Kosmoikos: The search for location in a networked age
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CHAPTER 3: POSITIONALITY
3.1 Introduction: Place as Panacea

[I]t has become a shibboleth in social theory that the essence of modernity is the demythification and disenchantment of the social world (Buck-Morss 1991, 251).

The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale (Jameson 1984b, 92).

A new genre has emerged in academic writing on new media in the ’10s around the basic claim that “the new organizational logic of the web is based on physical location” (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011, 7). Often these geolocation scholars present this new technological paradigm as a kind of remedy to a diagnosis concerning the negative effects of mediation on place, in terms, for example, of distracting people from their physical surroundings (Frith 2014, 1). Within the field of media studies and media art in particular, the related concept of locative media has generated significant academic interest amongst such scholars, with a substantial and growing body of academic literature devoted to discussing the concept (Farman 2012; Farman 2013; Wilken and Goggin 2014; Hjorth and Richardson 2014; Buschauer and Willis 2014; de Souza e Silva and Sheller 2014; Frith 2015; Evans 2015). Typically identified with a field of artistic practice for networked mobile devices rendered location-aware (for example, via line of sight connectivity to the GPS satellites array), locative media art practices have been framed as “responding to a depiction or criticism of the built environment as disenchanted […] with the] aim to offer a re-enchantment […] through the overlaying of informational environments onto the landscape” (Crang and Graham 2007, 807). Whereas geolocation scholars often tend to frame locative media, in substantivist terms, as a kind of remedy to the de-contextualizing tendencies implicit in communications media, this chapter looks at how the concept of location has been
theorized—as well as practiced—as a critical response to explicitly metaphysical diagnoses concerning the dematerialization of topographical space in a networked age. As such, this chapter is concerned primarily with the dialectic relationship between a cultural critique concerning the loss of location and a remedy of epistemological renewal—the latter figured in terms of positioning the individual in relation to an objectively mappable and comprehensible external reality—to which end I will focus on how Fredric Jameson developed the concept of cognitive mapping in relation to his well known diagnosis of late capitalism as “the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (1984b, 84).

While notions of “site-specificity” have been used to conceptualize locative media in terms of phenomenological problematics of embodiment and spatiality (Farman 2012, 56-75), in what follows, my approach departs instead from the grammatical definition of locative, corresponding to the prepositions “in,” “on,” “at,” and “by,” denoting the idea of positionality. In particular I will look at how the concept of positionality is developed within a tradition of philosophical critique associated with—though not identical to—Fredric Jameson’s Marxist metaphysics. In distinction to geolocation scholarship, I will develop this concept of positionality as a primarily topological, as opposed to topographic technique for thinking about location in a networked age, concerned with positioning the individual in relation to the whole. Departing from a close reading of what has been referred to as “the most memorable single exercise in all the literature on postmodernism” (Anderson 1998, 58)—in which Jameson envisioned an aesthetic practice that sought to map totality—the chapter goes on to locate the concept of positionality in relation to a critical discourse that predates Jameson’s contribution, as well as to look at how the concept has subsequently been taken up and critiqued within debates in the field of media theory. Whereas the concept of
positionality has been developed as a term of art by feminist theorists in reference to a reflexive approach to the production of academic knowledge that is opposed to “the god-trick of claiming to see the whole world while remaining distanced from it” (G. Rose 1999, 308; see also Haraway 1988), with some minor reservations, Jameson’s project is relatively committed to the global perspective.

Already at the time of the initial publication of his famous postmodernism article, Jameson was criticized as having, for instance, “homogenize[d] the details of the contemporary landscape” into a single “dominative or hegemonic position” (Davis 1985, 107), and indeed, his concept of cognitive mapping has subsequently been subject to criticism within the field of literary theory for overlooking marginal subject positions (Tally 1996, 406-409). Furthermore, in spite of his fame as a theorist of the postmodern, as we will see, Jameson’s cognitive mapping is avowedly normative in its ambitions, aimed at the creation of “a new systemic cultural norm and its reproduction, in order to reflect more adequately on the most effective forms of any radical cultural politics today” (1984b, 57). With these criticisms in mind, it thus should be noted that, in contrast to its other valences, the concept of positionality that I will be discussing in this chapter is expressly global in scope—an arguably legitimate use of the term in light of how recent debates in literary theory seems to have endorsed this particular interpretation.15

Recalling the detective genre as a means by which to frame the search for location in a networked age, the perspective of the “informants” in this chapter suggests a slightly

15 “Global Positioning Systems” was, for example, the topic of a major international literary theory conference in 2013, featuring a track entitled: “Fredric Jameson’s Spatial Dialectic as Global Positioning System,” at which I presented an early version of this chapter (American Comparative Literature Association 2013, 168).
alternative framing device concerned with examining a relationship of interdependence—
between a certain idea of positionality and a particular tradition of critique. In what follows, I
explore how a set of aesthetic theories and practices have sought to develop metaphorical
remedies to a metaphysical diagnosis concerned with the problem of subjective disorientation
in relation to the physical environment. Cultural theorists sometimes refer to the
indeterminate and entangled relationship between critical diagnosis and normative remedy
with the phrase pharmakon—defined as “a drug that may act as a poison or a remedy […]
whose effect can mutate into its opposite, depending on the dose, the circumstances, or the
context” (Stengers 2010, 29). In attempting to achieve emancipation from a state of
disenchantment, the French sociologist Luc Boltanski argues that critique proceeds by
“making a sharp (if not always clear) distinction between, on the one hand, critical judgments
delivered by so-called ‘ordinary’ people […] and, on the other hand, critical judgments made
by sociologists,” a distinction that licenses the critic to pass judgment “backed up by the
discourse of truth of the social sciences [which] endows critical theories of domination with a
certain robustness in describing the reality called into question” (2013, 4). While it has been
argued that aspects of critique in general, and Marxist metaphysics in particular, can in fact
be traced back to the antiquarian esotericism of gnosticism (Voegelin 2000, 257-277), this
chapter traces the role of positionality in relation to a (post)modernist lineage extending from
Lukács’s dialectic of reification and totality through Situationist avant-garde art practice to
contemporary digital mapping practices. The chapter then concludes by questioning the
extent to which the practice and theory of positionality remain valid in light of socio-
technical innovations that have arguably altered its underlying problematic, thereby implying
the need for an alternative diagnosis from that provided by the project of critique.
3.2 Lost in Postmodern Hyperspace

