EXTRACTING LANDSCAPE
FROM MAPPING

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I.

The work of a landscape artist is to set a given space/location within a historical, geographical or imaginary context and to construct the visual representation of the space with these references in a privileged moment of time, from a subjective point of view. In that respect, landscapes produced a regime of representation diametrically opposed to maps, whose true function was to establish the abstract image of a given space without any reference to temporality and strip it of any other layers of meaning. Landscape has always been confined to a singular narrative constructed from a subjective point of view, whereas the map has historically been a diagram indicating the location of things in space, as free of any subjective viewpoint as possible.

These two modes of representation coexisted and even collaborated in pre-modern cultures. In their documentary *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China*, David Hockney and Phillip Haas study how these collaborations functioned in Chinese scrolls until the advent of the Enlightenment. In their analysis, Hockney and Haas compare two scrolls depicting two journeys the emperors took towards the southern parts of their empire via waterways: the first between 1691 and 1698, and the second between 1764 and 1770. Once unrolled, the 72-foot long scrolls not only revealed the map of the vast empire, but they also depicted the cities the emperors visited during their tour over the Grand Canal and presented the daily lives of their subjects.[1] Hockney and Haas argue that rather than narrating the daily life of towns, the second scroll, executed seventy years after the first one, intended to incorporate the new perspective techniques borrowed from European painting and more "accurately" depicts places and locations. According to Hockney and Haas, the dissolution of the coexistence of two representational regimes under the influence of Renaissance painting, and the marginalisation of landscape in favour of the map, coincides with the period when the Chinese Civilization began to lose its intellectual curiosity and imaginative richness.

The liberation from the perception of the human eye constituted a major thread in the ontological transformation brought about by modernity, which consequently gave rise to the

1   David Hockney and Phillip Haas, *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China, or: Surface Is Illusion But So Is Depth*, BFI video, 1988.

domination of the representational mode that maps embody. However, we may as well think that rather than making it obsolete or muting it, the transformation that began with photography actually emancipated the other mode of representation embodied in landscape art. Raymond Bellour points to the fact that the popularisation of photography freed painting from mimeticism and made it possible to turn towards abstract expressions.[2] Muybridge's mapping of the movement of bodies in chronological sequences enabled Francis Bacon to reconstruct these bodies beyond their spatial limits in a non-linear progression of time. Mechanical reproduction banalised the images, stripped them off their uniqueness, and placed them among the ordinary objects of everyday life they represented. In return, these increased our distrust towards the banality of everyday appearances, and towards ordinariness itself. It led us to re-consider the pragmatics of images, shifting the artist's focus from the verisimilitude of the representation, to its logic.

In his essay, "Nonindifferent Nature", Eisenstein attempts to articulate the new power that landscape attained in the age of mechanical images by comparing it to a certain qualities in music that escape representational modalities.[3] Music expresses what is emotionally inexpressible by other means, Eisenstein argues, by referring to Wagner's distinction between tonality and speech. Cinema, on the other hand, could only come close to music when it would construct pathos visually, without resorting to the linguistic tools of narration borrowed from theatre and literature, through landscapes. In *Battleship Potemkin*, the mist over the port of Odessa and the dark silhouettes of the ships embodied anxiety and despair, whereas the first rays of the sun penetrating the curtain of fog was, according to Eisenstein, evoking anticipation and hope. Eisenstein's term countered the belief coinciding with the mode of representation of maps, that nature was entirely indifferent to humans and their emotions. In a poetic context, in the realm of aesthetics, nature is never indifferent. Unlike its representation on a map, when nature features in films, it always embraces the event, envelops the emotions concerning that event, and — just as the "symphony of the fog at the Port of Odessa" does — sets the scene for the actions that will transpire within it.

In another period of filmmaking, Jean-Luc Godard said in a voiceover set to grainy highway images recorded by a video camera: "This used to be a landscape; they built a factory over it." [4] Cinema was now superseded by the entertainment industry and public opinion machines, and had lost its landscapes. It had been transformed from an artistic medium into a means of production. Godard asks the child in front of him: "Are you a landscape or a factory?"

II.

This contrast between the two representational systems has diminished with today's digital media technologies, through the subsumption of landscapes by maps. The cumulative effect of Google maps, streetviews, geotags, augmented reality devices, and surveillance cameras, is the superimposition of all possible layers of meanings over "objective" representations of spaces.Yet, the

2   Raymond Bellour, "The Double Helix", in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996), p. 173.

3   Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature: Film and the Structure of Things*, trans. by Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 216–222.

4   Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants, Mouvement 1: Obscur/ Chimie* (Dark/Chemistry), New York, Electronic Arts Intermix, 1978.

resulting spatial abstraction, also stripped off these layers of meaning from the subjectivities they refer to.

Baudrillard talks about how the cultural signifiers – regulated by certain traditional restrictions until that point – spread frantically with the onset of industrial production; in medieval Europe, for example, wearing fur was a sign of nobility. Therefore, no matter how wealthy they were, sumptuary laws prohibited Jews from wearing fur. In addition to the sudden availability of cultural goods made possible with the emerging industrial production, the appearance of money as the arbitrator of all value freed symbols from their restricted economy, enabling them to circulate freely among all social classes.[5] It is possible to speak of a similar frenzy for the economy of images in this age of cell phones. Most importantly, contrary to the work of the landscape artist of the past, picturing the world no longer requires specialised labour, education, or equipment – the device we already have in our palm is ready to capture any moment. Besides, the picture on the cell phone screen embeds the data from the GPS application running in the background and is bound to be uploaded to social networks immediately. No matter how sentimental or personal that picture or landscape may be, independent of the quality and intensity of the emotions it carries, it immediately becomes a part of the database of a world map of infinite depth and scope. Self-portraiture has traditionally been treated as the landscape of the artist's own body in painting, photography and cinema. In the age of the cell phone, "selfies" replace self-portraits and these banal mug shots of "man with a cell phone" compose the anthropo-geographic layers of the digital world map.

