Topographies
of Popular Culture

Topographies of Popular Culture

Edited by

Maarit Piipponen and Markku Salmela

Topographies of Popular Culture

Edited by Maarit Piipponen and Markku Salmela

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2016 by Maarit Piipponen, Markku Salmela and contributors

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION:
IMAGINING POPULAR CULTURE SPATIALLY

MAARIT PIIPPONEN AND MARKKU SALMELA

Popular narratives often launch themselves, temporally and spatially, *in medias res*; perhaps the same strategy is fitting for a book that explores the topographical patterns of such narratives. In *Elementary*, a recent Sherlock Holmes television series produced by American television company CBS (2012–), the iconic detective has moved from London to New York in order to recover from his drug addiction. With its twenty-first-century American setting, the adaptation marks a spatiotemporal departure from the Holmes stories' original locale, Victorian London. This transatlantic travel and departure signifies a circulation, layering and sedimentation of space, time and narrative, as the series reproduces English space within New York in several ways. Among other things, the set design conveys a sense of Victorian time and space, a network of associations, and invites the viewer to compare and contrast: the nineteenth-century brownstone where Holmes now resides in New York, with its darkness, decay, peeling paint, leather furniture, fireplace and old carpets, reconstructs old times and thus transports the viewer to another place, another time – Holmes's original "home," 221b Baker Street, London. The brownstone – an English island within New York – stands in opposition to the many (hyper)modern flats and offices of the series' American characters; its interior space is also markedly different from the flat into which Watson, now a modern Chinese American woman, moves during the third season. It would not be too far-fetched to argue for some temporal congruence between house and character – between the resilience of a nineteenth-century brownstone in a modern metropolis and that of a literary character dating back to Victorian times – or even for spatial congruence, between domestic and psychological interiority.

The idea of English insular space is strengthened by *Elementary*'s representation of ethnicity, as Holmes is relocated outside Britain's borders but, nevertheless, attached to a specific ethnic group and cultural identity in a multiethnic American setting. Holmes's Englishness (and his

outsider position as an eccentric detective) is delivered on various levels: factors evoking Englishness or English space include some cultural signifiers relating to the performance of Englishness such as drinking tea or the English accent employed by the actor playing Holmes, Jonny Lee Miller. In addition, Holmes's preference for vests and jackets, his recollections of London and visits by Holmes's brother and father all contribute to the creation and mediation of English cultural space in the series. While the old brownstone and reconstruction of Englishness anchor the series in Doyle's Victorian stories and their locale, the conventions of American televisual detective dramas – especially diversity casting and seeming gender equality – and the presence of modern communication technology connect it to the contemporary world, its global consumer culture of adaptations and localisations. (In this volume, Birgit Neumann and Jan Rupp explore other manifestations of Sherlock Holmes's extraordinary journeys across different media and around the globe.)

As a detective series, *Elementary* is based on formulaic story patterns and character types; it also has mass audience appeal with its millions of viewers, so it could be called a popular detective drama. But what do we mean by "popular"? The concept of the popular has proved to be difficult to define, especially in the contemporary period, as it covers diverse fields from music to TV, from radio to comics and from vlogs to video games and fan fiction. In cultural criticism, depending on the chosen theoretical approach – from the Frankfurt School to postmodernist analyses and beyond – it has referred to folk culture, mass culture, subculture, counterculture, commercial culture, and so forth. The popular is a site which continues to have huge social, economic and ideological significance on local and global scales. It is little wonder, then, that as a field, the popular has often been argued to be about the exercise of power and domination (the spatial metaphor of high/low culture is a good example of this) and, broadly speaking, it can be said to refer to those dynamic spaces where the "struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged" (Hall 71). Dimensions of ideology, power relations and cultural negotiation are aspects of popular culture that some of the chapters in this book explicitly discuss.

Popular series like *Elementary* belong to and draw on larger genre frameworks and thus they are based on history, tradition and convention; however, their ability to attract audiences also depends on the renewal of genre conventions. Genres are crucial "to the social struggle over meanings" (Frow 10) and their conventions can be "mobilized to inspire" specific affects (Nguyen and Tu 9) and expectations in consumers, including expectations regarding setting and location. In this context, it is

worth emphasising that popular texts construct and offer specific subject positions to their readers or viewers; often a particular audience is already inscribed into the texts as they are being produced. In addition, as Jason Dittmer remarks, popular culture is important because through it "people come to understand their position both within a larger collective identity and within an even broader geopolitical narrative" (626). In this sense, the popular combines the social and the spatial to enable meaningful cognitive mappings in a world that has arguably kept increasing in complexity as one stage of modernity has followed another (see Jameson). Even the very act of reading is intertwined with location, as Dittmer and Klaus Dodds observe: "The agency of the audience is, in many ways, structured by the space(s) in which texts are read. Thus, the audience is constrained by its social location to interpret a text using only the cultural meanings available in that location" (449). Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes stories transmitted a sense of Britain's imperial might to their British readers through a local magazine. In *Elementary*, the significance of London, the centre of the former British Empire and focal point of the Holmes narratives, has been diminished; in its place stands a modern American metropolis, New York, familiar to global audiences from countless films, television shows and detective fictions.

In *Topographies of Popular Culture*, we agree with the idea that popular culture is "in part constructed by the very act of theoretical engagement" (Storey 11) and that "the popular" is an unstable term in itself (Lehtonen and Koivunen 28). While the book chapters might theorise and approach the popular in differing ways, they specifically emphasise the interconnectedness of popular culture, space and location. *Topographies of Popular Culture* investigates this theoretical and thematic junction in a broad variety of geographical contexts, and it is this global scope that represents something genuinely new in studies of popular spatialities. While a number of previous studies exemplify the steadily growing scholarly interest in spatiality and popular culture, they tend to focus on one specific geographical context, field, genre, spatial concept, or social group. In contrast to such studies, our book combines the study of popular culture and space with a great range of settings – from India and Palestine to former East Germany and Middle-Earth – and genres (both literary and visual).

