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A Hermeneutic Introduction to Maps

Paolo Furia
University of Turin, Department of Humanities

Abstract

The aim of this article is to show how a Ricœurian approach to space and place is likely to raise issues about geography and even cartography, rather than just ontological topology in a Heideggerian fashion. Two steps will lead towards that conclusion: the first concerns the role of Ricœur's *long détour* in the transition from a transcendental—therefore empty—notion of place to the concrete plurality of places, which turns them into matters for interpretation; the second shows how the task of interpreting of places implies distanciation and even objectification, through which they are constituted as objects of scientific and critical investigation. Maps will be introduced at that point as specific interpretations of places, halfway between text and images, between the subject and the object, and between science and art.

Keywords: Configuration; Distanciation; Map; Orientation; Text.

Résumé

Le but de cet article est de montrer qu'une approche ricœurienne de l'espace et du lieu n'aboutit pas à une topologie seulement ontologique, à la façon de Heidegger, mais qu'elle est aussi en mesure de poser des questions d'ordre géographique et cartographique. Notre démonstration se fera en deux étapes. On montrera tout d'abord comment l'herméneutique ricœurienne du long détour permet de passer d'une considération transcendantale – donc vide – du lieu comme condition *a priori* de toute expérience à une conception plurielle des lieux comme enjeux de l'interprétation. Puis on étudiera comment la tâche d'interpréter les lieux implique des processus de distanciation et d'objectivation, à travers lesquels les lieux peuvent être constitués comme objets de recherche scientifique et critique. Les cartes géographiques seront enfin abordées comme des moyens spécifiques d'interpréter les lieux, à mi-chemin entre texte et image, sujet et objet, science et art.

Mots-clés: Configuration; Distanciation; Carte; Orientation; Texte.

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I. From Place to Places

Contemporary hermeneutics' emphasis on the situated character of understanding normally goes along with a focus on the historicity of Being and the temporal nature of meaning and truth. Only in more recent years have scholars been giving attention to the spatial side of the situatedness of understanding. The pioneering work of authors such as Jeff Malpas, Christian Norberg-Schulz, and Edward Casey (among others) have been dealing with notions of place, space, and landscape from a hermeneutic perspective, relying mostly on Heidegger's early insights on being-in-the-world.[1] It is little surprise that an ontological approach to place has been qualified mainly as topological: space, in this framework, is not conceived as a neutral recipient to indiscriminately host interchangeable activities and events, but instead as a concretion of qualitative places that are actively involved in the determination of meanings. In this view, place is not simply the site where things merely happen and actions just unfold, but the transcendental condition for meanings to arise and take shape. Casey argues that "there are no nonplaced occasions, i.e., occasions without any form of implacement whatsoever."[2] As a consequence, the most original trait of our being-in-the-world consists in dwelling, that is, belonging to and with a place. In this framework, "to be" means "to be in place," and topology overlaps with ontology. Even though Paul Ricœur never directly approached Heideggerian topology as such, his more cautious method of addressing ontology necessarily implies a different way to address topology as well.

First of all, according to Ricœur, being cannot be grasped straightforwardly without a *long detour* through its plural manifestations in cultures and symbols, just as the ontological nature of language cannot be truly attained without taking into account the multiple forms assumed in

[1] Jeff Malpas is one of the leading philosophers and thinkers of place and space since the publication of the first edition of *Place and Experience. A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). His connection to Heidegger is even more explicit in *Heidegger's Topology. Being, Place, World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007). Edward Casey has undertaken an inspiring historical reconstruction of the notion of place, that spans from the Bible to Donna Haraway (see *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Both Malpas and Casey share a hermeneutic background and have aroused scholarly interest towards spatial issues. Hermeneutics of place has already achieved appreciable results, as shown by the publication of collective volumes such as the one edited by Bruce Janz: *Place, Space and Hermeneutics* (Cham: Springer, 2017). Quite surprisingly, one of the less investigated issues connected to this kind of philosophical topology is the uncanny character of our being-in-the-world and its implications on the geographical level.

[2] Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place. Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 13.

