

SURFACE ORIENTATIONS

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Surface orientations is a concept and methodology for approaching digital modelling and mapping platforms as 'lure for feelings' that intensify experience and provide a form of orientation within these constructed worlds (Whitehead, 1978). They involve a critical distancing from the regimes of visibility embedded within such platforms by questioning the ability to make far away places visible or to make them knowable. They instead emphasise experience and the intensification of narratives related to other possible worlds. A turn to surface resists the volumetric concerns of sensing technologies currently being deployed to colonise further into and beyond our planet, while rejecting technological imaginaries that claim to reveal new depths such as those of the deep ocean. Surface orientations provide another way of apprehending far away places beyond the remote sensed view of satellites while not eliding the computational. In taking a posthumanist stance, surface orientations necessarily involve the production of transversal relations that exceed the affordances of proprietary technology, and explode the myth of a unitary perspective of a planet we all inhabit but experience differently. As a material practice surface orientations takes seriously the question of what a malfunctioning satellite might sense; as a critical practice it might engage with the remote sensed view by exaggerating error and reinserting friction into the smooth experience of zooming in and out of places in platforms such as Google Earth.

Surfaces have always been crucial to the act of mapping and to its politics. Historically, the importance of surfaces emerged in cartographic disputes over the geometries of flattening a sphere onto two-dimensions to produce a navigable territory. The urge to lay claim to the world understood as globe has meant that navigation has always been central to cartography, and cannot be disentangled from colonial invasions and the seafaring voyages of slavery. Such navigation requires an external datum traditionally provided by the horizon or the stars, which, in contemporary times, is provided by the ping of our phones to the satellites orbiting overhead. These offer a relation to a known object from which a position can be triangulated and then pinpointed on an already existing map. Orientation is different, however; it does not require an external datum in the same way. Here, I am thinking with Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation where she writes that bodies and objects are affected by the orientations they take towards each other through sharing space, and that these orientations depend on certain tendencies and social norms. Ahmed is writing about queer lives but her insight into how orientations act both as 'straightening devices' as well as providing 'fleeting moments', where something slips and other inhabitations are possible, is also applicable in relation to digitally produced worlds (2006, pp. 563 & 565). Thus surface orientations offer an alternative to cartographic practices understood through the paradigm of navigation and colonisation embedded in humanist ideas of an externalised and objective perspective.

As visual and spatial practices embrace digital technologies of seeing, the question of how to situate ourselves without the horizon as datum seems to have gone unasked. To map a multiple subject requires a located yet composite point-of-view on a world that, on the one hand gives us information overload, and on the other produces a sense of complete visibility and knowability through forms of data analysis. The challenge posed in the horizonless worlds of platform visibility is that relationships between space and time are to be produced by the viewer (or the user) themselves as they navigate through and across platforms (Mende, 2019). Yet, this navigation occurs in a totalising world that

resists any outside meaning beyond the closed and often obscure circuits produced through the exchange and analysis of data across platforms. Recent debates in visual culture have discussed what a machine or a platform sees (as opposed to what it makes visible). These range from Trevor Paglen's (2014) exploration of machine vision that does not produce images that can be seen by what he refers to as 'meat-eyes', to the question of how visibility transforms in relation to algorithmic production. Here, the notion of 'image ensembles' emerging across hardware, software and various external inputs produces new forms of seeing but also new opacities (MacKenzie & Munster, 2019, p. 6). This opacity sits uncomfortably next to the claim to make far away places visible or to reveal the processes that are producing and transforming territories. It suggests that the pertinent political question may not be what we can see but how we see and what this does to our ability to act. If navigation is a key mode through which we can critically engage with new forms of the visual, then in relation to the image ensembles described above, the question of how to navigate through opacity seems to be crucial, knowing also that opacity is in certain contexts for certain people a mode of survival (Glissant, 1997). Here the notion of surface orientations returns as an embodied form of engaging with the images being produced through remote sensed and other technologies. As computational techniques are becoming malleable and their deployment ranges from the seemingly benign context of agriculture to that of border security, the agency of maps as tools is far from straightforward and they can only be approached as part of an assemblage of humans, technologies and environments.

Surface orientations, then, questions the centrality of a notion of agency in relation to maps that asks quite simply what use-value they have as objects in the world (Corner, 1999). While thinking through the operative nature of maps, mapmaking as surface orientation would consider itself a practice of 'distributed cognition' (Hayles, 2008), as well as questioning mapping as a practice that makes hidden truths visible, or one that bestows agency. Instead, we might approach mapping and visual regimes in their encounter with multiple and contradictory subjectivities, and through their technological, historical and computational complicities. This could allow a form of orientation within what at first sight appear to be the closed and smooth worlds of digital mapping platforms. Along the way some things may become visible or invisible and certain moments of agency might appear, but this mode of thinking and working with maps as visual regimes privileges the production of affective relations and intensities over use-value, in order to glimpse other possible worlds.

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