*I'm all lost in the supermarket, I can no longer shop happily (Strummer and Jones 1979).

*Late capitalism is a pyramid racket on a global scale, the kind of pyramid you do human sacrifices up on top of, meantime getting the suckers to believe it’s all gonna go on forever (Pynchon 2013, 163).

In *Postmodernism as the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, initially published as an essay (Jameson 1984b) and subsequently expanded into a book of the same name (Jameson 1991), Fredric Jameson developed a reading of postmodern aesthetics through the lens of Marxist literary theory that would go on to frame decades of debate in cultural theory.

Although the term *postmodernism* had already entered popular usage amongst avant-garde artists and critics of the ’60’s—who used the phrase to signify a rejection of ‘exhausted’ high modern aesthetics (Featherstone 2007, 7)—it has nevertheless been remarked that, with the publication of this article, Jameson “redrew the whole map of the postmodern at one stroke” (Anderson 1998, 54), at least within the then-thriving field of Anglo-American academic cultural theory.

Jameson’s theory of postmodernism emerged from his attempt to intervene into cultural theory debates around the concept of postmodernism that were only beginning to take shape at the time, but which would eventually come to dominate the entire field for the next several decades. If the concept of postmodernism was at the time associated with a mood of skepticism towards the utopian plans and schemes of high modernism, expressed by French philosopher François Lyotard as an “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (Lyotard 1984, xxiv), then Jameson’s antithetical move was in fact to treat postmodern culture as the by-product of a Marxist meta-narrative concerning global economic forces—indeed Jameson
would later identify his approach with the deterministic stance of “an older vulgar Marxism” (Jameson 1998, 137).

In periodizing postmodernism, Jameson identified a number of characteristic shifts away from modernism including a tendency towards depthlessness, a waning of affect, a weakening of historicity and a shift in tone towards an aesthetic of the sublime. Having opened his prior book—in which he definitively established his reputation as a literary theorist—with the imperative to “always historicize” (1983, ix), one of Jameson’s more influential arguments was that postmodern culture contributed to a diminution of historical consciousness and its corresponding substitution by nostalgia—a critique of which continues to be reiterated in popular media criticism (Lanier 2010, 129, Reynolds 2011, x-xi).

According to this line of argument, then, the weakening of historicity leads to “a society [that] has a hard time figuring out not only where it came from but where it might be or should be heading” (Fraser 2015, 315), thereby confounding attempts at positionality.

Jameson built on a particular tradition of Marxist literary theory, in an approach that literary theorist Perry Anderson has deemed “materialist symbolism” (Anderson 1998, 130), concerned with interpreting the latent symbolic meaning of material culture, in which he attempted to combine a rationalist theory of world economic development with a contextualist approach to cultural analysis indebted to Raymond Williams—the latter who had argued that no dominant mode of production was capable of exhausting “the extraordinary range of variations, both practiced and imagined, of which human beings are and have shown themselves to be capable” (Williams 2005, 43). For Jameson, postmodernism constituted a kind of symptom, a “cultural dominant” for the underlying pathology of “late capitalism,” a concept he borrowed with minimal alteration from Ernest
Mandel’s deterministic theory of economic and social change, which held that new technologies increased the rate of profit leading to a period of growth until their advantages were exhausted leading to a period of recession, followed eventually by a new cycle of growth.16

Jameson drew a direct relationship between historical transformations in the capitalist mode of production and aesthetic transformations in the sphere of culture. As introduced in Chapter 1, in Jameson’s analysis, under late capitalism, culture had come to constitute a kind of second nature, which had expanded to incorporate everything “as the purest form of capital yet to have emerged [and] a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (1984b, 78). As such, Jameson saw the stakes of his project in terms of a grand world historical political struggle, in which popular culture constituted the ideological battleground. He thus developed a metaphysical, if not esoteric, argument that material reality and sensual experience had effectively bifurcated, and that the problem of critique could be reduced to a matter of positioning. Fundamental to this diagnosis was the idea that the built environment could be read as symptomatic of the general problematic of late capitalism. To this end, Jameson painted an elaborate picture of what he called “hyperspace” (ibid, 80), packed with stimuli but devoid of meaning, in which the transcendental subject of eighteenth century critique was lost, as it were, in a kind of 1980’s American shopping mall.

