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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **The Natures of Maps: Cartographic Constructions of the Natural World.**

By Denis Wood and John Fels. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.  
Pp. xvii+230. \$49.

More than twenty years ago, our two authors' first collaboration was an article that attempted to bring the full power of semiological thought to bear on the map, dissecting it with the help of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco and reimagining it as a potent megasign, a "framework of discourse." This article, virtually ignored at the time, became a central focus of their very influential (and still in print) *The Power of Maps* (1992), a book which generated much excitement both in the cartographic community and in other fields like history, literature, art, and political science, many of whose practitioners became interested in the map as a mode of discourse.

Denis Wood and John Fels's new book carries allusions to two earlier titles which trod some of the same ground: *The Nature of Maps* (1976) by Arthur Robinson and Barbara Bartz Petchenik, and *The New Nature of Maps* (2001) by J. B. Harley. But another reference, and one central to their discussion, is to "the natural world," the ways in which maps attempt to help us make sense of the physical environments in which we live.

The three chapters of part 1 set up their principles and *modus operandi*. Wood and Fels begin by observing that while almost everyone now admits that maps showing such things as zoning lines or national boundaries are ideological constructions, they view *any* map as inherently ideological: "The map is not a picture. It is an argument" (p. xvi). These arguments are made using systems of signs, and the most central semiological function of the map is what Wood and Fels call a "posting." This is Charles Pierce's *index*, a direct *pointing to*, the statement that "*this* piece of the world (represented by a symbol) is *here* (represented by the symbol's location on the sign plane of the map)." The map, then, is a whole series of arguments, that "this is here," and "this other thing is here," and "that is there." Their second major point is

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that our long experience with maps that validate these manifold propositions “endows the map with an intrinsic factuality whose social manifestation is the authority the map carries into public action” (p. xvi).

In terms of methodology, Wood and Fels rely, first, on extremely thorough and systematic “unpacking” of the map, the kind of analysis they famously directed at a North Carolina state highway map in *The Power of Maps*. And to assist in this process, they’ve adapted some terms from literary analysis that allow them to talk about a map’s context. They speak of the *parimap* as the verbal and physical expressions that surround and embody the map, everything from titles and legends to paper stock and typography. They also recognize an *epimap*, constituting information not physically a part of the map, but circulating freely around it. Elements of an *epimap* would include advertising, commentary, and packaging, like the issue of *National Geographic* that holds a given map. Together, *parimap* and *epimap* constitute the *paramap*, “everything that surrounds and extends a map in order to present it.”

These are powerful and useful distinctions, and much of the book is devoted to demonstrating that maps are absorbed and understood in a kind of dialogue among these elements. As a way of explaining how this dialogue works, the authors borrow concepts from the field of cognitive linguistics, especially what its practitioners call “mental spaces,” and quote Gilles Fauconnier defining these as “partial structures that proliferate when we think and talk” (p. 15). “Mental spaces” and “cognitive cartographics” provide Wood and Fels with a way of conceptualizing what goes on when we “read” a map, and the dialogue that goes on between the map and its paramap.

The bulk of the book, part 2, consists of wonderfully rich examples of thick readings of maps. The authors concentrate on maps showing aspects of the “natural world” and arbitrarily divide that world into eight kinds of “nature”: “threatened nature,” “threatening nature,” “nature as grandeur,” and so on, with each kind getting its own chapter. They purposely stick to modern maps that are readily available, often products of the National Geographic Society, and the ample format of the book allows large and detailed reproductions. Many of these readings are tours de force, beginning with close examinations of epimap and parimap, literally unfolding the map over several illustrations as it begins to reveal itself. The language is typical Denis Wood—colloquial, jaunty, confiding, breathless, refreshing. The authors make no claim that their eight “natures” are necessary or sufficient, but, by leading us through the readings and unpacking the dazzling variety of conceptions which these maps evoke, they demonstrate beautifully that maps do not simply exhibit, but discuss, argue about, judge, and determine, the “realities” they show.

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