

The Artist as Whistleblower. Cartography, Capitalism and Cognitive Mapping

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In contrast to the elaborations of alternative modernities^[1], postmodern hybrid-identities and minority-politics that have characterised contemporary art and popular culture in the last decades, the recent years have witnessed a surprising return to what one might call an aesthetics of social totality. If art production in the 1990's was primarily concerned with the particular and the aleatory^[2], artists today often attempt to represent abstract social relations and systems, a concern that one is tempted to associate with the counter-cultural art practices of the 1960's and 1970's. Thus, according to a recent article by Alberto Toscano, "the past years have witnessed [...] a veritable efflorescence in efforts to provide models, diagrams or narratives that might allow us to orient ourselves around the world-system."^[3] When tracing this totalising aesthetic in contemporary art galleries and in popular culture, it becomes evident that the geographic imaginary of mapping has proven extremely fruitful for this undertaking. From Allan Sekula's photo-documentaries of the global container trade^[4] and the cartographies of Mark Bradford, to the psychogeographies of Iain Sinclair^[5] or the networked entanglements of the TV series *The Wire*, it seems undeniable that "critical representations of society increasingly appear as mediated by cartography."^[6]

Critical art theory has greeted the 'cartographic turn' enthusiastically as revelatory, politically subversive and providing of orientation in globally confused times.^[7] Two theses undergird the critical endorsement of artistic cartographies that both take Fredric Jameson's writings on late capitalism as their point of departure: First, the view that our current geopolitical conjuncture has become increasingly difficult to grasp due to its high degree of abstraction.^[8] Second, the belief that our political overview has become obfuscated due to a concentration of power in evermore synergised and secretive enterprises of politics, business and technology. Openly critical and incendiary, contemporary cartographies have been heralded as unmasking the hidden network of distinct local units of power and their global relations. In this context, they have been interpreted as answering Jameson's call for an aesthetic of 'cognitive mapping', able to unravel the tangled socio-economic threads and situate both artist and spectator productively within the broken totality of a post-industrial and neoliberal world-system.^[9]

The following article asks if the widespread 'cartographic turn' is actually successful in

providing a functional 'cognitive map' of geopolitical concerns. It argues that the information design aesthetic of artistic cartographies falls short of attaining the epistemic goals of cognitive mapping for the three following reasons: Firstly, because artistic cartographies presume a straightforward expression of data as knowledge. They thereby confuse collected data with constituted information and ignore the translation process that is necessary to extract epistemic value from any data set. Secondly, because by emphasising abstract knowledge, cartographic practices neglect art's affective dimension that powerfully complements or even firstly triggers a work's cognitive charge. Thirdly, because the investigative dramaturgy of artistic cartographies presumes that power always operates in secret, which is not necessarily the case today. After elaborating these theses in relation to two paradigmatic artistic positions, the article concludes by suggesting to approach cognitive mapping from *poetics* rather than from *cartography*.

1. Cognitive Mapping

To begin, let us ask: What is the impetus behind the contemporary aesthetics of social totality? From where does the desire for a new socio-economic realism draw its force? As Fredric Jameson is a key reference for the art-theoretical debate around artistic cartographies, he provides an important starting point to understand the revived interest in the aesthetic of mapping. For Jameson - arguing along a Marxist trajectory - the need for a re-invigorated representational realism arises out of a growing schism between phenomenal everyday experience and its structuring economic conditions, leading to an increased difficulty in understanding global economic processes. In an essay from 1988, Jameson reflected on the "desire called cognitive mapping," an as yet unformulated representational form, able to chart an increasingly complex socio-political environment. Drawing on both Ernest Mandel's three-stage model of capitalism as well as on Kevin Lynch's urbanism, Jameson constructs a timeline of the mode of production's increasing spatial abstraction from its material base. Market capitalism, Jameson argues, still maintained a strong grounding in the local. Its spatial analogue is

the grid-form, which assigns people, commodities and interactions a fixed and proximate place. For Jameson, both Taylorisation, as the rigorous, scientific management of labour, as well as the disciplinary technologies in factories, barracks and prisons, analysed by Michel Foucault provide the key touchstones for Mandel's first stage of capitalist development. Jameson argues that market capitalism did "probably not involve problems of figuration so acute as those we will confront in the later stages of capitalism, since here, for the moment, we witness that familiar process long generally associated with the Enlightenment, namely, the desacralization of the world [...] the slow colonization of use value by exchange value, the "realistic" demystification of the older kinds of transcendent narratives [...] the standardization of both subject and object."¹⁰¹

