After Cognitive Mapping

Michael Eddy

> The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale.
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> — Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

Geopolitics and capitalist globalization share a characteristic inaccessibility to totalized understandings. The stalwart Marxist political and cultural critic Fredric Jameson identified this dilemma of late capitalism (his preferred term among many to define the era) at a pivotal moment in what we now see as the ascendancy of neoliberalism and globalization. Written in 1984, during the heated debates on postmodernism, his seminal essay "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" pointed toward the profound correspondences between an economic and a cultural fragmentation: postmodernism as a dominant cultural mode to match the dominant mode of economic production.[1] In the midst of both a dizzying, global expansion of the horizons of political struggle and what many saw as the diminution of what the political could speak for, Jameson proposed "cognitive mapping" as postmodernism's aesthetic antidote.[2]

Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping sought to foreground "the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture."[3] However, along with its role in

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[1] See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984): 53–92.

[2] Jameson's mapping was oriented toward the global, but totality was clearly not a term embraced by all at the time, as evidenced by the turn toward themes such as temporary autonomous zones, heterotopias, micro-politics, and the end of metanarratives.

[3] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 50.

representing and teaching the "unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality," it was further tasked by Jameson with incorporating the "coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject)."[4] This suggests a more complex demand, including the need to take into account one's own implication in the constitution of totality—and the role of mapping as well. This brings into play a whole host of other practices that may or may not look like maps in the traditional sense, which I hope to address as we trace the relevance of cognitive mapping in the present.

Jameson's descriptions of postmodern aesthetics still ring uncannily true for artworks produced from and for globalized networks today, when aesthetic production "has become integrated into commodity production generally."[5] Jameson's concerns resonate with the work and ideas associated with the currently popular post-Internet label, for instance. Art that identifies its existential conditions with those of commodities, that is reduced to its circulation, and that concentrates on the superficiality of the photograph—these are all motifs specified in the pages of Jameson's essay. Despite the continuities, we need to recognize the further advancement of certain aspects only nascent in postmodernism's heyday; key features of Jameson's diagnosis of the postmodern era—its spatialized character, its schizophrenia, its historical disorientation—have become only more exaggerated.

Initially, perhaps, it seemed like a problem of perception; we simply could not "grasp our positioning."[6] It was impossible to comprehend how this sublime bogey-economy could encircle the globe. If cognitive mapping were only about making the global visible, as some optimistic technologist thinking goes, then one might conclude that we were already getting close (what is a self-driving car, after all, if not the terminal resolution to the dangers of spatial bewilderment, *pace* Jaron Lanier). In the present world, however, maps surround us and give us, in real time, all the information we need to know our place in the world. Consider, for instance, Jameson's nervousness about photographic flatness when, in the work of Warhol and photorealist painters,

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[4] Ibid., 52.

[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Ibid., 54.

its potentially realist use was drained of affect. Today there develops a cluster of problems having more to do with photography's reference to an "original" than with its exemplary non-originality; when circulation is written into images, devices decode location through image recognition and metadata without much fanfare, easily pinpointing fleshly identities. The multiple indexical registers of digital photography enhance their pedagogical potential to some degree. But with the omniscience granted by technological prostheses, we tacitly agree to, or have little choice in, the fact that the mapping is being done to us, rather than by us.

Art work tasked with producing literal maps has been taken up by generations of artists, especially those beginning in the post-war era.[7] Artists have made use of maps' communicative graphics and data incorporation as extensions of art's sites, as conceptual pathways, or as subversions of the voice of authority. An incredibly varied range of artworks has ensued. Though it isn't the purpose of this article to enumerate and analyze all examples of such work, it would surely be interesting to consider each according to Jameson's use of the term "mapping." In light of the current topic, one could point to lineages of practices that produce maps to highlight global power relations, such as the flow charts of the late Mark Lombardi (United States) and Bureau d'Études (France), or that use GPS technologies to track a multiplicity of actions, such as the installations of Esther Polak and Ivar van Bekkum (the Netherlands) and the tactical media project Transborder Immigrant Tool (United States). Challenging power motivates many artists who work with references to cartography, given its proximity to historical and governmental forces such as militarism and colonialism. These are indeed difficult to put into perspective, as they stretch toward science in their pedagogical appeal.

Further to its aforementioned uses in the surveillance apparatus, in our time the scientific sphere of cartography sits uncomfortably close to the terms of the knowledge economy. Art practices that support serious engagement with the field of cartography can at times enjoy certain protections and privileges within university faculties and state agencies. This doesn't mean that knowledge and strategy are condemned *tout court* as privileged—if we keep in mind that

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[7] See a brief survey in Ruth Watson, "Mapping and Contemporary Art," *The Cartographic Journal* 46, no. 4 (November 2009): 293–307. Watson's insight about the intimate relationship between maps and war is particularly worthy of further inquiry.

ideology was crucial to Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping.[8] In his calls for a return of the pedagogical function of aesthetics, Jameson did not intend only the scalar translations that demonstrate our relativity as beings in a world, nor did he seem to be suggesting an approach such as tactical media, whose interventions were claimed by some as superior to the ideology-soaked dissident practices of yore.[9] Diagrammatic simplification and avant-gardism in technologically excitable work would sometimes seem to cut away ideology as so much long hair. For Jameson, bearing the long hair of ideology is essential to getting your bearings.

