

published May 1, 2015

## Cognitive Mapping

I am inordinately fond of a crappy TV show called [Leverage](#). Its about a little band of hackers, grifters and second-story artists who steal from the rich to give to the poor. Perhaps I like it because it reminds me of my favorite childhood TV show, [The Adventures of Robin Hood](#). Made in the 1950s, it was regularly on Australian TV in the 1960s. Much later, I found out it was written and produced by blacklisted Hollywood Reds working in artistic exile in London.

What both shows have in common is that they picture a world of power and inequality, imagine it whole, and if not quite from the bottom up, then at least from the point of view of agents somewhere in the middle who act for and with the subaltern people below. Both shows are in that sense some sort of 'cognitive mapping' exercise, putting particular things into a perspective in which some sorts of systematic relations, at least within the social world, might be seen and felt.

The project of Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's, *Cartographies of the Absolute* ([Zero Books 2015](#)) is to ask what a Marxist aesthetic might be that tries to map the social totality. It is an excellent inventory of such attempts, across a range of media and art forms. I think there are still some problems with it, but I'll come to that after outlining the excellent work the book manages to do.

'Mapping' gets a bit of a bad rap these days, as certain kinds of mapping are without question tools of conquest and control. So one should think of mapping at least with a certain caution. But perhaps there are alternative ways of mapping, or different kinds of agent for whom the map create agency. Besides, maps have complicated relations to territories, as any Australian student of cartography knows. The 'map' of the antipodes preceded the territory. It was 'found' in part because in the cartographic imagination it was already there.

The age of GPS, of satellite and drone imaging, might not only make the world visible and even imaginable in advance, it might also be confusing. As Laura Kurgan says in *Close Up At A Distance* ([MIT Press 2013](#)) it "disorients under the banner of orientation." (6) Mapping finds what its programmed to find, but other agents might détourn it toward other uses. If as [Hito Steyerl](#) says our subjective experience is of freefall, where everything looks fine because we don't even know we are falling, then perhaps some kind

of cartographic practice might help locate there the bottom might be. Such practices might be in textual or cinematic form, or even actual maps.

It is Fredric Jameson who gave us the suggestive expression **cognitive mapping**, intending it to be some kind theoretical-aesthetic practice of correlating the field of culture with the field of political economy. In Jameson's periodization, such a mapping was possible in the early days of capitalism (see Balzac, for example) but becomes almost impossible in the age of imperialism. The geographic parts are too separate, and the separation loaded with cultural baggage, to enable anyone to chart across the divides and see capital whole.

In Jameson's declension, this gets even harder in the 'postmodern' age, when production itself becomes all but invisible within the space of the old metropolitan centers. Meanwhile in the peripheries the effects of capital are all too readable, but not their source. I think one has to question this periodization. Was the early stage of capitalism really all that readable in the first place? Certainly, TJ Clark thinks the *Painting of Modern Life* was mostly about misrecognition, of mistaking the city for capital. Rare were those who, like Courbet and Pissaro, understood that the city capital made depended on the exploitation of agriculture, and hence of the earth itself.

And is it really the case that the 'postmodern' is about the unreadability of underlying dynamics of the totality. Perhaps it is just that the old abstract, conceptual diagrams of eternal capital's value form are not operative in their original iteration, but have themselves mutated, and need a revised conceptual armature. As Deleuze and Guattari would insist, the abstract form really is all there on the surface. One doesn't have to imagine sublime and mystical depths. One just has to look at, and touch, the actual surface. Not to mention interact with it.

The problem with Jameson is that the cognitive map is contemplative. It is supposed to enable action but is itself not integral to it. Cognitive mapping, even in its own terms, is not sufficiently 'dialectical.' It freezes into a contemplative totality that prescribes an ideal form of action that never comes, that is felt only as a structuring absence. It's like a Marxist negative theology.

Maybe actual totalization is really not that hard, provided one gives up on certain preconceptions, starting with a merely philosophical idea of the eternal essence of the value form of capital. Cognitive mapping is still caught up in a dialectic of essence and

appearances, where the phenomenal form of capital is supposed to be captured in aesthetic form in such a way as to reveal its essence, which was *known in advance* to theory. Aesthetics just gets to be the linkage between the ruling conceptual work and the problem of mobilizing people to action based on their ability to grasp what they need to do. Somehow this never quite works out.