Classical market capitalism is a phase in which processes are newly embedded rather than uprooted, corresponding to fixed productive spaces in which bodies are disciplined and assigned a place. For Jameson, it is only in the next step of Mandel's three-stage model that the problem of mapping first appears. With the European colonial expansion, the economic reality of cities like Paris or London is increasingly determined not at home but abroad. Jameson describes a widening gap between the dominant aesthetic forms of European realism - characterised by the localism of Balzac or Flaubert - and the reality of 19th century life in Britain and France that is increasingly determined globally, by the connections between the capital and the colony. While individual life continues to be lived as if it were local, a world economy begins to take shape that ties this experience to the threads of colonial exploitation that remain invisible at home. Jameson sees the artistic incapacity to express this fissure as symptomatic for a more fundamental epistemological problem relating to the widening gap between the local and the global: "At this point the phenomenological experience of the individual subject, traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system

of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people."^[11]

In this gap between phenomenal experience and determining structure, Jameson finds the material analogue to Lacan's theory of the Real as an absent but structuring totality. For Lacan, the Real is the pre-individual realm of experience that escapes and resists symbolisation in language. Once the subject enters into the Symbolic, the Real becomes forever inaccessible. However it continues to exert the strongest of influences, becoming the foil against which all our projected fantasies and wishes must necessarily fail. Jameson adopts the Lacanian Real to designate the world economy as the "absent totality", invisible but felt, that unites individual and collective life. Echoing Lacan, he repeatedly emphasises the properly "unrepresentable", "unthinkable" and "unimaginable" nature of global capital. With finance capital, Mandel's third stage of capitalism, the problem of unmappability becomes more exacerbated and gains a new quality, as money, once detached from its material standard, becomes "to a second degree abstract."^[12]

Even though Jameson insists on the structural unrepresentability of the totality, he nevertheless delineates a positive concept of cognitive mapping to provide political orientation and reconnect the local experiential level at least minimally with its global determinants. In another reference to Lacan, Jameson describes the object of cognitive mapping as "the thing itself, namely, how the local items of the present and the here-and-now can be made to express and to designate the absent, unrepresentable totality; how individuals can add up to more than their sum; what a global or world system might look like after the end of cosmology."^[13]

Betraying a good dose of Marxist paternalism in his belief in art's educational mission, Jameson conceives of cognitive mapping as a novel aesthetic pedagogy with the global space of transnational capital as its object. As 'most people' find themselves at a loss to comprehend the increasing complexity of our geopolitical situation, cognitive mapping becomes a much-needed "pedagogical political culture, which seeks to

endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system."^[14] Brian Ott and Gordana Lazic have called this the *orienting impulse*^[15] of cognitive mapping that "both maps and critiques the various flows that constitute our world situation."^[16] Arguing that market capitalism's 'grid' and imperial capitalism's 'territory' have today been replaced by the network, they argue that contemporary cognitive mapping must disentangle and reduce the network's complexity. The task is one of re-centring the decentred subject, of addressing "the problem of the view from above, and of the invention of new forms of representation for what it is properly impossible to think or represent."^[17]

We can now see why Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping has held such widespread appeal for contemporary artistic practice. It endows artists with the important task not only of aesthetic innovation but also of political orientation. Connecting to a Marxist lineage from Lukács over Brecht to Gramsci, Jameson defines political art's goal with Cicero's formula "to teach, to delight and to move."^[18] While Jameson doesn't claim that the social totality was ever properly transparent, he argues that today more than ever "there is [a] problem of mapping the totality of social relations within the disorienting spatial displacements of late capitalism."^[19] However, Jameson remains vague on how to create such a new 'capitalist realism'. Moreover, it is unclear whether the difficulty of an adequate representational format is a-historical and essential or rather the result of a specific historical configuration within capitalism. His reference to Lacan suggest a more essential and structural barring of the possibility to represent the 'real' world economy, whereas his use of Mandel's periodization of capitalism points to a more malleable, historically contingent argument.

