



The Orient at Leicester Square: virtual visual encounters in the first panoramas

Hélène Ibata

► To cite this version:

Hélène Ibata. The Orient at Leicester Square: virtual visual encounters in the first panoramas. Hélène Ibata; Caroline Lehn; Fanny Moghaddassi; Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam. Geographies of Contact: Britain, the Middle East and the Circulation of Knowledge, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, pp.127-147, 2017, Études orientales, slaves et néo-helléniques, 978-2-86820-984-9. hal-02458802

HAL Id: hal-02458802

<https://hal.science/hal-02458802>

Submitted on 28 Jan 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Orient at Leicester Square: virtual visual encounters in the first panoramas

Hélène Ibata

► To cite this version:

Hélène Ibata. The Orient at Leicester Square: virtual visual encounters in the first panoramas. Hélène Ibata; Caroline Lehni; Fanny Moghaddassi; Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam. Geographies of Contact: Britain, the Middle East and the Circulation of Knowledge, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, pp.127-147, 2017, Études orientales, slaves et néo-helléniques, 978-2-86820-984-9. hal-02458802

HAL Id: hal-02458802

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02458802>

Submitted on 28 Jan 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Orient at Leicester Square: Virtual visual encounters in the first panoramas.

Hélène Ibata

In its early days, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the panorama was arguably the most sophisticated technology of virtual reality that had yet been developed. This vast circular painting fitted into a cylindrical building aimed to offer viewers the illusion of full immersion within real environments, as if they had been instantly transported from the heart of a bustling metropolis to an exotic city or a remote wilderness. Robert Barker, who had patented the invention in 1787 and opened the first permanent rotunda at Leicester Square in 1794, had designed an illusionistic apparatus that proved especially apt at providing such an experience and ensured the success of the medium for decades afterwards. This included a method to paint an entire 360° view without apparent distortion on the horizon line, as well as a purpose-built rotunda, with indirect lighting from the top and an access to the central viewing platform from below (rather than through a side door) so as to preserve the continuity of the view. The whole architectural configuration aimed to “make observers [...] feel as if really on the very Spot.”¹

Initially, the illusion effect of the panorama was sufficient to draw visitors, who flocked to see the representation of familiar cities and British places, simply to marvel at the ingenuity of the medium. The first panoramas were views of Edinburgh (1789), London (1791-92), and the harbour of Spithead, with the Russian Grand Fleet (1794). As the novelty of the invention began to wear out a little, however, its potential for virtual travel and discovery came to the fore. Barker and his followers realized that the commanding circular views could be the means to bring distant and often inaccessible spaces to inquisitive viewers, and the panorama became a privileged locus of geographical discovery, before the advent of mass tourism. As it substituted immersion within a visually concrete environment to the abstraction of maps or pictorial prospects, the Leicester Square panorama—like all subsequent

¹ Robert Barker, “Specification of Mr Barker’s Patent for displaying Views of Nature at large, by Oil-Painting, Fresco, Water-Colours, &c.”, *The Repertory of Arts and Manufactures: Consisting of Original Communications, Specifications of Patent Inventions and Selections of Useful Practical Papers From the Transactions of the Philosophical Societies of All Nations, etc.*, London, 1796, vol. IV, p. 167; my emphasis. For detailed descriptions of the technology of the panorama, and its impact of the visual culture of the time, see especially Richard Altick, *The Shows of London*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1978, especially pp. 128-40; Bernard Comment, *The Panorama*, London, Reaktion Books, 2002; Ralph Hyde, *Panoromania!*, London, Trefoil and Barbican Art Gallery, 1988; Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, New York, Zone Books, 1997; Peter Otto, “Between the Virtual and the Actual: Robert Barker’s Panorama of London and the Multiplication of the Real in late eighteenth-century London”, *Romanticism on the Net*, no. 46, May 2007.

panoramas - may even be understood as a cultural “contact zone”, albeit a virtual one, where cultural encounters remained purely visual. Mary Louise Pratt defines a “contact zones” as “the space in which peoples, geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” She adds that this notion of “‘contact zone’ is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect.”² The panorama, by inserting or superimposing a foreign space within the modern metropolis, and by giving the illusion that physical distance and separateness had been suspended, could be said to have allowed precisely the “spatial and temporal copresence” described by Mary Louise Pratt, without the tense interaction of actual encounters. The virtual foreign space, emptied as it was of its inhabitants and of all non-visual impressions, could be viewed as a paradoxical contact zone within which the viewer could bodily enter and yet experience neither tactile contact nor verbal exchange. While such a space could be said to have been an object of visual appropriation, the possibility of conflict vanished through the disembodiment of the encounter itself.