T+K: "capitalism as a totality is devoid of an easily grasped command-and-control-center. That is precisely why it poses an aesthetic problem..." (24) Really? For whom is this a problem, apart from Marxist theorists who imagine a command-and-control role for their theory center? For those who precociously abandoned the hierarchies of the party form, and with it the hierarchical relation of theory (seer of essences) and aesthetics (toilers in appearances), the social whole was one to be discovered by both aesthetic and conceptual practices, working together, and which early on started an inventory of diagrams that might describe it. This is the case with Constant's [New Babylon](#), situationist psycho-geography, and the 'situology' that Asger Jorn and [Jacqueline De Jong](#) created to expand it. It is just as true today of work such as Alex Galloway's on [Protocol](#) (2003), which rather patiently shows how control need have neither center or command.

It is a question, then, of suspending faith in the abstract conceptual scheme of eternal capital as the philosophers have extracted it from Marx's *historical* critique of political economy. Not all that changes is mere appearance. It's a problem not just with Hegelian but also Althusserian readings, where personified agents become mere bearers of social relations, or what T+K call "puppets of value" (42). We lose all sense of how the bubbling foam of the visible tangle agents at work not only express or bear social abstract social relations but also subtly modify them, even if not in the directions they might desire.

This perspective also helps us get away from petit-bourgeois revisions of Marx, in which abstract social relations are a tyranny forcing the precious individual into their mold. In these versions, what is abstract is either sinister and invisible or present but mechanical, and is only a malign power against precious individual sensibilities. Here someone like [Andrey Platonov](#), or in very different registers, [Asger Jorn](#) and [Donna Haraway](#) are refreshing antidotes, with their insistence on collective, collaborative meshings of flesh and tech, abstract and concrete. Here this tendency connects up with T+K on a point at which we all appear to agree: that the goal is not the particular or concrete as a value but a different kind of abstract totality to organize them.

The rival approach all of us have to find some way of containing would be **actor network**

**theory** (ANT) as 'personified' in the work of Bruno Latour. In [Bogdanovite terms](#), ANT has drawn its metaphors of causality from certain specialized labor practices of its time: accounting, logistics, forensics. Its favored basic metaphor is the network. Here I think the crucial conceptual problem is to recognize that 'network' both describes an actual series of forms in the world, and is also an ideology that ascribes certain qualities to that form.

Latour shifts attention to the worldviews of the actors and the tensions between them rather than aiming for a totalizing overview. Now, in the Marxist tradition, Bogdanov comes closest I think to ANT, but is still not quite a precursor to it. His **tektology** attends to the problem of coordinating between different kinds of 'actors', or in his terms, different kinds of labor, by understanding the roots of the worldview of each in its labors. His tektology proposes a kind of exchange of metaphors between domains of labor.

This was of course a road not taken, a kind of extension of syndicalist thinking, not in the direction of aesthetic labor as it is in the situationists, but in the direction of technical labor. Hence among Marxists the organizational problem tended to be posed not in terms of Bogdanovite networks of heterogeneous labor bound by exchanges of differences, but by more 'totalizing' models. One is social democracy, which settles on the totalizing model that can secure an electoral majority. After Laclau and Mouffe, this may no longer be a consensus and may instead be an articulation. Another is the Trotskyist practice splitting based on possession of the 'correct' totalizing view. The third is Gramscian hegemony, in which the party with the correct totality maintains contact with broader social movements, who supposedly do not.

The success of ANT must surely in part depend on the limits or outright failures of these organizational models. ANT capitalizes on the defeats of all forms of labor movement organizational practice. But Latour has to insist that his 'agents' share his aversion to totalizing thought, which seems to be an imposition of another kind on the specific experiences of actors, many of whom may indeed have their own view of the panorama of social life. T+K try to restore the honor of critical theory by appeal to Benjamin, for whom the very separation of the panorama from the world is, dialectically, the condition of possibility of its overview.