It is perhaps because of this vagueness that cartographic practitioners have so quickly appropriated the discourse of cognitive mapping. It does appear that cartography; with its attention both to particular entities *and* their surrounding environment can serve as an excellent tool to connect the local to the global and present in-depth knowledge of geopolitical links. Writing on the cartographic turn in the social sciences, Bruno Bosteels has characterised the map as a productive embodiment

of *Naturlandschaft* and *Kulturlandschaft*, as the “interface between nature and culture, earth and territory.”^[20]

2. Information Aesthetics I: Bureau d’Etudes

These links are what the Parisian artist duo Bureau d’Etudes attempt to show in their work. The Bureau d’Etudes are known for their large-scale mural cartographies, charting, in their own words, “contemporary political, social and economic systems.”^[21] Showing at galleries worldwide, the Bureau’s maps stage the intricate connections between local politics, global corporations, the business elite and a variety of institutions. Carrying titles such as *Gouvernement des Medias*, *Gouvernement Financier*, or *Gouverner les Ressources*, their works are intensely research-based and often yield a broad scope of historical knowledge as well as detailed information about global power networks. *Petropol* for example, a map from 2007 presents a timeline of the worldwide oil trade from 1901 to 2006. Its main axes represent British oil interests and American oil interests respectively and chart the gradual takeover of the latter over the former in the course of the 20th century.

Branching off from the main timeline, text boxes inform the viewer of the back room deals of Western oil tycoons. The 1928 Achnacarry meeting of executives from BP, Royal Dutch/Shell and Exxon in which world cartel prices were fixed is charted as well as the Red Line agreement from the same year that coordinated joint Western efforts in the Middle East. Detailing the gradual subsumption of the oil-rich Middle East under Western power through corporate deals, political backing (for example of the Ayatollah Khomeini) as well as the Gulf wars, the map reveals the Western influence in the Middle East and the dynamics of oil pricing. Parallel events such as the Kyoto agreement or the Soviet Glasnost are also mentioned and connected to the main timeline through arrows of varying size. The larger the arrow, the more important the event, relative to the global oil trade. The intention of the Bureau’s works is investigative and unmasking. “Revealing what normally remains invisible and contextualising apparently separate elements within a bigger whole, these visualizations of interests and cooperations re-symbolize the unseen and hidden,”^[22] as they write on their

website. Due to this pedagogical emphasis, their work has often been cited as exemplary in recent critical-theoretical returns to Jameson’s aesthetic of cognitive mapping.^[23] Writing on the use of cartography for the purposes of political resistance and social movements, Brian Holmes has praised the educational potential of the Bureau’s maps that, according to him, combine a didactic emphasis on transmitting technical knowledge about the links between power centres with an activist drive, enabling anti-capitalist resistance: “These maps aspire to be cognitive tools, distributing as broadly as possible the kind of specialized information that was formerly confined to technical publications. Yet on another level they are meant to act as subjective shocks, energy potentials, informing the protest-performances as they are passed from hand to hand, deepening the resolve to resist as they are utilized in common or alone.”^[24]

Similarly, Alexander Galloway has praised the “complex and variegated”^[25] vocabulary of the Bureau’s works that “denude the apparatuses of power by showing the deep interconnectedness of business, government and the elite.”^[26] The Bureau d’Etudes are evidently successful in convincing critics of their works’ critical educational potential. They achieve this authoritative effect by emulating the information aesthetics of the business world, including flow charts, timelines, and business schedules. In this, they rely on the link between data visualisation and cognitive knowledge that Alon Friedman has elaborated: “The communication paradigm of visualisation is often associated with capturing complex data structures found in computer systems, but the term is also affiliated with the domain of human cognition process that gives us accessibility and tracking of information and knowledge.”^[27]

However, there is no necessary reason why assembled data on the oil trade should appear in this form. Nor is the visual format of a timeline better suited than others to transmit knowledge on networked political activities. The paradigm of information aesthetics presumes a direct link between collected data and dominant regimes of representing this data. What it thereby denies is the translation process that is required to transcribe collected data into any visual format. This point can be illustrated through Alexander Galloway’s recent distinction between ‘data’ and ‘information’.