Significantly, the first geographical area to be recurrently brought into this virtual contact zone was the Ottoman Empire, and the first distant city to be brought to London, in two panoramic views, was Istanbul, in 1801, following an unprecedented field trip by Robert Barker’s own son, Henry Aston. This choice may have been coincidental, as the Napoleonic wars made travel to other European cities difficult, or it may have been determined by the consideration then given to Istanbul as “the most panoramic city in the world.”³ It was, in any case, most certainly influenced by a specific political context, as Britain and the Ottoman Empire had formed a military alliance against the French in 1799, and a curiosity for Ottoman culture and places had naturally been reawakened in British audiences. Seeing the eastern Mediterranean setting and scenes of conflict between the two major European powers of the time was especially fascinating for those often patriotic viewers, and for several years the London panorama makers capitalized on this curiosity: Barker’s two panoramas of Constantinople were completed by his own *Battle of the Nile*, or Battle of Aboukir, shown at Leicester Square in 1799, and by Robert Ker Porter’s *Siege of Saint John d’Acre* and *Battle of Alexandria*, which were displayed at the Lyceum in 1801 and 1802 respectively.

In the context of the wars with France, the Ottoman Empire was clearly seen as a potential area of influence, and for this reason the panoramas of the region may be interpreted as partaking of emerging imperialist discourses and perceptions. In a recent essay, Denise Aleksijczuk argues that Barker’s two panoramas of Constantinople in particular reflected the emergence of “imperialist structures of attitude and feeling”, showing especially how their two complementary views empowered viewers by providing comprehensive knowledge of the city. According to Aleksijczuk:

Ostensibly positive, celebratory views of the city (as far as can be from pictures of newly colonized territories), these images nonetheless afford British spectators an opportunity to think like imperialists. In them . . . British

² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 6-7.

³ Reinhold Schiffer, *Oriental Panorama: British Travellers in 19th Century Turkey*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1999, p. 145.

supremacy is masqueraded as objectivity. These eyewitness, highly detailed topographical views of Stambol, when used together with their supporting documents, were perhaps a more effective way to propound ideas on the superiority of British culture than any exoticized caricatures of the Ottomans found in European orientalist paintings produced later in the century.⁴

While topographic objectivity was a central concern of the Barkers' views, of their scientific conception of panoramic drawing in particular, and while it may have been an implicit expression of cultural superiority, such an emphasis is not completely satisfactory. Other messages worked against the viewer's impression that he or she was taking control of a foreign space, perhaps precisely because of the intangible nature of the artificial contact zone. The purely visual dimension of contact prevented the establishment of the relations of coercion mentioned by Pratt. What is more, within this paradoxical space, the viewer was both suddenly immersed within and kept at a physical distance from the represented surroundings, an experience which could be quite destabilizing and frustrating, as knowledge was promised and denied at the same time.

In the present study, I would like to argue that, although "imperialist structures of attitude and feeling" were emerging and possibly inflecting the viewer's gaze, the experience of these early panoramas was even more determined by the aesthetic discourses and attitudes of the time. The pictorial nature of the medium led viewers to make sense of their encounter with otherness in terms of contemporary aesthetic categories like the picturesque and the sublime, or genres like landscape or heroic painting. And even topographic knowledge was constrained by the conventions of a pictorial transcription. In my analysis of early oriental scenes in the London panoramas, I will argue that such aesthetic and pictorial mediations undermined the confidence of viewers, even as they were shown scenes of military victories or provided commanding views of foreign spaces.

Ottoman settings and military campaigns: the dual purposes of panoramic battle scenes.

It is undeniable that the development of the panorama in Britain coincided with the emergence of a new confidence in the powers of visual observation and representation. Charlotte Bigg links it to a "new observation ethos" and the "development of systematic methods of viewing, assessing and representing landscape" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, arguing that it owed much to the scientific practice of the *coup d'oeil*, which consisted in assessing the geography of a place by the trained eye, often from an elevated standpoint.⁵ Barker's first name for his invention, "La Nature à Coup d'Oeil", suggests that these new scientific practices did inform the creation of a pictorial medium with an all-encompassing view. The panorama may even be seen as the visual arts' response to this changing approach to landscape, and the resulting need for new forms of representation. Through its representation of a full circular view from an elevated vantage point, it reproduced the immediate and comprehensive apprehension of space

⁴ Denise Oleksijczuk, *The First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 93.

⁵ Charlotte Bigg, "The Panorama, or La Nature A Coup d'Oeil", in *Observing Nature-Representing Experience: The Osmotic Dynamics of Romanticism 1800-1850*, ed. Erna Fiorentini, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2007, pp. 75-8

that characterized the geographical gaze in its early days.⁶ In this context, the panorama may then be seen as a cognitive tool, an instrument of spatial control and a form of visual appropriation.

The sense of visual conquest would have been enhanced by the techniques used in panoramic drawing, which owed much to the practice of military topography and its own use of the *coup d'oeil*.⁷ As the scientific and military approaches were conflated in panoramic representation, geographic understanding went along with a conquering attitude. Nothing seems to highlight this dual approach more than the battle scenes that dominated the London panoramic production at the time of the Napoleonic wars. And the fact that the Ottoman Empire first reached the London panorama in this guise suggests that this form of visual appropriation could not be dissociated from issues of geopolitical influence.

