

The Power Reconstruction of the Gaze: A Postcolonial Re-examination of Orientalist Painting—Taking Gérôme's A Roman Slave Market as an Example

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Abstract: This paper takes Gérôme's *A Roman Slave Market* as its research object, employing postcolonial theory to re-examine the power mechanisms behind the "gaze" in 19th-century Orientalist painting. Drawing on Edward Said's "Orientalism" and Michel Foucault's analytical framework of the "gaze," it reveals how the artwork constructs the Orient as an exoticized and gendered "Other" through visual coding and spatial narratives, thereby serving the ideological needs of Western colonial expansion. Orientalist painting is not merely an aesthetic practice but also a visual vehicle of cultural hegemony. Through "visual violence," it naturalizes colonial logic, reinforces the East-West binary, and provides pathways for reflecting on the colonial legacy in art history.

Keywords: Gaze theory; Orientalism; Postcolonial criticism; A Roman Slave Market; Power reconstruction

1. The Colonial Historical Context of Orientalist Painting

In the early 19th century, Western powers actively engaged in colonial expansion, encountering numerous cultural elements from the Eastern world. This provided Western artists with ample material, leading to the rise of Orientalist painting. Colonial rule was not only about territorial and political control but also cultural export and reinforcement. Orientalist painting became a means for Western powers to display cultural hegemony, constructing perceptions of the Orient through visual representations that positioned Eastern cultures as objects of the "gaze."

In Orientalist paintings, Western painters act as active "viewers," while Eastern subjects are reduced to passive "objects of observation." Artists emphasized contrasts between the "backward East" and the "advanced West" to justify colonial rule. Techniques such as composition and color highlighted this hierarchy. For example, in Delacroix's *Women of Algiers*, the painter adopts a voyeuristic perspective, peering into the private lives of Algerian women, as if asserting a right to scrutinize the East. This "viewer-viewed" dynamic metaphorizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Through such a "gaze," the West established its power superiority by placing the Orient in a position of perpetual judgment.

Orientalist paintings, widely circulated in the West, became crucial media for disseminating colonial ideology. Works depicting the East as "barbaric" and "backward" convinced Western audiences that colonial expansion was a "civilizing mission." This ideological propagation legitimized colonial actions culturally, further entrenching colonial power in Western societies. Simultaneously, it impacted Eastern self-perception, fostering self-doubt and cultural identity crises among some Eastern populations.

Gérôme's *A Roman Slave Market* is one of the most controversial and representative Orientalist paintings of the 19th century. Through dramatized visual strategies, it embodies colonial power, gendered exploitation, and racist ideology, serving as a paradigmatic example of the Orientalist "gaze" mechanism^[12].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Said's Orientalism

In Orientalism, Edward Said subverts Western perceptions of the "Orient," revealing the collusion between knowledge production and colonial power. Borrowing Foucault's "discourse-power" theory, Said argues that Orientalism is not an objective description but a Western-constructed system of knowledge-power^[2]. The "Orient" is not a real geographical or cultural entity but an "Otherized" imagination fabricated through academia, literature, and art, obscuring its complex historical and social realities^[1]. As Said states: "Orientalism is not a theory about the East, but a theory about how the West asserts its power over the East."

2.2 Foucault's "Gaze" Theory and Power Discipline

Michel Foucault's "gaze" theory and his analysis of disciplinary power reveal how power permeates individual bodies and minds through observation, surveillance, and knowledge production, achieving normalized control over society^[8]. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault describes how doctors diagnose diseases by observing bodies, transforming illness into a "knowledge object" under medical authority. Similarly, colonizers used painting and photography to document colonial landscapes, people, and customs, converting them into "exotic symbols" that constructed a Western-centric "Oriental knowledge system." This gaze "Otherizes" cultures, consolidating colonial dominance over space. From clinical medicine to colonial art, visual control remains central to disciplinary power. Through observation, classification, and representation^[7], life and culture are subsumed into governable orders. In an era of algorithmic surveillance and data colonialism, Foucault's critique remains incisive: only by exposing the power logic behind vision can we reclaim subjectivity in "viewing" and "being viewed."