Claiming that “data have no necessary visual form”^[28], Galloway argues that collected data is first and foremost non-visual and quantitative rather than visual and qualitative. Data is numerical and therefore not essentially visual at all, which complicates the easy conflation that happens when the two terms merge in data-visualisation. In order to appear in a visual form, data needs to be translated into what Galloway calls ‘information’, meaning tangible and contextualised knowledge. In data visualisation, this happens in the form of an illustration, a chart, a timeline, or graph. While we are surrounded by a constant stream of data visualisations, these are mere aestheticisations that - rather than displaying pure data - actually show the translation of raw data into an aesthetic form beyond a purely mathematical value. Galloway thus correctly concludes that “any data visualisation is first and foremost a visualisation of the conversion rules themselves, and only secondarily a visualisation of raw data.”^[29]

By highlighting the constructed nature of data visualisations over and above their taken-for-granted-value as neutral carriers of information, we can draw attention to their strong affective capacity. Wherever data charts, maps and diagrams appear, they have come to symbolise scientific authority, in-depth research and quantitative accuracy. If we see data visualisations as a translation machine that renders numerical data visible according to *specific and pre-determined conversion rules*, we see that their authoritative affect is a performative effect of the visualisation enterprise. While information aesthetics do have their very own affective power in producing ‘objectivity’, ‘neutrality’ and ‘scientificity’, this is something that is seldom exploited artistically and rarely enters the theoretical debate. Aesthetic cartographies are thus *primarily* interpreted as *cognitive* and not as *aesthetic* objects. As such, they are evaluated on their delivery of factual information that is taken at face value, while their aesthetic properties - which are the actual carriers of their knowledge-effect - are ignored.

In this neglect of the affective dimension of cartographies, we can see a strong departure from Jameson’s emphasis on cognitive mapping as an *aesthetic*, meaning *sensible* form. As Jameson’s treatment of European realism, particularly the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht shows, aesthetics must be a battle for ways of knowing as well as feeling, as

artistic media communicate first and foremost on an affective level. Keenly aware of this in his writings on cognitive mapping, Jameson moved from a discussion of representation, as the possibility for a rational rendering of an invisible truth, to a definition of *figuration* as the possibility to combine cognitive knowledge with “the tangible medium of daily life in vivid and experiential ways.”^[30] The contemporary cartographic turn seems to have given up on the development of ‘figurative’ innovation and instead turns to the pre-existing image catalogue of geographic visualisations for its hackneyed didactic effect.

3. Information Aesthetics II: Mark Lombardi

Besides the pedagogical possibility of providing orientation in a confusing world, another reason why cartographies have been the source of much recent enthusiasm is their revelatory pathos. A case in point is the reception history of Mark Lombardi’s large-scale drawings of international business and power networks. Similarly research-based as the work of the Bureau d’Etudes, Lombardi’s maps merge different styles of information aesthetics into complex and intricate visualisations of unexpected links between politicians, bankers and businessmen. The drawing *Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama and Iran-Contra Operation* for instance traces the illegal U.S arms trading with Iran during the Ronald Reagan administration and charts how funds from this operation went into financing anti-communist militias in Nicaragua. The various actors involved, individuals such as Oliver North, the alleged owner of the bank account that was the vehicle for the money transfers, corporations such as American arms manufacturers, as well as entire nations states (Iran, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) serve as nodal points that are connected through a network of lines and arrows. Working in a three-step process from collecting data in the media, organising the collected information on index cards and finally drawing the diagram, Lombardi mimics a whole range of styles from “business charts, panorama painting and Conceptualism.”^[31]