From nineteenth-century industrialisation to the rise of mass culture and later economic and cultural globalisation, popular culture has been produced, distributed and received in different sociohistorical and political conditions as well as locations. Russia offers a recent example of how economic and political changes can affect the status of popular genres and

materials: popular fiction gained a new cultural position after the introduction of the post-Soviet market economy in the 1990s, challenging "good" literature and highbrow culture (Marsh 73–102). In contrast, in the USA, the role, history and status of popular genres, texts and media have followed a different trajectory. The contemporary era has witnessed an increasing globalisation, digitalisation and cultural borrowing of popular texts, their simultaneous consumption in various parts of the world, and the emergence of interactive modes of production. As for cultural borrowing and adaptations, space and location matter in specific ways. As an American television series, *Elementary* recreates a sense of Englishness and English space, but several other detective dramas have opted for alternative solutions, such as localisation. Examples include the Swedish-Danish series *Bron/Broen* (2011–), which was adapted to explore border dynamics between the USA and Mexico in *The Bridge* (2013–14). With television programme formats, such import and localisation have already become a typical aspect of cultural globalisation: formats from *Survivor* to *Idol* and beyond have been adapted to attract different national audiences and local markets. Such transpositions involve an act of translation that has to be sensitive to spatial issues and the cultural geographies of specific localities. As the two *Bridge* series attest, the national border between the cities of Copenhagen and Malmö represents a cultural boundary very different from the one that lies along the Rio Grande between El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

The central idea of *Topographies of Popular Culture* – complex in its simplicity – is that popular culture always *takes place* somewhere. By studying the spatial and topographic imaginations at work in popular culture, the book identifies and illustrates several tendencies that deserve increased academic attention. The first of these is *the intertwining of the spatial and the generic*. As several chapters in this book point out, often a topographic or cartographic configuration is already implicit in a given genre, and vice versa. The second is *imaginative border crossings* at several levels: spatial conceptions may be transmitted within or between individual texts and genres, from one geographical entity to another, between fantastical realities and the material world, or across media. Finally, this book highlights some ways in which topographies of popular culture are *both global and specifically local*. The scope of the book is thus broad and its chapters analyse the spaces of popular culture at a scale that extends from an individual's everyday experience to genuinely global questions.

There are common theoretical concerns running through the volume, perhaps the most significant of these being a sustained approach to real-

world geopolitics and place-bound identities as reflected in popular texts. This geopolitical emphasis is particularly strong in several chapters that explore concrete and metaphorical manifestations of east-west relations and other dimensions of geographically anchored self-other patterns. The chapters touch upon the full range of the popular geopolitical imagination from the alternative worlds of fantasy to the everyday perspectives of contested geographical zones in our physical world. A number of questions that often feature centrally in academic treatments of geopolitics are investigated here; these include the dependence of ideas about different parts of the world on visual images, whether they are maps or panels in a graphic novel. Another crucial concern reflected is how the epistemologies of power and space are intertwined with problems of changing, unstable or externally defined identity. In many ways, these same concerns also inform the rest of this volume, as engagement with a range of political questions, from local to global contexts, seems at least implicit in topographies of popular culture everywhere.

Geopolitics represents a facet of spatial conception that features prominently in world news, but another major emphasis emerges in chapters whose topics are centred on a single national framework: the interconnectedness of local patterns of representation and consumption with global cultural and economic networks. The spatial dimensions of domesticity and the contexts of consumption are highly important in any comprehensive look at popular culture. Despite the significance of domestic practices, the economic networks underlying basic consumerist acts, such as the purchase of a movie ticket or a comic book, are potentially global – and so are the topographies they mould. The capitalist marketplace represents perhaps the only worldwide framework for investigating the ways people read, watch and consume. Indeed, the public image of the (middle-class) home and its extensions, the prime sites of consumption, often reflects a set of near-universal qualities that can be expressed and ironised via popular genres. As Saara Ratilainen's chapter in this book illustrates, the very idea of consumption is equally open to satire, manipulation and various metaphorical treatments.

All the chapters in this volume theorise the popular and assess its social and ideological significance in different contexts. By employing both "classical" spatially informed theories (such as Michel Foucault's and Edward Said's) and a number of recent insights (such as the geocritical perspectives of Bertrand Westphal), *Topographies of Popular Culture* illustrates how the most fundamental meanings of popular culture often emerge from its spatial and geographical dependencies. Most of the contributors to this book also have a background in literary studies. Their

investigations of space as represented in a range of cultural texts demonstrate the general applicability of theories developed, in the last few decades, as literary studies and human geography have joined forces in an effort to understand fiction through geography, and geography through fiction. This confluence – whether one calls it literary geography, geocriticism, literary cartography, geopoetics, or something else – has created "one of the more striking manifestations of the ongoing spatial turn in the arts and humanities" (Alexander 3). Robert Tally, one of the most prominent practitioners in this academic field, summarises the disciplinary territory well in his book *Spatiality*, both providing an outline of central approaches and illustrating how they can be functionally combined. The spatial turn, as Tally argues, is "a turn towards the world itself, towards an understanding of our lives as situated in a mobile array of social and spatial relations that, in one way or another, need to be mapped" (16–17). Perhaps paradoxically, popular culture agrees well with this concern for "the world itself," its consumption being part of the daily lives of billions of people. Geocritical practices, the new methods of literary urban studies and other insights about space developed within literary studies are fully applicable to the world of popular culture. In fact, their relative focus upon realities and materialities creates a certain natural affinity with genres that are definable through the idea of consumption.

