

British Library Exhibition: *Maps and the 20th Century: Drawing the line*

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For any fan, expert, or self-proclaimed maps geek (which I imagine includes much of this journal's readership), the current exhibition at the British Library is a major boon. My reason for visiting, (aside from being requested to write this review) is that I am a radical academic with left-wing and anarchist leanings and an interest in critical cartographic theory and radical mapping practices used by social movements.

On entering the exhibition, you are confronted immediately with the kind of juxtaposition of maps which forms a motif of the exhibition. An on-screen real-time digital map shows how visitors are moving around the gallery; then a huge Navy League map illustrates British naval history and glorifies colonial exploits; a gridded cartogram shows a very distorted world, with cells resized according to population, with the most populous areas seeming to swell out. These large wall maps precede a row of vitrines with postcards carefully laid out inside. The postcards hail from all around the world and various eras within the 20th century. The only thing they have in common is that they incorporate maps within their graphic design. The postcards show how maps can be desirable, attractive, humorous or political. The postcards are followed by illustrated musings on the earth-as-globe as symbolic representation of human power through space exploration, as well as helplessness in the face of ecological disaster. The visitor is then led to consider the importance of maps in the rise of car use in the 20th century. Further examples included 3D topographical maps, with a display contrasting a 3D map of Busan in South Korea produced during the 1950s war to support US intervention, side-by-side with one produced for a very different purpose, a Braille map of Southeast Asia.

The atmosphere of the exhibition was quiet and sombre, yet at the same time informal and modern. The exhibition was busy on the Saturday when I visited and I had to wait a few moments at the entrance for the crowd to die down a little. When I got in, it was bustling, but not so busy as to deny a good view of all of the exhibits. Visitors were engaged in quiet contemplation of the maps and reading the text - low chatting, joking and occasional laughter punctuated the mood. The interior design was visually striking and fitting for the theme, with a conventional street-map on the floor and more abstract designs on the wall, including something like map-shaped piping dissolving into dandelion fluff.

There is a very loose thematic structure to the exhibition. 'Mapping a New World' offers an exploration of cartographic technique, issues of representation, the role of maps in colonization of the world by the West, and their use to shape the environment through urban planning. 'Mapping War' comprises maps used in wars around the world including a 1970s relief map of the Arab-Israeli conflict, World War II maps used to plan wars, artistic maps illustrating war themes and propaganda maps designed to incite patriotism. 'Mapping Peace' explores the use of maps to build peace, in post-war reconstruction, their use to help refugees, planning maps and blueprints for a better world such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City plans. The section includes maps of fairyland, a Hiroshima tourist map, and maps from the Greenham Common women's peace camp, with accompanying legal advice for protesters. 'Mapping the Market' section highlights include maps from British Empire trade routes through an Atlantic Pollution Map from 1954. Finally, 'Mapping Movement' includes a bird migration map and a Marshall Islands stick chart from 1900 used to teach navigation, GPS

includes a bird migration map and a Marshall Islands stick chart from 1900 used to teach navigation, GPS maps and maps of borders designed to restrict movement. A selection of London underground maps shows the evolution of the graphic through time.

It should be clear by now that the maps are not placed in any chronological order, surprisingly given that the exhibition title suggests an historical approach. The act of contrasting of very different maps of the same area, often from different eras (within the exhibition's parameters of either end of the 20th century) constitutes the key methodology of the exhibition. I have to admit that I would include myself in the category, identified by the Telegraph's reviewer, of those who 'find the subtle differences between hand-drawn and printed maps of the Saudi Arabian capital absolutely electrifying^[1]', and very much enjoyed thinking through the gaps of representation and differences in signification of different maps. This can lead to profound thought about the ways in which our understanding of the world is structured and limited by, yet constantly overflows, representation and communication. I wondered however if these more profound and philosophical aspects might have been teased out a little more in the exhibition, perhaps by including an account of critical cartographic theory. Such an account, included in the captions or in video documentaries, might also have made the curatorial approach clearer. Many of the key themes of cartographic theory were implicit in the exhibition narrative, but were not drawn out to the extent they might have been. It would have been good to see more interpretation relating to the role of maps in making, changing and shaping the world rather than simply representing it, showing that choices about what is left in and what left out, what made visible and what occluded, are political choices that affect the world, whether in a context of surveillance and control, or one of resistance and radical transformation.

Everyone will have their own favourites in this exhibition. Mine were the Greenham Common women's peace camp maps, the fairytale map and Ebenezer Howard's map of the garden city. These maps spoke to my own academic interests in left-wing radical activism and utopias. The idea of mapping that which does not, or does not yet, exist has a rich and long history. Indeed, there could perhaps have been a whole section on social movement maps and utopian maps that attempt to critique and change the present by visually portraying alternative worlds or futures. This is of course what all maps do – change the world by expressing desire, yet those which are intentionally utopian do so explicitly. An exploration of utopian theory and utopian maps might have brought together some of the key themes of the exhibition, though I may be somewhat biased as an academic interested in utopian maps. As Oscar Wilde said "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing^[2]".

As it stands, the curatorial choices and approach draw the visitor in with great interest, but sometimes seem a little confusing – there was a lot of overlap between the 'War' and 'Peace' sections for example, and also between the 'New World', 'Market' and 'Movement' sections, so it was not always clear at all why any particular map or set of maps was in one section rather than another. For example, it might be a stretch to understand why a tourist map of the Hiroshima bomb damage was included in the 'peace' section. Perhaps this was because tourism tends to arise in peaceful conditions, or might be interpreted as a peacemaking activity, yet one could equally see this map included in the War section as exploring the effects of war. I sometimes felt that the narrative of the exhibition as a whole was not as coherent as it could have been had the curatorial choices and approach been spelled out.

The exhibition is too large to take in during one session. I was beginning to feel in need of a sit down and cup of tea before I had even embarked on the second section. I arrived in the mid-afternoon and as I thought in good time to see the whole exhibition - around 2:45pm. However, it turns out my estimate was optimistic and I did not have the time to give the later parts of the exhibition the attention they deserved. In summary, it's an excellent exhibition, with enough maps for even the most ardent map fan, if too little utopia - and far

too little seating.

1 Mark Hudson (2016) "The maps that charted the 20th century: a beguiling new exhibition at the British Library" The Telegraph, 4 November 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/what-to-see/the-maps-that-charted-the-20th-century-a-beguiling-new-exhibitio/> accessed 20 Nov 2016

2 Oscar Wilde (1891) *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/> accessed 20 Nov 2016