Mobile Citizens, Media States: A Panel at the 2000 MLA Convention

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THE IDEA FOR THIS PANEL GREW OUT OF DISCUSSIONS AMONG ANTON KAES, DAVID RODOWICK, AND ME DURING OUR STINT as members of the *PMLA* Editorial Board in 1998–99. We were interested in developing a theme that would build on some of the issues raised in a prior *PMLA* special topic devoted to globalizing literary studies but that would concentrate more pointedly on the politics of transnational cultural production and the effect of global media on literature, art, and cinema. Working with the assumption that categories of citizenship and local forms of identity have become increasingly mobile, nomadic, and hybrid and drawing on theories of transnational citizenship in philosophy and social theory, we identified a number of interrelated subjects as our focus: the internationalization of aesthetics in a global culture industry; the influence of globally exported mass culture on nation-states worldwide; the consequences of the emergence of "cybernations"—virtual communities defined by electronic and Internet culture; the question of whether the dynamic push for economic and cultural internationalism will produce a return to political nativism and a renewed insistence on cultural difference; the politics of translation, not only across borders but in aesthetic exchanges between literature and cinematic and televisual forms; the shifting tensions between monolingualism and nonstandard language as new, displaced minority cultures emerge as consumers of transnational media and makers of alternative literatures and media; and the relevance of analogies between the borderless cartographies of the new Europe and medieval Christendom to discussions of global cultural production.

I would like to take up the last topic briefly in proposing neomedievalism as an appropriate paradigm for thinking through new conditions of mobile citizenship and the emergence of media states. This is not the new medievalism of historicist textual scholars such as Stephen Nichols, Gabrielle Shapiro, and Howard Bloch but rather a conceptual rubric drawn from the work of a loosely affiliated group of social scientists who use the term to describe resemblances between contemporary global civil society and ambiguous jurisdictional territorialism before

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the emergence of the modern state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[1]

According to these neomedievalists, Euroland, as an international economic forcefield, has surpassed the individual countries that compose it. Polycentric, digitalized multicultures straddling borders are seen as the latter-day equivalents of medieval fiefdoms or the papacy in the supervision of the citizen. Sovereign institutions such as the church, guilds, and feudal cities are aligned with contemporary transnational corporations, security companies, and semiautonomous institutional entities such as theme parks and universities. This new medievalism underscores many of the problematic aspects of Euroland as a borderless world by evoking a fortress mentality and pointing to the efforts of European countries to reborder their physical boundaries through selective surveillance and patrol.

Drawing on the seminal work of Hedley Bull—an Oxford professor of international relations who, in his book *The Anarchical Society*, published in the 1970s, introduced the new medievalism as a way of describing the future European Union under conditions of enhanced global capitalism and technological unification—social theorists such as James Anderson, Paul Hirst, John Ruggie, Stephen Kobrin, Richard Matthew, and Susan Strange advanced the idea that enhanced globalization in the world economy has led to the multiplication of political loyalties and the diffusion of political authority.[2] Anderson writes:

> The European Union featured prominently in Hedley Bull's speculations about a new medievalism, a reincarnation of the vertically segmented and overlapping forms of authority which existed in Europe before the rise of the modern state. He hypothesized that the new medievalism might arise by various means [. . .] including the development of hybrid forms, with a loss of the state's monopoly on political sovereignty, and increasing ambiguity about where sovereignty was to be found.

Anderson associates medievalism with the "unbundling" of modern state sovereignty:

> Whereas the medieval-to-modern transformation involved sovereignty over everything, secular and spiritual, being bundled together in territorial states, we may now be witnessing an accelerated *un*bundling of territoriality, with the example of the growth of "common markets" and of various transnational (or, more strictly speaking, transstate) functional regimes and political communities not delimited primarily in territorial terms. (134)

Though Anderson acknowledges that "talk about the 'end' of territorially based sovereignty, postmodernist ideas about the 'death' of states and their replacement by regions, or glib notions of a 'borderless world' or a 'space of flows' replacing a 'space of places' " are premature and problematic, he seems to ignore his own admonishments in presaging a condition of neomedieval borderlessness based on emergent forms of transterritorialism in contemporary Europe.