The predilection for contemporary battle scenes, however, did not mean that the panorama became a simple expression of combined cultural and military confidence. While such representations were meant to satisfy the patriotic sense of viewers, they could also be understood as experiments in the heroic pictorial mode, which according to academic standards was the most likely to strike the imagination and emotions of the viewer. The unprecedented format of a vast immersive painting would have been seen as a powerful vehicle of heroic action, likely to exalt even more than conventional academic history painting. Battle panoramas set in the Eastern Mediterranean, I would like to argue, were at least as much about the possibility to exalt through this new medium as about territorial conquest or influence. In order to assess this aesthetic dimension, in the absence of remains of the actual panoramic canvases (which were painted over and eventually destroyed), I will examine the orientation plans or verbal explanations which were provided to the visitors and, when available, preliminary studies, prints, or contemporary reviews.

The first of the oriental battle panoramas, the one which could be said to have set the trend, was Barker's *Battle of the Nile*, which was exhibited at Leicester Square in 1799. Unfortunately, while contemporaries commended it as a major artistic achievement, possibly even painted by J.M.W. Turner himself,⁸ little more remains than an anamorphic key, or orientation plan (fig. 1), and a few reviews. The key shows that the scene takes place at the mouth of the Nile, but without providing topographic information or recognisable landmarks. The main spatial concern of the artist is the strategic position of the boats, which was intended to be as accurate as possible. In other words, one could say that the battle scene prevents geographic knowledge, acting as an opaque screen between the British viewers and Egyptian lands, which remain mysterious and beyond reach.

More strikingly, the remaining textual evidence highlights the overwhelming nature of the display and its remarkable light effects, instead of insisting on military achievements and territorial issues. Barker's advertisement for his panorama in the *Times* emphasized the tenebrism and terror of a night scene lighted by fire, which "though seen by daylight, appears as in the action at 10 at night, the whole seeming lighted only by the fire from the ships, and those blown up and burning, producing an effect of destruction seldom seen by the oldest seaman."⁹

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷ Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, pp. 52-7; Charlotte Bigg, pp. 87-94.

⁸ Nicholas Tracy, *Britannia's Palette: The Arts of Naval Victory*, Ithaca, N.Y., McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, p.136.

⁹ Robert Barker, *The Times*, 16 May 1799.

Contemporary reviews confirmed Barker's claims, by emphasizing overpowering emotions which had little to do with a conquering attitude. The German correspondent of the *Journal London und Paris*, who had no patriotic interest in the scene, described an aesthetic response which was both somatic and highly emotional:

It is night (and what a terrible night it must have been, if the scene reproduced here is accurate). As soon as you enter a *shiver runs down your spine*. The darkness of night is all around, illuminated only by burning ships and cannon fire. . . . And if the whole scene is terrible, still it is the fate of the *Orient* that arouses the greatest horror: a ship with 120 guns . . . filled with gunpowder and flammable material, with its entire crew on board . . . Perhaps no words can fully convey an impression of this inferno.¹⁰

The description of a physical reaction of terror caused by darkness and the spectacle of extreme danger suggests that viewers' responses to such a panorama owed much to the contemporary aesthetics of the sublime, in which these early audiences were well versed. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke had described the sublime as a physiological experience of "delightful horror",¹¹ of intense aesthetic pleasure connected with fear. He had argued that such a pleasure was due to the pain and terror implied by certain natural scenes or poetic descriptions, but *not actually experienced* by viewers or readers. He had also drawn exhaustive lists of sources of the sublime, which included vastness of dimension or obscurity. The late eighteenth-century audiences, for whom the Burkean thematics had become common currency, knew that they could derive a form of pleasure from a scene of absolute terror, as long as it was virtual, and they were unharmed. And the panorama, with its vast scale and indirect source of light, provided the right conditions for such an experience. To some extent, the *Battle of the Nile* was making the most of such a possibility: having walked from Leicester Square to the rotunda through a dark corridor, the viewers were suddenly plunged at the heart of a terrifying battle as if they were part of it, while completely safe from its actual dangers. The German reviewer's somatic response, his references to "the darkness of night", "horror" and an "inferno", and his conviction that the delightful horror was especially enhanced by darkness, or by intermittent light and darkness, suggests that the aesthetics of the sublime was the favoured way to make sense of the painting. It was not an isolated response, as we can see in the following review of the same panorama in the *Morning Chronicle*:

Nothing can be more perfect or more sublime than the illusion which this Painting of the Battle of the Nile possesses. The effect is the most striking that we ever witnessed from the combination of light and colours. It is actually magical, for the Spectators are surrounded on all sides with the flames of the engagement, and they shrink from the explosions that threaten to cover them with the burning fragments of the ship blown up. It is the *chef d'oeuvre* of this work, and greatly exceeds all the former representations that Mr. Barker has given us in this new art.¹²

As such reactions suggest, the battle scenes were not just about arousing patriotic feelings, and allowing viewers to partake of the nation's heroic feats. They

¹⁰ *Journal London und Paris* 7, 1801, pp. 105-6.

