Thoughts on de-orientalizing photography: on Heba Y. Amin’s Windows on the West

Can artistic strategies of re-appropriation and remediation perform a de-orientalization of an imperialist image? Margherita Foresti writes about Heba Y. Amin’s rendering of a 19th-century photograph of an Egyptian harem in tapestry.

Essay / Margherita Foresti January 29, 2021

1 Frédéric Goupil Fesquet Harem de Méhémet-Ali a Alexandrie Egypte 1839-40 engraving from daguerreotype_Source gallica.bnf_.fr BnF.jpg



[1]
Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet, Harem de Méhémet-Ali a Alexandrie (1839-40) in: Lerebours, Noël-Marie Paymal Lerebours, Excursions daguerriennes : vues et monuments les plus remarquables du globe. Vol. 1 / 1840-1843. Aquatint engraving from daguerreotype. Copyright: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In a photograph taken on the 7th of November, 1839, by Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet on his journey through Egypt, together with the orientalist painter Horace Vernet, one sees the entrance of an edifice, surveilled by two men. The point of view from which this image has been made appears slightly elevated, resulting in the dominance of the viewer's gaze over the subject of representation.

The edifice must have belonged to an authority, because it is enclosed in walls and guarded by two figures, one of whom is armed. This is how far I would get, were I to look at this image outside of its visual context. I could go further and speculate on the identities of those represented, but I am reminded to beware the dangers of decontextualization. In other words, that images do not speak for themselves.

Contemporary Berlin-based artist Heba Y. Amin (b. 1980, Cairo) encountered this photograph in her research on Western representations of the Orient, specifically of North Africa. It figured in the first volume of *Excursions daguerriennes* [2],1 the first major publication to use Louis Daguerre's photographic technology. The album contains images of "*the most remarkable views and*

monuments of the globe," so the title reads. It was put together by Noël-Paymal Lerebours, a French daguerreotypist, between 1840 and 1843. The images were made by travellers Lerebours 'armed' with daguerreotype apparatuses and sent out to portray Europe, the Near East, North Africa, Russia, Saint-Helena, and North America.2 Today *Excursions daguerriennes* stands as the prototype of the photographic album.

More on the importance of context: in the album, the image is delimited by two lines of text on its upper and lower frame. They give us information about the place where the daguerreotype has been taken: Egypt, Alexandria, the Harem of the pasha Mehmet Ali. The next page contains a lengthy description signed by the author of the image, Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet. He and Vernet had embarked on a journey across Egypt in a photographic mission to collect images of this distant world. Their Daguerrean enterprise anticipated a series of state-sponsored French expeditions to the Orient in the 1850s, with the purpose of photographically documenting archaeological monuments, ruins, and inscriptions for both academic and commercial use.3 They subscribed to an imperialist discourse driven by the exigence to collect proof, preserve, classify, discipline; in other words, seize with the French eye this abstract entity called The Orient. Perhaps it is to these first photographs of the Orient that the origins of the discourse Edward Said named Orientalism can be traced.

Amin_WindowsontheWest_3-1.jpg **[3]**



[4]Heba Y. Amin, Windows on the West, hand-woven Jacquard textile (2019)
Photograph courtesy of the artist

This discourse is the object of Amin's critique of the Western gaze, which she detects in the photograph of Mehmet Ali's Harem. To 19th-century Europeans, Egypt was "a vision, a mute tableau, an inert image of the past,"4 nothing but a timeless visual representation. Amin's work *Windows on the West* reappropriates the subject of one of these photographs and weaves it into a tapestry with the aim to de-orientalize it. By translating the view of Mehmet Ali's harem from a Western technology into a North African one, the subject of representation is subtracted from the foreign gaze.

2 Heba Y Amin Windows on the West hand woven jaquard textile 2019 detail photograph courtesy of the artist.jpg **[5]**



[6]
Heba Y. Amin, Windows on the West, hand woven jaquard textile, (2019), detail
Photograph Courtesy of the artist

For the French photographers, to hold visual records of these monuments and places, to catalogue them, meant to make the Orient an object of study, to *own* it by owning control of the production of its knowledge.

