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the journal of media geography

Celestial Fire

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AN APHORISM BY WALTER BENJAMIN ENCAPSULATES my interest in exploring the place-image-media nexus. In perusing Benjamin's voluminous compendium, *The Arcades Project*, I came upon his deceptively simple statement: "Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability" (Benjamin 1999, 462-463). Long before the crisis of representation scrambled mimetic circuits, Benjamin captured the creative-destructive power of image. Once attuned, I encountered, seemingly at every turn, culturally mediated images relating to aging, place, and mobility, a long-standing research interest. Popular magazines such as *Travel 50 & Beyond*, *Where to Retire* and *Arizona Living* parading the elixir of anti-aging and agelessness rooted in mobility and place jumped off bookstore shelves (McHugh 2003), and I found myself tormented in viewing films depicting older folks feeling in place/out of place, such as Doug Hawes-Davis's documentary *This is Nowhere*, Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt*, and David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (McHugh 2005, 2007a, 2007b).

In reflecting on this, I realize that I did not pursue media geographies as a matter of calculated choice; rather, I felt compelled to respond to moving images that speak to disparate meanings of aging, place and mobility in our society and culture. Others surely have had analogous experiences. One might invert the question and ask: in our media-saturated culture how can a geographer avoid being drawn, in some fashion, to mediated geographies? Playing off the Greek origin of *Aether*, title of this newfound e-journal, can we say that the media writ large constitute the celestial fire of our age?

Stuart Aitken and Leo Zonn's (1994) essay, *Re-Presenting the Place Pastiche*, was an innervating introduction to film geography and an opening salvo in moving beyond mimetic, representational thinking. I recall reading their essay and experiencing a moment of delightful realization, writing in the margin: "we inhabit cinematic spaces!" Chris Lukinbeal (forthcoming) notes Aitken and Zonn's pioneering essay and expresses the point thusly: "Films are not merely images, but rather actively reconstruct our

lives.” A poignant illustration of the intertwining of film and life is Tina Kennedy’s (2007) paper “Living with Film: An Autobiographical Approach.” Tina presented her narrative in a colloquium at Arizona State, a heartfelt story that moved me greatly, a touching evocation of film, emotion, place, and identity.

Living with film is a slice of a daunting challenge in cinematic and media geographies: coming to grips with, and tracing out innumerable implications of, the implosion of the “real-reel” binary (Cresswell and Dixon 2002). Much of the time, of course, we are not cognizant of the deep conflation of real and mediated spaces and places in our daily lives and practices. Conspicuous examples bring it to the forefront. From the comfort of her motor home in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Missoula, Montana, a woman in the documentary film, *This is Nowhere*, speaks to the camera: “When somebody asks me, ‘Have you been to this city?’ I say I don’t know. I always ask him [indicating her husband]: ‘Were we there or did we see it on television?’” Film and media-related tourism is a striking example of the interplay of real and virtual worlds, as people engage and perform place in a panoply of productive and consumptive practices (Beeson 2005; Crouch, Jackson and Thompson 2005). A PhD student in geography at Arizona State, Ann Fletchall, is pursuing place making and reality TV via a case study of Orange County, California, setting for the popular shows *The o.c.* and *Laguna Beach*. Geopolitics is a field rife with thorny questions about the pervasive influence of mediated spaces and places, a point driven home in Carter and McCormack’s (2005) treatment of the film, *Black Hawk Down*, in relation to u.s. involvement in Somalia.

It is interesting to observe lingering attachment to the separation of the real and mediated in relation to place. An example can be found in remarks about thinned-out places made by the philosopher Ed Casey (2001, 684-685) in the course of elaborating his phenomenological schema of the ‘geographical self’:

It would follow that thinned-out places are those in which the densely enmeshed infrastructures of the kind Heidegger discusses are missing. Not only do such places not contain strictly, as on Aristotle’s model, they do not even hold, lacking the rigor and substance of thickly lived places. ... Think of the way in which programs on television or items on the Web melt away into each other as we switch channels or surf at leisure. In such circumstances, there is a notable *lability of place* that corresponds to a fickle self who seeks to be entertained: the “aesthetic self” as Kierkegaard might call it. The collapse of the kind of surface that is capable of *keeping something within* ... correlates with a self of infinite distractibility whose own surface is continually complicated by new pleasures: in short, a self that has become (in Deleuze and Guattari’s term) a “desiring machine” (emphasis in original).

This passage seemingly rests upon an all-too-tidy separation of real and mediated or virtual place, diminishing the latter vis-à-vis the former. Casey goes on to offer hope that all is not lost in the postmodern desert: “The more places are leveled down,

the more—not the less—may selves be led to seek out thick places in which their own personal enrichment can flourish” (p. 685). The self, says Casey, “is now able to move between virtual space and actual places—i.e. a space that does not require full engagement versus places that do...” (p. 685-686). Casey concludes this section of the essay equivocally, tacking a tad more favorably toward the virtual: “Despite an affinity for thick places, the contemporary self can flourish even in spaces that are disembodied, virtualized, and notably thin” (p. 686).

I quote Casey at some length to illustrate ambiguities and devilish difficulties in approaching place in binary fashion: real-virtual, thick-thin. How would a person weaned and fully immersed in the digital world and the Internet, for example, respond to Casey’s argument that she is navigating thinned-out spaces lacking in rigor and substance, that these navigations do not entail full engagement in the world, that her travels and experiences in virtual environments should be a springboard for more meaningful incorporation in real, thickly lived places? Would such questions register as intelligible?

A recent issue of the journal *Erdkunde* champions and celebrates the arrival of film geography as a bona fide subfield (Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2006; Aitken and Dixon 2006). The celestial fire burns bright in film. This chimes with rising concerns regarding affect and emotion in human geography (e.g. Anderson and Smith 2001; Thrift 2004; Davidson, Biondi and Smith 2005; Woodward, forthcoming). This is the direction in film geography that I find most innervating. Film engenders powerful affective currents and fields that are amplified and channeled in particular directions, constituting emotions when registered within bodies (Massumi 2002b; Carter and McCormack, 2005). Nowhere is this demonstrated with greater intensity than in Stuart Aitken’s (2007) deft treatment of Christopher Nolan’s disturbing film *Memento*.

Reading Brian Massumi’s (2002) book, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, was a mind expanding experience that launched me on a journey of Bergsonian-Deleuzian delight (Deleuze 2006, 1986; Massumi 2002a; Connolly 2002; Bogue 2003). Can an exploration of this ilk prove inevitable for anyone intrigued by society, culture and film? A morsel of this intrigue is provided by Deleuze in his final essay before his suicide, “Immanence: A Life” (Deleuze 2005, 31), part of his effort to flesh out the concept of the virtual:

A life contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities. What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality. The immanent event is actualized in a state of things and of the lived that make it happen.

I close with a Bergson-inspired observation: our passage through time and space is

not a succession of states; our experience is that of duration, a dynamic continuation of movement and sensation. Is it any wonder, then, that geographers turn to film in practicing and performing their art?

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