

MAPS AND THEIR SEMIOTICS

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Key-words: visual display, representational techniques, discursive connection, aesthetic resonance

Les Cartes et Leur Sémiologie. Les cartes nous permettent de passer au-delà des limites de notre capacité de voir. Ces codes visuels enregistrent des tensions entre les régions politiques et militaires. La relation entre littérature et cartographie d'une part et entre ces deux et la réalité d'une autre part se fait remarquer à condition qu'on voit dans les cartes plus que des simples enregistrements des notions géographiques et qu'on accepte la dimension culturelle qui les englobe.

Trying to view maps from a semiotic point of view, one has to take into account the fact that a sign is not an objective cause, not the main objective cause, but a substituting one, because of which a sign is said to have an instrumental value; of course not with the meaning that it would be the instrument of an active agent, but in that it is a substitute for an object, it represents, from the exterior of the represented object (Delly, 1997).

Maps "work", writes Denis Wood in *The Power of Maps* (London: Routledge, 1993), because they "give us reality, a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days, a reality we achieve no other way". They manage, that is, to be taken for evident truth what is hard won, culturally acquired knowledge about the world we inhabit; a reality unverifiable by the naked eye: by making us see what eludes our visual perception, by dragging into open view literally invisible spaces, maps promise with each line to transcend the limited powers of human eyesight. The sense of privileged visibility intrinsic to cartographic representation elicited many enthusiastic responses from very early modern commentators. Thomas Blundeville in his *A Briefe Description of Universal Mappes and Cardes* recommended in 1589:

"Study well these moderne Maps ... and with your eie shall beholde, not onely the whole world at one view, but also every particular place contained therein". The generic labels of atlases such as the "glass", the "mirror", or the "speculum" emphasized ocular effects; and when Abraham Ortelius, in the preface of his world atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, called Geography "the eye of History" he referred directly to the visual power of maps and their ability to increase the perceptive faculties otherwise limited by the restraints of space and time.

Trying to exploit a well-known metaphor, it should be noted that some eyes are as blind as others are observant, and Blundeville's contemporaries also recognized that the abstraction of geometric scale may quietly conceal rather than openly disclose geographical information. Trust in the usefulness of maps as visual tools was never as unconditional as the familiar tone of Blundeville's eulogy makes it to appear. Samuel Daniel, for instance, took the opposite stand when he judged maps to be indistinct and literally superficial images of space. He considered maps as insufficiently detailed and wrongly focused records of space, vague approximations at best, which concentrate exclusively on the outward "figure", not on the inner quality of landscape. They are, in fact, instruments of a worrying delusion which may effectively prevent visual access to vital information by keeping the viewer at a distance from the "reality" of the region depicted, from the "fashion and place *as it is*".

The distinction set up here, between maps as either completely revelatory or conceptually blurred images of landscape, should not come as a surprise. It is hard to dispute that maps indeed manage to style themselves as instruments of unlimited ocular inspection, but only after they have simplified their mode of pictorial composition and selected only certain bits of spatial information as worthy of representation: it is this dual process of internal revision which allows them to convincingly imitate what they casually refer to as the "real". On the content level, in the choice of what landscape elements to include in the visual display,

the “prior editing” of the cartographic picture plane is most clearly noticeable; and these “superficial” reductions in spatial complexity are repeated on the level of representational technique. Edward Worsop (1582) explained that cartographers simply cannot be expected to convey an “accurate” impression of landscape since they are exclusively concerned with “the upper face of anything”. Evidently, to call a map a selective vision of space endowed with the unique ability to feign a comprehensive and complete image of reality is not to accuse maps of a secret manipulative power but merely to comment on a constitutive aspect of cartographic projection.

Maps are, no doubt, visual codes. An interesting point to make may be the discursive connection between cartography and literature: the English construction of Irish space in a series of Elizabethan and Jacobean maps and the plays of Shakespeare as most important texts giving aesthetic resonance to the Anglo-Irish confrontation. On these maps, the representational tension between cartography’s claim to universality and its necessary partiality generates a pictorial dialectic between visibility and shadow that is manifest also in the actual geographical content of the map image. In contemporary discourse the definition of Ireland’s status with respect to the national territory was a problematic issue. Perceived as culturally inaccessible, both by government officials and professional cartographers, Ireland continues to avoid English military and discursive control in Elizabethan times. Maps reflect this incomplete conquest: even where an interrupted line encloses the entire island, suggesting full cognitive possession of the surface it circumscribes, the visual and conceptual coherence of the political surface is never fully achieved (Klein Bernard, *Early Modern Literary Studies*). In a similar way, on the Elizabethan stage, Ireland is rarely more than a shadowy and indistinct background of the dramatic scenery, always only partially coming into view.

The interrelation of dramatic and cartographic imagery may be rendered evident by considering a set of references to Ireland in four plays by Shakespeare. In a passage in the *Comedy of Errors* the body of kitchen maid Nell becomes the metaphorical paradigm of the globe, and by extension the map, inscribing a corporal topography with political and ethnographical meaning. Ireland is referred to as a territorial cesspit and a potential source of infection and disease. A bodily hierarchy of high and low, clean and filthy, cultivated and repressed is translated – via cartographic imagery – into a political relationship of cultural domination (Nicolescu A., 1999; *Istoria Civilizației Britanice*). *Henry VI* presents the Irish intervention in English politics as a highly complex and ambivalent affair (Boyce, 1990). On the other hand, as Andrew Murphy notes in “Shakespeare’s Irish History”, *Literature and History* (1996), the play skilfully recruits Irish otherness in the service of an internal English dispute over royal succession: York is in full control of his “army of Irish”, Cade masters the specific Irish ability to switch identity at random. But although Ireland serves as “a source of English strength”, at least for York, it is also a source of disaster, war and confusion. In *Richard II*, Irish rebels are again causing political unrest, a situation, that necessitates the king’s personal intervention. But in contrast to the earlier play, Richard’s Irish adventure invites catastrophic failure. Just prior to his return from Ireland his troops desert him and he subsequently loses the entire kingdom to Bolingbroke. Where York could gather military strength, Richard lost it. Ireland’s physical territory remains vague and unspecific throughout the play – a distant wilderness, a dark space loomong beyond the confines of the dramatic scenery.

Thus, in Shakespeare, Irish space is initially synonymous with a source of political unrest, a place from which rebellion may at any moment spread to England. It is a physical and political wilderness destined to haunt England (Legouis, 1979).

If maps are accepted not merely as records of contemporary geographical knowledge but also as pictorial suites on which the political and cultural shape of the nation was actively debated, cartographic evidence offers several models of how Ireland might relate to the national idea, varying from full integration to deliberate exclusion. Functionally related to the

wider political arena in which they intervened, Irish maps are graphic evidence of the contradictory process by which Ireland's landscape could either be visually absorbed into the emerging political concept of national British unity, marked as a locus of cultural difference, or even ignored completely as a geographical insignificance located safely beyond the borders of the British mainland.

In their function of address to the culture that produced them, maps do not simply reflect an "objective" sixteenth century perception of British and Irish Geography, but they construct an image of the internal dynamics of a political space which, indirectly, through the use of textual and visual ornamentations, acknowledges cultural difference as a defining characteristic of the Tudor state.

As a concluding word to the whole discussion concerning maps as codes to be deciphered one should remember the words of Charles Sanders Peirce who considers that though it may seem strange that a sign offers to the interpreter the task to complete a part of its meaning, the explanation of this phenomenon lies in that the whole univers – not only the univers of those who exist in it, but a broader universe in which the universe of those who exist is only a part of it – is imbued with signs, if not made exclusively of signs.

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