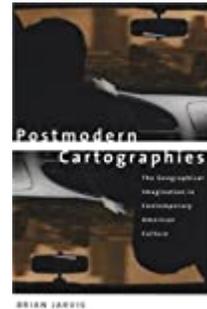


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Brian Jarvis.** *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. 208 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-21345-9.



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Geography and place have long played a central role in the American national imagination. The Puritans saw the landscape of the New World as a wilderness to be overcome. Emerson and Thoreau saw it as a “poem” and a site of mystical communion with God. Fredrick Jackson Turner and his disciples argued that the United States’ initial possession of a vast, undeveloped frontier determined its entire course of economic and political development. In *Postmodern Cartographies*, Brian Jarvis examines “contemporary responses to the land to establish whether there is an essential continuity in the geographical imagination, or, whether postmodern mappings of space constitute a decisive break with previous traditions” (6). He also tries to expose how such mappings have been shaped by distinct ideologies and political agendas. In the process, he deftly dissects the representation of the nation’s geography in recent fiction, film and social theory.

The first section of the book begins by criticizing the cartography of postmodern America associated with social commentators like Daniel Bell, Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard. These theorists of “post-industrial society” embrace the idea that advances in communication and information technology have fundamentally transfigured the nature of life and work in late twentieth century America, representing the nation as Sili-

con Valley writ large, populated exclusively by computerized offices and places of mass-mediated leisure. As Jarvis points out, this myopic view of emerging social and economic realities renders invisible the ghettos, sweatshops and Third World free trade zones which constitute the new information economy’s dark underside. As such, the postindustrialists’ cartographies “provide institutional alibis for right-wing hegemony through selective amnesia” (43). In the last chapter of this section, Jarvis contrasts the postindustrialists’ treatment of North American social landscape with the more critical, less selective efforts to map this terrain by thinkers on the left, notably literary critic Fredrick Jameson and geographers Edward Soja, David Harvey and Mike Davis. While he finds much to agree with in this group’s renewed critique of the processes by which capitalism restructures and degrades the built and natural environments, he nonetheless faults critics like Jameson for being “mesmerized by the awesome incorporative power of late capitalism” (46). Of the works he discusses, only Mike Davis’ *City of Quartz* – a history of Los Angeles combining attention to the macro-spaces of the global economy with brilliant evocations of ordinary people’s street-level resistance to the dislocations caused by global economic trends– is singled out for unqualified praise.

Jarvis opens the second section of the book by taking

issue with Jameson's famous claim that postmodernism as an aesthetic tendency is politically conservative and complicit in the "cultural logic of late capitalism". Contra Jameson, Jarvis contends that works of postmodern art and literature often "constitute a dissident remapping of contemporary American space" (51) far more compelling and effective than those offered by left-wing academics. His ingenious close readings of the novels of Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, Jayne Anne Phillips and Toni Morrison more than bear out this claim. He demonstrates how each of these authors problematize and challenge the standard representations of American geography drawn by mainstream social science. In this respect, his careful, detailed discussion of the political and racial meaning of domestic and neighborhood spaces in Morrison's writing is especially insightful as is his analysis of Pynchon's preoccupation with marginalized, "underworld" spaces as a gesture of refusal directed against the dominant culture.

While the chapters on literature are certainly interesting, the strongest, most original and most readable chapters of this book are contained in the third and final section on spatial imagery in such popular films as *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, *Terminator*, and the movies of David Lynch. In his astute analyses of these films, Jarvis succeeds in locating their images of both geographical and bodily space within the larger context of US politics and culture. For example, he notes that the world of Lynch's *Blue Velvet* is organized around a tidy geographical opposition between the suburb and the city. Yet the representation of these locations in the film refer as much to the film noir and sit-coms of the 1950s as to any real place. The contrast between these simulated spaces works, Jarvis argues, to encourage the spectator to "swallow the saccharine-coated pill of suburban sentimentalism" because "the suburb may be a simulacrum

but it still offers a sanctuary from Frank's place, the cities of dreadful night" (177). Jarvis concludes that Lynch's nostalgia for a mythologized 1950s, as manifest in his misty-eyed view of suburbia and small town America, echoes a similar nostalgia in New Right politics.

Ultimately, Jarvis demonstrates that there is an essential continuity between postmodern cartographies and earlier representations of space, and that contemporary representations of space continue to view America's social geography through deeply ideological lenses that variously challenge or sustain existing structures of social power.

As with any book of such sweeping interdisciplinary scope, *Postmodern Cartographies* necessarily omits as much as it includes. There is no mention here of the crucial role played by space and place in the films of the new generation of African American directors. Moreover, Jarvis fails to consider such obviously relevant, and popular, writers as Tom Wolfe and Douglas Copeland when discussing spatial representation in the contemporary American novel. There are other weaknesses as well. The authors, directors and theorists he discusses are established members of the postmodern pantheon whose works have been analyzed to death in the scholarly literature. And his interpretation of the current political and economic situation in the US is predictable, academic liberal boilerplate. Despite these problems, this is an intelligent, stimulating, and well-researched study. Anyone interested in recent American literature and film will find it an eye-opening and informative read.

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