16 In an attempt to explain the worldwide economic crisis of the early ’70s, Mandel adapted Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratiev’s long wave world system theory, shortening the intervals from approximately fifty to twenty years in duration, and periodizing the beginning of the late capitalist wave to approximately the postwar period—though Jameson would periodize its beginning to the late ’60s (Jameson 1984a), consistent with the post-industrialism thesis discussed in Chapter 2.
In his analysis, Jameson singled out architecture as what he called late capitalism’s “privileged aesthetic language” (1984b, 79), claiming that of all the arts it was the “closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship” (ibid, 56). His interest in architecture seems to have arisen in part as a response to his own intellectual milieu, that of North American Ivy League academia, where the term postmodernism had become closely identified with a debate in architecture theory referred to as the “battle of the ‘Grays’ and the ‘Whites’” (Scott 2001, 113), which pitted the champions of a new postmodern vernacular style of architecture—as most famously articulated by Robert Venturi (1972)—against advocates for a return to formalist modernism. The interest, however, turned out to be mutual, with Jameson’s diagnosis becoming a touchstone for architectural theorists, so that, over a quarter century later, his essay would still be identified with having articulated a “historical shift in the organization of power and knowledge into increasingly horizontal, pattern-based networks of control” (Martin 2010, 37). Indeed, on evidence of citation alone it has been observed that the essay is perhaps best remembered for “the great set-piece” at its centre (Anderson 1998, 58), Jameson’s observations regarding the architectural interior of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, which he presented as a kind of iconic representation of the “new spatial logic of the simulacrum” (1984b, 66). Constructed between 1974 and 1976 in the Bunker Hill district of downtown Los Angeles, the Bonaventure was designed by the American architect John Portman, who, while not considering himself a representative of the postmodern vernacular style of architecture, is nevertheless associated with the latter in the estimation of architecture critics (Scott 2001, 113). With its primary entrances connecting, via passageways, to other buildings rather than to the street, what seemed to fascinate Jameson about the hotel’s design

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17 When Jameson first started lecturing on postmodernism, he had just begun teaching at Yale where Venturi and other members of the postmodern Grays also taught (Anderson 1998, 52).
was the extent to which this building appeared to create an autonomous world within and yet somehow separate from the surrounding city in which it was located—in his analysis then, the Bonaventure “aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city” (1984a, 81).18 In the passage, Jameson offered an account of his own experience of getting lost in the hotel as a kind of culmination of his entire diagnosis of the epistemological rupture of late capitalism, in which his inability to make sense of the building’s confusing spatial layout became a metaphor for the inability for what he repeatedly called “the subject” to position itself in relation to the complexities of late capitalism. The inability to navigate postmodern hyperspace was thus conceptualized as an obstacle to be overcome in order to manifest meaningful political action.

In spite however, of his prominent influence on subsequent theorists of the built environment (Soja 1989, 62-64; Dear 2000, 47-69), Jameson may himself be understood to have nurtured a somewhat idiosyncratic conception of space. Identifying what he esoterically referred to as “a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by an equivalent mutation in the subject” (1984b, 80), Jameson’s “spatial dialectic,” as he would later come to refer to his approach (2009, 66), can be understood as relating here to a metaphysical strain of Marxist thought that extends the process by which capital comes to dominate economic exchange—what Marx referred to as “subsumption” (1992, 645)—to all aspects of reality. While Marx himself recognized many things as existing outside of capitalism (ibid, 131), this approach sees subsumption as a process of semiotic escalation, which ultimately results in a separation between the subject and the object, what the Marxist philosopher Guy Debord referred to as

18 Considering that one of Jameson’s critics referred to his reading of the Bonaventure’s interior as “a claustrophobic space colony [… that] reconstructs a nostalgic Southern California in aspic” (Davis 1985, 112), it is amusing that it features as a portal to outer space in Christopher Nolan’s 2014 film Interstellar (2014).
“eliminat[ing] geographical distance only to reap distance internally in the form of spectacular separation” (1995, 120). As an avant-garde artist committed to implementing his critique in the form of practice, Debord sought to develop new aesthetic forms, often at the level of urban spatial practices, that were nevertheless addressed to the totality of society (Debord and Knabb 2003, 29-42), an idea that Jameson can be understood in turn to have adapted as the basis of his own claim that “a model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern” (1984b, 89).

At the conclusion of his original essay on postmodernism, Jameson evoked the work of the urban planner Kevin Lynch (1960) who coined the terms wayfinding as well as imageability in reference to the navigational habits of city dwellers—concepts that subsequently became central in interface design for environmental media. For reasons that Jameson has never made clear, in referring to Lynch’s work, he chose however to use the term cognitive mapping. Although the idea that humans make use of mental representations of their everyday spatial environments in order to acquire, navigate and store information can be dated back to antiquity—the memory palace being a mnemonic device used by the ancient Greeks and Romans (O’Keefe and Nadel 1978, 201)—as a term of art cognitive mapping comes from a branch of psychology known as purposive behaviourism, where it refers to place learning behaviour (Tolman 1948). Jameson thus concluded his celebrated essay with a call for the development of a “new (and hypothetical) cultural form” (1984b, 89), a “representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp” (ibid, 79-80) that would render the complexities at the economic base of late capitalism somehow conceivable in order for subjects to thereby meaningfully position themselves in relation to their environments, characterizing cognitive
mapping in esoteric terms as “an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (ibid, 80).