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history by discourse, both oral and written.[3] Likewise, the ontological character of place cannot be fully appreciated without taking into account the plurality of modes through which places "take place" in experience and thereby become the matter of the interpretative enterprise. Just as affirming the linguistic nature of being does not contradict the fact that different texts are structurally different, bear different meanings, and elicit different receptions, the idea that place is at the basis of every possible understanding, and that human being realizes itself in dwelling does not contradict the fact that there are different ways of inhabiting, building, and taking care of places. As Abraham Olivier remarked in his contribution to *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, the rich volume edited by Bruce Janz in 2017, places actualize dwelling, belonging, and understanding in always contingent and varying ways, which make them the objects of site-specific interpretations. The author notes that South African townships—characterized by poor health conditions, inadequate sanitation, and pitiable housing and schools—present themselves as dysfunctional "unready-to-hand"[4] environments that do not fulfil the criteria of availability, usability, and positive orientation that Heidegger attaches to place. One could object that ontological hermeneutics refers to place as an *a priori* condition of being which is not invalidated by any empirical or particularistic case; on the other hand, it is precisely the focus on facticity of hermeneutics that leads us to take into account the plurality of webs in which objects take different, context-dependent meanings. In other words, it is precisely the always situated nature of our understanding, a condition that Olivier calls "being-in-a-world,"[5] that renders what Ricœur has named the long way of hermeneutics necessary.

The transition from a transcendental notion of place to the concrete plurality of places is at work in Paul Ricœur's article "Architecture and Narrativity."[6] In this text, Ricœur transposes the threefold *mimesis* developed in the first volume of *Time and Narrative* onto the architectural plane. The built space of architecture is a mediation between sheer geographical space and the living selves, always bodily involved with places. The embodied character of the bonds between people and places reflects the always spatially and temporally situated nature of understanding. Consequently, places are not only an ontological premise for understanding, but also the outcomes of specific configurational acts (such as building) which elicit different receptions and refigurations. Ricœur also affirms that inhabiting should be understood according to "the model of the agonistic act of reading":[7] it is very likely that different categories of people, and even different individuals, react in equally different ways to the built space. The architectural "conflict of interpretation" emphasizes the processual and negotiated nature of places, where dwelling is more a concern of human beings than a transcendental precondition. It is clear that, from a

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[3] The idea of *long détour* appears in *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* of 1950 for the first time. Ricœur "subsequently takes detours via symbol and myth, the unconscious and narrative" (Christopher Watkin, *Phenomenology or Deconstruction?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 8). Another clear example of *long detour*, in *Soi-même comme un autre*, that aims to reveal the many layers constituting the self without providing any univocal definition of the *cogito*.

[4] Abraham Olivier, "Understanding Place," in Janz (ed.), *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, 15.

[5] Olivier, "Understanding Place," 15.

[6] Paul Ricœur, "Architecture and Narrativity," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 7/2 (2016), 31-42, online version: https://ricoeur.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/ricoeur/article/view/378.

[7] Ricœur, "Architecture and Narrativity," 39.

Ricœurian point of view, the plenitude of full belonging represents the promised land of an ontological topology, but concrete experiences of places are imbued with ruptures, distances, misunderstanding, and denial. This might be considered the dark side of the betweenness of human condition, as reflected in the betweenness of places.[8]

The agonistic act of reading ties into the idea that places can be seen in the manner of texts. Again, Ricœur's model of the text helps realize what a strictly onto-topological conceptualization of place cannot. Heidegger draws a contrast between ontological belonging and the alienating distanciation of the self and the world, while Ricœur thinks that belonging and distanciation imply each other within the hermeneutic circle. By emphasizing the topological character of Being and the priority of original belonging, Heidegger takes a distrustful approach towards distanciation and objectification. Gadamer likewise claims that distanciation is "what renders possible the objectification which reigns in human sciences … but destroys the fundamental and primordial relation whereby we belong to and participate in the historical reality which we claim to construct as an object."[9] In contrast, Ricœur thinks that distanciation is at work every time a discourse is fixed through writing; that is, when a meaning is established and becomes autonomous from its productive context, a text or an action is put at a certain distance in order to be scrutinized and criticized.[10] The textualist model Ricœur applies to action can be applied to place as well. Just like texts, places are configured through multiple processes of distanciation, among which is the one pursued in scientific objectifications and explanations. As remarked by Bruce Janz: "For Ricœur at least, the text is the 'long route' through the analysis of language (as opposed to Heidegger's 'short route,' the analysis of *Dasein*), by which he means the establishment of a world in which the text interacts with other texts as opposed to being the expression of a pre-judgment. If taken in these terms, the text as metaphor for place suggests a kind of productive distanciation, a world as opposed to a situation."[11] Distanciation also has critical value. It is necessary because the concrete conditions of our belonging to a social, cultural, and even spatial context should not be taken for granted and need to be further investigated. In this sense, we are led to explain our living environment more, in order to understand it better.

II. From Onto-topology to Cartographic Representations

However cogent the metaphor of text may be with respect to places and the processes of objective distanciations, it is a fact that our experiences of places are very often mediated by pictures and representations. This holds even more for what Heidegger has called "the age of the world picture":[12] an age that is far from being concluded, if we consider the powerful evolution of

[8] See Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place. Toward a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

[9] Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences. Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 93.