Robert Tally's chapter on Tolkien's literary cartography examines the "geopolitical fantasy" produced by Tolkien and the film adaptations by applying Jameson's "cognitive mapping on a global scale" to the world of fantasy. Looking at *The Lord of the Rings* films (2001–03) in particular, the chapter argues that Tolkien's literary cartography in the fantastic mode makes possible a rethinking of our own "real," all-too-real, world – an objective that the films, perhaps, ultimately fail to reach. Ranthild Salzer's chapter, concerned with a different dimension of geopolitics, discusses the graphic narrative's potential for creating both symbolic and actual spaces for the immersion of its readers. This is illustrated via a close reading of Joe Sacco's work in comic journalism, *Palestine* (2001), which employs specific techniques to allow readers to locate themselves in relation to the narrative and the highly charged situation between Israelis and Palestinians. In this analysis, theories of graphic narratives are combined with Said's and Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial insight to show how the text encourages negotiation rather than negation.

Markku Salmela's chapter explicates some ways in which the American-style suburb has been understood as a scene of constraint and social confinement, a predicament often expressed in relation to conspicuous consumption. The extent to which the stereotypical suburban

topography can be seen to reflect, and interact with, principles of the global marketplace is examined through examples from various popular texts, including an episode of *The Simpsons*. In addressing the "discontents" of suburban consumerism, Salmela's chapter seeks to demonstrate the intertwining of economies and topographies at multiple levels. On the other hand, Saara Ratilainen's chapter on post-Soviet Russia analyses images of glamour and wealth and their spatial dependencies in Viktor Pelevin's popular vampire story *Empire V* (2006), in which the ideology of consumption comes to define sections of contemporary Russia. Building upon a number of genre-based and socio-historical considerations, the chapter argues that the novel's consumer fantasy ultimately seeks to overcome the idea of post-Soviet commercialisation as a cultural rupture.

Each of the final six chapters involves some notion of the East and the West interacting, forming and informing each other. Dealing with items as different as journalistic first-hand reports, mainstream Hollywood movies and iconic literary figures, this group of chapters demonstrates and examines the diversity of popular culture's spatial conceptions. The topics reflect a broad spectrum of culturally saturated spaces ranging from ships to islands and from slums to mythical deserts. Despite the variety of the topographies examined, what they all have in common is incompatibility with static, ahistorical notions of space. Instead, they encourage an understanding of spatiality as an open-ended process, where conflicted and contradictory impulses coincide and overlap. A good example of this is the construction of "criminal spaces" through existing power structures and social divisions: crime narratives are characterised by increasing cultural complexity, affected as they are by cultural exchange, transcultural zones as well as temporally and spatially specific reproductions.

In his chapter, Withold Bonner observes that the GDR has been conceptualised as an extremely terrestrial society, in whose symbolic lexicon, nevertheless, ships and the sea have played an important role. The chapter focuses on *Captors and Captives* (1983), a first-hand report by GDR-author Landolf Scherzer on the life aboard a deep-sea fishing vessel. The first-hand report is here understood as a specific utterance of popular culture, which offers a point of contact and friction with the traditions of socialist realism. In the context of a state where travelling was severely restricted, the ship transgressing the state's borders assumes the function of Foucauldian heterotopia, as might already be inferred from the title of the book. Whereas ships (and heterotopias in general) may be conceived through the notion of insularity, Johannes Riquet focuses on explicit island fictions in his chapter, aiming to sketch a geopoetics of the island, a

frequent and often hauntingly powerful topos in popular culture. He discusses representations of the island "as a spatial rendition of a state of crisis" in two films, *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) and *Skyfall* (2012). Islands have often figured culturally as sites of domination, desolation and extinction, and these films creatively draw on previous island stories, attaining much of their impressiveness and authority in that transformative process of borrowing. In Riquet's analysis, the island is established as a site of conflict and sedimented, intertextual knowledge, where different ideas of "island-making" clash.

Raita Merivirta examines the construction of Calcutta and slum space in her chapter on Ronald Joffé's film *City of Joy* (1992). The chapter explores the ways in which the film portrays Calcutta's topography of poverty and discusses some of the connections between slum films and slum tours. Merivirta argues that poverty in this film becomes a landscape for the global audience to look at, a background whose constituent parts and reasons for existing are never examined. Furthermore, she suggests that by portraying Calcutta, and by extension, India, as a slum-city, home of the poor, the film presents City of Joy/Calcutta/India as a prime location in which a Westerner can practice charity and where s/he can find "enlightenment" through that work.

Birgit Neumann and Jan Rupp also touch on India during their investigation of the interactions between seriality and the formation of spaces in the Sherlock Holmes stories and their various adaptations and remediations – literary, televisual and filmic – around the world. The chapter proposes that the dynamics of seriality at work in popular culture fundamentally affects the construction of space and allows for the continuous recall, adaptation and revision of spatial imageries. The concept of imaginative topographies provides one major framework through which these issues are theorised.

In examining Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), Irina Kabanova engages with another iconic figure familiar from the world of cinema. The chapter studies the hybrid and multilayered textual and national spaces in Puzo's novel through Bertrand Westphal's geocritical methods, foregrounding the notions of intertextuality and reterritorialisation. Kabanova argues that these are intimately interconnected: the novel's construction of intertextual space is reflected in how the novel represents the USA as a society permanently absorbing challenges from different immigrant cultures. The focus in Maarit Piipponen's chapter is on the (in)famous Charlie Chan detective series created by American writer Earl Derr Biggers. Through studies on American expansionism and the American West, the chapter addresses the construction of national,

colonial and gendered spaces in the Chan series. In particular, the chapter claims that Biggers not only creates a hybrid generic space in his novel *The Chinese Parrot* (1926) in order to address the (male) pleasures and anxieties of modern times but that he also offers the West as a setting for white remasculinisation.

