

We're All Americans Under the Skin: Reality TV and Cultural Diplomacy

Hatim El-Hibri
Department of Media, Culture, and Communication
New York University
Ph.D Candidate
hatim@nyu.edu

Can communication fail, or does it simply succeed in ways not intended by its creators? In what ways do these moments offer opportunities to learn about the contexts of the creators of cultural texts? This paper explores these questions by looking at a cultural diplomacy initiative in the Middle East by a non-governmental American organization. It examines the reality TV show *On the Road in America*, a text created for the purpose of cultural diplomacy via popular entertainment in the Arab world, by an organization named Layalina Productions, created for this specific purpose by former state diplomats not affiliated with the government or the current administration. The show follows a small group of young Arabs on a road trip tour of the US. This paper will seek to answer these questions by exploring the implicit ideas of the powers of media to transform or create subjectivities so as to govern through them, as well as the particular conception of citizenship which underlies this phenomenon. It will also seek to place it within a discursive and historical context of a genuine spirit of 'bridge-building,' which both denies and maintains power relations, and draws on a tradition of Orientalist representation. Rather than an exercise in debunking, this paper will attempt to situate how the use of the idiom of reality TV and a narrative of reform-by-road trip succeeds not in its objectives of fixing cultural relations, but in managing a moment of transcultural contact through a representation of such a moment, entered into Arabic-language visual culture.

Can media texts fail to communicate, or do they simply succeed in ways unintended by their creators? The question of a failure to communicate is a central one to those concerned with cultural diplomacy. It is one which may indeed reflect a genuine desire to correct what are perceived to be unfortunate, if not grave misunderstandings between a social group or a nation and a foreign audience. It may even seem to make sense to create popular media texts for the purpose of reworking a link between two cultures or geographies. In what ways might a text created for the purpose of 'bridging cultures' thus provide a unique opportunity to examine the underlying cultural and political logics implicit in their creation?

To this end, I wish to analyze the example of Layalina Productions, an American non-governmental organization created by a number of ex-Cold War career diplomats and statesmen whose explicit vision it is to "bridge the growing divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialog through effective television programming." Of particular interest is their first attempt, a twelve-part reality TV show titled *On the Road in America*, which aired on the Saudi-owned satellite channel MBC from January to April of 2007. It follows the experiences of three young Arab men and a young Arab woman on a road trip through the US. I will seek to analyze the narrative of transformation of the Arab cast

that underpins the show by examining what kind of person is presumed to be transformed, and how and into what they are being transformed. I argue that there is an underlying logic of governmentality, particularly related to security and American exceptionalism at work in this show, which reflects a recent shift in neoliberalism.

Layalina Productions is an interesting case example in that it is not affiliated with the government or any one political party in any direct way. However, its Board of Counselors reads like an attendance list of Cold Warriors, with the likes of George Bush Sr., Henry Kissinger, Lawrence Eagleburger, Robert C. Strauss, Don Hewett, and Zbigniew Brzezinski among others. These others include James Baker III and Lee Hamilton, of recent Baker-Hamilton report fame. Indeed, one only need take a cursory look at recent debates and articles generated by the policy establishment and the content of the Baker-Hamilton report to find evidence of what, termed mildly, is a growing disdain for the current administration's approach to foreign policy among many former Cold War-era diplomats, who see their previous work as being undermined, especially in the Middle East.¹

Speculating as to the true ideas and motivations of state diplomats is less the concern of this paper than is a kind of popular sentiment they seem to capitalize on and claim to represent. More centrally, it is concerned with the ways this popular sentiment is capitalized as part of an exercise in governmentality. Governmentality was a term developed by Foucault to shift the focus of political and cultural analysis to those efforts which seek to shape 'the conduct of conduct.' Rather analyzing politics as a form of domination or the state as a series of repressive institutions, this looks at governance which acknowledges and reinforces the individual's capacity to think and act. It also allows for a shift in analytic focus away from the declarations of state officials to a molecular and empirical cultural analysis. The word governmentality is also notably a merging of the words 'government' and 'mentality,' which suggests that regulating and administering populations in their daily lives becomes central to the exercise of power. Rather than a strict loyalty to this idea, this analysis seeks to borrow from its ethos to understand the freedoms this text seeks to foster.² As such, I am less interested in the skillfulness of execution or 'will it work' type questions, and more in what cultural perspective they are a culmination of.