¹¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 67.

¹² Quoted in Nicholas Tracy, *Britannia's Palette*, pp. 136-7.

were, to a great extent, about the thrill of a powerful reality effect, combined with the drama of military action. Viewers were mostly expecting powerful emotions and “a shiver down [their] spine”.

Panoramic battle scenes were such a sensation that soon after Barker's own *Battle of the Nile*, a former student of the Royal Academy, Robert Ker Porter, began displaying a succession of contemporary military scenes at the Lyceum Theatre, starting with three topical oriental subjects: *The Storming of Seringapatam* (1800), *The Siege of Acre* (1801) and *The Battle of Alexandria* (1802). In these vast frescoes, which were conceived as half-panoramas, emotion and aesthetic effect once again seemed to prevail. Robert Ker Porter's training in history painting, the highest category of painting according to academic teachings, meant that his emphasis was on the drama of heroic action, and on the variety of human expression, rather than on the disputed territories which served as a background to his scenes. This bias is suggested for example by the orientation map to *The Siege of Acre* (fig. 2), in which topographic elements are necessarily included, due to the fact that the action took place on land, but mostly provide the stage for a complex heroic narrative. Most of the points of interest which are indicated by numbers on the key and named in the legend are military figures. Out of 52 such points, 8 are place names, 4 designate battleships, and the remaining 40 focus on a diverse range of human actors, including Ahmed Pasha (the Ottoman Governor of Acre), Bonaparte, his officers, or the crew of the Tiger, with a summary description of their various conditions. The viewer is told whether the figures are “dead”, “wounded” or otherwise engaged in action. One may assume that such a variety would have allowed the artist to display his mastery of heroic bodily and facial expressions. Significantly, where places are mentioned, the key emphasizes their narrative dimension, their contribution to the action. Thus, 34 is “An Aqueduct demolished by the French, under cover of which their Approaches were carried on, at the commencement of the Siege”; 38 is “Richard Coeur de Lion's Mount from which Buonaparte and his Officers usually reconnoitred the operations of the Garrison”, and 39 is a “Ruined Light House converted into a Battery by the English Seamen.”¹³ Although it is difficult to draw conclusions from a simple orientation plan, it does appear that the topographic and geopolitical interest of the landscape is greatly superseded by the narrative and heroic interest of the scene. The painting seems to have been less about apprehending foreign lands than about exalting the viewer through the variety of human drama and suffering.

This aesthetic bias may also be noticed in the case of the *Battle of Alexandria*, even though the remaining verbal and visual material is of a different type. Porter's third epic fresco included an extensive historical narrative to increase the visitors' comprehension of the scene. However, as its title suggests, his *Historical sketch of the battle of Alexandria, and of the Campaign in Egypt; Illustrative of the Great Picture, Now Exhibiting in the Lyceum, Strand, Painted by Robert Ker Porter, Esq.* was more “illustrative” than descriptive. While it only briefly described the contents of the painting, focusing on the heroic death of General Abercrombie, it provided a detailed narrative of the historical context, of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, and of the British efforts to remove the French occupation. It was also full of patriotic accents, deprecatory considerations about French ambitions, and condescension about

¹³ *The Great Historical Picture of the Siege of Acre, painted by Robert Ker Porter; Descriptive Sketch*, London, Glendinning, 1801.

Alexandria, whose decline and “present miserable situation” were emphasized.¹⁴ Even though imperialist accents could clearly be felt, it is significant that this verbal narrative completed rather than described the visual display, possibly to add a dimension and a message which might have been absent from the painting. A remaining oil study at the National Army Museum (fig. 3) suggests that the visual emphasis was on the dynamics of battle and the expressive range the large semi-circular format made possible. It shows how much Porter aimed to energetically connect the various groups through nebulous motifs like clouds of smoke, coherent colour patterns, and the fluid and sinuous progression from figure to figure. In the study, an undulating wave of red army uniforms is interwoven with the white billow which descends from left to right, beginning with the smoke of muskets, breaking up into the large masses of the white horses and then fading into the small patches of the soldiers’ trousers. The viewer admires Porter’s ability to convey the confusion of battle together with formal fluidity and motion. This experiment with compositional dynamics on a large scale could even be said to be his main concern. The undefined landscape, with its vague palm trees and craggy rock in the manner of Salvator Rosa, is a conventional poetic backdrop meant to enhance the drama of the scene rather than give information about a precise place. Visual effect and affect seem to prevail over both the patriotic message and the cognitive dimension of the show, which are mostly developed in the accompanying verbal narrative. The production of this narrative may even have been a way to make up for the fact that the painterly exercise works against the development of such dimensions.