Although the territories, landscapes, urban spaces and communities typical of popular genres are not easily summarised, this volume as a whole presents strong evidence that one route to their legitimate analysis runs through various notions of replication and borrowing. The figure of the island, the geopolitics involving the self and the other, the collective image of the standardised suburb, and fictional journeys that repeatedly operate with similar identity-related motifs are all examples of the seemingly endless potential for recycling in popular narratives. Such recurring patterns may in fact be an important antidote to the disorienting complexity of the (post)modern, globalised world. Perhaps the comfortingly ordered and predictable non-places of our environment, and their representations in popular culture, serve an important function in alleviating the sense of rootlessness or disorientation that twenty-first-century travellers may commonly experience. In this digital age, the local and the global are indeed often hardly distinguishable. Some popular texts, then, may be like the familiar multinational fast food chain that promises much the same experience, and taste, anywhere in the world. And others, as the chapters in this volume prove, are both the burger joint and the mind-bending local delicacy at once.

Works Cited

Alexander, Neal. "On Literary Geography." *Literary Geographies* 1.1 (2015): 3–6. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

Dittmer, Jason. "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95.3 (2005): 626–43. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Dittmer, Jason, and Klaus Dodds. "Popular Geopolitics Past and Future: Fandom, Identities and Audiences." *Geopolitics* 13 (2008): 437–57. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Elementary. Writ. Robert Doherty. Perf. Jonny Lee Miller, Lucy Liu. CBS, 2012. Television.

Frow, John. *Genre*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular.'" *Popular Culture: A Reader.* Ed. Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz. London: Sage, 2005. 64–71. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. "Cognitive Mapping." *The Jameson Reader*. Ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 277–87. Print.

Lehtonen, Mikko, and Anu Koivunen. "'The Popular' Revisited: From Theory to Meta-theory." *Senmoderna reflexioner: Festskrift till Johan Fornäs*. Ed. Erling Bjurström, Martin Fredriksson, Olf Olsson and Ann Werner. Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012. 25–33. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Marsh, Rosalind. *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991–2006*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.

Nguyen, Mimi Thi, and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu. "Introduction." *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*. Ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 1–32. Print.

Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. 4th ed. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2006. Print.

Tally, Robert T., Jr. *Spatiality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GEOPOLITICAL AESTHETIC OF MIDDLE-EARTH: TOLKIEN, CINEMA AND LITERARY CARTOGRAPHY

ROBERT T. TALLY JR.

In a querulous 1958 letter, J. R. R. Tolkien presented his meticulous comments on a draft "story-line" of a proposed film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*.[1] Tolkien's irritation is palpable as he details the misrepresentations, misreadings and outright mistakes in the "treatment." Tolkien concludes that the writer of this unacceptable vision of the popular novel is "hasty, insensitive, and impertinent" (*Letters* 266).[2] Lest one assume that the great Anglo-Saxon philologist and medievalist was merely opposed to the modern medium of cinema or to adaptations of books into

---

[1] A slightly different version of this chapter was published, in Russian translation, in the collection *Topografii populjarnoi kul'tury*, ed. Arja Rosenholm and Irina Savkina (Moscow: NLO, 2015).

[2] See Tolkien, *Letters* 266. The mistakes identified by Tolkien are so numerous that the editor of Tolkien's *Letters* limited himself to "some extracts from Tolkien's lengthy commentary on the Story Line," rather than reprinting the letter in full. The errors are illuminating, as are Tolkien's "corrections." For example, referring to the writer (Morton Grady Zimmerman) as "Z," Tolkien asks, "Why does Z put beaks and feathers on Orcs!? (*Orcs* is not a form of *Auks*.) The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the 'human' form seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types" (*Letters* 274). As I have pointed out in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Orcs," this is Tolkien's most explicit description of the appearance of Orcs and his definitive statement on the nature of this "race."

movies, it should be noted that Tolkien was initially enthusiastic about the prospect of a film version of *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, he did not see any particular reason why a film could not reasonably approximate the same power and effects as would stories delivered in the form of an epic or a novel. As he put it, "[t]he canons of narrative art in any medium cannot be wholly different; and the failure of poor films is often precisely in exaggeration, and in the intrusion of unwarranted matter owing to not perceiving where the core of the original lies" (*Letters* 270). Tolkien himself believed that, in the hands of a filmmaker of sensitivity and skill, the vast world of Middle-earth could very well be rendered visible on the big screen.

Fans of Peter Jackson's wildly successful *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy might agree that the spirit of Tolkien's original does come through on screen, although detractors would smile to hear Tolkien's complaints, since some of the most stringent critiques of these films centred on the filmmakers' decisions to alter Tolkien's story, either by cutting memorable scenes and characters (most notoriously, perhaps, the elimination of Tom Bombadil), inserting or exaggerating the role of others (for instance, with the enhanced presence of Arwen Undómiel) or inventing new storylines entirely (Elves of Lothlórien fighting at Helm's Deep, Faramir taking a captive Frodo and Sam to Osgiliath, and so on). In "Mithril Coats and Tin Ears: 'Anticipation' and 'Flattening' in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy," eminent Tolkien scholar Janet Brennan Croft analyses a number of the differences (see Croft). Yet, apart from the fiercest purists, most moviegoers have been struck by how effectively, if not always faithfully, Jackson's films have re-created the world of Middle-earth in all its diverse majesty. The sometimes breathtaking visual imagery and landscapes, perhaps even more than the compelling characters and epic narrative, render Tolkien's Middle-earth "real" in a way that for many viewers matches the power of the original texts. A large part of the films' success lies in their capacity to make visible the geography of Tolkien's world, broadly conceived, which then lays the foundation for the geopolitical aesthetic of the narrative.

