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Introduction: Empire of Landscape

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Introduction
Empire of Landscape

The politics, culture, and processes of empire have been much studied, but the means by which imperialism has been—and continues to be—transmitted visually has been examined only in the most cursory way. The publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* effectively unmasked the discursive structure of the European imperialist project in North Africa and the Middle East. This broad yet in many respects highly detailed account of Orientalist studies, literature, and art between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries fused Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony with Michel Foucault’s notion of discursive formations to demonstrate how European and American culture fixed the “other” as a course of study or a subject of art, thereby neutralizing the potential expression of alternative worldviews that might challenge imperialism’s legitimacy. Said’s work has been questioned and critiqued by many scholars and by the author himself, but the influence of his fusion of hegemony and discourse has only increased in significance and relevance over time.

Numerous analyses of Orientalist painting, particularly concentrating on the nineteenth century, have followed the publication of Said’s seminal analysis of Orientalism, resulting in a greater understanding of this ideologically loaded group of images. Studies of Orientalist art began by considering a very broad group of images. Recently, book-length works have developed from extensive historical research and complex, theoretical analyses of Orientalist imagery. Yet despite the ascendance of the study of visual culture, most academic accounts of imperial imagery have focused upon only a small fraction of the pictures that accompanied colonial contact. While some attempts have been put forward to include studies of “popular imagery,” meaning broadsides, cheap prints, and the photography generated by colonial encounters, many analyses have been hindered by familiar dichotomies such as self/other, native/exotic, visible/invisible, and so on. Some recent studies have proposed more sophisticated models of contact through recourse to the concept of hybridization, but such a notion leaves out the intentions of many image producers and disavows the unequal distribution of power. Certain images that emerged from colonial contact have survived over time and can be interpreted by historians; other representations, which might have challenged the underlying assumptions of such views, are lost to history. Further, while historians of art have been effective in reading in paintings traces of contemporary political and social developments, no study has considered the way in which colonial imagery not only complements but in fact generates imperial power through an amazing variety of forms. Employing rigorous historical and visual analysis, this book hopes to accomplish as much.
It must be stated from the outset that, while this book follows Said's fundamental premise that a discourse (Orientalism) operates as a real cultural force with political manifestations over the course of history (hegemony, broadly understood), my goal is distinct from art-historical studies of Orientalism, properly speaking. As Said explains, the Orient is not clearly delimited geographically or temporally, so works of so-called Orientalist art could refer to a wide variety of cultures at any point within their distinct historical developments, or even in an imagined or apocryphal history. In this sense, Orientalism as a category of art history is inadequate. While it is useful to describe the irruption of alternative models in the development of the tradition of European painting, Orientalism is not particular enough to serve the purpose of describing the reciprocal development of European culture and the way in which imperial powers in Europe influenced and controlled the cultures referenced in Orientalist art. One of the most significant critiques leveled at Said was that he generalized the West just as much as he claimed the West generalized the East. My response is to follow recent authors and attend to the specifics of the interaction between French imperial machinations in particular locations and the images that negotiated these historical episodes in the mid-nineteenth century. The innovation I propose is to examine in greater detail the way in which images affected—as opposed to merely reflecting—these fundamental social and political changes in France.

Another difference between Said's project and this study is that rather than examining all Orientalist art featuring Algeria and made in France between 1830 and 1870, I focus instead on a single category of images, those that can be productively classed as landscapes. There are two fundamental reasons for this self-imposed limitation. The first is that landscapes have been left out of most examinations of Orientalist art, which have concerned themselves primarily with figurative compositions and problems relating to identity construction. The second reason is that, as will be argued below, depictions of landscape direct attention to the territorial character of French colonialism in the nineteenth century and provide a unique means by which to investigate the relationship of visual representations of the colony of Algeria and the social and political changes that France initiated there.

While it is clear that landscape has played a small role in investigations of Orientalist art, it is also true that examinations of landscape have not played a significant role in the development of art history in the last generation. Of course, countless books on landscape paintings have been published, many of them focusing on nineteenth-century France, but the subject of landscape is a topic whose full implications have been little examined in recent art-historical literature. While many authors have now gone beyond perceiving landscape as merely a category of imagery and have acknowledged it as a category of perception and a historical force, few have formulated a sophisticated model for conceiving the relationship between geopolitical notions of space and landscape representation. Rather, most analyses prize painting over other visual media and primarily consider the way in which politics and society affect the representation of landscape. Those who have broadly considered the social dimension of landscape imagery have examined the way in which artists responded to historical, social, and political changes rather than considering how such transformations are themselves, at least in part, a result of pictorial representations and their apprehension by viewers.