But as T+K point out, this is satisfying on a literary level only. It is likely more progress can be made by abandoning the contemplative world of the spectator, and engaging with the way organizing practices and organizing worldviews form a unity. It is not that one has to see the whole first, before acting. It is that seeing and acting, while never mapping neatly

onto one another, nevertheless advance – and retreat – together. The world is not waiting for us to make a total work of art about a total theory before deciding to go back to the work of making itself again – in our image.

T+K assemble an impressive range of works with which to think about such problems. There's [Mark Lombardi's](#) hand-drawn diagrams of intersecting circles of power. There's [Allan Sekula's](#) *Fish Story*, with its patient documenting of the materiality of maritime labor. There's [Trevor Paglen's](#) photographic work on the sites and signs of the secret state. T+K rightly caution against pushing too hard, making too many connections, as arguably Lombardi does (although it earned him a visit from the FBI). Paranoia is never far away in such work, where the links between the separate perceptions is made too fast.

There might be two privileged figures, and two scales, at which totality is meant to reveal itself: **crime and crisis**. In the post-situationist crime novels of [Patrick Manchette](#), for example, crime is not a moment calling for the restoration of the false totality of order, but is rather revealed as both the means and result of the totality itself. Here his work is of a piece with the *film gris* wing of *film noir*. These 1940s and 1950s films, by [Jules Dassin](#) and others, are often the product of blacklisted former commies and fellow travellers, who use crime as the key to a totality that is more murky than the restoration of order narratives would want to acknowledge. *The Adventures of Robin Hood* was the same sensibility as pulp period comedy. It's the world Dashiell Hammett described, run by the "cops, the crooks and the big rich."

The other figure is crisis, one which [Janet Roitman](#) shows to be far more ambiguous and problematic in how it structures causality and time than Marxists are wont to believe. Crisis is supposed to be a ripping of the veil from totality. I offered a slightly different take on this in [Virtual Geography](#) (1995). There I show how we still depend on mediated experiences, even of crisis, even when the crisis also has immediate physical affects on people's lives. The value of the crisis moment – or what I renamed **weird global media event** – is not the ripping of the veil of spectacle. Rather, it offers the spectacle of a scrambling and proliferating of narratives. Its an experimental moment, when no story fits, and many are tried. But it is not a piercing through of appearances to get to the essence. It is rather a time of new tactical exploits among disorganized appearances.

Many attempts at a Marxist theory go wrong by taking the young Lukacs seriously. The great flaw of [History and Class Consciousness](#) is his rather comic attempts to make the *actual knowledge* generated in both manual, technical and scientific labor go away,

and to subordinate them to the megalomania of the philosopher as stand in for the party. For example he faults the Machists for taking the actual resistances and affordances of the material world, as delimited in particular natural sciences, as constraints to which thought and action must attend. In this Lukacs condenses much of what is obsolete in 'modern' thought.

The party faulted Lukacs, not so much for a sleight of hand, as for revealing the trick by trying to do it twice. The party had usurped for itself the right to think the totality in the name of the proletariat. Lukacs tried to double the trick and have the philosopher perform it on behalf of the party. Much of both the beauty of the text and its incoherence comes from this. In Lukacs, the specific labor practices cannot on their own produce knowledge (because, fetishism!). Rather than think about how specific labors might coordinate among themselves as Bogdanov (and other Machists) do, or how the party might be the centralized command and control center of such a coordination, Lukacs puts in place of these real problems an imaginary solution: philosophical method. Those in possession of the right method have the keys to totality. The method alone guarantees the correct assessment of the totality, a vision which has then to be *imputed* to the proletariat whose thought it is supposed to be.

The gap between the actual and imputed class consciousness then becomes an *aesthetic* problem. At one and the same time the totality is supposed to be opaque to all those poor benighted workers living out their fetishistic fragments. Yet somehow the philosopher, on behalf of the party, in turn on behalf of the class, somehow has a method that reveals the totality, independent of any specific empirically testable knowledge. (The test is supposed to be 'practice', but if you want reflection on actual examples of organization problems in Russian Social Democracy, read Bogdanov's [Tektology](#)).