In his foundational study of Tolkien's work, *The Road to Middle-earth*, Tom Shippey has argued that *The Lord of the Rings* developed in relation to a fundamentally "cartographic plot." Unlike *The Hobbit*, with its simpler political geography, *The Lord of the Rings* establishes an entire geopolitical world system in which the narrative elements – Frodo's quest, Saruman's treason, Aragorn's reclamation of his birthright, and so on – unfold. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the literary cartography of Middle-earth is the principal aim of the narrative. In my view, Tolkien's

generic or discursive mode might be labelled "geopolitical fantasy," and the projection of an imagined global system, complete with diverse languages and cultures, deeply historical and unquestionably political, in some respects resembles a sort of cognitive mapping in which the individual subject attempts to represent figuratively a social totality that gives form to both subjective experience and objective reality. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this attempt at mapping involves the sometimes conflicting perspectives of an individual subject on the ground, as it were, and the panoptic or god-like view from above.

Starting from Tolkien's own text, we can see the ways in which Jackson's film trilogy adapts, translates and in some ways enacts the geopolitical aesthetic of *The Lord of the Rings*.[3] Drawing upon Fredric Jameson's call for a "cognitive mapping on a global scale," and particularly his reading of cinema and space in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, I would argue in this chapter that the overlapping narrative spaces of the novel and the films enable readers or viewers to envision a kind of global totality that might not always be available to them in narratives produced in a more strictly mimetic mode. In *Spatiality* and *Utopia in the Age of Globalization*, I have suggested that the fantastic mode is a necessary element of literary cartography, a process by which writers and readers project imaginary maps of their world. As Tolkien discussed in "On Fairy-stories," this is the vocation of fantasy: to produce imaginative cartographies of a world. However, the cinematic rendering of Tolkien's particular Otherworld in Jackson's film trilogy effectively undermines the force of Tolkien's literary cartography by reducing its variety and nuance to an artificially simplistic image. The movie version of *The Lord of the Rings* also engages in a form of imaginative cartography, but it produces a very different map, with rather different results.

In this chapter, I would like to begin by looking at this "cartographic plot" in Tolkien's work, which forms the basis of visual text in *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. Then, using the bizarre image of Sauron as a disembodied eye as a metaphor for the films' geopolitical aesthetic, I examine Jackson's "scopic drive" in recasting Tolkien's subject-centred

---

[3] Filmmaking is a vast, collaborative endeavour, and even in the case of the *auteur*, it is probably misleading to name the director as the "author" of the film. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will use "Peter Jackson" as the code-word or sign that indicates the collective creators of *The Lord of the Rings* movies, understanding always that screenplay writers (including Jackson himself), cinematographers, special effects wizards, producers, actors and others have also stamped their subjectivity upon the final product under consideration.

itineraries and viscerally perceived landscapes as distant panoramas or bird's-eye-view representations. Following Jameson, I discuss the ways in which this formal or aesthetic feature comes to reproduce a sort of sociopolitical content in the guise of a conspiracy, by which the seemingly random or chaotic elements of a shifting geopolitical balance of power becomes somehow "knowable" through a reduction of elements, not entirely unlike the graphic processes used in cartographic art and science. Finally, I examine the effect of this erasure of nuance on the work of art itself, as the epic and novelistic features of Tolkien's narrative are subjected to a profound levelling effect. In this way Tolkien's thoroughly modernist novel gives way to a postmodern cinematic cartography of the twenty-first century world system, albeit in an uncertain and tenebrous figuration as a place in which "even the very wise cannot see all ends" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 65).[4]

For the purpose of this argument, I focus only on Jackson's original *Lord of the Rings* trilogy – *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003) – and I do not discuss *The Hobbit* trilogy (2012–14), although some of my arguments may also apply to the latter. One reason for my decision not to consider *The Hobbit* is that, at the time of this writing, the third and final film had yet to appear. However, *The Hobbit* may be safely placed outside of the discussion for more substantive reasons as well. For one thing, the attempt to create a prequel trilogy *à la* the *Star Wars* franchise required an eccentric, spatiotemporal reversal of Tolkien's own narrative and geographical project. That is, whereas the original novel of *The Hobbit* provided a glimpse into the world of Middle-earth, the literary cartographic project of that novel was rather limited in scope. As I discuss below, *The Hobbit* included very few toponyms, as most of the identifiable places on the map were given merely descriptive names, labels that in some respects concealed the deep historical and philological roots of their referents. What is more, as becomes clear only with the sequel *Lord of the Rings*, published 17 years later, *The Hobbit*'s story takes place only in the northern part of Middle-earth, and almost no attention is paid to the vast southern and eastern territories in which the adventures of Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippen take place. By operating as it were in reverse, the

---

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations of language from *The Lord of the Rings* come from Tolkien's novel, not from the films, and are cited by title of the respective volume (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*).

filmmakers had already transformed the real and imaginary geography of New Zealand into Tolkien's Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings* films, so *The Hobbit* trilogy had to be reconstructed on top of the already existing map. By attempting to retell the smaller tale according to the plan of the larger, the filmmakers have resorted to the sort of narrative trickery that Tolkien bemoaned in the aforementioned letter. Thus, for my purposes, the "world" depicted in the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* is already established before *The Hobbit* was conceived, as strange as that sound to readers of the novels.[5]

