslim terrorists in particular have become common in films, especially in the 1990s, following the decline of the Communist ‘other’ after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. ‘Terrorism’ is associated with equally ill-defined pejorative terms such as ‘fanaticism’, ‘extremism’ and, more recently, ‘fundamentalism’. These hostile images of Islam are linked to what is often described as the ‘orientalist’ mentality.

**Orientalism**

In the last twenty years of the twentieth century, the concept of ‘orientalism’, once a neutral term employed to describe western specialists on the cultures of the Near, Middle and Far East, became a pejorative one. Its change in meaning is largely due to one man, the literary critic Edward Said, and his book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978. Said described his kind of Orientalism as ‘the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient’ which developed in the west from the late eighteenth century onwards. Alternatively, he referred to it as a ‘discourse’,
or (quoting the British historian Victor Kiernan) as ‘Europe’s collective daydream of the Orient’, or as ‘a western style for dominating … the Orient’ against which the Occident defined itself.7

Said worked with texts, deciding not to discuss the cultural stereotypes of what he called ‘the Oriental genre tableau’, but his ideas can be – and have been – used to analyse the paintings of the Middle East by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), and Delacroix, as well as by English, German, Italian and Spanish artists.8 It would not be difficult to assemble a substantial corpus of western paintings of the Middle East which are filled with stereotypes and focus on sex, cruelty, idleness and ‘oriental luxury’ – harems, baths, odalisques, slaves and so on. The Ingres painting Odalisque with Slave (illus. 66) is fairly typical of the genre, giving a western spectator a sense of entering a harem and so of viewing the most intimate secrets of an alien culture.

These visual images illustrate, or at any rate they run parallel to western literary stereotypes of the Orient, such as Montesquieu’s Persian Letters (1721). Indeed, we know that some artists turned to literature to help with ‘local colour’, as Ingres turned to the letters from eighteenth-century Istanbul written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Ingres transcribed some of the letters, including the passage in which Lady Mary describes her visit to a Turkish bath, in preparation for painting his Bain Turc (1862–3).9

66 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Odalisque with Slave, 1839/40, oil on canvas mounted on panel. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA.
Nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs of scenes from Middle Eastern life taken by Europeans for a European audience perpetuated some of these stereotypes. So did films, notably The Sheikh (1921), in which the leading role of Ahmed Ben Hassan was played by the Italian–American actor Rudolph Valentino, as if to American WASP eyes all olive-skinned men were interchangeable. The long life of the stereotypes as well as their multiplication suggests that these examples of collective fantasy or the ‘imaginary’ responded to the voyeuristic desires of viewers.

The previous paragraphs have tried to show that an analysis of the western images of the Middle East in Said’s terms is indeed enlightening. All the same, this approach obscures as well as illuminates. Western attitudes to ‘the Orient’ were no more monolithic than the Orient itself, but varied with the artist and the genre. Delacroix and Géricault, for instance, both expressed enthusiasm for the cultures of North Africa. Distinctions are in order. To complicate matters still further, it is possible to find what might be called ‘oriental orientalists’. The owner of Ingres’ Bain Turc was the Ottoman diplomat Khalil Bey, while Hamdi Bey (1842–1910), a Turkish artist who had studied in Paris with Gérôme, painted scenes from his own culture in the western style. It would seem that the modernization of the Ottoman Empire required viewing it through western or at any rate westernizing eyes.

Another important distinction to make is between a ‘romantic’ exoticizing style and what has been called the ‘documentary’, ‘reporting’ or ‘ethnographic’ style, to be found in some nineteenth-century painters of the Middle East as in the earlier work of John White in Virginia (illus. 3) or John Webber (1752–1798) in the Pacific, who was chosen by Captain Cook to accompany him on his third voyage in order ‘to preserve, and to bring home’ images of ‘the most memorable scenes of our transactions’. Examples of this ethnographic style, the equivalent of the ‘eyewitness style’ discussed above (Introduction) include Two Seated Women by Delacroix (illus. 1), the drawing of the Ottoman sultan going to the mosque (illus. 2) by the French artist-reporter Constantin Guys (1802–1892), and the Street Scene, Damascus (illus. 67) by Alberto Pasini (1826–1899), including horsemen, street traders, veiled and turbaned figures and an impressive house jutting into the street, the windows covered by latticework so that the women within could see out while themselves remaining invisible.