One cannot deny the patriotic dimension of such battle scenes, and they may indeed mark the emergence of an imperialist vision, but as I have argued, these martial panoramas were at least as much about the exploration of new pictorial paradigms as they were about British conquests. Admittedly, emotion was enhanced through visual effects in order to exalt the national sentiment. Nevertheless, the artists were especially keen to display their understanding of the aesthetic discourse of the time and to demonstrate the panorama’s ability to enhance the sublime or the grand effects of the heroic mode.

Topographic panoramas: the limitations of the geographical gaze.

In these heroic panoramas, the Ottoman places which provided the setting for battle seem to have remained relatively unspecific backdrops for aesthetic experiments, not lending themselves to the geographical gaze. However, the contemporary interest in the Ottoman Empire also expressed itself in topographic panoramas in which this geographical approach prevailed. In these landscapes, which were more obviously informed by the scientific practices of the day, that of the *coup d’oeil* in particular, the cognitive and didactic function of panoramic painting asserted itself. Yet, once again, I would like to argue that they were far from providing a sense of visual control or appropriation.

As mentioned earlier, the first topographic panoramas to represent a non British city were the Leicester Square *Views of Constantinople*, which were displayed in 1801 and 1802. They were the result of several months of preparatory drawings by Robert Barker’s son, Henry Aston Barker, whose journey to Istanbul in 1799 and 1800 was the first field trip of a panorama artist outside Britain. Barker had initially

¹⁴ *An Historical Sketch of the battle of Alexandria, and of the Campaign in Egypt; Illustrative of the Great Picture, Now Exhibiting in the Lyceum, Strand, Painted by Robert Ker Porter, Esq.*, London, Denovan, 1802, p. 15.

worked from the Tower of Galata, on the European side of the Bosphorus, and then from the Tower of Leander, from the Asian side. The view from the Galata Tower was shown in the lower circle of the two-storied rotunda, and that from the Tower of Leander in the upper circle.

It is still possible to find detailed visual information about the first view, as the preparatory drawings were engraved and even aquatinted a few years later, in 1808 (fig. 4 and 5). When looking at the prints, one is immediately struck by the very precise depiction of everything that could be observed from the Galata Tower. The town of Galata itself, the ships on the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus, and the distant city. The painstaking transcription of roof tiles and bricks in the foreground makes it obvious that the prevailing intention of such a panorama was the complete illusion of reality. The viewers were truly expected to be deceived and feel as if indeed “on the very spot.”

This thorough realism served several purposes. To begin with, this was the first clear instance of the use of panorama as a substitute for travel, a function which emerged then and was to remain central through much of the nineteenth century. Because the image was so accurate, visitors could imagine themselves instantly transported from the heart of London to Constantinople, and were allowed to enjoy what was considered the most spectacular city in the world without the exertion of travel.¹⁵ This use of the panorama was especially crucial at a time when the wars with France made travel quite difficult.

Such topographic views also had educational uses, as is made obvious by the fact that visitors were given a short narrative of the history and geography of the place (*A concise account of the views of Constantinople*), a map, an anamorphic orientation plan or “explanation sheet”, and “references to the explanation sheet” (Barker, 1801). Unlike Porter’s keys, the anamorphic horizontal projections emphasised the function of the panorama as a geographical representation. Thus, on the orientation plan to the view from the tower of Galata (fig. 6), twenty-nine points of interest are indexed. The viewer’s eye is guided for example to “1. Divan where the Grand Signior [the Sultan] gives audience”, “3. Mosque of Santa Sophia”, “4. Mosque of Sultan Achmet”, “5. Sublime Porte and Palace of the Grand Vizir”, “6. Validi Mosque”, “7. The porphyry column of Constantine”, among other topographic landmarks. The various points are listed again in the “References to the explanation sheet”, and in half of the cases summary historical or cultural commentaries are added, but the information remains mostly topographic. Such an emphasis suggests that spatial knowledge, the ability to orient oneself within the city and to locate its famous landmarks was the primary purpose of the representation. In this respect, the panorama was an unprecedented cognitive tool: the 360 degree view and the commanding viewpoint over the whole circle of the horizon made the geography of distant places immediately accessible. The whole experience could be understood as a form of immersive cartography, which would have been truly empowering.

As Denise Oleksijczuk claims, these functions of the panorama may go hand in hand with the emergence of “imperialist structures of attitude and feeling”. Such an interpretation is bolstered by the fact that British presence in the Ottoman landscape is explicitly visualized. At Seraglio Point, the final point of interest of the key, number 29, shows four small boats described as “Lord Elgin’s embassy by water”, and the large ship saluting next to them is the Phaeton frigate, on which Lord Elgin, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, had travelled to Istanbul. It is clear that

¹⁵ Oleksijczuk, *The First Panoramas*, p.104.

the panorama is a celebration of the diplomatic ties that are being forged, rather than a neutral urban view. It also foregrounds the question of British influence in the region, perhaps even more obviously than the battle scenes.

