

Criticism and Corporate Myth: Edward Said and the Media

--Timothy Brennan

Edward Said, the well-heeled iconoclast, was riddled with contradictions, and the *angst* that plagued him as a result is among the most endearing aspects of his public personality. Ivy League rebel, angry humorist, emotionally fraught loner with hundreds of friends, and a Palestinian partisan who was culturally American. It is difficult to imagine being as rewarded as he was while saying such unpopular things – even scandalous or blasphemous things according to the prevailing attitudes of his time -- unless one is able to invent a persona worthy of celebrity in a world of brands and pundit one-liners. In this presentation, by turning to a side of his intellectual life that I think has not been given enough attention – his theory and practice of the media – I mean to dwell on one of the biggest contradictions of all: the conflict within him between philosophical idealism (the notion that ideas create reality rather than being produced by it) and his equally severe philosophical materialism (the notion that all language, communication, and value are by-products of the structural determinants of society and environment). His approach to the media gave evidence of both in equal measure and often side-by-side.

On the one hand, as the idealist, his message had been that narrative ultimately defeats armies; that the authority that allows one to rule, to raise money, to govern constituents, and to organize a military derives from a commonly shared story. Everything depends on how compelling and memorable the story is of one's claim to authority. On the other hand, as the hard-nosed realist, he claimed that Arab capital had yet to learn that the victory over ideas is

achieved not through better arguments but through ownership of the airwaves. Let us be more specific. A concrete example of the first, or idealist, aspect of his thinking can be found in his essay “Projecting Jerusalem” (1995) where he relies on a point found in the work of Antonio Gramsci that the dismantling and disarticulation of historical Palestine by Israeli troops, settlers, and bulldozers was the fruit of an idea, an ideological projection: “Only by doing so first in projections could it then proceed to the changes on the ground during the last eight or nine years, that is, to undertake the massive architectural, demographic, and political metamorphosis that would then correspond to the images and projections.” He’s of course thinking here, among other things, not only about the Biblical narratives of the chosen people, but about the brutal effectiveness of the Israeli PR machine. And yet, to take the second, or materialist, side of the matter, he writes at about the same time in the essay “A Changing World Order: The Arab Dimension” found in *The Politics of Dispossession* about the “systematic intervention against the Arabs on the cultural and informational level” as well as the surprising passivity in the face of that operation. Arabs, he says, must intervene productively, not cosmetically, to the changing world order by affiliating themselves “with the productive cultural and informational processes of the world system.” “During the past year,” he continues, . . . international Arab money lost the chance to make itself productive and set itself up at the level of production internationally: first, when Random House was for sale; second, when *Harper’s* was for sale; third, when the *London Times* was for sale.” In each case, the well-funded leaders of Arab countries dropped the ball and pulled back from owning a major Western media concern.

Said’s turn to studying seriously the vast media complexes of the market-driven West, although slow in coming, was in a way pre-destined. As a new transplant to the United States at the age of 15 at the height of the Cold War he came to study at the Mt. Hermon School in rural

Massachusetts. He would later in his memoir describe the evangelism of the school's founder, Dwight L. Moody, as the "enthusiastic mass hypnosis of a charlatan." Religious fanaticism and mass hypnosis seemed a combination particularly perfected in the United States, taking its leads from European fascist states before WWI, and then deployed with surprising self-consciousness by U.S. advertising industries after the War. If Said's thinking was primarily geographical, and it was, this too bore on the problem of the mass media. For, the problem, he once noted, of the United States is geography. "The dispersion. There's no center." Even where there is a sense of locality there isn't a sense of commonality. "The usurpation of the public space, of the common space, by the media and the corporations, is really very, very, very disheartening." PPC 205.

The bewildering complexity of the United States proved daunting, and presented him with a dilemma that this Europeanized, colonially trained young man was seeing in this light for the first time. The intellectual in America, unlike in Berlin, Paris or Cairo, had lost any resemblance at all with erudition, metaphysical authority, or aesthetic arbitration, assuming instead the guise of an anonymous technician in the sciences (on the one hand) or (on the other) a media intellectual of the quasi-entertainment news industries (Bill Maher or Rachel Maddow rather than Benedetto Croce or William James, for example).

