ON CINEMATIC CARTOGRAPHIES, OR, WHAT IS ART FOR?

In May 2009 I traveled to Vancouver, BC from Gainesville, Florida–where I teach Film & Media Studies at the University of Florida–for the purpose of facilitating a weeklong moving image production workshop. In collaboration with cheyanne turions, the Programs Manager + Curator at Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society, we decided upon the frame of cinematic cartographies, which grows out of a number of my interests: Marxist theory, the architectural forms of postmodernism, globalization, *et cetera*. During the first night of the workshop, I quickly laid out my interest in these issues, and the participants then raced out into the city to make works on the general topic of mapping their city [or perhaps I should even say their cities, since it's not clear at all that each person's subjective mapping overlaps with the others]. This exercise proved incredibly fruitful, revealing aspects of what I knew I'd find [for example, the constant tug of the global networks even in the small local details] and many things that I didn't [for example, the impact of the drug trade on Vancouver's housing market]. What I was not quite able to broach given the practical nature of the workshop, and what I'd like to discuss here, is the history out of which this project of Cinematic Cartographies emerges. While I did race through the Realism/Modernism/Postmodernism schema in order to contextualize issues related to mapping our contemporary globalized spaces, there's a longer narrative to tell, tracing its roots all the way back to the Greeks.

Let me start briefly by recapitulating my discussion of Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism as it relates to mapping. Under the period of Realism [roughly 1840-1890], opposing social classes were in immediate spatial juxtaposition [in, say, Dickens's London], so understanding the functioning of power in an emergent industrial society was pretty straightforward. The Modernist period [roughly 1890-1945] was also the period of imperialism where, despite a spatial discontinuity between exploiter and exploited, there was still a pretty clear sense of a mapping of center [London, say] and periphery [India, for London]. The period associated with postmodernism [roughly 1945-present, or possibly only 1945-1991], it has been argued by Fredric Jameson and others, presents no such easy mappings. Instead we are faced with the difficulty of mapping the much more complicated structures associated with globalization. There is not yet an elegant way to designate the mobility of the working population or the non-hierarchical networks of capital flows and communication or many of the other unique characteristics of our modern age. This, in brief, is the argument I made in the workshop, and it's the foundation of my argument for the necessity of a project of cinematic cartography. But again, I think we need a longer detour through the history of art practices to understand why the inability to map is a significant problem.

Western aesthetics, since its very inception, has been concerned with, and often perplexed by, the question of what art is for exactly. Initially, with Plato, art famously fared poorly—Plato saw art as a hollow imitation of the world, which was itself a degraded replication of the Ideal, a kind of pure conceptual place where things are perfect realizations of their essences, such as an ideal rose or an ideal bowl. Plato saw no place for poets in his Republic, trumpeting instead the virtues of philosophy over

poetry and warning of the dangerous emotions roused by the poets. Aristotle offers a much more nuanced view of the possible benefits of art in his *Poetics* [he makes an argument for the catharsis of tragedy over the virtues of the epic poem], but it is only with Horace's *Ars Poetica* that we get a full redemption of poetry in his famous *ut pictura poesis* [as is painting, so is poetry], as well as, more importantly, the formulation of the role of art that became foundational for the last two millennia of our thinking about the aesthetic. Horace asserts that the poet must aim to "delight and instruct," and in so doing, he stakes a claim for art as not just a realm of sensual experience but also as a pedagogical tool. This basic formulation has set the terms for the debates of nearly all of Western thought about the arts [and not just poetry]. Even in moments of rebellion against the pedagogical function of the arts, like the *fin de siècle* slogan "art for art's sake," Horace's words still provide the backdrop against which that rebellion takes place.

Of course, each theorist produces unique understandings of the balance of "delight" and "instruct" in their working out of this formula. Immanuel Kant's version of the aesthetic, a separate realm of works that display what he would call "purposiveness without a purpose" [that is, intentionally made objects that have no functional justification], definitely emphasizes the sensuous over the pedagogical. On the other end of the spectrum, Bertolt Brecht's Marxist aesthetics might be the closest thing to a fully pedagogical view of the function of art, but even here I'd emphasize there is certainly an aesthetic pleasure in these works as well.

It is with this long history of the aesthetic and the various compromises between the two functions of art as background that I was drawn to the notion of a workshop dealing with cinematic cartography. My sense, following Jameson, is that we have definitely witnessed a relative weakening of the pedagogical function of art over the course of the last century, first with the modernists' assault on meaning and their flight from the world of mass culture and later with the kind of uncritical blankness that has typified much of postmodern art [think Warhol's Marilyns or Campbell's soup cans, which seem more to revel in the surfaces of mass culture rather than to provide some kind of critical commentary]. As a countercurrent, then, I hoped in this workshop to shift the balance back toward the critical. The workshop and the works that I used as exemplars [Jorge Furtado's *Isle of Flowers*, Bill Brown's *Hub City*, to name a few] do still present an argument for attention to film form, making the case that critique or political engagement in film can only be expressed through cinematic forms [which is to say through forms that attend first to the sensuous nature of the medium]. Yet they also insist that a mere modernist reveling in form is not and should not be enough. And so now on to the question of mapping.

We are at a point in our history as a civilization where much of what we classically knew about our world has been upended. The idea of the nation-state as a defining kind of mental map has been superceded by the much more amorphous and decentred networks of the web. Even if we have started to formulate some kind of metaphoric representation of the networks of global capital [through, for example, Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome from the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*], it's still not entirely clear to us how we locate ourselves in relationship to that metaphoric map. That kind of mental connection or location is critical, though, for our sense of empowerment as political actors [and this is the

point of Jameson's many discussions of cognitive mapping]. If we're disconnected from the places in which exploitation happens—that is, we're not neighbors with the sweatshop workers in the Pacific Rim who enable Wal-Mart's [and others'] low, low prices—then we don't have the same sense of connection with their travails. The emblem of a previous moment would be Detroit, where the entire community has been torn apart by the shuttering of the Ford and GM factories. When this happens in your community to the people who make the products that you use, you can hardly miss the direct connection. Ironically, of course, this current moment the misery in the Midwest manufacturing states is itself the result of globalization, with many auto plants moving to Mexico after the ratification of NAFTA. Previously, if workers in Detroit had problems with their working conditions, they could form a union and apply pressure to local management; now, if the management just packs up and leaves, it's much less clear how one could apply pressure.

And so we return to the Cinematic Cartographies workshop and to the greater project that it represents. Film and video are one important tool in seeking to make the world mappable again. We might learn about our connection to places and people far removed from our immediate surroundings, and learn to have a more ethical relationship with or towards them. We might find new forms of resistance, new ironies in the system of globalization, that allow us more opportunities to shape its future development. Film and video mappings of this new, complex, and often alienating world are just one tool—but an important tool—in helping us not just to understand but also to feel our place in this world. In this vision of the aesthetic, art is no mere plaything for those with a liberal arts education and some time on their hands; art can matter, it should matter, and this kind of critical mapping project is one way to make that happen.

Roger Beebe, 2009