

## Animated maps and the power of the trace

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### Abstract

The animated map, a generally overlooked rhetorical device, is questioned throughout this essay as a meaningful and useful case for rethinking the notion of the trace in the analysis of documentary films. Drawing on the debate led by critical cartography since the 1980s the essay discusses the relation between maps, ideology, and propaganda specifically with regard to fascist documentaries made between 1939 and 1942 that are entirely composed with animated maps. Through the notion of the ‘power of the trace’ – the construct warranting the perfect correspondence of image and world – the essay interrogates the misleading use of animated maps in documentary as evidence, informational images, and faithful reproductions of the territory. By looking at the roles played by space, time, materiality, and narrative in animated maps I instead propose an examination of the trace, taking into account the possibilities offered to visual-oriented analysis.

**Keywords:** animation, cartography, documentary, fascism, propaganda, traces

For about a decade animated maps were extremely popular in many documentaries as devices for illustrating places, actions, and processes set on the surface of the globe. Although some examples could be found in French newsreels during the First World War it is only after the mid-1930s that animation techniques and technologies were developed enough to make full use of this device aimed at offering the straightforward visualisation of the territory and the effects of the passing of time over it. Animated techniques do not just provide the map with motion but also undermine most of its meanings by adding an element – movement – which integrates the world’s static order into a flow of processes and changes. In these respects animated maps respond to a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century belief fostered by positivist, modern-

ist, and colonial ideologies that asserts the possibility of knowing, seeing, and charting all aspects of the world. The illusive dream to capture the world through the image pertains separately to the cinema, in particular the documentary film and the map. However, their mutual exchanges<sup>1</sup> deserve to be questioned broadly in order to better understand the reasons why both have been and still are considered faithful instruments of knowledge, images that have a peculiar relationship with reality and truth.

I would propose the trace as the epistemological notion for analysing the peculiar relationship between film and the map. Borrowing some methodological concerns specific to film theory and critical cartography, this essay is meant to focus on what I shall call the power of the trace – that is, the construct warranting the perfect correspondence of image and world through the case of animated maps, devices that could be seen as emblematic of that power of the trace well beyond any matter of accuracy, transparency, and objectivity. Despite the fact that throughout the last 20 years a wide range of enquiries related to the ontological, historical, and political status of these kinds of images have been addressed, pointing out their value as a site for power-knowledge relations, the power of the trace nonetheless keeps assuring the inner fiction of their relationship with reality and truth. Why then can an assemblage of animated maps, which does not have any link with the physical reality of the territory, be conceived as effective within the regime of the documentary?

## The map and the territory

In 1948 the Polish-American philosopher Alfred Korzybski coined the cartographic truism ‘the map is not the territory’, whose obvious meaning is constantly defied by the fantasy of a total correspondence of map and territory. Although based on a perfect physical coincidence such as the map of the Empire on a scale of 1 to 1 evoked by Borges in the short story *On Exactitude in Science*, this fantasy has always been translated into the analogy map-territory which nourishes the undisputed trust in maps. ‘Handling a map we are intent on the veridical perception of what is there on the piece of paper’,<sup>2</sup> Gombrich comments in a bright account of the theories of perspectival representation, moving from the confusion between the mirror and the map. If maps ‘give us selective *information* about the physical world, pictures, like mirrors, convey to us the *appearance* of any aspect of that world as it varies with the conditions of light’.<sup>3</sup> The two systems can

be melded, juxtaposed, and integrated, as they actually were by several artistic traditions such as the Egyptian, the Renaissance, and the Dutch.

As belonging to the group of the ‘informational images’ – a category that also includes ‘graphs, charts, geometric configurations, notations, plans, official documents, some money, bonds, patents’, etc.,<sup>4</sup> – maps are indeed used outside of the proper domain of cartography ‘any time a particular kind of information is required’<sup>5</sup> within a network of discourses and practices that does not include just artworks but all modes of functional communication. Therefore, when a map is *détourned* in something else – that is, when a map’s main function is not providing quantitative data apt to orientate its reader – its properties work to a different but very effective degree. According to Svetlana Alpers,

despite differences in kind it is important not to miss the aura of knowledge possessed by maps as such regardless of the nature or degree of their accuracy. This aura lent a prestige and power to maps as a kind of image. Their making involved a possession of a particular kind which must not be underestimated in considering the relationship of art to mapping.<sup>6</sup>

Locating an analogy between mapping, surveying, and painting at the heart of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch visual culture, Alpers proposes the reconciliation of maps and pictures under the rubric of description which led to the development of new modes of images. The huge popularity of Alpers’ book and consequently the many misreadings ignoring the cultural and historical specificities it draws has caused a generalisation of its thesis that could be epitomised by Martin Jay’s daring use of ‘the art of describing’ as one of the three scopic regimes of modernity (along with the Cartesian perspectivism and the baroque madness of vision), which implies a kinship between this and ‘the visual experience produced by the nineteenth-century invention of photography’ because of some shared salient features such as fragmentariness, arbitrary frames, immediacy, and so on. A critique by Jay regarding Alpers’ thesis seems to be particularly significant in this context: the fact that ‘the strong opposition between narration and description’;<sup>7</sup> derived from Lukacs’ opposition between realist and naturalist fictions, pertains to the Cartesian perspective as well. Furthermore, for what is at stake here it does not enable the acknowledgement of more dynamic, living, imaginative, and active characters to the images I am about to analyse. In other words Alpers’ images are charged with some distance and superficiality that could hardly be accepted for maps – and not at all for animated maps, whose specificities include depth, materiality, mobility, and narration.

