

## The exact shape of the world? Media and mapping

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‘There’s something to knowing the exact shape of the world and one’s place in it – don’t you agree?’ – *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (Gore Verbinski, 2006)

Among the different critical turns that have been reshaping recent media scholarship, the emphasis on space and spatiality seems to be particularly important. Its coming of age should not come as a surprise: already in 1991, in his influential *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson acknowledged ‘a certain spatial turn’, observing that the latter constituted ‘one of the more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism’.[1] The same intuition was shared – and, in addition, widely explored – by critical geographers Edward Soja,[2] David Harvey,[3] and Doreen Massey,[4] to quote but a few. Influenced by Henry Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (published in French in 1974, but translated into English almost twenty years later, in 1991),[5] all these authors contributed to what appears today as the significant renewal of the study of spatiality within the humanities and social sciences, which has been continually developing from the late 1980s onwards. The emergence of this new paradigm forms the general backdrop against which one should read the proliferation of such key concepts as mapping, place, territory, landscape, environment, local/global, mobility, etc. in the domain of media (and visual) studies, as well as the theoretical and institutional development of new interdisciplinary approaches, such as media geography.[6]

It is in the wake of this ‘spatial turn’ and the multiple theoretical debates that it sparked that our choice to reflect on media and mapping should be

inscribed. Referring to a heterogeneous and complex array of operations and strategies committed to the very general project of ‘understanding space’ – in order to structure, master, control, navigate, reshape, reclaim, re-appropriate, re-imagine, etc. – mapping represents, for us, much more than a set of (albeit valuable) representational techniques, or a (useful) critical trope.[7] As Christian Jacob rightfully points out:

[t]he map is not an object but a function. Like a microscope, a telescope, or a scanner, it is a technical prosthesis that extends and redefines the field of sensorial perception, or, rather, a place where ocular vision and the ‘mind’s eye’ coincide. As a mediation, an interface, it remains hidden. [...] And yet, paradoxically, what defines the map is the mediation of representation [...]. [8]

Conceived as a media-embedded action, mapping invites us to rethink the very notions of place, location, territory, and space. Moving beyond the more standard consideration of maps as significant artifacts in different visual and media landscapes, to consider mapping is, potentially, to examine both an essential world-making strategy and to acknowledge an anthropological impulse: the ‘mapping impulse’.[9] Referring, as late historian of cartography John Brian Harley suggests,[10] to a fundamentally human (and therefore anthropological) need to communicate about space, these ideas force us to take into consideration apparently contradictory elements such as power relations, sensible experiences, and bodily affects.

Within this general context, the historical intertwinings between film and mapping strike us as particularly suggestive, deserving here a more detailed discussion. True, cinema is one among many other forms rendering these relationships visible, but the legacy of a dense theoretical elaboration, as well as its representativeness in the media system, grants it a privileged position from which we can grasp some crucial tensions. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and undoubtedly still afterwards), the faith in cinema’s indexical powers turned it into geography’s most spectacular and cutting-edge auxiliary. Already at the dawn of the First World War, film theorist Hermann Häfker greeted film as the ideal tool to produce an ‘authentic representation of reality’, that is, of the world in its totality[11] – an opinion shared, at least, by eminent French geographer Jean Brunhes.[12] Indeed, even early-cinema catalogues reflected this trend to the extent that Samuel Rohdie could claim that ‘the dominant category of film until 1914 was “geographical”’.[13] Behind the ‘sly rhetoric of neutrality’[14] and transparency that then shrouded not only conventional maps but the filmic medium, and that Häfker heartfully

embraced, cinema's careful coding and scaling of the world through its variegated shots and editing capacities concretely assimilates it to a (film-embedded) mapping enterprise.[15]

Setting the tone in 1903, the Charles Urban Company, one of Britain's leading film companies, excelling in the production of travelogues and educational films, explicitly envisaged itself as a cartographic enterprise of sorts, inscribing the filmic medium in the long tradition of image atlases and proposing, as encapsulated in its famous motto, to make the world visually immediate. If cinema satisfies spectators' 'curiosity', allowing them to 'make a trip around the world', as writer Rémy de Gourmont observes in a 1907 article, it also 'depicts landscapes wonderfully', the basic editing of early film travelogues creating a form of 'imaginative' or 'creative geography' that would not embarrass Lev Kuleshov:

