

SPELLBOUND



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TERRITORIES:

ON COLONIAL GLAMOUR

Guy Debord once wrote: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” But what if that very social relation were itself the effect of a spell? What if the image fascinated not because it told the truth, but because it bewitched?

Magic has always taken many forms, from rituals to spells, from healing charms to curses. Some require incantations, others seem to need nothing more than a good camera angle. Glamour is one of them. The word itself carries a trace of witchcraft, grammar, grimoire, glamer – all bound together in the same constellation of meaning. In old Scottish lore, a glamer was a witch’s spell, a charm that made things shimmer with a beauty they did not truly possess. A glamour was never meant to wound or to protect, but to seduce. It works not by force, but by suggestion: reframing perception, transcending the ordinary, and quietly reprogramming desire.

Like every spell, glamour has its recipe, and its main components are mystery and transfiguration. Something honest, vulnerable, or transparent would fail to produce the glamour effect. It is precisely the element of interrogation that sparks desire – a desire not born of resentment, but born of love. Above all, glamour must seem effortless, and any visible trace of labor risks breaking the spell.

These very conditions are precisely what we find at play in events like the Met Gala. Yet beyond the parade on the red carpet, isn’t it the interior of the Met Gala, off-limits to photographers and hidden from the public eye, that embodies glamour even more fully? A secret space that fuels desire through its very absence, creating that thought, whether admitted or not, “if only I could sneak a peek.” After all, spaces themselves can be utterly glamorous, and territories, just like people, can fall under a spell, sometimes even trapping their inhabitants within it.

But glamour isn’t simply a phenomenon, nor a surface; it is an operation, and like any operation, it carries with it an intended outcome. The spell is never cast without purpose, whether it seeks obedience, affection, wealth, or power. As Foucault reminds us, power does not only repress, it also produces. It arranges, stages, and circulates – notably through space and the regimes of visibility that govern it, deciding what can appear and what must remain unseen.

Last year, while researching cinema censorship during the Algerian war in the colonial archives in Paris, I came across how propaganda tools operated like spells, carefully cast by ministries and administrations, designed to seduce both the colonizers, who saw their mission as noble and just, and the colonized, who were pressured to internalize an image of their own subordination.

The polished aesthetics of colonial visual culture – from travel brochures and heroic portraits to orientalist tableaux and even urban plans – all contributed to the construction of enchanted imagery. As Edward Said observed: “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” Colonial Algeria was seamlessly integrated into this invention, its landscapes and people reframed through a cultural apparatus that displaced reality with fantasy. These images worked to mask violence, to exoticize inhabitants into spectacles, and to reduce the territory itself to a stage set. This was glamour at work:

a spell cast to make domination appear beautiful, and therefore legitimate. Carefully repeated codes accumulated until the image itself became the territory. Achille Mbembe extends this point: “Africa is not a reality but a set of signs, an excess of meanings that the world has projected on it.” Colonialism produced not just domination, but fictions – phantom territories, enchanted spaces where one inhabits the sign more than the place. Propaganda establishes a strategic arrangement of signs, casting a carefully composed illusion to create an image at the service of the state, and Algeria became a territory under the spell of glamour in which the non-glamorous was kept invisible. Its landscapes were rendered as exotic idylls, the Casbah painted in pastel tranquility, settlers photographed as benevolent pioneers.

On maps, vast zones were rendered as blank, waiting to be conquered. The void itself became a form of transfiguration: erasing lives while promising landscapes of fertility, abundance, and infinite possibility. The exhibition “Made in Algeria” at the MUSEM in Marseille that took place in 2016 traced this very genealogy, showing how colonial cartography turned space into spectacle, representing Algeria less as a lived territory than as a stage to be occupied, consumed, and domesticated.

