



OBJECT-ORIENTED CARTOGRAPHY: MAPS AS THINGS

By Tania Rossetto

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Object-Oriented Cartography: Maps as Things, by Tania Rossetto, invites the reader to consider new ways of relating to cartographic images and practices. Drawing from recent advances across diverse academic fields such as object-oriented ontology (OOO), critical cartography, and visual studies, Rossetto provides a deeply personal account of our everyday interactions with maps. Over the course of eleven chapters (plus an Introduction and Conclusion) she develops an innovative research methodology that foregrounds the relational, phenomenological, and agential capacities of spatial representations. She accomplishes this through synthetic academic research illuminated by practical examples and inventive case studies. The book's overarching project is to re-imagine maps as more than flat representations of an external reality, and to see them instead as lively actors that shape our world in powerful and intimate ways.

Therefore, it seems only appropriate to begin a review of the book with a discussion of its own “thingness” as an object in the material world.

The seven by ten inch, 149 page, hardcover volume is disarmingly slim, and the publisher's stock purple damask pattern cover design is modestly understated. The terse, somewhat obscure title—in bold, condensed, sans serif capitals—catches the eye, and gives just a hint of the rigorous intellectual work contained within. A casual reader might be put off by the stark title, but it is balanced by

the straightforward (though by no means simple) subtitle promising a discussion of *Maps as Things*. Opening the book, one finds: quotations of favourable reviews from leading researchers in the field of map studies, a short description of the book, the bibliographic information, and a concise table of contents. There is, unfortunately, no index of images or photographs.

The “Introduction” briefly charts a recent history of cartographic thinking as it has developed alongside the author's own academic trajectory. This section sets the stage for the discussion to come, and is vital in order to fully appreciate Rossetto's intellectual motivations and unique multidisciplinary approach. Caught between a fascination for maps and the pervasive late-90s tendency to “deconstruct” and “distrust” spatial visualizations, Rossetto allows her curiosity and intuition to lead her through a discovery of image-making practices ranging across geography, photography, architecture, and visual studies. These novel explorations coincide with a period of rapid innovation in the technical production, theorization, and cultural dissemination of maps (the author cites various examples, such as the rise of Google Maps and the development of post-representational cartographic theory). While these historical touchstones are useful for orienting the reader to the author's key references and areas of interests, the salient takeaway from the Introduction is that *Object-Oriented Cartography* is, first and foremost, a love letter to maps.



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The chapters that follow can be divided into three broad categories. Chapters One through Three provide a detailed overview of object-oriented ontology (OOO), its major figures, arguments, and debates, and their relationship to cartographic studies. OOO is a twenty-first century school of thought that rejects the privileging of the social and political agency of humans over the agential capacity of nonhumans and nonhuman objects. Rossetto also uses these opening chapters to develop her own innovative and eclectic research methodology. Chapters Six through Eleven offer a series of empirical case studies and vignettes that illustrate the key theoretical contributions put forward in the opening chapters. In between, Chapters Four and Five act as a fulcrum between theory and practice through a discussion of the various images, surfaces, and interfaces that connect map-objects to their surroundings.

Chapter One considers the objecthood of maps through an overview of major works by key theorists engaged in topics related to cartography and phenomenology. This review covers relatively recent scholarship, presumably with the goal of focusing the reader's attention on the rise of digital mapping and its implications for the ubiquity, accessibility, and rapidly changing materiality of map-objects. The author presents these technological and intellectual developments in order to link longstanding work on the performativity and materiality of maps to more recent philosophical trends in OOO. A recurrent theme in this chapter—and throughout the book more generally—is an emphasis on questions of ontology over epistemology: Rossetto is more interested in the work that maps *actually do* rather than how humans perceive and interpret them as representational or semiotic surfaces.

Chapter Two addresses OOO directly. For readers unfamiliar with this particular current of philosophical thought, the chapter opens with a concise overview of its key figures, arguments, and internal tensions (a daunting task that Rossetto accomplishes gracefully and succinctly). In short: OOO treats material objects as autonomous beings who possess their own agency to engage with and intervene in the world. While the OOO literature is rife with cartographic vocabulary and metaphor, Rossetto repeatedly states that her project is not metaphorical; she is not proposing an approach to map theory that slavishly follows the tenets of object-oriented philosophy. Rather, the book articulates an experimental and open-ended questioning of the social and political life of cartographic objects. Citing an example put forward by the philosopher

Jane Bennett (2010), Rossetto argues that a “plastic topographical map is not a tool for knowledge, nor a social construction, nor a philosophical way of approaching material beings. It *is* a material being” (26). This claim represents a radical departure from the more conventional social constructivist perspectives mentioned in Chapter One. Yet Rossetto's palpable curiosity and passion for the subject matter (enhanced by her appropriate use of the first-person pronoun) will surely entice skeptics to continue.

Chapter Three, entitled “Stretching theories,” is poised to address the skeptical reader's queries and potential objections. Rossetto begins by invoking familiar debates from post-representational cartography—in particular, that maps are not stable entities but processes that come into being through embodied social and technical practices (Kitchin and Dodge 2007). This framing enables Rossetto to find common ground between her eclectic use of OOO and longstanding conversations in cartographic discourse on the affective and ontological nature of maps. It also allows Rossetto to articulate a more nuanced description of her project: while she is primarily interested in the “thingness” of maps, the book “notices mapping practices/processes as well” (30). This nod to the relational and performative dimensions of practices and processes may appear to contradict Rossetto's primary focus on the map-object itself, however, it succeeds in strategically bridging the book's inventive research methodology with more familiar academic terrain. The chapter closes by returning to the objecthood of maps, and suggests that in order “to do justice to objects . . . we have to grasp their existence outside human experience” (34). As Rossetto acknowledges, this is no small task given that maps are (often) human-made objects.