Even scenes like these, despite their strong ‘reality effect’, need, like later photographs, to be utilized with care as evidence of social life in the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. Artists often used
Jewish female models because the Muslim women were inaccessible. Sometimes they admitted what they were doing, as in the case of *A Jewish Wedding in Morocco* (another work by Delacroix), but on other occasions they did not. The identity of the women in *Two Seated Women* has often been discussed. They may be Jewish, but the details of their costume suggest that they are indeed Arab Muslims, confirming the tradition that a French acquaintance of the artist’s, an engineer working at the port of Algiers, persuaded one of his staff to allow Delacroix to draw his women from life. Another problem of the documentary image is its focus on the typical at the expense of the individual. What is considered to be typical of a given culture may be the result of years of observation, but it may also be the fruit of hurried reading or of pure prejudice.

What Said christened or rechristened ‘Orientalism’ is a special case of a much wider phenomenon, the stereotyped perception of one culture by another, or of individuals from one culture by individuals from another. Northern European images of the South, especially of Spain and Italy, not all that different – especially when Andalusia or Sicily was the setting – from images of the Orient, might be described as examples of ‘Meridionalism’. Images of the far North of Europe, including Lapland and Finland, might be described as ‘Borealism’. European images of Africa developed in parallel to images of the Orient. In North and South America, artists represented black slaves in a more or less stereotyped manner.

Among the more sympathetic portrayals of African Americans were a series by Eastman Johnson (1824–1906), a northerner – he was born in Maine – who supported the abolition of slavery. His best-
known treatment of the subject, *Negro Life at the South*, was painted in 1859, on the eve of the American Civil War. This scene of the slaves relaxing after their labours – a man playing a banjo, mothers playing with children, a young man sweet-talking a pretty girl – was described at the time as a pictorial equivalent of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel had appeared seven years earlier, in 1852). It was praised as an authentic representation of ‘the affections, the humor, the patience and serenity which redeem from brutality and ferocity the civilized though subjugated African’. More recently, Johnson’s images of African Americans have been described as ‘nonstereotypical’. Yet *Negro Life at the South* is composed of stock poses and attributes – the banjo for instance – associated with the slaves. I would prefer to say that the figures are in a relatively gentle and sympathetic manner stereotyped.\footnote{13}

Non-European images of Europeans as ‘the other’ also bear eloquent testimony to cultural stereotyping. The Chinese as well as the Europeans had visions of monstrous races, as some seventeenth-century woodcuts suggest (illus. 68), including one figure uncannily like the classical Blemmyae (a case of cultural diffusion or independent invention?). A sixteenth-century Japanese bottle (illus. 69), like a number of painted screens made a few years later, shows the Portuguese with their breeches blown up like balloons, suggesting that the clothes of the Europeans – like their big noses – were viewed as particularly exotic. African images of the Portuguese made similar points (illus. 70). In this sense we may speak of ‘Occidentalism’, even

\footnote{68 Woodcut of a monster, from Wu Renchen, *Shan-Hai-Jing. Guang. Zhu.*}

70 Nigerian (Benin) bronze plaque showing two 16th-century Portuguese men. Private collection.
if it was never what Said calls a ‘corporate institution’ in the service of political and economic dominance.14

Within the west, xenophobia was often expressed by images presenting the people of other nations as monstrous or verging on the monstrous. Hogarth’s *Calais Gate* (c. 1748), for instance, draws its power from the tradition of English stereotypes of the French. The emaciated Frenchmen remind the viewer that poverty and absolute monarchy were closely associated in British minds, while the jolly fat friar gazing at the meat, his plump hand to his breast, evokes the negative image of popery and what eighteenth-century Protestant

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intellectuals used to call ‘priestcraft’.

