

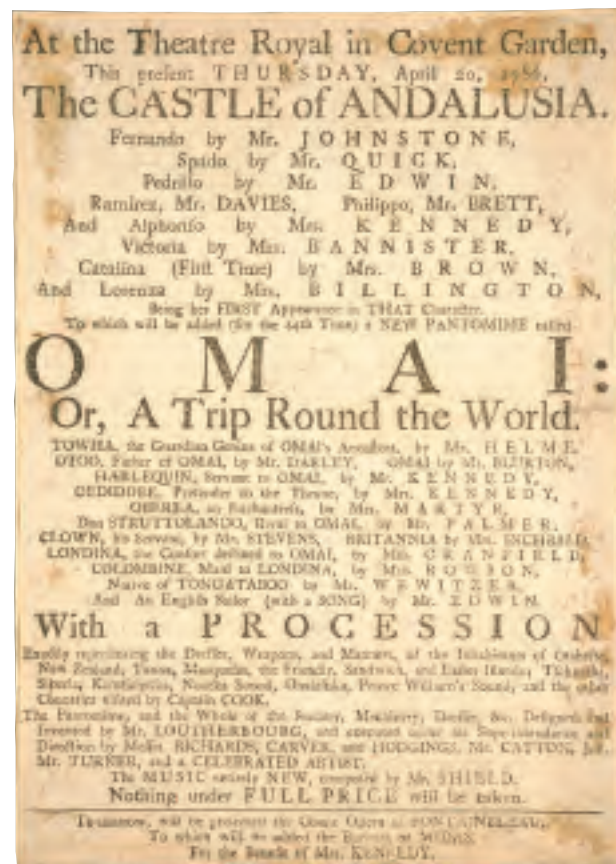
Spectacles of Knowledge: OMAI as Ethnographic Travelogue

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People have always visited museums to be entertained as much as instructed: even the most sober of these institutions has usually had to combine pedagogy with some measure of showmanship. Conversely, the theatre and related forms of popular spectacle have increasingly relished the role of teacher. Anyone in Britain around the time of the First Fleet, who wanted to learn about the fashionably exotic cultures of the South Seas, would have been wise to visit the myriad 'shows' of London.

Located mainly around Leicester Square, most of these exhibitions and spectacles aimed to entertain and instruct mixed audiences of men, women and children in exchange for a fee. Pseudo-scholarly methods of display, such as descriptive taxonomies, were often combined with innovative visual and mechanical marvels designed to impart a sense of wonder.

When the young German novelist Sophie von la Roche visited London in September 1786, eager to learn about the South Seas, one of her earliest actions was to scan through the long lists of spectacles featured in the daily papers.¹ The region was still very much in fashion. The official Admiralty account of Cook's fatal third voyage had been published only two years earlier in 1784. A *Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* had quickly gone



[Playbill for the 44th performance of Omai, or, A trip around the World]

20 April 1786

23.3 x 16.2 cm

into three editions, many reprints and numerous serialisations. Sophie von la Roche's appetite may have been freshly whetted by an edition in German, which appeared in 1786.²

Von la Roche began her quest on 7 September with a visit to the British Museum in Bloomsbury, which had



Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg (1740–1812)
Nootka or King G. Sound 1785, watercolour; 31 x 19 cm

been opened free to the public in 1759. Having told the librarian that she wanted to see the South Seas collection donated by that 'excellent man', Captain Cook, she was entranced at the range of objects on display, especially by an exquisite garment woven out of tiny red feathers that had belonged to the Otaheite 'King'.³ The following day at a cost of 2/6 she located a still 'vaster' Pacific collection at Sir Ashton Lever's Holiphusikon Museum in Leicester Square.⁴ Its Cook voyage objects were so numerous that they merited their own special gallery, and so tangible that they included the grisly heads of two cannibal warriors.⁵ Here and elsewhere von la Roche was struck by the way that the English conjoined science and commercial showmanship.⁶ Around the corner in Covent Garden a few days later, she viewed the personal South Seas collection of naturalist George Forster. The same precinct also provided her with the most entertaining of this swarm of spectacles, the 'jolly' pantomime.⁷

A hybrid genre with no real modern equivalent, the pantomime encompassed farce, topical satire, mime, song, dance, baroque allegory, romance, commedia dell'arte improvisation, theatrical tableaux and 'special effects' performance. The most talked about production out of Covent Garden Theatre in that year made a special point of its naturalistic knowledge content. *OMAI: Or, A Trip Round the World*, which had opened in December 1785, was manager Thomas Harris' bid to usurp the reputation of rival theatre Drury Lane as a venue for spectacle. Deliberately intended as the greatest blockbuster pantomime of the eighteenth century, *OMAI* gathered the combined production talents of set designer and special effects expert Philippe de Loutherbourg, playwright John O'Keeffe, musical composer William Shield and scene painter John Webber, plus at least four other 'artistic

gentlemen'. De Louthembourg led this team and was most responsible for imbuing *OMAI's* farcical plot with a powerful overlay of geographic and ethnographic realism. A member of both the French and English art academies, the Alsatian-born painter had by 1786 already produced lavish set designs for 30 London pantomimes. Over the previous 14 years he had revolutionised the dreary staging traditions of the London theatre. De Louthembourg possessed a landscape painter's talent for rendering vivid naturalistic scenes, combined with an engineer's understanding of the mechanics of illusion, including, depth of field, clockwork movement, realistic automata, and dynamic light and sound effects.⁸