In contrast to the almost exclusively favourable reaction towards the Bureau d’Etudes, Lombardi’s diagrams have polarised critical attention. Interestingly, the debate around Lombardi’s work revolved almost entirely around the presumed accuracy, or lack thereof, concerning his application

of data visualisation methods to politics. On the side of the admirers, Alberto Toscano has praised Lombardi's documentation of "collusion and covert activity."^[32] Similarly, Robert Hobbs, the curator of Lombardi's first major retrospective has stated the artist made "the first art to visualise the new global order that has seemed to be one of the key resources of power in the late twentieth century and thereafter."^[33] While the theorist Ryan Bigge has claimed "Lombardi's diagrams make abstract movements of capital concrete and comprehensible."^[34]

On the critical side, the theorist and fellow artist Trevor Paglen has critiqued Lombardi for "producing beautiful images whose cognitive consistency is as tenuous as the pencil-drawn lines between the named nodes of collusion."^[35] Writing on the relationship between the arts and paradigms of data visualisation Alon Friedman has equally expressed disappointment at the absence of cognitive depth in Lombardi's diagrams: "The majority of his (Lombardi's) concepts did not share any common schemes or themes [...] The list did not provide us with any information about personal job positions at that time, geographical locations, or the personal involvement in the frauds or background ideology."^[36] The lack of detail concerning the actors of the portrayed conspiratorial activity has caused even admirers such as Bigge to note the at times obfuscating power of Lombardi's information aesthetics, that risk veering off into a kind of *fetishism* of data visualisation: "Clusters of activity, like meteorological disturbances, emanate from dozens of nodes [...] Chronological progression is expressed [...] through long horizontal lines that bisect twirls of intrigue."^[37]

The interpretation of Lombardi's works as actual investigative detective work found its epitome, when after 9/11 two FBI agents requested to see some of Lombardi's maps in the New York Metropolitan Museum in the hope of gaining a more thorough insight into the obscure dynamics of Al Qaeda.^[38]

Echoing Jameson's argument about the increasing opacity of local-global ties, for both Lombardi's critics as well as his admirers, the task of the artist is to follow the leads from the development of local structures to big business at the international level. Reflecting a common cultural trope that fuels

countless conspiracy narratives, spy novels as well as the contemporary impact of whistleblowing figures such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, this reception history betrays the idea that power is a secretive agent, spreading its tentacles in hiding. While Jameson himself was generous towards conspiracy theory, which he characterises as "the poor person's cognitive mapping"^[39] and as an "unconscious collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century"^[40], I suggest we be more harsh with the good intentions of cartographic practitioners. While there certainly exist back room deals between powerful media moguls, the business elite and corrupt politicians, the thesis that power holds a dark secret that needs to be revealed can be disproven today. The media theorist Jodi Dean has recently presented a forceful argument into this direction: "The politics of the public sphere has been based on the idea that power is always hidden and secret. But clearly this is not the case today. We know full well that corporations are destroying the environment, employing slaves, holding populations hostage to their threats and move their operations to locales with cheap labour. All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today."^[41]

While it is thus laudable to attempt to reveal those activities that are purposefully kept in the background, revelatory artistic practices tend to give a too simplified picture of global power by relying on the sensationalising thrust of exposing 'classified' information. In a conversation with the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, Slavoj Žižek has echoed this belief in the ineffectiveness of 'revelatory' information: "What did we really learn? Isn't it clear that every power in order to function, [needs] to have a certain digression between what you say and what you don't say?"^[42] While the spy-novel imaginary of power as a secret agent has dominated the late 20th century, power in the 21st century, operates overtly and transparently, for instance on the internet where social media users openly provide corporations with their private data and perform hours and hours of unpaid microlabour.

Notwithstanding the radical intentions of artists of the whistleblowing type, it is thus possible to see the clichéd figure of the paranoid conspiracy theorist operating in the artistic cartographies

discussed above. Suspecting hidden power schemes to operate beneath the visible layer of everyday politics, they set out to visualise these connections and expose them to critique. The intended effect is to spur the viewer into action, producing an activist jolt in the audience and politicising it by revealing the scandalous workings of power. Laudable as this project may be, Alexander Galloway has argued that “this would be a noble pursuit if it were not demonstrably false: the photos from the Abu Ghraib prison were released, or they were not (and nothing changed); we grieved and we protested in the proper channels, or we did not (and still nothing changed).”^[43]

