Exhibitionary Order in Fashion Photography

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The concept of the "exhibitionary order," as postulated by British political scientist Timothy Mitchell in the essay "Orientalism and Exhibitionary Order," is one that refers to a system in which the "Other" is put on display, resulting in the exotic commodification of native artifacts or traditions for the hegemonic gaze (i.e. that belonging to the white man).[1] This notion of the "Other" often finds itself belonging to at least one of two demographic groups: one that differs from the hegemonic culture (i.e. a foreigner), and one opposite the "dominant" gender (i.e. the woman).[2] The notion of exhibitionary order can be explained, or rather exemplified, through the lens of contemporary fashion photography. The photographs examined in this particular archive, collectively and individually, deliver the idea of exhibitionary order through means of not only objectifying the native artifacts, such as clothing and atmosphere, but also by objectifying skin colour itself. This particular discussion of skin colour focuses on the transient and physical transformation, more specifically,

[1] French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas originally coined the concept of the Other in the 1950s.
[2] Dominance in this case refers to power and privilege, as opposed to majority.

blackface. It can be said that blackface serves as another, but more extreme, way of re-appropriating racial differences for the white man's gaze. [3]

Before furthering the discussion of the Other and "orientalism," one must look to literary theoretician Edward Said's seminal 1979 work, aptly titled *Orientalism*. At the core of Orientalism, Said defines the term as not an academic field of study, but also as a containment of imaginative meanings in which it takes into account historical material context (Said 1979, 3). The theoretician also contends that the "Orient at large … vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and shivers of delight in – or fear of – novelty" (Said 1979, 59). In turn, he highlights the key traits often associated with the perceived Orient – strangeness, difference, and exotic sensuousness. But it is the concluding point which ties Said's study of Orientalism with that of Mitchell's exhibitionary order – the depiction of the Orient as an irrational, weak, and feminized Other, leaving it to the decision and gaze of the masculine and dominant Occident.

Delving into the archive, one notes that Figures 1 and 2 present Dutch model Lara Stone in blackface; Steven Klein photographed the images for the October 2009 issue of *French Vogue*. While the concept of the foreigner being the Other is often immediately considered, one must also recall the notion of the Other as being "she." In all of the photographs of this particular archive, the represented gender is the female. Relating to Barthes' ideas as presented in *Camera Lucida*, one comes back to the notion that the subject always is transformed into the object within a photograph (Barthes 1979, 13). More explicitly, the "[p]hotograph is the advent of [himself or

[3] Beginning in the 1830s, the rise of blackface minstrelsy, which later evolved into vaudeville acts, began and became incredibly popular in American theatre, and remained so right through to the mid-twentieth century. It involved the physical transformation of the white man into the black man through means of painting his face with greasepaint, donning woolly wigs, gloves, tailcoats or ragged clothes. ("Blackface Minstrelsy" 2011, np)

herself] as other, a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes 1979, 12). What can be remarked upon or drawn from this objectification of women is what becomes of it – lending to the new object's codification befitting the male gaze[4] – one which offers the position to embrace the aforementioned as sexuality, sensuality, softness, etc.

Referring to both of the Klein photographs, one is not only led to consider the exhibitionary order of the Orient, where they are set up by Westerners to be viewed as an "endless exhibition" (Mitchell 2002, 496), but also that of the woman by means of her suggestive poses. Figure 1 highlights Stone with her stoic expression and overt sexual demeanour, with legs widely spread. The immediate case could be made that there is a loss of the Western "condition of femininity," otherwise interpreted as timidity and softness; however, this very notion of femininity can easily be contested as an oversimplification. Gender codes today find themselves blurred, as there are no particular sets of defined roles to which women must cater or adhere. Granted, expectations of motherhood and sexuality prevail in contemporary media; however, alternative discourses speak otherwise and contest the "old norms."

In contemplating the argument that Stone violates this particular code of "Western femininity," one could say that this Other not only permits the objectification of the subject of "the woman," but rather, also of the foreigner. In effect, because "she" is not a component of the hegemonic society, one could suggest an excusal from the labeling of the image being "sexist" despite its overt sexuality. Relating to Said's observations on Flaubert's viewpoint of the Oriental, one notes the consideration that the woman "[is] usually the creature of a male power-fantasy… express[ing] unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are

[4] The term 'male gaze' was coined in 1975 by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey; one of the main features of the male gaze is that it relegates women to the status of objects (Mulvey 1975).

willing" (Said 1979, 207). Granted, Flaubert speaks to a time that is centuries past; however, the re-positioning of the woman as a part of the unknown creates a loophole of sorts where the fantasy takes hold and displaces discourses surrounding strength in femininity.