I stop as I wish in Tokyo or Singapore. I follow the craziest of itineraries. I go to New York – which is not beautiful –, passing through the Suez – which is hardly any better – and travel through the forests of Canada and the mountains of Scotland, all within the same hour. I go up the Nile to Khartoum, and, a few seconds later, I contemplate the deep and dark expanse of the ocean from the deck of a transatlantic cruiser.[16]

Beyond the symptomatic presence of maps in films – discussed as early as 1909 and owning a history in itself[17] – it was therefore cinema's ability to capture the visible features of the Earth, as well as its extraordinary reality effects, that made it such an efficient visual surrogate of the world, in particular of the world as a global entity. Many subsequent audiovisual and new media productions have pursued this same trend.

Commenting on the 'feverish production of views of the world' that characterises early 20<sup>th</sup> century visual culture, Tom Gunning recalls Martin Heidegger's claim that modern Western man 'conceives and grasps the world as picture'. [18] It could be argued, in line with Italian geographer Franco Farinelli, that 'to grasp the world as picture' is a fundamental cartographic problem, the geographical map being a perfect materialisation of the intellectual operation to which Heidegger's notion refers. But if Heidegger's reading grid proves useful to make sense of modernity's objectifying gaze and of its drive to transform the world into a systematic totality, the notion of the 'world conceived and grasped as picture' puts perhaps too much an emphasis on representation, concealing the picture's performativity or agency as a specific media artifact. As a matter of fact, and as Häfker himself hinted at, film – in

particular film as mapping – is as much about offering an ‘authentic reproduction of reality’ as it is about world-making.[19] In other words, and this brings us to the question of power, film – and more generally audiovisual and new media – as mapping should also be conceived as an endeavour that opens up possibilities and brings forth ‘the world’ not as (indexical) representation, but as a set of possible actions. Power then refers as much to the images’ capacities as to the way in which film as mapping participates in the construction of (gendered, racialised, etc.) systems of power/knowledge – and to the way in which film as counter-mapping plays an important role in the critical subversion and deconstruction of different hegemonic systems, by sometimes putting an emphasis on sensible experiences.

Once the world stops being conceived merely in its geological concreteness, it appears urgent to consider it instead, as Farinelli would put it, as ‘the complex of social, economic, political, and cultural relations in which humans live’.[20] This, of course, has an evident impact over a conception of mapping that exceeds physical spatial features in order to turn towards more complex instances of reality. If film and media have helped mapping and making the world understandable and even possible, according to Fredric Jameson – who is responsible for one of the most fortunate uses of the word ‘mapping’ in relation to media – the contemporary world system, in its post-modern outcome, has a prominently non-visual nature. If capital, labor, and information are today intrinsically invisible, media’s impulse to draw a ‘cognitive mapping’ of the social totality, or the social space, should involve an ‘allegorical’ representation of that invisible totality.[21] This can be achieved also, but not uniquely, through the representation of particular spaces or architectures, as in the famous scene in Alan Pakula’s *All the President’s Men* (1976) set in the Library of Congress that Jameson discusses in the first chapter of his book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. [22] The encounter between geography and media can thus be very literal, as in the dominant modern framework, or, on the contrary, allegorical, as in Jameson’s more postmodern-leaning case: media can help deep mapping under the surface of concrete spaces. This does not really fall outside the borders of the geographical discipline: a body of critical and epistemological literature in the last 30 years (often labeled as ‘critical cartography’) has unmasked the ‘second meanings’ that geography has always had, even when it was believed to ‘simply’ map the surface of the Earth.[23] Namely, it has shown its discursive level, its ‘allegorical’ character, that is the tendency of the discipline to speak of something other

than what it professes, revealing the subjective, political, strategic, historically- and culturally-determined character of geographical writing.[24] Indeed, mapping is never just a matter of surfaces.

