

# The map *is* the territory

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When I read the expression ‘The map is not the territory’ for the first time, it occurred to me that it contained the quintessence of Anglo-American philosophy of common sense. The defiant insistence on a logic of representation, a common-sense belief in the evidence of an objective ‘reality’ that is prior to all mental representations or written marks, a normative concept of rigour and scientism – all that appeared to be condensed in that one expression, which Alfred Korzybski coined in a paper on the ‘Necessity for Rigor in Mathematics and Physics’ in 1931, and which can be seen as an emblem of analytical philosophy. Certainly, I do not intend to start an argument like the one that Jacques Derrida once had with John Searle. And I will certainly not address the historical issue of the divide between the continental and the analytical traditions of philosophy, which according to Michael Friedman can be traced back to the clash between Heidegger and Carnap in the early 1930s. I only wish to use the expression of Korzybski, who was a partisan of Carnap, to point out the media-philosophical impact of Cultural Technologies and Techniques Studies, which have constituted a new and rapidly expanding field of research and teaching in Germany for about a dozen years now. The media-philosophical core of this field of research can be seen as the unfolding of the possible meanings of negating Korzybski’s negation, namely that ‘the map *is* the territory’.

One of the possible meanings of this sentence can be found in those maps that were invented by Lewis Carroll and Jorge Lu s Borges: maps of a territory or an empire in the scale of 1:1. In Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* a German professor tells the story of how the map-makers of Germany had experimented with the use of always larger maps, until they finally produced a map of the scale of 1:1. ‘It has never been spread out, yet’, said the professor. ‘The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.’<sup>1</sup> Borges’s text ‘Del rigor en la ciencia’ tells of an empire in which the art of map-making had reached such a degree of perfection

that the cartographic institutes were content only with a map of the empire that had the size of the empire and was congruent with it in each of its points. In the end, the map and the empire became indiscernible.<sup>2</sup> But it is not this interpretation of the sentence ‘the map is the territory’ that is relevant for an understanding of the media-philosophical core of the concept of cultural techniques. As cultural techniques, maps are not just representations of a territory. First, they can also be representations of the ocean. It is hard for logicians to keep in mind that there is an ocean where all kinds of contradictions are gathered together and the *tertium* is not *non datur* but given. Second, maps are not just representations but also instruments. They are based on mathematical operations and they constitute a substantial part of a cultural practice.

A main feature of the analysis of maps as cultural technologies is that it considers maps not as representations of space but as spaces of representation.<sup>3</sup> The historicity that is of interest, in the first place, in connection with those spatial representations is not the historicity of the represented spaces. Instead it is the historicity of the space of representation itself.

From the perspective of Cultural Studies, as well as from the perspective of the Study of Cultural Technologies and Techniques, maps contain less information about a territory than about the way it is observed and described. But the hermeneutic or cognitive approach that is predominant in Cultural Studies reads the map as a key to the understanding of the intentions of those who produced the image of the world that is displayed by the map.<sup>4</sup> Hence, understanding maps means here to understand the intentions – the conscious and unconscious dispositions – of the authors of the maps, their ‘world-view’. In contrast to this reading method, the media-philosophical approach inherent in the study of cultural technologies and techniques reads maps as media that are themselves agents of subject constitution. The marks and signs on a map do not refer to an authorial subject but to epistemic orders and their struggles for dominance over other epistemic orders, in the course of which marks and things enter a new play of signs. The cartographic operations produce a

subject, which correlates to them. Such an approach does not consider a map as a representation in two ways: neither in the sense of a denotation, nor in the sense of a reflection of the cultural predisposition of an authorial subject. It is instead concerned with the way changes in cartographic procedures give rise to various orders of representation. Instead of representing cultural predispositions, it is their very basis of production. What is used for interpretation in the approach of hermeneutics and Cultural Studies is that which needs to be interpreted in the approach of Cultural Techniques and Technologies Studies. Representation is not presupposed but is itself a historical event, which appears at a certain date in the history of cartographic orders. Maps thus appear as sources of a history of representation and not as representations in a history of intentions and their cultural conditions.