It could be found symptomatic that Alpers uses the term ‘aura’ for indicating the map specificity because, although she clearly does not refer to Walter Benjamin’s well-known thesis, it still echoes its definition: ‘a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be.’<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, the map is able to produce the opposite effect by letting the territory appear as something that the reader can capture at a glance, an intuitive presence rather than a distant absence. In *The Arcade Project*, Benjamin himself uses the term ‘trace’ to explain the opposite of ‘aura’:

[t]race and aura. The trace is appearance of nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of thing: In the aura, it takes possession of us.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of trace in its Latin origin *trahere* (to drag, draw, pull, acquire) carries connotations of inscription, absence-presence, and evidence which have made the concept extremely useful for those disciplines based on the investigation and interpretation of signs in order to reveal their hidden meanings – that is, in semiosis. The trace is the particle of the sign, the proof that actually ‘*aliquid stat pro aliquo*’ – when something stands for something else the trace demonstrates this relation. In the context of the map then the trace guarantees that the drawing on a table somehow corresponds to the physical reality of the territory represented, otherwise the map has to be intended as a purely decorative picture. It is exactly this feature that Peirce has pointed out by defining the map as ‘something more than a mere icon’ to which are ‘added characters of an index.’<sup>10</sup> If the trace is what allows us to add the characters of an index to the map its power lies in the subversion of the cartographic truism ‘the map is not the territory’ in as much the territory and its associated symbolic meanings become visible in the clearest way and work as discursive formations – statements, claims, stories, narratives – that owe their effectiveness to the trace itself. To put it differently, the power of the trace consists in the affirmation of the objectivity of the map apart from any factual evidence.

Animated maps in films represent a further problematisation of the trace and its power since they have fewer reasons to benefit from the authority derived by those; they are shown in non-scientific contexts, made by people without any knowledge of mapmaking, used as a mere rhetorical device for explaining something other than information on the territory. The point is then that animated maps still rest on a system of signs (that of the map)

but are deprived of 'scientific' premises (the obedience to the cartographic tenets of accuracy, faithful visualisation, and transparency) and nonetheless operate as maps.

## Living maps

When analysing the presence of animated maps in documentary films (which appears to be prevalent since the mid-1930s) it is striking to note the partial dismissal that occurred around the mid-1940s, as if they were no longer suitable for the purposes of effective communication because of their progressive slippage into less influential genres such as travelogues and industrial documentaries. A transnational phenomenon that in its heyday had been so widespread and then almost disappears is a fact that should not be considered a coincidence. It could advance the hypothesis that, as the pioneer of animated cartography Norman Thrower pointed out, animated maps 'approach the ideal in historical geography, where phenomena appear as dynamic rather than static events'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore their use has been particularly meaningful throughout the wartime period because it allows for the expression of dynamic phenomena like battles and war actions, whereas in the aftermath of the Second World War other kinds of rhetorical devices were necessary.

More than just war documentaries, animated maps appear in nearly every film dealing with political – or to be more precise *geopolitical* – issues. But as will be clearer by examining the case of fascist propaganda the themes and subjects of these films are less relevant than the power of the animated maps they feature; what they guarantee in terms of effectiveness, appeal, and suggestion might not easily be compared to any form of informational image whose objective detachment and rigid structures have nothing to do with the attractions designed by animated mapmakers for the benefit of communication revolving around the need to seduce and mobilise the audience. In this sense the partial dismissal could be explained by pointing to the important change in political communication that occurred in the postwar years when the need to address the masses in order to arouse them was replaced by a subtler concern for the education and awareness of citizens.

A second element confirms this primacy of attractions over descriptions: the animated mapmaker. It would be natural to believe that animated maps were highly regarded by geographers. Instead it was only since the early 1960s, and with a much more accurate awareness since the emergence of computer animation in the late 1980s, that cartography seriously inte-

grated the use of animated maps within a 'scientific' framework intended to neutralise the suggestive characters which were the main features of other popular and despised kinds of maps. Films featuring animated maps seldom resorted to professional mapmakers or the advice of geographers, as they usually relied on the skills of animators. Italian cartoonists Liberio Pensuti and Ugo Amadoro will be at the centre of attention in the next section, though it is worth noting a few other important players: Walt Disney in the US (the series *Why We Fight* [1941] and *Food Will Win the War* [1942]); Ivan Montagu in the UK (*Defence of Madrid* [1936]); Mitsuyo Seo in Japan (*Momotarou: God Warriors of the Sea* [1944]); Norman McLaren in Canada (*Hell Unlimited* [1936] and the series *The World in Action* [1943-1945]).

That all animated maps were made by people not acquainted with geography is a fact that should not be underestimated. How could it be claimed that animated maps are still maps – that is, informational images – when the information they deliver is nothing more than a loose likeness, an abstract similarity with the territory they are requested to depict? If a map is supposed to offer a 'reproduction' of the territory animated maps offer no more than a 'representation', not even so faithful and accurate as to deserve the title of map. It is evident then that in the distinction proposed by Gombrich between map and mirror animated maps pertain to the domain of the mirror – that is to say, the picture.