Anderson projects the expanded field of Euroculture as a scene of adventure playgrounds and enterprise zones. This internationalized society calls for "flexible citizens"—elites who, in the European context, might maintain a business address in London, a residence in France, and a vacation home in Italy.[3] The new breed of Eurocitizen transforms the national subject into a multicultured microcosm, a miniaturized state without borders or a postnational vector of cultural crossover. The stress on elites is crucial to the neomedieval model of mobile citizenship, since, as Anderson points out, elites provided medieval Christendom with transnational, theocratic allegiances: the "family interconnections of medieval Europe's ruling class," "common and inclusive religious and legal systems," "Latin as the common elite language," and the "belief that political units were allotted in a universal and God-given order" (141).

Where Anderson emphasizes the economic and political effect of territorial unbundling on

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the European Union, Stephen Kobrin, Richard Matthew, and Robert Kaplan have broadened the application of neomedievalist analogies, comparing the "disorder and violence of the early Middle Ages" to the breakdown of civil society and the rise of crime in much of the Western world and likening the architecture of "medieval castles and moats" to "modern suburban walled and gated communities" (Kobrin 366). These communities are "interdictory spaces" in Steven Flusty's terms, characteristically designed "to intercept and repel or filter would-be users" (qtd. in Bauman 20) and offering, according to Zygmunt Bauman, "a new urban equivalent of the moats and turrets that once guarded medieval castles" (20). The association here of medievalism with new technologies of fortresslike surveillant space lines up well with the "vitrification of European ground," Paul Virilio's early-1980s description of territories that were camera-mediated, or under glass—militarized zones of engagement that in turn limned the battlefields of late-twentieth-century holy war (87, 73). Virilio's epic rhetoric confirms, within the parameters of the modern military-industrial complex, how the war machine invokes a Crusades mentality, what Michael Nerlich called "the ideology of adventure" in his study of medieval wars.[4]

While the uncanny apposition between medieval and modern times may not be new (consider how overtly it was exploited in Nazi art and propaganda), it now speaks to a distinct political condition of heightened anxiety around national identity and existential safety. This wider application was already apparent in Umberto Eco's prescient view of "the return of the Middle Ages" in *Travels in Hyperreality*. Eco draws free and easy connections between a medieval Europe "furrowed by pilgrimage routes" and "our skies furrowed by air routes"; between millennial expectations in the two epochs; and between two social conditions of "insecurity," the early period seen as plagued by the haphazard attacks of roving bands of marauder-crusaders and the contemporary world seen as beset by hijackings and terrorist bombings. Eco also detects what he calls "shaggy medievalism" in contemporary mass culture's worship of brutal ideals of male heroism:

> Are there any connections between the Heroic Fantasy of Frank Frazetta, the new satanism, Excalibur, the Avalon sagas, and Jacques Le Goff? If they met aboard some unidentified flying object near Montaillou, would Darth Vader, Jacques Fournier, and Parsifal speak the same language? If so, would it be a galactic pidgin or the Latin of the Gospel according to St. Luke Skywalker? (61)

Eco's "back to the futurism" encourages examinations of, say, Eurocyberfiction adventure stories that update quest narratives with visions of corporate warlordism, or the technodungeons and castles littering the landscapes of electronic game worlds, or pseudomedieval fantasies capitalizing on occult rituals and "Dark Ages" mythologies. While this romance and fantasy emphasis is clearly a rich vein of neomedievalism, the term may also be experimentally applied to manifestations of globalized culture without overtly medieval themes. Take, for example, the phenomenon known as "European pudding," indicative of Europe's push toward American mimeticism in the cultural sphere. Films such as Volker Schlöndorff's *Swann in Love* and *The Ogre*, Wim Wenders's *Until the End of the World*, and French-Italian-German coproductions directed by eminent filmmakers such as Margarete von Trotta, Istvan Szabo, Andrzej Wajda, and Patrice Chéreau typify the genre, which privileges literary adaptations, period pieces, and costume epics. When contemporary settings are deployed, a kind of single-flavor, subtitle-ready, pan-European cultural product gains ground (as in some of Eric Rohmer's films set in French new towns, with their sports complexes, underground malls, and American-style social spaces), often keyed to culturally indistinct visions of modern life in Western societies. Even when these stagings afford an ironic *clin d'œil* of the suburbanization

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of Europe, they nonetheless confirm images of standard-issue Euroland.