The trajectory was in a sense to be expected. When at the beckoning of his activist friend Sami Al-Banna, he set out to write a short book on the obscene caricatures of Muslims and Arabs in Euro-American intellectual life – a project that he originally proposed to co-write with Noam Chomsky. He knew from the start that the book had to be a kind of roman à clef. On the surface, the culprits of *Orientalism* are 19<sup>th</sup> century orientalist scholars building an edifice of authoritative learning that, either intentionally or not, bolstered the prevailing justifications for imperial conquest; but at every moment of his argument, it is not hard to discern that he intended

that case to imply equally to the contemporary scenes and figures of NYT editorials, *New Republic* features stories and *Commentary* exposes. He was too deeply embroiled in New York as a media capital to miss the continuities between these two situations, or to miss the parallels between Ernst Renan and Bernard Lewis.

His career as a literary critic was from the start deeply enmeshed in the NY media world. He relied heavily on introductions to that work by his mentor and colleague Fred Dupee, a founder of *Partisan Review* and a close friend of Mary McCarthy, whose former husband Edmund Wilson – a non-academic, belletristic kind of critic who wrote for magazines -- was always a model for him as he was busy placing essays as a young professor in NYT, and later in flashy NY crossover venues like *Grand Street*, *Granta*, *Interview Magazine*, *the NYRB*, and even *House & Garden* magazine. It is revealing to note how bravely, even quixotically, he sought to clear a space for serious and scholarly intellectual subjects in those venues geared to the audience of a notoriously anti-intellectual America. Here's was how Said sounded when he pitched a piece on French structuralism and sociolinguistics to the NYT: "I hope to be describing these discoveries, not as arcane, hopelessly specialized instances of new sciences (and jargons) but as admittedly complex problems that ought to have an immediate appeal to the common, situated intelligence of the general reader."

As a New York media intellectual himself, he was at once a pariah and an insider. On the one hand, he was on the outs for being Palestinian and a critic of Israel; on the other, he got more invitations precisely for that reason, having become the go-to spokesperson on the Middle East. As late as 1989 he was being invited to NYT luncheons in the hope of luring him into writing an article for them. He corresponded often with NY publishers, speaking candidly and at some length, although often enjoined *not* to write about politics in his autobiographical pieces

for the NYTBR. His personal experiences navigating the clubby NY media world (and more than not benefiting from his insider connections) has a lot to do with his later interest in poring over macro-studies of the techniques of mind-management in media theory.

Even before he began appearing on mainstream news programs – these included Night Line, Evans & Novak, David Brinkley’s *This Week*, *The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour*, Phil Donahue, Charlie Rose, etc. – he is surrounded by people who open doors for him in the NY media world, or counsel him on its mysterious functionings. At the literary salons of Jean Stein, he either meets or gets to know better Barbara Epstein of *New York Review of Books*, Shelley Wanger of Conde Naste and *Interview Magazine*, Mary Kay Wilmers of the *London Review of Books* (LRB). Once he gains prominence in the Arab world he seeks out, and learns from, Nasser’s former right-hand man, Hassanein Haykal, who had access to media outlets throughout the Middle East. Even as a young professor at Columbia, he would call one of his former students, Robert Friedman, throughout the 1970s and 1980s for practical advice about how to intervene in the media. The advice Friedman gave Said was practical not theoretical – for example, what are the various hierarchies in the different media, who is in whose pockets, how could the New York Times publish such and such, and so on. Friedman had worked for the student press, but then went on eventually to edit *The Village Voice*. Clearly Chomsky’s famous *J’accuse* in the late 1960s (“The Responsibility of Intellectuals”) leveled against the professors, artists, and writers who by silence were complicit in the Vietnam war, helped him make a connection between the “new mandarins” as Chomsky called the establishment intellectuals and the media propaganda apparatus.

