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The Cosmological Map is also a Journey

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BROADCAST TELEVISION BEGAN IN OTTAWA, CANADA, where I grew up, in 1953. In 1954, when I was four years old, my parents purchased the first TV in our neighborhood. They were not wealthy and the TV was not cheap. The choice they made was between buying the television set and making a down payment on a car. My dad, influenced by mid-fifties discourse that positioned television as the universal educator, opted for the TV because, in his words, it would help with “the boy’s” education. For a while, before other families had acquired their own sets, our house was popular with neighborhood kids who would stop by after school to watch the cartoons broadcast shortly after programming on the sole (CBC) channel commenced at 4PM. Before the shows started, a static test pattern filled the screen. Amid the rows of parallel lines was a native man in full headdress drawn in profile. I used to watch the pattern with a mixture of awe and impatience. Impatient for the cartoons to start, I’d also stare at it, intent on understanding its meaning. The screen became my map, a pixilated geography of light.

They say that many geographers aren’t very good at reading a map. I am. At about the same time as TV entered our home I discovered the paper map. As much as I loved TV I loved maps too and pestered my parents to unfold them, talk about the places on the maps, get them to tell me what the different kinds of lines on the map meant—railroad, highway, county road, natural attraction. Maps were one of the ways I learned how to read and count. The first time I saw a map on TV I was puzzled, then enthralled that TV could swallow the map. After the other neighborhood families had their own televisions the collective nature of TV watching at our house gave way to solitary family viewing. Local chums no longer stopped by just to gaze at the screen. They had their own. But I still had my maps and thus began my earliest engagement with what we might now call multiple viewing practices. I’d sit on the floor in front of the screen, but as often as not

there'd also be a map on the floor between me and the screen. I guess you could say I was an early "distracted viewer" but I was also mixing my media.

My fascination with the box, however, didn't last forever. I stopped watching—period—when I was eighteen. I still don't watch, except for concentrated doses when I stay in motels or conference hotels. I'm as mediated as the next fellow but I've never sat down to an episode of *Cagney and Lacey*. I've heard a lot about the banality of *The Love Boat* but I've never seen an episode. The same for *Taxi*, *Laverne & Shirley* and *Everyone Loves Raymond*. In the early 1970s, I was taken aback, however, when a friend, seriously critical in tone in the way New Age-y folks sometimes can be, told me that "listening to you make a joke is like listening to the radio or watching TV, all your references are media."

If I'd turned my back on tv I still had my maps and my sense of how they connected as representations to the actual world they make claims to diagram. During the 1970s and '80s I worked with a series of community organizations in Ottawa as a volunteer planner, organizer and community activist. I became skilled at guiding citizens adversely affected by planning decisions on how to understand the sugar-coated maps produced by planners and intended to lull or mute community opposition to freeway widenings, zoning changes and the like. One evening in the late 1980s, I had an experience that served as a kind of extended wake-up call. As president of an inner-city community organization, I'd helped organize opposition to a freeway widening by residents living immediately adjacent to the existing road. The proposed widening would have meant demolishing all buildings in each city block running along either side of the freeway across the entire length of the community. On the evening in question, the Ottawa City Planning Committee met to vote on a key detail in the widening program. The community organization had publicized this meeting in the affected neighborhood. It was important to get a strong show of support at City Council chambers and essential that residents living adjacent to the freeway attend. Planning Committee listened to our presentation, duly noted residents' opposition, then passed the motion to proceed with the widening. The vote was reported the next day by local media. Upon hearing the news a woman living directly across from the freeway called me to ask why we, as a community organization, had not been able to block the vote. We had, she said, let her down and badly. I agreed the Committee's decision was bad news but also noted the battle was not yet over. But I also asked her why, considering the potential demolition of her home, I had not seen her at the meeting. She told me she couldn't possibly have attended because she would have missed Norm and the gang on *Cheers*, her favorite tv program. I was speechless. How could not missing a single episode of a tv program be more important than saving one's house—even in the pre-TiVo era?

On a separate occasion right around the same time, an acquaintance complained to me in passing that her landlord was harassing her because she was behind in her rent. He'd come to her door the previous evening, she said, interrupting her favorite program, demanding she pay her arrears or he would begin eviction proceedings. I sympathized

until she added that he'd then asked how she could afford cable TV when she couldn't pay her rent. Why, he'd asked, didn't she cancel her cable if she was so broke? To which she'd apparently replied, "Surely you can't expect me to do without cable."