The concept of cultural techniques is not ‘post-media’ in the sense that it is designed to replace the concept of the media, or in the sense that in the age of digital media artworks transcend the Greenbergian dogma of media specificity. But it is ‘post-new-media’ in the sense that it suggests we interpret Media Studies as something completely different from Internet Studies or Mass Media Studies. It attempts to turn Media Studies into ‘Medium Studies’ in so far as it calls for a ‘physics of media’. It is designed to set a new perspective on media or mediums: namely, to relate the concept of media/mediums historically to ontological and aesthetic operations that process distinctions (and the blurring of distinctions) which are basic to the sense production of any specific culture.

### **Cultural techniques, media studies**

In nineteenth-century Germany, the term ‘cultural technologies’ signified what in the English language was called ‘agricultural engineering’: river regulations for instance, but also techniques of breeding and domesticating animals. In the 1970s it was related to elementary techniques of education: reading, writing, calculating. When the concept of cultural techniques re-emerged in the context of Media Studies and German *Kulturwissenschaft* shortly before the turn of the new century it was based on a post-humanistic understanding of culture. Thus, its spectrum could be expanded (for instance, to calendar techniques, techniques of jurisdiction, or techniques of trance and the sacred) and, in addition, it could find a systematic place in the context of history of science, legal history, art history, cultural anthropology and ethnology, inasmuch as those disciplines were themselves effected by the ‘cultural turn’. What was left out systematically were the big

explanatory models of a history of ideas or a philosophy of history: the progress of the individual and humanity and freedom, on the side of idealism; economic crises and revolutions, on the side of materialism.

The concept of cultural techniques thereby took up a feature that had been specific to German media



theory since the 1980s. This specific feature set apart German media studies from Anglo-American media studies, as well as from French and German studies of communications – let alone sociology, which, under the spell of enlightenment, in principle wanted to consider media only with respect to the public. German media analysis placed at the basis of changes in cultural and intellectual history inconspicuous techniques of knowledge like card indexes, media of pedagogy like the slate, discourse operators like quotation marks, uses of the phonograph in phonetics, or techniques of forming the individual like practices of teaching to read and write. Thus media, symbolic operators and practices were selected out, which are today systematically related to each other by the concept of cultural techniques. The philosophical specificity of German media analysis was that it took up Michel Foucault’s concept of the historical *a priori* and turned it into a ‘technical *a priori*’ by referring the Foucauldian ‘archive’ to media technologies.

While in communication studies, sociological methods played a predominant role, in German media studies there was a link established between media and changes in knowledge and perception. More precisely, it was not so much the question of what was

represented in the media, and how it was represented, and why it was represented in one way and not in another, that came into focus – since questions like these lead always to the same answers. Content analysis of media products will always reproduce the same highly predictable results, because it will always find what it already knows that it is to be found there. A Marxist will always discover the commodity form of contents, and a fan of Cultural Studies will always find *race*, *class* and *gender* as the cultural semantics which govern those contents. In contrast to content analysis, parts of German media theory shifted the focus from the representation of meaning to the conditions of representation. The question is not how the map interprets the objective territory it represents, but what techniques of representation it uses and how those techniques of representation were part of power relations, and how the very concept of the territory is related to those techniques and those power relations. The whole question of representation was shifted towards the question of the conditions of representation. These conditions are not at all exclusively technical *a priori*s but involve the materiality of media in the broadest sense, including their technicality, discourse networks, cultural techniques and formations of knowledge.

The concept of cultural techniques highlights the operations or sequences of operations that historically and logically precede the media concepts generated by them. However, although an operation like counting could be processed purely by means of a bodily technique, in the sense of Marcel Mauss, it nevertheless always presupposes technical objects (be it one's own fingers), which predetermine the performance of the operation and thus the concepts derived from that operation. Calculation by means of an abacus gives rise to another concept of number than calculating with one's ten fingers, and the paper surface and the computer to yet other concepts of number.

The media-philosophical core of the study of cultural techniques and technologies therefore consists of a vehement criticism of an ontological conception of philosophical terms. Instead, the study of cultural techniques aims at revealing the operative basis of those terms. There is no 'man' independent from cultural techniques of hominization, or anthropotechnics; there is no time independent from the cultural techniques of calendars, time measurement and synchronization; there is no space independent from cultural techniques of ruling spaces and so forth. This does not imply, however, that writing the history of cultural techniques is meant to be an anti-ontological project. On the contrary, it implies more than it excludes a historical

ontology, which however does not base that which exists in ideas, adequate reasons or an *eidos*, as was common in the tradition of metaphysics, but in media operations, which work as conditions of possibility for artefacts, knowledge, the production of political or aesthetic or religious actants.