I would argue that the whole concept of *Orientalism* was formed with precisely this kind of consideration in mind: that is, although ostensibly about the literary philologists of the Arab

and Islamic minds, it was more directly about the systematic fictionalization and PR efforts, as well as the opportunistic pliancy, of intellectuals who either willingly, or out of abdication, served the imperial state. Indeed, for several decades after *Orientalism*, Said was working on a study of intellectuals as a whole – a book he meant to provide for the U.S. what Régis Debray had recently managed in France in his book *Le pouvoir intellectuel en France*: a study of what intellectuals do, what particular power they wield, how they work, and the various pecking orders among them: the different functions they perform in the operations of power. Although he worked on it for decades, he never brought the book to realization, although bits and pieces of its arguments were strewn throughout his individual essays. His essay on Walter Lippman, for example, the first one he ever published in the LRB, was all about the “journalist’s relationship to power—whatever the regime—and the journalist’s own power.” Essays on media intellectuals represented a subgenre of his essays as a whole: the intellectual who uses their decisive social function either for good or for evil, and either as a journalist or as a mouthpiece for the journalistic tribe (seen, for example, in his writing on Chomsky, Samuel Huntington, George Orwell, V. S. Naipaul, Ahdaf Soueif, John Berger, Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, and others).

Walter Lippmann – the ultimate establishment journalist, a kind of gatekeeper of power – is similar in his rendering to the Orientalists Edward Lane, H.A.R. Gibb, and Ernst Renan in *Orientalist*. He speaks there sardonically of Lippmann’s ability to defend “at least two sides of every major public issue of his time”; his striving “to assist his America readers to make “an adjustment to reality” by rationalizing the appearance and conviction of “realism” as “dispassionate impartiality” understood as the facility for not straying too far from the thrust of public opinion.” This involved, as he put it, “an aura of coldness and emotional inadequacy; a

condescending view of humanity.” For all this talk of impartiality, he points out that Lippmann, although silent about it in public, supported racial quotas in immigration, thought the Caribbean races inferior,” and was “bored and uncomfortable with the Third World,” arguing that interning Japanese Americans [was] just fine” and that “Hindus were loathsome and terrifying.”

Lippmann self-consciously represented the interests of America’s ruling classes as an “adroit master of disseminative techniques and rhetorical strategies; a secular evangelist representing the cult of expertise.”

Said’s essay on Lippmann is a diagnosis of the power of the media to dissemble its role by appealing to old-world sensibilities, even as someone like Lippmann “belongs in McLuhan’s media world.” The shady arrogance of this paid-for intellectual jealous of his own undeserved prominence he contrasts to the likes of his muckraker contemporaries, among them, Randolph Bourne, I.F. Stone, and C. Wright Mills. Unlike them, his was a self-confident thoughtlessness. Said’s question: “How did the ever-expanding contemporary information apparatus (of which the mass media are a branch) grow to such an extent as almost to swallow whole the intellectual’s function.” The media, as fourth estate, therefore is both the playing field of the intellectual work that counts in contemporary market societies, but it is also the force that overwhelms and destroys the intellectual’s proper work.

Again, one after the other, he is drawn more than anything to a diagnosis of everything that intellectuals should NOT be, since most of those with genuine power represent the inverse of the intellectual’s proper function: George Orwell, for example, is notable for “his provinciality, his narrow view of life, his cheerless reporting.” Even in an early review of a book on Orwell in 1980 (RE, 97), Said is already playing the role of a media critic rather than that of a narrowly defined literary critic, acutely aware of the media’s limitations and possibilities. His mode of

