

Theorizing ‘Really Good Maps’ : Cartography and Aesthetic Philosophy

Chelsea Nestel ^a

^a University of Wisconsin–Madison (USA), nestel@wisc.edu

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Aesthetics is implicit in cartography’s claims to disciplinary value. Map success is evaluated on technical *and* aesthetic grounds, for a map that does not follow cartography’s scientific design principles might not seem like a ‘good’ map in certain respects (and maybe not even like a ‘map’ at all). Despite aesthetics’ importance, aesthetics remains controversial within cartography. Some cartographers have a positive view of aesthetics (Kent 2012, Denil 2007) but others have rejected aesthetics as unscientific and hedonic (e.g., Robinson 1952, Woodruff 2012, Cartographic Perspectives 73). Furthermore, cartography *itself* has been critiqued on aesthetic grounds by authors engaging the hermeneutics of suspicion, revealing hidden ideologies within the cartographic ‘mask’ and ‘image’ (e.g., Harley 1989, Wood 2007, Edney 2019). Critics’ concerns with aesthetics are well-founded. What these critiques tell us is that either (a) we should abandon aesthetics in cartography or (b) we should reform it. Option (b) is worth considering.

I argue (b) by examining cartographic writing on aesthetics, cartographers’ critiques of aesthetics, and aesthetic-based critiques of cartography. I focus on aesthetic value, including its relation to ethics (e.g., John 2006, Gaut 1998),* explaining that critiques of aesthetics derive from philosophers’ misunderstanding of aesthetics, namely, that aesthetic value must be based on hedonism (i.e., pleasure or a *finally valuable experience of some kind*; see Lopes 2018). I introduce new developments in aesthetic philosophy regarding normativity (Lopes 2018) and experience (Nanay 2016), discussing through these developments aesthetic concepts such as aesthetic value, aesthetically relevant properties, aesthetic objects and aesthetic attention. Philosophy of aesthetics provides resources for cartography to respond and reform in response to critiques and to argue its value as a discipline making ‘really good maps.’

Cartographic aesthetic commitments are not optional. With or without aesthetic theory, cartographers will engage aesthetically. If cartographers argue they make ‘really good maps’ aesthetic theory matters.

*(Although all aesthetic concepts potentially intersect ethics, value’s association with ethics is strong in the ‘shoulds,’ ‘oughts,’ and ‘musts’ of map design epistemology. Cartography deeply understands the link between aesthetics and ethics in making ‘good’ maps and bases much of its value claim on this understanding, for seemingly superficial design changes on a map – notional differences – are often not notional at all, but essential to a map’s functional success.)

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