Again, in nineteenth-century English and American cartoons, the Irish were often represented as ape-like, or, drawing on the science fiction of the age, as something like a new Frankenstein, a monster, called into existence by the British, which now threatened them. In some ways these images recall the tradition of personifying rebellion or disorder (one of the simian Irishmen drawn by the cartoonist John Tenniel in illustration 71 wears a hat inscribed ‘Anarchy’). All the same, their xenophobic thrust is unmistakable.\textsuperscript{15}

The Other at Home

A similar process of distinction and distancing operates within a given culture. Men have often defined themselves against their image of women, claiming for instance that ‘men don’t cry’). The young define themselves against the old, the middle class against the working class, the north (whether in Britain, France or Italy) against the south. These distinctions are embodied in images, so that it may be useful to speak of the ‘male gaze’, for instance, or the ‘urban gaze’. Certain artists specialized in producing images of the Other, like David Teniers the younger, who painted witches, peasants and alchemists, another favourite target for the satirists of the time.\textsuperscript{16}

These distinctions are at their most visible in polemical images, religious or political, but there is no sharp line between polemical caricature and unconscious distortions, since the caricaturist both appeals to and reinforces existing prejudices. This point may be illustrated from representations of Jews in paintings and prints in Germany and elsewhere from the Middle Ages onwards (since Jewish culture is anti-iconic, it is not normally possible to compare these representations with self-images of Jews or Jewish images of Gentiles). A recent study by the American historian Ruth Mellinkoff notes how the Jews were ‘othered’ in medieval art. They were represented in yellow, for instance, wearing peaked or pointed hats and making vulgar gestures, such as sticking out their tongues. They were frequently shown as physically, and so as morally, close to the devil. Their sub-humanity was demonstrated to viewers by associating them with swine in the recurrent image of the \textit{Judensau}.\textsuperscript{17}

Some of these associations recur in other contexts. In the cartoons produced during the French Revolution, for instance, King Louis XVI was sometimes portrayed as a pig. Also pig-like are the fat and villainous capitalists in the paintings of Georg Grosz (1893–1959), for instance, or Diego Rivera. Less crude and perhaps less conscious
distortions may be found in many images of women – products of the male gaze – which represent them as alien, whether as seductive or repulsive. Images of prostitutes are the most obvious example of alienating stereotypes. On the seductive side, one thinks immediately of Manet, whose famous *Olympia* clearly evokes the image of the odalisques of the Orient. On the opposite side, one thinks of Edgar Degas (1834–1917), whose images, emphasizing the women’s least attractive features have been described as ‘brutal and brutalising’, or of Grosz, who caricatured the women of the town as rapacious harpies.  

A still more extreme case of the male ‘othering’ of the female is the image of the witch, usually ugly, and often associated with animals such as goats and cats as well as with the devil. A woodcut by the German artist Hans Baldung Grien, for instance, represents a witch as a naked woman flying through the air on the back of a goat. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, witches were coming to be represented more frequently in the act of cooking or eating babies. This accusation recurs in texts of the time but this change in the visual image of the witch may have come about in part as a result of what might be called ‘contamination’ from the images of cannibals in Brazil and elsewhere discussed above. Literary and visual images sometimes develop independently or semi-independently of one another. The final metamorphosis of the witch, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was into a crone in a pointed hat with a broomstick (illus. 72), surrounded by small devils, the image which has endured to this day in popular imagination.

As in the case of the accusation of eating babies, levelled against Jews and witches alike, the pointed hat in this woodcut, like the woman’s hooked nose, illustrates the migration of stereotypes. The hat may no longer evoke images of Jews, but it once did. The evidence for this assertion includes the law promulgated at Buda in 1421 that anyone arrested for the first time on a charge of witchcraft was obliged to appear in public wearing a so-called ‘Jew’s hat’. In early modern Spain, heretics arrested by the Inquisition were obliged to wear similar hats. The confusion between witches and Jews is a revealing one, testifying to a general idea of the Other and to what has been called ‘a general visual code expressive of sub-humanity’. Dehumanization is surely the point of the association of other groups with animals – apes, pigs, goats, or cats – in images and also in verbal insults.