The term "empire of landscape" seeks to account not just for images of power but also for
the power of images. My point is that images themselves serve a hegemonic role in society. Of course, images respond to social and historical shifts, but the visual articulation of such transformations alters consciousness and directs perception. New visual media have been continually introduced at a rapid rate from the nineteenth century to the present. As the forms of visual culture multiply, responses to and interpretations of visual media become more sophisticated. By studying a period when visual spectacles became an essential part of modern life—the mid-nineteenth century—it is possible to evaluate some of the fundamental differences between various forms of visual culture and how each one structures our ability to apprehend information visually. Such a project has clear relevance today, in an era when new technologies and visual media have radically altered our perceptual faculties.

Between 1830 and 1870, the French nation experienced unprecedented developments in the spheres of politics, society, economy, and culture. As any French historian knows, 1830 was the year of the revolution that put a constitutional monarch in power, but it was also the birth of France’s second colonial empire, which began with the seizure of El-Djezaïr (later renamed Algiers) on the north coast of Africa. While France was, at that moment, administering colonies around the world dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the nineteenth century ushered in the period of settler colonialism for France. In the late nineteenth century, European nations greatly expanded their colonial empires overseas and, for France, Algeria provided the prototype for its later colonial ventures. The changes wrought by French domination in this area of North Africa were unquestionably enormous, but France’s colonial venture in Algeria also altered French society considerably. There can be no full historical accounting of these changes, but images of Algeria generated by Frenchmen who had experience in the colony offer a window onto this vast historical escapade.

New worlds were opened to French viewers not just extrinsically, through the expansion of France into Algeria and the subsequent imagery that resulted, but also intrinsically, through the profusion of new visual media that allowed French viewers to apprehend the world around them in novel ways. In examining paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, maps, panoramas, and illustrated travelogues from this period, I have become fascinated by the ability of images to transmit certain forms of pictorial truth based upon their particular medium. No one would expect to get the same information from a painting and a photograph of the same subject. The way a viewer perceives information from an image, historical or otherwise, is a product of the underlying principles of the medium itself. In order to interpret a painting, for example, a viewer must be initiated into its pictorial language—such as the ability of relative values to communicate spatial information, the way composition produces pictorial harmonies, or the symbolic importance of color. Attending to the perceptual shifts made possible by new media leads to a more nuanced understanding of the period and its imagery. This investigation of the reception of visual images suggests another role for pictures of the colony in France.

At bottom, a colony is no more than an assertion of control over space backed by military force. Though control of foreign territory is not always colonialism, understood in its proper historical sense, the French colonial experience in the nineteenth century was founded on redefinition of territory. As the ongoing multinational occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq amply demonstrates, military
domination alone cannot succeed in convincing the vanquished—or even the population of the vanquishing country—of the legitimacy of such an enterprise. This was equally the case in North Africa in the nineteenth century. In order for a colony to succeed, the character of that place had to be redefined. El-Djezâr had to become Algiers, the widening area of control had to be circumscribed through borders, and a new name had to be invented: in this case, Algeria. By no means automatic, this development was a process of historical formation. El-Djezâr was first conquered in 1830, and as the French continued to expand their control, Algeria was christened in 1837. Abd-el-Kader, the leader of the resistance to French domination who did much to unify the region, was not captured until 1847. The pacification of the colony was not complete until Général Randon conquered the mountainous Kabyle region in 1857, and even in 1871 a new anticolonial force emerged. In these years, a profusion of texts about and images of Algeria circulated in France, all connected to this course of events. Numerous scholars have shown how these works were ideologically charged and laden with more or less sophisticated messages about the relationship of France to the colony. The innovation of this study is to examine how these messages were conjoined with the perceptual terms dictated by visual media. Images of Algerian territory not only translated political and social changes in the colony but also suggested the means to apprehend spaces anew.

The term landscape has a number of meanings, and most of them apply here. For historians of art, the primary reference is pictorial. It will be useful to say that a landscape is, first of all, a picture of the world. The term landscaping suggests that a landscape can be created in the material world. The creation of luxurious gardens and spaces designed for aesthetic enjoyment underlines the fact that nature is a human creation as much as any picture of the natural world would be. Further, the current rise of landscape designers and landscape architects demonstrates a contemporary recognition that spaces, as much as buildings, require human intervention and conception in order to transmit certain experiences. In all of these uses of the term, landscape is a way of framing the world according to aesthetic principles. Whether it is a question of seeing beauty in the world and recording it as a picture, or moving earth in order to achieve a picturesque prospect, landscape is, as Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove have argued, "a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings."

