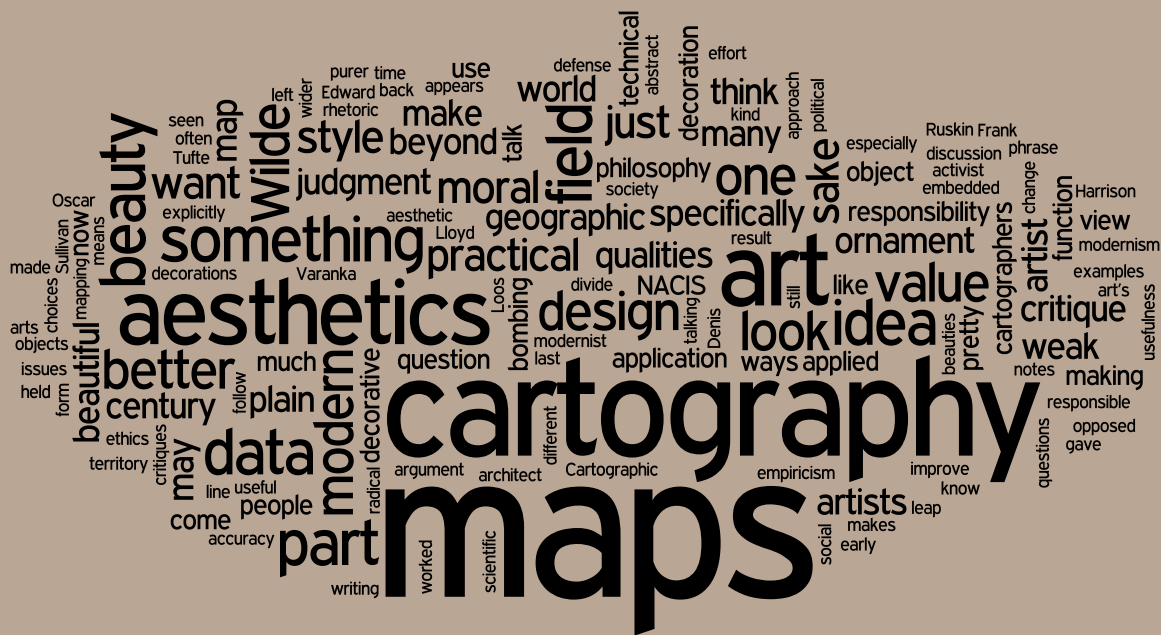


Function and Beauty (In Defense of Useless Maps)

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We say we want to make “better maps.” But what does that mean?

We can improve accuracy with better data. We can improve clarity with proper use of type and appropriate color and line choices. We can make better choices of projection and more intuitive symbology, and devise new ways of interpreting three-dimensional surfaces as two-dimensional artwork. All of these are topics cartographers have worked over for as long as there has been a field called “cartography.”¹

We can come up with more efficient ways of managing, updating, and rendering geographic data with our computers. As GIS has superseded manual cartography as the core mechanism for turning raw geographic data into visualization, the technical aspects of transforming data into something humans can intuitively understand has consumed us as a field.

But “better” is not limited to technical issues. Critical writing about cartography over the last half-century has focused on ways cartographers and the field as a whole can act as a kind of moral filter, rather than as a service to those who would use maps as a tool for domination of the land and the people who live upon it. Beginning with a focus on the ethics of mapping in the early 1970’s spearheaded by J. B. Harley—and expanded to a look of maps as instruments of power, especially in Denis Wood’s *The Power of Maps* in 1992—this line of critique continues



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1. Which as Denis Wood pointed out, is less than 200 years, as it was initially a Portuguese neologism, invented around 1839 (Wood 2003).

to challenge us to watch what we do not just for accuracy, but for its effect on the world around us.

These critiques often produce discomfort. But I think there's something beyond simple defensiveness in our collective skepticism about jumping on board any of the bandwagons we have been presented with as a field. We know something is wrong, but we feel dissatisfied from the answers we've come up with so far to make things right.

The application of aesthetics to maps is another approach to this question of "better maps." For example, the introduction by editors Timothy R. Wallace and Daniel P. Huffman to NACIS' 2012 *Atlas of Design* argues for beauty as a framework in our practice, zeroing in on the idea that "We care about how the map looks" (Wallace and Huffman 2012).