Tolkien's Cartographic Plot

As noted above, *The Lord of the Rings* can be said to have developed in relation to a fundamentally "cartographic plot" (see Shippey, *Road* 94–134). Although an actual map is crucial to *The Hobbit*'s narrative, with Thrór's Map providing the motive force behind the quest of Thorin and Company, that novel included surprisingly few distinctive toponyms. That is, the place-names in *The Hobbit* are largely descriptive: geographical features like mountains, forests, rivers and lakes are given names like the Misty Mountains, Mirkwood (formerly Greenwood, until it became murky), the River Running or the Long Lake. Proper names are largely reducible to descriptions: Hobbiton is a town populated by Hobbits; Laketown is a town on a lake; Elrond's hidden realm of Rivendell is hidden in a deep valley cloven by a river; the Lonely Mountain stands alone on an otherwise relatively flat plain; and so on. In contrast, the expansive geography and distinctive *topoi* of *The Lord of the Rings* establishes an entire geopolitical world system in which the narrative elements unfold. If anything, in that novel's sprawling discourse, there is a surfeit of geographical and historical knowledge, as places are not merely named, but named in multiple languages, and often in connection to distant historical events and personages. Shippey counts some forty or

---

[5] Of course, another reason to limit myself to *The Lord of the Rings* is that *The Hobbit* trilogy, as was made perfectly clear in the second film (*The Desolation of Smaug*), is not really a film adaptation of Tolkien's work, but rather a form of "fan fiction" in which the persons, events and places depicted are only loosely tied to the imaginary world described in Tolkien's writings. Although critical readers may question the choices of the filmmakers in adapting *The Lord of the Rings* for the big screen, by the time they have seen *The Hobbit* films they will have understood that the purported source material is not really relevant to the movies at all, so they may as well sit back and enjoy the show.

fifty "rather perfunctory" names in *The Hobbit*, whereas *The Lord of the Rings* boasts over 600 named persons and as many places (*Road* 100). The geographical discourse can be at times overwhelming for readers, as when, for example, characters begin to "talk like a map"; Shippey cites the farewell of Celeborn to his erstwhile guests, in which the elf lord describes the course they will take along a river, naming the different places to be encountered along the way, and using no fewer than twelve proper names in a short paragraph. As a result of such detail, the world of *The Lord of the Rings* is much richer and "realer" than that of *The Hobbit*. In Shippey's words, "[t]he maps and the names give Middle-earth that air of solidity and extent both in space and time which its successors so conspicuously lack" (103). I would go so far as to say that the literary cartography of Middle-earth is the principal effect of the narrative, whose substance is not so much the adventures of a handful of hobbits as the creation – or, as Tolkien would prefer, the "sub-creation" – of a world.

In focusing on Tolkien's literary cartography, I do not mean to suggest that maps themselves are the key to the narratives, although there is no question of the importance of actual maps to Tolkien's project, both within the writings as narrative devices and outside of them as tools for the writer and for readers. Maps are, after all, particularly significant in Tolkien's work. Tolkien himself drew maps by hand, partly to accompany and to illustrate his work, but also because mapping was a critical element of his literary method. As he put it in a well-known letter, referring to his approach to the composition of *The Lord of the Rings*, "I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit (generally with meticulous care for distances). The other way about lands one in confusions and impossibilities, and in any case it is weary work to compose a map from a story" (*Letters* 177).

As noted above, in *The Hobbit*, there is a map at the very heart of the plot. Without Thrór's Map, the facsimile of which appears in the book and was drawn by Tolkien, there is no quest to reclaim Erebor from the dragon. Bilbo himself is quite the map-gazer, and detailed geographical knowledge is valued highly by nearly all of the characters. Thrór's Map is not only crucial to the narrative itself, perhaps most notably when Elrond discovers and translates its "moon-letter" runes, but it also aids the reader in gaining his or her own bearings in the imaginary geography of Middle-earth. The maps in *The Lord of the Rings* are extremely helpful in this regard, and I would imagine that most readers cannot but smile when Peregrin Took rebukes himself for not having studied the various maps available to him in Rivendell (*Two Towers* 52). In my own case, that is one of maybe a hundred moments when I would have paused to look at the

map included in the front of the book – the original, drawn up by Christopher Tolkien – as I, like the reader and like Pippen himself, try to figure out just where these orcs were going, tracing itineraries through strange lands, finding their "place" relative to places with which we are already familiar. And I confess that my battered copy of *The Silmarillion* has a deep crease in the spine from nearly constant flipping back to that map of "Beleriand and Its Realms" (*Silmarillion* 139), which is extremely useful not only for gaining one's bearings in the vast physical geography of the territories but also for understanding the geopolitical balance of power, accords and discord among the various elven enclaves. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that a significant part of the difficulty of that text comes from the reader's inability to adequately project a usable map of the various realms depicted in its pages, something allayed somewhat by the intensely spatial or geographical discourse in *The Lord of the Rings*. For it is not merely that the world east of the Blue Mountains and across the sea is so vast and complex, but the mythic lore of an epic like the *Silmarillion* likely precludes the sort of cartographic detail expected of the modern novel.[6]

Having said all of this, my interest in the spatiality of Tolkien's work lies not so much in literal maps, either those in Tolkien's work or those based on it.[7] Rather, I want to suggest that Tolkien's literary cartography is a productive response to the peculiar spatial problems associated with modernity. To write it as a bigger thesis than I could possibly follow through on here, I would say this: Tolkien's writing, especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, produces a cognisable otherworld in its seeming totality as a means of making sense of the fragmentary, uneven and largely unrepresentable world system of the early-to-mid-twentieth century. By means of this "geopolitical fantasy," Tolkien gives form to the all-too-real world through the creative, imaginative projection of alternative spaces. In this sense, I see Tolkien's literary cartography as a profoundly modern, if not modernist, artistic program. Jackson's film adaption, on the contrary, alters this project dramatically, at once evacuating the narrative of this