Baudrillard referred to the map of empire in Borges's "On Exactitude in Science" (which was equal to the size of the empire in this short story) in his criticism regarding the postmodern regime of representations. For him, the age of simulacrum is characterised by representations that substitute reality without making any reference to it: "[t]he territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it." Yet Gregory Bateson had already claimed before him that there was no absolute and perfect map that could represent the territory as it is: "[w]e say the map is different from the territory. But what is the territory? Operationally, somebody went out with a retina or a measuring stick and made representations, which were then put on paper. What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all. [...] Always the process of representation will filter it so that the mental world is only maps of maps of maps, ad infinitum."[6] Finally, as Baudrillard points out, the question is not how representations began to replace the already unmappable reality, but how one impression of reality becomes established at the expense of all other possible appearances.

III.

In reference to 18th century British Imperialism, says Mathew Edney, "Imperialism and mapmaking intersect in the most basic manner. Both are fundamentally concerned with territory and knowledge." He adds, "The maps came to define the empire itself, to give it territorial integrity

5   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 1.

6   Gregory Bateson, "Form, Substance and Difference", in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 461.

and its basic existence. The empire exists because it can be mapped; the meaning of empire is inscribed into each map." [7] In the book entitled, Empire, Hardt and Negri, criticise the new form of imperialism that emerged in late 20th century.[8] In contrast to 18th century imperialism, the post-Fordist "Empire" is founded on temporal relations within global networks, rather than geographical territories; it appears as a mode of capitalism that expands by colonising everyday life. The digital world map gives us the representational regime of this new form of capitalism. It does not only show us the topography and borders of an intangible geography as such, but also registers the information regarding every movement of every individual living in it and records the image of every landscape they encounter. Without acknowledging their singularity, all these narratives are stored in the same relational database feeding into the overarching "big data", readily available for a variety of algorithmic production processes.

The mechanical production of the image had introduced a new way of perceiving and understanding the world, which would become hegemonic in the following century. In earlier times, understanding the world depended on being able to identify and observe certain "privileged moments" in the flow of events. Things and relations between them unveiled themselves, movements unfolded, nature displayed itself and events were constituted in these privileged moments. The artist's job, then, was to observe and capture these moments, and then reconstruct them in his/her work. Photography, and immediately after, cinema, not only liberated the gaze from subjectivity, but also provided the possibility of recording every moment of every event in sections, and recreating the movement by bringing these sections back together. Prefiguring cinema, Muybridge's photo sequences and Marey's chronographs introduced precisely this new ontological model and represented unfolding of the movement by mapping the time over the moving bodies. From now on, time would flow straight forward, every moment would follow the preceding one without demanding any privileges and cinema would record each moment at equal intervals. The knowledge of the event would be obtained afterwards, by observing and analysing the recording of it.

Art cinema appeared as an intervention against this ontological device, to redeem time from the banality of routines and schedules by reinventing privileged moments with it. From Dadaists and Constructivists to the Nouvelle Vague, cinema verité and experimental structuralist cinema, every film movement has suggested a different method for these interventions. The digital image (and the interconnected geo-location and virtual reality technologies) promise a new ontological transformation, similar in effect to the one cinema introduced in the previous century. Altogether, these offer points of view that no painter or cameraman could ever imagine, and scan the earth in endless detail from a distance that fits into no frame. At the same time, they render every potentially subjective perspective into algorithmic data for processing the layers of a global map.

If we are suffering from the authoritarianism of such a representational regime, we must intervene in this period of transformation with new forms of art that make use of its tools. I believe this is precisely what Murat Akagündüz does in his "Kaf" paintings series – he extracts the landscape, reclaiming it from the digital map so that it might serve new ends.

What Akagündüz accomplishes in these paintings based on the mountain maps from Google

7   Matthew Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 2.

8   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

Earth is the reconstruction of what Francis Bacon did with the bodies he took from Muybridge's photographic sequences, in a different technological and ontological context. Bacon deformed the bodies Muybridge so meticulously mapped, superimposing them in order to break up their temporal linearity, and, as Deleuze wrote in regards to "Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X", he reconstructed them as an "operation through which the entire body escapes through the mouth."[9] This can be perceived as a counterattack on the representational regime of photography and cinema by a mode of representation that can only be made possible through the means of painting. In Akagündüz's earlier landscape series ("Yurt-Anadolu", 2010–2012; "Ankara", 2007–2009) a similar gesture was concerned with photographs of spaces and locations. In the "Kaf" series; however, Akagündüz targets post-photographic images and maps. His intention is not to re-render the topographic details of the mountains and summits that Google Earth maps show in absolute precision onto canvas and re-represent the land in great detail, or, to produce the "representation of representation", as Bateson affirms. The Google Earth view is not the direct reference, but the basic material of a new territory that will be confined only to the surface of Akagündüz's canvas, forever. No longer a part of any digital map and database, this is a new topography applied monochromatically on the bare canvas with white lines and stains. The paintings themselves, on the other hand, are the landscapes the artist redeems from a world that has already been captured from every conceivable perspective.

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9   Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 12.