

YOU ARE HERE: SEE WHAT YOU THINK.

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Some comments prepared as a brief introduction to the work of Gunnar Olsson, for the Annual Meeting of the North American Cartographic Information Society in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States, at the "Theoretical Frontiers" session on Friday, October 16, 2015.¹

Abstract

Cartography is commonly reduced to the craft of map making without a full appreciation for its legacy as an intellectual framework and cognitive practice that has had profound implications for endeavors beyond the geographical. Gunnar Olsson, author of ten books, is professor emeritus of geography at Uppsala University, Sweden. *The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (2009) describes his work as “a lifelong journey of self-conscious reevaluation” in which Olsson “has pursued his core theme of human interaction in search of its geographical essences.” The culmination of this journey is an epic work, *Abysmal* (2007, Univ. Chicago Press Books), that offers fascinating insights into the intersection of human reasoning and cartographic rhetoric. My overview of this work will invite cartographers to move beyond thinking about their work in increasingly technological terms and to also engage with the historical and philosophical discourses at play when we think, not about cartography, but cartographically.

Introduction

My focus as it relates to the mission of the NACIS is primarily geographic historiography. One of the primary discourses of geographic history is cartographic history. So, in keeping with the theme of this year’s meeting, you could say that I’m interested in *mapping the interactions* of ideas, for example, between Alfred Crosby, Carol Delaney, and the National Geographic Society; between Dava Sobel, Jordan Branch, Michael Blanding, Alexander von Lünen and yes: Gunnar Olsson.

¹ <http://sched.co/3llp>

Olsson's career-long pursuit of a new geographic language for use in the social sciences, a concept called **Cartographic Reason**, should be of interest to you (if you are not already familiar with it). Mark Monmonier has taught us well: it is the nature of maps to both represent and *mis*represent (Monmonier, 2). This applies also to the map of our experience. For educators in particular, engaging with Cartographic Reason reveals the forgotten fact that we first made maps as an exercise of imagination.

I am fascinated by maps, and one lesson we learn from Gunnar Olsson is that we have very little choice but to be fascinated by maps.

Gunnar Olsson

Gunnar Olsson is an acclaimed geographer from Uppsala University, operating continuously since 1595 and located 63 kilometers north-northwest of Stockholm, Sweden. Olsson is not the university's most famous alumni. (That honor goes to the 18th-century botanist, Carolus Linneaus.)

Olsson's magnum opus, *Abysmal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason*, was published in 2007 and is the result of two decades of work and the culmination of five decades as a prolific researcher and admired teacher both in Sweden and the United States (Olsson, Curriculum Vitae). *Abysmal* is framed by Olsson as a continuation of the work and thought of Immanuel Kant. By situating his work in the tradition of the philosophical critique---which is not a criticism, but an effort towards comprehensive explication---and then entitling it *Abysmal* (which denotes not only immense depth but gravitas), I'm pretty sure that Olsson is inviting us to play. He is not exhibiting arrogance but is making a self-reflexive gesture. It says: this is the journey I've taken. Are you curious how I got here?

The tradition, the context, in which Olsson places himself encompasses a vast swath of history---almost all of it, going back to Babylonian, cosmological creation narratives. He engages with Biblical figures such as Noah (whose ark inspired a medieval cartographer named Hugh). Fast forward to Mount Sinai where Moses cuts a deal with the Almighty that forbids (among other things) cartography itself (see the fine print in Exodus 20:4). We then move across the *Mare Nostrum* to the academy of Plato, East to India (and back again to Egypt) with Aristotle's upstart student, Alexander the Great...

I'll stop there to ask you a question: were you able to "keep up," to "follow along" with this narrative? I suspect you were---despite the fact that we don't yet *really* agree where Mount Sinai is. To paraphrase Korzybski: the map is not the story (Korzybski). Rather, a story is a map. This revelation is what Franco Farinelli identified as "Cartographic Reason" in 1989 (Olsson, 482), and what David Foster Wallace in 2005 called---with trenchant eloquence---"water" (Wallace).

We navigate our way through history the same way we navigate our way through human interactions, the same way we organize our experience as a whole: using cartography. Rather than a map of the world we experience, Cartographic Reason is the cartography we use to *experience* the world.

Regarding Cartographic Reason

Regardless of what motivates your interest in the work of Olsson, I want to offer a *shibboleth* that will unlock the Cartographic Reason found on any map:

You Are here.

As Sartre famously explained in his existentialist philosophy immediately after World War II: “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 13). Olsson asserts something similar when he has said that maps, like humans, are "a form in search of a meaning" (Broder, @~1:01:30). And, of course, that meaning comes from those who look upon them; first but not last, their cartographic Creators. For this reason, the words “You Are Here” appear on every map---whether they are printed or not. They are always first an existential statement, and only secondarily a locational indicator.

