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# Kaleidoscope Eyes: Geography, Gender, and the Media

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the journal of media geography

## Kaleidoscope Eyes: Geography, Gender, and the Media

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We are suggesting...a change in attitudes and perceptions, a substantial shift in the angle of vision, a recognition, in short, of the supreme social, and thus geographic, fact that women, as individuals or as a class, exist under much different conditions and constraints in a world quite different from, however, closely linked with, that inhabited by males. *The human geographer must view reality stereoscopically, so to speak, through the eyes of both men and women, since to do otherwise is to remain more than half-blind.*

(Zelinsky, Monk and Hanson 1982, 353)<sup>1</sup>

Picture yourself in a boat on a river,  
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies  
Someone calls you, you answer quite slowly,  
A girl with kaleidoscope eyes.

*The Beatles, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" (1967)*

WHEN I BEGAN MY GRADUATE WORK, Jacqueline Burgess' "The Production and Consumption of Environmental Meanings in the Mass Media: A Research Agenda for the 1990s" (1990) and Wilbur Zelinsky, Janice Monk, and Susan Hanson's "Women and Geography: A review and prospectus" (1982) inspired and supported me as I took my first steps into media work. I was interested in landscape photography and gender, wondering about gendered experiences of place as well as gendered gazing at landscapes and peoples. Or as Burgess (1990, 157) phrased it:

...how landscapes, places and nature are encoded in the press, television, radio, the cinema and advertising and what do they signify for different groups of consumers? How do class, gender, ethnicity and locality affect the ways in which media texts are produced and consumed?

(Burgess 1990, 157)

I wrestled through a master's degree and then a PH.D. in geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. There were times when it was challenging to be a woman interested in gender, geography, and media. After Gillian Rose's *Geography & Feminism* (1993) was published, interested faculty and graduate students got together in the library to discuss it: I was the only woman in the room. Later in my graduate career, I received a teaching assistantship in Women's Studies out of pity, I'm convinced: a male advisor's incredibly sexist letter of recommendation drew their gaze to our department. Time has passed but in many ways questions of gaze continue, for me as an area of research interest and personally as the only woman faculty in an all-male department, and in terms of work being done in geography, gender and the media.

The potential elements for study in the realm of geography, gender, and the media includes a great variety of media from the news (print, magazine, television, internet, advertising) to creative works (films, books, comics, graphic novels, photographs, websites) as well as a variety of geographical themes (landscape, globalization, regions, movement, etc.) and gender issues (masculinity, femininity, feminism, GLBT studies). This is well beyond the "stereoscopic view" that Zelinsky, Monk, and Hanson advocated for geography in 1982 but a virtual "kaleidoscope"—endless potential patterns, a riot of colors and shapes (Zelinsky, Monk, and Hanson 1982). But a kaleidoscope it is not just the patterns, but also the mechanism to create these patterns, and the human eye to gaze through the kaleidoscope to these patterns. On this occasion, *Aether's* first issue, I'd like to think about geography, gender, and the media and on how *Aether* offers an opportunity to draw our gaze to patterns that matter.

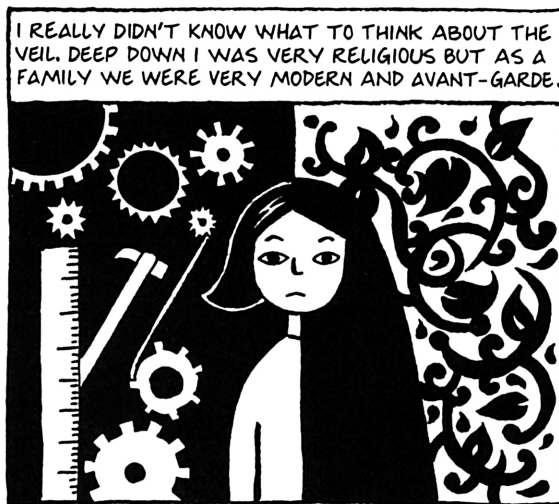
### THOUGHTFUL GAZING

Geography as a discipline has long been tied to viewing and the gaze. Historically, early geography was based on what had been observed, translating these observations into written descriptions (Driver 2003, 227). As Western society has developed its science and technology, we have grown more and more dependent on visual information—photographs, maps, satellite imagery. A range of mediums offer us access to this information: paper, television, computer screens, websites, iPhones, etc. Even the language we use in geography is filled with visual references—"reading the landscape," "world view," "visualization" (Sui 2000). However, despite our growing visual culture we seldom question this visual information for its "accuracy," let alone their implications (and by "we" I mean geographers as well as contemporary Americans) (Goin 2001). It is easier to glance at the images, accept them, and then move on to the next image. Early work on the gaze began with art history and film studies, particularly early feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Linda Nochlin, and Griselda Pollock (Davidov 1998; Mulvey 1989; Parker and Pollock 1981).<sup>2</sup> These feminist scholars' groundbreaking work examined what it means to be both the subject of the gaze and a constructor of the gaze. Women have traditionally been the object of the gaze (gaze as masculine) and that there are differences produced when women "guide the gaze," creating art or directing films.

