

Putting the Philippines on the Map - A Map Lover's Discourse

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An amator of antique maps

As an amateur, or better still, an amator of cartography, I offer here a lover's discourse on the unique pleasure rendered by maps, especially antique maps. But before undertaking a journey which starts from the geographical map, one must attend to some questions that come up. Why are artists, like Leonardo da Vinci, Johan Vermeer, Jasper Johns, enamored with maps? Is there perhaps a relation between art and cartography? At a time when contemporary art seeks new forms of expression, it may help to bring out "the cartographic eye" in art. Hopefully, the praxis of cartography can throw light on the impasse of art today.

The "Icarian view"

How do we escape the gravity (in the sense of "seriousness") which holds back present-day art in its quest for "the unbearable lightness" of a space with neither center nor horizon? A cue may be found in Peter Bruegel's 1558 painting of the "Fall of Icarus." Borrowing a theme from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Bruegel presents a panoramic view with three characters in the foreground – a farmer, a shepherd, and a fisherman, too absorbed in their tasks to even notice the tragic event. To recall Icarus' daring enterprise – his father, Daedalus, imprisoned in the Palace of Minos, decides to escape by air. He constructs a flying machine made up of wax and feathers. He then orders his son to fly but not too near the sun. Icarus, because of pride, disobeys his father. The wax of Icarus' wings melt. Icarus errs in space (isn't to err human?) before plunging into the sea.

In Bruegel's "Fall of Icarus," we gaze from an elevated site. From this high position, we obtain an overall view of the world. The world unfolds itself to us as a panorama, with all its minute details. It is this panoramic and plunging view, this macroscopic and microscopic view, this view of the distance and of the detail, evident in Bruegel's art, which we call the "Icarian view."

This Icarian view is "the cartographic eye." As Christian Jacob, the noted cartographic epistemologist reminds us: "To look at a map is to view the world from on high." It is in some way to be like God who sees everything. To view everything is to be everywhere, to feel sovereign, to experience the power of controlling everything and everyone. There is a compelling link between cartography and sovereignty, between maps and power.

IMAGE – From *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, showing the Pacific Ocean, RP and the Americas; beautiful drawing of a galleon, published in Antwerp; Latid ed.

The "cartographic transaction"

A map represents or more aptly, presents the world. By a strategy of visual representation understood as "a highly artificial technology of signs invested with the unique power to imitate in a network of lines and colours" what we usually refer to as the "real," a map renders the world visible. But maps do not only reveal but also conceal. They do not only display the world but they also distort or idealize it. They can either enhance or erase existing boundaries and differences. Here, we come close to understanding what is truly unique to a map, if we bear in mind that there is an important "cartographic transaction" in the mapping of the world. The "cartographic transaction" brings about the "mental and material renegotiation of the lived space of experience." It should not surprise us then that cartography has been often enlisted to serve the rhetoric of nationalism, the ideology of conquest or the politics of cultural difference.

Let us go more deeply into this “cartographic transaction” or change of the physical world into a conceptual map. Three conceptual stages comprise this “cartographic transaction:” a first stage where space is measure; a second stage where space is visualized; and a third stage where space is narrated. The conceptual triad of number, image, and text accounts for the conversion of the natural world into a mental map. Let us briefly discuss the first two stages and dwell more lengthily on the third and last stage which is the focus of this essay.

The narration of space

In the third stage of narration, space is narrated or recounted. Here, the task does not consist in examining in great detail a historic series of single maps of a particular space. Although this may lead to valuable insights on understanding the shape of a specific place, one should concentrate on the act or process of mapping. If one does this, the individual map will appear “as a hinge around which pivot whole systems of meaning, both prior and subsequent to its technical and mechanical production.”

There is a discourse of geography. Maps may narrate a new social, economic, or political order. They can forge an identity – both cultural and national. Here, we note the importance of “chorography” or local maps of the enhancements of self-esteem. The 1734 “Carta Hydrographica y Corographica de las Islas Filipinas” of the Spanish Jesuit cartographer, Fr. Pedro Murillo Velarde, which is considered to be the “Mother of all Philippine maps” comes to mind. Space is not to be regarded as a “void packed like a parcel with various contents,” an all-encompassing container of a physical world made up of material objects but as “the imaginative product of social (and political action).” If space is materially produced in architecture, urban planning, and civil engineering, geographical texts and images also “produce” social-cultural space. To quote J.B Harley and David Woodward: “Maps are graphic representations that facilitate a spatial understanding of things, concepts, conditions, processes or events in the human world.”

IMAGE – Mapa de las Yslas Philipinas copper engraving by Murillo de Velarde S.J. and Nicolas Pedro de la Cruz Bagay from “Historia de la Provincia de Philipina” Philippines, 1749 (1744).

The Icarian point of view is also the painter’s point of view. It is the point of origin – the point of the creation of the world, where chaos becomes cosmos, ordered arrangement. It is from this view that the painter masters the landscape from above. This aspect of domination is already contained in the profession of “land surveyor,” for the “surveyor” is a kind of “overseer.”