In the early 1990s, burnt out on community organization and the discursive politics of conservative politicians to always position opposition to ill-conceived development as a reactionary or knee-jerk opposition to "progress," I decided, with much encouragement from friends, to pursue a graduate degree in planning. Faculty was very supportive of my interests and offered me great latitude in my studies. "You've already figured out a lot about the planning process before coming here—what would you really like to study?" my advisor asked, somewhat rhetorically. With the memory of the above incidents still echoing in my mind, the gist of my reply was, "The relationship between television and planning—why urban architecture and city forms so often look like a screen—how the map seems to have been swallowed by the TV." "Go for it," my advisor said. "See if you can pull it off." And I did.

But I didn't really want to work as a planner. I wanted the time to think through what my experience in community organization had meant. I'd not only seen how media seemed to trump practical considerations. I also seen up close and personal how often the idealism that young planners bring to the job about making a better world gets turned to the sign of the dollar, how planners usually end up acting as soft cops. As a student studying various "offbeat" planning techniques I developed an interest in the hype surrounding a new technology—virtual reality or VR. All the buzz, both corporate and academic, worked to suggest that you would, in just a few years, be able to relocate yourself, your identity, inside the computer, inside media technology itself. I smelled a rat but was fascinated by the ways that the technology was a form of cosmological *mapping*—an ironic inversion of the myth of Plato's Cave and one within which the media hype implied that every spatial strategy, including those defying the laws of physics, would be possible.

With a Masters of Planning in hand and still somewhat footloose, I decided to pursue my interest in VR and work toward a PH.D. at the same time. In Geography. Looking at VR as a form of virtual space, a kind of 3-D immersive map that swallowed the territory and pulled the viewer into its magical ersatz space. But in 1996 American Geography generally, while finding my research "fascinating," wasn't ready to go the distance and legitimize studying virtual space as "real" Geography. I had, however, minored in Communication/Cultural Studies and while I couldn't find a job in Geography I did have multiple offers from Communication departments. Perhaps I was in the right place at the right time as Communication and Cultural Studies more generally were very intrigued with issues of space, power and identity at that time. (That had been one of my frustrations with American Geography—for many researchers, Geography's core concepts of place, space and landscape had slipped beneath their radar, lost in a wholesale rejection of purportedly outmoded 1970s phenomenological enquires into these concepts. The concepts had, however, been enthusiastically picked

up by Cultural Studies scholars, though too often in ways that ignored or naively inverted generations of Geography research.)

Immersive Virtual Reality never fully lived up to its hype, though important military and medical applications exist. But I don't think that a full actualization of its promise ever was the overall intention. Instead, "cutting edge" technologies such as VR often serve as the necessary advance brigade in the capitalized economy of hype. Hype propels popular interest in new media applications but, just as importantly, it also prepares people to be more receptive to more commercial, more realizable applications. One such application, coming onto the scene at the same time as immersive VR was making such a media splash, is the World Wide Web. If the "promise" of VR remains largely unfilled by the particular technology itself, much of it has been realized on the Web. Today such "Internet 3.0" sites as Second Life, Active Worlds and There! realize in 2-D formats a considerable degree of what was said to be possible through immersive VR. My current research focuses on these sites and their capacity to organize ritual practices in online settings. Hundreds of thousands of members "populate" Second Life "where" they hang out, build houses, flirt, have sex, make friends, inhabit virtual islands and, increasingly, engage in forms of education and commerce with real-world implications. Navigation is important—the entire site is premised on infinitely extensible Cartesian space, organized around the map's latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates.

Moving from Geography to the media studies unit of a Communication Studies department has allowed me to pursue my interest in Web practices and techniques and their relationships to social space in several interlocking ways. One example would be the ways that sellers on eBay organize their listings as a set of linked virtual territories within which they establish specific forms of identity claims linked to memorable events. I've been fortunate enough to study the ways that sellers do so in order that they might more profitably "auction the authentic." But I have not been limited by my move only to the study of "new" media. My interest in urban issues, space and subjectivity extends back in time long before taking on the mantle of community organizer in the 1980s, and I have been pleased to find new, interdisciplinary ways to organize my research in urban space through the "lens" of film studies. Specifically I have pursued the relationships between the city itself as a character in the cycle of films popularly known as *film noir*. Los Angeles is frequently the overarching non-human (though sometimes anthropomorphized) character in many of these films set in that fair megalopolis, and I currently work on a set of related projects asking into the nature of urban subjectivity, paranoia, sexuality and space as depicted in these films which, on the surface, seem realistic but in point of fact are anything but. The spatialized id and the cultural politics attached to it as revealed to spectators through the camera's dark eye might be a more productive way to think of the classic *film noir* cycle.

From Geography to Communication Studies via the map relocated to digital media. And back again. It's been a journey fair for this media geographer, one I don't think I'll ever quite finish charting on my own inner map.