4. Only one image

Rather than evaluating Lombardi’s and the Bureau d’Etudes success or failure to adequately represent the local-global entanglements of political power, I want to flip the question and interrogate the ubiquity of data visualisation in the aesthetic field. When sampling contemporary artistic representations of the local-global ties of politics and business, one has to conclude that they all adopt and take for granted the generic network-form. Why is it that art that wants to be political is so keen to reproduce the information aesthetics readily used by power-holders worldwide? Is the desire to expose the workings of power through providing ‘information’ really the most effective way for artists to offer critique? More importantly, does a counter-map really disclose any information at all? Alexander Galloway has critiqued the uniform nature of information aesthetics, claiming that “there is but one image, from beginning to end, across the decades, a massive repetition of the same and nothing more: only one visualisation has ever been made of an information network.”^[44] Let us quote Galloway at length: “The hub-and-spoke aesthetic predominates. Minuscule branching structures cluster together forming intricate three-dimensional spaces. Nodes are connected by links. Small capillaries merge into even greater arteries fabricating massive hierarchies governing flows and prohibitions on flows. Yet through it all, the legibility of the map remains one-sided, even ideologically motivated. The viewer is able to intuit certain vague cosmological ‘facts’ about the digital firmament,

while gleaning little about ‘the facts on the ground’...No poetics is possible in this uniform aesthetic space.”^[45]

While Galloway provides a useful critique of the uniformity of contemporary network-art, he remains vague in defining what a more ‘poetic’ way of approaching the goals of cognitive mapping would be. If we maintain that the enterprise of epistemic mapping is a valuable artistic pursuit, we can differentiate between at least two versions of cognitive mapping at this point. First there is the dominant information aesthetic of cartographies, put into the service of revealing concealed information and offering leverage for political critique. Our analysis has shown the relative poverty of this artistic option that remains unconscious of its own mediality and its rules for translating data into knowledge. Lacking this self-reflexive dimension, Information aesthetics’ affective power is lost to practitioners and critics who reduce the affective power of art to the level of investigative journalism. They thus foreclose the possibility of *poetics* by tying themselves to *one* dominant way of representing information instead of searching for expressive alternatives or questioning the power and the informative value of current representational models.

Secondly, there is Jameson’s own account of cognitive mapping, which he characterises as a “matter of form.”^[46] Apart from this, Jameson remains equally tentative in making any concrete suggestions as to cognitive mapping’s visual format, repeatedly insisting that he is “not even sure how to imagine the kind of art.”^[47] that would fall under its epistemic purview. Furthermore, any endeavour of cognitive mapping can be sure to confront significant problems of scale, as it involves “to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves.”^[48]

In this, Jameson echoes the familiar Marxist argument of an irreconcilable gap between the immediacy of phenomena and the opacity of their determining structure. While it is unclear who could bridge this fissure, Jameson trusts art’s capacity to enlighten what remains impenetrable to others. The closest Jameson gets to giving an example of achieved cognitive mapping is in the *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, where he suggests that the era of

symbolism that has reigned since romanticism is superseded by a renewed interest in allegory that allows a story's partial aspect to stand in for a larger narrative.^[49]

We can historicise the impulse behind cognitive mapping to abstract it from its late capitalist connotations and embed it within a wider aesthetic problematic, that of unrepresentability. Harking back to the Burkean and Kantian sublime, modern aesthetics is haunted by the possibility of its failure, traditionally framed as an excess of sensory stimuli that overwhelms our cognitive faculties and leaves us stranded, with no hope for representation or orientation. Art theory has often framed this as a question of the representation of unbearable suffering, epitomised by the debate around the representation of the Holocaust, most recently reinvigorated by Georges Didi-Huberman.^[50] In contrast, Marxist aesthetics has from Lucáks and Brecht to Jameson framed the unrepresentable as a question of depicting not momentary, eruptive violence, but the structural violence inherent in the mode of production.