In the opening moment of the first episode of *On the Road*, the director of the show strikingly recounts a conversation he had with a son who is in the military. He goes on to express his expectation that if this son were to be killed in a war, he would expect it to be in the Middle East. If for no other reason than that, he hopes the show improves understanding between the US and the Arab world. Any genuine hope for a better humanity aside, this is a particularly problematic logic. Layalina's goals of addressing "negative stereotypes about the US by providing Arabic-speaking television viewers with programming that is honest, positive and entertaining," of "promoting understanding" and "providing a forum for the people of the Arab world to constructively air their concerns and opinions," and of "setting a more professional standard for Arab television" speaks to a genuine desire to bridge real divides. It is genuine in the sense that foreign-exchange student programs build from genuine sentiment, and at times, patriotism and its lesser cousin self-assured cultural superiority. Yet it also cannot allow for difference, and also works to obscure the kinds of experiences and histories which those differences come from. This is in turn tied to what has been called a narrative of innocence regarding US involvement in those histories.³ One of the particularities of the tradition of American exceptionalism that this derives from is the natural and immediately apparent goodness and superiority of American pop culture, journalism, political and economic systems, and way of life, but especially in the way that these things are conflated.

The appropriation of popular culture for cultural diplomacy has precedence in the Cold War. As Penny von Eschen explores in her book *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, the use of jazz for the purposes of cultural ambassadorship and diplomacy during the Cold War, and the harnessing of popular forms to promote 'freedom of expression' and other values conflated with a nation-state are therefore not without historical precedent.⁴ Part of the reasoning behind the appropriation of jazz music and the reputation of jazz musicians for this purpose was to counter Soviet criticism at the time of American hypocrisy due to race relations during the period of the 1950s-1970s. The paradox crystallizes when von Eschen highlights the way that jazz came to be promoted as a universal and modern form of expression, while at the same time making the color of the musicians' skin hypervisible to legitimate the claims to national racial equality. In this case, audiences who's only supposed exposure to musicians such as Louis Armstrong may have been via radio broadcasts or recordings were suddenly then exposed to a racial hyper-signifier, rendered unproblematic by its modernized and modernizing qualities.

While not improvisational in the way that live jazz can be, *On the Road* is built around the certain intimacy and spontaneity that reality TV offers. The show itself is premised on a process and narrative of transformation, and follows a twelve-episode journey across the US, with the last two being back in the cast's home countries. The cast is comprised of three Arab men between the ages of 18 and 27, a Lebanese-Jordanian, a Saudi and an Egyptian, all of whom are university educated and sport a kind of cosmopolitan good looks. There is also a young Palestinian woman who is the assistant to the director and functions as a kind of link between the cast and crew, as the crew and technical process of filming the show are, like much reality programming, an integral part of the show. Each episode deals with a different theme or set of experiences and is shot in a different location, each representing a facet of a larger America. The episode on 'Free Speech and Democracy' is set in D.C., 'Capitalism High and Low' is set in New York City, and 'True West' is set in Montana. This should be contrasted with the 'brand America' approach of the Bush Administration; for example the hiring of Charlotte Beers, formerly an advertising executive in the period immediately after 9/11. The show itself capitalizes on the pseudo-organic process of making a TV show to lend credibility to the authenticity of experiences it creates for its participants and viewers, an authenticity which is of crucial importance for the producers' faith in the show's transformative powers.