address is, if anything, a direct function of his awareness of the inside and outside of power, and the co-terminous relationship of that position with access to the crossover writing of the major media. We have to take note of the personal venom he has for what this media structure has done to the intellectual's vocation. He refers to Orwell's "stubborn professionalism and the 'natural' white style" of his writing which hide an "astonishingly apolitical awareness of the world; his political writing was not fed by his years of being down and out (*Down and Out in Paris and London*) or of experiencing imperialism (*Burmese Days*) but his "re-admission to and subsequent residence inside bourgeois life." Unlike, say, Jean Genet, who brilliantly gives voice to what it is like to be on society's margins, Orwell gives us a kind of "tourism among the dogs." Orwell's "retrospective doctoring of his past, and of his downright foolishness about the contemporary scene" is most clearly expressed in his pretense to have condemned socialism from within, whereas (in Said's words) he "had no knowledge either of Marx or of the massive Marxist and socialist traditions". His was a "middlebrow 'our way of life' variety" of opinion-making which has more recently been dressed up in the U.S. as "neo-conservatism." His "plain reportorial style coerces history, process, knowledge itself into mere events being observed . . . such a style is far more insidiously unfair, so much more subtly dissembling of its affiliations with power than any avowedly political rhetoric."

This curiosity about those to whom one has an aversion was, here as elsewhere in Said's contradictory life also a way of learning from the enemy. It is a firm pattern of his life to have lingered over the gestures of the powerful and the influential in order to internalize their force and turn them to contrary ends. He despises Orwell and Lippman, but admires their accomplishments. He studies them to be both like and unlike them. And so it was towards the end of his life in regard to Samuel Huntington, whose spurious thesis that the basic conflict of



geopolitics in the 1990s was no longer between socialist and capitalist warring camps but the great *cultural* divisions of divergent peoples: the so-called “clash of civilizations” The thesis was discussed so widely and became influential not because of what it “ponderously” and “ineffectively” says, he notes, but because of its timing. Just as with Lippmann, nothing Huntington says expresses the slightest doubt or skepticism, and therefore lacks the most fundamental self-interrogation required of the intellectual. Huntington’s book, *The Clash of Civilizations*” is, in Said’s view, a “brief and rather crudely articulated manual in the art of maintaining a wartime status in the minds of Americans.” “This sense of cutting through a lot of unnecessary detail, of masses of scholarship and huge amounts of experience, and boiling all of them down to a couple of catchy, easy-to-quote-and-remember ideas, which are then passed off as pragmatic, practical, sensible and clear” is the measured outlook of the Pentagon and the defense industry executives.”

Inasmuch as all three of these intellectuals were media giants representing either the official policies of the United States of his adopted home or the Britain of his colonial training, his diagnosis of their rhetorical arts and their navigation of the corporate press was intimately bound up with the question of Palestine, since the policies of these two powers were precisely Israel’s safe haven and therefore the bane of the Palestinian movement. In this sense, it is not only Chomsky’s earlier public attack on the complicity of intellectuals with military and imperial power that impressed him with the need to study media, but Chomsky’s pioneering condemnation of the crimes of Israel, as well as that country’s role in American imperial designs in the Middle East. For that reason, the development by Chomsky and his colleague Edward Herman of a theory of corporate propaganda -- what they called “Manufacturing Consent,” a nuanced and well-documented theory of how censorship, disinformation, and the murdering of

dissidents functions in liberal democratic countries – was doubly influential on Said. They conditioned him to pursue the work of media critique more generally – especially the work of analysts of the nexus between cultural power and market capitalism.

This is why repeatedly he returns in essays that are ostensibly about poetry, the novel, or university life to references to an emerging canon of media critiques; he chides those in the profession of letters who ignore this all-important *infrastructural* aspect of their avocation: namely, the very means of communication by which ideas find their audiences at all, quite apart from the content of those ideas. Notable here is, for example, the sociologist Herbert Schiller who coined the term the “Mind Managers” and who discussed the way corporate advertising has perfected a kind of “packaged consciousness” even as, in Schiller’s words, corporations are busy “creat[ing], process[ing], refin[ing] and presid[ing] over the circulation of images and information which determines our beliefs, attitudes and ultimately our behavior.”

