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The General's Stork

We live in a risk society; a moment of global hysteria. A time in which everything is a construct of fear, where responses are formulated according to the phobias that define our social world. In such a world, the narrative becomes everything; it is power. We speak about subjects, events and experiences in ways that reveal the "relationships between the exercise of power and the constitution of truth".¹

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Lord Allenby and his pet Marabou Stork in Cairo (date unknown)

Today, our visual paradigms are drastically changing. Our paranoia leads us to question even the construct of our visual realities. We've begun to dismantle the linear perspective; the

¹ Ramadan, Hisham M., and Jeff Shantz. *Manufacturing Phobias: The Political Production of Fear in Theory and Practice*. (University of Toronto Press, 2016). 19.

mathematics of art as put-forth by Italian Renaissance painters and architects, no longer deals with the horizon or the vanishing point but rather the detached observant gaze of “God’s eye view”: the aerial view.²

The aerial view has become the new norm as technological tools of surveillance become seamlessly embedded within our contemporary landscapes. From the Orientalist depiction of the desert of nineteenth century aerial photography in the Middle East to the role that satellite imagery has played in transforming war reportage, the problematic practices in landscape surveillance perpetuate the narrative of imperialism through the technology of warfare. The language of occupation and colonization has been written in to the visualization of landscape.

In 2013, Egypt made worldwide headlines for a story about a stork. It was caught and detained after a local resident identified an electronic device attached to its body and suspected it of espionage.³ It was accused of being a Zionist spy and later imprisoned. Once it was broadcast in the media, it became a spectacle that was in keeping with the frenzy of the events unfolding in Egypt:

At this time, Egypt is in the middle of a grave crisis. The elected president Mohammad Morsi and senior figure of the Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown and jailed by the military on July 3, 2013. In the two months since Morsi was toppled, hundreds of his followers have been killed in clashes with the army and police, including during an event that Human Rights Watch has called “the most serious incident of mass unlawful killings in modern Egyptian history” where they state that at least 1000 people were killed on August 14⁴. Furthermore, an insurgency has flared in the Sinai Peninsula.

On Sunday Sept 1, 2013 “Nature Conservation Egypt” receives an email:

“To whom it may concern:

We have found out from the media, that a white stork with our satellite tracking

device was caught in Egypt near Qena and it is in captivity: Could you get in touch with the authorities and inform them, that this is a stork from Hungary and the device is a wildlife tracking device we attached to it to follow the migration of the bird.

Even you can find the details of the bird and the tracking data on our satellite tracking website.”

² “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective - Journal #24 April 2011 - E-Flux.” Accessed July 1, 2017. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

³ Urquhart, Conal. “Arrested ‘Spy’ Stork Killed and Eaten after Release in Egypt.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 7 Sept. 2013, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/07/arrested-spy-stork-killed-eaten-egypt.

⁴ “Egypt: Security Forces Used Excessive Lethal Force.” *Human Rights Watch*, 17 Apr. 2015, www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/19/egypt-security-forces-used-excessive-lethal-force.

The stork was a native of Hungary, and was following the Nile River on his migration toward the Lake Victoria basin in East Africa when villagers in Qena, a city in southern Egypt, spotted him at rest with a white satellite tracker fixed to its body. The bird was one of 115 migrating birds being tracked by a consortium of European wildlife organizations. Qena has become a major traffic route between Upper Egypt and the Red Sea. But perhaps more compelling is its complicated relationship with a secret American military airbase. Here is an account from Larry Grinnell, technical communicator for the U.S. military whose role was to perform occasional preventive maintenance inspections, and certify the destruction of radio operators' classified documents.

This is taken from his personal website:

"The 1st Comm had an ongoing mission sending people to a classified location somewhere in the middle east, simply known to us as...Site Alpha. As it turns out, this was the forward base that launched the rescue attempt to bring back the American hostages in Iran, taken when the US Embassy was invaded in 1979. The rescue attempt, Operation Eagle Claw, failed completely due to many factors that are probably still being discussed today."

The helicopters were sent from the military base in Qena, Egypt and all encountered technical problems: 8 helicopters were sent, one encountered hydraulic problems, another got caught in a cloud of fine sand, a third showed cracks in the rotor blade, and lastly one of the helicopters crashed into a transport aircraft killing eight servicemen and one Iranian citizen.

"No one was supposed to know where [the base] was until they were under way, unless they had the appropriate clearances and need to know...Gee, I thought, just having seen King Tut's riches, this was pretty amazing to be going to the country where he came from. We finally touched down, after going around three times due to difficult weather at the site, and when I got to the open doorway, my heart sunk. There it was. Miles and miles of miles and miles. This was a real desert with basically nothing.