So I will say it for the first time: Cartographic Reason is NOT a spatial query in a GIS. Cartographic Reason is: an intricate, dynamic, spatially oriented, metaphorically-driven base map that we use every day whether we know it or not.

This should be one of the *least* controversial claims you will ever encounter. If we accept ourselves as physiologically embodied, semiotic animals: then a cartographic model is the *obvious* and *most efficient* way for humans to organize our experience. It allows us to repurpose our individual, unavoidable interactions with the physical world.

Language, Space, and Meaning

I could say at this point: “don’t take my word for it,” except that language itself betrays the ubiquity of the spatial, the geographic, and the cartographic in our thoughts. When Satan finally hits bottom, one of the first things John Milton has him do is to rally the troops by invoking this famous dictum: "The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n" (Milton, Book I).

Literature is rife with language that exploits the meanings of space and place from Homer to Shakespeare to Rushdie. Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers explored *The Power of Myth* in the late 1980s and the mythological is firmly “grounded” in geography.

Since the “linguistic turn” academics have adopted the kind of poststructural playfulness used to *de-center* various constructs by using spatial/cartographic terminology in particular (Brown). Hence, we have numerous works that take us “towards” a niche of research, placed at an “intersection” of two or more areas of inquiry, or perhaps “constellated” with that of others in their “field.” Are these “*just metaphors*”?

Olsson’s imaginative “Map of the Kantian Island of Truth” (Olsson, *Abysmal*, 226) is a literally cartographic product of his “self-appointed role as a (post)modern land-surveyor” (Olsson, 239). George Lakoff, at the University of California in Berkeley, has spent a non-trivial amount of time investigating how people think. His conclusion in brief: primarily through *metaphor*. This is an even less controversial claim than Olsson makes. Lakoff & Associates focus primarily on the embodied frontier of our experiential horizon. Olsson playfully acknowledges Lakoff’s work by naming a metaphorical beach on this island in his honor.

Mapping Cartographic Reason

We’ll now take a whirlwind tour of the mechanics of Cartographic Reason by de-constructing it into familiar metaphors; or what Olsson refers to as “instruments” (Olsson, *Abysmal*, 77). At a minimum, we’ll need: a compass rose, a system of coordinates, some labels, and a legend.

The cardinal directions of the mind demarcate the whole of our experience. We have latitudes of experience that are **visible, present, known, and derived from our senses**. We have longitudes of experience that are **invisible, absent, unknown, derived from our “sixth sense of culture”** (Olsson, 239). The latitudes correspond to what Kant called “phenomena” and the longitudes to what Kant called “noumena.” As Donald Rumsfeld clumsily reminded us in the early days of the Iraq War, our epistemological model must account for “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” “unknown knowns,” and “unknown unknowns.”²

In the map of our mind, the coordinate system is every bit as complex as the projections with which traditional cartographers must grapple. Coordinate systems are mythological nets, mindless assembly lines, or “world wide webs” that put everything, including ourselves, in its place (Olsson, 218).

Our collective understanding of The Grid has largely been a matter of autocorrelations between our paradigms of *the* world above and *our* world below; between *the* cosmos and *our* “pale blue dot” (Sagan). We choose our coordinate system *and we can change it*. It is the projection of the world we show ourselves through our beliefs; and, through our chosen religious, political and cultural interactions. It *determines the resolution with which we can think* and our *world view*. We use the grid to remind ourselves: you are here, see what you mean?

The American Civil War could be described as a bloody conflagration that changed the alignment of the grid for many. Michel Foucault’s landmark postmodern inquiry that reset the agenda for discussions about the entanglements of knowledge and power is entitled *The Order of Things* (Foucault). Ta-Nehisi Coates’ new book is about the order of things, too. His evocative title, *Between The*

² <https://youtu.be/4Sd4DGNUXW4>

World And Me, invokes the space and the violence created by the intersections of privilege, ignorance and authority in America by leveraging the full power of a preposition (Coates). Olsson is fascinated by prepositions and explores their roles as “pre-positions” (Olsson, 49).

