

# VISUALISING SPATIAL INJUSTICE Q&A (PART ONE: ALBERTO TOSCANO)

by Stephen Connolly & Matthew Gibson & Patrick Brian Smith

The organizers of Kent's recent Visualising Spatial Injustice conference reflect on it and interview one of their keynote speakers, Alberto Toscano.

'Visualising Spatial Injustice and Exploitation' took place at the University of Kent on June 8<sup>th</sup> 2018. Convened by Stephen Connolly, Matthew Gibson and Patrick Brian Smith, it explored a shared interest in trying to visualise the spatial and geographic dimensions of contemporary economic, social and political exploitation. As the noted urban theorist Edward Soja has suggested, "relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life... human geographies become filled with politics and ideology."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Soja, we were interested in how processes of exploitation, which often remain obscured and invisible, can be visualised and critiqued within visual culture. In the epoch of transnational global capitalism and neo-colonialism, how can contemporary moving image practices capture—and, concomitantly, offer modes of resistance to—the spatial machinations of contemporary power relations?

The varied contributions to the symposium showed how moving image practices present crucial tools for exploring exploitation and injustice. In the work of filmmakers and visual artists such as Allan Sekula, Ursula Biemann, Patrick Keiller, Susan Schuppli, Jonathan Perel, James Bridle, and Trevor Paglen, the moving image offers significant powers of spatial visualisation. Media forms offer a resource for bearing witness, and bringing into view, the voices of peoples and communities affected. Such moving practices play a crucial role in undermining the apparently "seamless" functioning of spatialised power relations, helping to throw into sharp relief their fissures, cracks and contradictions.

The day was bookended by two keynote speakers: Alberto Toscano, Reader in Critical Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Miranda Pennell, a London-based artist and filmmaker. In this two-part interview, we spoke to Toscano and Pennell about their work in relation to the key debates that arose from the symposium.

In part one (below), Toscano reflects on some of the issues brought up by his presentation, entitled *Vision and Division: Reflections on Race, Space and Film*, which developed his work on film and visual culture in *Cartographies of the Absolute* (co-authored with Jeff Kinkle, 2015) by reflecting on visual practices that have addressed the spatial dimensions of racial inequality and domination. His presentation centred on Detroit in the late 1960s and early 1970s and in particular, the radical documentary *Finally Got the News* (1970), a key reference in Fredric Jameson's much cited work on 'cognitive mapping.' Toscano explored Fred Moten's critique of Jameson and the intersection of this debate with visual material produced in response to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. As Toscano explains, "the conjuncture of race, riots and revolutionary labour politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s [can be] contrasted with some of the visual material produced around the 2014-15 revolt following the killing of Michael Brown [...], notably the documentary *Ferguson: A Report from Occupied Territory*, in order to reflect on salient shifts in the fatal couplings of power and difference."

## What is the importance of spatiality to your critical/creative work and its political outlook?

**Alberto Toscano:** My intellectual and academic formation in philosophy was only peripherally, or speculatively, involved with spatial matters, and I only truly began to engage with questions of geography and spatiality when I began teaching in a sociology department. Teaching political and social theory in the midst of the Iraq War and occupation, and through the Blairite consolidation of neoliberalism in the UK – to name but two salient concerns – meant looking for critical resources to grasp the new mutations of capitalist power, and turning to thinkers able to grasp the dynamic and conflictual character of space, scale and inequality, from Doreen Massey to Neil Smith, David Harvey to Timothy Mitchell. That political and pedagogical encounter, born of a certain contemporary urgency, meant that attending to the materiality of spatialising practices, to the production and representation of space, came to take up a greater role in my own thinking, and to be at the centre of my efforts (along with Jeff Kinkle in *Cartographies of the Absolute*, as well as with Master's students at Goldsmiths in my 'Mapping Capitalism' course) to tackle contemporary debates on the representations of capitalism, which became unavoidable especially in the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis.

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To try to articulate a critical social and political theory in a period marked by imperialist wars, and mortgage-debt driven financial crises – but also by catastrophic anthropogenic climate change and mass migration – is ultimately impossible without truly attending to spatiality. That said, I don't think that every problem is of necessity a spatial or geographical one, and – as the best materialist geographers themselves have shown – I think that attention to temporal difference and unevenness, to the times as well as spaces of capital (and anti-capitalism), is an indispensable task.

## How has your thinking around questions of counter-mapping violence and injustice developed since the publication of *Cartographies of the Absolute*?

**Toscano:** The notion of counter-mapping seems to me inseparable from an activist or research practice of space and its representations, so I would not claim to be engaged in it – though I've learned a lot from people who are, among them [Trevor Paglen](#), [Eyal Weizman](#) and the people around the [Centre for Research Architecture](#), but also more political projects, such as the ones collected in the *Atlas of Radical Cartography*.

In terms of directions of questioning and research that I've become more attentive to since the publication of *Cartographies*, I would name the three very broad headings of time, ecology and race. In a piece for a special issue of the journal *Social Text* on the work of Fredric Jameson, entitled '[The World Is Already Without Us](#)', I tried to draw from his account of dead labour and the self-extinguishing temporality of capital a somewhat different angle than the one rehearsed via the problem of cognitive mapping in *Cartographies* through which to grasp some aesthetic symptoms of our present, for instance the iconic circulation and prevalence of depopulated landscapes of capital (in art photography and beyond).