Aside from the pervasive presence in war propaganda and the exorbitant liberty taken from the cartographic tenets, which common features are present in these animated maps? In other terms, is a critical reading possible when even the few titles cited above make full use of the most creative powers enabled by animation and the most suggestive effects demanded by propaganda in such different ways that a comparison seems to be unattainable? How to associate animated maps pretending to mimic graphics and abstract drawings in which countries are mixed up into an organic hodgepodge? I would argue that the most striking thing they have in common is precisely the struggle against geography, as they challenge a structured, ordered, and steady depiction of the world.



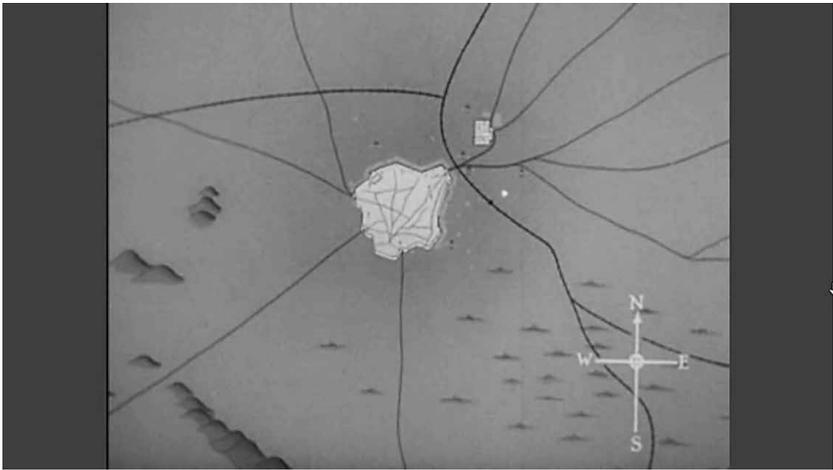
*Fig. 1:* Food Will Win the War.



*Fig. 2:* Feldzug in Polen.

A very different proposal comes from one of the few professional geographers involved in animated mapmaking for documentary films – G. J. Cons, who collaborated with the British Film Institute as scientific consultant for the production of educational documentaries. Referring to the series *Indian Town Studies* made by Gaumont-British Instructional, Cons highlights that ‘these films were made *effective geographically* by the use of animated maps’.<sup>12</sup> It is evident that this effectiveness is based on the power of the trace since it allows a purely explanatory discourse which consists of the plain transmission of data and information even though no element really legitimises it. For him, there is little difference here between animated maps and informational images; the constitutive properties of motion and animation, whose consequences are far from being neutral, is relegated to a blurry allusion to a ‘*living accurate*’<sup>13</sup> vision. Does this prove the ineffectiveness of the attempt to acquire animated maps into the project of geography for ordering the world, or does it confirm Cons’ statement that ‘the genius of documentary film reveal[s] the screen as a magic casement through which our geographical vision of the Earth and its peoples is heightened’?<sup>14</sup> In other terms, does the author’s faith in documentaries negate any concerns about the fabricated spectacle that animated maps present?

Apparently, and with a certain naivety, Cons seems to advocate a perfect analogy between the map, the mirror, and the screen – a position that may surprise coming from a professional geographer. However, as explained by Priya Jaikumar in an insightful essay on the series, the result is not the faithful and plain reproduction of Cons claims but rather an attestation of the role of animated maps in the building of that ideology that put together positivist, modernist, and colonial contents: ‘[t]owns in India were visualised to make them intelligible and transparent, with vision transforming a place, its people and fullness of their lives, into abstract space.’<sup>15</sup> Again, thanks also to the power of the trace the pretensions of correct visualisation and geographical accuracy have been overthrown and transformed into something completely different: the colonial fiction of mastery and control through alleged scientific instruments used in narrative and visual devices for making this very same fiction true.



*Figs 3, 4: Bikaner, film of the Indian Town Studies series.*

## Tracing a doubt, drawing a line

Another proposal coming from Hans Speier (a sociologist engaged in the study of propaganda) demonstrates how the awareness of maps and their effects could already be traced back to the period in which these devices were effectively used. In his 1941 essay 'Magic Geography' Speier analysed the use of maps in Nazi propaganda by claiming that the impudent employ-

ment of those symbolic values so ordinarily unnoticed in cartographic representations, along with other rhetorical tactics, deprived maps of their alleged scientific character and turned them into a sort of magical means for achieving successful communication. The maps taken into account by the author not only refuse the cartographic tenets but they come to cannibalise such tenets as the source of their undisputed authority. As the author firmly states, '[t]he less geography remains on the map the more likely is the map to succeed.'<sup>16</sup> Speier's essay is not only one of the first manifestations of interest for the encounter of propaganda and cartography but also a remarkable and careful testimony of the two elements I am focusing on: the struggle against geography and the power of the trace. In fact, Speier's stress on the 'magic' entails the tricky nature of propaganda maps – their ability to invert and upset the norms of geographical reality and, above all, the fact that in spite of the erasing of geography they claim to present geographical information. Referring particularly to animated maps he sustains that animation transforms the content of the map into 'abstract geometrical symbols of political and military action' and provides 'an almost ludicrous effect'.<sup>17</sup>

The explanatory style and the detached overview could mislead the reader of the essay's main function, which was to provide an analysis of Nazi propaganda not as a 'scientific' phenomenon but rather a craft that needed to be understood. Speier, together with art historian Ernst Kris, was carrying out the Research Project on Totalitarian Communication funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and his contribution had an effectual usage value, primarily to wage war. So the mere existence of a conspicuous essay on Nazi propaganda maps reveals two facts: first, that both the Nazis and the Americans attributed an important value to the power of maps; and second, that the Americans were deeply, although elusively, indebted to Nazi strategy for the purpose of their own propaganda.