---

[6] This thesis cannot be elaborated here, but see my forthcoming essay "Tolkien's Geopolitical Fantasy: Space, Narrative Form, and the Literary Cartography of Middle-earth" in Lisa Fletcher (ed.), *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reading Genre Settings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

[7] I have not even mentioned the remarkable body of geographical work that has been inspired by Tolkien, including the beautiful *Atlas of Middle-earth* by Karen Wynn Fonstad, first published in 1981, which uses state of the art cartographic techniques, lovely drawing and finely attuned reading to map Tolkien's world.

world-building content and reshaping its form as pure spectacle. At some level, this is probably a matter of the traditional rivalry between the text and the image, but Jackson's conscious decisions to alter the narrative reinforce and supersede this divide, making the story less about telling and more about seeing. Somehow, in the movie version, *The Lord of the Rings* becomes a story of an eye.

The Eye of Sauron

As noted, Jackson and the team behind the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* elected to make a number of changes, some of which are more understandable than others, whether the reasons were strictly artistic (for example, based on the differing media of film versus novel) or more commercial in nature. Of the many departures from Tolkien's original texts, I believe that the most significant and perplexing was the decision to represent Sauron as a flaming eyeball perched atop a tower. In the Jackson films, the "lidless eye" is not just a symbol of vigilance and surveillance, but it is literalised as the physical form of the person, which leads to the almost comical treatment of the Sauron-Eye as a rather ineffectual searchlight by the end of the third instalment in the series. Although there is certainly something spooky about a villain who maintains an eldritch, incorporeal form, it is difficult to imagine the practical threat from such a person. As a symbol, the eye of Sauron compels obedience and inspires fear, but this is only because the symbol is connected to an actual power, that of one who gives orders and exacts punishments. A fiery eyeball seems like an odd choice.

To be clear, Tolkien not only envisioned Sauron as having the appearance of a man, but the text itself makes clear that Sauron continues to embody a human form. Indeed, in *The Two Towers*, when Frodo mentions that Isildur had cut off Sauron's finger an age earlier, Gollum – who has seen, and been tortured by, Sauron himself – confirms: "Yes, He has only four on the Black Hand, but they are enough" (278). In letters, Tolkien is clear about Sauron's appearance. For example, "Sauron should not be thought of as very terrible. The form that he took was that of a more than human stature, but not gigantic. In his earlier incarnation he was able to veil his power (as Gandalf did) and could appear as a commanding figure of great strength of body and supremely royal demeanour and countenance" (*Letters* 332). Ironically, then, the filmmakers may have been closer to Tolkien's intent in their depiction of Sauron in the Prologue (which appears in the movie, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*), in which an admittedly "gigantic" Sauron, masked and clad in steel

armour, does battle with Isildur's father, Elendil. In other words, Jackson and his team were well aware of how Sauron was supposed to look, and therefore we may conclude that their decision to render the enemy as a fiery eyeball is not rooted in ignorance. Jackson undoubtedly had his reasons for overlooking Tolkien's fondness for synecdoche,[8] but I am most interested in the effect of the choice. What does it mean that the enemy of the "free peoples" of Middle-earth is merely a lidless eye, wreathed in flame?

The principal effect of *this* Sauron is to underscore that the Dark Lord's power lies in surveillance. Envisioned as a gigantic organ of sight, perched atop what may well be the tallest tower in all of Middle-earth, the Sauron of the films is the very avatar of surveillance. In this vision, the entire world is a panopticon designed and operated by Sauron. Of course, the narrative of the movies complicates this, which inevitably leads to an almost ludicrous disempowerment of Sauron. For example, when Saruman explains to Gandalf that Sauron cannot yet take physical form (but surely the flaming eyeball is physical!), but that the lord of Mordor can see all, viewers must wonder why Sauron is so often completely unaware of what's going on throughout the entire movie trilogy. The fact is that Sauron does not see all; he does not even see much. But as the figural embodiment of surveillance itself, Sauron represents the supremely terrifying force that instils fear in nearly all of the realm's occupants. A literal "overseer," albeit one who also overlooks a good many things, Sauron occupies the subject-position of a celestial cartographer, whereas everyone else in Middle-earth is located (and locatable) as points on the map.

Consider the distinction made by Michel de Certeau between the itinerary and the map, especially as expressed in his discussion of urban pedestrians. Certeau begins his analysis of "walking in the city" by contrasting the perspective of the street-level pedestrian with that of a "voyeur" who looks down upon the entire city from a lofty vantage. Using the then tallest buildings in the world as his exemplary point of view, Certeau argues that, from the observation deck of the World Trade Center in New York City, a person looking out on a clear day could get an excellent view of nearly the whole of Manhattan, as well as of other boroughs and parts of New Jersey across the Hudson River. This overview

---

[8] For example, the "Mouth of Sauron" scene was cut from the theatrical release of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, but a version of it appeared on the extended special edition DVD.

represents a form of mastery, but it also necessarily requires a distancing and abstraction from the realities below. As Certeau puts it,

> To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more. (92)

The "scopic drive" motivates the need for panoramic overview, where seeing all is a way of knowing all, and thus the "celestial" spectator wields power over the subjects down below. For Certeau, the image of the city from this perspective is "the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer" (92–93). Concluding with an image that might even call Sauron to mind, Certeau maintains that "[t]he voyeur-god created by this fiction . . . must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them" (93).