Departing from the discussion of overt sexuality, it could also be posited that Figure 1 makes attempts to escape from the role and "weaknesses" (as posited by Flaubert) of the Oriental female. Such can be observed through the stoic demeanour and re-interpretation of posture. In having the legs spread and left hand visibly and firmly rested on the thigh, one could contend that Stone asserts an air of masculinity so as to disarm the "power-fantasy" that would otherwise be in play. Furthermore, the masking of hair and distinctive female characteristics (i.e. breasts) permits for a reprieve from the feminine and a crossover to the milieu of androgyny; however, it does not offer escape from the notion of Otherness. Said contends that a hierarchy is created in which the foreigner will always first and foremost regarded as the Oriental, and then as a man; however, given that there is no man (but only an attempt at such), Stone is most definitively captured in the frame of the Other (Said 1979, 231).

Apart from the display of the body is the very consideration of the blatant use of blackface. What can be immediately noted about the presentation of blackface with Stone is that it exemplifies a different means of objectification. As opposed to only objectifying clothing and environment, the notion of skin colour, too, has become a commodity in itself. In utilizing this "modification" of a white woman to represent the Other, it can be said that the Other is a Western construct (Said 1979). It is to say that there is no "real" authenticity in this image; skin colour is now also communicated as part of the commodity.

In dealing with the notion of objectifying the Other, one may pose the question, "can the Other objectify his or herself?" And to certain degree, the answer

is "yes." Figures 3 and 4 deal with such a concept, in which singer/actress Beyoncé Knowles, who identifies as being "black", assumes blackface for an editorial shoot by Mark Pillai for the March 2011 issue of French Magazine *L'Officiel*. ("Beyoncé Knowles – Biography" 2011, np) Knowles articulates that the photo-shoot was a means of honouring Nigerian musician Fela Kuti (Steinmetz 2011). What can be said of this tribute, however, is that Knowles, despite being an Other on the basis of race alone (in American culture), is partaking in the adding of a secondary level of the Other.[5] This particular secondary level of Otherness may derive from or find parallels to the Oriental condition of Otherness whereby the focus now zones in on African culture. As a means of reinforcing the idea of this added layer of the Other, and not the primary level (which for the purposes of this paper refers to the Other in hegemonic culture and is therefore more broad standing), one may be quick to point out that Figure 3 introduces a set of complements. This set articulates the qualities with which one may reduce African culture to mere symbols and ornaments - vibrant colours and animals - based on acquired culture and knowledge via media in various forms, similar to Said's assertion of the Occident's understanding of the Orient [6] (Said 1979).

Figure 4, however, draws the viewer in by *adding* to the blackface that represents the "African Other" via the strong gaze and bright tribal marks. To add, the distinction between the primary and secondary levels of the Other are further distanced by the choice in styling. The python and leopard prints add an animalistic quality, thus highlighting a feral and aggressive component in the representation of

[5] So as to discern Said's notion of the Other, which focuses on the Orient (and the Middle East, in particular), the discussion of a secondary or added level of Otherness is mentioned. This second level of Otherness makes reference to the objectification and placement in exhibitionary order of African culture.

[6] To be clear, the headpiece is in the shape of an elephant, which is connotative of African origin.

the woman, all the while dehumanizing her. It is the decision to solely use animal prints that disturbs the viewer's interpretation of Knowles' identity; the feral quality, especially when out of context, displaces her as a female. When placed in context with the singer's identity as a performer, however, the clothing bolsters her image as an "independent woman," while obscuring the hint of Otherness through materialistic cover-up and demonstrating the loss of agency by the mode in representation. Without prior understanding, the interpretation of the images and the association with such patterns is wide open. In sum, the use of the Other to represent a second degree of Otherness highlights an issue with identity as performance, as well as a problem of agency and representation.

In terms of Knowles' gaze, it is one that depicts bewilderment, interrogating the viewer of his or her presence in this "closed cultural sphere." It is seemingly almost a challenge to the objectification and commodification of the Other. Coming back to Barthes' notion of the photograph being violent, however, one acknowledges, "in it nothing can be refused or transformed" (Barthes 1979, 91). In effect, the canvas cannot be refused and must be taken in whole; thus leaving no room for contention and creating a discrepancy between what the viewer sees and what the viewer knows about the subject in question.