Chapters Four and Five link the theoretical contributions in the opening chapters to the more empirical experiments presented in the latter half. However, before embarking on these case studies, Rossetto first addresses some of the conceptual difficulties that arise in attempting to understand maps through her object-oriented approach (How do maps *experience*? How do maps *relate*?). Drawing upon her personal encounter with a large You-Are-Here map in Padua, Italy, Rossetto muses on the nature of surfaces and interfaces as the point of contact between the map and its surrounding environment. Traces of environmental weathering and previous tactile encounters offer clues into the lifeworld of the map: it becomes partially knowable, yet remains fundamentally autonomous (media archeology

enthusiasts may find this chapter particularly interesting; see Mattern 2017). Rossetto uses this tension to juxtapose her OOO methodology with Marxist and humanist approaches to cartographic analysis that seek to dismantle the map in order to reveal its hidden ideologies or power structures. For Rossetto, the cartographic surface is not a barrier but a place on which to rest and reflect upon the radical alterity (or “otherness”) of, and imperfect communication between, human and nonhuman objects.

Chapter Five continues this line of thought by asking: “what counts as a map today?” (49). How might an object-oriented cartography contend with our contemporary geovisual culture (Rossetto 2016) where the lines between the visual and the cartographic are blurred? Rossetto embraces this blurring as evidence of cartography’s capacity for wild hybridization, which she explores through a photo essay of two map-like objects: *cartifacts* (maps that are produced on a carrying media not usually associated with cartography) and *mapscapes* (cartographic materials perceptible as part of a city or landscape). Rossetto gives multiple examples of cartifacts, including wallpaper and wine bottle labels featuring maps as a kind of decorative element. The use of Google Maps on a smartphone is perhaps the most salient example: it reveals how map-objects are able to leave the flat page and take on a performative and phenomenological dimension. Similarly mapscapes, such as digital wayfinding infrastructures in airports or train stations, weave the semiotic and navigational function of maps into the urban fabric itself. According to Rossetto, these hybrid typologies are valuable because they defamiliarize conventional academic cartography and stretch it to a conceptual breaking point. The proliferation of these hybrid typologies, she argues, necessitates new approaches and methodologies to map studies.

Chapters Six through Eight illustrate potential applications of an object-oriented cartography approach in static and pre-digital maps. Each of these three chapters is organized around a core theme or idea that links cartography and map-making practices to parallel discussions in literature, architecture, and the pictorial arts. In each chapter, OOO’s core concepts of relationality and “otherness” are explored through both familiar case studies and more experimental approaches to research. For example, Chapter Six applies object-oriented cartography to literary maps. Using Cormack McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) as a case study, Rossetto explores how maps serve to forge intimate bonds between the story’s characters, thereby

entering their relational world as a powerful, yet autonomous force. Similarly, Chapter Seven uses the technique of non-human narration to give voice to the experience of Fonteuropa, a mosaic map in Padova. In both of these examples, the experiences of map-objects are neither treated as metaphorical nor literary devices; Rossetto attempts to imagine their embodied subjectivities in order to interrogate their social agency. Lastly, Chapter Eight explores similar themes through maps featured in paintings, postcards, photography, and film. Some readers may object to, or dismiss out of hand, Rossetto’s novel methodologies as mere anthropomorphism—a narrative technique commonly found in children’s books—yet Rossetto approaches the subject with seriousness and academic rigour. While each of these chapters takes a decidedly speculative turn relative to the previous sections of the book, they succeed in inviting the reader to consider the dynamic, if somewhat inscrutable, lives of cartographic objects.

Chapters Nine through Eleven transition from pre-digital to digital maps, and shift the focus of the book away from the specific “thingness” of maps towards our vital and dynamic interactions with cartographic objects. Chapter Nine explores how individuals enter into dialogue with the “living images” (98) they encounter on TV, smart phones, and computer screens. Told through four narrations by different map users, Rossetto captures the deeply personal and idiosyncratic ways that maps enter our everyday lives and transform our relationships with our surroundings. Chapter Ten advances this line of inquiry through a discussion of human-digital intermediation through cartographic objects. The implications of new spatial technologies have been widely discussed across a range of disciplines (see Braun 2014; Kitchin and Dodge 2007), however, Rossetto’s contribution is unique for its consideration of technology’s potential impacts on humans, as well as how these technologies might transform humanity’s coexistence with “digital others.” This theme carries over into Chapter Eleven, which focuses not on the dynamic qualities of maps, but on their capacity for decay and dormancy. Using the technique of repeat photography (i.e. re-taking the same photograph at different times), Rossetto captures multiple periods in the life cycle of a map in order to reveal how it can accumulate a patina of memory through different modes of contact and interaction.

Following the experimental case studies presented in Chapters Six through Eleven, the Conclusion feels refreshingly focused. Rossetto uses the closing pages of

Object-Oriented Cartography to reiterate her primary objective: that we must pay attention to maps as lively things in and of themselves. I would argue that the book is successful in this mission, and that it offers both academics and students a fresh, captivating, and deeply personal approach to cartographic study. While some of the chapters could have better engaged with the evolving orthodoxies and internal divisions in speculative realist philosophy and OOO thinking, Rossetto takes time to acknowledge these potential oversights in the Conclusion. In the end, we are reminded that object-oriented cartography is fundamentally open-ended and tentative, and as readers, I believe we should not mistake brave intellectual experimentation with—as Rossetto self-deprecatingly suggests—sentimentality or naivete. As an exercise in true multidisciplinaryity, *Object-Oriented Cartography* provides researchers of cartography, geography, aesthetics, visual studies, media theory, and science and technology studies with a renewed appreciation for the lives of maps.

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