In contrast to this "solar Eye," Certeau asserts that the "ordinary practitioners of the city" are down below, on the street: "they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (93). Drawing upon Michel Foucault's elaborate vision of disciplinary societies and the "carceral archipelago" in *Discipline and Punish*, Certeau maintains that pedestrians attempt to locate "the practices that are foreign to the 'geometrical' or 'geographical' space of the visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions" (93). In the very act of walking amid the hustle and bustle of a metropolis, Certeau argues, the walkers "elude discipline" (96). For Certeau, the voyeur-god whose scopic and gnostic drive attempts to order the city into an artificial, geometric plan or map is ultimately vanquished from participating in the space so represented, whereas the urban wanderers are the real authors of a city. "They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize" (97).

I find this description resonant with the contrasting themes of panoptic surveillance and transgressive movement in *The Lord of the Rings* movies. Sauron remains within Barad-dûr at all times, or, rather, in the absurd figuration of the Enemy as a fiery eyeball, he remains atop the tower, in an unceasing act of looking outward and downward upon the world. The Twin Towers of Certeau's voyeur-god are matched by the many towers from which different geopolitical powers attempt to visualise and alter the map of Middle-earth. In addition to Sauron in his fortress, we see Saruman atop Orthanc in Isengard, Denethor in Minas Tirith, the Witch-King mounted on a winged beast over Minas Morgul. Even lesser places, the various watchtowers such as Weathertop or Amon Hen, are sites of scopic (or telescopic) desire, from whose vantage point the vistas seem supernaturally clear. Moreover, there are the apparently magical or monstrous forms of surveillance, including a beast called the Watcher in the Water in the murky pool outside the western gate of Moria or the Two Watchers outside the tower of Cirith Ungol. Indeed, birds themselves, including the "crebain" of Dunland and eagles of the Misty Mountains, function as aerial monitors of events on the ground. Purportedly on the side of the righteous, Galadriel's mirror and the *palantíri* (also known as the "Seeing-stones of Númenor") represent additional means of surveillance, although they are not necessarily reliable ones. As Galadriel says, in what might also be a caveat to all who would rely on surveillance to secure and maintain their positions, "the Mirror is dangerous as a guide to deeds" (*Fellowship* 407).

Meanwhile, the movement of individuals and groups on the ground tend to operate as antagonists to these functionaries of oversight. The fellowship of the ring is itself referred to as the Nine Walkers (in contrast to the Nazgûl or Nine Riders), and, apart from a brief river journey by boat, they make their way exclusively on foot. Contrary to the abstract projection of spaces enabled by the God's-eye view from above, the walkers experience the places on the ground viscerally, whether swatting at insects (Sam calls the stinging midges "Neekerbreekers") or enjoying a cool draught from the Entwash. In Certeau's sense, the walkers "write" these spaces through their movements and experiences, whereas the Sauron-like eye in the sky can only "map" them. The southerly and eastward advance of Frodo and Sam gives texture and meaning to the places encountered, while the intersecting adventures of Merry and Pippen in Fangorn Forest and Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas and later Gandalf in Rohan and Gondor also provide substance to the toponyms. While the great powers strive for control over Middle-earth, so the story goes, the small folk actually change the world.

Yet the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* complicates this schematic view of the narrative. As in the books, halflings accomplish great deeds, heroic warriors do battle with the nameless hordes of enemies, while potentates like Saruman, Denethor and Sauron (not to mention Elrond and Galadriel) remain within well protected fortresses from which they can observe and make plans.[9] But the films offer an additional perspective, that of the camera – the *Kino-Eye* of Dziga Vertov, perhaps – which frequently functions as a surrogate to the all-seeing Sauron. Much like other visual devices used to descry places, persons and events from a spatiotemporal distance, the Mirror of Galadriel and the *palantíri* or "seeing stones" being the most memorable, Jackson's own cameras offer the viewer a "bird's-eye view" of Middle-earth. This perspective is itself literalised with the eagle, a reliable *deus ex machina* in Tolkien's fiction, one that even he worried might be overused (see, e.g., *Letters* 271). The preponderance of helicopter shots and sweeping panoramas give the movies much of their visual power, but they also detract from the pedestrian mission of the *Wandersmänner*-protagonists. Even the many close-ups and intimate shots only serve to emphasise the "scopic drive" of the medium itself, as the eye of Sauron or of the camera "zooms" in on its unsuspecting prey. The special effects, becoming so meticulous and minute as to include the enhanced blue-ing of Elijah Wood's eyes, only augment the power of the visual to capture and control the subjects. When at the end of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, as Frodo slips the One Ring on his finger in his effort to escape Boromir, he suddenly feels the presence of "the Eye," and an ominous voice emerging (somehow) from the fiery eyeball declares "I see you," it is fair to wonder whether we the audience have been placed in the position of Sauron all along. That is, we "see" Frodo throughout, but our own scopic, gnostic drive and voyeurism is only made effective by the cameras, which definitively dictate what and who will be seen, and how.

In the language of Certeau, the films "map" the terrain in such a way as to undermine the itineraries of the errant walkers on the ground. Of course, one might expand the argument to suggest that cinema is always also a form of mapping. For example, Tom Conley has suggested that, "[i]f

---

[9] In Appendix B of *The Return of the King*, we learn that Galadriel, Celeborn and a company of elf warriors did engage in battle, overthrowing the forces of Dol Guldur in southern Mirkwood. This is one of apparently many battle-scenes to remain "off-camera" in *The Lord of the Rings*, as the dwarves of Erebor, elves of Thranduil's kingdom and men of Dale also fought in the North (see *Return* 415–16).