There is a certain particularity to the word landscape as opposed to space or place. Landscape is specific and general at the same time. A landscape can be ordered according to any aesthetic principles, but it is always organized, structured, and crafted. Even if it is often perceived as "natural," the crafting of it as such is still a cultural endeavor. It is a means of perceiving the world derived from vision, even the imposition of a visual structure. There is one more meaning of the term landscape—the purely metaphorical one—that is not confined to any actual place. In this sense, landscape need not be tied to a material form, such as a picture or a garden. It can be seen as a means of interpreting the world and making it into an identifiable image. This abstraction of the landscape metaphor is telling because it suggests that landscape is fundamentally linked to perception and is applicable to any number of subjects: landscape of the body, landscape of possibilities, and so on.

For the purposes of this analysis, landscape should be contrasted with the inhabitation and pro-
ductive use of space. It is one thing to live in, make use of, and develop an intimate familiarity with a place, and it is another to conceive of the world as an object to shape according to principles, whether innate or acquired. How we live in and interact with a world familiar to us is distinct from how we imagine the world in which we live. There is an ontological divide that separates the direct experience of space and the perception of landscape. The intersection of the two, in the colony of Algeria, is one of the central concerns of this work.

Landscape is a form of idealization: we perceive and identify with the world, as opposed to merely occupying a place in it. Everyone lives in and interacts with a variety of spaces, but the term landscape could not be used to describe all of those. It is only when an individual applies, blindly or willfully, a subjective interpretation of the world that a space becomes a landscape. This is the most fundamental claim to make regarding the empire of landscape: in the context of nineteenth-century imperialism, landscape comes to mediate relations between humans and the world. Landscape becomes ubiquitous and functions to secure the colonizer's control over space. It masquerades as both universal (it is everywhere) and authoritative (it is impossible to deny).

In the colonial context, landscape serves an instrumental function, both political and social. Since colonialism is about control of space—literally seizing territory—its complement is the imposition of the colonizer's understanding of space onto the colonized. The French took control of El-Djezair and the surrounding area from Turkish rulers, so it could be argued that the residents of this part of North Africa simply exchanged one colonial power for another. Yet the nature of French control was very different and, over the course of time, the French determined to give their colony clear boundaries and eventually to privatize the spaces of the colony, replacing spaces with actual property. They were not content to control a subject people who perceived their world in a distinct manner. Previous practices of land use and engagement with urban forms were drastically altered to accommodate not just the French presence but French views of agriculture, urbanization, and transportation as well. The indigenous population of Algeria thus could not simply live under the French as they had under the Ottomans. Their own means of relating to and understanding their environment had to be adapted to French conceptions. This was a crucial aspect of the self-imposed civilizing mission of the French. Alternative conceptions of space had to be eradicated in order for French colonialism to be completely effective. Further, there was an equivalent need to make the colony apprehensible to French viewers as a discrete subject in order to situate the imperialist project in the guise of contemporary society and politics. This is where landscape comes to serve a political and social function: landscape, a subjective view of the world, was deployed in order to modify both Algerian and French views about the territory of the colony.

How is it possible to explain this paradox that landscape could be at once subjective and socially mediated, or deployed in a political context? To a certain degree, this duality can be explained by virtue of the fact that landscape comes to exist through its iteration in a specific medium and perception in an environment proper to that medium. Making sense of a picture ultimately means accepting the terms it sets forth for rendering the world. Interpretations may vary, but all viewers of imagery have to agree on the basic principles proper to a medium, such as understanding that a photograph is not drawn but is instead a direct impression of
light. This knowledge provides the foundation for interpreting a photograph and binds all viewers of such images together. Yet there is another means to conceive of the landscape as collective: through an analysis of historical formation.