*I quickly found out that Site Alpha was a former Soviet air base, built in the days when the Soviets and the Egyptians were fast friends...Officially, it was known as Wadi Qena... We called it Bum F**k Egypt (BFE for short). Along with Thule, Greenland and Minot, North Dakota, BFE was an often mythical place that military training instructors threatened to send you if you didn't get with the program. I think we even had a sign outside Base Operations that said "Welcome to BFE," but when local Egyptian military folks and civilian dignitaries visited, the true meaning of BFE was masked with the acronym "Beautiful, Friendly Egypt." I don't think anyone was fooled, but we did at least try to play the game."⁵*

The operation was eventually aborted, and failed to save the hostages. The embassy hostages were then scattered around Iran to make another rescue attempt impossible. It was Sadat, Egypt's president at the time, who leaked the information of the American military base in Egypt. The deal was that the Americans would use the Egyptian facilities to introduce land-

⁵ "Meet Larry Grinnell." Air Force Days, Part 6: Life as a Combat Communicator in the First Combat Communications Squadron : Meet Larry Grinnell, www.larrygrinnell.com/?p=1669#more-1669.

based American airpower to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. This was not a surprising move considering the development of aerial technologies in the region.

A German engineer first attached a camera to a pigeon in 1908 to take aerial photographs. Dr. Julius Neubronner patented the 'pigeon-cam', a camera attached to a homing pigeon activated by a timing mechanism. Neubronner was an apothecary near Frankfurt and started receiving his prescriptions from a sanatorium in Falkenstein using pigeon post.

He then thought, well if a pigeon can carry drugs, surely it can carry a camera. He fitted a light miniature camera with a harness weighing up to 75g, and the birds were already accustomed to carrying such weight. The imperial patent office accepted his invention which he titled "method and device for photographing sections of terrain from the bird's eye perspective" in 1908.⁶

His 'pigeon-cam' inspired the German military intelligence, and in 1932, leading up to the Second World War, the German Army was training pigeons for photography. It was only a matter of time until real animals started being replaced by artificial ones.

Today the United States has the most comprehensive and aggressive drone program in the world. They lead the world in drone technology. "When American army strategists imagine what drones will be like in twenty-five years, they begin by getting an infographist to create a composite image of a typical Arab town, complete with mosque, other buildings, and palm trees".⁷

It was Israel who had discovered the potential of remotely piloted vehicles, after they had inherited a few machines scrapped by the Americans who, momentarily, had abandoned the development of their drone program in the 70s. In 1969, the Israeli Air Force was using drones to photograph and monitor Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian troops, and by 1973, in the Yom Kippur War, they sent out a wave of drones to mislead enemy defenses –the Egyptians used up all their artillery and they were able to attack while Egyptians were reloading.⁸

This was the first time drones were officially used in battle. Techno-aesthetics became inherently tied to the greater Middle East; from land surveying, to aerial mapping to bombing and drone warfare, military technologies throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were developed against the backdrop of Middle Eastern geographies. Even though we see the images of another land, the objective of drone wars is no longer about territory, as was with the colonial project, but rather how to eradicate a "terrorist threat" from a distance.⁹ The drone as a weapon presents us with the terrifying prospect of warfare that is completely detached from the physical body. The power structures at play are dependent on the might of the machine, which as we have come to know, has no bounds.

⁶ "Neubronner Applies for Pigeon Camera Patent | History Channel on Foxtel." History Channel, 8 June 2017, www.historychannel.com.au/this-day-in-history/neubronner-applies-for-pigeon-camera-patent/.

⁷ Chamayou, Gregoire. *Drone Theory*. (Penguin Random House, 2015), 56.

⁸ Chamayou, Gregoire. *Drone Theory*. (Penguin Random House, 2015), 27.

⁹ Chamayou, Gregoire. *Drone Theory*. (Penguin Random House, 2015), 71.

In 1869, W.F. Quinby of Wilmington, Delaware, invented a new and improved flying machine. Quinby states in his application that his improvements “intended to provide an arrangement of temporary sails resembling in some respect the wings of birds.”¹⁰ Like him, many before Quinby attempted to acquire bird-like characteristics. In fact, the bible itself has prompted many scholars and inventors to conceive of flying machines or bird-like machines inspired by the following passage from the book of Isaiah:

“As birds flying, so will the LORD of hosts protect Jerusalem; he will protect and deliver it, he will pass over and preserve it.”¹¹

After taking up his command in Cairo in June 1917, Lord Allenby the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force had been given explicit orders by the Prime Minister David Lloyd George to capture Jerusalem by Christmas. This was in the wake of two failed efforts by his predecessor to conquer Gaza, a necessary condition for the conquest of Palestine from the Ottoman Turks.