There is another aspect that makes this essay curious: its destiny. Ignored by later research on propaganda and forgotten for a half century, 'Magic Geography' was rediscovered in the early 1990s in the context of the newborn discipline known as 'critical cartography'.<sup>18</sup> Earlier the leading spokesperson of cartography during the postwar period, Arthur Robinson, welcomed the essay as an exercise of a 'sterile attitude' towards inconceivable 'artistic or psychological components of maps'.<sup>19</sup> Robinson's harsh opposition has to be explained with the project of the 'revolution' in cartography he was undertaking at the time – that is, the establishment of a method able to give a scientific character to maps. It had to refuse any variety of critical accounts that could have damaged not only the authority of the map but

even its ontology. Thus, the entire field was decontaminated and the general disregard towards popular, persuasive, or simply unconventional kinds of maps was directed at pushing them outside the disciplinary framework of cartography.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the evolution from Speier's idea of propaganda maps to the re-appropriation by critical cartography is pronounced. According to the German sociologist some maps, namely those designed for propaganda, may pervert the scientific spirit which drives so-called cartographic reason. For critical cartographers influenced by post-structuralism it is the cartographic reason itself that may pervert the acknowledgement of maps' 'Merlinesque constructions'.<sup>21</sup>

This critical movement challenged the history of cartography and in some respects the textual hermeneutics of maps through three fundamental theoretical statements: first, the authority of maps draws on a normalising and ideological power; second, cartographic processes and products include artistic and subjective characters; third, the map is just a stage of the process of mapping and not a discrete object isolated from the technical, social, and historical contexts from which it emerges.<sup>22</sup> According to the formula proposed by Brian Harley, cartography like propaganda is 'an art of persuasive communication'.<sup>23</sup> This position is marginal, as I have already pointed out, insofar as both common knowledge and cartographic practices keep alive an abiding trust in maps despite the adopted code (in projection, scale, shape, colour, symbols, lettering, and so on) being neither neutral nor objective. The supposed established knowledge by maps, their truth and trustworthiness, is always followed by the faith that human, technological, and scientific progress will be able to produce an increasingly accurate map. Animated maps do not belong to that scientific approach – at least not before the birth of Geographical Information Systems – but all the same take advantage of their hybrid position between map and drawing, documentary and fiction, abstraction and the figural, and finally, information and propaganda.

## Material that matters

By forcing the acknowledgement of this hybrid position even in the form of dialectical contrast a certain complicity between information, education, and propaganda necessarily emerges within the liberal tradition of documentary. In order to propose a close reading of some animated maps in documentary films I have decided instead to turn my attention towards a much more explicit case: the fascist propaganda documentaries made between 1939 and 1942 entirely composed from animated maps. The

choice to look at an extremely coherent corpus has to do with the fact that animated maps carry some cultural, historical, and political specificities that deal with the cultural, historical, and political environment in which they are conceived. The allure of this case for me rests mostly on the intersection of visual culture, propaganda, imperialism, geography, and history – elements that could hardly be separated from the national context of fascist political cinema and more generally from a very defined geopolitical background. At the same time this analysis is aimed at isolating some features that are not exclusive to the fascist use of animated maps; the choice to limit the scope to this is due also to the power of this specific case, whose violence and aggressiveness erase any sort of ambiguity to such an extent that animated maps could be taken to be a part (and not a minor one) of a wider project of hate propaganda. In fact, if I have already stated that the acknowledgement of the hybrid position of animated maps that makes evident a certain complicity between information, education, and propaganda has to be forced in order to be visible in the liberal tradition of documentary, when it comes to the fascist tradition no forcing is needed because the same complicity is manifest.

In such titles as *Roma e Cartagine / Rome and Carthage* (1941), *La carta d'Europa / The Map of Europe* (1941), and *I pionieri / The Pioneers* (1940) it is possible to recognise something that goes beyond propaganda and incorporates educational topics. In fascist documentary the boundary between propaganda and education is almost indistinguishable; it is hard to find a product that does not promote the ideals of the regime and at the same time broaden the discourse through pedagogical issues, and vice versa. This was the case in particular with wartime production, even though the mobilising power of fascist documentaries lies in the ability to promote a perennial time of war. Thus, this assimilation is also inscribed into the films themselves, which always make use of physical and historical animated maps in order to narrate political affairs.

