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Phantasmagorias of the Post-Colonial Interiors

Abstract. Benjamin has stated in his *Arcades Project*, under “Louis P..., or the Interior”, that “[t]he unreal center makes its place in the home” (Benjamin, W. *The Arc. P.* 1999, 9). For much of the bourgeois homes of today, the vestiges [Spurren] of an exoticism gave the private man the atmosphere of “a box [Kasten] in the theatre of the world” (ibid.). Later, the *Jugendstil* made of homes an illusory, stylish setting and the interior into a *Wunderkammer*. This paper focuses on such a lineage, from ornaments to souvenirs, from arty to do-it-yourself, which now, in ex-colonialist nations, bring a collection of naturalistic-memories and ethno-nostalgia, mingled with a high-tech ultra-modern air, within a sense of hybrid visions of tribalscapes. Nonetheless, they engage in a visible/ invisible complex.

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“Just as external history is ‘reflected’ in internal history, semblance [Schein] is in the interior space”
Kierkegaard, T.W. Adorno and Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*.
Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999, 219.

Post-Colonial Interiors

The argument of this paper is that interiors reflect a cultural atmosphere that is neither simply based on tradition nor in state of the art innovation. In fact, they are crossed by history such as are cities, homeland landscapes and countryside settings, pointing to a wide traditional element that can incorporate what the hegemonic cultures (Saïd, 1995) have considered for so long as inferior objects from colonized territories. If not inferior, at least, dominated ones, by means of what Homi K. Bhabha calls the “stereotype” effect regarding the relation colonizer/colonized in his essay *The other question: the stereotype and the colonial discourse* (Bhabha, Homi. In *Visual Culture: the reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, London, Sage, 370-378).

In fact, it must start to be stated that the interiors which are at stake here, belong to a lineage of what Walter Benjamin was the champion to name the bourgeois dwelling. Therefore, it should not be taken for the castle, the fortress or the palace environment, but instead, that sort of a “compass case” (Benjamin, 1999, 220) [*Zirkelkastens* (Benjamin 1991, 292)] from where the individual grabs hold of historical events. just for the sake of prestige, denouncing a curiosity knowledge that is no other than a dominion of past worlds and times, within a sense of powerfulness:

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The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of allowing his commercial considerations to impinge on social ones. In the formation of his private environment, both are kept out. From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior - which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theater of the world (Benjamin, 1999, 8).

The unexpected result of what Benjamin calls a box to see the world, as it must be observed, is that the colonial universe, so to speak, entered this dwellings by means of objects and other unsuspected kind of beings that led the nowadays post-colonial interiors to a sort of *Wunderkammer* [a Cabinet of curiosities], which are a scene of what Homi Bhabha calls the “process of *ambivalence*, central to the stereotype” which is still the “major discursive strategy (...) of the colonial discourse” (Bhabha, 1999, 370).

This does not mean that colonialism got to encounter an alternative way of proceeding its program in the form of decoration and interior arrangement, which would be quite a reactionary statement. But on the other hand, like all times interior settings it was captured by an imaginary that brings a taste of all things past, though they might be quite alive and still subjects of exploitation and “epidermal schema” (Fanon and Bhabha, 1999, 376). By means of a reaction to the capitalist mass production utilities, which only give sway to the imperialistic kitsch and arty souvenirs industry.

What is being argued is not that some kind of reversed colonization has happened through the phantasy in which post-colonial interiors have engaged by the exhibition of hunting trophies, tribal monuments and ethnic statuary. It is instead that this ambivalent value, to use Homi Bhabha’s terms, is affected by a double strategy of fixity on the masking of artifacts, which offer them their “phantasmatic quality” (Bhabha, 1999, 376), as well as their revelation under a regime of a “scopic drive” (Bhabha, 1999, 375). All these, surveillance and identity anxiety, sure reproduce the colonial discourse, but as to what the interiors are concerned, it goes further, or at least further back, since the taste for antiques and the matter, which the utmost example is the hanging of old china, means nothing less than a proclivity for the domestic interiors being a mimicry of the temple. And in modern times, of the museum. All in the name of a class-ridden complex, according to which, the nobles and the royals live prestigious past lives.

Because the modern sciences surpassed the hegemonic historical epistemological regime, it is no wonder that, through the precocious colonial sciences, such as anthropology, ethnography, paleontology and evolutionary biology, all dwellings tend to look like a multicultural museum. Like in the *incipit* of L.P. Hartley’s novel, *The Go-Between*, the antique and the foreign are interchangeable. As it goes: “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (Hartley, 1996, 7). However, we can see the same effect in a typical nineteenth century bourgeois household dwelling, in the Buddenbrooks’ Mengstrasse house, where in the 1901 eponymous novel by Thomas Mann, the ancient represents nothing else but the faraway, with a touch that the nostalgic post-colonial ambiance was never capable of go without: places of freedom, well-being and fortune. Just like in *Buddenbrooks*:

The room was hung with heavy resilient tapestries put up in such a way that they stood well out from the walls. They were woven in soft tones to

harmonize with the carpet, and they depicted idyllic landscapes in the style of the eighteenth century, with merry vine-dressers, busy husbandmen, and gaily beribboned shepherdess who sat beside crystal streams with spotless lambs in their laps or exchanged kisses by a pale yellow sunset to match the yellow coverings on the white enameled furniture and the yellow silk curtains at the two windows (Mann, 2020, 5-6)².