So while Jameson’s evocative use of the term cognitive mapping certainly signifies that he was inspired by the idea of spatial apperception, his allegorical use of the term should not however be confused with the former experimental tradition, instead signifying a rather specific if not somewhat arcane offshoot of the term. Ultimately, for Jameson, the condition of postmodernism amounted to the feeling of being lost in space. He thus concluded his famous text with a programmatic call for the development of something that he called an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping” (1984b, 89), which he proposed as remedy to the diagnosis that “this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (ibid, 83). In an attempt to treat this diagnosis, Jameson’s project can arguably be understood in relation to Debord’s interpretation of Marx—that an aesthetic representation of totality constitutes the antithesis to spectacular separation—which in turn can be traced back to the dialectic of reification and totality as developed in the field of Marxist metaphysics.
3.3 The Situational Sublime

From the ethical point of view, no one can escape responsibility with the excuse that he is only an individual, on whom the fate of the world does not depend (Lukács 1972, 8).

While Jameson’s cognitive mapping has been described as “one of the most influential” concepts in postmodern cultural theory (Tally 1996, 399), it has also, however, been described as one of “the least articulated” of his concepts (MacCabe in Jameson 1992, viv). Defined by Jameson as an “extrapolation of Lynch’s spatial analysis to the realm of social structure” (1988, 353), cognitive mapping has been said to speak directly to the central question in all of Jameson’s work, namely: “[h]ow does the psychically enclosed, subjective individual relate to the socially dispersed, objective totality?” (Tally 1996, 405). As such, Jameson’s cognitive mapping can be understood as essentially concerned with the problem of situating meaning within a universal interpretative framework in which Jameson claimed that “[o]nly Marxism can give us an adequate sense of the essential mystery of the cultural past” (1983, 3), as it alone offered a view onto history as “vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot” (ibid, 4). Setting aside for a moment Jameson’s steadfast devotion to the explanatory power of Marxist historiography, the concept of cognitive mapping may be understood as playing a similar structural role in Jameson’s metaphysics as the concept of the sublime in Kant’s metaphysics, positing an ideal relationship between the individual and the totality that is mediated by the “free play” of the faculty of imagining in the contemplation of the aesthetics of the sublime (Kant 2000, 102-103). In attempting to make sense out of an overwhelming aesthetic experience of seemingly infinite complexity, Kant associated the sublime with the imagination’s movement from a state of confusion to one in which the mind reflected on its underlying moral rational framework, what he called its “supersensible
vocation” (ibid, 141). The momentary experience of self-abnegation induced by the sublime thus paradoxically grounded Kant’s “transcendental” subject within a universal moral order, the latter of which Jameson, for his part, figured in terms of an awareness of one’s position within the true system of economic relations.19

Jameson’s intellectual project is perhaps best understood in terms of a metaphysical discourse concerned with identifying an underlying principle governing the relationship between things’ appearances and their true position in the big picture of economic relations, a project associated with Western Marxism—of which Jameson is considered a foremost contemporary exemplar (Anderson 1998, 74)—that he is understood to have adapted from one of the principal initiators of the discourse, Georg Lukács (Kellner and Homer 2004, 29). In History and Class Consciousness (1971), originally published in 1923, Lukács rejected a doctrinaire interpretation of Marxism by combining aspects of Hegelian metaphysics and Weberian anti-positivist sociology in order to develop the concepts of reification and of totality.20 Taken from the German word for objectification, reification was Lukács’s term for the process of subsumption through which objects are transformed into subjects and subjects

19 In The Postmodern Condition, a text which stands alongside Jameson’s as amongst the most influential in the debates on postmodernism, François Lyotard also put forth an association between postmodernism and sublime aesthetics (1984, 81). However, since Lyotard rejected the presumed universality of meta-narratives, his concept of the sublime denied any notion of solace, or any appeal to universalism in favour of a plurality of language games—the latter which has been characterized as “a replacement of […] universalism by localism” (Featherstone 2007, 4).

20 Prior even to having developed the concept of cognitive mapping, in a text originally published in 1977, Jameson would make clear the conceptual foundations of this idea in his description of Lukács’s concept of reification—as “a process that affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality […] a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity” (2008, 447)—later going on to describe cognitive mapping as a remedy to this diagnosis, “stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience” (1988, 353).
are turned into objects, while he defined totality as “the system of production at a given moment in history and the resulting divisions of society into classes” (ibid, 50).

Following Engels’s assertion that the proletariat was “prescribed, irrevocably and obviously, in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organization of contemporary civil society” (1956, 134–5), Lukács claimed that totality in fact lay dormant in those commodities that Marx had theorized as “external to man, and therefore alienable” (1992, 182)—Marx’s commodity fetish entailing the separation of use value from exchange value, and “the abstraction of the product out of real conditions of production” (Carey 2008, 170). As such, for Lukács, in a Kantian turn, reification contained within it the roots of its own overcoming since it produced an epistemological standpoint from which perspective totality could be grasped. In extending the commodity form into a “universal category of society as a whole” (1971, 86), it has been claimed that Lukács articulated “the central problem” of critical theory (Staff 2013), and in so doing essentially inaugurated the entire Western Marxist critique (Anderson 1987, 24-48). According to this seemingly paradoxical view, adopted in turn by Jameson, it was out of the total subjugation to (and repurposing of) the commodity form that a truly universal class consciousness would emerge—in the original language of Marx and Engels, compelling man “to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life” (1948, 12).

Described by the noted art historian Peter Wollen as representing “the summation of Western Marxism” (1993, 124), the Situationists, led by Jameson’s forebear Guy Debord, can be said to have updated Lukáks relatively static conception of the dialectic of reification and of totality as the foundation for an interventionist avant-garde practice—that has subsequent become the standard against which all critical art is now measured, a point to which I will
return in this chapter’s conclusion. Though having begun as an extremely marginal and
highly elitist art movement (Sadler 1999, 20), Situationist ideas made an indelible mark on
their time, particularly in the May ’68 movement in Paris, having formed part of a narrative
concerning a golden era of political radicalism of which Jameson is himself avowedly
nostalgic (Jameson 1984a). Exemplary of the idea of revolutionary praxis—as captured in
Marx’s slogan from his famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that “philosophers have only
interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (1998, 571)—in their
founding manifesto, Guy Debord defined the objective of Situationism as “the concrete
construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior
passional quality” (Debord 1957), with the notion of the situation subsequently defined as “a
moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation of a
unitary ambiance and a game of events” (Anonymous 1958).