Liberio Pensuti's *Come fu scoperta la forma della Terra / How the Shape of the Earth Was Discovered* (circa 1937) is an educational documentary which was designed for school teaching in which the focus is on the history of geography combined with a nationalistic argument that links together scientific development and Italian primacy in science. Along these lines the film maintains that most of the discoveries made from the age of antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century were due to the glorious Italian people; even the 'ancient Italians' were already aware that the Earth was a globe (before the 'barbarians' imposed their savage belief in a flat Earth). Three kinds of animated maps are utilised in the film, although their virtual force is occasionally

restrained to a merely instructive purpose: the itinerary – a winding and dotted line passing over the map; the conquering – a coloured surface broadening out; the attack – one or many arrows moving in on a point. As the effects guaranteed by these forms depend mainly on the combination of elements the mild employment in *Come fu scoperta la forma della Terra* makes them rudimentary. The conquering scene with the shining energy of Rome irradiating while inch by inch occupying the whole map is nonetheless so successful in communicating a compelling and relentless power that Pensuti would use it again on other occasions. After all, while this is one of the basic forms present in many animated maps from different traditions in fascist documentaries it gains the greatest relevance by virtue of the naturalised meaning it conveys.





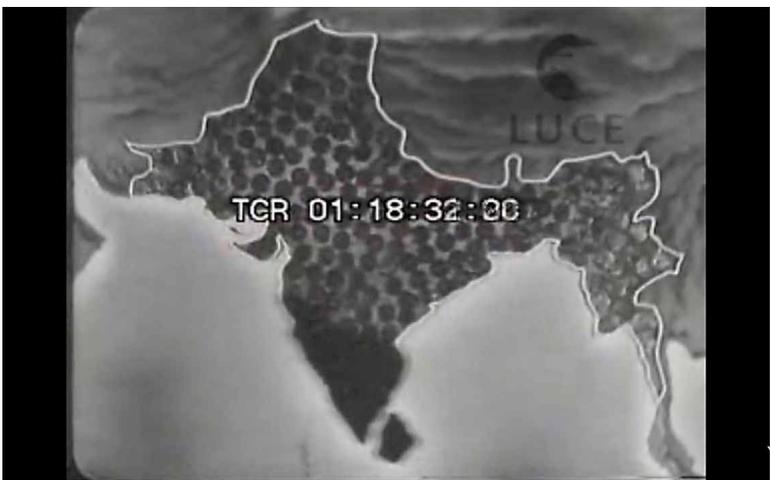
The conquering stain appears in almost each film in my study, often in a very similar fashion. Primarily used in war propaganda this form inflects the substance of the map; no more a drawing, nor a simple representation of the territory, it acquires a problematic materiality that recalls the notion of ‘plasmaticness’ as theorised by Eisenstein in his discussion of Disney animation. Alluding to a mechanism at the heart of the nature of animated maps the Soviet theorist proposes a contrast in animation between what ‘we know’ (the fact that cartoons are drawings, projections, and tricks of technology) and what ‘we sense’ (the effect of their moving, active, existing, and even thinking, presence).<sup>24</sup> Though this argument shows a striking consonance with the idea of the power of the trace what interests Eisenstein is not the contrast in itself, that which Annabelle Honess Roe when commenting on the passage defines as ‘the epistemological-phenomenological dichotomy created by animation that occupies the liminal space between reality and make-believe.’<sup>25</sup> In a visionary passage of his writing Eisenstein defines the cartoons’ ‘plasmaticness’ as ‘a displacement, an upheaval, a unique protest against the metaphysical immobility of the once-and-forever given.’<sup>26</sup> This notion displays in a strong form what has already been defined as the animated maps’ struggle against geography. If the purpose of geography – and particularly of the map – is to provide a fixed, stable, and ordered representation of the world, the property of ‘plasmaticness’ operates exactly in the opposite direction by providing a representation of the world (or rather of what loosely resembles the world) as a magmatic substance in which nothing has a fixed, stable, and ordered form.





Figs 10, 11: Inghilterra vs. Europa.

Another case to consider in these respects is Ugo Amadori's *Il vero volto dell'Inghilterra / The True Face of England* (circa 1939). The film was part of a mass propaganda mission against the United Kingdom that began in the mid-1930s as a reaction against the British opposition to the war with the independent state of Abyssinia. In fascist propaganda 'la perfida Albione' ('the perfidious Albion') has historically been depicted as a rapacious, greedy, and 'plutocratic' power which denies the right of a 'proletarian nation' to have its 'place in the sun' – that is, to exploit African resources just like any other 'developed' European country. Paradoxically, the anti-British propaganda, though instigated primarily by colonial claims, actually stemmed from anti-colonialist arguments – or rather, in the contested assertion between differing 'civilisation' projects, thus creating an even more paradoxical narrative of a liberal, disinterested, and crusading regime. While in cartoons the United Kingdom appeared as a huge spider, a chubby aristocrat, an overdressed buccaneer, and a grotesque harpy, in maps she is the black fluid that submerges blank territories. Narrating the story of English colonialism in India the sequence below presents the first phase of commercial enterprises through thick dots which recall the pockmarks of smallpox, and then the process of colonisation through a growing black stain, the slow and shivery motion of which fosters the sense of visual oppression.





*Figs 12-16:* Il vero volto dell'Inghilterra.