When Zelinsky, Monk and Hanson called for a “stereoscopic” view, geography was just venturing into geographic perspectives on women and women’s lives, refocusing the discipline’s gaze as it were. Gillian Rose’s work has pointed to the role of masculine gaze in constructing geographic knowledge (Rose 1993, 88). Susan Ford suggests “Feminist geographies can enrich the discipline by subordinating the ‘male gaze’ to being one look amongst many” (Ford 1991, 154). In 2000, Daniel Sui called for a shift in geography’s metaphors from the visual to the “aural,” linking this shift to the increased number of women in geography and use of interviews and other methods by feminist geographers that involve “really listening” (Sui 2000, 333). While Sui’s call was very intriguing, geographers still seem attached to our gazing traditions and contemporary postmodern culture seems, if possible, even more visual and media oriented than ever, which makes it all the more important for geographers to be conscious about the gaze and our gazing. John Wylie’s “Depths and folds: On landscape and the gazing subject” draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty to move landscape beyond mere gaze to a “geopolitics” involving not only visual culture but also performance/embodiment and materialities (Wylie 2006, 533).<sup>3</sup> Today, geography has moved beyond a mere stereoscopic view but in many ways we are still coming to terms with our “gazing.”

#### A TURN OF THE KALEIDOSCOPE

I would like to play with the concept of gender and the gaze, to turn the kaleidoscope as it were, and play with some potential patterns of geography, gender, and the media, and dream a little of the “tangerine trees and marmalade skies” that *Aether* promises.



**Figure 1** This image of Marjane captures the different worlds she occupies (Satrapi 2003, 6).

*From Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, ©2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*

One element of gaze that has great potential for geography is the increased involvement of women in constructing the gaze in a variety of mediums. I would like to highlight three potential areas, drawing from graphic novels, film and television journalism.

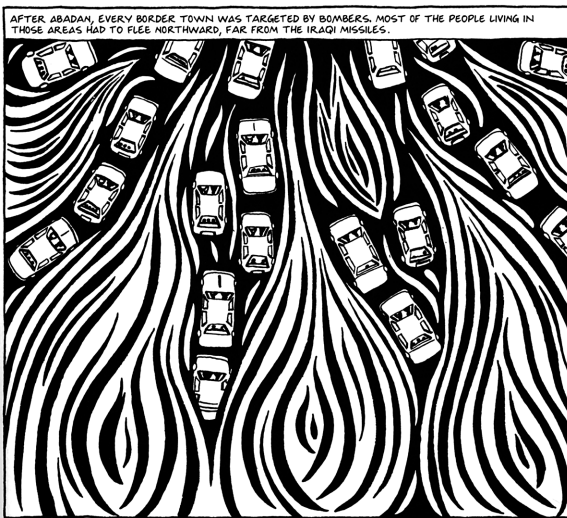
Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a graphic novel/ autobiography of girlhood in Iran during the 1979 Islamic Revolution and war with Iraq (2003).<sup>4</sup> With its strong black and white graphics (Figure 1), it captures the changing geography of a girl moving

from childhood towards adulthood, as well as the changing geography of Iran as it moves from the more liberal regime of the Shah to the tight control of the Ayatollah Khomeini (Figure 2). Comic books are a medium that have long been associated more with young men than with young women, a landscape traditionally of busy women and heroic, powerful men (Wright 2001, 250). Over the last twenty-five years, women have moved into authoring comics and graphic novels in increasing numbers. Satrapi's foray into graphic novels represents one way women shift from the object of the gaze to creators of the gaze, creating works that communicate their "view." According to Satrapi (2003, 11):

We learn about the world through images all the time. In the cinema we do it, but to make a film you need sponsors and money and 10,000 people to work with you. With a graphic novel, all you need is yourself and your editor... Of course, you have to have a very visual approach to the world. You have to perceive life with images—otherwise it doesn't work. The point is that you have to know what you want to say, and find the best way of saying it.

