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The Anthropology of Cartography

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In 1986 John Fels and I claimed that 'The anthropology of cartography is an urgent project' (Wood and Fels 1986: 72). In 2011 this is truer than ever: we still have little idea what the gazillion maps are used for. With the explosion in the map's popularity that has taken place since 1986 and the extraordinary expansion of its reach and reception – map art, the ludic turn, map as performance, map as theatre, and so on – what the map in fact does, what it *accomplishes*, seems less clear, because more diffuse than ever. Indeed, as the map's functions multiply, the function that most justifies the pervasiveness of its presence in our lives seems ever more capable of receding into the background the better to perform its work unobserved. This growing invisibility threatens to blunt, if not wholly undo the entire critical project, even as criticism finds itself on everyone's lips.

What do people do with maps?

Why did Fels and I call for an anthropology of cartography? Because we were fed up with the woolly-headed nonsense cartographers spouted – without a shred of evidence – about how and why people used maps. Consider a 1985 episode of *MacGyver* in which MacGyver has been sent to retrieve a map from an unnamed North African country.¹ 'Great thing about a map,' MacGyver says, 'it can get you in and out of places a lot of different ways.' The map he's after, he goes on, 'documents the plans of some heavy-handed trouble-makers. Folks back home figure if I can get a hold of it, the trouble might stop.' As Legionnaires approach, MacGyver clammers through a window into the room with the map. Having seized it he discovers the door is locked from the outside. Slipping the map under the door, MacGyver pokes the key from the

keyhole with his knife. The key drops onto the map which MacGyver then pulls back into the room. During the ensuing chase MacGyver uses the rolled-up map as a pea-shooter to distract a bystander. Wrapped around an iron bar, MacGyver uses the map to disable a pursuer. Finally MacGyver uses the map to patch a hole shot in the hot air balloon in which he's escaping. The map is used to document plans, to retrieve a key, as a pea-shooter, as a disguise, and as a patch. 'A good map,' MacGyver concludes, 'will always get you where you want to go.'

The shortcomings of MacGyver's examples were that they were limited to what we might call *literal* functions, this at a time when Roland Barthes, among others, was encouraging us to pay attention to the *mythic* functions that hitchhiked, as it were, along with the literal. This was a well-understood characteristic of communication. Hitchhiking on MacGyver's varied uses of the map, for example, would have been his ingenuity. That is, what appeared at the level of what Barthes called *language* to illustrate no more than how to use a map to retrieve a key, appeared at the level of what Barthes called *myth* to illustrate something else, MacGyver's endless resourcefulness. Barthes's innovation was to recognize that this tiered system of signification applied to institutions, to the news, to advertising, to mass consumer goods, to 'collective representation' of all kinds. What Fels and I couldn't help noticing was that these 'collective representations' included maps. In fact Barthes might have been talking about maps when he wrote about his popular collection, *Mythologies*: 'I had just read Saussure and as a result acquired the conviction that by treating "collective representations" as sign-systems, one might hope to go further than a pious show of unmasking them and account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature' (Barthes 1970: 9). We too wanted to account in detail for the mystification enveloping the map, but the mere unmasking exposed map uses we hadn't thought about before.

For example, it soon became obvious how the North Carolina state highway map was first and foremost a promotional platform for the governor and a way of advertising the state as a tourist paradise. Its navigational function was really just a syringe for mainlining these secondary meanings. As a professor of curriculum and instruction, commenting on the availability of state highway maps for classroom use, remarked, 'It has the governor's picture on it. You can get as many as you want.' The discovery of such 'secondary' uses – 'secondary' in quotation marks because they're so often primary – blew the number of map uses out of the water. Here's a photo illustrating a story about a legislatively mandated North Carolina social studies curriculum