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MEDIEVAL CARTOGRAPHY AND THE IDEOLOGICAL MAPPING OF CYBERSPACE

Part II, section A

ARE YOU SURE IT'S REALLY ROUND?

What we consider the territories of cyberspace, with their capabilities for collaboration, information storage and transfer, communication, enterprise, reportage, education and expression, are places of virtual reality, and, to an increasing degree, virtual real estate. Within cyberspace we can discern trade routes appearing, political factions emerging, creative arts blossoming, religious groups proliferating, educators conducting long-distance learning sessions, minstrels performing, and town criers disseminating information. These mirror images of travel, traffic, and communication form "scripts" and/or "maps" are employed to find order in what is considered, at this writing, a predominantly anarchical and chameleon-like space.

For artists, the space of telecommunications offers a new opportunity for territorial mapping; one which could redeem imagination and even propaganda from the negative connotations deposited upon them by our culture. This paradigm of navigation in new media, and the role imagination plays in the delineation and shaping of space is analogous to the way the 13th century Western European makers of maps displayed their world. Medieval cartographers leaned

towards an ideological mapping of the world at the time when classical tradition had been swept aside and the annals of cartography had been predominantly dominated for centuries by theology. The medieval cartographer was shaped an individuated interior (mind)space while simultaneously shaping an external stereotypical (world) space which would comfort and reassure the curious, holding heresy at bay and glorifying the feudal hierarchy and God. Just as an image of the earth as a moveable sphere was heretical in the 13th century; the idea of an information or educative space that is, and remains individuated or unindexed, is tantamount to heresy in our time.

Imagination and Propaganda Become Devalued

Drawing the curtain on the 13th century, we see that some depicted the world as a flat, circular disc, finite, and with a definite edge. The center of the disc was occupied by heavenly phenomena radiating out into manifestations of earthly existence. As one proceeded farther out to the edge of the world the nature of things declined and became faulty and cumbersome, this was purgatory. Hell resided outside the edge. The idea of the "inside" and "outside" has a parallel in the creation of illuminated manuscripts - where monks would freely inject puns, anagrams, and notes in the margins and illustrations of their manuscripts which had more to do with their personal longings and everyday complaints, than the subject of the text itself.

Long before the 13th century Herodotus had put forth that the world was a sphere. This chunk of knowledge became buried under the theological deluge that swamped cartography in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. It was not until the great explorations of the 15th century that mapping could become a science there. It was also at that time that Ptolemy's work was translated for use - and translated from his words, not his images, since none of the maps themselves had survived. So Western Europeans refuted that the earth was round in their depiction of it. To those who took literally the biblical phrase: "four corners of the earth", the earth was depicted as a square or rectangle. It was illustrated in an oval or circular form by those who considered it heresy not to put Jerusalem in a space that enabled it to be centered and equidistant from all the world's edges. [Exek. v. 5 "This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations round about her."] The earth as a sphere would mean that nothing on its surface could be central to anything else, an extremely heretical proposition. At the same time in history, in an effort to ensure the safety of their trade routes, Arabic cartographers sought real knowledge of the terrestrial world, and were even using astronomy to chart territory in an empirical way.

In her article "The Medieval Consolations of Cyberspace", Margaret Wertheim discusses on Roger Bacon's 13th century argument that religious art make use of 3-dimensional illusion to delude the viewer into thinking they were participating in the pictured theological event - and thus turn from "viewer" into "believer. This parallels the literal interpretations of the Bible used to constitute geography. This phenomenon of "belief" initiates for us the first holy holodeck.

Seeing the world ideologically; without an interest at large in maps as charts of the real geographical, topographical world, provides a clue to seeking out paradigms of making works of art in cyberspace.

There are differences of course, between then and now. In the course of all the time mankind has been walking on earth it is only in the past generation or two that anyone has really seen the earth - that is, - left the earth and gone far enough to turn around and look back at it. This phenomenon in most 13th century minds would be inconceivable except as a metaphor or an allegorical idea, and one that was definitively heretical. One of the things our culture may have in company with medieval times is that nothing was considered without dwelling on its significance -- its function as a metaphor and allegory.