A return to the reading of Homi Bhabha's conjecture on colonial stereotypes has to be clearly put. In reality, as might be seen in the images below, the currency of the stereotypical discourse, as equal it was to the historical proven fact, is not based on a simple reduction of human variables, but instead in a functioning of a fixed repeatability:

Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise, the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated – as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. It is this process of *ambivalence*, central to the stereotype [...] that ensures its repeatability. (Bhabha, 1999, 370)

It is this chain of repeated stereotypes in the form of hunting assets, black statuary and a dark atmosphere that can be seen in Figure 1 as a post-colonial setting, which clearly gives a prophetic tone to the words of Walter Benjamin:

In the end, things are merely mannequins, and even the great moments of world history are only costumes beneath which they exchange glances of complicity with nothingness, with the petty and the banal. Such nihilism is the innermost core of bourgeois coziness—a mood that in hashish intoxication concentrates to satanic contentment, satanic knowing, satanic calm, indicating precisely to what extent the nineteenth-century interior is itself a stimulus to intoxication and dream. This mood involves, furthermore, an aversion to the open air, the (so to speak) Uranian atmosphere, which throws a new light on the extravagant interior design of the period. To live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like so many insect bodies sucked dry. From this cavern, one does not like to stir. (Benjamin, 1999, 216)

In a nutshell, a place of phantasmagorias.

2. Die starken und elastischen Tapeten, die von den Mauern durch einen leeren Raum getrennt waren, zeigten umfangreich Landschaften, zartfarbig wie der dünne Teppich, der den Fußboden bedeckte, Idylle im Geschmack des 18. Jahrhunderts, mit fröhlichen Winzern, emsigen Ackersleuten, nett bebändigten Schäferinnen, die reinliche Lämmer am Rande spiegelnden Wassers im Schoße hielten oder sich mit zärtlichen Schäfern küßten...Ein gelblicher Sonnenuntergang herrschte meistens auf diesen Bildern, mit dem der gelbe Überzug der weiß lackierten Möbel und die gelbseidenen Gardinen vor den beiden Fenstern übereinstimmten... (Mann, 2007, 10)



Figure 1. ¡HOLA!, Nr. 3.957, 3rd May 2020, Madrid, p. 8-9

In Figure 2 one can clearly perceive the major fascination that the colonial bric-a-brac exerts in post-colonial, and therefore, modern sensibility, which is the stereotypical gaze towards the so to speak naturalistic irregularities and imperfect handicraft work that allows all of it a commitment to an atmosphere of asymmetries and deviations, going from the tigress and zebra skin carpets to the twisted horns of gigantic beasts. As Benjamin states, denouncing the colonial stereotype of savage disarray and master Vs. slave/conquer Vs. conquered nexus:

In the first place, arranging at an angle enforces a distinction - and this, once more, in a quite literal sense. By the obliquity of its position, the object sets itself off from the ensemble, as the carpet does here... But the deeper explanation for all this is, again, the unconscious retention of a posture of struggle and defense. In order to defend a piece of ground, I place myself expressly on the diagonal, because then I have a free view on two sides. It is for this reason that the bastions of a fortification are constructed to form salient angles... (Benjamin, 1999, 216)



Figure 2. ¡HOLA!, Nr. 3.955, 20th May 2020, Madrid, p. 8-9

In Figure 3, one can find one of the most emblematic tropes of a stereotypical discourse on the colonial environment which was deeply studied by Pierre Bourdieu in his *The Berber house or the world reversed*, among the Kabylla community. The house is a place of inversions. It is never safe, despite one feels its domesticity. It is a place of aggressive negotiations and tends to turn things the other way round. Something that is supposed to be tightly safeguarded is in fact sheer lost. Just like in Figure 3, things that should be busts of real people, are nothing more than flowerpots. Moreover, with swapped skin colour.



Figure 3. ¡HOLA!, Nr. 3.956, 27th May 2020, Madrid, p. 8-9

Conclusion

Post-colonial interiors are ambivalent in their use of a creative nostalgia but also of old-school artefacts. They tend to lead one into a discomfort made by a double effect: a misconception of the faraway, based on repeated stereotyped, combined with a recognition of a natural atmosphere, in a disparaged knowledge of places and peoples. As a matter of fact, they are truly a reproduction of what this paper calls a phantasmagoria scene, or using a zoological metaphor, a cage where the natural and the exotic can be turned endemic and tamed, just like Figure 4 shows and Theodore Adorno asserts:

The ordering of things in the dwelling-space is called 'arrangement.' Historically illusory <*Geschichtlich scheinhaJte*> objects are arranged in it as the semblance of unchangeable nature. In the interior archaic images unfold: the image of the flower as that of organic life; the image of the orient as specifically the homeland of yearning; the image of the sea as that of eternity itself. For the semblance to which the historical hour condemns things is eternal (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, 220).



Figure 4. In Barros, Jacinta, Rui Simões, Production, *Portuguêsses*, Documentary Feature directed by Rui Veiga for RTP- Radio Television of Portugal, 11th June, 2020, 40:07 min.

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