*The Grotesque Peasant*

For another case study of images of the other at home we may turn to
urban representations of the inhabitants of the countryside. From the twelfth century onwards, western images of shepherds and peasants often represented them in a grotesque manner, thus distinguishing them clearly from the higher-status people who would view these images. Some vivid examples from fourteenth-century England can be found in the pages of the famous Luttrell Psalter. The spread of such negative representations of peasants in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, giving them short fat bodies and vulgar gestures, suggests that the cultural distance between the town and the countryside was increasing along with urbanization.  

Some of the most memorable of these images occur in the paintings of Pieter Brueghel the Elder, himself a town-dweller and a friend of humanists, and suggest that they were supposed to be seen as contributions to a tradition of urban satire. The famous *Peasant Wedding Banquet* (illus. 73) may at first sight appear to be an example of the ‘art of describing’ (Chapter 5), but a number of small details suggest a comic or satiric intent. There is the child in the foreground, for instance, wearing a hat too large for him; the man at the end of the table burying his face in the jug; and perhaps the man carrying the dishes, with a spoon in his hat (probably a sign of vulgarity in the sixteenth century, like the pencil behind the ear in Britain a generation ago). This comic tradition was carried on in the seventeenth century in the images of peasant fairs and of peasants in inns dancing.

72 An early 19th-century woodcut showing a witch.
drinking, vomiting and fighting. It would be a mistake to homogenize a tradition which had space for individual variations. As one critic suggests, ‘The paintings of Adriaen Brouwer and the later works of Adriaen van Ostade present very different images of the peasantry – the one brutish and uncivilized, the other prosperous and rather stupidly self-satisfied’. All the same, the negative visual tradition was both widespread and powerful.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this tradition was gradually replaced by another. The peasant – like the ‘savage’ – was ennobled or idealized (see above). Alternatively, as in the case of some ‘orientalist’ painters (above) the gaze of the artist was neither idealizing nor grotesque, but ethnographic, concerned with the faithful reporting of both costumes and customs (the Spanish term to describe this kind of painting or literature was costumbrista). The ethnographic gaze can also be discerned in many nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographs of workers, criminals and mad people, although it was generally less objective and less scientific than its practitioners believed. The photographers – the middle class taking photographs of workers, the police taking photographs of criminals and the sane taking photographs of the insane – generally concentrated on traits

73 Pieter Breughel the Elder, Peasant Wedding Banquet, c. 1566, oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
which they considered to be typical, reducing individual people to specimens of types to be displayed in albums like butterflies. What they produced were what Sander Gilman calls ‘images of difference’.\textsuperscript{25} The parallel with westerners producing images of ‘the’ Bedouin or the Sikh will be obvious enough. The explorer David Livingstone asked his brother Charles, who was taking photographs, to ‘secure characteristic specimens of the different tribes’.\textsuperscript{26} In some ways the opposite of the vision of the monstrous races, the scientific gaze, attempting objectivity, can be almost equally dehumanizing.

Images of the other, packed with prejudices and stereotypes, appear to undermine the idea that the evidence of pictures is worth taking seriously. But as usual we need to pause and ask ourselves, evidence of what? As evidence of what other cultures or sub-cultures were really like, many of the images discussed in this chapter are not worth very much. What they do document very well, on the other hand, is a cultural encounter, and the responses to that encounter by members of one culture in particular.

At a deeper level, these pictures may have even more to tell us about the West. Many of the images examined here have represented the other as the inversion of the self. If the view of the other is mediated by stereotypes and prejudices, the view of the self implied by these images is still more indirect. Yet it offers precious testimony if we can only learn how to read it. Ruth Mellinkoff’s remark about Northern Europe in the late Middle Ages surely has a much wider application. ‘One way of penetrating the core of this society and its mentality is to ask how and where it established the borders of who was in and who was out.’ What people in a given place and time view as ‘sub–human’ tells us a good deal about the way in which they see the human condition.\textsuperscript{27}
References

Introduction


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1 Photographs and Portraits


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7 Stereotypes of Others


4 Hassig, ‘Rejection’.


8 Visual Narratives
1 William A. Coupe, *The German Illustrated Broadsheet in the Seventeenth Century*