When we talk about aesthetics, it's inevitable that at some point we will end up talking about art. Some argue that aesthetics is synonymous with the philosophy of art, in which case there's little for us to discuss—our field and the fine arts may have regard for one another, but are clearly different in their approach to even basic questions of value. NACIS approached the broad topic of art and cartography in a special issue of *Cartographic Perspectives* in the winter of 2006. It was a well-intended effort, and it included some excellent resources, but reading the articles today it still feels as though we are talking past each other: the artists continue to talk art-talk, and the cartographers continue to talk map-talk.

I've been interested in this divide for some time now—I addressed it in a paper I gave at AAG in 2006 (Case 2006). What I suggested in that paper is that the divide in question is between a cartographic value of "usefulness" and a fine arts value against practicality. I still think this describes a difference in historical self-definition, but these days it is almost impossible to say anything definitive about the art world without some artist or movement noting that they contradict it. And as Denis Wood noted in his survey of maps in art, there *are* artists like Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison for whom the practical application of the truths in their art are very much part of what they are about.

In addressing ourselves to "aesthetics," I believe it will be useful to look back at the first century of modern aesthetics, the period beginning with Immanuel Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment* and ending with Oscar Wilde. Kant (contradicting his predecessor, Alexander Baumgarten, who introduced the term "aesthetics" in its modern sense in 1750) held that beauty was *not* inherent in objects but a result of our perception and non-rational judgment of them. He "insisted that a pure aesthetic judgment about an object is one that is unaffected by any concepts under which the object might be seen; and he tried to show that the implicit claim of such a judgment to be valid for everyone is justified" (Budd 1998).

One of the great periods of debate in aesthetics was the last half of the nineteenth century. Broadly speaking, the lines were drawn between critics like John Ruskin, who held that beauty was inseparable from moral and social value, and Ruskin's fiercest opponent, James McNeil Whistler, who sued Ruskin for libel after a review of his *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* accused him of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." It pitted two different visions of modernism against

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each other, one responsible to society and one responsible to nothing but itself (Jones 2003).

Oscar Wilde's philosophy took Whistler's point of view and pushed it further. Explicitly railing against Victorian moralism, Wilde set out to unencumber beauty from all social constraint, to celebrate it solely for its own sake—this is the origin of the phrase “art for art's sake.” It's against this point of view that many activist and other “radical” artists have been working for decades now, especially since the 1960's (the narrative thread from Wilde to the present is of course convoluted, and moral and activist art comes in as many flavors as there are political agendas, conservative to liberal and beyond).

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For a field so devoted to “usefulness” and practical production issues, cartography has its own flavor of “art for art's sake”—call it “maps for maps' sake” perhaps. Many of the contemporary critiques of cartography come from the political and philosophical left: the very idea of “counter-mapping” or “radical cartography” carries a counter-cultural overtone, and is primarily directed at established corporate and state-based mapping structures.² Beginning with J. B. Harley's discussion of maps and ethics, we have been asked specifically whether we are comfortable creating maps that are then used for purposes we may or may not be in agreement with. If we are not, then what is our duty to? To the maps themselves, or to a wider moral order?

elin o'Hara slavick gave a passionate critique of cartography in her presentation at the NACIS conference in 2007.³ In associating cartography directly with modern air and missile-based bombing, she made cartography complicit in mass murder. She is an artist. Her textual critique is ringing, and her paintings are themselves indictments of bombing and of maps' part in that bombing. As an artist, she is calling us out for hiding behind a “maps for maps' sake” defense. She is also, as an artist, firmly making a statement that her art, which is abstract (it is not optically representational, but uses cartographic imagery with painted texture that recalls bombs and their physical results), nevertheless is very much about something, not just about itself.

The look of modern, mainstream cartography appears on the surface to be related to modernist ideas from more than a century ago. Expressed most famously in modern design writing by Edward Tufte, we can trace this idea back to architect Louis Sullivan (and his protégé Frank Lloyd Wright) and his maxim, first stated in an 1896 essay, “form should follow function.” This was amplified by Austrian architect Adolf Loos' 1910 declaration that ornament was “criminal.” This germ of an idea formed the heart of modernism in architecture and industrial design for the next century.

Loos' argument in *Ornament and Crime*, interestingly, is not that the forms beneath ornament are somehow purer, but that ornament goes in and out of fashion, and that it was wasteful to spend time and effort on something that will be unfashionable within the life of the object (the building). It was left to later modern-

2. For examples, see most of Denis Woods' work, the work of John Pickles' counter-cartographies-collective, and elin o'Hara slavick's work, discussed below. See also: Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, eds. 2008. *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press.