At the same time, however, the sense of visual control over Ottoman scenery is partly delusive. I would actually argue that even though it gave viewers the illusion of being transported to Istanbul and empowered them as virtual travellers, who could discover distant places without the physical inconvenience of travel, it also made obvious the limitations of such a visual encounter. The necessity to choose an elevated viewpoint that would provide extensive visual information, combined with topographic accuracy, was incompatible with close-up or detailed images. Thus, Barker claimed that the view “from the Tower of Galata ... exhibits the superb imperial City of Constantinople, with the Seraglio, magnificent Mosques, Minarehs, and Baths; the Cemeteries, or Burial-places of the Turks, and their entire mode of building, *to an immense extent*,”¹⁶ and yet, the aquatinted engravings that were made after the panorama show a very remote city at the same time as an extensive view. Henry Aston Barker, as was the practice in early panoramic painting, had probably used a perspective grid in his preparatory drawings, in order to convey the view as accurately as possible, instead of literally relying on his *coup d’oeil* and making quantitative assessments by eye. This method would have prevented him from taking liberties with the material at hand, but as a consequence, much of the view is taken by the town of Galata, and the old city itself remains distant and mysterious. A comparison with earlier views from Galata, such as Melchior Lorck’s panoramic view, *Byzantium sive Constantineopolis* (1559), shows how much Barker’s wish to be as faithful as possible has made the city appear paradoxically more remote. Where Lorck lifts up the topography of the old city and brings it closer for the viewer to appreciate its architectural details, in Barker’s representation it is a distant and narrow strip, from which only the tallest architectural features (domes and minarets) emerge.

As the key emphasizes, most of the points of interest are in the far distance, and the only features in Galata to which the viewer’s attention is drawn have to do with ethnographic information: a “minaret, with the muezzin or cryer calling the Turks to prayer,” a “Turkish warm bath” and a “rope walk” in Galata, where workers are seen spinning rope. The rest of the foreground is filled with rooftops and houses pressing against one another, as a sort of opaque barrier to the gaze of the viewer, which receives much less topographic information than it would in a map or even a prospect with a bird’s eye view. In other words, the immersive mode of representation, with its promise of proximity, becomes a source of opacity. The viewer is installed as if “on the very spot,” but cannot move beyond that very spot.

What is more, this purely visual encounter necessarily remains a public encounter, without individual contact, as the viewer’s gaze can only see into the broadest streets. Personal encounters between Britain and the Ottoman Empire are only represented in the form of diplomatic encounters (as is shown by the inclusion within the painting of Lord Elgin’s embassy). And the few and scattered human figures that people the place are distant and only to be seen within public spaces: there are two muezzins calling for prayer, a few figures walking in the streets, four Turkish laborers making rope, but nothing is disclosed about private lives.

The key to the upper panorama, which showed the city from the Tower of Leander, conveys a similar resistance of Ottoman spaces: the tower being surrounded

¹⁶ Robert Barker, *A Concise Account of the Views of Constantinople; with a map; and an illustration to the descriptive sheets, which are given to each person who goes to see those Paintings, at the Panorama, Leicester-Square*, London, J. Adlard, c. 1801, p. 5; my emphasis.

by water, most of the foreground seems to be taken up by the sea, while the city with its suburbs (including Galata) appears as a narrow strip on the outer circle of the projection. To fill the painting with foreground elements, Barker has included passing ships and smaller craft, including an assembly of barges conveying the Sultan (called the “Grand Signior” on the key), his attendants and eunuchs. Thus, cultural curiosity is satisfied, but the encounter is once again of a very public nature. Only state figures, which were meant to be seen by the public eye, are represented.

As Edward Ziter has argued in his essay on *The Orient and the Victorian Stage*, the desire to visually intrude into private spaces only becomes obvious in later panoramas, around the middle of the century, which make up for the lack of visibility by extensive descriptions of private spaces in the reference books and verbal narratives.¹⁷ Robert Burford’s 1846 *View of Constantinople* and its textual *Description* reveal a clear wish to give the viewer greater visual and cultural control. In this panorama, a more dominant vantage point had been provided by the recently-built eighty-five meter tall Seraskier tower. Contemporaries marvelled at the comprehensive view which was thus made possible and gave “on every side a visual control over the entire scene, and the whole internal economy and distribution of the most beautiful city in the world.”¹⁸ Burford’s *Description* emphasized the comprehensive geographic, economic and cultural knowledge the new view made possible:

Constantinople is universally acknowledged to be the finest city in the whole world. Viewed from the Seraskier’s Tower, from whence the present Panorama is taken, the admirable position it occupies is fully apparent, and the whole of its curious internal economy is at once visible in its fullest extent and magnificence. Mosques, minarets, places, and kiosks, in countless variety, being spread out *like a map* beneath, whilst around, in every direction, stretches an immense extent of scenery of the most varied and picturesque description.¹⁹