This is the problem cognitive mapping inherits from Lukacs: the problem of the opacity of the totality, the faith in a non-empirical method that discerns its essence, and then the role of the aesthetic as a subsidiary service which chisels in stone what theory hath seen on its mountaintop. Nowhere does it appear that an aesthetic practice might *fundamentally* alter the concepts. There's a one-to-one mapping between the failure of this organizational form of critical theory and practice and the aesthetic failure to produce much by way of perceptions of the world felt whole.

On the aesthetic rather than the theory front, it is tempting to keep dwelling, as generations of old and new leftists did, on the magisterial failures of Vertov and

Eisenstein. Both in their own ways reproduce the pathology of a hierarchical view of perception and action in the world. Here it's the film maker who is his own private Lenin, perceiving all and instructing all from his command and control center. When Hito Steyerl takes the idea of a visual bond from Vertov, it is interesting that it has to become something no longer shot and cut and printed in a centralized fashion. The world just doesn't work that way now, and perhaps never did. 'Network' might indeed be mostly an ideological figure, but it is one that doubles actual practices and experiences.

Brecht: "Petroleum resists the five-act form." (84) Nor does it neatly fit within a novel, as Pasolini found out wrestling with his last great (anti)novel [Petrolio](#). Here again is something we might borrow from Deleuze and Guattari: the shift in perceptual registers from molar to molecular. The world can't be described in a drama, nor can 'dramatic' action engage a world. Not when that world is made up of global processes that exceed the scales of perception of drama (the molar) and in both directions. But one has to take Guattari quite literally when speaking of the molecular: where do hydrocarbons come from? What industrial form does their extraction take? What's the role of both labor and nonlabor? And – not least – where do the residues of those collective labors end up? If Marx ever had a real intuition of totality, it is not *capital*, it is *metabolic* rift. Capital might in large part be the agent, but to see only capital is itself a kind of fetishism.

That capital is the fetish of a certain kind of marxocological thinking is made all too clear when it confronts the empirical sciences that point to alarming signs of metabolic rift. The first act then becomes to rename these signs of the Anthropocene – as the capitalocene! There is and only is capital, as if we were supposed to accept at face value its own "I am that I am" claim be all there is. But even if capital were abolished tomorrow, most of the problems grouped under the rubric of the Anthropocene remain and remain ongoing. Ocean acidification, for example. There's more to totality than capital, more even than capital's hidden double of labor. So while I think [Jason Moore](#) is doing very important work under the rubric of the capitalocene, the term ought not to blind us to the larger sense of metabolic rift.

T+K document many fascinating examples of attempts at cognitive mapping, many of which I don't know, and all of which sound like they are worth exploring. There's William Bunge's book *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*. There's Michael Wadleigh's film [Wolfen](#). There's the photography of [Camilo José Vergara](#), [Takuma Nakahira](#) or [Lewis Baltz](#). I am less worried than T+K about photographers who leave human labor out of the

frame, and I think would-be Marxists would do well to get over the fetish of seeing everything in the frame that is not human as 'dead labor.' The ruin is also the molecular, is also metabolic rift. The ruin points to a larger and even less coherent and stable totality.

It is probably no longer the case that the city can stand in for the totality, if it ever was. The contemporary city of the over-developed world is in any case a quaint relic. The challenge now would be to cognitively map the megalopolis. How would one make sense of the Pearl River Delta or Mexico City or the vast stretch of human habitation that stretches from Sao Paulo to Brasilia and probably includes one hundred million people? The art of city looks from today's perspective to be just a notch in scale up from tales of village life.

I think T+K get more leverage in thinking about another metonym: the container of containerized transport. There's the seed of a whole genre. They mention a magnificent collage by [Martha Rosler](#) which puts images of models' faces on the outside of a stack of containers, who small black-skinned workers visible in the frame was well. It's a powerfully condensed image of class and race, gender and the commodity, the colonial and the logistic.

Other examples of container as trope would include *Fish Story* again, William Gibson's novel *Spook Country*, although it is probably more valuable for its insinuated concept of a *cold civil war*. The opening sequence of Andrew Niccol's film *Lord of War*, the second series of *The Wire*, and for that matter the episode of *Leverage* about a container used to smuggle American cash money *back* from Iraq. In academic work, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter's brilliant critical and empirical work <http://logisticalworlds.org/> stands out.

