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Photography and the Imperial Propaganda: Egypt under Gaze

Fatima Zohra HAMRAT

Abstract

The mid-Victorian era and the Edwardian period witnessed important advances in graphic arts leading to the invention of photography. The eastward imperial expansion of Britain during this period resulted in the emergence of different representations of the Orient. After the role played by paintings in conveying a rather fantasist and imaginative vision based on an orientalist background, photography, in its capacity to reproduce reality, promised a more accurate image. Thus, the aim of this paper is to show that the earliest photographs of the Orient and mainly of Egypt unveiled the role of photography in creating a new orientalist vision tinged with the imperialist ambitions of Britain. It focuses on the use of photography in the press and how it was propelled in the political field to confirm its commitment in a propagandist strategy to gain the support of public opinion. This paper offers a critical review of photography within a specific colonial context and determines the strong links between technological development and the sustainability of the imperialism demanded by the rush to acquire new colonies in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The study of the images published in the Illustrated London News in relation to the situation in Egypt unveils the manipulation of the image to reinforce the imperial system. One of the conclusions is related to the different strategies used to give the image a propagandist role, notably to enhance colonial policies.

Keywords: *photography, the Orient, British imperialism, the illustrated press, propaganda*

The emergence of photography as a recognised form of art is the outcome of the technological advances witnessed during the Victorian and the Edwardian periods in the field of graphic arts. Photography soon became a cultural aspect reflecting the rapid evolution of society and the adoption of the scientific innovations. Photography and before it, paintings had been the first means to make the Orient known to the Occident. From the beginning, the image under its different forms was intended to bolster and emphasize a certain perception of the Orient. In this paper, we attempt to demonstrate how the perception of the Orient went hand in hand with the evolution of graphic arts and how photography contributed in the shaping of public opinion during the British eastward imperial expansion. In other words, we will highlight

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the role of photography in enhancing the orientalist representation of Egypt and in reinforcing the British colonization [1]. The focus will be on the period which preceded the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and during which Photography appeared and on the early days of the occupation. Despite the fact that the British colonization of Egypt has been tackled at various levels related to economy, religion and even culture, this paper suggests the establishment of a link between the evolution of the colonial and the scientific spirit. The aim is to show the instrumentalization of a technological innovation, namely photography, supposed to be a means to reflect truth, in a propaganda campaign launched to justify a colonial policy. This vision is particularly relevant as it offers new elements that helped in the building of the colonial system.

Three main axes will be debated: first, the relationship between paintings and photography; second, the involvement of photography in the imperial project through the case study of Egypt. Finally, we will shed light on the early illustrated press to determine how it did transmit an iconic message in parallel with the discursive one. Through the illustrated articles of the *Illustrated London News* newspaper dealing with the Egyptian Question, the role of photography in shaping convictions and beliefs of the public opinion will be unveiled.

I. Photography, the continuation of a process

Photography and painting

However, the study of photography without referring to its ideological and technical relationship with painting would belittle the dialogue that existed between painting and photography. In this sense, painting may be considered an inspiring element for photography, especially when the latter espoused an orientalist vision and assured its continuity. It is inappropriate to ignore the relation that existed between the two modes of representation, given the fact that there were similarities in the subjects treated by painters and photographers as well. Many photographers had been painters, as was the case of the French Horace Vernet, Roger Fenton and August Salzman, to cite just a few. Orientalist painters such as Leon Belly, Ludwig Deutsch and Jean Léon Gérôme became dependent on the works of photographers like Henri Bechard, Pascal Sebah and Abdullah Frères. The relationship between painting and photography evolved when photography played the role of aide

memoir. Today, we know that “the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti posed his friend Mrs William Morris for the camera and used photographs of her in his paintings “(Van Deren Coke, 1972). On the other hand, photographers took over most of the painters’ subjects, primarily the photographed places, namely the Orient. Henceforth, “[...] photography altered orientalist genre painting, transforming its techniques and turning its romantic reveries into realist fantasies” (Bahded 2016). As stated by Klarke, the reason lies in the fact that “Photography emerged at a time when painters were not only seeking a new realism [...] and when western cultures were establishing a new awareness of the natural world, [...] it also emerged at a time of the continuing exploration and settlement of new lands” (1997).