[10] Cf. Paul Ricœur, "The Model of the Text. Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *New Literary History*, vol. 5/1 (1973), 91-117.

[11] Bruce Janz, "Is Place a Text?," in Janz (ed.), *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, 28-9.

[12] See Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 115-36.

digital technologies and the saturation of images characterizing our everyday experience of places in the contemporary world. But our experiences of places are not mediated by pictures and representations only in the age of the world picture, or even because of it. Our spatial experiences are filled with pictures and representations because space is prefigured or symbolically mediated from the outset. Images and representations inhere in space and places both phenomenologically and ontologically. This is not just about recognizing how "representation bears on place, calls for it, and thrives in its multifarious presence," but also that "place elicits representation and is enhanced by it."[13] Between representation and place there is a reciprocally formative interrelationship that Ricœur, following Gombrich, has acknowledged as fully effective in landscape painting: "The invention of landscape painting was 'at the same time for us a new way of looking at nature as a landscape.' There was an 'augmentation of our world.'"[14] This insightful assertion can be extended in principle to other forms of representation. Casey remarks that "representing landscape occurs in line and in paint, in gesture and in photograph, in image and in word."[15] Maps are probably the most interesting forms of representation of places, even if their complexity and philosophical relevance are often overlooked. In maps one finds drawings and colors, lines and shapes, symbols and figures. Maps mark the presence of the places they represent, but clearly, they are not the places themselves: they can be seen as objectifications in a double sense, for, on the one hand, they reproduce some features of the land on another material support, but on the other hand, they project on that same support the implicit codes of the gaze of the mapmaker. So, maps are indicative of a phenomenological condition of non-belonging with place and are equally indicative of a quest for enhanced, renewed belonging. When we need to make or to have a map of a place, it is because we cannot just live by the place itself, but we need to realize what it is like and how to orient ourselves within it. Consequently, the onto-topological issue of original belonging should not be severed from what I suggest calling, in an etymological sense, the *geo-graphical* issue. In this perspective, space is recognized as always already mapped. The places we inhabit are historically produced and enhanced by and through cartographic representations.

Before delving into maps from a hermeneutic perspective, my use of the term "geography" here must be specified. First, I limit my use of the term to its etymological meaning. Casey notes that: "The Greek *graphē* originally meant 'writing or drawing or painting' and the activity of *graphein*, that is tracing, is common to all three enterprises."[16] The geographical undertaking, in the broad sense, consists in displaying the Earth's surface or of some of its parts—usually called regions—on various material supports to enable people's orientation and to foster spatial awareness. At the same time, it would be unfair to ignore that the term geography gives the name to an ancient and proud discipline whose aim is to obtain a complete description of Earth, in Ptolemy's words, but also of its regions, characterized by specific and idiographic features, as remarked by Strabo. In this latter sense, geography is chorography, literally the drawing of

[13] Edward Casey, *Representing Place. Landscape Painting & Maps* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), XVII.

[14] George Taylor, "Ricœur's Philosophy of Imagination," *Journal of French Philosophy*, vol. 16/1-2 (2006), citing Paul Ricœur, "Lectures on Imagination (1975) [Lectures]" (unpublished).

[15] Casey, *Representing Place. Landscape Painting & Maps*, XIV.

[16] Casey, *Representing Place. Landscape Painting & Maps*, 258.

regions.[17] From a disciplinary perspective, geography is distinguished from cartography because the latter refers to the part of geography that explicitly uses maps as privileged tools, while the ways in which geography pursues its explanatory ends differ greatly between ages and cultures and are not confined to maps. Both general and regional geography make use of categorial tools such as descriptive texts as well as mathematical and geometrical surveys, but also pictorial methods such as drawings and landscape paintings.[18] More recently, deep morphogenetic processes are studied through methods derived from natural sciences in the field of physical geography, and deep transformations of the terrestrial surface produced by human societies are taken into account in the field of human geography. The discipline of geography is not only about surfaces and appearances, but also about those natural and anthropic processes which determine such surfaces. In this sense, geography deals with causative processes and invisible phenomena which take place over time; processes and phenomena which, nonetheless, have impacts on the visible patterns of the Earth surface. The articulation between physical and human geography is quite a recent one and reflects a typically modern division between humanities and natural sciences. This is an increasingly disputed divide, as it is ever clearer the impact of the human world on nature, and on the other hand, the unavoidable dependence of humankind on its ecological relationships with Earth. But the resistance of ecology against a too-strict divide between nature and culture is eventually anticipated in geography itself, where the visible countenance of Earth and its regions are at issue, regardless of whether the formative processes are natural or human-induced. Furthermore, geography is not only a matter of quantifiable distances and objective patterns of spatial organization and distribution: it is also about the qualitative specificity of places and their idiographic character. The qualities of places cannot be apprehended in mere objective ways, as if places were nothing more than mere sites identified through coordinates on a Cartesian space. Rather, qualities refer directly to bodily felt experience and concern the affective dimension of the self. This is why the concept of place is so important for both geography and aesthetics. For instance, the aesthetician Tonino Griffero uses the term "atmosphere" to indicate the sensuous, affective power of places: "[A]tmosphere also implies a certain affective quality of (lived and non-geometrical) space. Put in general terms, an atmosphere is an emotional space that involves one's