Lord Allenby was a believer in bible prophecy, he was a religious man and did not want to destroy the holy places in the city of Jerusalem. Convinced by biblical scholars to move forward based on this biblical prophecy of “As Birds Flying”, Allenby ordered as many planes as possibly to fly over Jerusalem. It is said that at that time the Turks had never seen so many planes in the sky and were terrified by their presence. He ordered pilots to send down leaflets commanding the Turks to surrender.

The flyers read: "Surrender the city today, Allenby." Allenby in Arabic, can only be written in one way: al-naby, which means prophet or son of god. What he did not know was that the Turks also believed in an old prophecy that they would never lose the Holy City until "a man of Allah came to deliver it". The Turks surrendered without firing a shot...an incredible fulfilment of Biblical prophecy which put Israel under British mandate. This mandate, called the Balfour Declaration, called for a Jewish homeland and set the foundation for modern Israel.¹²

In fact, the following version of the story is seldom told and probably because the sociopolitical transformation of the entire region was prompted by hens: according to the witness account of Major Vivian Gilbert relayed in detail in his book from 1928 called “The Romance of the Last Crusade: With Allenby to Jerusalem”, the city of Jerusalem was, in fact, surrendered to the general’s cook who was out on a mission to fetch some eggs.

On December 9, 1917 the eggs were spoiled, so British private Merch, a cook from London, was sent off alone with his rifle to the next village to fetch eggs for the commander’s breakfast. He, as an incompetent soldier, got lost in the fog and dust and accidentally stumbled on a group of men who greeted him with a set of keys. Hussein Effendi el Hussein, the mayor of Jerusalem, wanted to surrender the city to the cook. “I don’t want your city” he says, “I

¹⁰ “Knowledge Repository @ IUP.” Site, knowledge.library.iup.edu/as_patents/13/.

¹¹ “Isaiah 31:5.” Isaiah 31:5 As Birds Flying, so Shall the Lord of Hosts Shield above Jerusalem; and He Shall Rescue and Shall Protect and Shall Deliver., studybible.info/compare/Isaiah%2031:5.

¹² Neiberg, Michael. “Allenby Captures Jerusalem.” HistoryNet, 15 May 2017, www.historynet.com/allenby-captures-jerusalem.htm.

want some eggs!". Upon his return, private Merch relayed his amazing adventure and his commanding officer promptly declared the fall of Jerusalem.¹³

Conscious of the city's special meaning for three of the world's great religions, in a deliberate act of humility and respect Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot through the Jaffa Gate on December 11, 1917. He walked to the Citadel from where he read a proclamation that made it clear he came not as a conqueror, but as a liberator.¹⁴

At this point, Allenby becomes the man of the moment. All eyes were on him. His unprecedented success had made him out to be a hero with religious values and kindness. But most peculiar, however, with the media focus on our new hero is the emergence of a particular relationship with a bird...

Lord Allenby had a pet marabou stork. Perhaps it was biblical fate that strengthened the bond with this bird. Perhaps the bird represents a sort of triumph that he holds dear to his heart, a symbolic embodiment of biblical prophecy. Perhaps it is not a coincidence.

But it is this precise relationship that defines the absurdity of this story, the thread that unites the sequence of events. It relays the surreal way in which history is written and highlights the details that often get left out and are eventually forgotten and erased from history. The fantasies and the truths that we hold on to. The REGIME OF TRUTH and the power of narrative.

So how does the story end?

The spy bird in Qena was given the name Menes (Mina) – after an Ancient Egyptian pharaoh who was credited with uniting Upper and Lower Egypt. Mina, in fact, means "he who endures". However, the short-lived success story of getting Menes released was not enough to keep him safe until he exited Egypt. Upon release, he was almost instantly shot down by hunters and eaten by the very people who had questioned him in the first place. They had consumed their PARANOIA.

¹³ "The Romance of the Last Crusade : with Allenby to Jerusalem : Vivian Gilbert : Free Download & Streaming." Internet Archive, W. B. Feakins, archive.org/details/romanceoflastcru00vivi.

¹⁴ The Advance of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. London, England: His Majesty's Stationery Office. 1919. p. 3.