The attractiveness of the Orient

After the Egyptian expedition of Napoleon, which triggered the curiosity of the Europeans and presented Egypt as a land which deserved to be conquered and discovered, it was the Victorian novelists and artists’ turn to be attracted by the Orient, in search of exotic and new inspirations. In 1844, W. M. Thackeray (1811-1863) declared that “there is a fortune to be made for painters in Cairo, and materials for a whole Academy of them” (Lamboune 1999). John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876) is the most known orientalist painter who spent ten years in Egypt and returned to Britain in 1851. Before him, David Roberts (1796-1864) embarked for a one-month journey to Egypt following the advice of his friend, the famous painter William Turner. He painted street scenes and monuments in the historical Cairo and was fascinated by the architecture of the minarets and the domes of the capital. He then travelled to Nubia, Jordan and the holy land Palestine, a classical path followed by most European orientalists. This brings us to consider that the attraction of the Orient may also be related to the geographical location and its religious importance since Palestine, the Holy Land, the rest of the Levant and Egypt are cited in the Bible.

The early perception of photography was related to its capacity to reproduce reality. Moreover, “[t]o many Victorians photography seemed to be a perfect marriage between science and art: a mechanical means of allowing nature to copy herself with total accuracy and intricate exactitude” (Ryan, 2013). This is consistent with the belief that Photography was seen as a true representation of nature which man

cannot spoil or alter to his taste [2]. According to Roland Barthes, in a photography “the scene is there, captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity)” (Storey, 2016). The changes brought by photography in terms of objectivity impacted on the perception of the world including the Orient. By making the Orient a photographic subject, photography took over the role of shaping the Victorian vision of the Orient.

In fact, photography was in its turn trapped in an orientalist/anti-orientalist dilemma leading to a mutation of orientalism into what Edward Said used to call modern orientalism. It was characterized by “[an] increase in documentary realism [...] precipitated by the colonial process in North Africa” (Codell 2016).

However, the fact of revealing the unauthenticity of the oriental paintings which preceded the photography in representing the Orient did not prevent the influence of photography by the prevailing orientalist vision. Put otherwise, what happened was the transposition of the orientalist scene into the West, hence unable to bring real orientalist subjects of the *Harem* for instance, the photograph sought to create his own oriental world in his studio to satisfy the clients who were fond of being photographed in oriental clothes [3]. Orientalist Photography seemed to be an alternative presented to the British public to have access to the Orient’s fantasies.

Nevertheless, the invention of Photography was intended to be a means of an authentic representation of the environment. The daguerreotype, the first photographic machine, put an end to the processes in use till then such as lithography [4]. But the complexity of the early techniques, the high costs, the heaviness and cumbersomeness of the equipment restricted photography to wealthy amateurs and scientists. In addition to that, the daguerreotype allowed the production of only a unique image.

This problem was resolved by William Henry Fox Talbot when he invented the collotype in 1841, a photographic process which allows the production of the translucent original negative image and obtain positives. Other techniques followed using different chemical solutions for the only sake of obtaining and reproducing sharp images in the shortest time as the collodion process and the gelatin process. Photography turned to be a social and popular practice in addition to being a valuable ally for the scientists and the archaeologists.

II. Photography and imperialism

The Orient Again

The emergence of the art of photography coincided with the imperial expansion of mainly France and Britain. The colonial rivalry between them to acquire more territories and zones of influence was transferred to all the domains that would enhance their colonial projects. The first photographers of the Orient were foreign travel photographers who came on a trip for a limited period or European residents interested in the historical sites and monuments of the ancient civilizations [5]. As far as Egypt is concerned, the early photographic expedition arrived in 1839, three months after the announcement of the invention of the daguerreotype, headed by Horace Vernet [6] and his nephew Goupil Fesquet. As many others, they were more attracted by the hugeness of the pharaonic vestiges than by the Egyptians themselves and their miserable life. The daguerreotype was becoming part of most European tourists' luggage. Nerval, Gautier, Flaubert and many others attempted to bring home part of their Orient.

The interest of Photography in the Orient and precisely Egypt was a natural transitional process following the orientalist paintings. Photography took over the representation of the Orient and its adaptation to public demand. Till then, as stated by Mounira Khemir "*[...] cet orient est l'orient de l'imagination et du rêve [...] la plupart des orientalistes n'ont jamais voyagé*" [this Orient is the Orient of imagination and dream [...] most Orientalists have never travelled] (Khemir 2001). Before the emergence of photography, the different representations of Egypt were submitted to the artists' fantasies, both writers and painters sought to exhibit Egypt as the land of dream and fantasy.