Numerous painters also contributed to this imaginary. Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* offered a voyeuristic scene of intimacy and exoticism, inscribed within the broader orientalist movement. Women who in Europe embodied chastity and virtue were recast in colonial imagery as sensual and exotic, their representations steeped in eroticism. Meanwhile, Dinet’s idealized scenes helped naturalize a vision of harmony under French rule. Or again Horace Vernet’s *La Prise de Bône, 27 mars 1832*, a painting commissioned by Louis-Philippe to support the military expeditions and the colonial project, glorified the French army conquering Bône. In this painting, the territory unfolds as limitless, green, fertile, yet uncultivated, a land ready to be claimed. The Arab figures appear impassive, almost fatalistic, facing the rise of the French flag, as if offered up in consent to domination, some even eating the bread distributed by the soldier.

While painters had already immortalized their vision of Algeria in the service of the state, tourist imagery also mobilized the codes of glamour. Barely conquered, Algeria was transformed into a coveted destination. From the 1870s onwards, artists, writers, and bourgeois travelers were all drawn there, soon joined by cruise ship passengers. Algiers and Biskra became fashionable destinations, while alpine clubs and travel companies set about “promoting” and “orientalizing” the country’s heritage, thus feeding the imagination of visitors.

Very quickly, tourism was folded into the colonial strategy: a showcase of the “benefits” of conquest and a tool of propaganda as much as an economic activity. Algeria was marketed as a “French California,” a land of sunshine and quality, “the most beautiful trip of your life,” a promise of wealth and pleasures. Brochures, posters, and exhibitions conjured a visual seduction that reframed the country as a stage set for the civilizing mission. And among all of the destinations, the Sahara embodied the summit of this colonial glamour. A vast emptiness reframed as mystery, transfigured into luxury. Desert cruises, reconstructed caravanserais, motorized expeditions



and aerial circuits offered a condensed spectacle of mystery, exoticism, and sportive adventure, haloed in imperial prestige. Landscapes became dreamscapes, and the unknown was turned into a consumable luxury. But Algerians themselves were rarely the subjects of this narrative. They appeared mostly as service workers or as folklorized figures of “authenticity.” Integrated by force into this mise-en-scène, they were reduced to ornamental roles, while the colony as a whole was reframed as a spectacle to be consumed.

Once arrived, the fantasy continued. Postcards circulated to propagate the enchantment, playing a crucial role in this visual economy. As David Prochaska has shown, they formed a veritable industry of colonial images, multiplying “scenes and types”: beggars, young shoe-shine boys, crouching artisans, languid Moorish women or sorcerers. Torn from their context, these images froze Algerians into archetypes, suspended in a timeless limbo. Sought for their exotic charm, collected as souvenirs, these postcards did not merely document, they fabricated an imaginary. They presented a subordinated people, fixed in folkloric roles, docile and immobile, tailored to the gaze of foreign visitors, tourists, settlers, or metropolitan audiences. Once again, the lure of the picturesque served to mask inequality, transmuting domination into a spectacle made desirable.

Together, these images conjured an Algeria reframed as an Eldorado, a fantasy space that masked oppression, segregation, and social tension, and invited desire: “what a beautiful place”, “how noble France’s civilizing mission”. Propaganda appears less as information than as performance: an aesthetic choreography that casts domination in seductive form, masking violence behind carefully constructed narratives designed to shape desire, fear, and belief. This logic has not vanished. We continue to inhabit spaces that are not merely geographic but glamorous territories. It no longer speaks solely through state decrees but circulates as a global regime of images. As Hito Steyerl states: “The image is not just a representation, but an actor in the system of power.” They do not simply reflect reality, they arrange it, deciding what comes into view and what remains hidden. If images act, then they also enchant. Glamour controls not only how we see, but what we come to accept. “Vision is always a question of the power to see, and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. “With whose blood were my eyes crafted?” asks Donna Haraway. If images are never innocent, and fascination itself becomes complicity, then perhaps the greatest enchantment of all is believing we are immune to it. The question, then, is not whether we resist propaganda, but whether we would even recognize its glamour if we saw it. What spell, after all, are we consenting to? •



THE RISE OF FASCISM. IM ARCHITEKTUR IM POLITISCHEN GEWENDE

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