These images show how the conquering stain appeals to the ideas of contagion, infection, and corruption which in turn recall a distinctive conception of the nation as a body of a political nature. Therefore India is perceived as a sick body and England as a propagator of the plague that threatens other countries' health. This claim is also presented with very interesting variations.



Fig. 17: Il principio della fine.



Fig. 18: La carta d'Europa.

Siegfried Kracauer's 'Propaganda and the Nazi War Film' devotes a nuanced annotation to animated maps. Declaring his intent to widen Speier's remarks, Kracauer claims that animated maps must be considered the backbone of the two campaign films he analyses in that essay: *Feuertaufe* / *Baptism of Fire* (1940) and *Sieg im Westen* / *Victory in the West* (1941). Animated maps, he affirms,

stress the propaganda function of the statements about strategic developments inasmuch as they seem to illustrate, through an array of moving arrows and lines, tests on some new substance. Resembling graphs of physical processes, they show how all known materials are broken up, penetrated, pushed back, and eaten away by the new one, thus demonstrating its absolute superiority in a most striking manner.<sup>27</sup>

Kracauer opts for an analysis that stresses the interplay between formal qualities and political messages, seeking to understand the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda. In this account animated maps symbolise Nazi strength and mastery over the world. Unexpectedly the map again becomes a projection of the world but in an altered fashion: it is neither the unproblematic representation of the Earth according to cartographic conventions nor an oversimplified iconic depiction apt for more direct communication, but rather the symbol of the totalitarian idea of the world as magic 'mouldable' matter. By looking at the material dimension of these forms and their unstable constitution a deep feeling of unreliability definitively emancipates the animated map from geography.

### **Myth against reality**

In spite of the convergence of abstraction and materiality the analogies with Nazi propaganda end precisely because of animation. A very traditional use of cartoons is characteristic of fascist propaganda, often intertwining persuasive concerns and unsophisticated imagery. Elsewhere animated maps are used to illustrate some processes; usually war actions and their force, as Kracauer has highlighted, burst upon the images like a flood to suggest the dynamism and the powerfulness of the country praised. On the contrary, in fascist documentaries they are part of a narrative. The organicist metaphor assumes a specifically pictographic dimension – for instance, the representation of England as a spider, an aristocrat, a buccaneer, and a harpy – that lives side by side with a metaphorical one; both are pushed into the narrative, usually the story of a struggle for geopolitical hegemony. Through this mutual exchange the linear spectacle of propaganda surfaces. Visualising the nation as a living being facilitates an immediate understanding of the otherwise subliminal contents of the animation and assures a much more entertaining spectacle. Also, making this symbolic gigantism and its recourse to gross, crude, and prosaic conventions so explicit places these maps in the context of the propaganda of agitation, a

form of political communication whose success depends on the fact that it is 'addressed to the most simple and violent sentiments through the most elementary means'.<sup>28</sup> The map loses its closure, what Emanuela Casti calls 'self-referentiality',<sup>29</sup> the autonomy of a representation mistaken for real, whereas the cartoon gains admittance into a semiotic system to which authority and truthfulness are granted through the power of the trace; the narrative makes the implications coherent – the propaganda message is stronger than ever.



*Figs 19, 20: Inghilterra vs. Europa.*

John Pickles recognises the purpose of propaganda maps as first and foremost ‘to territorialise identity and foster hegemony’,<sup>30</sup> but this scope could be expanded through the idea that the map is nothing more than an instrument of power-knowledge produced in response to state interest. In these respects maps are propositions rather than pictures:

[a]s long as we conceive maps as representations, our imagination will be fettered by the received picture of the world that it is claimed maps no more than mirror. Invariably this received picture is inadequate, inaccurate, often false; and always it is in thrall to dominant interests. Of course this is *why* it's the received picture. All that making maps of this picture does is confirm its authority.<sup>31</sup>

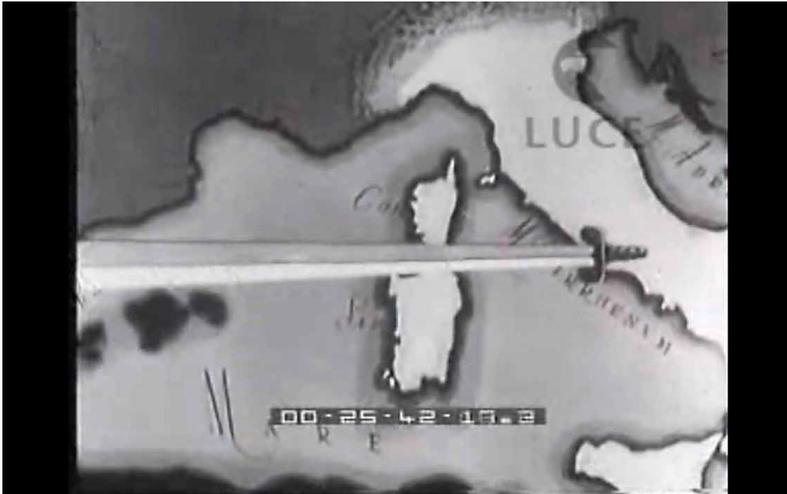
In a comparative essay about what he labels ‘geopolitical cartography’ in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, Edoardo Boria has pointed out the emergence of a new kind of political as well as popular map rather autonomously developed during the 1930s in both countries. Drawing on the tradition of critical cartography Boria's essay highlights how these maps were aimed at conveying a cartographic message oriented towards effective fashion and communicativeness more than accuracy and correctness. They were constitutionally cinematic since dynamism was illustrated as a sort of geographical law through graphic solutions giving the impression of movement, thus suggesting the overwhelming force and aggressiveness of their countries' foreign policies. An enlightening citation from a 1942 history atlas designed for Italian high schools and informed by such ideological concerns states: these maps aspire to ‘convey a sense of change, of the perpetual progression of history, minimising the impression of stillness which seemed so irreducibly linked to any transmitting historical concepts through geographical means’.<sup>32</sup> Professional cartographers did not recognise that what they intended to make had already been produced by the cinema. In fact the complex combination of maps and cartoons for the purposes of propaganda and agitation inflected the structure of even the most neutral geographical documentaries so deeply that it is hard not to be completely relativistic about animated maps.

