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The Middle of Where? Media Geography and the Middle East

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MUCH HAS HAPPENED IN THE MIDDLE EAST since the conceptual genesis of this *Aether* special issue, which began as a somewhat whimsical call for papers well over three years ago. While its lengthy delay in finding the published light of the online day has been exhaustive and frustrating at times, variously dictated by the long arms of university bureaucracy and the stilted feet of the California financial crisis, it gives us a chance to pause and ponder how the articles presented here provide insights into the complex and heterogeneous life of a region commonly termed: “The Middle East.” From the recent “Arab Spring” to Dubai’s financial crisis to the death of Osama bin Laden to the soon-to-come and long-overdue Palestinian move to formally declare their case for statehood in front of the United Nations, the events, people and places of the Middle East have continued to capture the attention of the news media – but it is attention to only a particular Middle East. The popular imagination, fueled in no small part through various media forms—from film to music to print media to the worldwide web—has stubbornly persisted in representing the entities assigned to this fuzzy region as ones largely dominated by violence/conflict and resources/revenue; when granted more complex light, “The Middle East” still remains in both its media and popular imaginings largely a spatial container of an always intersecting conundrum of territoriality, oil, religious fervor, conflict and death – in the ebbs and flows of its territorial application it seems “The Middle East” cannot escape its early twentieth century conceptual inception by the military mind of Alfred Thayer Mahan as an “arena of strategic operations” (Lewis and Wigen 1997, 65).

Perhaps, in some ways, this special issue of *Aether* is at least ostensibly guilty of a perpetuation of all of this. Indeed, our central concerns do not stray far from these popular representations – but this is to an end: sometimes one must wear the mask of the representational beast in order to slay it. In explorations of how media and geography

intersect, take root and bloom, we easily could have taken on flavor-of-the-day questions examining how social media has played an integral role in collective movements of revolution, resistance and resilience from Tunisia to Israel to Egypt to Syria or how various propagandistic productions are increasingly outlined through and constructed as media entertainment – for example, recent Iranian cinematic presentations of the immanent conquering of Jerusalem and al-Qaeda-produced cartoons doubling as youth recruitment devices. But all of this seems so secondary to, so contingent upon, what geographically inclined minds from Said (1978; 1993) to Gregory (1994; 2004) have told us is so central about—what is always in the middle of—any representational depiction of the Middle East: the geographical imagination.

As much as the region loosely stands together and endures in the popular and academic mind with somewhat simplified and essentializing representations, there is very little material extant coherency to its very geographical name. In any given representation, the region may lay across three continents—themselves no less entangled in politically convenient constructs of power and the (meta-)geographical imagination—and extend from the Maghreb to the Tibetan plateau and the sub-Asian continent to the northern frontiers of Afghanistan (Lewis and Wigen 1997). In its conflation with the world of Islam, a heterogeneous cosmos of ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences is left out of or displaced from its geographical space(s) – a move which in its most insidious maneuverings works to surgically sever Judeo-Christian history from its geographical realities and lay it, as if a Crusader prize, solely in the intellectual and spiritual lap of Euro-American lineage. In the ongoing claim that it holds a civilizational essence—one only need look as far as the vitriolic rhetoric of popular news pundits like Ann Coulter, Glenn Beck and Bill O'Reilly or films such as *Syriana* (2005) and *The Kingdom* (2007) and television shows such as *24* (2001-2010) where we are told, yes, there may be 'good' Arabs, but they inevitably (and predictably) must die—the Middle East continues to be the quintessential regionalized Other negatively defining "freedom" and "democracy"; the Germans, the Russians, the Japanese have all come and gone, the Chinese and North Koreans are simply either too distant or too irrelevant, in the search for the fetishized Other it seems that none can hold a villainous light to the enduring reel/real "Bad Arabs" (Shaheen 2009) and the concomitant ongoing civilizational threat—and threat to "civilization"—that is the Arab World: another simplified synonym for the Middle East that representationally homogenizes and excludes a kaleidoscope of internal and external difference.

The power of representation, as Debord (1967) understood so well, is not so much in what it portrays, but in what it conceals – and today media undoubtedly is the most powerful adjudicator and disseminator of what is to be shown and what is to be hidden. It is in this context that this special issue on media geography and the Middle East can be best understood. Our concerns with media representation(s) and the geographical imagination as they relate to the Middle East have, in some ways, a

very non-representational bent. That is, our explicit purposes and motivations are not to reveal more authentic, more exact, more accurate interpretations or meanings, but (i) to grapple with a dangerous a(e)ffective dark-side always stirring within media representation itself and (ii) to point to how lights of understanding may emerge through representation's subterranean flows to grant subtle insights into a more complicated, more affirmative Middle East.

We begin this task with Murat Es's confrontation of the spatial and geopolitical imaginations at play in Zack Snyder's and Frank Miller's *300* (2007; 1998). Despite its readily explicit Manichean vision of history, culture and geography, Es explains how the film also offers opportunities for "negotiated spectatorship" that opens "alternative routes of identification with Spartans by those who are located outside the film's Westcentric radar of signification." In and through this argument, Es points to a "doubly monstrous" (Craine *et al.* forthcoming) life of film and graphic novels and underscores how with(in) any media object there are always lurking powers of both negation and affirmation.