More interestingly, though, is the partial blackface in both of these photographs. Exemplary in Figure 3, the contrast between the two skin tones is quite apparent with only Knowles' face depicting the secondary level of the Other, whereas the rest of her body remains untouched as the primary level of the Other. What can be posited is that there is an intersection of two exhibitionary orders within the photograph, thus creating a particular tension and discourse. This intersection deals with a secondary level of Other that is heavily portrayed by its complements (such as the garb and accessories), and the Western construct of the Other by means of race to

which Knowles belongs. On one hand, skin colour is objectified through an active transformation, and on the other, it remains untouched, so as to depict her as the Other in her own American culture.

In addition, this objectification of culture strips the represented of any identity. In the four photographs examined so far, the only "fact" that we can ascertain is that these images communicate what we merely *perceive* to be the Orient. Thus the images simply build upon and support Said's notes that the Orient is "less a place than a *topos,* a set of references … a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining" (Said 1979, 177). In addition, there is no particular culture or ethnicity being communicated in and associated with any of these photographs – in effect, this transformation of the Other from subject into object for the white gaze has resulted in an aggregate and anonymous identity.[7] In other words, everyone and anyone befitting certain appearances and garb will be lumped in into the sphere of the Orient and Otherness.

The last image, the only one with a title denoting a particular ethnicity or culture, draws upon the Orientalism and allure of Morocco. The idea of Orientalism in itself is comprised of three aspects according to Mitchell – "unchanging racial or cultural essences," otherness, and "a series of fundamental absences (of movement, reason, order, meaning and so on)" (Mitchell 2002, 495). The representation of the Moroccan dream is what the Western society may opt to view it the editorial as, as opposed to a "true and present-day" reality.

To explicate, the image highlights the fantasy of the Moroccan harem with model Sasha Pivovarova dressed in suggestive garb. The references to the foreign are easily made evident by means of the reduction of symbols to simple signifiers on the

[7] Admittedly, provided the context for Pillai's photographs, one can surmise that the culture is Nigerian; however, without any context, the title *African Queen* communicates very little.

body, such as the brightly coloured turban and ornate trims. However, it is the overall scene, as opposed to solely the model (which has been the case in the other photographs as they were portraits, as opposed to constructed scenes) that creates an air of discomfort for the viewer who regards the photograph as one of putting the "unknown" up for display. The background comprised of overly saturated deserts shifts the viewer's gaze to the more mundane colours and shadows on the right. The suggestion of the likeness to a harem is made not only by Pivovarova's suggestive pose (i.e. the crossed legs and hands folder over the top of her trousers), but also by the man in the shadows. The anonymous man's presence directs the viewer's gaze towards the woman, following the direction of his eyes, which focuses on the model's breasts (covered only by a triangle bikini top). All the while, the anonymous man clings to the dark, as though it were an attempt to disguise his desire for her, which, too, is suggested by the inconspicuous image of a bed of sorts in the background. Overall, the examination of this scene objectifies the woman in such a way that it finds itself recalling Said's discussion of the treatment of the woman as a male power-fantasy with the explicit depiction of both man and woman. With that said, though, one can also comment on the objectification of skin colour.

Granted, the literal idea is not exemplified in this case (as it was in Figures 1 through 4), but rather is modified – Pivovarova's skin tone is green. In any case, Pivovarova still finds herself on display; not only is she the focus of an idealized fantasy of what can be likened to a Moroccan harem, but also, the absence of logic and creation of flow between the recognizable (spectrum of skin colour) and unusual (i.e. the green skin) creates a particular means of otherization that is unsettling for the viewer who is unable to accept the photograph as "fact."

In examining this archive the question arises as to whether or not it is honorific or repressive. This dichotomy in traits brings us back to *The Body and The*

Archive by Alan Sekula, who in 1986, comments on the system of representation being capable of functioning both honourifically and repressively (Sekula 1986, 5-7).[8] Admittedly, such can be difficult to discern within an archive that objectifies both women and the Other. That said, the qualities of repression are evident in these photographs; the objectification of skin colour, and therefore distancing of race from Western culture, the repression of the woman by transforming her into a sexual viewing object through the male gaze, and the reduction of the Other into nothing more than an exhibit. However, with the archive, one must also recall that according to Sekula, the archive is fluid, meaning that its values are neither fixed nor are they static.