One cannot stress too much how these ideas, straddling the time just before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, ran contrary to the triumphalist mood of a media-devised “public opinion” which tirelessly underscored the differences between the free expression available in the West and the punishing vacuum of opinion in the police states of the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. The rare constellation of contrarian voices puncturing this Whiggish bubble were all the more attractive to Said for this reason, and he felt that they represented a way of studying culture that the natural advocates of his project (university intellectuals in the humanities) were ignoring. By contrast, his colleagues were caught up in the pseudo-philosophy of linguistic screens and autonomous texts in pursuit of an indulgent aestheticism. Their effeteness made it impossible for them to turn their attention, despite needing to, to the hard stuff

of economically determined cultural processes and technological limits. This is Said in his materialist element.

Apart from Schiller, Chomsky and Herman, Said was taken with the Austrian economist, Fritz Machlup's *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States* published in 1962 – a book that coined the phrase the “information society” and that clearly presented knowledge itself as an economic category. Others to whom he turned included the Belgian media theorist, Armand Mattelart (who worked as an information minister under Salvador Allende in Chile before the Pinochet coup) and later assumed a similar position of authority in the French government under Mitterand. In other words, Mattelart's prolific work was tempered throughout by this hands-on experience working directly with companies and state ministers, understanding the actual process of policy-making rather than being simply a critic of policies. In books like *Penser les medias* [thinking the media], he was especially insightful and outspoken on the international disparities of access in the distribution of media technologies (above all, the role of powerful press syndication centers, think tanks, and ultimately the infrastructure of fiber optic cable networks, satellites, radio towers, and chip technologies that help determined who and how matters are known, debated, or resisted). Said's interest, similarly, in the work of Régis Debray, whom I have already mentioned, went beyond his mapping of the intellectuals of modern France, and instead extended to his study of “mediocracy” – the consequences, in other words, of the unelected ruling power of the fourth estate as a matter less of hardware (as in Mattelart) than groups, tendencies, friendships, alliances among the connected, as well as the consequences for critical thought of the shift from writing to the secondary orality of the media: a culture of the evanescent, the backlit screen, of ubiquitous sound, and incessant and coercive visibility.

Perhaps most pertinent of all in this juncture, though, was the work of the Irish politician and consultant, Sean McBride, who once again ties Said's interest in the media to the politics of the Middle East. For McBride has the distinction of being the author both of the UN draft report on Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 – which bravely stated, after years of documentation, interviews, and eyewitness accounts, that Israel was guilty of “war crimes”—and a separate study by UNESCO on what his commission called the “New World Information Order.” The book they issued titled *Many Voices, One World* published in 1981 was a devastating indictment of the one-sidedness of media ownership and control, describing the outrageous status quo by which reporters in Dakar attempting to describe a war occurring in the Senegalese provinces, had first to filter the story through gatekeepers in Paris, London or New York before it reached its intended audience. For both of these achievements, McBride is frequently touted by Said in his books and essays, always as a way of urging his readers to venture out into more institutionally inflected forms of studying culture. In the pages of the UNESCO study, one can see very clearly how the order of the West is maintained at least in part by the supposedly benign, but usually invisible, management of information.

Said's own most obvious critique of the media can be found in the book with the appropriately punning title, *Covering Islam*, of course (punning, since it means both taking Islam as one's subject and concealing or covering up Islam as its adherents experience it). Surely *Covering Islam* is the most underrated of his books. It is a masterpiece of restraint, offering less a comprehensive theory of media – an exposure of media ownership patterns, the propaganda apparatus, or any such large scale claims – than a carefully suggestive *description* of hundreds of concrete cases, news programs, articles, and so on that provide a persuasive picture of 1) the fatal reliance of the Western press on so-called “experts”; 2) the appalling ignorance of these