The map *is* the territory inasmuch as, for instance, map-making is a cultural technique that, in the service of the state, *produced* the territory as a political reality. Let me use the example of one of the most famous maps in art history to elaborate in just one aspect of the Cultural Techniques approach: the map in Johannes Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting* (1665–67, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

### Vermeer's map

On the wall of the painter's study we see a map of the Netherlands, which displays on the right side (north) the seven Protestant provinces and on the left (south) the ten provinces that stayed under the rule of the Spanish Habsburgs. The map that Vermeer displays here was created by Claes Jansz Visscher and was published some time after 1652.

The metaphysics of space that lie at the basis of the truism 'that the map is not the territory' originate from the cultural technique of perspectival image construction, in which line rules over colour, and the surface over the materiality of flatness. Linear perspective is biased to support the conception that technical distinctions between the eye and the imaginary space, abstract space and image objects, are embodiments of the metaphysical distinctions between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, idea and matter (as happened in Florentine



*disegno* theory during the sixteenth century). Although Vermeer was a painter who widely used perspectival machines like the camera obscura, his thematization of the image surface defines the image in a completely different way than did Leon Battista Alberti. As the concept of representation is rooted in the principles of linear perspective, it can be described as a historic version of hylomorphism. Following Gilbert Simondon, Deleuze and Guattari postulated in *A Thousand Plateaus* what they called nomadic science as an alternative to hylomorphism, and I think that the way Media Philosophy is analysing the way image spaces operate within the conceptual framework of nomadic science.

Hylomorphism is the name for a metaphysical relationship between form and matter that goes back to Aristotle, in which it is the form alone to which is ascribed the idea, action and being. Matter does not matter in terms of what is essentially needed for the being to be. Already, early Dutch painters like Van Eyck challenged this model of hylomorphism by favouring another model, in which the pictorial ground does not appear as passive but as possessing a potential which has always already initiated a becoming form, which is realized by operations like folding, weaving or braiding. It is essential for this other model that the operations that allow the matter to become form are inherent in the structure of the matter; they belong to the matter; they are expressions of the matter itself. In the model of hylomorphism all matter is assigned to the content while form is completely turned into expression. But in a media-philosophical conception of content and expression, each of the two terms embrace form and matter. Matter here appears as a medium of singularities. With regard to the map in Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting*, the surface which represents the pictorial ground of an image is not a geometrical construction, but some kind of textile matter, which is the medium of folds and bends and bubbles of colours. 'The expression, too, is not just formal, but is inextricably connected with structural features which form a matter of expression.'<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the map in Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting*, the painted object is not exterior to the medium of the image, but it is connected to it in a recursive way, as it is in the case of the ornament, which refers to the structure of the pictorial ground, which it translates into a motive. The mediality of the image in Vermeer does not separate technique and motive; on the contrary, the technique is thematized by the motive. The painted ocean on the map in Vermeer's painting displays the structure of the canvas it is



painted on, and the painted waves repeat and thematize these structures, which connect the art of painting to the art of weaving. The painted ships sail over the folds of the pictorial ground, and the shadows which they cast on the painted ocean interfere with the shadow which the fold is casting on the ocean. Or is it on the canvas? What is the difference between these shadows? Are they not both painted shadows, are they not both painted on one and the same canvas? As the contours of the territory define the map as striated space, the structure of the canvas, the ornamental recursivity of motive and technique, the folds and bubbles, which reflect the light, turn the whole map into an ocean, into the smooth space par excellence. The map is the territory. In this case this means that as the materiality of the map interferes with its contents, and as the medium of representation interferes with the representation of the territory (for which representation is an ontological condition), the map as a representation is deterritorialized by the map as a medium.

## Notes

1. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Macmillan, London, 1898, p. 169.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Del rigor en la ciencia', in *Obras Completas*, Emece Editores, Buenos Aires, 1974.
3. See William Boelhower, 'Inventing America: A Model of Cartographic Semiosis', in *Word and Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1988, pp. 475–97; here p. 479. Boelhower refers here to Henri Lefebvre's tripartite distinction between spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces.
4. In Germany this perspective was supported by Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich and Vienna 2003, p. 91.
5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1980, ch. 12.