[17] There is a subtle tension between the general and the chorological attitudes both in ancient and modern geography. Limiting ourselves to the modern debate, the general ambition of Ptolemy's geography was inherited by the so-called spatial science. The distinction between the two attitudes is rephrased by the influential geographer Robert Sack as follows: "One of their major differences is thought to be their conception of geographic questions, the chorological emphasizing the nature and interrelationships among specific places and regions, and the spatial emphasizing the geometric arrangements and patterns of phenomena" (Robert Sack, "Chorology and Spatial Analysis," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 64/3 (1974), 439-40).

[18] It is commonly agreed that chorology makes use of description and figurative tools much more than general geography, which, especially in the 20th century, considers the idiographic traits of regional geography as inadequate to understand spatial phenomena and has reinterpreted geography in nomothetic terms as "a science concerned with the rational development, and testing of theories that explain and predict the spatial distribution and location of various characteristics on the surface of the earth" (Maurice Yeates, *An Introduction to Quantitative Analysis in Economic Geography* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968)).

body conceived of more as felt (*Leib*) than as physical (*Körper*)."[19] In this framework, places can be understood as more-than-representational, insofar as their performative power operates at the level of the unconscious and directly affects the bodily gestures and behavior patterns of the inhabitants.[20]

The qualitative dimension of places elicits descriptions and representations that are halfway between art and science. At a first look, maps seem to be closer to science while landscape paintings are a form of artistic expression. As Svetlana Alpers puts it: "[M]aps give us the measure of a place and the relationship between places, quantifiable data, while landscape pictures are evocative, and aim rather to give us the quality of a place or of the viewer's sense of it."[21] But, at a closer look, one could easily note the overlaps between maps and landscape paintings. In fact, they share a representational character which draws on the presentational quality of the terrestrial surface itself. Maps, along with other presentational modes such as landscape painting, should not be understood as *Vorstellung*, where places are artificially set up in subjective operations of abstraction, but rather as *Darstellung*, where places present themselves and elicit representation.[22] Casey expresses this idea by establishing an opposition between disposal and display:

> It is one thing to say that the world is "at our disposal," that it is there to be calculated and manipulated, stored and saved, and that all of this happens in the guise of cogitational "representedness" … It is quite another thing to hold that the world is "in display," that it exists to be presented for the sheer sake of show, to be exhibited…, to be beheld as something more (and other) than "objective reality," to be given presence and re-presence in perception and memory, painting and maps.[23]

Places can be reproduced in drawings and paintings because they are in themselves drawing-like: indeed, we speak of the lines of the reliefs, the curves of the rivers, but also of the colors of houses and the expressive qualities of a landscape as a whole. It would be mistaken to downgrade this issue as mere aestheticism. At issue is the possibility of reconnecting the question of representation to the dimension of truth which goes beyond both transcendental idealism and objective realism. Representation of places is not only a matter of cartography or, say, history of art, but involves a kind of hermeneutics that has not lost its bond to the ontological dimension of truth and its manifestations.

The question that arises concerns what kind of knowledge can be achieved through maps and, ultimately, how to conciliate the transcendental interpretation of Earth and its many places as

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[19] Tonino Griffero and Marco Tedeschini (eds), "Introduction," in *Atmosphere and Aesthetics. A Plural Perspective* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 2.

[20] See Hayden Lorimer, "Cultural Geography. The Busyness of Being 'More-than-representational,'" *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 29/1 (2005), 83-94.

[21] Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 124.

[22] It is noteworthy that, according to Gadamer, "presentation (*Darstellung*) must be recognized as the mode of being of the work of art" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 104).

[23] Casey, *Representing Place*, 248.

the *a priori* conditions of every possible understanding, and the more empirical conception according to which Earth and places make the objects of specific interpretative acts, such as mapping.