Cartographic Reason may entail the use of labels. In the early part of his career, Gunnar Olsson spent a period of no less than five years pondering the significance of the equal sign, “=” (Broder, @52:00). Olsson says he finally grasped its enigmatic nature when he realized that the equal sign was a semiotic sign, too. One that denoted both identity and existence (Olsson, *Abysmal*, 182; Broder, @~56:50). Olsson’s obsession has an ancient precedent:

$$a = a$$

$$a \neq \sim a$$

$$a \vee \sim a$$

Aristotle’s Laws of Thought: the first is the tautological statement identifying a thing with itself. The next its negation. This last one (“a OR not-a”) Olsson reminds us, is a *theorem*---not an *axiom*: “the law of the excluded middle...is not an unbreakable law but a principle with many exceptions” (Olsson, 182-183). When we name something we produce meaning by equating a thing with something other than itself:

$$a = b$$

This is what Kant refers to as “synthetic knowledge.” For example: Olsson explains that $2 + 2 = 4$ (or: a equals b) is a statement which is “true at all times and

all places.” $4 = 2 + 2$ (or: b equals a), however, is rhetorically weaker---and also more subversive. For when we place the sum on the left of the equation, it can be made equivalent to an *infinite number* of possible equations. **This is the excluded middle. This is the dangerous essence of reasoning by inference.** Olsson advises: “From the truth of $a = b$ one must not conclude that $b = a$ ” (Olsson, 94).

I want to be more explicit still:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{From } a = b: \\ &(b = a) \vee (b \neq a) \end{aligned}$$

...From $a = b$, it is possible---but not *inevitable*---that $b = a$.

We may reference a legend on the map in our mind to help us interpret the experiences we place or find upon it. Our primary means of doing this is through **semiotics** (the study and use of signs that de-privileges spoken or written words as primary conveyors of meaning). The late nineteenth-century patriarch of semiotic inquiry was **Ferdinand de Saussure**. In lieu of points, lines, and polygons the legend of Cartographic Reason relies on signs, structures, and discourses to keep our experiences aligned with the thoughts we think and vice versa.

(I will say it again: Cartographic Reason is NOT a spatial query in a GIS.)

One distinctive feature of this legend is that the items shift or change (much like scrolls in *Harry Potter*) right before your mind’s eye! Olsson spends a lot of time explaining how these “ontological transformations” happen. We witness an

interplay of meaning in the objects of our thought as the signifiers, and that which they signify, adjust to the context (the place) in which we encounter them.

The word “Vietnam” may indicate a nation state found in Southeast Asia, a military quagmire that occurred there, or the referent of a film by Francis Ford Coppola who once said that *Apocalypse Now* “is not a film about Vietnam. It is Vietnam” (Bahr, Hickenlooper, Coppola).

In summary: Cartographic Reason (i) is not a spatial query in a GIS, (ii) relies on latitudes of sensory experience, and longitudes of mental experience, (iii) reveals the taken-for-granted coordinate system we use to organize our experiences, (iv) requires caution near the abyss of the excluded middle by resisting the use of labels that present false dichotomies, and (v) has a contextually driven, semiotic legend.

Two Scenes from my *Abysmal* Journey

Scene I

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935, the same year of Olsson’s birth. Said’s father was an American citizen. After receiving his early education in Jerusalem and Cairo, Said attended Princeton and Harvard and eventually became a Full Professor at Columbia University. There he achieved his greatest acclaim as the author of *Orientalism* in 1978, “one of the most influential scholarly books of the 20th century” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Before Said died in September 2003, he published a memoir entitled *Out of Place*: “a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world.” In the preface, Said

explains that he decided to return to visit his homeland in 1998. He writes that during his time there:

“One of the routine questions I was asked by Israeli officials (since my U.S. passport indicated that I was born in Jerusalem) was exactly when after birth I had left Israel. I responded by saying that I left *Palestine* in December 1947, accenting the word ‘Palestine’” (Said).

We can find in this interaction the essence of Cartographic Reason: a collision of place, time and experience.

Scene II

The well built thousands of years ago in Egypt on the temple grounds of Kom Ombo is actually an ancient “Nileometer.” In past epochs, at the appointed time each year, priests would have someone descend into the well and note the water level of the River Nile by referencing the marks on its wall. The priests would then announce to the people that *the gods had informed them* of the coming annual flood and they would levy taxes according to the water levels in the well.

This particular well is in the Aswan province, not far from the location of the ancient town of Syene. It was to a well located there (*perhaps* this one) in the early second century B.C.E. that the head of the Library at Alexandria dispatched observers to determine both its distance from Alexandria, and to confirm reports that the sun could be seen reflected in its abyss on the Summer Solstice. The librarian’s name was Eratosthenes and the reports about this counterintuitive observation were confirmed.

Some people look into a well see water. Others see darkness, others light. Some find messages from the gods. But sometimes an unseen librarian will look

into a well and see the whole world *so clearly* that they can derive, for the first time, an accurate estimate of its circumference. More than a measurement: an insight; derived using one shadow, one reflection, some geometry, and Cartographic Reason.

You *are* here. What do you see? Do you see what you think?

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