5. Waiting for an adequate image

Contemporary cartographic practices claim this second lineage as their own and answer the representational question through the elaboration of maps, diagrams and flowcharts. They therefore confirm Jameson's prescience about the desire for new aesthetic formats in conditions of late capitalism, as the mapping of current political and financial networks has become a key occupation for the contemporary art world. This has mostly taken the form of an appropriation of visual formats developed in information aesthetics, with an emphasis on diagrams, maps and cartographies. Even though greeted enthusiastically by theorists and critics, we have pointed to a recurring confusion in the reception history of this genre between the artworks' aesthetic properties and their perception as *actual* investigative knowledge production. The critical endorsement of this new 'capitalist realism' has led to such exaggerated claims as "the TV series *The Wire* provides the best ethnography of contemporary US society"^[51], which is problematic for several reasons. Above all, this view betrays a self-congratulatory attitude on behalf of political critique that views power as

always operating behind closed doors and in hiding. The role of criticism thus finds itself reduced to unmasking supposedly hidden, but in reality clearly visible – and therefore unsurprising – truths, while the critic appears in the flattering position of a *whistleblower*.

A close reading of Fredric Jameson's theses on cognitive mapping has shown that Jameson's call for a new aesthetic for our times meant more than the simple application of cartography to the goals of an art form that produces knowledge. Jameson repeatedly insisted on the *poetic* quality of cognitive mapping, while leaving a thorough elaboration of possible artistic approaches open to interpretation. Ott and Lazic have in this context connected Jameson's elaboration of *figuration* as encompassing both cognitive knowledge and affect to Lyotard's concept of 'the figural' that designates "art's material, expressive, and non-signifying dimensions and their capacity to evoke sensory experiences."^[52] Rather than copying the information aesthetics, with which power-holders convey their impressions of objectivity, knowledge and scientificity, we ought to find more engaging ways to depict, as Steven Shaviro says "what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century."^[53]

While in the last decade, it seemed like the most interesting works of (post)-internet art critically reflected the internet as our contemporary mode of production, consisting of networks, algorithms, social media platforms and big data, its increasing formal mimeticism that makes its products look *just like* Google, Uber and AirBnb has taken away much of its appeal.^[54] Meanwhile, the world economy has been in protracted crisis since at least 2007-2008 with no upswing in sight. The political correlate of this crisis is the rise in new fascisms in North America and Europe. While art will not be able to change any of this, generating adequate representations of the ongoing crisis is where successful cognitive mapping today could start.

NOTES & REFERENCES

A version of this article has appeared in German as "Der Künstler als Whistleblower. Kartografie, Kapitalismus und cognitive mapping", in ed.

Kathrin Busch, *Anderes Wissen* (Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2016), 283-317.

[1] *Altermodern* was the title of a 2009 exhibition by Nicolas Bourriaud at Tate Britain that explored postcolonial themes and sought to unearth and give room to non-Western accounts of modernity.

[2] The YBAs, in particular Tracy Emin with her interest in the biographical can be seen as paradigmatic for contemporary art's interest in the individual, the personal and the anecdotal. In the realm of theory, this trend is epitomised by Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, which locates the role of art in the production of ephemeral social situations. Rather than in any kind of totality, art for Bourriaud is hyperspecific, operating "at the hub of social infra-thinness" or occupying "that minute space of daily gestures". Any aspiration of art to be relevant outside its own specific context is confidently abandoned. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002)

[3] Alberto Toscano "Seeing it whole: staging totality in social theory and art", *The Sociological Review* 60, (2012): 64.

[4] In his project *Fish Story*, Allan Sekula documents international container shipping as one of the key sites of contemporary logistical capitalism. See Alan Sekula, A. *Fish story*, (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002).

[5] Among others, Iain Sinclair's work can be seen to have fundamentally triggered the contemporary interest in psychogeography. In his book *Hackney the Rose-Red Empire*, he develops his method of mental cartography through extended walks in different locations in London. See Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, the Rose Red Empire*, London: Penguin, 2009)

[6] Toscano, 65

[7] The theoretical enthusiasm also incorporates a

renewed practical interest in the practices of mapping. Both Queen Mary University in the UK and the University of North Carolina recently launched counter cartography collectives which combine geographical mapping technologies with political activism.

See <http://countermappingqmary.blogspot.co.uk/>

[8] The idea that late modernity is accompanied by an increasing loss of orientation is one of Fredric Jameson's fundamental theses. In particular the development of finance capital massively subverted "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organise its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to cognitively map its position in a mappable external world." See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review* 146, (1984), 53-92.