(Satrapi 2003, 11.)

Satrapi's works capture an Iranian view of its history and politics for a transnational audience of men and women, but specifically a woman's perspective of the experience of becoming "veiled."<sup>5</sup> Through the imposition of and policing of veil and dress, Satrapi's



**Figure 2** Satrapi's bold graphics captures the sense of movement and urgency in this panel of border town residents fleeing Iraqi missiles (Satrapi 2003, 89).

From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris, ©2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

text and graphics capture how "an oppressive state regime inscribes itself on the body of the individual and nation" (Tarlo 2007, 356). In *Persepolis*, it is through appearance, the ways in which others gaze upon you, that your political position is established. In a serious yet amusing turn of events, Marjane is stopped by female Guardians of the Revolution and questioned about a Michael Jackson button she is wearing on her denim jacket: she tries to convince them it is Malcolm X. Satrapi captures and communicates her own gaze as she documents her youthful attempts at expressing

herself in her clothing and its ramifications, as well as capturing her evolving landscape and how space comes to define both her dress and behavior.

The films of Mira Nair, such as *Mississippi Marsala* (1991) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), captures Nair's view of the changing landscape of women globally. *Mississippi Marsala* depicts the struggles of a young woman of Indian ethnicity (from Uganda), caught between American culture and her parents' Indian traditions and values as she becomes involved with an African-American man. *Monsoon Wedding* uses a wedding in India to pull together a family scattered around the world, with one foot in the traditional and the postmodern worlds. Nair uses the medium of film to explore how women negotiate our globalized, postmodern landscape:

She has always, the filmmaker says, 'been drawn to stories of people who live on the margins of society; people who are on the edge or outside, learning the language of being in between; dealing with the question, 'What, and where is home?'

(Simpson 1992, 67)

Nair is deeply intertwined in her subject matter: being an example of it herself, capturing it on film, and catering to this audience with her work, with *Monsoon Wedding* finding success in the United States, Britain, and India (Sharpe 2005, 61). As she explores themes of home and margins, mobility and transition, Nair uses almost exclusively the visual: "I make images in my work. I don't pen words" (Nair quoted in Rivera 2007, 82). The gaze is one of Nair's hallmarks with complicated "gazing" found in many of her works. *Mississippi Masala*, for example, captures a clash of cultures "between Indian Africans who have never seen India and African Americans who have never seen Africa. In the background are anxious white Americans who are equally dislocated as the country changes around them" (Simpson 1992, 67). Rather than a male or an imperial gaze, Nair constructs interracial gazing: "traditionally subjugated characters look back, stereotypes are challenged, and the gaze, with its inherent anxieties and domination, becomes a mutual process of looking" (Klaver et al. 1998, 12).

While new forms of the gaze are possible, old habits are hard to break. Women newscasters are not "new" to the newsroom, but their positions are still being negotiated, particularly when it comes to locations and the gaze.<sup>6</sup> A year ago, Katie Couric became the first woman to anchor a network newscast, the CBS Evening News. Couric's occupation of the seat long held by legendary journalist Dan Rather prompted Rather to comment that CBS executives had tried to increase viewers by "dumbing it down and tarting it up" (Shales 2007). Rather then backpedaled and tried to explain that he was "trying to make a larger point about dangerous trends I see in broadcast news." However, the comments were widely seen as directed at Couric's relocation into the anchor position, a location expected to command respect and demonstrate intelligence, as they guide the audience through the news. Couric long anchored NBC's Today Show, a morning news

and entertainment program. “Dumbing down” and “tarting” can be read as gendered, associated more with female newscasters, who are often viewed as being hired more for their looks, to be the subject of the gaze, rather than the focuser of the gaze.

In May 2007, *The Daily Show* correspondent Samantha Bee did a report on “News I’d Like to F@#k.”—“I’m a n.i.l.f. hunter and the 24 hour news networks are my Serengeti.”<sup>7</sup> Bee’s commentary on the attractive newswomen points to the gendered gaze, even when it comes to such serious news as the Iraq war: “Take CNN... Their coverage has proved that war is hell—o ladies! Jennifer Eccleston’s screen says Baghdad but her open neckline says bag these.” According to Bee:

News anchors used to be just pretty enough that you could spend a half hour a night getting informed. But now they’re so hot I just want to stay home, draw a steamy bath and inform the shit out of myself.