What is important is the way in which a unified and singular America is constructed, in this case, out of a series of parts. The cast of the show is presumably transformed by its experiences with these parts, and by proxy, the imagined Arab viewership. An ontologically unified and singular America and a unified and singular Arab Other are therefore integrally part of the premise of the show, as it is by acknowledging and making difference visible that this logic works. The different backgrounds of the cast are not ignored, they're simply tacitly acknowledged and meant to stand in for a unified and internally consistent whole. The show bills itself as being a combination of Al-Jazeera and MTV. This is a binarism telling of a curious expectation of cultural boundaries, as there are numerous Arabic-language satellite music channels. However, I'd argue that the use of panoramic shots and montage of landscapes and urban environments also speaks to a sensibility shaped by National Geographic.⁵

This still begs the questions: Why would these young people need to be transformed? How would they need to be transformed, and into what? To answer these questions requires a re-examination of the logic of diplomacy and governance. In the lectures at the College de France on 'Security, Territory, Population,' Foucault develops the concept of a 'technology of security,' whereby the potential of uncertain and potentially damaging events are put under the purview of

the functioning of state power. It is through the emerging art of good governance of the territory that the proper circulation of the proper kinds of subjects and goods continue and are optimized. While many of these logics are not new, Foucault is describing the emergence of liberalism and its afterlives. Of particular pertinence for this analysis is the transition he describes from pastoral government, with all of its metaphors of a shepherd leading the flock to salvation, to liberal and secular forms of power. The concern of our example is the governing of souls for a different purpose, although this technocratic faith in the power of media is both telling and fascinating in itself.

A very simple logic then reveals itself: Our (meaning American) security is dependent upon Them liking Us. The way to make Them like Us is for Them to see the real America. Not only will They then like Us, They will also then become more like Us. In this light, the show seems to make perfect sense: it is the enactment of a 'real' interaction between Arabs and Americans, where all end up getting along because of their common humanity, and America itself is shown to be transcendent. The narrative of transformation is therefore significant because it demonstrates, in the reality TV idiom, the constructed and genuine interactions and reactions that the cast have and the ways that they change within this light. The cast members are performing the transformation of a cultural identity presumed to be (at least potentially) intrinsically dangerous or inferior, into one which is safe. What is exceptional is that the transformation is into what are asserted to be American cultural attributes. A biopolitical notion of the population is thereby strongly reasserted in a peculiar post 9/11-Orientalist metaphor, while at the same time implying that we are all Americans under the skin, or at least want and need to be. The politics of Us and Them, premised on an active construction of a cultural and racial line, therefore stems from a biopolitics of security. If my use of Us and Them exasperates, it is only because I wish to reflect the operation of this cultural logic.

Cultural diplomacy, in this case, reveals itself to be a governmental technology of security premised on the threatening cultural Otherness of the Other. It is in this light that we must understand the notion of showing Them why not to hate the US and how to become more like Us so that We become secure. This manifests itself in the notion of the at-risk Arab youth who, because of the presumed lack of access to media that show the 'real America,' and who because of their lack of freedom and opportunity understood to be American in nature, turn to extremism and terrorism. This reflects the ethos of neoliberalism, whose subjectivities are the key to a peaceful and productive future.⁶ The narrative of converting the ethnic Other is also similar to the problem of ur-freedom used by Frances Stonor Saunders to describe the work of artists and intellectuals working as part of the cultural front of the Cold War.⁷ Ur-freedom is a kind of false consciousness wherein actors are given freedom and agency, but not under conditions of their own making or control.

The transformation by conversion operates by giving the cast a taste of American-ness, where Individuals can attain their fullest realization due to the Freedoms therein. This again reflects a feature of classic Orientalism, where the social, economic, and political are collapsed back into the psychological or moral inferiority of a timeless Otherness. An episode where this comes through quite explicitly is the 'True West' episode, set in Montana, which the director of the show begins by describing as the geography where '...the story of American growth takes place...' It is here that the old Rooseveltian notion of the recuperative powers of the geography of the West itself are revived and charged with the task of transformation. The episode pulls no stops, and includes a visit to a dude ranch, horse-packing, and an outdoor barbecue. The cast also spends time talking to an anthropologist who describes a little bit of the religious ceremonies of