Perhaps surprisingly for an art movement, art as an end in itself was in fact of
relatively little interest to the Situationists. Instead, they considered that “[t]he artists’ task
[was] to invent new techniques and to utilize light, sound, movement and any invention
whatsoever which might influence ambience” (Nieuwenhuys 1958), developing their own
applied vision of Lukács’s totality, which they referred to as unitary urbanism and defined as
“the complex, ongoing activity that consciously recreates man’s environment according to
the most advanced conceptions in every domain” (Debord and Nieuwenhuys 1958). Where
Marx had theorized capitalism as alienating workers by dividing their time, the Situationists
extended this diagnosis to space whilst envisioning its eventual overcoming in the creation of
new forms of space in which “separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally
be dissolved” (Debord 1959). Taking as their basic subject “[t]he study of the specific effects
of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and
behaviour of individuals” (Debord 1955), the Situationists may thus be understood to have prototyped the notion of positionality as a critical practice through their development of a variety of artistic tactics, most notably perhaps through their notion of the dérive, a practice of purposefully getting lost in urban space, for example by intentionally following the wrong map. But while cognitive mapping can be understood in relation to this romantic critique of alienation, in formulating the concept, Jameson also drew on the ideas of a somewhat different strain of Marxist thought influential in the period leading up to May ’68, associated with the dour figure of Louis Althusser.
3.4 The Desire to Really Know

O man full of arts, to one is it given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them (Plato 1972, 275).

Louis Althusser was opposed to what he saw as the romanticism of the Lukácsian mode of critique (2005, 221-231) in favour of what he framed as a scientific and “anti-humanist” approach to Marxism. Rejecting any sort of appeal to human nature, he argued that all entities at all scales were in fact merely the product of historical forces that could be understood to actively produce human subjectivity through a process that he referred to as *interpéllation*. In what would become an influential proposition, Althusser rethought the basic Marxist concept of ideology in terms of an active system of representations, as opposed to a veil of illusion, that constituted a kind of interface to the actual conditions of existence, what he called “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1994, 123) without which, he argued, politics of any form would be impossible. According to Althusser, interpéllation involved the subject’s self-recognition as a certain type of person in responding to the address of an ideological authority whose objective was to reproduce itself, thereby reproducing existing social relations. While there were bad ideologies and good ideologies, for Althusser there was however no utopian state of collective being somewhere beyond the reach of ideology—there was, as it were, *no outside*. In order to

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21 It has been noted that there is a logical paradox in Althusser’s concept of interpéllation, as it implies a subject that somehow predates its own existence—otherwise “how does the individual human being recognize and respond to the ‘hailing’ which makes it a subject if it is not a subject already?” (Eagleton 1991, 143).
reveal these ideological authorities at work in culture, Althusser developed a hermeneutical method that he referred to as “symptomatic reading” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 32).  

Concerned with revealing the hidden biases in texts through attention to their gaps and contradictions, with this technique Althusser argued that the idea of representing totality, so central to Lukács for example, was essentially impossible since it would not, in any case, be graspable by the human mind. Following Althusser, Jameson frequently acknowledged the impossibility of totality, referring at one point to cognitive mapping as “a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly un-representable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (1991, 51, emphasis mine) and as an attempt at “systematizing something that is resolutely unsystematic” (ibid, 418). But while claiming to reject the idea of “some privileged bird’s eye view of the whole” (ibid, 340), Jameson’s project is nevertheless unthinkable without the idea of totality—indeed, it has been observed that Jameson’s dialectical thought seems capable of absorbing and resolving all kinds of seemingly contradictory ideas (Tally 2011).

In line with his influential adaptation of Althusser’s symptomatic reading—which set a pedagogical tone in literary theory for decades to come (Hayles 2012, 59)—Jameson would come to apply and develop the concept of cognitive mapping as a kind of hermeneutical method of textual analysis concerned primarily with metaphorical representations of space and positionality, intended “to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century” (1992, 3). As an illustration of how he developed the