*Samantha Bee, 2007*

Bee highlights the “so hot” newscasters (compared to “pretty enough” newscasters such as Jane Pauley and Linda Ellerbee), categorizing them by location/network (“Fox... is the *Hustler* of news networks”). While women now occupy forty percent of the all jobs in TV and radio newsrooms, physical attractiveness, in men as well as women, is still a crucial factor in obtaining positions on air (Bauder 2007). Bee challenges convention by addressing the overt sexuality of women newscasters head on in a satirical format, her own gender key to the commentary. Bee’s subject matter, her forthright gaze, and her use of raw language, pushes convention in ways associated more with masculinity than femininity, an irony as the pioneer women journalists often felt, in order to succeed, they needed to be less feminine and more masculine. But Bee’s subject, gaze, and language are more associated with “private” masculinity than the public masculinity displayed by today’s male newscaster. Bee’s language and gaze make the piece funny yet critical: done by a male correspondent on air, it would have come off as disturbing.

These three brief examples provide a glimpse of the ways in which geography, gender, and media interact with the gaze, particularly with the practice and construction of the gaze, but more importantly how binaries can be broken down through this process. The visual work of Nair and Satrapi explores “the interconnections between the local and the global,” offering an opportunity to see “the experiences of women ‘over there’ as interrelated to our lives, actions, and policies ‘over here’” (Hobson 2006/2007, 96 and 104). The case of women newscasters demonstrates that while women are increasingly involved in framing our news (framing as providing meaning to a series of events), they are yet part of the image itself (that is tied to the gaze). But by acknowledging or even bridging these dichotomies, such as in Bee’s commentary, light can be shed on this relationship and its contradictions. Wilbur Zelinsky, in “Geographer as Voyeur,” his essay on fieldwork, laments the demise of fieldwork in the face of “virtual” ways of sensing the world (Zelinsky 2001, 3). Zelinsky (2001, 8) uses “voyeur” to refer to a

return to fieldwork and the pleasures it entails: “an inspired voyeurism will someday regain its rightful place as one of the necessary means for knowing the world.” But, in my mind, both the fieldwork (practice) and the media (representation) are forms of gazing, and which have traditionally been constructed as masculine. Gunhild Setten, in exploring notions of gendering and the male gaze in a Nordic context, suggests a new possible way of approaching this intersection of gender and geography that echoes Wylie—that “identity formed through practice might...contribute to a re-definition of dichotomies and categories by focusing on what we *do* and not exclusively on what we *are*” (Setten 2003, 134).<sup>8</sup>

### KALEIDOSCOPE EYES

Human geographers must now view our world with kaleidoscope eyes – helping humans to make sense of our geography, media, and gender saturated world. Between the various medias, genders, sexualities, and cultures globally, there is tremendous potential for some spectacular patterns to be brought into focus. I am looking forward to seeing the patterns *Aether* publishes—in terms of the topics it covers but also in the forms. Photographer Peter Goin has questioned the use of photography as “illustrative and subordinate to the written text” and that “the track record reflects underutilized and underrepresented potential for photographic collaboration” (Goin 2001, 34). James Ryan has called for “positive engagements between geographers and visual artists, such projects produce new understandings of visual art as a form of conceptual and practical enquiry and academic geographical research as creative practice” (Ryan 2003, 236). *Aether’s* online format means that the envelope can be pushed further in terms of incorporating not just images but also media clips...and who knows what else? While the name *Aether* seems to suggest transparency, it also suggests greater connectivity. But a kaleidoscope is not just the patterns, it is also the mechanism. *Aether* can be a means to view these patterns but also the mechanism to bring these patterns into play.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup>Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” first published in 1971, is widely regarded as opening the door to work in feminist visual culture (Nochlin 1988).

<sup>3</sup>Gillian Rose’s commentary “On the need to ask how, exactly, is geography ‘visual?’” points also to the performance element, specifically the use of slides in teaching and presentations.

<sup>4</sup>An animated feature based on *Persepolis* (2003) is scheduled to be released in 2007. The film shared the Jury Prize at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. (with *Silent Light*).

<sup>5</sup>A great review of *Persepolis* appears in the journal *Fashion Review* (Tarlo 2007).

<sup>6</sup>This discussion was inspired by Scott Rodgers, “Reporting live from ?”: Researching spatial ontologies of journalism,” *Geography and the Media IV: Journalism, 2007 AAG Annual Meeting*, San Francisco.

<sup>7</sup>Textually this was how the word appeared on television screens but Bee said the word on the air with censor beeping over it, hardly obscuring the profanity.

<sup>8</sup>Emphasis is Setten’s.



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