the 'Native peoples' of the region (who are mysteriously absent) and shares his views on the problem of America being materialism and consumer culture. The curious form that the narrative of transformation takes here is the cast members themselves begin to describe their experiences as having become more in touch with what's important, that wars aren't wars between 'us people,' but between politicians. One explains that he doesn't know why 'we're' fighting, that people lose their souls in cities, with false aspirations put in their heads by the media. It is striking because he's describing the trope of regeneration in the Great American Wilderness. His personal genuine experiences are represented as having transformed him in a way consistent with a so-called American experience of the West. Another member of the cast describes being homesick, and missing speaking Arabic, although he's found a deep admiration for the American way of life and the opportunities it offers, notably citing technological advancement as a key achievement. We can understand these two as examples of the moment when the visual circuit of power watches itself creating agency through the subject. Regardless of the ways that these may or may not reflect the genuine experiences of the cast members, they are themselves implicitly part of the logic of transformation. Perhaps most fascinating is that the cast also begin to describe the Middle East in a way that is consistent with a presumably American positionality regarding media and visual culture; distant, a source of concern, and rife with seemingly inexplicable violence.⁸

The strongest example of this kind of positioning with regards to mediated experiences of the Middle East that are 'Un-American,' characterized by collapsing of the social, political and historical into the psychological, occurs in the second episode of the show. The young Palestinian woman, who officially is assistant to the director but essentially is part of the cast, gets into a very overwrought encounter with the Israeli director of photography and cameraman. A predictable course of events ensues: her passionate feelings against Israelis are reduced to the product of misunderstanding or personal emotional baggage, and after speaking face to face with a real live Israeli and a little time out in the Great Outdoors, the two become friends. As the show was shot in the summer of 2006, there are images of the 33 Day War in the background, to which they are both referring. The cameraman articulates a point which is echoed elsewhere in the show, that images of suffering all look the same, claiming a universal transcendent humanism. The transformative and corrective work of the show here becomes an almost plain naturalization of the positioned-ness of this perspective within a transnational visual culture. Arguably images of war look different when you can hear bombs falling. The real political work might actually be in placing the two experiences within a clear, binary, and unequal relationship. I shall presently return to this point regarding dividing lines in the experiences of visual culture and mediated links between geographies, but must first necessarily take a detour through some unresolved issues regarding race and neoliberalism.

It is in the concept and history of American exceptionalism, the belief that the US is uniquely endowed with a particular destiny in the world, that I find many of the issues relating to cultural geography and neoliberalism to dovetail. It would of course be a mistake to collapse a technology and ethos of governance to the actions or ambitions of any one country or group, much less just America. Neil Smith's reading of the relationship between liberalism and nationalism in the US, and how they emerge as American exceptionalism are quite useful here. In The Endgame of Globalization, he describes how the project of Enlightenment liberalism in the United States itself became wrapped around an emergent and spatially expanding nationalism, never completely fitting with its self-image as being inherently liberatory and anti-imperialist in its various global projects. He argues that the contradiction between the supposedly

universal and benign values of Locke and Kant and the implicitly narrower nationalism of the US manifests in the form of its engagement the process of globalization. We can find this in evidence in its historical and repeated political ham-stringing of the United Nations, of which the US was the main architect. The second contradiction emerges within American cultural politics. The geography of America itself comes to eerily echo Locke's words regarding common lands found in the state of nature, whose reverberations are felt in the Montana episode of *On the Road* described earlier. The uneasy fit of neo-liberalism with nationalism also continues to surface in debates regarding immigration. The second salient point regarding American exceptionalism is one that American Studies has long been at work on. Amy Kaplan has described this peculiar cultural logic as working '...By defining American culture as determined precisely by its diversity and multivocality, "America" as a discrete identity can cohere independently of international confrontations with other national, local, and global cultural identities within and outside its borders...' (Kaplan 15)⁹ This also manifests itself in *On the Road* in the way in which the cast are positioned to identify with a universal Americanness via the Otherness of blackness. This happens most clearly in the style of awkward outsidership that they are fit into when visiting a gospel choir in DC. This is also symmetrical with a number of moments in the movie *Borat*.

