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USSY 227 – Ehrlich

Travel Writing on Screen

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Cambridge Companion Chapter 6 Notes + Summary:

An Appropriated Middle East

* Middle East defined as the sea and land stretching between a farther East (India) all the way to the westernmost territories of Asia and the eastern Mediterranean
* Middle East extended to include the expanding Ottoman Empire and the land it controlled
* religious and international conflict defined the middle east as a border zone
* the powerful Ottoman empire and its expansion threatened the borders of European countries
* Ottoman Empire not only dangerous militarily, but also with the cultural views of the society. Empire had alternative views that Europeans disagreed with
* repulsion of the empire was reflected in travel writing by perpetuating stereotypes of middle easterners
* Ottoman empire sees drastic change in power during battle of Lepanto in 1572
* “One of the truisms of the scholarship on travel to, and travel writing on, the Middle East is that both were indices to Western and especially British political military superiority” (106)
* “British curiosity about the Orient and distinct Anglo-American travel cultures are taken as the ultimate sign of an asymmetry of power between Britain and the Middle East; and the Western traveler’s eye is identified as an ‘imperial eye’, performing a colonial act of appropriation” (106)
* by 1978, it is said that the Oriental had become the most influential paradigm in studies of travel writing and colonial cross-cultural exchanges
* travel writing compared the West and the East: “Christianity and Islam, rationalism and its absence, progress and stagnation” (107)
* travel writing depicted “the oriental despot, the corrupt prophet Muhammad, the religiously fanatic Muslim, the lascivious oriental female, and the somewhat different image of the noble Arab nomad” (107)
* the middle eastern traveler has changed over time, so viewing the Middle East in a binary way is inexplicable
* pilgrimage the dominant form of travel throughout the Middle East
* curiosity about the world a sin in Christianity -> found loophole to explore Middle East anyways
* revitalization of travel in the Middle East coincided with mechanization of travel, but not directly a cause of it
* reports of Middle Eastern villages as places of no antiquity
* “The interchangeability of past and present and of text and land made it possible for travelers to locate themselves in Christian eschatology as active agents and at the same time strengthened their sense of identity as ‘true Christian’” (110)
* “Whereas the evangelical travelogue and the description or survey of antiquities largely ignored Muslim culture and society, the ethnography focused on Muslim customs and manners” (110)
* Westerners viewed Eastern private life, sexuality, and the segregation of women and polygamy very controversial
* liberty signifies “a complex or juridical, customary, and economic freedoms and above all sexual freedom, which Enlightenment concepts did not extend to women” (112)
* not all writers were capable of tolerance towards the culturally different
* depictions of Arabia are ridden with ambiguities and contradictions
* Arabian travel not focused until mechanized travel could conquer the landscape
* travelers individual journeys shaped their political vision of the peninsula, as well as building new identities as Orientalists
* the vast emptiness of the Middle Eastern landscape impinges on the traveler
* “Travelers endow the desert with redemptive and purifying powers which ‘cleanse’ the suffering individual” (115)
* travelers described their guides as companions and metaphorically related to them as a sibling
* male travelers celebrated the noble Middle Easterners ‘manliness,’ that made him an “equal” to an upper-class Englishman
* “The traveler’s project of humanizing the Arab, documenting his life and making him audible is marked by a paradox” (117)

***Summary***

In Billie Melman’s essay *The Middle East/Arabia: ‘the cradle of Islam’*, he briefly recounts a history of the Middle East, land once under the rule of the Ottoman Empire which stretches between the westernmost territories of Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. The powerful Ottoman rule saw swift and vast military expansion that encroached on Western territories and threatened with an alternative culture that had replaced rationalism with disagreeable ideals. Chapter 6 of the Cambridge Companion outlines the development, diversity, and coexistence of “distinct travel cultures and traditions of writing” (107). Melman begins with a brief examination of travel writing paradigms that saw growth in Middle Eastern discourse during times of colonial intervention, along pilgrimages, and within an appropriated Middle Eastern culture. The chapter then goes on to discuss Arabia and the effects of the dessert and harrowing landscape in general that could cleanse the suffering individual and impinge upon the travel writer himself. It is in the descriptions of Arabia that the reader may notice a change in travel writing focus. Whereas previous writing was ridden with stereotypes and discontent for Middle Eastern customs, the travel writer in Arabia described their guides as companions and developed a bond among siblings. Male traveler writers even celebrated the noble Middle Easterners ‘manliness,’ that made him an “equal” to an upper-class Englishman.

***Quotes***

* “Travelers endow the desert with redemptive and purifying powers which ‘cleanse’ the suffering individual” (115)
* “The interchangeability of past and present and of text and land made it possible for travelers to locate themselves in Christian eschatology as active agents and at the same time strengthened their sense of identity as ‘true Christian’” (110)
* “British curiosity about the Orient and distinct Anglo-American travel cultures are taken as the ultimate sign of an asymmetry of power between Britain and the Middle East; and the Western traveler’s eye is identified as an ‘imperial eye’, performing a colonial act of appropriation” (106)
* Travel writing compared the West and the East: “Christianity and Islam, rationalism and its absence, progress and stagnation” (107)

***Questions***

* Much of what I read seemed the typical Middle Easterner was appropriated and stereotyped in past travel writing like he is in modern society: backwards views on the world, an absence of rationalism, and intense hatred. Do modern views of Muslims and Middle Easterners in general originate from history’s travel writing? Do we draw a lot of our prejudice today from men and women who once wrote about the Middle East?
* Melman’s description of Arabia seems to be marked by a paradigm shift. Before the Arabian section, Middle Easterners were viewed as below that of most Westerners in the eyes of travel writers. Afterwards, Melman, even unsure himself, says noble Arabians were viewed as equals to the upper-class Englishman. How did this change come about? Melman says that travel writer’s political views were shaped by their individual experiences. Did noble Arabians reflect upon travel writers well enough to inspire this change?