Photographic albums reveal specific relations of knowledge and power. The role photography had in giving the orientalist a self-imposed permission to narrate the Orient generated a discourse that still affects our present perception of it. The image of the Orient in novels such as Flaubert's *Salambô* (1862) or his *Voyage en Orient* (1849-1852)5 might have inflamed the fantasies of French bourgeois society, but it was still nothing compared to photography, a visual apparatus with the modest presumption of capturing reality itself, of generating infallible documents. So, when the orientalist photographed the Orient, he defined the knowledge Europeans would have of it: that of a still image to be catalogued inside albums. Photographic albums contained the Orient. Said wrote:

"Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world. […] the Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks."6

3 Heba Y Amin, Windows on the West, handwoven jaquard textile 2019 Photograph courtesy of the artist.jpg **[7]**



[8]Heba Y. Amin, Windows on the West, hand-woven Jacquard textile (2019)
Photograph courtesy of the artist

It is within the textual net of these albums, in the margins of photographs like the one of the Harem of Mehmet Ali, that we find specific discourses of power. Besides imperialism, the male gaze behind the making of this photograph reveals also a sexist discourse. In fact, Goupil-Fesquet's daguerreotype created a great sensation among his countrymen and women, because of its allusion to the erotic subject of the harem – or rather *their* idealized notion of harem.7Because of its subject and of its reception, the photograph had the effect of turning Egypt into a double-subaltern: as an oriental and a female.

The Harem of Mehmet Ali is, according to Amin [9], the first known photograph of the African continent in the West. What is at stake in this representation is not just the sight of a harem, but rather the image of that entity called 'the Orient' created by the colonizer, who had turned both the 'oriental woman' and North Africa into machines to exploit.

Amin attempted to liberate the referent of this photograph by means of the artistic strategy of re-enactment, characteristic of her work at large. She reworked the original image of Mehmet Ali's harem and had its subject woven into a tapestry she named *Windows on the West*.8 The use of an Egyptian local technology means reclaiming the right to speak about oneself, to reject being the topic of the other's narration. The subject of representation in the tapestry has not changed, yet the act of weaving it anew (by a female artist) symbolizes an operation of cleaning out the male, colonialist gaze from the harem, Alexandria, Egypt, and by extension North Africa and the Middle

East. Remediation, the practice of transferring a subject from its original medium into a new one,9 is an attempt to erase power structures that are so old they have frozen into matter, into the grains of the photographic image.

Vincent Mercier - musÇe du quai Branly.jpg **[10]**



[11]Heba Y. Amin, Windows on the West, hand-woven Jacquard textile (2019). Full view
Photograph courtesy of Vincent Mercier

The result is an image of Egypt of literally another texture. The title *Windows on the West*, refers, according to Amin [9], to the European attraction to cities like Alexandria because of the potential to revive their presumed Greek past, thereby culturally reconnecting to Western origins. By borrowing this expression the artist alludes to the reversal implicit in her act of remediation: though apparently the eyes are still on Egypt, the act of re-reproducing its image now subtracted from Western gaze, turns the spotlight on the history of colonization inherent in the photograph. Truly, in the field of vision of *Windows on the West*, epitomized as a lens or a windowpane, is Europe, 'us', and not the Orient, 'them'.

Re-appropriation, as a critical gesture, performatively visualizes the former appropriation of the Orient by Europeans, yet what does it suggest for the future of that *thing* called Orient? In the aftermath of that process of exposing power discourses, there is a need for indigenous artists to fill the now-empty spaces of a History long taken for granted. In other words: what comes after *de-*

orientalization?

- 1. Noël-Marie Paymal Lerebours , Excursions daguerriennes: vues et monuments les plus remarquables du globe, Vol. 1, 1840-1843. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84583748/f1.item [2]
- 2. Michèle Hannoosh, "Horace Vernet's 'Orient': Photography and the Eastern Mediterranean in 1839, part I: a daguerrean excursion," *The Burlington Magazine* CLVIII April 2016, 264-271.
- 3. Keri A. Berg "The Imperialist Lens: Du Camp, Salzmann and Early French photography," *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 2008, Vol. 6 No 1, 1-17.
- 4. Francis Wey, "Album d'Egypte de M. Maxime Du Camp," La Lumière, 14 September 1851. Cited in Berg, 2008, 1.
- 5. Noteworthy is Flaubert's assessment of the oriental woman as a "machine" which resounds in the famous description of his courtesan Kuchuk-Hânem in a letter to his French mistress Louise Colet, whereby the Egyptian woman becomes a locus of Orientalism and female objectification. See Lisa Lowe, "Orient as Woman, Orientalism as Sentimentalism: Flaubert," in L. Lowe Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalism (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 75-101.
- 6. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 41.
- 7. Heba Y. Amin at https://www.hebaamin.com/works/windows-on-the-west [12]/
- 8. The tapestry *Windows on the West* was made with the help of Textile Prototyping Lab in Berlin.
- 9. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, "Remediation," in *Configurations* Vol. 4 No. 3 (Johns Hopkins University Press, Fall 1996).

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[9] https://www.hebaamin.com/works/windows-on-the-west/
[10] https://tohumagazine.com/file/vincent-mercier-mus%C3%A7e-du-quai-branlyjpg-0
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