Liberio Pensuti's *Roma e Cartagine* is a film which presents itself as a history documentary about the Roman-Punic wars. The maps displayed follow a structure of increasing vehemence, from the starting distinction between the white Rome and the black Carthage to the representation of the progression of war actions through, respectively, a shiny white sword and a dark crooked sabre – until the ending personification of the Carthaginian

territory as a human face whose traits distinctly refer to the iconographic codification of the Jewish merchant. Present in these images is something more consistent than the soft propaganda that measured graphic gimmicks intends to suggest or rather evoke as a geopolitical claim – it comes to view that the real backbone of fascist propaganda through animated maps is the manipulation of history. In this specific case the distant Roman-Punic wars become the occasion to claim the right to rule the Mediterranean exactly like Ancient Rome did more than two millennia ago. On closer inspection it becomes evident that all the animated maps featured in these documentaries deal with historical subjects. It is crucial then to stress how in spite of the disappearance of geography the power of the trace somehow reactivates the cartographic logic. In the words of Pasi Väliäho,

cartography traces the forces that, in a given social field, bring forth, combine and regulate the condition of *seeability* and *sayability*, the visible and the articulable. Cartography consists of the activity of mapping the forces that make up our reality<sup>33</sup>

even when there is no reality at all, just a fanciful past.





*Figs 21-23: Roma e Cartagine.*

Animated maps usually display the flow of processes and changes over a short interval of time – for instance a war action – and their goals are pursued through an explanatory discourse. Their use responds primarily to the need for visualising and locating events whose meaning would otherwise be impossible to transmit in such an effective way. The trace, as it has been said, guarantees nearness and possession and then enables a communication grounded in effectiveness. So the animated map stands for the ever-changing but still controllable world; in the bounds of the power-knowledge axiom it can be assimilated to the myth. From a negative

perspective such as that of critical cartographers maps are myths because they are seen as natural, innocent, and dehumanised pictures of the world. From a positive perspective they would involve the ideological function of the myth as assertive reassurance in a world dominated by human beings.

Fascist animated maps do not work on the same level since they deal with historical time, a time so far in the past but nonetheless still present and included in a strong narrative. This past often refers to the Roman Empire and its prominence has to be connected with the myth of *Romanità*, a historical legacy that authorises and empowers all types of ambitions of a regime which has neither the political capital nor the economic strength for a primary role on the international scene. Like the notion of *Lebensraum* for Nazi rhetoric, *Romanità* turns power politics into a natural right: aggressiveness, imperialism, and militarism are embodied in animated maps as necessary and unquestionable means to obtain the reparation that is entitled to a nation that is still facing a historical injustice. In fascist propaganda animated maps are always claims and demands and, through the representation of the sacred time of the Roman Empire, they attempt to establish an unreal historical continuity which transforms the 'Era Fascista' (Fascist age) into the sequel of the Roman age. The more magnificent the remote past was the more magnificent the immediate future is going to become. Actually, in fascist rhetoric the word 'future' does not exist – it is called destiny.



Fig. 24: Inghilterra vs. Europa.

In its most elementary shape the narrative of the animated maps in fascist documentaries promises that history will prevail over geography, myth will redeem reality, time will restore space. The power of the trace warrants these bonds since it establishes that animated maps in spite of every fictional element, abstract anatomy, and transgressive representation refer to a reality – the territory, which somehow has been concretely identified even though it is more a pledge than a matter of fact. Combining the skeleton of the map and the blood of the cartoon under the power of the trace animated maps finally gain access to the realm of the organicist metaphor; from there any military and geopolitical pretension becomes the spontaneous consequence of a law of nature.

These animated maps are inherently part of the imperialistic rhetoric that was the linchpin of the fascist style which became harsher after the proclamation of the Empire in 1936. In this kind of muscular and offensive propaganda the theme of the imperial legacy is also extended to the colonies of East Africa, which never endured Roman domination; the geographical explorations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century become the set term to which the imperialistic pretension is traced back. *I pionieri* illustrates this with a singular graphic solution which combines the map of East Africa, the portraits of the explorers, and the inscription of their itinerary. When an explorer is mentioned a white line is sketched upon the map and a portrait appears, and each time a new line is added to the map; at the end of the film in the foreground the image of the explorer is depicted and in the background a tangle of lines creates a strange pattern which recalls some surrealist experimentation. The effect is fascinating and disturbing but most importantly emphatic; the itinerary transformed into a track within a system; the map, reduced to a formal and rhetorical structure, strongly expresses the fascist ambition to take possession of a land to which the regime claims some historical rights. The pattern drawn out from these tracks is in a way the signature on the bottom of a contract whose validity is determined by the power of the trace.



