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“Media’s Mapping Impulse” – Extended Abstract

## **Cinema and the Crisis of Cartographic Reason**

This paper intends to explore the “mapping impulse” of cinema and, in particular, it aims at questioning the concept with reference to contemporary film, taking into consideration the mutation of the cultural role of both cinema and geography – and therefore the evolution of their mutual relations – in the contemporary scenario.

The discussion of the intrinsic “geographical vocation of cinema” was inaugurated by Hermann Häfker in 1914 and it has often resurfaced during the last one hundred years in many different forms. Also, many very good studies on the subject have been published in recent times, such as Castro 2011. Cinema not only interprets and fuels the geographical imaginary of modernity, but is also (technologically) informed by the epistemic paradigms that founded it: as the quintessential medium of modernity it is deeply rooted in the logic of the map and of the table.

However, a fundamental question is usually *ignored* in these recent studies: the radical reconsideration of the geographical discourse in the last quarter of the XX century, and the new critique of geography, as a science and epistemic project of modernity (see e.g. Harley 2001, Jacob 1992, Wood 1994, Gregory 1994, Pickles 2004). If it is true that the cinematic medium has always shared with geography a mission of intellectual, if not material, appropriation of the Earth, the “cartographic penchant” of cinema typically traced by many scholars should now be considered with a similar critical attention. *How does a medium with an ancient geographical vocation deal with the new “crisis of cartographic reason”* (Farinelli 2003, 2009, Olsson 2007)?

Researches in the cinematic mapping impulse have individuated some linguistic and stylistic features of film that would mirror and exhibit the “geographicity” of the medium – the “cartographic forms of cinema” (Castro) – such as the Panorama, the aerial view and the atlas. Drawing upon analytical categories of semiotics of enunciation (Metz 1991) we can consider these forms as “enunciational configurations.” However, if we trace similar cartographic configurations in contemporary (also mainstream) films, it is possible to see how they do not simply celebrate the geographicity of cinema, but in fact they consider and represent it as a *problem*.

Indeed, contemporary cinema almost invariably shows the crisis of the efficacy of these cartographic forms, representing:

- a) The transgression and profanation of a narrative perimeter, a “well-constructed” space (for example in the new “conspiratorial film”). Which is in fact the breach of the Panorama – also in the form of a mismatch between a map internal to the diegesis

and the world (the difficulty of what Dematteis 1985 called “mimetic morphogenesis”);

b) An unprecedented rhetorical shift of the aerial view, which is not considered anymore as objective, precise, effective and victorious, but on the contrary is exposed as mendacious, violent, ineffective or frustrating;

c) A new difficulty in the possibility to visualize the world and also in the possibility to describe and organize it in a coherent narrative. The crisis of both the *indicability* of the world and of its *presentability*, which is also the consequence of the complexity of late capitalism and of the invisibility of capital and labor, undermines the foundations of the idea of cinema as atlas (also discussed in Jacob 1992).

This paper intends precisely to problematize the question of the geographical vocation of cinema by discussing how contemporary films thematize some problems that self-reflexively concern the medium’s “geographical powers.” What contemporary cinema is carrying out is a sort of archaeology of its own gaze: it interrogates the (geographical) rules and conditions on the basis of which it had been describing and narrating the world for more than a century, challenging the traditional strategic quality of its gaze, the possibility of “ground truthing” and the integration of different visual paradigms (the same paradigms that constitute the so-called “cartographic paradox”). While doing so, contemporary cinema seems to express a form of “cartographic anxiety” (Gregory 1994): it deconstructs itself and its geographical discourse as much as the contemporary critical tendency in the theory of geography has eventually reflected on geography as a discourse – with hidden meanings, a political agenda, a specific rhetoric and some representational limits.

Moreover, while declaring sometimes symptomatically and other times explicitly the limits and the inadequacy of its own geographic gaze, cinema itself confesses to be aware that its cultural role has changed, that it cannot represent and understand the world in a certain way anymore. That something is ungraspable for it. Indeed, the crisis of the cartographic reason of cinema is a synonym of a structural crisis of “cinematographicity,” that is of a way of arranging the world, a geometry that used to describe the positions of subjects and objects, to establish their value and their meaning.