[9] In their discussions of contemporary artistic cartographies, Alberto Toscano as well as Brian Holmes and Alexander Galloway unanimously refer to Fredric Jameson as their key theoretical reference. See Brian Holmes, "Network Maps, Energy Diagrams". Available at: <https://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/04/27/network-maps-energy-diagrams/>. Alexander Galloway. (2011) "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?", *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 no. 7-8 (2011), 85-102.

[10] Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson & L. Grossberg, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press 1988), 348.

[11] *ibid.*

[12] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, London: Verso (1998), 142.

[13] Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 10.

[14] *Postmodernism*, 92.

[15] Brian Ott, Gordana Lazic, "The Pedagogy and Politics of Art in Postmodernity: Cognitive Mapping and The Bothersome Man", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 3 (2013), 263.

[16] Ian Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory*, (New York: Continuum, 2006), 73.

[17] *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 2.

[18] *Cognitive Mapping*, 347.

[19] Tyson Lewis, "Too Little, Too Late: Reflections on Fredric Jameson's Pedagogy of Form", *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 3 (2009), 444.

[20] Bruno Bosteels, "Misreading of Maps: The Politics of Cartography in Marxism and Poststructuralism", in ed., Stephen Barker, *Signs of Change: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 117.

[21] Bureaudetudes.org/about

[22] *ibid.*

[23] cf. Galloway, Toscano

[24] Brian Holmes, "Maps for the Outside: Bureau d'Etudes, or the Revenge of the Concept", in ed. Ursula Biemann, *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, (Cologne: Generali Foundation / Konig Books, 2003), 167.

[25] Galloway, 96.

[26] *ibid.*

[27] Alon Friedman, "Mark Lombardi's visualisation discovery", in ed. Michael Hohl, *Making visible the invisible: art, de-sign and science in data visualisation*, (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Eprints, 2012), 12.

[28] Galloway, 88.

[29] *ibid.*

[30] Fredric Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: Dog Day Afternoon as a Political Film", *College English* 38, no. 8 (1977), 845.

[31] Ryan Bigge, "Making the Invisible Visible: The Neo-Conceptual Tentacles of Mark Lombardi", *Left History* 10, no. 2 (2005), 127.

[32] Toscano, 75.

[33] Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*, (New York: Independent Curators International, 2004), 20.

[34] Bigge, 128.

[35] Cited in Toscano, 76.

[36] Friedman, 12, 15.

[37] Bigge 128, 130.

[38] Cited in Toscano, 75.

[39] *Cognitive Mapping*, 357.

[40] *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 3.

[41] Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 173-174.

[42] Slavoj Žižek in conversation with Julian Assange, 02.07.2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1Xm08uTSDQ>, Minute 18:58.

[43] Galloway, 95.

[44] *ibid.*, 90.

[45] *ibid.*

[46] *Cognitive Mapping*, 357.

[47] *Ibid.* 347.

[48] *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 2.

[49] See *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 5. where Jameson says "on the global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall, with a fluidity that has no equivalent in those older national allegories."

[50] On the question of unrepresentable suffering, see Georges Didi-Huberman's discussion of photographs taken clandestinely by Jewish inmates in Auschwitz. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all : four photographs from Auschwitz*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008)

[51] Cited in Toscano, 65.

[52] Ott & Lazic, 263.

[53] Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 2.

[54] See for instance the installation *New Ealam* by the British artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas that had a prominent place at DIS Magazine's 2016 Berlin Biennale. Seeking to reimagine the question of housing in an age of intensifying displacement, the artist suggests a series of "global housing subscriptions" that detach from private property to create a shared living space. Sadly, since the artist believes that "technologically accelerated dislocation" is the main factor affecting worldwide displacement, rather than say global warming, all his proposals look as if lifted from Airbnb. While Thomas' piece is symptomatic of the accelerationist belief that Western bourgeois mobility would indeed constitute something like a new global condition, more fundamentally it betrays a great aesthetic poverty in simply mimicking the 'look' of the sharing economy for an allegedly post-capitalist future. See <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/participants/kulendran/>