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22 Having demonstrated this technique in his reading of Marx’s œuvre, much later in life Althusser admitted to not, in fact, having read many of those same texts (see: Wheen 2008, 107-111).
concept, consider for a moment Jameson’s description of a shot in the American political
thriller film *All the President’s Men* (Pakula 1976), in which the camera slowly zooms out
from a close-up on two reporters attempting to unravel the Nixon Watergate burglary, while
seated amongst countless other researchers under the vaulted dome of Washington’s Library
of Congress. In Jameson’s analysis, the architectural space of the library, as gradually
revealed in the shot, represents the totality of late capitalism, “a system so vast that it cannot
be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with
which human beings normally orient themselves” (1992, 2), while the reporters’ search for
knowledge signifies “the desire called cognitive mapping—[w]herein lies the beginning of
wisdom” (ibid, 3). But while Jameson offers this type of ideology critique as an exemplary
application of the cognitive mapping method, it need be recalled that he also initially evoked
the concept in terms of “*a whole new technology*, which is itself a reflection, or way to deal
with a whole new economic world” (1984b, 58, emphasis mine). Given the enormous impact
of Jameson’s syncretic approach to postmodern theory, as well as the ambiguity of some of
his concepts, it should therefore perhaps not come as a surprise that there exists another
alternative interpretation in which the concept of cognitive mapping is literally identified
with new technology, specifically innovations in mapping aesthetics and interface design for
the representation of dynamic network topologies. Before moving on from the former
allegorical approach to discuss the latter topological approach, we can briefly consider the
American science fiction film *They Live* (Carpenter 1988)—a “self-consciously B-movie”,
set adjacent to the vicinity of the Bonaventure Hotel, that has attained cult status for its
depiction of mid-80s America class politics (Lethem 2010, 55)—as allowing us to speak to
both interpretations of Jameson’s cognitive mapping. In one particularly celebrated sequence
in *They Live*, the film’s protagonist stumbles across a magical pair of glasses that, when
worn, actually seem to position the wearer in relation to ideology; so that, with the glasses on,
the camera assumes the protagonist’s point of view and images on advertising billboards suddenly appear as bold-faced injunctions to “CONFORM, CONSUME, SUBMIT”, and so on. The Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek offers a reading of this sequence as a supposed illustration of the Althusserian concept of ideology, where “[o]nce you put the glasses on and see [ideology], it no longer determines you. Which means that before you see it through the glasses, you also saw it, but you were not aware of it” (2013).²³ Anticipating the geolocative interface design of Google Glass, in which the virtual and real become co-terminus—what the media theorist Paul Virilio would refer to as “stereo-reality” (Oliveira and Virilio 1996)—the glasses in They Live can be thought to provide the film’s protagonist with esoteric insight—they are, in fact, referred to as Hoffman lenses, perhaps in reference to Albert Hoffman, the Swiss chemist who discovered the formula for LSD—while simultaneously functioning to position him in relation to the totality of class relations, in Jameson’s words “endow[ing] the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (1984b, 92).

Drawing on Jameson’s evocation of cognitive mapping as technology, the field of new media theory can be understood to have developed an alternative interpretation of the concept in order to frame critical art practices that attempt to answer Jameson’s question of “where we are” (1992, 3) through the creation of miniaturized topological diagrams of the interconnecting relationships between the power brokers of late capitalism.²⁴ This topological

²³ In what he referred to as a kind of “non-vision […] inside vision” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 21), Althusser argued that looking and seeing were not the same, so that, without ideology critique, one might look without actually seeing.

²⁴ Jameson’s concept has featured prominently in a recent media theoretical exchange between the media theorists Wendy Chun and Alex Galloway (Chun 2004; Galloway 2006a; Chun 2008), although their disagreement arguably stems, in part, from their different interpretations of Jameson’s concept—with Galloway following an allegorical interpretation (Galloway 2013, 54; Galloway 2006b, 18:90), and Chun following a topological
interpretation of Jameson’s concept has been developed by the media theorist Brian Holmes in his well-known promotion of the work of the French critical art collective Bureau d’Etudes, in whose extremely detailed, large-scale information diagrams he argues that “[t]hrough miniaturization, the aesthetics of cognitive mapping becomes a way for an individual subject to grasp the complexity of the networked world” (2009, 53), positioning their diagrams as representative of what he has referred to as “the major intellectual project of the worldwide Left in the 1990s […] to map out the political economy of neoliberal capitalism” (2000, n.p.).

While Holmes may not necessarily claim that Bureau d’Etudes’s diagrams represent totality, the media scholar Richard Rogers identifies their approach with what he refers to as “an outlook that may be called a techno-epistemology, a way of coming to know and making particular claims only with a technological apparatus that desires to grow to satisfy its cravings for ‘really knowing’” (2006, n.p.). Offering a methodological critique concerned with the difference between structure and action, he claims that “it is the format of the map that (dramatically) organizes these networks” (ibid), as opposed to the other way around—a critique echoed by media theorist Alex Galloway, in a direct rebuke to Holmes, with his claim that “the ideological content of the map is ultimately beholden to the affordances and prohibitions of its form” (Galloway 2013, 94). In critiquing this so-called techno-epistemology, Rogers also references a well-known new media critical art project discussed by Holmes, entitled They Rule (On 2004), that maps the overlapping relationships of board members of major multinational corporations, and which has been lauded by media theorists interpretation (Chun 2011, 59-95). We can therefore say that not only is Jameson’s cognitive mapping not cognitive mapping in the conventional sense of the term, as used by experimental psychology, but the new media (topological) interpretation of cognitive mapping is not even cognitive mapping in Jameson’s conventional (allegorical) sense of the term.
as the embodiment of a “new rhetoric of interactivity” (Manovich 2006, 212) and even a new kind of “democratic art” (Sack 2007, 143).

If, as Rogers and Galloway posit, form and format organize and delimit the explanatory power in visual depictions of ideology critique, in looking at software implementations of cognitive maps, we may go further still in speculating on the extent to which our navigating these new topographic landscapes might also be understood as signifying “a process of internalizing and adopting [a] specific philosophical approach to the world” associated, for example, with the object orientated programming language with which many, if not most forms of software are today written, in which “[o]ne conceives of object orientation in spatially embodied terms because the language itself demands it” (Alt 2011, 288). Given the relative ease with which social networking software, for example, allows for an awareness of one’s positionality within a vast networks of relations, the media theorist Wendy Chun claims that the cultural context may therefore be understood to have shifted so dramatically since Jameson initially proposed his concept that, “instead of a situation in which the production of cognitive maps is impossible, we are locked in a situation in which we produce them—or at the very least approximations of them—all the time” (2011, 71).