“experts”; 3) the more salutary commentary of critical minds that do not pretend to be experts; 4) the scary similarities between the government’s official “line” and what even the most supposedly independent of the networks (PBS instead of CBS, say) report. What is more, *CI* is the one book of Edward’s that deals with the problem of representation specifically and uniquely in regard to Islam. It is his book about the fear of Islam – the view of Islam in the Western popular mind, and therefore it virtually invents the critique of what later came to be known as Islamophobia. The book has been cleverly slandered (by Christopher Hitchens, Leon Wieseltier and others) as being soft on the Ayatollahs, and the religious dogmatists of Iran. There is not a hint of this in the book he wrote, though. This is a kind of fresh, hard-hitting, media critique enriched by the sensitivities to word and image of the literary critic at the height of his powers, excited by what he is seeing all around him in the fire of maturity and relative youth. He sees this Islamophobia of the early 1980s as a clear return to the Cold War inaugurated by a “renaissance of self-delusion.” *CI* xxiv

One of my favorite passages is when he stops to demand that the U.S. look in the mirror. In fixating on the so-called “Persian psyche” they speak of its overriding egoism (overlooking the same trait in a Western hero like Rousseau); they speak of the Persian’s view of the malevolence of reality (as though they had never read Kafka), of Islam’s fatal belief in the omnipotence of God (as though the Old and New Testaments were not a part of Western thought), Islam’s lack of causal sense (forgetting about Samuel Beckett), or the Arab’s Bazaar mentality (choosing to ignore NY Stock exchange). Said in this book illustrates by way of unfolding events a general speculation about the evanescence of power, and the decisive category of culture (and here, of course, is a sign of the persistence of his idealist strain): “Power, of course, is a complex, not always visible, very protean thing, unless one thinks only in military

terms . . . I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the feeling of ‘national impotence’ of which Kraft spoke was the temporary eclipse of one kind of American power by another: the military’s by the media’s.” He stresses “the “rich symbolizing powers of the media.” (Loc 2615).

A concise version of the book appeared at about the same time in “Iran and the Media: Whose Holy War? (1980), *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1980). “Islam” is what has always hovered in the background “no more than a poorly defined and badly misunderstood abstraction.” From V. S. Naipaul to John Updike to comic strips, grade-school textbooks and tv, the iconography is the same: oil suppliers, terrorists, mobs. What’s interesting too is how much he defends Islam, on broad humanitarian grounds, and in the spirit of knowledge, but also as an outsider. Subtly, in CI, he goes beyond simply citing a litany of fools, blackguards, and polemicists who said vicious and stupid things about Iran and Islam. More interestingly, he describes (w/o naming) the actual workings of government censorship: p. 29 “There was a constant effort to discredit testimonials . . . that might undermine the government’s version of events,” although denying any “actual collusion between the media and government”. It was all much more indirect, and more mediated, than that.

I have been trying to lay out a case for the sheer extent of theoretical and writerly attention Said paid to the mass media while showing its direct influence on his concept of the intellectual. In doing so, I have tried to map out the projects he undertook, and the people he was reading, that moved him more and more in the direction of a systematic theory of the media. In this effort, Raymond Williams is key. As I have argued elsewhere, Williams’s *Country and the City* was one of the main models for *Orientalism*. There is no evidence that Said read closely Williams’s *Sociology of Culture*, but he certainly followed its spirit: Against the prevailing

theoretical trends of his day, Williams set out to steer the question of culture away from what theory at the time was concentrating on – namely “representation” (the idea of the impenetrability of language, the death of the author, the wiles and snares of syntactical structures, and so on) – and direct it more towards clearly materialist categories: for example, the control of images and the circulation of information, not just in the technological sense of the expensive hardware, computers, satellites, tv towers and so on upon which the mass media rely, but on the larger problems of *mediation*: that is, the institutions that govern distribution, the training of technicians to oversee the flow; the establishment of institutes to create profitable content, set agendas, and so on. This is what Williams systematically analyzes in *The Sociology of Culture*.

There is no counterpart for this kind of stand-alone book on media structures in Said’s oeuvre (and it would be the kind of study that none of his readers would ever imagine him writing) but he litters his essays and books with precisely this kind of inquiry, and it remained a fundamental concern: that is, this focus on the actual infrastructure of culture – the university curriculum committees, the editorial board offices, the Washington think tanks, the ownership patterns of major presses, which governments control, and which do not control, the fiber optic cable, satellite towers, or television links, the producers and distributors of films and (in today’s language) streaming apps. Both the hardware and the wetware are constantly on his mind – on the one hand, expensive technologies as rigid gate-keepers; on the other, and only slightly more subtly, the ideas, beliefs, and values disseminated with organizational forethought by institutes, boards, senate subcommittees, target magazines, and academic anthologies before anything like a dialogue or a debate can even begin.