However, the relationships between mapping and media can be played on a different axis, other than those between objectivity and manipulation, and between the literal and allegorical understandings of the term 'world'. Roughly speaking, one could claim that media are both the subject and the object of geography.[25] Although studies on audiovisual media and geography have rarely approached the question in such a systematic way, it is very likely that all research on this broad topic has structured itself along these two lines of reasoning. First, as a subject, media are geographical because of their (different grades of) realism and their ability to represent the (whole) world. This line emphasises that in essence every medium, every film and every audiovisual content, contributes to the great archive of the visible. Media allow people to see the Earth from afar; they involve locations, represent and map space, produce places, and describe the world –both its surface and its inner, deep, 'invisible' functioning. Second, as an object, media are geographical because they happen in space. This line, instead, insists on the fact that audiovisual content is produced somewhere, it is distributed following some strategic patterns (and using some material infrastructures as well), and then it is consumed and experienced through practices that possibly contribute to its relocation. In other words, media are also the ideal objects that can be seen from afar, hence located: they can be represented as if they were the world, in an atlas of sorts, by media history and criticism.

Reflecting on the deep imbrications of mapping and the media, as this special section attempts to do, assumes a different poignancy and significance from a perspective more attuned to the structural transformations brought about by the digital age. To a certain extent, it is not far-fetched to see in the digital realm a resolution to the dualism at the core of the encounter between geography and media, pitting media-as-subject and media-as-object against each other as just mentioned above. Inasmuch as the digital allows spatial media to be, at the same time, representational and analytical tools, the conflict between the two standpoints comes to an end. In fact, that maps have become so pervasive to the point of saturating our lives is also due to the increased capacity provided by digital spatial technologies including satellites, the internet, and Web 2.0.[26] The latter in turn have helped shape more and more complex forms of GIS-based (Geographic Information System) research and practice, not exclusively within the academic boundaries

of the discipline.[27] If maps and media have always been coextensive, the ways digital media have enhanced GIS's multiple applications – already so broad to encompass forms as diverse as surveillance, disease prevention, navigation, and urban planning – have led to the emergence of unforeseen formations. Scholars, for instance, have coined the term 'neo-geography' to indicate the democratisation of GIS techniques and tools enabled by Web 2.0, which on the one hand has brought cartographic skills to the masses, while on the other one has gradually removed the authority and stability so closely associated to GIScience.[28] Besides media's instrumental role to enable these new forms of knowledge as well as their promises to foster original modalities of engagement and engender alternative horizons for social action, media studies could easily prove to be in a privileged position to grasp the renewed configuration of knowledge, power, and space underlying these transformations.

In light of these reflections, this special section further interrogates the possible relationships between mapping and media through a variety of perspectives that, in themselves, demonstrate the vitality of the problems at stake for both geography and media studies. In this respect, the integration of different disciplinary knowledges opens up new horizons of possibility on a level – that of cartography – seldom explored with such a plurality of voices. For this reason, a short presentation of the essays seems all the more necessary so as provide some guidance, albeit fragmentary, to the reader.

Chris Lukinbeal opens the section with an essay that, by proposing a cartographic analysis of Marc Webb's *500 Days of Summer* (2009), reignites the encounter between cinema and cartography. By means of a fresh, critical approach to the methods of cinematic cartography, the author locates in both the performative turn and in the need to complement the map and the tour some necessary instruments for an 'affective geo-visualisation' intersecting representation and practice. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping and on its afterlives, Tiago de Luca's contribution explores the compelling challenge of mapping out the world undertaken by contemporary cinema, by specifically discussing the 'global network film' and the 'world symphony'. Advocating an aesthetics able to come to terms with a world totality, de Luca identifies in Eduardo Williams' *The Human Surge* (2017) a project aimed to realise a grounded, bottom-up form of cognitive mapping of our time, able to capture forces and networks that exceeds the human. Marta Boni's essay focuses on the overlooked practice of fan-mapping meant as a collective endeavour that transforms maps into heuristic

tools granting access to the complex worlds of contemporary media culture. Crucially, Boni also proposes to incorporate media as semiospheres within a cultural space shaped by social media, GIS techniques, and mobile devices, so putting mapping practices at the core of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of media.