III. The Betweenness of Maps

We have seen how geography makes use of a wide array of methods and media to pursue its scientific goals: maps, no doubt, are the more used and the more complex ones. There exist many sorts of maps, which vary according to the representational medium, the economic, political, and cultural context of production and fruition, the social interests at stake, and the shared styles of vision in a specific situation. The great variety of maps which have been drawn over the centuries by painters, travelers, traders, migrants, military officers, pilgrims, surveyors, cartographers, and explorers is proof of the many kinds of objectifications that space can elicit. This makes them hermeneutical in the first place: they result from the projection of the worldviews of the mapmakers and beholders and reflect their situatedness. But maps are not only of a hermeneutic nature because, as crafted by humans, they express human ways of seeing and understanding; they are also interpretations of the Earth's surface, which lends itself to vision and compels humans to tailor their vision to its own forms and expressiveness.

What Ricœur might add to this picture is the consideration of maps as specific interpretative tools through which the ways we look at the world take shape. It is fruitful to apply the threefold *mimesis* of *Time and Narrative* to maps, following the pattern of *Architecture and Narrativity*. The land which lies beyond the map could easily be taken as the prefigured: just as "humankind has built because it has inhabited,"[24] people make maps to orient themselves in and to make sense of a land which was already there. And of course, maps have their own emplotment, make the landscape intelligible, and are intertextual, just as any other configuration of time and space.[25] At the same time, maps are not entirely reducible to narrative configurations. The narrative, fictional traits of maps are concealed behind the more explicitly descriptive and explanatory ones. As far as maps are involved in the discipline of geography, they should satisfy scientific requirements, which, by the way, change over space and time. The textual elements do not produce a relatively autonomous sphere, as it happens with literature, because, on maps, words and (more rarely) sentences are always functional to the figurative element. Therefore, maps should be understood on their own terms, as specific configurations of the prefigured, wavering between textuality and figuration, description and fiction, art and science. As far as refiguration is concerned, by reconfiguring our experience of the world, maps foster and direct more substantive operations, such as surveying, building, and designing places. Despite their ontic, derivative nature as objectifications enabled by distanciation, maps eventually enhance the ontology of place. This idea fits into the broader Ricœurian claim according to which the ontic enhances the ontological. In this framework, maps are clearly recognized in their ontological power and are not reduced to objectivist tools based on the subject/object dualism.

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[24] Ricœur, "Architecture and Narrativity," 33.

[25] See Ricœur, "Architecture and Narrativity," 35-6.

A hermeneutic approach to maps also includes a critical inquiry aimed at revealing their ideological meanings. According to John Pickles, maps can be seen as "descriptions of forms of lived experience. The drawing and reading of a line, the historical emergence of cartographic reason, the production and circulation of a map, and lived experience are so thoroughly and historically intertwined and overdetermined."[26] If, from a phenomenological point of view, maps can be understood as orientational tools through which we make sense of a place, the meanings they bear with themselves should not be taken for granted. In this sense, the critical task aimed at decoding maps and revealing their hidden meanings is not antithetical, but rather complementary to the phenomenological approach. In Ricœurian terms, as with texts and actions, maps can be viewed through the double lens of "knowing how" of phenomenological and practical knowledge and "knowing that," where meaning is objectified in order to be explained.[27] Post-structuralist geography has undertaken that critical task in order to reveal the social interests and the political biases underlying specific ways of mapmaking that have been appointed as universally objective – this is typically the case of Western modern maps. But when deconstruction goes too far, it risks losing sight of what is really at stake with mapping: to orient ourselves in a spatial world which surrounds and embraces us and which also bewilders and estranges us, revealing the precarity of our spatial condition. It is important to bear in mind that neither maps nor words and images provide us with an absolute knowledge of our Earth, and it is fair to be aware that maps essentially represent a way to interpret the Earth from an always situated vantage point. However, it would be unfair to reduce maps to mere "maps of meanings,"[28] related only to the representational powers of the eye. Maps are indeed characterized by an explicit reference to what is beyond our representations and presents itself. Erasing the ontological reference of maps risks falling into a hopeless form of idealism. By giving up the impossible claim for absolute knowledge, the possibility remains to consider maps as very specific, as well as inherently diverse and highly useful articulations of understanding, mediating between our gaze and the world we belong to.

The main hermeneutic character of map is betweenness: it stands as a third term between the expressive characters of Earth surface and the human gaze, which is always culturally shaped and embodies social interests and values. Betweenness will return in the analysis of the following features, which will confirm it as the most important pattern of maps.