The following paper by Linda Quiquívix and I examines the politics of identity, mobility and place in the context of Israeli military occupation of the Golan Heights. We work through Eran Riklis's film *The Syrian Bride* (2005) to shed light on how practiced conceptions of space and place have affective and violent consequences on the everyday lives of the Druze ethno-religious minority. This paper works doubly in this context to discuss a people of the Middle East often ignored and overlooked in media representations and popular imaginings and to underscore how attempts to fix bodies in place deny the possibility that society and space could be ordered or encountered differently.

Maytha Alhassen expands on the themes of the first two papers in her discussion of how popular North American hip hop artists visually and lyrically imagine, conceptualize and represent the Middle East. She identifies two dominant modes of representation: "One, Middle East Conflict as the pinnacle of conflict, used as a comparative tool in rhyme. Second, Middle East/Oriental cultural fetishism/Third World Exoticism: Bellydancers, camels, headwraps, merriment, desert expanses, and a conflation of Indian and Middle Eastern cultural art forms." Following this analysis, she explores how alternative hip hop artists and their media productions present informed and nuanced challenges to more mainstream hip hop representations of the region.

Karen Culcasi and Mahmut Gokmen turn our discussion of Middle East representations to printed media and the body, particularly the beard. They examine "representations of the male body as a site and symbol of difference and 'otherness'" and the beard, "whether worn by al-Qaeda fighters or Afghan citizens, as key symbols in the manufacturing of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim men as 'the dangerous other.'" These bodily representations presented and perpetuated by and through different media forms, they argue, not only work as homogenizing forces of the region and its people in the popular imagination, but have real material consequences through the social discrimination they promote and the cultural and political hegemony they propagate.

El Hadi Jazairy takes on these points of representation and their material impacts through a much different scalar lens. He explores how images produced through 3D immersive worlds such as Second Life and Google Earth impact perceptions and material designs of the concrete city, focusing particularly on the Palm Islands and The World archipelago in Dubai (UAE). Through a flux of orientalist imaginings, global trajectories of capital flows, trends in urban development and transformation, and “the smart positioning of a brand in relation to the emergence of virtual and GIS technologies and environments,” Dubai, Jazairy argues, is working to cement its place as an important node in the global economy.

Following in a different key the passion and energy of all of these papers, we close our special issue on an emotionally trying and difficult-to-accept somber tone. Not too long before our issue even began to churn with any true intensity, one of our authors, Mahmut Gokmen, left us far too soon as the consequence of a tragic accident. While many of us never had the good fortune of meeting Mahmut in person or corresponding with him at any length, Necati Anaz and Karen Culcasi—his friends, colleagues and co-author—introduce us to him and his memory in heart-felt notes.

So, too, has the time of the long delay of this issue’s publication brought to us another loss: my most intense, most intensive and most personal connection to the Middle East. On March 31, 2009, the day before I was to fly to New York and take part in the “CRISIS STATES: The Uncertain Future of Israel/Palestine” conference at Columbia University, my mother suffered a massive stroke that ultimately took her from my sisters and I a few days later.

An immigrant from a small, predominantly Melkite, village in southern Lebanon, our mother had an ambivalent relationship to the Middle East. Undoubtedly, this ambivalence was born in part as a consequence of being a forceful and vocal woman whose early years were spent embedded in the suffocations of patriarchal society and as a pacifist whose pacifism was increasingly challenged and eroded by the visual, rhetorical and ideological hatred and violence she confronted as a professional Arabic-English translator every day. Even across the sea and ocean, settling over 7,000 miles away in Los Angeles, it seems Mom could never get away from the middle of this particular Middle East.

People have told me I have my mother’s eyes, and while our ambivalences never exactly saw eye-to-eye, like Mom, it is behind these Arab eyes that I see the world and imagine it could be otherwise. This is not to suggest some absurd dualism severing the imagination from the world. Rather, it is to underscore that the imagination is always embodied, and thus always acting and acted upon. This is, if there must be, the central point of this special issue: there is a materiality to the imagination – and it is here where geography is continually re-born; and in the fuzziness of its re-births, in movements between opaqueness and clarity, certainty and the unknown—through the subterranean and almost imperceptible labyrinths congealing affect and imagination

into memory and action, emotion and reason—the Middle East becomes in the middle of all of us as we watch and read the news, flip through television shows, gaze at movies, surf the web and bump to music.

To dismiss the impact of this life of media and geography on the beliefs, practices, materialities and politics of the everyday is a very dangerous, and indeed at times very deadly, proposition. All we need do is look at how the American public so readily, so willfully—so ignorantly—through its still unacknowledged prejudice and racism allowed a line to be drawn between Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime in 'justifying' war in Iraq or how the Christian Right continues to promote through largely unchallenged Orientalist appropriations and imaginings a geopolitics excusing the privilege of the few and the marginalization, dispossession and suffering of the many. Spinoza once warned us to be on guard against the slave in all of us and Deleuze and Guattari, following Foucault, the fascist. So, too, must we be wary and on guard against the Orientalist, the imperialist and the intellectual colonialist lurking within. It is for this reason that we ask, and we ask all of you to ask: The Middle East: The Middle of Where?

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