If the first three essays explore the potentials of cartographic analysis, the following two adopt a critical standpoint that questions the ontology as well as the politics of cartography, both cinematic and not. In Laura Sharp's article, cartography's objectivist and disembodied ontology undergoes a radical rethinking through the tools provided by feminist geography and science and technology studies in order to engender a situated, embodied, and grounded geovisualisation. Through the study of a day in the life of a location scout and its representation by means of the GIS-based web application Story Maps, the contribution reflects on the methodological and technical challenges of integrating the apparently contradictory objective view from above and subjective view from below. While Sharp's essay questions the gendered dynamics of knowledge production in cartographic analysis, Lola Remy's explores the colonial legacy of those practices and their urgent rejection and subversion by Indigenous documentary filmmakers in North America. Reflecting on the promises of an instrument and a practice traditionally associated with settler colonialism, Remy proposes the notion of 'contrapuntual cartography' to expand the ways in which 'Indigenous filmmakers use to offer an alternative, multivocal cartography of the Nation(s)'.

The last two essays examine the world-building potential of mapping as environmental strategy. Adam Wickberg's confronts the presentism of media studies by tracing its mapping impulse back to the Early Modern era. Against the background of the colonial history of cartography, the enmeshment of coloniality, modernity, and media as explored in the essay in dialogue with the practices of mapping American natureculture demonstrates the centrality of media in 'the rapid building of environments, altering of habitats, and establishment of global networks', giving historical depth in this way to the current eco-crisis. Enmeshments of a similar nature are explored by Janet Walker in an insightful contribution that studies the strict interrelations between a range of media and the oil infrastructures on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, whose encounter produces 'earth rewriting and remapping'. The idea that media co-constitute, rather than merely represent, the environment

leads the essay to a necessary and renewed political commitment with environmental media that for us represents the ideal conclusion to this special section.

## Authors

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## Notes

- [1] Jameson 1991, p. 154.
- [2] Soja 1989.
- [3] Harvey 1990.
- [4] Massey 1994.
- [5] Lefebvre 1991.
- [6] See Lukinbeal & Zimmermann 2008; Mains & Cupples, & Lukinbeal 2015; Roberts 2012; Hallam & Roberts 2013.
- [7] See Jacob 2006.
- [8] Jacob 2006, pp. 11-12.
- [9] See Castro 2009, 2011.
- [10] Harley 1987, p. 1.
- [11] Häfker 1914, p. 13.
- [12] Brunhes 1913. Note that Jean Brunhes ran the Archives de la Planète from 1912 to 1930, overseeing the constitution of its autochrome, film, and stereoscopic collection of images.
- [13] Rohdie 2001, p. 10.
- [14] Harley 1989, p. 14. See also Schwartz 1996, p. 35.
- [15] Castro 2011.
- [16] Gourmont 1907, p. 124.
- [17] Mareschal 1909, p. 47. On the presence of maps in films see, among others, Conley 2007, Castro 2017, and Fidotta 2015.
- [18] Gunning 1992.

- [19] According to Häfker, film has the capacity to transform the Earth into 'our home', the mission of geography being also to envision a space eventually 'freed from horrors, explained and fully subject to humankind' (Häfker 1914, p. 7).
- [20] Farinelli 2003, p. 6.
- [21] Jameson 1989, 1991. See also Toscano & Kinkle 2015.
- [22] Jameson 1992.
- [23] See Crampton 2010, pp. 13-21. See also Wood 2010.
- [24] See Pickles 2004; Wood & Fels 2008. For a more political take, see also Winichakul 1994; Akerman 2017.
- [25] See also Avezzù 2015.
- [26] See Kurgan 2013.
- [27] See Wilson & Stephens 2015; Wilson 2017.
- [28] Schuurman 2009.