First, maps are both textual and pictorial. However trivial this feature may appear, it is highly relevant from a philosophical point of view. Twentieth-century hermeneutics is often considered to be part of a wider linguistic turn where different approaches are united in recognizing the fundamental role of language and discourse in the realization of a meaningful

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[26] John Pickles, *A History of Spaces. Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-coded World* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

[27] Ricœur draws this idea from Anscombe in his article "The Model of the Text." I have applied the Ricœurian model of the text to place, landscape, and maps more completely in "Understanding and Explanation. Ricœur and Human Geography," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 2021, online version: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355109738_Understanding_and_explanation_Paul_Ricoeur_and_human_geography

[28] The expression draws on the title of an influential handbook of the American Cultural Geography: see Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning. An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London/New York: Routledge 1989).

world. With early post-structuralist social science, text and language became universal metaphors used to explain a plurality of phenomena. For geographic concerns, human geographers of 1980s and the first half of 1990s broadly used the metaphor "landscape as a text."[29] Geographer James Duncan argued that: "The landscape … is one of the central elements in a cultural system, for an ordered assemblage of object, a text, it acts as a signify system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored."[30] Bruce Janz remarks that textuality "sharply dropped off thereafter."[31] In the so-called "pictorial turn," traditional language-centered notions of meaning are considered to be inadequate to grasp the embodied, precognitive dimension of experience.[32] Pictures, by virtue of their sheer visibility, immediately address our senses—more specifically, sight—and give shape to our perceptual field which, from a phenomenological point of view, makes the basis for every possible experience of meaning.[33]

Hermeneutics endowed with ontological ambition can easily overcome a concept of understanding exclusively based on the model of the text to meet the specific clearings provided by image. Map should be integrated into this framework as a model of fruitful integration and cooperation between the textual and the figurative. First, words and picture can coexist in the space of maps for the simple reason that the written words are also composed of signs materially fixated on a medium. In this sense, written words share with pictures aesthetic significance, witnessed for instance by calligraphy. The mimetic character of maps is clearly found in some of its figurative patterns. Let us consider a roadmap like the ones we were used to using before digital maps were available. The choice of the colors of the lakes, rivers, and glaciers can hardly be considered as just conventional: after all, at certain lighting conditions, light blue is the color assumed by bodies of water of some magnitude. In the same way, the forms and some idea of the steepness of reliefs can be depicted through physiographical drawings which are tailored to the actual shapes of the mountain chains. The colors of the streets and the political borders, instead, are merely conventional. Usually, modern maps have a legend explaining how colors and icons are chosen to indicate some kinds of items. Such symbols are purely indexical: they indicate some kinds of items without imitating their actual shape in landscape. The use of conventional symbols is necessary when it is not possible to depict the selected items on maps or there is no point in doing so. For instance, different street colors can pragmatically indicate their different size (two or four lines) when it is not possible to represent their perfect scale on maps. Presentational drawings, which

[29] A useful introduction of the use of the metaphor "landscape as text" in aesthetics, geography and semiotics is provided by the article of Federico Bellentani, "Landscape as Text," in *Concepts for Semiotics*, eds Claudio Julio Rodríguez Higuera and Tyler James Bennett (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2013), 76-87.

[30] James Duncan, *City as Text. The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 17.

[31] Janz, "Is Place a Text?," 24.

[32] See William John Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[33] The hypothesis of a pictorial turn in hermeneutics has been suggested by Alberto Martinengo in the article "From the Linguistic Turn to the Pictorial Turn. Hermeneutics Facing the 'Third Copernican Revolution,'" *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, vol. 5 (2013), 302-12.

Casey calls "topographical,"[34] coexist in the map with merely symbolical icons that are products of human communication. Moreover, on maps, words are required to provide ostensive identifying references, as in the case of place names, or they are used in legends to explain the exact meaning of pictograms employed to indicate the presence of this or that element on landscape. The explanatory function of words, therefore, makes explicit the cognitive and categorial contents of maps, which are otherwise concealed by the assertive power of the image. Far from being merely innocent and neutral presentations of the Earth surface, maps are endowed with highly cognitive contents that say a great deal about the representational codes and the culturally-shaped biases of the mapmakers.

From that follows a second characteristic of maps: they aim to represent how the land really is, but at the same time they are ineludibly cultural in status. Let us take into consideration medieval *mappae mundi*, where the symbolic character is heavily predominant and there is very little resemblance between the actual topological forms and the drawing.[35] The symbolism here is not confined to any pictogram, icon, or color; it is in the drawing itself, which literally folds the Earth's surface to the semantic order of the Christian Middle-Ages' picture of the world. Asia, Europe, and Africa are not topologically reproduced as they are in the manner of modern world maps, and their relative positions appear oversimplified and distorted. Of course, medieval *mappae mundi* are premodern maps which do not follow the principle of positive clarity and distinction tied to the modern scientific standards. But in them there is still a powerful mimetic ambition:[36] to represent the Earth's ideal order, which lies beyond the disharmony and the unevenness of the apparently real world. In order to escape the vicious circle of representations, maps—just as pictures in general—must aspire to represent an invisible but still performative and operative *cosmos*. When new geographical discoveries made it impossible to adopt old-fashioned *mappae mundi*, because the cosmic order they depicted could no longer be defended, one might be tempted to believe that the symbolic component of mapping has given way to a new focus on pure naturalism and realism. There is no doubt that the end of the metaphysical comprehension of the *cosmos* has elicited an unprecedented attention to natural and geographical phenomena and events; but at the same time, new symbolic patterns emerged to frame the spatial world according to new metaphysical comprehensions, which are rarely put into question and problematized along the way. For instance, the very fact of drawing Europe at the center of modern planispheres is a macroscopic flaw of Eurocentric cartography. However ideological and dangerous a symbolic framework may be, especially when it is the expression of a simple will to power that takes the spontaneity and innocence of its gaze for granted, it is impossible to commit maps to the pure imitation of Earth. Maps are not only a matter of purely mirroring external reality: they concern the need for meaning, with our possibilities of making sense of the world.