However, the major stake was whether Photography would be able to remain faithful to reality and avoid distortion. In fact, the Victorian public was already familiar with images of the Middle East and Egypt due to the drawings and lithographs of David Roberts and many others. But photography was seen as an innovative technique of representation. However, many of the photographers who travelled to the Middle East were motivated by business and commercial competition, but the choice of the subjects and the angles of perception cannot be considered trivial and purposeless. Apart from the willingness to preserve the past and show the unspoiled nature of the land, photographers aimed to last over time and transmit the symbolism

of the land by avoiding any repulsive details. The departure of Francis Frith, for instance, to Egypt was motivated by the economic interest of photography; he sought to publish and market the photographs taken during his three voyages which made him famous. [7]

What is striking in Frith's album *Egypt and Palestine* is the high quality of the photographs which revealed interesting details on the monuments and the walls in ruin. Frith was not the first to photograph Egyptian scenes, but he was the first to go beyond the Nile River. He allowed the Victorian public to have a new vision of the Orient, that of a place where life is quiet and peaceful. A place which reflected the biblical atmosphere and recalled its religious history. In other words, even if Francis Frith in his three voyages to Egypt and to the Middle East had been motivated by either a personal passion or by a lucrative business, he contributed to presenting the Orient as a salvation area and a purgatory land. Influenced by his religious convictions since he grew up in a Quaker house, his photographs reflected biblical atmosphere. Accordingly, the photographic experience in Egypt, for instance, or in the Orient, in general, cannot be merely seen in terms of social and economic features. Photography became a means to counter the old orientalist representation of the Orient by creating a new orientalism free from fantasies but more committed in the imperial propaganda.

The photography caught up in the spiral of imperialism

In fact, the Victorian photographs encapsulated the Orient in two perceptions: emptiness and immutability. The early orientalist photographs were characterised by showing open spaces where the human element was limited. The role of the Natives' presence was reduced to technical details and scale indicators. The sense of emptiness conveyed through the photograph below (Image 1) represents not only the spiritual emptiness which the artist was looking for but also that of the Orient. According to Derek Gregory, "early photographers tacitly represented Egypt as a vacant space awaiting its repossession [...] from Europe" (2003).



Image 1 Great Pyramid and Sphinx. Egypt and Palestine / photographed and described by Francis Frith. Source: Gallica

By the nineteenth century, Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire but led by a Viceroy, Mohammed Ali Pasha [8]. He launched a movement of reforms which prevailed the occidental model in the administration of the country. He developed the agriculture and the local industry. He encouraged modern sciences and established new Western style of schooling. The changes that occurred in Egypt were certainly noticed and felt by the artists who were in direct contact with people but were not present on their photographs. The early Victorian photographers such as Cramb Brothers, Francis Bedford and Francis Frith tried to capture an Orient ready to receive the new ideas of Europe. Some of them belonged to the Anglican Church so their photographic images such as Frith, F (1857) reflected the desire to find the original world as described in the Bible and preserve it.

Photography became a means to justify colonial policy and a political device. First, to make imperial expansion a cultural and social phenomenon and second, to gain the support of public opinion.

However, the use of photography in the press highlighted a new perspective of the emanated discourse and confirmed the power of the image.

III. Egypt in the British press

The illustrated press and the technical difficulties

Representation of Egypt principally was related to specific events. Some national newspapers such as *The Times* were more reluctant to introduce illustrations as part of the article. However, some events imposed the publication of illustrations which today seems difficult for us to determine whether they were taken from a drawing or a photograph.

The difficulty to obtain the cliché in times by the newspaper favoured the narrative nature of the articles. Facsimiles and photographs were never totally abandoned by the newspapers which were not labelled as illustrative. We have noticed sporadic publications representing some historical places in Egypt when dealing, for instance, with excavations. However, the true investment of the photograph started when it became technically possible to make a photograph printable.

According to Gisele Freund, “with rare exceptions, however, all photographs published in newspapers perform an advertising function even if this is not immediately evident. The photograph’s task became the presentation of the reality according to the conveyed message. The photographic image has transformed our vision of the world” (Freund, 1980). The transformative role of photography in changing the vision of Egypt implied the use of photography in the press to contribute to making readers more informed of the situation overseas. *The Egyptian Question* was a frequent title in the 19th-century newspapers; it may be compared to the Middle East Question today.

For a long time, it was believed that the illustrated newspapers were characterized by objectivity and neutrality, as claimed in the opening address of the *Illustrated London News*, “Our Address,” on 14 May 1842: “If the pen be ever led into fallacious argument, the pencil must at least be oracular with the spirit of truth”, which implies that the pencil records what the eye witnesses without the personal interference of the author who may be influenced by his opinion. Photography inherited this aspect from painting as it inherited its realism. Its objectivity was claimed out of its reproduction of nature without man’s

interference in changing that nature. However, when we consider photography within its historical context, we are confronted with the political and ideological environment. Its persuasive and communicative capacity was soon grasped by news makers who understood the impact of the image on the reader. For this reason, the objectivity of the photography was questioned as it became a propaganda means.