3. Which is repeated in her 2007 book *Bomb after Bomb: A Violent Cartography*. London/New York: Charta.

ists to find fundamental value in purer forms and shapes. Meanwhile, Sullivan's call for form to follow function did not result in his discarding decoration; indeed, his ornate organic decorations are now seen as a signature part of his style, as are Frank Lloyd Wright's decorative details.

While modernist design certainly plays a part in the look of modern maps, the adoption of a simplified style in cartography actually goes much earlier. As Dalia Varanka notes, a change in map aesthetics in early 18th-century England was part of a push by the Royal Society towards an unornamented "plain style" in scientific discourse of all kinds, explicitly a matter of making arguments clearer and less encumbered by irrelevant rhetorical (or decorative) flourishes. Thus cartouches went from imitations of classical stonework to plain engraved boxes, and decorative illustration on maps disappeared.⁴

The plain style was not advocated purely on aesthetic grounds. It was part of the rise of English Empiricism, which emphasized practical application of scientific knowledge over disinterested observation. Varanka notes that embedded in the rhetoric supporting empiricism is a gendered argument that "plain style" rhetoric and specifically cartography invoked "manly" qualities as opposed to "feminine" decorations (Varanka 2005).

I find this interesting because to me it echoes the idea which sometimes appears in geographic data circles, that cartography is about "making maps pretty." The word "pretty" connotes triviality—it's no coincidence that it's an adjective more often positively applied to women and girls than to men and boys. When it's applied to maps, it implies that the underlying data is what is important, and that the aesthetics of the map are secondary, applied qualities—decoration. It relies on the notion of weak femininity.⁵

Is this part of what makes us leap to the defense of the accurate, data-driven nature of our craft? Is what makes us trot out our Edward Tufte references about design revealing the hidden beautiful evidence, the beauties of data? Is it because we don't want to seem weak, and we buy the idea that decoration is weak?

It worked against Wilde and the aesthetes. Gilbert and Sullivan parodied them in *Patience*, and *Punch* magazine lampooned them mercilessly. When Wilde was arrested for homosexual "gross indecency," it only reinforced a public stereotype of Wilde and his followers as weak (i.e., effeminate).⁶ His aestheticism faded into the background after his arrest and imprisonment.

As we leap forward into discussion of the aesthetics of maps, we are rocking more than one boat. We are standing up for beauty within a field where the practical

4. I initially heard Varanka offer a history of this at the 2007 NACIS Annual Meeting, in a paper "The Emergence of Plain-style Mapping in Early English Atlases, 1606–1729."

5. For an exemplary discussion of this use of "pretty," see a thread begun by David Medeiros on the Cartotalk forum, at <http://www.cartotalk.com/index.php?showtopic=4462>. I also sometimes refer back to a thread on James Fee's blog, at <http://geospatialblog.wordpress.com/2008/06/09/that-looks-like-a-gis-map/>.

6. In case there is any doubt, let me be clear: I believe that beauty is not weak, and neither are women or GLBT folk. And the equation of women and beauty, and of men and "usefulness" is simply incorrect—still surprisingly pervasive, but wrong.

is embedded as a superior value. We are edging into a territory—the philosophy of art—that itself has been subject to controversy specifically over the question of beauty and other abstract qualities for their own sake vs. those qualities serving the wider world. Most of all, though, we are heading into territory where we can't depend on quantitative analysis to decide what “better” means, and where use and function may not be relevant.

I want to stand up here for useless maps, and defend them from the pejorative “pretty” or its companion “eye candy,” a phrase with equally sexist connotations. We all know people hang maps up on their walls or view them in coffee table atlases not just because they are useful, but because they are beautiful. Many of the examples in the *Atlas of Design* are clearly meant not to be read as text, but to be viewed as examples of beauty. Can we help push a cultural change that is already underway, disassociating gender, strength, and attractiveness?

What do maps say as beautiful objects? Do they imply possession of geographic space beyond what our walking-around selves can possess? Do they remind us of the glorious beauties of the world itself, or of our emotional connections not just to what we can see outside our door, but to larger spaces like our city, state, nation, biome, continent, and planet? Do we just want to revel in the idea of *knowing* some piece of the ground we walk on? Is that what maps really represent?

It's a kind of responsibility I am nervous of, even more than the moral responsibility the “carto-critique” that I discussed above has made us aware of. But it's a responsibility artists have been figuring out how to navigate for centuries. If we can force ourselves to address what it means to make a beautiful map, beyond the technical questions of dressing it up to look good to the client—if we can really learn to look at maps as expressions of something people want and need, we will, I think, have accomplished something.

What do maps say as beautiful objects?

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