Why do antique maps fascinate us? The appeal of antique maps comes from the unique synthesis of geography, exploration, trade, travel, history, culture, commerce, science and art. Antique maps continue to fascinate us not only because they are coveted instruments of power, works of aesthetic beauty (often delightfully decorative) but because they are archives of knowledge, and more importantly, sign posts of the creative imagination.

A map is not only an object of knowledge, beauty, and power. It is also a “metaphysical object” in the sense that it transports us from one world to another from the “Old World” to the “New World,” to unknown worlds. It prompts us to wonder about our own being, our own place, our “own inclusion inscription – in space and in time.” Cartography seems to thrive from a kind of ambiguity. Situated at the junction of exact science and art, it is based on physical description and mathematical theory. Yet, it nevertheless finds it necessary to reintroduce the imagination into its theoretical principles and makes the map a representation.

IMAGE: From Cosmographia (German ed.), published by Sebastian Petri in Basel; (1st ed. 1544); Sebastian Munster (1488-1552) probably had the widest influence in spreading geographical knowledge throughout Europe. First map of a German cartographer to identify a Phil. Island: Puloan (Palawan) insert description.

IMAGE: Map from “Descripcion de las Islas occidentales, Historia General, da. 314 1st ed. Published in 1601 in Madrid; Herrera (1559-1625), a writer & official historian to the king of Spain,

compiled a history of the Indies accompanied by maps of the West Indies & Central and South America.

In the first stage of measurement, we witness the land “surveyor,” standing on the highest vantage point in the locality (a mountain top or a church belfry) to obtain accurate measurements of the landscape. With this surveying tools and the specialized code of geometry, the space of the world becomes quantifiable and mathematizable.

In the second stage of visualization, the cartographer creates graphic images that later “circulate in society as a pictorial signifiers of specific social, political, or economic spaces.” To convey the perils as well as the thrills of the Age of Exploration, the maps of Abraham Ortelius (who was a friend of Bruegel) abound with mermaids, monsters and fantastic creatures. The 1613 Mercator-Hondius map, which puts the Philippines at the very center of Asia, shows two ships – Spanish and Dutch – firing at each other. It proclaims Spain’s naval might, manifested in the sea battle off Manila Bay between Admiral Olivier Van Noort and Dr. Antonio de Morga in 1600. In the 1744 small version of the Murillo Velarde map, we see the figure of St Francis Xavier approaching Mindanao, bolstering the eighteenth-century fond belief that this “Apostles of the Indies” had set foot there. The map makes accessible not only a space of exploration, conquest, missionary activity but also for commercial ventures as indicated by the galleon and maritime trade routes on many maps.

To appreciate the map as a graphic representation of space, let us see the link between maps and picture making. This link goes back to Ptolemy’s *Geographia*. The only Greek word available to Ptolemy in referring to a “maker of pictures” was *graphikos*, a term etymologically linked to words ending in a form of *grapho*-geography, chorography, topography. The common meaning of the suffix *grapho* is not only “to draw” but “to record and write.” During the Renaissance, *grapho* translated first as picture gets replaced by description in Latin (description in French, *beschrijven* in Dutch). All these words, of course, depend on the Latin *scribo*, the equivalent of the Greek *grapho*. The word “*descriptio*” as used by Renaissance geographers calls attention to the sense in which images are drawn or inscribed as something written. It calls attention to a mode of pictorial representation. *Grapho* suggests both picture and writing, image and text. As “description,” maps make us see and show us a knowledge of what is beyond the narrow sense – “the shapes of coastlines, the distribution of hills and valleys, the distances between human settlements” -- but enrich us with political, ethnological, strategic, social, and linguistic knowledge.

To illustrate this, different narratives are told by the text at the back of the 1598 Petrus Kaerius map (the first separately printed map of the Philippines) and the text in the southwest medallion of the 1760 Murillo Velarde map. In the Kaerius map, the description (“*Beschryvinghe*” in Old Dutch) states that there are “inhabitants without laws” (“*inwoenderen zonder Wetten*”) who are “cannibals” (“*Menschen eeters*”). In the Murillo Velarde map (drawn by Francisco Suarez and engraved by Nicolas de la Cruz Bagay, both Filipinos), we read:

The Indios are well-built, have fine features and are dusky in complexion. They become good writers, painters, sculptors, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, embroiderers and sailors. The Christian religion is taught in Spanish, in Tagalog, in Sangley or Chinese, Pampango, Ilocano, Pangasinan, Cagayano, Visayan, Camarinis and other languages.

Here, two different subjectivities are at work. The first one is disdainful; the second benevolent. The process of mapping undergoes a change. The narration produces or projects different spaces of meaning.

From amator to narrator

The reading or interpretation of maps is an invitation to travel—to venture on an odyssey of the imagination, to enter the space of what is more “real” than what we consider real—the space of fiction, literature, narrative. A map tells the story of space. Cartography is the narrative of space. To name a place is already to tell a story. There are as many stories as there are names on a map. Like a lover, the amator of maps has always one more story to recount in the journey of being human.