"Allegory was the guiding concept. Every incident in the Old Testament was considered to pre-figure in allegory what was to come in the New." *The Calamitous 14th Century*, Barbara W. Tuchman.

Theology and Technology -- Windows to the World

Can artists of today cloak their relatedness to the technology in the same way that the ancients could cloak their fiction in the "facts" of the geography of their time? Was the point not that Herodotus and Homer might be liars, but storytellers using the fictive mode buttressed by some absolute givens -- i.e., geography as far as it was known.



The Mappa Mundi, Hereford Cathedral, Great Britain

The Hereford Mappa Mundi, located in at the Hereford Cathedral in Great Britain is a prime example of this. Made and signed by one author, Richard de Haldingham in 1289 in England, it measures 5 feet 2 inches high and 4 feet 4 inches wide. The map is a history of the telling of many stories. In Armenia, Noah's ark has come to a stop after the deluge on a mountaintop. The Garden of Eden, where we see Adam and Eve being expelled, forms the apex of the meeting of four rivers including the Tigris and the Euphrates, and is repeated elsewhere in the map, another key to the nonliteral interpretation of geography in this map.

The path of the Exodus is the most fully illustrated part of the bible on the map. It starts from the treasure city of Ramses and crosses the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, where Moses receives the ten comandments. It then continues to be traced, including a literal depiction of the parting of the Red Sea, all the way to Jericho.

The map is peopled by idiosyncratic creatures, some handed down from Pliny in the second century.



From Exodus, Lot's Wife turned to salt, Sodom and Gomorrah The Hereford Mappa Mundi, Hereford Cathedral

Entities

The disembodied presence we have in cyberspace allows for appearances as "actors," i.e., the taking on of assumed characters and identities. It is common practice in virtual on-line communities for participants to adopt extremely idiosyncratic, sometimes phantasmagorical characteristics, similar to those of the medieval cartographer. The tensions between various notions of "reality" in this space open up verdant territories for artists.



In the annals of Solinus, there were the inhabitants of Strabo, who wore only their oversize ears as clothing, the dog-headed men in Africa who barked when they talked and had a dog for a king, the coastal tribe there whose citizens had four eyes apiece, the race whose eyes and mouths were in their chest, etc.

Examples, below are descriptions self-set by individual characters inhabiting a virtual community, or, in the vernacular: a moo (Object Oriented MUD - a textual environment programmable by the inhabitants), on the internet:



Dampire: a succulent green mold covers his body bearded at both ends the fangs might lead one to imagine a desperate heart but he hails you with a silent voice that evaporates your resistance.

Wombat: A pet: a rodent adorned in a slightly-too-large blue robe. It screams in a warbling, monotonous drone.

Calcium Enriched Toad Stool: A slight & desiccated fungus. It appears to have been mainlining milk, but it is not any stronger. You notice a malodorous emanation from the underside of the toadstool. Secretes charm.

Cybernauts are rushing headlong into creating a world full of creatures as phantasmagorical as the biological monstrosities of Solinus produced as nonsensical interpolations of Pliny's Natural History which dominated cartography from Solinus' time in the 3rd century A.D. through the 17th century.



Disembodiment is what makes it possible for everyone to safely be imperfect and monstrous - "safe" in certain respects, to be anything one wants to be - virtually. In cyberspace there is as equal a flux to hell as there is to heaven because it functions as a performance space that sets its stage solely in our minds.

So if forms hypermedia and virtual reality, i.e., experiential forms of art and expression, have been around for many centuries, then what does the new technology have to offer that is special?

I think it is a more literal and experiential venue for the exercise of imagination and discourse, particularly by artists. It supplies us with infinite possibilities for pluralistic narratives, and for presenting ourselves as disembodied in an environment with no borders except for the arbitrary ones we impose on it. It also provides a real-time time vehicle for experiential work and restores art to process and discourse and not only the making of objects.

Our world is now recreating itself via new technologies. At a time when sensor and satellite technology have the potential to report the location of any particular creature in the world at any time, it will be quite an adventure to see the form that emerges from a scramble for bearings in a rapidly changing technology.

The coded cosmologies of hypermedia create a need for new re-encryptions of mapping models derived from an imaginary structure, rather than mimetic reproduction; centerless cartographies that would have been heretical in the Middle Ages.

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