Now, while there may not be precise equivalents of the Europudding effect in literature, I would suggest that Michel Houellebecq's 1994 novel *L'extension du domaine de la lutte* (mystifyingly translated into English as *Whatever*) exhibits a comparably generic form of narrative that qualifies as neomedieval insofar as it relocates God's theocratic order in the mysterious ways of corporate Europe and paints a portrait of the modern European citizen as a subject nationally adrift on the infobahns of the European Union.

Whatever depicts France as if it had already been "European-Unionized"—that is, as a state that could be anywhere in Europe and that conforms to neomedieval paradigms of abrogated sovereignty, atrophied national consciousness, and barbaric cultural atavisms. In the segment of the novel that takes place in Rouen, the "fine medieval remains" of the town match up unfavorably with the sorry state of its contemporary infrastructure. Rouen is "dirty, grimy, run down, spoiled by the abiding presence of cars, noise, pollution," and infested by bikers from the surrounding suburbs, areas "nearing total industrial collapse" (67). The venerable site of Joan of Arc's pyre has been commemorated with a pile of "weirdly curved concrete slabs, half stuck in the ground, which turn out on closer inspection to be a church." These disgraced remnants of sacred ground are latticed with ramps that "seem destined for lovers of skateboarding—unless it be for the cars of the disabled, it's hard to tell" (68). The town's heart—composed of shops and a transportation hub—is submerged under concrete, while the local inhabitants rove in bands much like medieval armies or displaced villagers of yore. Many of the residents sport the signs of shaggy medievalists, wearing leather jackets emblazoned with rebarbative heraldic messages like "*Kill them all!*" (69).

Houellebecq contrasts a happy Middle Ages with grim snapshots of the neomedievalist present. A latter-day barbarian in the guise of "an enormous Alsatian, even more monstrous than most of its race," is visually balanced, as if on the background scenery of a triptych, by a wedding party of rich peasants whose red faces and ridiculous mien prompt heckling from young louts (69). This glimpse of public life, inferior though it may be, is soon displaced by an even gloomier public sphere—the porn cinema, whose dark space is dominated by masturbators shifting in their seats in the hopes of being observed by the rare couples in the theater. The city's acclaimed cathedral having been usurped by a sleazy movie house, Rouen has clearly fallen into a new Dark Ages and now symbolizes the scabrous urbanism infecting provincial centers throughout Euroland. Perhaps, in addition to Rouen, Houellebecq had Rem Koolhaas's megastructural Euralille disparagingly in mind, with its tangle of reinforced concrete and gargantuan steel struts designed to house the transfer station where the Chunnel train joins the French TGV.

For Houellebecq's narrator, supranational community is (in Jean-Luc Nancy's phrase) "inoperative community," but instead of showing nostalgia for past eras, he lowers his sights and settles for staying alive in a modern hospital, subordinating passions and paranoias to the mind-numbing phenomenology of product awareness in the material world and getting his kicks by writing perverse little animal tales. The realm of the animal is where the potted philosophy of Houellebecq's Eurocitizen may be found. The novel's ghoulish finale of murder and suicidal depression is encrypted in *Dialogues between a Chimpanzee and a Stork*, described as a "political pamphlet of rare violence" (124). A salesman named Tisserand describes his emotional decline with phrases like "I feel like a shrink-wrapped chicken leg on a supermarket shelf" and "I feel like a frog in formaldehyde. Besides, I resemble a frog, don't I?" (98). The narrator's literary oeuvre proffers a dyspeptic combination platter of Aesopian fables, medieval bestiaries, and naturalist taxonomies gone awry as the cultural fare of the new Europe.

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With its images of existential bleakness and anarchic regionalism, the new medievalism projects a Dark Age version of global culture in which Michel Houellebecq's vision sits easily. Though neomedievalist paradigms surely risk overstating analogies between (in Stephen Kobrin's words) "the unknown future" and "the known past," they nonetheless offer the narrative structure of legend (a stand-in for historical temporality) as compensation for the loss of distinct cartographic borders of national sovereignty within media states. In this way, contemporary literature that might otherwise be seen as having no claim to national identity whatsoever gains, at the least, the generic cultural identity of "whatever."

Notes

[1] See Brownlee, Brownlee, and Nichols; Shapiro; and Haidu.

[2] See Hirst and Thompson; Matthew; and Strange.

[3] I borrow the expression *flexible citizens* from Ong.

[4] My thanks go to Margaret Cohen for alerting me to this text.

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