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In work I am currently trying to develop following up on that essay, which takes aerial photography of climate change and ecological devastation as one of its starting points, I am trying to think through how the particular temporality of the Capitalocene (in Andreas Malm’s brilliant formulation of this concept) generates a different type of aftermath photography – not the aftermath of war, as we know it from photographers from Roger Fenton to Simon Norfolk, but *the aftermath of capital*, one in which the visual evidence of violence may turn out to be rather difficult to fix, and in which a monumental (or catastrophic) mode of representation may not be able to do justice to the multiple modalities of what Rob Nixon has called ‘slow violence’. At the junction of capital, ecological devastation and apparatuses of domination and inequality (classed, racialised, gendered and otherwise), the question ‘can slow violence be seen?’, and if so how, becomes particularly urgent.

**In your talk, you suggested that aesthetic strategies of counter-mapping often bypass or elide the truth of racial difference. Can you point towards some possible reasons for these processes of elision?**

**Toscano:** In the talk I tried to draw from the foundational writings on race and geography of Ruth Wilson Gilmore – as well as on Judith Butler’s remarks on the racialisation of the visual field in the wake of the beating of Rodney King and the 1992 LA riots – to articulate ways in which race functions as a principle of vision and division, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, critical to any thinking of the visualisation of spatial inequality.

The elision you mention probably has a multiplicity of causes. A large burden of responsibility can no doubt be laid at the feet of the generalised sidelining of critical theorisations of race from large swathes of the academy – whether intentionally or otherwise. One of the great virtues of Gilmore’s work is that she shows, building upon the full range of historical materialist geographies and state theories, that space is produced through racial difference (which is turn articulated through and as class, gender and other axes of violent differentiation). The violence of capitalist abstraction and the violence of race qua abstraction are intimately bound up with one another. But we could also perhaps suggest that the hypervisibility of (certain modalities of) ‘race’ can also serve to mesmerise the critical intellect, and disarticulate racial difference from other kinds of difference, and from dynamics of capital accumulation or indeed of anti-capitalist resistance.

The ‘epidermalisation’ that Fanon so incisively anatomised in *Black Skin, White Masks* can also trap one into ‘fixing’ race (as in certain contemporary discourses on blackness) and treating it as a kind of absolute, non-analogisable, abysmal difference. In that regard any critical theorising about race also needs to be attentive to how not to repeat and congeal the racialisation of the visual field accumulated through histories of slavery, colonialism and racial capitalism.

**Fredric Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping has been very productive, yet as you point out, it has also been critiqued by thinkers such as Fred Moten. Do you think cognitive mapping has a future as a conceptual tool in investigations of inequality and exploitation, and how might it be modified?**

**Toscano:** I would prefer at this point to emphasise the tentative, problematising or even prophetic dimensions of Jameson’s original formulation of an aesthetic of cognitive mapping – his talk at the *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture* conference began with these words, after all: “I am addressing a subject about which I know nothing whatsoever, except for the fact that it does not exist.” I think that might be more productive than an overly programmatic notion of cognitive mapping, which would end up returning it to its original home in the domain of ameliorative urban design (Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City*, from which Jameson originally ‘transcoded’ the concept).

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For the problem, or even *enigma*, of cognitive mapping to be further developed, enriching our thinking about exploitation and inequality, it will need, in my view, to deepen a critical reconstruction of what it means to ‘totalise’ in the present. Moten’s emphasis on how the sonic dimension of politics and the political dimensions of sound transform the default visibility of our thinking of totality is one element in this. But we could also think of the ways in which opacity, secrecy, and the clandestine might also become, in different spaces and times, resources for opposition to abasement and domination – to think of how one might transform a certain enduring martial imaginary, where strategy means a systematic overview of the battlefield, and where that vision is a pre-requisite to acting with radical efficacy. Perhaps this presupposition – about the bond and sequence between knowledge, vision and action – needs to be further interrogated, allowing for the possibility that the process is often inverted, a totalising vision (or hearing...) as the side-effect of an action which, while not ‘blind’, is nevertheless not operating *from*, but instead *towards*, what Jameson had termed a ‘successful spatial representation’.

[Part two of the *Visualising Spatial Injustice* Q&A will continue with Miranda Pennell].



### **Stephen Connolly & Matthew Gibson & Patrick Brian Smith**

Stephen Connolly is a filmmaker and Lecturer in Film Production at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. His work is an investigation of the spatial cinema through place, politics and history. His single screen work has been widely shown internationally since 2002. His current doctoral research explores the spatial cinema as a post-landscape approach to film. A FLAMIN award recipient, he has had solo screenings at the ICA and BFI Southbank in London and has exhibited installations in US (Wexner Centre) and Portugal. His Detroit work was recently given a prize for the Best Practice Research Portfolio, Moving Image, BAFTSS 2018.

Matthew Gibson is a PhD Candidate in Film Research by Practice and Graduate Teaching Assistant at University of Kent. He is currently conducting interdisciplinary film research by practice at the intersection of spatial theory, literary studies (geocriticism) and film studies. He is interested in counter-mapping the social and cultural divide between Paris and its banlieues through an essayistic film practice that privileges a poetics and aesthetics of urban space in Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and Patrick Keiller’s ‘Robinson Trilogy’ (1994, 1997, 2007).

Patrick Brian Smith is a Film and Moving Image Studies PhD Candidate in the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University, Montreal. His research interests include experimental nonfiction cinema, the politics of space, Marxist geography, late-capitalism's (un)representability, and the essay film. He is currently working on a thesis project entitled "The Politics of Spatiality in Experimental Non-Fiction Cinema," which maps out the presence of a spatio-political tendency within a diverse corpus of contemporary experimental nonfiction films.