The intersection of Said and Foucault's theories treats knowledge-power as a dynamic, pervasive technology. Said's Orientalism concretizes Foucault's disciplinary framework within the colonial context, revealing how cultural hegemony disciplines the "Other" through discourse, art, and knowledge production. Their synthesis deepens our understanding of colonial power mechanisms and equips postcolonial critique with methodological tools—deconstructing the power logic of knowledge production to challenge invisible cultural violence.

3. Visual Analysis of A Roman Slave Market

3.1 Historical Context and Background

Gérôme's travels to the Orient marked a pivotal shift in his career, profoundly influencing his themes, style, and motivations. Although Gérôme never openly endorsed colonialism, his works objectively aligned with European colonial discourse. His Orientalist creations were not merely personal artistic explorations but also responses to 19th-century colonial expansion and market demands.

In 1856, Gérôme embarked on his first Oriental journey, accompanying French diplomat Prosper Marilhat to Egypt. Over eight months, he traveled along the Nile, visiting Cairo, Luxor, and other cities, documenting local architecture, attire, customs, and daily life. Egypt's desert light, vibrant bazaars, Islamic architecture, and exotic figures inspired his later oil paintings, such as the detailed scenes in *The Circumcision Ceremony in Egypt*^[9]. Gérôme acted not merely as a tourist but as an "anthropologist," immersing himself in local societies and rituals. He even used early photography to ensure "authenticity" in his details. Despite his efforts to capture Eastern realities, his perspective remained constrained by colonial and Eurocentric ideologies. As an outsider, his depictions often filtered and romanticized Eastern scenes, reinforcing European stereotypes. His preference for themes like slave markets and harems catered more to European exoticism than to truthful social documentation.

Meanwhile, the 19th-century French Salon's enthusiasm for Oriental themes propelled Gérôme's career. Works like *A Roman Slave Market* became salon highlights for their "exoticism" and "sensuality," attracting aristocratic buyers. Through widespread prints, Gérôme's works solidified his status as an "Orientalist master," yielding substantial profits.

3.2 *Iconographic Analysis*

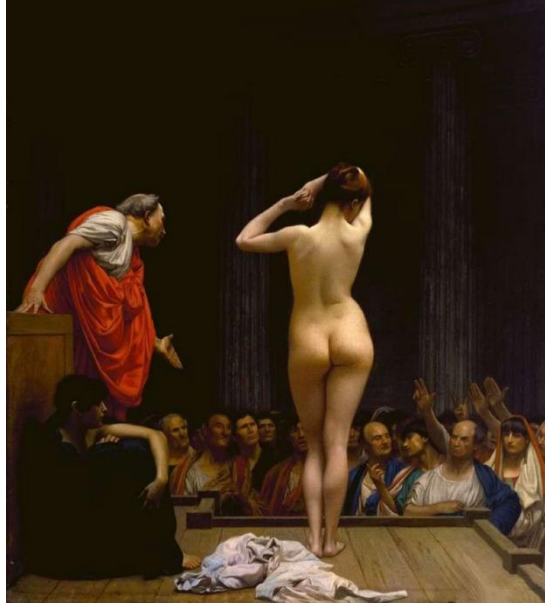


Figure 1: A Roman Slave Market

A Roman Slave Market depicts a slave-trading scene steeped in colonialist imaginaries of the "Orient." The backdrop features Islamic architecture, with arched doorways and shadowy spaces evoking a claustrophobic, oppressive environment. Sunlight slants in from the left, creating stark contrasts that highlight the figures, postures and expressions. At the center stands a fully nude young woman displayed on a platform. Her pale skin and rigid posture—hands clasped above her head, eyes downcast—convey vulnerability and submission. A robed male trader gestures toward her body, his expression cold and authoritative. Shadowy figures in Arab attire encircle her, their gazes scrutinizing the woman, symbolizing transactional indifference.

3.2.1 *Composition and Space*

Foucault's "panopticism" theory elucidates the spatial dynamics: the enclosed "Oriental stage" resembles a "cultural specimen" fixed under the Western gaze. Spatial segregation implies the Orient as stagnant and in need of "management." The spotlight on the slave's body parallels the panopticon's "invisible watchers"—the gazed-upon cannot resist, as power is omnipresent yet invisible[8].