Chun claims that a certain idea of cognitive mapping has paradoxically become the paradigmatic tool of neoliberal self-governance. Tracing software’s “promise of transparent technologically mediated contact” (2011, 87) back to Douglas Engelbart’s concept of the “augmentation of human intellect” (1962, 91), discussed in Chapter 2, Chun considers Engelbart as having inaugurated a new kind of political subject based on the idea “of users who act and through their actions believe” (2011, 86), leading to “certain expectations about cause and effect […] a way to navigate our neoliberal world […] as an economic game that
follows certain rules” (ibid, 92). Whereas the tradition of liberalism had compelled the individual to act blindly—in which man was supposedly “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (Smith 1981, 456)—Chun claims the situation has reversed today, so that “each individual must ‘know thyself’ and others: he or she is constantly driven to make connections and to relate his or her actions to the totality” (2011, 75). In an apparent attempt to address what is seen by some as the tendency for this Foucauldian type of critique of liberalism to foreclose on the possibility of resistance (McNay 2009, 56; Saïd 2014, 208), in conclusion Chun turns to Situationist-inspired critical art practices as developed by contemporary locative media artists (2011, 95)—thereby repeating an association between locative media and Situationism that has been made as often as it has been criticized (Sant 2006; Tuters and Varnelis 2006; A. Greenfield and Shepard 2007; Mitew 2008; Bleecker and Nova 2009; Flanagan 2009; McGarrigle 2009). From a critique of capitalism to a description of capitalism, debates around cognitive mapping thus provide an object lesson in the valences of critique and its complicated relationship with the idea of critical art practice.
3.5 Conclusion: The Valences of Critique

The trajectory of Situationist discourse—stemming from an avant-garde artistic movement in the post-war period, developing into a radical critique of politics in the 1960s, and absorbed today into the routine of the disenchanted discourse that acts as the critical stand-in for the existing order—is undoubtedly symptomatic of the contemporary ebb and flow of aesthetics and politics, and of the transformations of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia (Rancière 2004, 9).

Considering themselves to be “the last avant-garde, overturning current practices of history, theory, politics, art, architecture and everyday life” (Sadler 1999, 1), a commitment to critique drove the Situationists to gradually abandon their earlier utopian ideas of interventions in favour of a completely conceptual practice (Tuters and Varnelis 2006, 359), anticipating a turn towards the “dematerialization of the art work” (Kwon 2004, 24) that came to characterize much contemporary art in the early ’70s. Whereas, in the late ’50s, the Situationists had imagined the creation of re-enchanted types of urban environments, by the early ’60s they claimed to offer no more than “a critique of urbanism” (Anonyomous 1961), a position that, by the end of the decade, became systematized into a kind of party line amongst Marxist architecture critics, in the assertion “there can never be an aesthetics, art or architecture of class, but only a class critique of aesthetics” (Tafuri 2000, 32). What seemed to contribute to this radicalization of critique was an awareness of the inevitability of critique’s recuperation by increasingly dynamic forms of capitalism.

While the Situationists had theorized their practices as fundamentally oppositional, they did so in relation to a type of capitalism that, as discussed in Chapter 2, arguably underwent a fundamental transformation, having supposedly developed the capacity to integrate, reify and normalize forms of dissent and critique, thereby constituting what Autonomist theorists came to refer to as a “new enemy [that] not only is resistant to the old
weapons but actually thrives on them” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 138). This narrative tends to locate a symbolic defeat of the left as having occurred in the late ’60s or early ’70s, after which point an epistemological rupture took place such that advocates of the strong version of this postmodern periodization narrative are said to believe that “the world changed completely” (Graeber 2008, n.p.)—Jameson indeed pessimistically reads postmodernism as a kind of by-product of the political defeats of that era (1991, 117), an assessment echoed by other prominent contemporary philosophers in the Western Marxist tradition as well (Anderson 1998, 9). Out of this morass of decline and recuperation, Marxism emerges as “the untouched master (of) theory – a tool of diagnosis and analysis that presumes to judge theory and finds it wanting” (Noys 2010, 3).

As typified by Jameson’s project, the legend of the unfulfilled promise of May ’68 was nurtured within Anglo-American humanities departments throughout the ’80s, where it is said to have acquired a quasi-religious tone “written in the demiurgic language of words ending in -ism” (Cusset 2008, 215). Having failed to change the world when it briefly had its chance to do so, within the subsequent “political radicalization of academic discourse” (ibid, 8), Situationism has become canonized as a kind of high-water mark for both critical art and left-wing politics. Its memory is carefully curated, as signifying “the overcoming of separate and specialized knowledge, and has to be recalled in that spirit” (Wark 2011, 3, emphasis mine), as opposed to its misuse and recuperation by a subsequent generation, which “silences, ignores, and forgets (in a sort of pre-meditated amnesia) the profound theoretical and political insights that underpinned these excursions into new forms of urban practice and living” (Swyngedouw 2002, 154). In defending the ongoing radical potential of Situationism against contemporary usurpers, it could be argued that these critics are engaging in what
analytic philosophers refer to as a genetic fallacy, a form of argument based on an appeal to origins, which overlooks how ideas change over the course of time.

