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**Dialectics of Secular Revelation:
Jameson's Cognitive Mapping Aesthetic, Thirty Years On**
Marc Tuters

Review of Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle (2015) *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Alresford: Zero Books, 311 pp.

How do we, as the increasingly atomized individuals of capitalist societies, formulate a collective relationship to capital when conditions seem constantly to mitigate against such an effort? This is, perhaps, the central question of Western Marxism, a once vibrant tradition of critical thought, for which it has been claimed that the American literary critic Fredric Jameson today stands as the foremost living exemplar (Anderson 1998, 74). In *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Alberto Toscano & Jeff Kinkle take Jameson's conceptual framework to be axiomatic, along with most of the political and philosophical foundation of Western Marxism; and while their intention is not to comment directly on Jameson's hermeneutics, the book could nevertheless be understood as *the* single most sustained response, within the entire field of cultural analysis, to Jameson's challenge, made at the conclusion of his famous essay on postmodernism, that "[t]he 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" (1984, 92). In addition, then, to touching on a few of the book's own unique contributions, in what follows

I will be sketching an outline of a particular discursive tradition with which, I will argue, this book finds itself deeply enmeshed.

Referred to as both his most influential concept (Tally 1996, 399) and his least defined concept (Jameson 1992, *viv*), Jameson initially formulated the notion of cognitive mapping as a kind of metaphorical remedy to his metaphysical diagnosis of subjective disorientation under conditions of late capitalism — as an imperative to represent the hidden totality of class relations through the development of a new aesthetic form. Formulated, in part, as a kind of dialectical response to the epistemological relativism characteristic of intellectual trends in American academia at the time of writing in the mid-'80's, Jameson was also responding to formal preoccupations in the field of architecture, thus orienting much of his analysis to a study of the built environment, which he saw as the "privileged aesthetic language" of late capitalism, due to its "virtually unmediated relationship" to capital (1984, 79 and 56). In essence, Jameson's project could be understood as a continuation of the basic problematic of Western Marxism, as inaugurated by Georg Lukács (1971), concerning the dialectical relationship between, on the one hand, the divisive symptoms of capitalism that result in social class divisions and, on the other, attempts to represent the a priori totality underlying those same processes.

If Toscano & Kinkle's approach can be identified with Jameson, then it can also be counter-posed to the work of Bruno Latour, another highly influential yet very different type of thinker who likewise tends often to be preoccupied with metaphors drawn from cartography. Indeed, the opening chapter of their book puts forward a rather in-depth critique of Latour's incapacity to comprehend the larger dynamics of capitalism from within the bounds of a methodology (derived in part from ethnography) that refuses to accept the a priori existence of any so-called "social explanations" (2005, 1) including, most notoriously, the existence of capitalism itself (1993, 173). Whereas Jameson's cartographic epistemology is an attempt "to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (1984, 80), for Latour "[t]otality does not present itself as a fixed frame, as a constantly present context; it is obtained through a process of summing up, itself localized and perpetually restarted" (2006, NP). While it is perhaps understandable why

Toscano & Kinkle would find Latour's methodological commitment to the small-scale ill-suited given the scale of ambition in *Cartographies of the Absolute*, at the outset of the book their polemical stance against Latour seems to preempt the possibility of exploring more productive tensions in the dialectical relationship between different cartographic modes of thought. Whilst this opening polemic is not necessarily representative of the book as a whole, it does however demonstrate their scholasticist fealty to a particular type of hermeneutics. In conclusion, then, whilst their book is original — even, at times, idiosyncratic — in the way that they have selected their objects of study, I will argue that in terms of their methodology Toscano & Kinkle are, in fact, quite traditional.

Jameson first expanded upon his initial call to develop “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping” (1984, 89) at a famous conference on the topic of “Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture” (Nelson & Grossberg 1988), and then in a book-length version of the postmodernism article in which he described the challenge of cognitive mapping in quasi-gnostic terms as a revelation of “the true economic and social form that governs experience” (Jameson 1991, 411). Jameson was, in effect, writing a kind of artistic manifesto *avant la lettre*, calling for: the development of “a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system” (1984, 58); the development of a pedagogical art-form, whose objective would be “[t]o teach, to move, to delight” (Nelson & Grossberg 1990, 347); but also, calling for experimentation at the formal level, instructing his readers to forget “all figures of maps and mapping” in order to “try to imagine something else” (Jameson 1991, 409). Thirty years later, then, Toscano & Kinkle have set out to assess the extent to which Jameson's call has been answered, producing what amounts to a taxonomy of the “cartographic turn” in the arts of cinema, television, photography, and installation. Matching Jameson in terms of scope, interdisciplinarity and theoretical ambition, Toscano & Kinkle read these cultural artifacts “symptomatically” as material traces of a late capitalist world system in crisis. In separate chapters centered around the critically lauded cable series *The Wire* ('02-'08) as well as the now forgotten genre film *Wolfen* ('81), for example, Toscano & Kinkle read depictions of the decaying inner-city landscapes of Baltimore and New

York City — both, respectively, around the period of a major financial crisis — as commentaries on what Marx called the “vampire-like” quality of capital.

Whilst Jameson was evocatively vague in his initial discussion of the cognitive mapping concept, he would go on to apply the term to describe his own method of cultural analysis, when, in an analysis of 1970s Hollywood ‘conspiracy films’, he stated that “in the intent to hypothesize, in the desire called cognitive mapping — therein lies the beginning of wisdom” (1992, 3). Jameson's approach here was itself indebted to Louis Althusser's technique of symptomatic reading — an exegetical approach to cultural analysis concerned with the “necessary invisible connection between the field of the visible and the field of the invisible” and the “psychological weakness of ‘vision’” (1970, 19) that was also influential in the field of film criticism in the 1970s. Believing capitalism, then, to be the ultimate referent and true ground of being, a kind of actually-existing metaphysics whose fundamental laws could be mapped, Jameson's cognitive mapping method — the fundamental framework for Toscano & Kinkle's whole approach — was therefore to render visible the noumenal economic base hidden in the cultural artifacts of the superstructure.