I would now like to turn back to the issue of the way in which this show attempts to engage with Arabic-language visual culture. The transformation of the cast members by their unmediated experience of the US, and the liberal or neoliberal values that it embodies, returns us to the underlying logic at work in the form of this show. I would argue that in its celebration of American exceptionalism, its construction of a bioracist politics, and underlying logic of security which attempts to work as a technology for staging interiorities, *On the Road* is much closer to the tradition of social uplift programming in the US than even to the kind of programming intended for social improvement in the Arab world. Following much postcolonial scholarship, I would argue that part of the reason for the difference between this show, and for example Egyptian TV dramas with morality lessons, is the intrinsically ethnocentric nature of neoliberal and modern subjectivities.¹⁰ The creation of individuals with subjectivities that are compatible with the logic of security seems in this case to be the creation of viewers with a 'correct' involvement with a 'bad' visual culture that brings them 'bad' images of America. Part of this also involves an emotional restructuring. The form of reality TV in this case borrows its realness from the conventions of the documentary travelogue, and of relevance here, the infamous confessional shot. The improper presence of passion in public, which prevents reasoned public debate, is remedied by allowing the cast to 'vent,' presumably allowing its viewership to identify with this process and similarly be corrected. As noted by Marwan Kraidy and others, reality TV already occupies a robust part of Arabic language satellite TV programming, notably those which allow for audience participation, and have become a sort of pan-Arab hypermedia space around which national, social, and political identities organize and encounter one another.¹¹ However, it could also be easily asserted that such programming is self-selecting as far as its viewership.

The transformation of the cultural specimens that the cast members represent are also therefore significantly part of an attempt to symbolically transform the mediated relationship of Arabs from one geography to the American geography by reworking the kinds of mediated links between these two spaces. It would seem to take a great deal of faith in the power of media to place such a tall order in the hands of a media text. As described by Edward Said and others, the relationship of the center to the periphery, of the original to the copy, West and non-West, has

historically been established in the process of fixing and determining what is the line and relationship between the two. It is crucial to see how it is in the very *process* of creating a unified America/West and Arab/non-West, and a decisive distinction between the two that the possibility for such a dualism becomes possible. The purpose of the show is to fix and police the nature of the relationship between the two, for the sake of America's security and implicitly and seemingly benevolently, to help develop the Arab world. But in so doing, it recreates the problem underlying the issues it seeks to fix.

In conclusion, the question of a failure to communicate depends upon an evaluation of what it means to successfully communicate. In the case of *On the Road in America*, it would seem that it is possible to create a text that, intentionally or not, reflects a particular worldview quite spectacularly. This would seem, however, to be a great deal different than bridging a divide. However genuine the intentions of the creators, the personal experiences of cast and crew, the self-charged task of the show would seem not to fit the problem, but it would also not be adequate to describe it as an instance of 'failed communication.' By hinging itself on cultural transformation, the show unintentionally becomes premised on essentializing cultural logics, which then itself would only be part of an attempt at policing and fixing the linkages between transnational visual cultures. Even if we accept its claimed viewership numbers, it could have only at best further charged the political climate it aimed to defuse. While it is significant that a non-governmental American organization would attempt such an intervention, it speaks more of the conditions and problems of our time than the solution.

¹ Examples supporting this abound, but an example would be The American Interest, Vol. 2, Issue 5. May/June 2007. I am indebted to Brett Gary for pointing me in this direction.

² Nikolas Rose offers an excellent elaboration on this in his (1999) Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought. Cambridge University Press.

³ See especially Sturken, M (2007). Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma to Ground Zero. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴ Von Eschen, Penny M (2004). Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Lutz and Collins examine the construction of the Western viewer/reader which in this cultural tradition is presumed to be at the center and position of mastery over nature. See their (1993) Reading National Geographic. University of Chicago Press.

⁶ I particularly have in mind here the preferential and racializing hierarchies built around presumed neoliberal subjectivities and education that Aihwa Ong explores in (2006) Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁷ Saunders, F. S. (1999). The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters. New York: The New Press.

⁸ For an excellent look at this in a historical context, see Melanie McAlister's (2001) Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁹ Kaplan, A. (1993). "Left Alone with America": The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture, in A. Kaplan, Pease, Donald eds. Cultures of United States Imperialism. Durham: Duke University Press.

¹⁰ For more on the idea of staging interiorities, see Lila Abu Lughod's (2005) Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt. University of Chicago Press.

¹¹ Kraidy, M. (2002). "Arab Satellite Television Between Regionalization and Globalization." Global Media Journal 1(1).