More significantly perhaps, in these later displays, increased visual control went along with infringements upon spaces that were deliberately kept from outsiders’ eyes. Although topographic realism preserved their closure in the panoramic view, the verbal narrative provided much additional visual information which allowed the gaze to imaginatively enter them: luxurious interiors were described, as were harems and even bath scenes. For example, as the viewer’s attention was drawn to the warm Bath (no. 30 on the key), detailed textual information about the cultural significance of the practice of ablutions was given, with a concluding comment which revealed a much more inquisitive, and even voyeuristic, approach than before: “A female bath attended by thirty or forty bathers, with their beautiful children and numerous slaves; all sumptuously attired and blazing with jewels, is described as a splendid sight.”²⁰ This imaginary visual intrusion into the very private space of the bath contrasts with Barker’s description in his “References,”

¹⁷ Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 27.

¹⁸ “General Intelligence”, *North Star and National Trades Journal*, 4 April 1846; qtd in Laurie Garrison, *Panoramas, 1787-1900*, London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012, 5 vols, *Vol. 2: Stable Panoramas in Britain*, p. 250; my emphasis.

¹⁹ Robert Burford, *Description of a View of Constantinople; with its European and Asiatic Suburbs, and a Great Extent of Surrounding Country. Now Exhibiting at the Panorama Royal, Leicester Square. Painted by the Proprietor, Robert Burford, Assisted by H.C. Selous, from Drawings Taken on the Spot, by William J. Smith, Esq, Architect to Her Britannic Majesty’s Embassy at Constantinople*, London, Brettell, 1846, p. 3; my emphasis.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

which consists of a rather medical perspective on ablutions and insists on the impossibility of viewing such practices, as “[t]he different apartments are lighted by bottle-glass sky-lights to prevent a possibility of being seen.”²¹

Further on, Burford’s *Description* focuses on Tchigaran, “Commenced by Mahmoud II, in 1836, for a summer palace,” which becomes a pretext to present the splendour of the Sultan’s household, and eventually his harem:

The establishment of the Harem consists wholly of females, a portion of whom are negresses; they are under the guidance of seven superiors, and number about 350, two-thirds of whom have been selected for their personal charms. The present Sultan has had five Kadinns, of whom four are living, (the law allows him seven) they are Circassians, and hold the highest rank in the Harem; but not being married, are not Sultanas. He has had by them seven children, two boys and three girls of whom are living.²²

More generally, the whole description is interspersed with references to mysteries that are hidden from the public eye, and from the outsider’s gaze in particular. It is clear that, even though the view is “like a map,” the geographical interest which prevailed in Barker’s panorama is now compounded with a more “coercive,” but also a more “gendered” approach. The recurrent mention of harems, baths, and even a slave market where “female slaves [...] present to the eyes of those privileged to see them, an extraordinary assemblage of grace and beauty”²³ are evidence of the eroticization of western conceptions of the Orient at the time.

In comparison, Barker’s own mention of the harems at the end of his short narrative contains no description of those very private spaces. It is part of a presentation of the Seraglio and mostly consists of a disambiguation: “and though the whole is in general called the Seraglio, that part which is called the Harem, strictly signifies the apartments of the women, and the inclosures appropriated to their use. The other part signifies those buildings occupied by the Grand Signior, and his household.”²⁴ Further information is then given about harems, but once again it remains neutral: “Foreign ambassadors have each a Seraglio, but no Harem; and every Turk may have a Harem; but the Vizer himself has no Seraglio. The Grand Signior has both.” Oleksijczuk sees this concluding focus of the description as evidence of emerging fantasies.²⁵ I would instead argue that the absence of visual descriptions inside the inclosures suggests an awareness of the irreducibility of oriental spaces.

For the time being, a respectful distance is maintained. With the relatively distant viewpoint and comparatively unintrusive verbal description, the landscape preserves its otherness and the limitations of virtual visual travel are made evident: the viewer may have travelled thousands of miles in an instant, but cannot travel further than the tower of Galata, which is surrounded by rooftops, or its pendant, the Tower of Leander, which is surrounded by water. The magnificence of Istanbul is placed at a tantalizing but unapproachable distance, and the city eventually reveals little about itself. Paradoxically then, instead of bringing foreign places closer to Londoners, Barker’s faithful topographic approach enhanced the otherness of the landscape, and the distance that separated the viewer from the subject of the panorama.

²¹ Robert Barker, *Views of Constantinople*, p. 16.

²² Burford, *Description of a View of Constantinople*, p. 12.

²³ Burford, *Description of a View of Constantinople*, p. 15.

²⁴ Robert Barker, *Views of Constantinople*, p. 9.

²⁵ Oleksijczuk, *The First Panoramas*, p. 117.