A third hermeneutic feature of maps is their both presentational and orientational use. At first sight, one might think that maps differ from landscape painting because the latter is a merely

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[34] Casey, *Representing Places*, 157.

[35] See Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space. How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* (London: British Library Board, 1997).

[36] "Mimetic" here is intended to convey the basic meaning of "imitation of nature". Paul Ricœur's reinterpretation of the *mimesis* is already an attempt to articulate and integrate the referential character of *mimesis* with its insertion into the hermeneutic circle.

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subjective re-interpretation of real landscape from the artist's point of view, while the former is bound to issues of exact representation, correct scaling, and objectivity. Instead, it might be argued that landscape painting, at least in the work of early theorists such as Alexander Cozens and Carl Gustav Carus, draws on a deep contemplation of space and aims to represent the qualitative essence of landscape on canvas. Landscape painting reduces the symbolic, conventional, and discursive traits of representation to a minimum; therefore, it is highly topographical. It is often taken for granted that landscape painting indicates a process of subjectification of landscape, based on the modern assumption of the separation between subject and object.[37] The alternative hypothesis is rarely taken into account, according to which, what is at stake in landscape painting is solely the landscape's inherent expressive qualities, which communicate themselves directly to the contemplation of the beholder. In this case, the truth of landscape, so to say, lies in its aesthetic, affective, and meaningful bonds with dwellers and beholders, and the task of landscape painting is to represent those bonds. This is the topographical meaning of *Stimmung*, a concept used by Simmel to indicate the qualitative and atmospheric character of landscape and, at the same time, the psychological condition of the beholder.[38]

Maps are not extraneous to the presentational character of landscape painting. Let us consider one of the planispheres depicted in Ortelius' atlas, which bears the telling name of *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*.[39] Here we are confronted with a veritable "portrait of the world,"[40] endowed with fine pictorial traits to foster a pleasant experience. The metaphor of theatre, investigated by authors such as Stephen Daniels[41] and Denis Cosgrove,[42] was quite widespread in the context of sixteenth-century cartography and alluded to the active participation of the beholders to the *mise en scène*. The theatrical metaphor cannot be fully understood in mere representational terms: it rather evokes the idea of play, where the beholder, far from being the master of representation, is embraced and involved with it. However, maps involve the beholder in a more radical and embodied way when their orientational character is taken into account. Let us consider the example of a portolan chart of Spain from 1321.[43] Here, the topographical and

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[37] This is the conception of both Joachim Ritter, who sees the birth of landscape in modernity in rather positive terms, and Augustin Berque, who complains about this process and struggles to overcome the interpretation of landscape as the correlate of the detached, panoramic gaze of a subjectivity. See Joachim Ritter, "Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft," in *Subjektivität* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 141-90; Augustin Berque, *Thinking through Landscape* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013).

[38] See Georg Simmel, "The Philosophy of Landscape," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 24/7-8 (2007), 20-9.

[39] The Ortelius Atlas was originally printed in 1570 in Antwerp. Among the many researches devoted to it, see at least Marcel van den Broecke, *Ortelius Atlas Maps. An Illustrated Guide* (Leyde: Brill, 1996).

[40] Lloyd Brown, *The Story of Maps* (Boston: Little Brown, 1949), 163.

[41] See Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, "Spectacle and Text. Landscape Metaphors in Cultural Geography," in James Duncan and David Ley (eds), *Place/Culture/Representation* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 57-77.

[42] See Denis Cosgrove, "Spectacle and Society. Landscape as Theater in Premodern and Postmodern Cities," in Irving Rouse (ed.), *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 99-110.

