

**Laura Kurgan: Close Up at a Distance: Mapping Technology and Politics.
Zone Books: New York. 2013. 228 pages.**

Back in 1992 Denis Wood declared we are 'map immersed,' so much of our lived realities are mediated through maps. Only a decade later we are better described as 'map saturated' or mapenmeshed. Maps permeate our lives from car navigation systems to weather forecasting. From agriculture to the internet, our ways of moving, being, and consuming are dependent on the spatial organisation of information, that is on maps. This cartographed reality is reflected in the panopticism of the 'Big Data Revolution' and the mega-mapping projects now underway that map the entire universe, the human genome, the brain, all activity on earth. NSA's surveillance regime is in effect mapping all human interactions. Google has come to realise that its real role is to re-present to us the details of our lives through maps.

There is a burgeoning literature analysing the ways in which maps, knowledge and power are deeply imbricated; ontologies and epistemologies, temporalities and spatialities are revealed as co-productions of historical processes defining, mapping and naming reality. There is also a massive efflorescence of cultural production around maps and mapping, artists, geographers, activists, indigenous groups, GIS and Google Earthers are all turning to cartography as a form of resistance or aesthetic expression on the one hand, or as new modes of knowledge management and market expansion on the other, while at the same time new forms of spatiality and connectivity are demanding revised forms of mapping.

Yet we are also variously described as suffering cartographic anxiety, labouring under cartographic illusions or being captured in the map. We appear to be stuck, seemingly unable to get outside the map to meet Foucault's challenge 'what is philosophy...if not the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently instead of legitimating what is already known?' (Foucault, 1992: 8-9). Brian Holmes, for example, suggests it is impossible to 'escape the overcode,' the entangling mesh of linguistic, taxonomic, political, digital and technological infrastructure that supports the contemporary cartographed reality (Holmes, 2009).

The ineluctable saturation of our lives in maps results, in part, from the expansion of mapping capacity, both technical and cognitive, provided by GIS, ICT, satellites, the internet and Web 2. This vastly augmented capacity to organise and re-present data, text, and materials spatially, enables the location and geocoding of every aspect of reality, at every scale from the smallest particles to the collision of galaxies, along with every detail of our daily movements, our genomes, and our desires. Cartographed reality is set to complete a transformation of the embodied and enacted coproduction of life and the environment from a process of movement, interaction and becoming into a seamless web of seemingly objective, placeless and timeless information. Arguably this is why we cannot escape the overcode, datafication provides the source material for the latest

phase of accumulation and enclosure in cognitive capitalism.

Given all this, it is difficult to be enthusiastic about Kurgan's book, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping Technology and Politics*, that promises much for her projects exploring the new mapping technologies of GIS and GPS, but makes little reference or connection to the whole flocks of scholars who have thought deeply and critically about our thoroughly cartographic lives (e.g. Harmon, 2009; O'Rourke, 2013; Pickles 2004). Critics and artists whose work is available at the click of mouse on Kurgan's GPS connected computer.

Why does each new generation continue blithely assume they have invented something new, when in actuality its been worked-over extensively in the past. The fear of influence is understandable in the young and unsure, but it is also a form of ignorance. The complaints of an old fart maybe? But when I look at the acres of print devoted to mapping and the new technologies, that are simply ignored in this book, it makes me wonder. Why does each generation have to work things out for itself, doesn't anything accumulate or resonate down the years? Or is it something else?

One possibility is that the world is not as united and connected as we have been led to believe - the working contention of the book under review here. Territories, disciplines, audiences are divided, knowledge and its production practices are messy and localised, and that any coordination and connection depends on human agency and a great deal of collective work, including work by the authors and publishers of new books.

Another possibility is that Kurgan has gone native and is captive of the military mapping technology she purports to criticize. She explicitly makes the claim her work is special and different:

Central to the ways these projects unfolded and to the fact that they do not simply analyze, but in fact employ, these technologies, is this claim: we do not stand at a distance from these technologies, but are addressed by and embedded within them. These projects explicitly reject the ideology, the stance and security of "critical distance" and reflect a basic operational commitment to a practice that explores spatial data and its processing from within. Only through a certain intimacy with these technologies- an encounter with their opacities, their assumptions, their intended aims- can we begin to assess their full ethical and political stakes. (p.14)

This is a very strong claim and is very like the methodology of participant observation that typifies a good deal of anthropology, sociology of science and especially practising critical cartographers. However she does not appear to grasp the epistemic practices that go along with that; practices involved in constituting an author as authoritative: need to be self-reflexive; or the difficulties raised for example by Audre Lorde that 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House'. Kurgan claims to reveal the biases, and spatialities that modern mapping technologies open up by actually using those technologies in art projects. And indeed many of her projects do force a critical examination of the new cartographic reality. The problem lies more in her exposition than in her projects.

She makes no mention of Tom Van Sant's geosphere image which says it all, and gives only a passing mention to Denis Wood's *Power of Maps*. Denis Wood's work is foundational, but especially relevant is his 'Map Art' article that surveys the huge 'map as art' field ignored by Kurgan and argues:

Art maps are always pointing toward worlds other than those mapped by normative mapping institutions. In so doing art maps unavoidably draw attention to the world-making power of normative maps. What is at stake is the nature of the world we want to live in. In pointing towards the existence of other worlds - real or imagined - map artists are claiming the power of the map to achieve ends other than the social reproduction of the status quo. Map artists do not reject maps. They reject the authority claimed by normative maps uniquely to portray reality as it is, that is, with dispassion and objectivity, the traits embodied in the mask. (Wood, 2006: 5-14)

If escape from the overcode is to be possible and other worlds are to be made real, it is going to take a united effort across all areas of endeavour and imagination, and a recognition of the mapping practices of cultures that are not enmeshed in a western cartographic reality (Woodward & Lewis, 1998).

References

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