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Criticism on the Map

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On the evening of November 9, 1989, thousands stormed the entry points of the wall marking the historic split between West Berlin and East Berlin, the archetypal symbol of the bipolar Cold War. Meanwhile, President George H.W. Bush sat with Secretary of State James Baker, fielding questions from reporters in the Oval Office. On his desk, a binder of briefing information was opened to a standard State Department map of Cold War Germany. Throughout the hastily arranged press conference, the president often gestured toward the map, even tapping on it to emphasize his points about a "whole and free Europe" coming to fruition. Yet, even with the momentous news, Bush's mood was famously subdued. CBS reporter Leslie Stahl asked why he wasn't more "elated," and the president replied, "I'm not an emotional kind of guy." A palpable uneasiness hung over what would purportedly be a jubilant celebration of Western triumph. James Der Derian wrote, "Flash back once more to the Berlin Wall, taking its first hammer blows, President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker appearing at a televised press briefing with a map of Germany in front of them, seeking in cartography what they could no longer locate in reality: the fixity of former borders and former times….When events were moving too quickly and too unexpectedly, the map became a more appealing, more plausible home than the world itself."[i]

For Bush, the map provided a sense of certainty, fixity, and truth; it housed the structure of a wall and an accompanying border that had rendered a world recognizable and definable. But his abstract map could not keep pace with real events. Bush's anxiety speaks to the ways in which we critically deal with the abstractions and concretes of public life, for which Robert Ivie

offered a compelling metaphor. Five years after the collapse of the wall, Ivie declared elegantly

in a 1994 editorial that "a complete critique of rhetorical action concerns itself explicitly with the

consequences of rhetorical architecture, revealing not only its components and structure but

alerting us also to better alternatives for constructing our character as a people and for

developing an improved sense of community." That quote contains the mysterious phrase

"rhetorical architecture." Architecture often conjures up the hard materials of steel, concrete, and

marble, shaped into fairly fixed entities that endure weather and wear. At the same time,

architecture connotes the design and the shaping of form and function, and the architect must

also constantly search for alternative structures—the merged art and science of new ways of

building. Rhetorical architecture, then, refers to both the structural elements of discourse and the

realization that those elements are artfully constructed. If architecture shapes the planes and

contours of public space, then rhetorical architecture shapes the planes and contours of public

communication.

Robert Ivie has himself been an architect of our field, one whose building materials and

blueprints have become the inventive resources of a discipline. Ivie's work, so steadily human in

its outlook, has consistently challenged us to search for alternative ways we can both structure

the world and critique its structures, to create what he calls "a body of scholarship especially rich

in its understanding of the symbolic design and dynamics of civic substance." To take such

architecture seriously, I believe that critics must accentuate the tensions, now more than ever,

between time and space, and history and geography—to trace responsibly the hard materials of

the world rubbing up against abstract ideologies. We might seek, according to Peta Mitchell, a

critical approach that "is at all times attentive to the stratification of history, memory, language,

and landscape."[ii] Such stratification reminds us that there must be an important relationship in

our criticism between architecture and mobility. In other words, how do people move through space, mediated by the structures around them? How do the enclosures of our lives envelop, aid, and constrain us? It is easier to use architecture as a kind of sturdy metaphor. But in a time when hundreds of thousands of migrants escaping tyranny and violence run up against barbed wire fences in "politely" authoritarian regimes like Hungary, these movements are also challenging national and transnational structures and the symbolic actions that protect such structures. And when the free movement of black bodies runs up against the bullets of police gunfire, these bodies also collide against the structures of public discourse that censure honest discussion about the nature of mobility and space. In these cases, the x and y axes of structure and mobility seem more relevant than ever. Our critiques need to contend with those tensions between the materiality of bodies and fences, walls and buildings, and the edification of ways we speak about and visualize such materiality.

And while architecture is often steeped very much in locale and place, we cannot afford to ignore the transnational flows between the rhetorical structures of public discourse that we study. For example, Google Earth maps, so different than Bush's simple maps of Germany, have forefronted that transnationalism. A massive corporation creates software that can pinpoint the exact locations of North Korean prison camps and the types of movements its inhabitants make in them, thus transcending, through surveillance, the accepted national structures of sovereignty. On one hand, international social justice groups can then use this software to spatialize these camps and advocate for change in global human rights. On the other hand, the corporate creators mimic the function of a nation by traveling to North Korea to open up markets despite the human rights violations their very technology can indict. Our critiques of "rhetorical architecture" need

to account for these new fluidities, as well as the fact that real humans still languish in confining structures on the ground.

Perhaps my favorite sentence of Ivie's editorial is the simple "Yes, we take the social significance of symbolic action seriously." It is the "YES," punctuated by the seriousness at the end of the sentence that commands the reader, as if Ivie needed to re-assure himself and his audience of rhetorical critics that we were in this *deep*. Ivie's emphasis on the serious nature of critical work never succumbs to lofty pontification about a critic's worth—he simply reminds us that, as critics, we have to reaffirm a promise to responsibly seek the alternative in constructing something better and more human. But in Ivie's spirit of self-reflection, there are new complexities in the structures of public life, particularly those that blur the lines between abstract and concrete, and national and transnational—it is as if we ourselves are looking down and tapping at the old map, preparing for the realities of the new map that is coming.

NOTES

[i] James Der Derian, "'All But War Is Simulation,'" in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, eds. Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (London: Routledge, 1998), 261.
[ii] Peta Mitchell, "'The Stratified Record Upon Which We Set Our Feet': The Spatial Turn and the Multilayering of History, Geography, and Geology," in *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, edited by Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria, and Douglas Richardson (London: Routledge, 2000): 77.