Contrary to photographs which were intended to be exhibited and sold to a private collector later, the press photographs aimed at reinforcing the arguments brought in the article and presenting current events and hot topics with the help of a visual support. The primary concern of newspapers has been the increasing of readership and the obtaining of more advertisements, nonetheless, the choice of the photographs to include in an article should be framed by the editorial line of the newspaper.

The illustrated press gave the image a political dimension and unveiled its capacity to shape national identity. According to Klarke, 1997, “the photograph allowed the land to be controlled at least visually - to be scaled and ordered in the way that white colonial settlement attempted politically.” In fact, photography played the role of a pathfinder that would provide information about a new land and depict it without showing the constraints that could be encountered. It was to have a complex role in a society which was in mutation due to all the innovations that were adopted in different fields. However, its major role was to convey an image of an Orient in need of the West and a West ready to intervene.

The first illustrated newspaper in Britain was the weekly *Illustrated London News (ILN)* which appeared for the first time in 1842 under the proprietorship of Herbert Ingram. Targeting the upper middle class (good incomes, high education, may have an ancestor who belonged to the upper class), the paper soon reached a high circulation mainly because of its illustrated articles. Other papers appeared to compete with the *Illustrated London News*, such as the *Graphic*, which appeared 27 years later, the *Punch*, *The Sketch*, *The Sphere* but the *ILN* could resist even after the death of Ingram in 1860 and the taking over of the business by his family.

A committed press

The illustrated press which dealt with Egypt had been a vehicle for a colonial discourse and an expansionist ideology. The aim was to support the opinion expressed in the article and reinforce its arguments. In other words, the sketches had to follow the editorial and political line of the paper. *The ILN* was a conservative newspaper which favoured the colonial expansion of Britain; this opinion was expressed in the first publications. It focused on the superiority of the British over the other nations and insisted on the relationship between immigration and colonization. In an article entitled “Emigration and Colonization,” which may be coined as ethnocentric and elitist, we can read:

Our spirit rules the world. Our wisdom enters into the composition of everyday life and half the globe. Our physical as well as intellectual presence is manifest in every climate under the sun. Our sailing ships and steam-vessels cover the seas and rivers. Wherever we conquer, we civilize and refine. Our arms, our arts, our literature are illustrious among the nations. We are a rich, a powerful, an intelligent, and a religious people. (*ILN* July 22, 1848)

Representation of the Orient in general and Egypt in particular was related to specific events, as the primary objective of a newspaper was to inform its readership and comment the events. Hence, the paper’s early illustrations were representations of historical places in Egypt to inform readers about the excavations works [9]. It was in connection with the tendency of photographing the monuments and Egyptian vestiges and, since the illustrations were based most of the time on photographs, we will find the same aesthetic features as the framing and the use of human presence to provide the sense of scale. The difference lies in the comments or the article related to these illustrations. Contrary to the commercial albums, the illustrated articles used to present a detailed report on the history of the photographed place. However, the historical elements revolving around the image had to reflect the article’s opinion and reinforce the journalistic message.

After the British military occupation of Egypt in 1882, the newspaper focused on covering the construction of railways, telegraphs, and the new buildings to promote British policy in Egypt and expose the benefits of the occupation to British public opinion and to Europe as well. In the press, the photograph became a vehicle of a

message which reflected the supremacy of the white race over the indigenous populations. For a Victorian reader, reading an illustrated newspaper, in addition to being a source of information, was a real entertainment. For the newspaper, the objective was to captivate the reader and bring him to adopt the paper's vision. Such images would prepare public opinion to support British expansion and accept the domination of other nations. Hence, the use of photography in the press contributed to consolidating colonialism and increasing the longevity of the popular support to the British presence in Egypt.

The coverage of the political crisis caused by the young Khedive Abbass Hilmi II [10], who had dismissed the pro-British Prime Minister Mustapha Fahmy and appointed Ahmed Fakhri Pasha known for his opposition to British presence, is an example of how the image was put into the service of the political complexion of the newspaper. In addition to an article explaining the causes of the crisis, the paper published two images below, one of Lord Cromer, representing the British authority, and the other of the 22-year viceroy.

Another image showing the arrival of Lord Cromer to Abdeen Palace in a ceremonial atmosphere. Questions about the objectivity of these illustrations may be raised if we consider the antagonistic aspect that links the two personalities. We are in front of a biased and directed communicative visual medium. On one hand, Lord Cromer's image involves authority, power, experience and wisdom. His gaze reflects his self-confidence deriving from his knowledge illustrated by the book in his hands. On the other hand, the young Khedive with a bewildered gaze seems less experienced and devoid of any means to rule the country. The image became part of the conflict and justified Cromer's decisions. The message was clear: Egypt was still in need of Britain, unable to redress its financial situation and repay the debt which was used principally to dig the Suez Canal.