Recalling the discussion in Chapter 2 of how the innovation military strategy reiterated pronouncements made by Situationism some thirty years prior, or else the notorious case in which Situationist tactics were purportedly adapted in the development of counterinsurgency tactics to advance troops through urban space by breaking through the interior walls between residential units (Weizman 2006, 56), it might plausibly be argued that, over the course of time, we have learned that there is in fact nothing inherently emancipatory in the tactics and techniques of Situationism. If, as Foucault suggests, “one should totally and absolutely suspect anything that claims to be a return” (2001, 359), then perhaps the defenders of this unsullied exemplar of baby-boom era radicalism might consider that the truest measure of political philosophy’s success—at least from the perspective of realism in statecraft—may lie in its capacity to develop multiple, competing and mutually incompatible valences. While the idea of positionality as a critical practice may once have represented a radical political promise, as no less a figure than Guy Debord himself acknowledges: “[a]vant-gardes have only one time; and the best thing that can happen to them is to have enlivened their time without outliving it” (Debord and Knabb 2003, 182).

In what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière refers to as the contemporary “left wing melancholy discourse” (2011, 40), ’68 is generally looked upon as a failed revolution. The Italian avant-garde architect Andrea Branzi claims that “[i]t was a failed revolution because the political avant-gardes were pitched against the cultural avant-gardes,” adding that, if “[t]he former lost their revolution; the latter (perhaps) won theirs” (2006, 142). While the art critic Benjamin Buchloh has defined avant-garde practice as “the development of new
strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuse of the culture industry to occupy and to control all practices and all spaces of representation” (1984, 21), Branzi identifies a conflict between the goals of avant-garde critique. In the previous chapter, I introduced Boltanski and Chiapello’s theory of a “new spirit of capitalism,” that they periodize as having emerged out of the 1960s and claim co-opted what they call the “artistic critique” of capitalism as a source of inequality (2005, 38). Boltanski and Chiapello’s argument is based on the premise that while there are a number of distinct critiques of capitalism—as a source of disenchantment; as a source of oppression; as a source of inequality; and as a source of opportunism—it is “virtually impossible to combine these different grounds for indignation and integrate them into a coherent framework” (ibid, 38). In what amounts to an analysis of the tendency for leftist critique to be recuperated by its own object of indignation, Boltanski and Chiapello observe that the critique of capitalism as a source of oppression can “gently lead […] towards acceptance at least tacitly of liberalism” (ibid, 39), an argument they illustrate with reference to how the management literature from the ’60s onwards developed a critique of bureaucracy that drew on this particular critique in order to promote a creative and hedonistic new model of work and consumption.

In his critique of critical art, Rancière views the Situationists as the ultimate exemplars of a patronizing pedagogical attitude whose objective is “to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation” (2009, 45). As a former student of Althusser’s, Rancière’s aesthetic theory posits that political regimes duplicate themselves far beyond the normal purview of politics, effectively pre-formatting reality on an aesthetic and experiential level. According to Rancière, then, political regimes rely on a certain aesthetic organization of the world which avant-garde practices—which he prefers to refer to as “the aesthetic regime of art” (ibid,
96

—are capable of disrupting without necessarily appealing to “critical” frameworks. In contrast to the idea of compelling a passive spectator to act against their domination, Rancière proposes an alternative aesthetic theory as a way out of this endless narrative of defeat and recuperation, that posits the innate capacity of active spectators to interpret and therefore transform the world themselves. For Rancière, the real promise of the avant-garde rests in their capacity to reveal the fundamental contingency in how the sensible world is arranged. Based on this premise, Rancière’s approach to aesthetic theory rejects any foundational divisions between the realm of politics and the realm of aesthetics, in order to claim that even the most self-secluding of arts can harbour an innate political promise. Rancière, however, critiques Situationism specifically and “critical art” in general as reproducing a misanthropic model of explication. “There is,” for Rancière, “no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world” (2011, 75), from which perspective, it could be said, that the desire to really know may ironically diminish the difficult work of translating intellectual awareness into political action. Foregrounding the centrality of translation, conceiving politics as an aesthetic activity concerned with the arranging and assembling of spaces, and opposing itself to the supposedly dualistic metaphysics of the critical project, Rancière’s aesthetic theory thus shares a number of post-critical positions with the philosophy of Bruno Latour.

Following a pattern, then, laid down by Situationism, contemporary art theorists often treat “the search for place-bound identity […] as both a compensatory symptom and critical

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25 In developing this alternative aesthetic theory, Rancière draws on Friedrich Schiller’s argument to extend Kant’s idea of the “free play” of the imagination in the contemplation of the sublime into what he referred to as a “play impulse”, which Schiller imagined would liberate humankind from intellectual servitude (Schiller 2012, 76).

26 Within debates in art criticism, Rancière and Latour have indeed been identified with a new post-critical turn in response to “the fatigue that many feel with critique today” (Foster 2012, 6).
resistance” (Kwon 2004, 8) to cultural symptoms of fragmentation and disenchantment, framed—in terms often indebted to Jameson—as manifestations of the underlying pathology of late capitalism. What if, at this point, we were however to look for a second opinion concerning the search for location in a networked age? As with any treatment, no remedy is appropriate for all cases. If in this chapter we have explored a kind of holistic type of remedy, a radical alternative would be to focus attention to the peculiar specificity of the symptoms themselves. What if we were to abandon the search for a global cure, along with its related concepts of late capitalism, postmodernism, dialectical thinking and the spatial turn? Would there in fact be anything at all left in the apothecary? To answer these questions requires a change of cultural diagnostician from Fredric Jameson to Bruno Latour, accompanied by a shift in treatments from what this chapter framed in terms of global positionality to what the next chapter will explore in the framework of *non-local proximity*. 