*Figs 25, 26: I pionieri.*

## Conclusion

In this essay I have proposed a reading of animated maps as rhetorical devices used in documentary films that have interrogated the authority granted by what I have called the power of the trace; in doing so I have deliberately neglected the major concern of contemporary film theory with regards to trace and documentary: indexicality. Though not explicitly

articulated indexicality has nevertheless been present throughout the essay as an invisible but perceptible menace to the usefulness of the notion of trace, which in some manner remains too unproductively tied to the physical correspondences between image and referent that unveils the notion of index as a necessarily unavoidable reference concept. After all, is the addition of an index to the map as suggested by Peirce something other than the theoretical basis of the power of the trace?

Strictly speaking neither in the case of the map nor in that of the animated film is the index an element to be taken into account for a better understanding of their distinct ontologies, nor should it be for the animated map. Notwithstanding the degrees separating image and referent in the case of animated maps the trace operates to reduce the distance to such an extent that a ghostly, ideological, unclear correspondence actually happens to be perceived. No indexicality needed for that. In fact, when the notion of trace has been detached from the image as instrument of registration – that is to say, from the product of an objective technology – a broader awareness of its properties arises. Referring to photography, Peter Geimer has pointed out that

[e]ven seemingly objective technologies of image production rest on the assumption of their technical, social, or ideological factors ... But they are nonetheless exhibited and viewed with the assumption that those depicted in them used to exist.<sup>34</sup>

Animated maps evidently are not products of 'objective technologies' but their ontology expresses similar claims and pretences to the possibility of 'depicting' reality.

In his oft-cited 'Moving Away from the Index', Tom Gunning, drawing on Metz's impression of reality, proposes a radical dismissal of the indexical argument in favour of a more nuanced and effective notion of motion. Among the many disadvantages of the former he highlights what he feels to be 'one of the great scandals of film theory': 'the marginalization of animation'.<sup>35</sup> In the same issue of the journal hosting Gunning's and Geimer's essays Mary Ann Doane resists the temptation to force out the index and attempts a last moment rescue by replacing the logic of the trace with that of the deixis. Both scholars are concerned with the mutation the digital has imposed on the ontology of the film image and their action necessarily passes through the discharge of the trace, which in this context is nothing but 'a material connection between sign and object as well as an insistent temporality – the reproducibility of a past moment'.<sup>36</sup>

More recently Joshua Malitsky has proposed an analysis of scientific and documentary films in which the animation method has been defined as ‘visual pointing’ – that is, a means to call attention to specific isolated details, subtending ‘the logic of connection, of continuity, that defines the terms of the deictic’.<sup>37</sup> However, when we deal with the index, whether purely trace or combined with the deixis, two problems at the heart of the relation between the map and the image come to view: ‘the interest for superficial aspects of the things of the world and, consequently, the rhetoric of transparency’.<sup>38</sup> Both the index as trace, by ratifying the past of something that was in front of the camera, and the index as deixis, by ratifying the ‘thereness’ and the ‘nowness’ of the image itself, are strictly connected with the ideologies of a superficiality and transparency by exhibiting stable, fixed, and unquestionable meanings. On the contrary the deconstruction of animated maps – also beyond the specific use made by fascist propaganda – enables a renewed examination of the trace outside the ideological template of connection and continuity into a domain where the spatial relations are given as an appearance (a cultural side effect of a collective belief in the truth of the map) and the temporal dimension is an endless back-and-forth, from a mythical past to a reliable future, from actuality to a blurry time yet to come.

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## Notes

1. See Castro 2011.
2. Gombrich 1975, p. 127.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
4. Elkins 1999, p. 4.
5. Gombrich 1975, p. 130.
6. Alpers 1983, p. 133.
7. Jay 1988, p. 15.
8. Benjamin 2005, p. 518.
9. Benjamin 1999, p. 477.
10. Peirce 1998, p. 8.
11. Thrower 1959, p. 12.
12. Cons 1959, p. 463.

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 464.
15. Jaikumar 2011, p. 177.
16. Speier 1941, p. 320.
17. Ibid., p. 326.
18. See Crampton & Krygier 2006.
19. Robinson 1952, p. 21.
20. See Pickles 1992 and Crampton 2001.
21. Pickles 2004, p. 46.
22. See Cosgrove 2008.
23. Harley 1989a, p. 11.
24. Eisenstein 1988, p. 55.
25. Honess Roe 2013, p. 82.
26. Eisenstein 1988, p. 33.
27. Kracauer 2004, p. 279.
28. Ellul 1973, p. 73.
29. See Casti 2000.
30. Pickles 2004, p. 40.
31. Wood 2010, p. 39.
32. Cited in Boria 2008, p. 291.
33. Valiaho 2010, p. 11.
34. Geimer 2007, pp. 23-24.
35. Gunning 2007, p. 38.
36. Doane 2007, p. 136.
37. Malitsky 2012, p. 250.
38. Avezzi 2014, pp. 17-18.

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