In *The Sociology of Culture*, Williams brilliantly brings the materialist and the idealist aspects of Said's intellectual formation together in one tightly bound whole. The new constellation he's after in the book is not simply adding culture to the mix as one of the reputable objects of study but posing new questions and new evidence. Earlier studies of the contents of culture relied heavily on "observational analysis" – whose self-image is that of an "objective, systematic, and quantitative" description of the manifest content of culture, especially of communications. Williams distinguishes this from what he is doing, which has as its emphasis on the "whole social order" rather than the isolatable, quantifiable social event, and operates under the idea that cultural practice and cultural production are not simply derived from that order, but "themselves major elements in its constitution." 13. In addition to looking at new kinds of artifacts – in addition to the arts and language, philosophy, journalism, fashion, advertising, sports – it looks at all signifying systems by 1) exploring "actual relations" and 2) "the means of cultural production." Although highly developed empirically, most work of this type in the mainstream university is uncritical of market society, and that democracy and the commercial world are inextricable. By looking at the different ways in which for certain actors culture and cultural production are socially identified and distinguished, cultural studies is self-reflexive – it interrogates its own methods, and considers the reflection *upon* culture to be as fully a part of culture as the original work or act. One of the key points here is W.'s judicious explanation for why intellectuals both can be truly oppositional and innovative, but why they are structurally destined also to *reproduce* conventional meanings and values (and ultimately power relations) without knowing they do. W. also makes the important point that when intellectuals formulate a theory, or when they develop, in words, a new agenda, that they do so – and can only do so – because society has generally already invented them. They grasp, formulate, articulate,



and order innovations, but are quite reliant (in this formulation) on what society itself, collectively and to that degree anonymously, has already invented.

Said's media critique becomes more and more refined and dogged after *CI*, and once again is bound up with his theory of intellectuals. In a little-known lecture at Macalester College titled "The Limits of the Artistic Imagination," he refers to "an age with proliferating informational resources and control, [where] the management and manipulation of these resources usually results in misrepresentation, distortion or effacement of the human (or inhuman) agency and interest at work. There exists therefore a need for providing counter-information, information, that is, that runs counter to and is often hidden by the prevailing consensus, information whose description and analysis is based on the privilege of human agency and responsible choice."

He counterposes the role of intellectuals to the authors of novels, disagreeing with his good friend Nadine Gordimer who takes the conventional view that imaginative writers reach out beyond the confines of their time and place to a space not hedged in by conventional loyalties". Although he grants that creative writers do this, he calls the view "romantic" for giving the author a vatic role, a given the author's "unseen and unheard truths" a priestly power. What is true about the present that was not true for others who espoused this romantic view is an international literary marketplace in which a highly selective group of writers from Latin America, the subcontinent, the Far East, parts of Africa, Australia and so on are translated, published and circulated on a mass scale: media empires with consumer tastes that can hardly provide authors with a neutral reception. Cairo, Macondo and Bombay have become cosmopolitan in both a good and bad way.

“The politics of international exchange” might best be seen in the case of Arabic. Much more is known of Caribbean, Latin American or African literature than of Arabic, and this is not just a case of translation. The work pouring out of the Middle East just wasn’t reviewed in the Western press. Mahfouz was an exception, but so big that he could stand in for the rest. “Literature” and “artistic imagination” have to pass through several filters, modifying perspectives for them to be seen at all. He importantly concedes some points: “I have no intention,” Said wrote “of reducing the aesthetic to crude, politically correct messages; on the contrary, I want to assert the independence of the aesthetic, its relative social autonomy. But what I do want to insist on is the insufficiency of the artistic imagination when it comes to dealing *directly* and *analytically* with politics, society and even history. There we need the worldliness of the secular intellectual.” “on its own the artistic imagination needs the support, if not the actual energies of the intellectual to sustain itself in a world that is as full of traps and internationalized and globalized instabilities and inauthenticities as this one.”