In all these early panoramas, whether they were of battle scenes or of urban landscapes, we have seen that Ottoman places were both elusive and resistant to visual appropriation. The main reason for this, as we have seen, was that viewers were as much exalted by the artistic ingenuity of the new medium and the new representational range it permitted as they were by the knowledge it conveyed. Perhaps more importantly, these first panoramas of non-British places were making it obvious that virtual contact, virtual immersion within a place, could not replace real immersion. They emphasised the distance of a purely ocular contact and underlined their own limitations as a cognitive tool. Even though they significantly contributed to the construction of geographical knowledge about the region, the foreignness of Ottoman spaces was, in them, paradoxically preserved by the aesthetics of immersion. To some extent, these virtual “contact zones” made manifest all the paradoxes of cultural contact at the time: the desire for immersion and the fear of interaction, the wish for immediacy (the immediate plunge into a foreign environment) and the need for a representational or aesthetic mediation, the desire for knowledge and the wariness of the perceptual processes associated with discovery. One did not need to travel further than London to realise how complicated cultural contact was. One only needed to visit the Orient at Leicester Square.

Bibliography

Primary sources

- Barker R., *A Concise Account of the Views of Constantinople; with a map; and an illustration to the descriptive sheets, which are given to each person who goes to see those Paintings, at the Panorama, Leicester-Square*, London, J. Adlard, c. 1801.
- , “Specification of Mr Barker’s Patent for displaying Views of Nature at large, by Oil-Painting, Fresco, Water-Colours, &c.”, *The Repertory of Arts and Manufactures: Consisting of Original Communications, Specifications of Patent Inventions and Selections of Useful Practical Papers From the Transactions of the Philosophical Societies of All Nations, etc.*, London, 1796, vol. IV, pp. 165-7.
- Burford R., *Description of a View of Constantinople; with its European and Asiatic Suburbs, and a Great Extent of Surrounding Country. Now Exhibiting at the Panorama Royal, Leicester Square. Painted by the Proprietor, Robert Burford, Assisted by H.C. Selous, from Drawings Taken on the Spot, by William J. Smith, Esq, Architect to Her Britannic Majesty’s Embassy at Constantinople*, London, Brettell, 1846
- Burke E., *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990
- The Great Historical Picture of the Siege of Acre, painted by Robert Ker Porter; Descriptive Sketch*, London, Glendinning, 1801.
- An Historical Sketch of the battle of Alexandria, and of the Campaign in Egypt; Illustrative of the Great Picture, Now Exhibiting in the Lyceum, Strand, Painted by Robert Ker Porter, Esq.*, London, Denovan, 1802.

Press

Barker R., *The Times*, 16 May 1799.

Journal London und Paris 7, 1801.

Secondary sources

Altick R., *The Shows of London*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1978.

Bigg C., "The Panorama, or La Nature A Coup d'Oeil", in *Observing Nature-Representing Experience: The Osmotic Dynamics of Romanticism 1800-1850*, ed. Erna Fiorentini, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2007, pp. 73-95.

Comment B., *The Panorama*, London, Reaktion Books, 2002.

Hyde R., *Panoramania!*, London, Trefoil and Barbican Art Gallery, 1988.

Garrison L. (ed.), *Panoramas, 1787-1900: Texts and Contexts*, 5 vols, *Vol. 2: Stable Panoramas in Britain*, London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012, vol. II.

Grau O., *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

Oettermann S., *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, New York, Zone Books, 1997.

Oleksijczuk D., *The First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Otto P., "Between the Virtual and the Actual: Robert Barker's Panorama of London and the Multiplication of the Real in late eighteenth-century London", *Romanticism on the Net*, no. 46, May 2007.

Pratt, M. L., *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Routledge, 1992.

Schiffer R., *Oriental Panorama: British Travellers in 19th Century Turkey*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1999.

Tracy N., *Britannia's Palette: The Arts of Naval Victory*, Ithaca, N.Y., McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007.

Ziter E., *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

List of illustrations

Figure 1: Robert Barker, *Panorama Leicester Square: Short Account of Lord Nelson's Defeat of the French at the Nile*. 1799. Engraved key. 21 × 17 cm. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Figure 2: 'The Great Historical Picture of the Siege of Acre', guide to the panorama at *The Lyceum, The Strand, London*. 1801. Engraved key. Reproduced with permission of Northumberland Archives.

Figure 3: Robert Ker Porter, study for the panorama of the *Battle of Alexandria*. 1801. Oil on canvas. 54.6 x 92.4 cm. National Army Museum.

Figures 4 and 5: F.C. and G. Lewis, after Henry Aston Barker, *Panorama of Constantinople*. 1813. Aquatint and etching. 55 × 40 cm. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 6: Henry Aston Barker, *View of Constantinople from the Tower of Galata*.
1801. Engraved key. 38.6 × 31.8 cm. © The Trustees of the British Museum