To bear us along, the textual clippings that Jameson posits as archetypal to postmodernism have to regain a certain degree of narrativity.[10] In evoking Brecht and Lukacs, Jameson clearly has the history of realism in mind, but realist narratives are not without their problematic detours. Think of the scandal around the theatrical monologue *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2010), author Mike Daisey's "creative" account of Foxconn, and the real experience of the global supply chain. When it was discovered that Daisey had embellished his supposedly nonfiction account with characters and events in order to inject more human content into it, it aroused disgrace from the journalistic community. But surely this theatricalizing of transnational capital would be permitted as pedagogical realism from certain angles? The pedagogical style still counts; the ligament between propaganda and cognitive mapping may get taut, but the two are discrete. Compare *The Agony* to Allan Sekula and Noël Burch's *The Forgotten Space* (2010), which explored the central but unimaged role of the sea in the space of

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[8] "Ideology has then the function of somehow inventing a way of articulating those two distinct dimensions ["existential experience and scientific knowledge"] with each other." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 53.

[9] See Gregory Sholette's criticisms of tactical media in *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 35.

[10] "The former work of art, in other words, has now turned out to be a text, whose reading proceeds by differentiation rather than unification" (Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 31). Unfortunately, this is not the place for the highly important investigation into "traditional" narration practices in various cultures as relational mapping models.

globalization by documenting a range of seemingly disparate moments in the social and historical development of the international shipping industry. Although uncovering the human costs of globalization was the task of both works, the former narrative took liberties for emotional impact, whereas the latter gave evidentiary vision (fragmentary, but admittedly syndicalist at heart) to the banal material and labour conditions of outsourcing. Both may have presented ideologically driven stories connecting human gestures to boundless systems, but by concealing ideology under saccharin Daisey was pulled closer to the language of advertising.

The art work since *Postmodernism* that had most centrally taken up the question of ideology would surely include practices associated with institutional critique. Artists such as Hans Haacke—whose work Jameson singled out for dealing with a "crisis in mapping"[11]—made their inroads by charting the latent ideologies of ostensibly neutral institutions. They were reorienting in that they shed the layers of naturalization that power accumulated, but they were always specific. Therefore, rather than conveying totality, they hinted at it by pointing to its fragmentation into numerous "semi-autonomous" institutions. As critique becomes demanded by art institutions and, according to critic Suhail Malik, contemporary art takes on the form of a permanent gaseous entity absorbing all the black pucks of negation launched into it, the relationship between critical art and its institutional support gets a little convoluted. Following the line deeper into the institution—seen as the exclusive jurisdiction of critique—movement toward the outside is precluded as naughty idealism.[12] Once we reach the point that this very inward turn is conceived as the only exit, the global meaning of cognitive mapping takes on some very small proportions indeed. However, following Jameson's earlier diagnosis of the conjoining of aesthetic and commodity production, if everything is cultural and commodity, the inside-outside dichotomy is not so easily maintained. This doesn't mean that consumerism

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[11] See Fredric Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986)., p. 38.

[12] "Anarcho-realism" is the term that Suhail Malik uses for this in his series of talks called "On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art" held in 2013 at Artists Space in New York (also the topic of a forthcoming book): http://artistsspace.org/programs/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art.

becomes the only game in town, as espoused by discourses in market-reflexivity and suggested by neologisms such as "epistemology of search."[13] What it means is that we are still on the lookout for a transitional space that allows us to move between spaces, between our particular "empirical" situation and the horizon of the global. The question of autonomy thus arises again, as a space that is produced politically and intentionally, rather than as the space reserved for aesthetic contemplation. It cannot be completed practically, or it would result only in the atomism that, as Jameson warns, protects something as vast as late or neoliberal capitalism from being even conceived and mapped. Starting from totality, on the other hand, "has come to carry overtones of conspiracy and paranoia with it."[14]

The experiential mapping practices of the Compass group's Continental Drift project comprise "a collective and mobile project of inquiry" that aims to "explore the five scales of contemporary existence: the intimate, the local, the national, the continental and the global."[15] As navigations and narrations of these scales—literally, by collectively walking, riding, discussing particular spaces—Continental Drift itineraries become engines for affects, texts, and photographs, but are also forms of production themselves. Inherent in such processes are the transgression of art's boundaries, and pedagogy conceived as self-education. If collective space seems reminiscent of the secessionism of which Jameson warned institutional critique was at risk (inside the art institution),[16] the mobility of Continental Drift means a passage between scales, an

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[13] Isabelle Graw's *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010) offers a consistent example of the former; the latter term is David Joselit's in *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). On the links between financial power and art, Joselit also advises, "The point is not to deny this power through postures of political negation or to brush it under the carpet in fear of 'selling out.' The point is to *use* this power."

[14] Jameson, "Hans Haacke," 56.

[15] Claire Pentecost, "Notes on the Project Called Continental Drift" in *Deep Routes: The Midwest in All Directions*, ed. Rozalinda Borcila, Bonnie Fortune, and Sarah Ross (Compass Collaborators, 2012), 17.

[16] Jameson, "Hans Haacke," 49.

active crossing of disciplinary boundaries, and sure, a certain amount of getting lost. As Brian Holmes, contributor to Compass, asked, "But what would it really take to lose yourself in the abstract spaces of global circulation?"[17] Losing yourself is, to some degree, part of the process of founding this necessary transitional space.

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[17] Brian Holmes, "Drifting Through the Grid: Psychogeography and Imperial Infrastructure," *Springerin* 3 (March 2004).