[43] The example is taken from Casey, *Representing Places*, Plate 14: Portolan Chart of Spain, from *Atlas of Petrus Visconte*, 1321, kept at the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon.

presentational traits are minimized, at the point that our contemporary look struggles to even recognize a geographical entity. The Archimedean point of this chart is represented by the lines of the coast: everything, from the sketched landscape features to the names of the cities, is oriented in relation to the coastlines. As a consequence, the beholder's own position is not considered to be a stable vantage point from which to view the map. Even to read the names displayed on this map, the beholder is compelled to keep turning it around and upside down, as they are oriented entirely to the graceful, but highly irregular lines of the coast. At that time, cardinal directionality was not yet adopted as the objective framework that fixes and orients our gaze. Since the vantage point of portolan charts are the coastlines, it is clear that they are crafted to meet the needs of navigation only. Furthermore, considering the wide diffusion of such maps in a premodern context that has not yet come to terms with the broadening of the known world enabled by the great geographical discoveries, it has been argued that portolan charts constitute a living record of Mediterranean self-knowledge: in this sense, they garnered the great legacy of the *periploi* of the ancient world.[44]

The orientational character of maps has found new emphasis in the current utilization of devices such as GPS, Google Maps, or Google Earth. In this case, the apparently external position of the beholder can easily overlap with the internal and immersed position of the traveler. The bird's-eye view from above, which is required to realize correct projections and calculate objective distances, is typically mixed with the situated vantage point of the traveler, whose aim is to pragmatically orient herself in space and between places. Satellite technologies allow for a complete representation of the Earth's surface, achieving a sort of totalization of the cartographic knowledge without residue.[45] In fulfilling the task of cartography, Earth is ultimately worked out as the mere object of a detached look projected from the outward space. But does that suffice to discharge the idea of Earth as the transcendental dimension of dwelling? Is the promised land of onto-topology to be found at the level of saturated objectification? It seems to me that, on the contrary, the powerful enhancement of satellite mapping and the worldwide diffusion of digital orientational tools are dramatically boosting the chances for bewildering experiences. This occurs because our orientational capacities are slowly reduced to clumsily following the indications of GPS, while our understanding of the spatial context weakens and is mostly inattentive. All this drastically increases the risk of getting lost when confronted with places of which the objective position on maps could in principle be perfectly singled out, while their unexpected qualitative traits disorient us and challenge our prefigured *schemata*. Suffice it to consider how lost we feel when our digital maps are not working, or when they do not record some occasional interruptions which suddenly compel us to change course.

IV. A Short Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to establish a possible Ricœurian way to understand maps within a broader hermeneutic framework. This endeavor has been carried out in the light of a wider

[44] For a complete discussion of portolan charts, see Casey, *Representing Places*, 175-86.

[45] It is in the so-called "age of the air" that not only specific regions and landscapes, but the entire Earth can be seen from the above and subsumed to the scrutinizing gaze of the humankind traveling through space. See Matteo Vegetti, *L'invenzione del globo. Spazio, pottere, communicazione nell'epoca dell'aria* (Torino: Einaudi, 2017).

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understanding of geography as a discipline at the edge of science and aesthetics, dealing with both the quantitative, measurable, and sizeable spatial phenomena and processes and the qualitative, affective, phenomenological dimension of places. The parts of Ricœur's philosophy called to account for a hermeneutic understanding of maps are not only those expressly devoted to spatial issues. The possibility of applying the Ricœurian threefold *mimesis* of narration to maps is based on the compelling precedent of *Architecture and Narrativity*, where the threefold *mimesis* was applied to architectural space. Nevertheless, given the representational and descriptive character of maps, it has been useful to recall the model of the text and the fruitful use of distanciation and objectification in the framework of Ricœur's theory of discourse and action. A full and exhaustive application of the threefold *mimesis* to maps remains to be done. What especially remains to be done is reflection over the alterations of the very process of mapping produced by the advent of digital technologies, an issue full of consequences that have only been mentioned at the end of the third paragraph. In this paper I have sought to pave the way for further developments by clarifying the nature of maps as interpretive mediations between the human gaze and the sheer visibility of the world, between idiographic topography and cultural biases, and between the presentation of being and the quest for orientation of the self. If not places themselves, maps can at least be conceptualized as peculiar kinds of texts, where the textual and the pictorial merge together to foster orientation and belonging. Despite their eminently representational character, maps must be understood as true and proper usable reconfigurations of the Earth's surfaces that do not depend primarily on a mental abstraction that objectifies places and reduces them to the panoramic overviews of an allegedly neutral and separated subjectivity, but rather on the practical need for orientation of a situated and finite human being. They do not solve the complexity and the richness of places in representation; rather, they serve the purpose of understanding places by opening new paths, also out of metaphor, and new interpretations of them. Thanks to their formative powers, maps belong with a history of the onto-topology; a history where, as Ricœur taught us to see, the derivative enhances the original.

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