I really do wish Marxists would stop embarrassing themselves by gesturing against some sort of Platonist approach, where information is all that is real, so as to return to old fashioned 19<sup>th</sup> century value theory as if this hand-waving made the problem go away. As I put it in *A Hacker Manifesto*, information is not form divorced from matter. It is form whose relation to (other aspects of) matter has become abstract and contingent. *This* information can be embedded in *this* material substrate, but could be transferred to another with almost no loss. The ontological aspect of information is indeed quite strange, and not really something that was much thought about until the mid-twentieth century, not least because it was not actualized as a force of production until very recent times either. If there's a turning point one could signal it as [Claude Shannon's Mathematical Theory of Communication](#) (1948) and the coeval invention of the

transistor at Bell Labs.

Hence we're not making any progress when T+K declare about the Platonist theory of information, "This is the very fantasy that we encounter in paeans to the seamless shaping of architecture by computer design, or in the spurious, but nonetheless influential (for a time) view of the 'new economy' as a domain of immaterial flows and immaterial work." (212) Emphasis here on 'for a time'. This is obsolete ideology that is being criticized here. But merely retreating to the obverse, where 'materialism' just means matter, is not much help. So if materialism is to mean anything in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it really has to be molecular as well as molar, and really has to understand information as well as matter and energy as broad descriptions of what the forces of production actualize. (Here I am closer to the position of [Tiziana Terranova](#)).

As I have [suggested elsewhere](#), this might mean rethinking value theory, where use value is not just doubled and commandeered by exchange value in the form of the general equivalent. Rather, one might have to think information in at least four forms: **general equivalent** (money), **general non-equivalent** (logistics), **specific equivalent** (culture) and **specific non-equivalent** (revolutionary developments in both art and science).

Using these speculative extensions of the old abstract concepts, one might then have a way to think about [Harun Farocki's](#) work on the **operative image**, as a way to make legible to humans the way the general non-equivalent of logistical data about the world is a way of controlling the world that may or may not pass through exchange value, or may even dominate exchange value the way the latter dominates use value.

Its qualities are nicely summed up by Grégoire Chamayou's [A Theory of the Drone](#), as persistent gaze, totalizing, archive, fusion of data, schematizing forms of life and edge detection. These are the features of what in [Gamer Theory](#) I called the *topological* or *gamespace*. A manifold space for which cartography may no longer be an adequate mode of understanding. Perhaps that's what accounts for the feeling Steyerl calls free fall. It's a space in which one could never "identify the levers." (237) There are no levers – its an obsolete metaphor.

Marxist aesthetic theory so often wants to be the special theory that guides aesthetic practice, where the special object in view would be social labor revealed at work beneath the surface of exchange. But it more rarely wants to be what Bogdanov thought was essential: the **labor point of view**. Not an ideal labor point of view posited by a special

theoretical method, but the actual points of view (plural) of actual social laborers. The road not taken so often is something like **proletkult**, because it means building another practice of collaborative work in which the aesthetic and theoretical have no special powers but have to negotiate with all kinds of labors and their metaphorical extensions and self-understandings. In this sense ANT is what you end up with as default setting for not trying to practice proletkult: you end up trying to do the negotiations within existing institutions from which the social movements are excluded in advance.

If one gives up the magic claim to know the totality, how then does one not fall into the trap of taking bourgeois economics to be a complete and last description of reality? Well, perhaps one has to give up the command and control center view, but not then accept that the general equivalent is the only kind of information. Its functioning depends on the other three forms. A new kind of abstraction might reorder the relations between the four forms of information, their four forms of equivalence and generality, and lack thereof. Perhaps that other socialist Machist, Otto Neurath, was onto something in his pioneering attempts at data visualization in the service of the self-organization of socialism. (An idea put to me a long time ago by nettime.org comrade [Frank Hartmann](#), the significance of which I am now starting to see.)

What we need, then, are not so much cognitive maps (theory controlling aesthetics) as a new kind of proletkult, or a new kind of *dérive*, a new way of collectively experimenting in the act of mapping, as an ongoing practice, rather than an aesthetic work for contemplation. So while Toscano and Kinkle present an excellent summary of cognitive mapping as a concept and practice, I think we might need to move on.

**Also for you:**