Then, in this very same lecture, he systematically presents to his audience the findings of the media critics I have been mentioning above. He notes that Machlup, for example, explains that over 60% of GNP is knowledge-related production. Despite the centrality of intellectuals that the economic importance of information implies, our analysis of the intellectual’s function is comparatively crude. Once more, the contradictory Edward Said rushes to hold up and learn from a figure whose views he does not share. Pointing to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century reactionary Catholic critic Julian Benda (the author, famously, of *The Treason of the Intellectuals*) he remarks on why he admires Benda nonetheless: That “Benda’s effect at bottom is to stimulate in us the whole problem of what it means, and how difficult it is, to be a real intellectual . Benda emphasizes the vocation of holding onto values in the face of punishment and derision; if

oppression is unjust it must always be held to be unjust even in the face of an inconvenient or strident national mood. Hence, translating Benda, one could say that being a complacent Milton or Shakespeare scholar and say that oppression is not my concern, is to *betray* the intellectual vocation.

He builds to an analysis of those involved in humanistic study in the universities, how they are pushed under the influence of specialization and guild consciousness. He quotes Peter Nettl: “The intellectual is being winked out of the crevasses of his social and political concerns. Politics – the arena par excellence of dashing ideas and normative conflicts – is itself becoming a specialized business with its own professional qualifications . . . a highly skilled technical affair of lobbying and fixing.” Even though the bureaucratic apparatus is there to “coerce, rule and control” in matters large and small, “to reduce and mystify consciousness into depoliticized acceptance, placidity, and passivity” there is always a space in which the secular intellectual can “articulate alternative acts and intentions”.

Most interestingly of all, it is in this lecture (never published) that he explicitly lays out what he believes to be the intellectual’s proper function, while turning away from the impingements of guild, ethnicity, nation and even race, since these have always have always provided intellectuals with what can only be called a structure of apologetic compromise. First premise:

- 1) In the distorting world of information technologies that deform and deflect human choice, the intellectual has an *archival* function. There is a need for “relentless erudition.”
- 2) Second, the intellectual must translate the jargons, moves, and attitudes of particular classes, groups, and corporate guilds, exposing in that why their

“common sense;” they must master details. This would be the *interpretive* or “re-interpretive” function.

- 3) Third, to resist prevailing functional, pragmatic, or supposedly “realistic” modes of analysis that systematically hide the role of interest, perspective, and agency. To demystify by articulating. This the intellectual’s *epistemological* function.
- 4) Fourth, to note that specialization breeds an ethic for one’s own field of eminent domain, and consequently one of non-interference towards others’. Therefore, the intellectual must have a *dramatic* function of intervening and interfering across lines of specialization.
- 5) Fifth, in a culture suffocated by kitsch, it is left to art (and to the critic as an interpreter of art) to “wordlessly assert what is barred to politics”. We battle not only brute force but trivialization. The intellectual, then, must observe an *insurgent* function – one of resistance.
- 6) Sixth, so much of intellectual work has been reduced in our society to practical problem-solving. This produces a “trimming” or “fudging” dimension to inquiry. By contrast, we must “eccentrically and crucially press distant claims,” stake out principles when the situation calls for “expediency”; This is the intellectual’s *moral* function.

Said often expressed a love for the amateur, and for autodidacticism. For him, this was more than the playing-down of credentials; it was an improvisatory, unsanctioned knowledge that arose from reading without particular plan or use. The intellectual was, then, to him about curiosity, the acquiring of a deliberately non-instrumental knowledge devoted to knowing the

case, for the sake of truth rather than individual interest. And with these immaterial weapons – precisely because they are spiritual rather than financial or military – the intellectual for him could effectively counter the corporate myths of the imperial state.