The *Times* report on Boxing Day 1785 left its readers in no doubt that *OMAI* and de Louthembourg had broken fresh ground. The reviewer thought it rare for a pantomime to offer its audiences such lasting 'utility':

It may be considered a beautiful illustration of *Cook's Voyages*—an illustration of importance to the mature mind of an adult, and delightful to the tender capacity of an infant. The scenery is infinitely beyond any design or paintings the stage has ever displayed. To the rational mind what can be more entertaining than to contemplate prospects of countries in their natural colours and tints—to bring into living action, the customs and manners of distant nations! To see exact representations of their buildings, marine vessels, arms, manufactures, sacrifices and dresses?⁹

The newspaper reported that de Louthembourg had consulted Commander Phillip on naval matters and had employed John Webber, artist on the third Cook voyage, to advise on 'native' costumes and to paint occasional scenes. Judging from a sales catalogue compiled after de Louthembourg's death, Webber may

also have sold his old friend some original examples of 'Otaheitea dresses'.¹⁰

Historians have tended to echo the opinion of the *Times* reviewer on the subject of the pantomime's scenic authenticity. In a pioneering article of 1936 William Huse argued that each individual travel scene of the pantomime was based scrupulously on individual plates



Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg (1740–1812)
Obereyau [i.e. *Oberea*] *Enchantress* 1785, watercolour, 32.2 x 20.2 cm

from Webber, with occasional supplementation from William Hodge's illustrations of the second Cook voyage. Huse also listed similar sources for all of de Louthembourg's Polynesian costumes (the original drawings of these are in the National Library of Australia).¹¹

Even if we discount that the original Webber/Hodges drawings are in themselves highly mediated representations of reality, de Louthembourg did not in fact translate these drawings into faithfully equivalent set designs. Rather, he treated the voyage plates as a rich menu of possibilities from which he could construct dramatic and hybrid tableaux. His famous pantomime scene of the habitations of the Kamtschatka Balagans, for example, can be reconstructed through the detailed reports of a newspaper critic, through set descriptions on the original script, and through an original model maquette, which survives in the Victoria and Albert Museum.¹² Close comparison with Webber's plates shows that de Louthembourg actually blended elements from Nootka Sound and Oonalashka, that is, from the Asiatic and American segments of the third voyage. Such examples can be multiplied many times.¹³

We should not be surprised at this. De Louthembourg was a painter drawn powerfully to the aesthetic of the sublime. This is partly what made him a pioneer of romantic art. Many of his celebrated scenes in *OMAI*, such as the king's burial, the war canoes and the enchantress, were selected and embellished for their gothic frisson. Indeed, complaints from early critics that de Louthembourg had overused sublime effects forced substantial changes to both the script and set. In order to lighten the pantomime's mood, a new role was created for the prominent comedian, Delpini, and a machinery expert from France was hired to introduce

humorous mechanical effects.¹⁴ De Louthembourg's use of whirlpools, waterfalls, shipwrecks, fires and storms at sea was deliberately intended to display his genius as a special effects magician. He took pride in being able to simulate and extend nature's elemental dynamism using technological and pictorial illusion. Both as a painter and scene designer, he saw himself as a specialist in *trompe l'oeil*, someone able to generate realistic appearances by means of visual trickery and other modes of artistic legerdemain. Fascination with illusion lies at the heart of all de Louthembourg's art.¹⁵

We need also to appreciate the paradox that de Louthembourg, the trained engineer and technologist, was a devout believer in magic, necromancy and the supernatural. He possessed one of the most extensive occult libraries of the day and was a lifelong seeker after the philosopher's stone for transmuting gold and the universal elixir for ensuring eternal youth. In 1786 he actually contracted the alchemical charlatan, Count Cagliostro, to undertake a rejuvenation of himself and his young wife, Lucy, on a Swiss mountaintop.¹⁶ Theories of the alchemical transmutation of matter underlie the colouration and themes that de Louthembourg deployed within both his academic and popular art.

How then, do we assess the impact of the pantomime on those mixed audiences who attended its 70 performances of 1785–1786? Of course, we cannot be certain how audiences of two centuries ago processed *OMAI*'s multiple messages. But we do know that newspaper critics valued the pantomime, primarily, because it enabled them to soak up Enlightenment knowledge in an entertaining form. To use a more contemporary parlance, they felt they had undertaken a 'virtual' voyage in the South Seas. Time and again reviewers praised *OMAI* in the language of empiricism, calling it 'a living history' or

'a school for the history of man'. De Louthembourg would have seen this as a testimony to the effectiveness of the illusion.