Though a number of thinkers have investigated the logic and history of colonialism, more often studies of the unequal distribution of political and economic power over the surface of the earth in the modern world have been investigated as a function of empire. What is the difference? Does it matter? If one imagines that a single nation comes to control a large area outside of its integral boundaries (however much those may have shifted), there are two elements to the equation. One is the ideological structure that allows such a seizure of power to be conceived and rationalized—the idealization of national interests in a global context—and the other is the ability to act on that impulse, to control another territory through the military seizure of buildings, spaces, and persons. If one speaks of the Dutch trading empire beginning in the seventeenth century, the reference is to the ontological whole, the way in which a variety of corporate and national forces worked together to provide an overall system of trade and the power to maintain and regulate it. If one refers to the Dutch colonies of the seventeenth century, the discussion would hinge upon the specific plantations and networks of trading relations that developed in particular areas, from Brazil to the East Indies, that actively fed the economic engine and made certain historical figures very rich. While it is debatable whether Dutch seventeenth-century trade could be defined as an empire, properly speaking, its colonies were real enough. However, with the exception of South Africa and some areas of Indonesia, these were not lasting settler colonies of the sort that became common in the nineteenth century.

The point is that while empire is a forceful political conception, colonialism is the process of manifesting national power over foreign territory. To colonize a place is to undermine its very character, to redefine it as a means to take possession of it. Of course, this means getting rid of others who would offer up resistance to this process, or sidelong their concerns and their ability to engage in distinct activities that would threaten to undermine the seizure of the colony. Landscape helps elucidate these terms and demonstrate how they work in tandem: it is situated at the crux of creating an ideal world (its aesthetic dimension) and can literally remake the colonial map through its undeniable pictorial logic. Landscape can help viewers imagine a world in which their centrality is unquestioned and their power is unlimited, while at the same time it informs them about the particularities of a region, a climate, or a space. This study will consider images of landscapes that circulated in France and allowed viewers to imagine that distant land across the Mediterranean as part of their nation. It will also examine images that demonstrated how French settlement had definitively changed that region and marked its development. In certain cases, these two functions converge in a single landscape image.

There is a collective character implicit in landscape imagery when that vision is manifested by changes to the land itself. In the context of colonial Algeria, the French occupants and visitors did not often produce landscape imagery for indigenous Algerians and, as far as I have been able to determine, there were no indigenous inhabitants active in the visual arts during this period. However, both conquerors and subjects shared the limitations of landscape imagery that framed the relationship of an individual to the world in both a metaphorical and a very real way. There were changes to the environment put into place in Algeria that led to a
totally different way of life for all the inhabitants of the colony. Landscape, as a structure of perception, became a means to enforce a certain definition of territory and thus a way of legislating the relationship of self and the world. The legislation of this relationship was one of the central mechanisms of nineteenth-century colonialism—and it is also a seductive means of introducing culturally specific terms, such as individualism and property, among subject peoples.

In the period under investigation here, landscapes and images of it were produced amidst a battle over land that ultimately became a battle for cultural sovereignty in North Africa. The French won, at least for the first 130 years. Between 1830 and 1870, the most common term for France’s domination of Algeria was colonialism, although between 1832 and 1870, France was officially an empire. (In 1860, Napoléon III muddled the terms even more by declaring Algeria a royaume arabe—an Arab kingdom—with himself as its leader.) No matter what specific term was employed, the pattern of expansion of French territory abroad continued, even accelerated, in the early part of the Third Republic.

One interpretation of this period in French history views it in isolation. While nineteenth-century versions of imperialism accelerated near the end of the nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth, this political form of domination more or less came to an end with independence movements that developed after World War II in Africa and Indochina. The present study certainly contributes to an understanding of this semi-isolated historical process of nineteenth-century imperialism and seeks to excavate its cultural mechanisms and demonstrate their involvement in, and even contribution to, political domination in this period. Yet this historical investigation is influenced by contemporary debates as well. Contrary to the notion that historical experience of empire is an isolated phenomenon, another idea of empire has begun to gain currency in contemporary studies of politics and culture. In the book titled simply Empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue for a new understanding of the term, founded on an absolute and borderless domination of the world beyond the control of any world power, such as France aspired to be in the nineteenth century. Though I do not agree with their conclusions, Empire makes clear that the notion of empire is alive and well today despite the decolonization of the later twentieth century.

The imperialism of nineteenth-century France and the place of landscape in this development is the subject of this study. Of course, the methodology is born of our own period and cannot be divorced from landscape and empire as they are present today. There is no teleological connection—it is impossible to connect the dots—but I hope to suggest that there is a relationship between the two eras. Landscape has altered the way people interact with their environments; it continues to structure a relationship between the self and the world. The term itself is replete and imagistic. It functions not as an external force, but as a currency of interpretation. As such, landscape continues to exercise an effect on our individual and collective perceptions.