Media’s Mapping Impulse

Edited by Chris Lukinbeal, Laura Sharp, Elisabeth Sommerlad and Anton Escher
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ON AUTOPILOT: TOWARDS A FLAT ONTOLOGY OF VEHICULAR NAVIGATION

Sam Hind and Alex Gekker

The following chapter tackles the entrenched ontological divide between the map and the territory, both as a theoretical construct in (post-)modern philosophical thought and in its capacity to inform various cartographic endeavors. In this chapter, we wish to demonstrate how such a dichotomy is not necessary for, and might even be harmful to, our conceptualization of those two objects and the relations between them. We do so by turning to the ongoing convergence (Jenkins 2006) of driving and media practices, previously separate types of human activity that are becoming increasingly connected through two related phenomena: social driving and automated cars. The relation between driving and media consumption is not new. Winfried Schulz (2004), for example, uses listening to the radio while driving as an example of what he calls the amalgamating effect of media. According to Schulz, when media consumption becomes ubiquitous, previously separate activities habituate into new patterns. These change the structure and meaning of each: driving a car in silence might become strange to a commuter, for instance, or radio stations, previously an independent and dominant force in the media institutions landscape, become reliant on a particular kind of a driving listener, changing content and schedule to accommodate her or him.

The transformation we see in front of us, courtesy of the introduction of software and network-based media into the daily lives of users, also changes the way space is consumed and experienced (de Souza e Silva 2006; Kitchin and Dodge 2011). For drivers, this change alters what Nigel Thrift (2004a; 2004b), via Patricia T. Clough (2000), has called the “technological unconscious.” The consolidation of digital screens, mapping software, and car manufacturing, in the same hand (Zillman 2015), further changes the political economy of driving. Thus, we argue here that through the hybridization of media-aided navigation and actual movement, the map and the territory, or rather the map-territory occupy a single ontological plane. To explain our position, we first briefly chart the perceived ontological divide between map and territory envisioned by modern and postmodern theory. Then we suggest a solution that eliminates the need to bifurcate or prioritize either one by turning to the concept of flat ontology. Finally, we exemplify our vision through the discussion of recent developments in social navigation and automated driving.
ONTLOGICAL DIVIDE

“The map is not the territory” (KORZYBSKI 1994 [1933], 58), the semioticians’ famous maxim, inspired BAUDRILLARD’s rallying postmodernist claim on how “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it.” (BAUDRILLARD 1995, 1). Within the fields of geography and cartography, particularly sensitive to the ontic realities of mapping, these totalizing metaphors, and straightforward map-territory translations, have been subject to sustained critical inquiry (CRAMPTON 2002). Theorizations of such have focused on historical discourses (HARLEY 1989), the divide between active and passive consumption of space (DE CERTEAU 2011), the role of narratives and habits (INGOLD 2000), “hidden” power agendas (WOOD 2010) and, perhaps more than anything else, the fluid, emergent properties of various maps in multiple contexts (DODGE et al. 2009). While many of these critical approaches follow DEL CASINO and HANNA’S (2006) reproach of reductive binaries (say, between map-makers and map readers), one stable distinction remains at the heart of the cartographic inquiry: the ontological divide between the map and its territory.

It is our contention that the map/territory divide will continue to exist but perhaps not for much longer. This “crisis of cartographic reason,” diagnosed by Franco FARINELLI (2003; 2009), is explored by Giorgio AVEZZU in his contribution to the current volume. In our chapter, we take such a crisis as a point of departure to argue that with the advent of the driverless car, we are beginning to see the outlines of a new world in which navigation and movement are subsumed into the vehicle such that map and territory are indistinguishable. Here, we take up Jörg BECKMANN’S (2004, 90) then-speculative need to “reconsider the notion of the car-driver hybrid” in light of its possible replacement by an “auto-pilot” in which navigation and movement are both automated. Yet, in order to make a case for an ontological combination, we must first detail this perceived divide abstracted from the case study of the automated vehicle.

For KORZYBSKI (1994, 58), “the map is not the territory” affirms that a relationship exists between one and the other, but mistaking one for the other inevitably results in practical if not epistemological problems. However, in full, the maxim reveals slightly more on the matter: “A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness” (KORZYBSKI 1994, 58). Thus, the utility of the map is drawn from its representational power, that is to say, from its structural similarity with the territory.

In practical terms, if this similarity did not exist it would result in a multitude of possible problems, as KORZYBSKI (1994, 58) notes in reference to an erroneous map of Europe:

If, speaking roughly, we should try, in our travels, to orient ourselves by such a map, we should find it misleading. It would lead us astray, and we might waste a great deal of unnecessary effort. In some cases, even, a map of wrong structure would bring actual suffering and disaster, as, for instance, in a war, or in the case of an urgent call for a physician.

Thus, in KORZYBSKI’S terms, putting undue faith in the (“incorrect”) map in order to navigate the (“correct”) territory would have deleterious effects.

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But for Baudrillard, the maxim should be understood historically as a statement on, and only for, the postmodern world. His inversion, suggesting that “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it” (Baudrillard 1995, 1) is one that signals the end of, in Baudrillard’s mind, a modern conceptualization of territory in favor of a postmodern hyper-reality. As David B. Clarke suggests in his contribution to this book, “Baudrillard offers a strategic reversal that serves as a poetic vehicle, mobilized to disarm any lingering faith in the rational kernel of the real.” Our aim here is to offer a contested view, one of amalgamation instead of dissolution. Challenging Baudrillard’s diagnosis, we wish to pinpoint the symbiotic relations that territory and maps exhibit in the digital age.

In the supposed hyper-reality that Baudrillard constructs, there is no such thing as territory, no world outside of the map. But as he also affirms: “Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept” (Baudrillard 1995, 1). These various modes of abstraction, different in form, are all said to have been in relation to a “referential being” (Baudrillard 1995, 1) such as territory to which the map or any other abstraction is in servitude.

Instead, we inhabit only a cartographic world of points, lines, and polygons. The conclusion of this argument, from an ontological perspective, is that there is no such remaining divide between map and territory because the territory is erased completely. Baudrillard’s initial clause that “The territory no longer precedes the map” invites one to reason that he has simply spun Korzybski’s maxim around, that instead, “the map precedes the territory.” In this, it is the map that assumes priority as the “referential being” rather than the territory.

Taken on its own, this would have left the territory intact, albeit switching its ontological status from being the map’s superior to being the map’s inferior. This view would postulate that a postmodern realignment of map and territory merely shifts “actual suffering and disaster” (Korzybski 1994, 58) to the plane of the map. However, as is made clear in Baudrillard’s second clause, the territory no longer “survives” the map. In Baudrillard’s hyper-real battle to the death, it is the map that claims ultimate victory, not in reversing the ontological state between the two but in banishing it completely. In his work on hyper-reality, Baudrillard treats the map as a sign without a referent. However, it is important to note that in his view this is a recent development, a result of a map-territory struggle and not an a priori ontological state. As he emphatically continues:

…if one must return to [Borges’s] fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. (Baudrillard 1995, 1)

The “real,” says Baudrillard, is becoming (if it has not already become) deserted. Unlike in Borges’s tale where the 1:1 scale map of the territory becomes torn, shredded, and unusable, it is the territory itself that is left to “rot across the extent of the map.” The territory, thus, is becoming obsolete. Baudrillard’s crisis, needless to say, is not Farinelli’s. Whilst Avezzù, in his chapter of this book, suggests that the crisis identified by Farinelli describes a world “withdrawn into a space… beyond representation,” we see Baudrillard’s crisis as depicting a world entering
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