Does it matter whether audiences of a popular pantomime were really receiving accurate geographical and ethnographic information about Mai and the Pacific peoples? With his usual acuity, Greg Dening has suggested that pantomime's juxtaposition of techniques of naturalistic illusion with a fantastical

magical plot probably enhanced its reality effects.¹⁷ De Louthembourg's spectacular travelogue inserted viewers into a framework of Enlightenment empiricism with its well-known love of measuring, categorising and constructing social laws. Attendees of *OMAI* were being exposed to a type of pseudo-realism disguised as entertainment. One likely consequence is that they took the pantomime much more seriously than usual; whether or not consciously, fun and farce were



John Cleveley (c.1745–1786), *Morea [i.e. Moorea] One of the Friendly Islands in the South Seas, 1777*
watercolour; 51.3 x 69 cm

transformed into serious knowledge. This in turn—we may speculate—helped to make the grandiose patriotic and imperial sentiments that issued from the mouths of the actors, who represented Mai and his kin, more plausible. Within this frothy, romping spectacle the seeds of the ethnographic cinema of the future were being germinated. The sometimes-insidious consequences of such pseudo-realism—as Roland Barthes has warned—are present with us still.¹⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Clare Williams (ed.), *Sophie in London, 1786, Being the Diary of Sophie von la Roche*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1933, p. 95.
- ² M.K. Beddie, *Bibliography of Captain James Cook, RN, FRS*. Sydney: Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library, 1970, pp. 298–309.

³ Williams, op. cit., pp. 109–110.

⁴ Ibid., p. 114.

⁵ Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 1978, p. 29.

⁶ Williams, op. cit., pp. 114, 118, 120–122, 141.

⁷ Ibid, p. 94.

⁸ John O’Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O’Keeffe*. 2 vols. London: Colburn, 1826, vol. 2, pp. 114–115; Christopher Baugh, *Theatre in Focus: Garrick and de Louthembourg*. Cambridge, UK, and Alexandria, Virginia: Chadwyck-Healy, 1990, pp. 24–35; Frederick Burwick, ‘Romantic Drama: From Optics to Illusion’, in Stuart Peterfreund (ed.), *Literature and Science: Theory and Practice*. Michigan: North Eastern University Press, 1990, pp. 167–173.

⁹ Quoted in Ralph Gilmore Allen, *The stage spectacles of Philip James de Louthembourg*. Dissertation, Yale, 1960;



William Woollett, engraver (1735–1785), after William Hodges (1744–1797), *The Fleet of Otabeite Assembled at Oparee* London: Wm. Strahan & Thos. Cadell, 1 February 1777, engraving; plate mark 24.7 x 39.5 cm

Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Microfilms, 1960, pp. 274–275. *The Rambler*, January 1786, likewise stressed that the materials had been drawn from 'authentic sources' and that 'the landscapes, scenery, dresses, character and manners ... we may depend are truly depicted'.

¹⁰ *A Catalogue of All the Valuable Drawings, Sketches, Sea Views and Studies. Of that Celebrated Artist Philip James de Loutherbourg, esq.* RA. London: Peter Coxe, 18 June 1812. The prefatory observations, written by his friends William Henry Pyne and Edwin Landseer, also stressed his commitment to scientific precision, including his special knowledge of 'Oriental Costume', see pp. 4–5.

¹¹ William Huse, 'A Noble Savage on the Stage', *Modern Philology*, vol. 32, February 1936: 303–316.

¹² *London Chronicle for 1785*, 20–22 December 1785: 595–596.

¹³ Allen, op. cit., pp. 288–290. He shows that de Loutherbourg has borrowed from Webber's plates 78, 48 and 52 in the account of Cook's third voyage, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*.

¹⁴ Allen, op. cit., pp. 270–272.

¹⁵ Pyne and Landseer, 'Observations', *A Catalogue of All the Valuable Drawings ...*, op.cit., pp. 5–6; William Henry Pyne, *Wine and Walnuts*. 2 vols. London: Colburn, 1823, vol. 1, pp. 281–303; Rüdiger Joppien (ed.), *Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, RA, 1740–1812*. Kenwood: Iveah Bequest, 1973, passim.

¹⁶ Iain McCalman, 'Mystagogues of Revolution: Cagliostro, de Loutherbourg and Romantic London', in James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds), *Romantic Metropolis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming-December 2000.

¹⁷ Greg Denning, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 269–271.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Lost Continent' and 'The Great Family of Man', in *Mythologies*. St Albans: Paladin, 1973, pp. 94–96, 100–102.



Philippe Jacques de Louterbourg (1740–1812), *Dancer, Otaite* 1785
watercolour; 31.3 x 20.3 cm