

GILES TILLOTSON. *The Artificial Empire. The Indian Landscapes of William Hodges*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, 162 pp., 60 black and white & 8 colour illustrations. ISBN 0-7007-1282-8, £70

Being a contribution to debates on the role of visual arts in asserting the European power in India, the book by Giles Tillotson takes as a ground for exploration the representation of Indian scenery and architecture by British artists in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, focusing primarily on William Hodges (1744–97) who was the first professional English landscape painter to visit India. The subject chosen for discussion is quite well documented, however, the interpretation presented by Tillotson comes out with simplistic freshness, which arises from an attempt to match the approaches of art-historians and critics of post-colonial cultural theory. The theoretical argument with regard to reconciliation of these approaches, advocating stylistic or ideological alignments respectively, runs mainly for consideration of the process by which works of art are produced. It is to reconsider works of art in relation with the historical events and ideas that recent post-colonial cultural theory seems to be inclined to ignore.

The primary purpose of the study is to propose an answer to the question of a possible application to visual arts of recent theories of Orientalism. For this purpose author deliberately concentrates on the works of a single artist by examining them in the contexts of aesthetics and intellectual history. The motive of the art historian to take up the topic from the eighteenth century art history is clearly delineated and pertains inter alia to the changes within the very discipline over the recent decades: the lingering dominance of formalism in art analysis of the early 80s of the last century after the challenging criticism was changed by exploration of the ideological basis of art (p. 112). The art of the eighteenth century played a crucial role in this project, therefore it was particularly these attitudes towards merely identifying art with ideology that based the analysis of Orientalist constructions in art over the last decades of the 20th century.

These theoretical shifts are pertinent to Tillotson's position regarding picturesque aesthetics of which William Hodges was one of the representatives. Methodologically, however, it is a mediating force of the process of production, which is emphasised throughout the book in order to balance the feasibility of encounter and the artifact in the analysis of art. For the purpose, Tillotson deals extensively with both Hodges's paintings and prints, part of the latter published as *Select Views in India* (1785–88), and his publications which include *A Dissertation on the Prototypes of Architecture: Hindoo, Moorish and Gothic* (1787) and a narrative of his travels and observations entitled *Travels in India* (1793), as well as with the writings of English aesthetic theorists of the time. A comparative approach also seeks to relate the work of Hodges to contemporary theory and practice of picturesque aesthetics, which is the chief subject

matter for the enquiry of topographical representations in the works of Hodges and his contemporaries.

Taking as a starting point the criticism of the simplistic though amply used associations of the picturesque aesthetics with colonial ideology, Chapter One is devoted to an account of English picturesque theory as it appears in the primary texts of Edmund Burke, William Gilpin, Richard Payne Knight, and Sir Uvedale Price. In comparison with the earlier studies of the picturesque, a different emphasis by Tillotson is detected by concerning the quintessentially formalist character of the theory, which appears from dissociating moral concern from aesthetic enjoyment as discrete domains. Such an account conflicts with the interpretations of the picturesque aesthetics and representations of the eighteenth century British landscape, in particular as a mode of political discourse (p. 26) which is naturally considered as imposing moral values upon whatever imaging of the objective world. The author, however, persuasively argues that the whole concern of the picturesque is the form of landscape rather than its meaning. What is so central in this argument in relation to ideological inclinations is decidedly that to consider the picturesque 'a conscious (or unconscious) directive of the aesthetic to misrepresent or disguise aspects of the ambient culture, would be to misidentify its focus of attention' (p. 27). It is likely the priority of inventive meaning that imputes 'political consciousness' to the picturesque – an idea which meets little support in the theory and practice of the eighteenth century yet pertinent to an Orientalist discourse on art.

Chapters Two and Three detect the picturesque strategies as exemplified in the works of British landscape artists in India, the main focus being on the paintings and drawings of William Hodges who spent three years in India (from 1780 to 1783). Chapter Two sets the problem of transfer of aesthetic vision from England and Wales, where the tradition of picturesque painting commenced, to other geographical domains. Central to the argument of exploration of the picturesque as confronting with accuracy in topographical depiction appears the Hodges's attempt to 'submit the genius and fancy to the strictest veracity' rather than merely to play with artistic conventions. Moreover, the artist was clearly conscious of the tension arising between the picturesque and the exotic, while his major aim was through sustaining the pictorial tradition to convey also 'scientific information'.

This tension is further developed in Chapter Three by comparing Hodges's works with those of other British artists 'drawing on the spot' in India over the period between 1760 and 1875. Later it is followed by the Mughal mode of representation of architecture, which is juxtaposed with a picturesque depiction, thus broadening the theme of aesthetic discourse established through the processes of design.

Chapter Four is decisively central to the argument of the book while setting out the problem of connection between picturesque depiction and colonial power. To counter the post-colonial interpretations, Tillotson takes up the debate on Orientalism and visual arts from the perspective of an art historian and chiefly with the purpose to

bypass the uncritical subjection of art to epistemic constraints, which not always escapes unhampered manipulation at the price of artificial empiricism in post-colonial studies. With regard to the problem, Tillotson describes three distinctions concerning visual hegemony, the contention being that, first, connections which exist between images and colonial power are most often drawn completely ignoring the pictorial treatment or style; second, formation of aesthetics is often mistaken for its consumption as was the case with British eighteenth century painting; and, third, the use of the picturesque is too often forced to submit to the colonial domain, irrespective of its original and purposeful development in the non-colonial context as a way of responding to landscapes in Britain and in continental Europe (pp. 102–3). The concluding contention of Tillotson is that ‘to describe the picturesque as Orientalist in the sense defined by Said and now widely used in post-colonial criticism would be so to stretch the meaning of that term as to deprive it of any useful application.’ Therefore, following the author’s idea, ‘we can speak of picturesque images of objects which have Orientalist significance [...], but the picturesque itself is not Orientalist’ (p. 103). This contention is followed by a particularly useful summary of the debate on the applications of Saidian ideas of Orientalism to art studies and likely visual modes of colonialism.

Finally, the last chapter of the book extends the debate on Orientalism in visual arts by discussing the contribution of Hodges to the theory of Indian architecture as it appears in his *Dissertation*. Hodges’s contribution to the eighteenth century European theory of architecture is assessed by primarily emphasising his broadening of the prevalent rationalist argument with introducing the cave as a prototype of the Indian temple. On the one hand, it moves beyond the picturesque, but on the other, attempts to complement his artistic preoccupation with reporting on Indian landscapes and buildings with great accuracy, thus providing the British audience with detailed scientific information.

To conclude with the consideration of the author’s promise of a ‘new intervention in post-colonial cultural theory’ (p. vii), it should be stated that in spite of the supposedly radical re-evaluations of representational modes as pertinent to an Orientalist discourse, the subject matter of the book is of immense significance in terms of reminding the students of colonial art the historiography of an almost forgotten stylistic analysis in visual Orientalism, moreover, with an intention of consciously de-politicising the domain. However, ideological appropriations of the picturesque in the colonial practice, which fall out of the scope of the book, might be also of no less significance for the study of vision-production as colonial strategies yet finding the parallels for British India in other colonial histories worldwide.