Referencing a 1928 letter to Henry Ford in which the Colombian poet José Eustasio Rivera claimed that, if rubber could speak “it would exhale the most accusing wail” (193), Toscano & Kinkle discuss, for instance, an approach that they refer to as “materialist prosopopoeia” (43) as a name for a cognitive mapping aesthetic that attempts to show “that the causes of ‘our’ social life [lie] elsewhere, in the processes of extraction, dispossession and subjugation that constitute imperialism and colonialism” (16), discussing, as exemplary, a piece by the British contemporary artist Steve McQueen entitled *Gravesend*, that uses the medium of video installation to portray the commodity chain of rare earth minerals in electronics manufacturing. While attempts at debunking the seeming ‘bargains’ of globalized capitalism has, as of recent times, become a kind of cause célèbre of liberal virtue — with campaigns for ethical consumerism attempting to bring a measure of transparency to the working conditions in Chinese smart-phone factories, and regulatory schemes for corporate social governance seeking, on paper at least, to redress the problem of conflict minerals — Toscano & Kinkle view the former as weak and ineffective

symbolic actions that, in attempting to render commodity chains transparent, paradoxically represent “a new kind of opacity” (201). They are thus fascinated by attempts to render multinational global capitalism visible whilst at the same time being fundamentally suspicious of the contemporary discourses of ethical transparency.

In the same manner that Jameson performed symptomatic readings of 1970s Hollywood conspiracy films as another example of a cognitive mapping aesthetics, Toscano & Kinkle also survey a selection of Hollywood films from the 2010s addressing the global economic crash of 2008 in which they are much less interested in the quality of their narratives than they are concerned with decoding how, for example, in the filmic diegesis, “the inanity of built space (alternating between the triumphant banality of the glass skyscraper and the tawdry iteration of ‘luxury apartments’ and sundry cubbyholes) are ‘realistically’ depicted in these films” (169). According to Georg Lukács — the former theologian, who, as we have seen, may be thought of as a cornerstone in the Western Marxist hermeneutical framework — it is precisely at these moments of transition and crisis that the fundamental gap between the false appearance of things and their underlying reality becomes apparent. While Toscano & Kinkle draw from this framework when they speak of “crisis [as] a... *synthetic rupture*, potentially rendering visible the unity between seemingly disparate domains” (79), they are also critical of what we might call the post-industrial sublime, as for example represented in the photography of Lewis Baltz or Edward Burtynsky, which depict the effects late capitalism has on the built environment and on landscapes. Here, by contrast, they celebrate the works of Allan Sekula, to whom the book is dedicated, as well as those of Harun Faroki, visual artists, both of whom frame and narrativize their own work in critical essays that Toscano & Kinkle celebrate as attempts to rethink visual imagery as indexes of the machinic operations of global-spanning logistical processes — as opposed to naïvely realist modalities of representation.

While Toscano & Kinkle do speak of an idealized “realism shorn of didacticism” (193), as with Jameson’s original concept, their approach to aesthetics seems to value the pedagogical above all else. In so doing they might be said to re-stage the

same relationship of inequality between those who know and those who passively absorb an image, a notion of passive spectatorship that Jacques Rancière (2009) associates with Guy Debord — another Western Marxist figure who stands behind Jameson and Toscano & Kinkle, with Kinkle having, in fact, written his PhD on Debord. Against the ideal of critical art that he identifies with Debord — to “turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation” through “build[ing] awareness of the mechanisms of domination” (2009[2004], 45) — Rancière advocates an approach that appreciates the capacity of art to open up a world of phenomenological experience that reveals the fundamental contingency of how the sensible world is distributed, a political promise that he argues may be contained with even the most self-secluding, and seemingly apolitical, of artworks. Embracing polemics over ambivalence, Toscano & Kinkle’s emphasis on the role of theory in producing univocal symptomatic readings — as well as in their preference for ‘critical’ artists— seems to lead to the conclusion that the aesthetic of cognitive mapping that Jameson had called for some thirty years previously, today finds its realization not in the field of aesthetics so much as in the interpretation of aesthetics in line with the same old framework that had called for the development of a new form of aesthetics in the first place. Within that framework, Jameson had initially conceptualized cognitive mapping as a kind of antidote to his famous postmodern diagnosis of subjective dislocation, in which he announced “a mutation in the object, unaccompanied as yet by an equivalent mutation in the subject” (Jameson 1984, 80). Perhaps then, when, in their conclusion — in spite of the many postmodern equivocations that they, like Jameson, have made regarding the fundamental partiality of perspective — Toscano & Kinkle speak wistfully of a future “politics with a totalising impetus” (241), the ultimate forebear of this call to critical awareness in face of unimaginable complexity might be understood less in terms of Western Marxism than of Kant’s third critique, according to which it is in the ultimate inadequacy of representation, in cartography’s very failure to systematically divide the boundlessness of the absolute, that reason becomes intuitively palpable and, through this critical act, that the individual comes to make sense of her true location in the world.

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Biography

Marc Tuters

As an educator at the University of Amsterdam's department of New Media and Digital Culture, through his affiliation with the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) and as director of the Open Intelligence Lab (oilab.eu), Marc Tuters' research seeks to ground media theory in an empirical engagement with the materiality of new media infrastructure. While his past research contributed to the field of new media art discourse by developing the concept of "locative media", his current work looks at how online subcultures use digitally-native formats to constitute themselves as political actors, with particular attention to the so-called alt-right.