Image 2. *Illustrated London News*, The Political Crisis in Egypt. Saturday, January 28, 1893. Available at 'The Political Crisis in Egypt' (1893)

The ILN is an example of a paper which pushed ordinary people to be interested in politics and in the colonial policy of Britain. Even if its circulation was never large enough to be described as truly popular. '[...] however, it provided some of the most striking imperial and militarist icons of the age, and large numbers of servants [...] must have seen copies when their masters and mistress were finished with them' (Mackenzie, 1984: 21). Accordingly, when Egypt became a strategic country after the opening of the Suez Canal and the British presence was vital, the newspaper provided the reader with all the necessary information about Egypt. The paper published illustrated files about the different ethnicities forming the social tissue and their social classes to inform the reader about the variety of Egypt's inhabitant



Image 3: Montbard. (1882) *The Crisis in Egypt: Types of the Egyptian Army*. Available at 'The Crisis in Egypt: Types of the Egyptian Army' (1882) *Illustrated London News*, 03 Jun, [533].

However, the one on the constitution of the Egyptian Army was worth a military document on an enemy's army (image 3). It was published out of a military crisis caused by the officer Arabi Pasha who presented a list of political claims concerning the Egyptians in the army and asked for reducing foreign influence in his country. The illustration of Arabi Pasha below and depicting him as '*The would-be dictator of Egypt*' was far from reassuring readers about the intentions of the man. The debate on the military intervention of Britain in Parliament and the hesitation of The Prime minister Gladstone was faced by illustrated arguments which favoured the military intervention.



Image 4: *Illustrated London News*. (1882) Arabi; The would-be dictator of Egypt. Available at 'The Crisis in Egypt' (1882) *Illustrated London News*, 10 Jun, 562+,

Graphic arts and photography participated in the creation of a new orientalism; they conveyed and reinforced the idea that the west was in a better position to show and exhibit the Orient because of its scientific advance. Newspapers gave illustrations and photographs a political dimension and propelled the orient into a geopolitical context. What a photograph denoted was more related to political decisions, colonial and economic interests. The Orient became the Middle East and Egypt became the Egyptian Question or the Egyptian crisis and a source of instability and conflicts, thus leading to the demystification of the 'Orient'. The publication of sketches or photographs on Egypt, while dealing with the political and military situation in Egypt, gave the Orient a dimension far from the fantasies conveyed through the commercial photographs. As far as Egypt is concerned, the images

invested in the press which depicted Egyptians, landscapes and illustrated important events in relation with British colonial policy played a role in making the Egyptian Question known by popular readers. Political issues and the government's colonial policy were no more the focus of a limited elite, and the middle class became more interested in the empire and in the news connected to it. Contrary to the commercial photography which seemed to respond to public demands, the journalistic sketches or photographs were committed to the editorial line of the newspaper and to a dominated colonial mentality.

Notes

[1] It had been a veiled colonization until the declaration of the protectorate in 1914.

[2] A naïve conviction since surrealism influenced photography and allowed the production of pictures which does not exist in reality. See Bate, David. *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*. Tauris, 2004.

[3] Roger Fenton was the official painter of Queen Victoria, converted to photography; he used to photograph oriental figures by clothing European subjects in oriental style.

[4] Invented in 1798 by Alois Senefelder and introduced in France by Philip de Lastryrie.

[5] The first photographers were either Europeans or belonging to the Christian community in the Ottoman Empire (Greeks, Armenians and Syrians), Muslims and Jews were reluctant because of religious constraints.

[6] He was primarily a painter; he accompanied the French army in Algeria and immortalized the storming of the Smalah of Abdelkader at Taguin in 1843 and the storming of Constantine.

[7] His photographs were collected in an album entitled Egypt and Nubia: Descriptive catalogue of one hundred stereoscopic views of the Pyramids, the Nile, Karnak, Thebes, Abou Simbel and Nubia. Edited by Negritti and Zaubra society before Griffith decided to have his own company.

[8] Mohamed Ali Pasha was nominated by the Sublime Port as the Vice Roy of Egypt under the pressure of the Egyptian Ulema. He established the Allaoui Dynasty which allowed his descendants to be the heirs of the Egyptian 'throne'.

[9] During the 19th and the 20th centuries, news about excavations in Egypt had been a subject reported by most newspapers.

[10] The grand-son of Mohammad Ali and the Viceroy of Egypt from 1892 to 1914.

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