(1) Central Symmetry and Pyramid Structure

The slave woman occupies the vertical axis at the center, contrasting with the horizontal spread of buyers. Her nudity becomes the focal point, symbolizing her status as a "commodity." The buyers form a pyramid around her, stabilizing the scene's "orderliness" and masking violence as "ritual."

(2) Circular Enclosure

Buyers encircle the slave in a semicircle, intensifying her isolation and oppression. Converging gazes (e.g., a buyer lifting her chin) exert multi-layered control.

(3) Metaphorical Geometric Elements

Arched doorways frame the scene, echoing the crowd's curvature to create a "double cage"—the slave is trapped by both buyers and exotic cultural symbols.

(4) Spatial Narrative Through Realism and Abstraction

The slave's hyper-detailed body contrasts with blurred architectural backgrounds, reflecting Gérôme's selective Orientalism: the body as an object of desire versus cultural context reduced to symbolic fragments.

3.2.2. Gender and Racial Power Metaphors

(1) Objectification via the Feminine Gaze

The slave's nudity violates Islamic norms, reframing her as a "sexual spectacle" for European voyeurism. Her submissive posture aligns with 19th-century European ideals of femininity, repurposed here to signify enslavement.

(2) Collective Male Gaze

All buyers are male, asserting control through gestures (encirclement, raised hands, chin-lifting). This gendered power structure is framed as an "inherent barbarism" justifying European intervention. European viewers are invited into this gaze, forming a "triple exploitation"—buyers, artist, and audience collectively commodify the female body.

(3) Implicit Color Politics

The slave's pale skin (contrasting with darker-toned traders) reflects "white supremacy," suggesting white women's "scarcity value" even in "barbaric" settings.

(4) Racialized Moral Absolution

By framing slavery as an "Eastern problem," the painting absolves Europe of transatlantic slave trade culpability. European audiences retain moral superiority, cloaking colonialism as a "civilizing mission."

3.2.3. The "Double Gaze" Under Said's Orientalism

(1) First Gaze: Internal "Barbarization" of the East

Gérôme portrays A Roman Slave Market as emblematic of the East's "inherent savagery," masking Western complicity. The sexualized body symbolizes Eastern "moral decay," while male buyers embody "Oriental patriarchy"—a trope used to legitimize Western "liberation."

(2) Second Gaze: External "Civilizing" Gaze of the West

European viewers adopt a "rational" and "humanitarian" gaze, perpetuating Said's "epistemic violence." Gérôme's academic style aestheticizes slavery, turning suffering into consumable exotica.

(3) Intertwined Gazes: Cyclical Colonial Power

The binary of "Eastern barbarism" and "Western civility" sustains Orientalist knowledge. Said critiques this false dichotomy as legitimizing colonial power. For instance, 19th-century Europe's "abolitionist" interventions in the Middle East masked geopolitical expansion—a "savior colonialism" denounced by Said.

4. Conclusion

A Roman Slave Market, as a cultural product of colonialism, materializes Said's "Orientalism" and Foucault's "disciplinary society" through a double-gaze mechanism: the former explains how power constructs legitimacy through cultural representation, while the latter exposes power's micro-techniques in daily life. Colonial power is both a grand ideological project and the sum of countless mundane practices. Artworks not only witness history but also reproduce power—they serve colonial rule while offering postcolonial critique a dissection sample.

Postcolonial criticism liberates art history from "Western-centric narratives," challenges colonial knowledge hegemony, and carves discursive space for non-Western artistic subjectivities. It deconstructs colonial legacies, reinterprets Orientalist art like *A Roman Slave Market* as products of colonial gazes (not "objective records"), and shifts from "Otherness" to "pluralistic subjectivities." Non-Western artists, once anonymized, are now foregrounded.

Postcolonial critique transforms art history from a colonial knowledge machine into a cultural tool. It demands acknowledgment: art history is not objective truth but power-shaped storytelling; non-Western art is not a passive discovery but a self-sufficient meaning system; our duty is not only to interpret the past but to build a more equitable cultural future. This liberation reshapes our understanding of colonial legacies and imbues art history with ethical depth—deconstructing hegemony while amplifying silenced voices.

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