

Sébastien Smirou interviews Denis Wood for LIGNE 13, No. 4, 2011

SS: *In Ce n'est pas le monde, a comic you wrote with John Krygier, you argue that a map is not an image or even the portrayal of any place or any activity but the fruit, each time unique, of a recurrent proposition : "This is there". Could you develop this idea ?*

DW: The traditional idea, of course, is that maps are more or less accurate and precise representations of the world we live. But if this were the case, and there is only one world, how could there be so many different maps of it? Over the years my colleagues and I thought our way through "selective representations," "social constructions," and other alternatives, and as we did what became more and more obvious was that they simply weren't representations at all. Gradually it dawned on us that maps were actually arguments – like those you'd make in court – about the nature of the world. This gets clearer and clearer in today's world which is filled with maps in contention: these insist global warming exists, these deny it; these say poverty is rampant, these say it's not; this says this piece of land is part of China, this says it's part of India, this says it's part of Pakistan. Now, an argument is composed of propositions staking claims about reality, and in maps the propositions are about what is true ("this is") at some location ("there"). "This is there" maps say again and again and again. Doing this allows maps to make assertions about the nature of places. John Fels and I make this argument at length in our book *The Natures of Maps* and I elaborate in a different way in my more recent *Rethinking the Power of Maps*. *Ce n'est pas le monde* was an attempt to make the case a third time, more graphically, as a comic.

SS: *Taking all this into account, we could imagine an infinity of maps for one single place – each one being a "moment of truth", if I can say so. But I guess this is not exactly your intention when you're drawing your maps of Boylan Heights. What do you think they're showing us ? - as a chain or a series. Including what part of you ?*

DW: "Moments of truth" were certainly one of my intentions for the atlas as I originally conceived it, for the atlas's final third, which remains largely incomplete. Among other things the atlas is an essay on the idea of neighborhood. We understood a neighborhood to be a "transformer," a structure mediating between the individuals living in the neighborhood and the city (and the rest of the universe). The neighborhood transforms individuals into citizens and citizens back into individuals, among other things. The atlas was to open with maps of those aspects of the neighborhood – the stars overhead, the gas and electricity flowing through the neighborhood – that made the neighborhood part of the larger world. It was to conclude with maps of those aspects of the neighborhood –

wind chimes, barking dogs, people sitting on their porches – that were absolutely unique to the neighborhood. These would be your “moments of truth.” In between would be maps of the transforming processes, historical maps and maps like the one of the neighborhood “digesting” a newspaper and so transforming it into conversation. At the time we made most of the maps I was living in the neighborhood. They were maps of *my* world.

SS: It evokes me the way Gilles Deleuze thinks the cartographic issue from Spinoza. “A cartography, he says, is knowing what is a line of you”. According to him, rather than a subject or a figure, each individual is taken into a ratio between a longitude and a latitude. “I would call longitude of a body the collection of particles which belongs to it in a ratio between movement and rest, speed and slowness. Later : “I would call latitude of body [its] power of being affected”. But if Deleuze is mostly focused on this latitude, could we read your maps as attempts to spot your own body on a deleuzian longitude line ? (If I'm wrong and your work has nothing to do with Deleuze', where does it come from ?)

DW: In fact Deleuze has absolutely nothing to do with my work. I began working on the atlas well before Deleuze began to be translated into English, and *long* before I became aware of his work. I developed an interest in maps as a young child. They were all around me and I found them fascinating. In the early 1950s I discovered *The Hobbit* (of J. R. R. Tolkien) with its endpaper maps, and shortly after that *The Fellowship of the Ring* was published with its fold-out map of Middle Earth. But maps were all around me, of all types and ages, and I soon found myself immersed in the history and technology of mapmaking. I studied English literature as a college student but took my advanced degrees in geography, working with psychologists on what we were calling “mental maps.” I also fell under the influence of the radical geographer, William Bunge, who was leading *expeditions* into the cities he lived in and mapping everything (candy wrappers on the street, places where cars ran over kids). He proposed but never completed an *Atlas of Love and Hate*. I began making maps of my world. Then I ended up teaching in a department of landscape architecture about which I knew less than zero. I thought, though, that I knew something about the landscape, and that maps could be a powerful way for landscape architecture students to engage with it. That's where the neighborhood atlas came from, my interest in maps stirred into a desperation to figure out something for my students to do: we mapped the neighborhoods around the university, starting in 1975 and continuing through the late 1980s. It just took a long time before it found a publisher.