Admittedly, it is difficult to propose the traits of valorization within these photographs. However, one may be able to suggest that this transformation of skin colour and use of partial blackface in Figures 3 and 4 illustrates a certain sense of comfort with colourism. It is to say that the deliberate transformations of colour in portrait photography enables the first step in moving towards a society in which race is fluid. Granted, these images alone are not proof that worldly cultures are celebrated and that race is wholly fluid; however, this particular archive highlights that skin colour and foreign cultures have the capability to be incorporated in constructs of what deem to be "art." With that said, the act of putting the Other on display is still quite evident, but it is the choice to create and include the subject matter that may permit the conversation to go further.

Finally, coming back to the category of fashion photography as a whole, one draws upon French theorist Roland Barthes' work on the subject. Barthes proposes in "Fashion Photography," which appears as an appendix in the 1967 work *The Fashion*

[8] The honourific aspect of the archive refers to a celebratory or positive connotation, whereas the repressive aspect refers to a negative or dissuading connotation.

System, that within fashion photography, there are three key styles – objective, romantic, and mockery.[9] Immediately the labels of objectivity and mockery do not jump out at the viewer as appropriate for these photographs. For if they were to be objective, the representation of an Orient woman, for instance, would be literal, as opposed to being symbolic (i.e. using a white woman in blackface). And if they were to be under the guise of mockery, the element of mockery would be evident; however, there is a quality of "realism" that is strived for in all of these photographs. The notion of romanticism, though, in this context, evokes the idea of illustrating desire and, and more importantly, the imaginary. These five photographs all fall into this sub-category of romanticism, which in turn, can be said to reinforce this idea of construction in exhibitionary order – a construction not by the Other but by those who are viewing the Other.

Overall, it can be surmised that the exhibitionary order puts the Other, whether it be foreigner, woman or both, on an endless display as captured by the photograph in the process of embalming the subject into an object. The exhibitionary order, however, cannot be defined as solely repurposing native artifacts and traditions for the white man's gaze, as Mitchell had proposed in his essay. It should be noted that ethnicity and skin colour, too, are a part of the exhibitionary order, especially when dealing with photography; their objectification, especially through blackface, creates a real distance from the "authentic" and "reality" of the true Other. It is to say that the act of fully removing the person eliminates any possibility that perhaps there is veracity in what is being shown, and thus creating a real absence or disconnect, of which Mitchell discusses in his definition of Orientalism. Those key aspects to

[9] The depiction of the world – décor, background or scene as theatre - evokes particular feelings and moods, which can be categorized into the three above (granted, there is possibility for overlap). The objective style is a literal representation, whereas the romantic style seeks to express a dream or an imagined scene, and the mockery style illustrates outrageousness.

Orientalism – essentialism, Otherness, and absence – are also applicable to defining the representation of the Other in general within the exhibitionary order. But it is Said who best articulates the Orient's existence in Western culture – a stage on which the whole East is confined (Said 1979, 63).

After all, the fashion photographs examined, for instance, create this exhibitionary order by means of removing an actual cultural identity, giving a subjective and objectified view of the Other and creating a disconnect in discourse of events. While the archive is said to be fluid and can be deemed both honourific and repressive, the context in which one understands the Other often lends to a more negative and pejorative view, hence the criticism that much of these photographs have faced upon release. That said, the exhibitionary order is a problematic one; it presents cultures not as they are, but as how the photographer believes they should be perceived. The average person, who intakes thousands of images per day, would have to manually process and decipher the codes that embedded in the photograph so as to realize the disillusion presented. Otherwise, the photograph may very well be taken as a "true representation" because of his or her unfamiliarity with the unidentified Other.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Klein, Steven. 2009. Paris: Vogue Paris. Accessed October 14, 2011. http://models.com/work/vogue-paris-lara-8

Figure 2. Klein, Steven. 2009. Paris: Vogue Paris. Accessed October 14, 2011. (Seventh shown image). http://coutequecoute.blogspot.com/2009/10/vogue-paris-october-2009-lara-stone.html.

Figure 3. Pillai, Mark. 2011. *Beyoncé African Queen*. Paris: L'Officiel. Accessed October 14, 2011. http://models.com/work/lofficiel-beyonce-african-queen/48828.

Figure 4. Pillai, Mark. 2011. *Beyoncé African Queen*. Paris: L'Officiel. Accessed October 14, 2011. http://models.com/work/lofficiel-beyonce-african-queen/48829.

Figure 5. Meisel, Steven. 2009. *Moroccan Holiday*. Milan: Vogue Italia. Accessed October 14, 2011. http://models.com/work/vogue-italia-moroccan-holiday/6986.