SS: You're not only a "map maker," as Tolkien was, by the way, you're also a poet. If «This is there» is the general proposition to which each map

answers, what would be its equivalent for a poem or a book of poetry? How would think the common points and the differences between a map and a poem? Why do you need both of them?

DW: These aren't easy questions in the general case, but practically it's less hard. Poems and maps are both discourses about existence, but in most maps the emphasis is on the "THERE" ("this is THERE") whereas poems put the emphasis on the "THIS" ("THIS is there"), the "IS" ("this IS there"), or the "THIS IS" ("THIS IS there"). "This is" is what, in *The Natures of Maps*, John Fels and I call the "precedent existential proposition." Mapmakers turn the precedent existential proposition into the "fundamental cartographic proposition" ("this is there") by posting the precedent existential proposition to the plane of the map. Few poems take such a step, and in this regard Japanese haiku are exemplary. They are so wrapped up in saying "this is" (so that you *know* that it *is*) that they have little energy to expend on the *where*. On the other hand, most maps are so concerned with the "there" they expend little energy on the "this is," and thus the smorgasbord of generalized symbols that say as little as possible about the "this." Between the extremes of a map by Google and a haiku by Bashō, of course, there are poems that approach maps and maps that approach poems. For example, David Hinton, the renowned translator of ancient Chinese poetry, has published *Fossil Sky*, an epic poem that takes the form of a lyrical map. And I want to imagine that some of my maps approach graphic poems. But poems and maps *are* different mediums with different capacities. That said, thinking about them together is liberating and can be fruitful.

SS: Forgive me, I'm going to play the idiot, but what do you exactly call a "graphic poem"? "What could be the "there" of a poem?" is maybe another way to formulate the question.

DW: It seems to me that these are two quite different questions. At a minimum a "graphic poem" would be written rather than spoken. Many, maybe most written poems take limited advantage of their graphic situation, but there is also a rich tradition in which the layout of the words on the page is integral to the poem (and probably this is true to a certain degree of all poems composed on the page). I'm thinking, of course, of George Herbert's shaped poetry ("The Altar," "Easter-wings") of the 17th century, of Mallarmé's "Un coup de des jamais n'abolira le hasard," of the 19th, of Apollinaire ("Il Pleut") in the early 20th, and the long train of concrete poets that has followed in their wake. In the David Hinton poem I referred to, he lays the words out along the paths he traverses, as though marking them on a map.

The other question, about the "there" of a poem is about reference, about deixis. Even to say something like "across the street" would give the poem a "there", and to say

something like “when first I came among these hills,” as Wordsworth does in “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” is to name a “there” in a very specific way, almost as a map does. Little discourse is free of place reference, place deixis, though the emphasis does vary.

SS: *Sorry, it's my fault (too focused on my own questioning and not enough on yours). What strikes me when I'm looking at your maps is that I'm not looking that much for its meanings. I don't really care (or I don't want to know, maybe). I'm more snapped up by the image. A bit like when you repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat a word it becomes empty and you, at least, can see it for itself. (As if it was a new object, a nude one). And that's what I'm trying to do when I write, in a sense. I was just wondering if you knew how to produce this effet... Have you got THE secret ?*

DW: I wish I did have *the* secret. But I don't. Nevertheless I do know what you're talking about when you say you're “snapped up” by the image quite independently of anything it might mean. Certainly that was an effect I was striving for. I don't speak to the general case, but with respect to my maps – the ones that really work – I think some of it is due to their stripped down character: black and white, a single subject (street lights, wind chimes), and strong marks. Those are what let the successful maps leap off the page, less as maps than as simple signs in their own right. We weren't thinking of Bashō (“Autumn evening/ – a crow on a bare branch”), Pound (“The apparition of these faces in the crowd/Petals on a wet black bough”), or Williams (“so much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow/glazed with rain/water/beside the white/chickens”) when we made the maps, but we could have been.

Yet no less important to me is the reality that at the same time they're maps. *Those* pumpkins were in *those* places in Boylan Heights in Raleigh, North Carolina; and their distribution illuminates social and historical facts about the neighborhood. When taken together the sequence of maps – each in its stripped down character – not only shines a light on Boylan Heights but attempts to make an argument about neighborhoods in general. The map may leap off the page but once it's in your lap it repays close attention. That's important too. That's essential.