Affective Mapping

The decisively new ferment that enters the taedium vitae and turns it into spleen is self-estrangement.
—WALTER BENJAMIN, “CENTRAL PARK”

In his influential 1960 book The Image of the City, Kevin Lynch explored the ways residents internalize maps of their cities. These cognitive maps give one a sense of location and direction, and enable one to make decisions about where one wants to go and how to get there.¹ A later scholar helpfully defined cognitive mapping as “a process composed of a series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, stores, recalls and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of the phenomena in his everyday spatial environment.”² Lynch studied three different cities—Boston, Los Angeles, and Jersey City—and found that some cities are more “legible” to their residents than others. That is, “the ease with which [the city’s] parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern” varies from city to city.³ In a nongrid city like Boston, with notable points of reference like the Charles River, Boston Common, and Boston Harbor, residents were quite able to assemble usable cognitive maps of the city through repetitive experience of it. Jersey City, on the other hand, organized by an incomplete grid, was found to be more undifferentiated and thus less legible. Many of its residents, Lynch found, had only fragmented or partial images of the city. Since an image of the total system in which one is located is of course a crucial element in establishing one’s confidence in one’s ability to live in the world—see friends, get to the hospital, buy groceries, go out to dinner, arrive at the train station on time—the lack of such an ability can produce a sense of anxiety and alienation.
In his essay “Cognitive Mapping,” Fredric Jameson expanded the use of the term to suggest that just as one needs a cognitive map of city space in order to have a sense of agency there, one requires a cognitive map of social space for a sense of agency in the world more generally. Such a map’s function is “to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.” In other words, in its negotiation of the gap between local subjective experience and a vision of an overall environment, the cognitive map is an apt figure for one of the functions of ideology, which is, in Althusser’s now classic formulation, “the representation of the subject’s imaginary relationship to his or her real conditions of existence.” We all need such representations, no matter how imaginary, in order to make sense and move through our everyday lives. By the same token, “the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience.”

The difference with the social map is that where the totality of Boston is quite representable, the “totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole,” conversely, is not. And the socioeconomic systems we all must negotiate on a daily basis are becoming ever less representable. Increasingly, Jameson argues, the distance between the structures that order everyday life and the phenomenology and datum of that life itself have become unbridgeable. Cognitive mapping in this context would be an essential part of “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system.” Without such a picture insights remain partial and fragmented; we remain mired in the logic of the system as it exists.

So then what is this thing I have been calling affective mapping? In the context of geography and environmental psychology, the term affective mapping has been used to indicate the affective aspects of the maps that guide us, in conjunction with our cognitive maps, through our spatial environment. That is, we develop our sense of our environments through purposive activity in the world, and we always bring with us a range of intentions, beliefs, desires, moods, and affective attachments to this activity. Hence our spatial environments are inevitably imbued with the feelings we have about the places we are going, the things that hap-
pen to us along the way, and the people we meet, and these emotional valences, of course, affect how we create itineraries. For instance, I live in downtown Detroit, and when I am in the suburbs around Detroit, I often get the sense that some people in the suburbs who have not crossed over the city limits for years carry around with them a map on which Detroit is a large, hazily defined space, but a space clearly marked by some mixture of fear, anxiety, sorrow, and nostalgia. They avoid Detroit not because of poor urban planning or a lack of landmarks but because of the emotions they have associated with the city space of Detroit.

Thus, by way of analogy, I would suggest that social maps are also marked with various affective values. To return to the example regarding the suburban resident who avoids Detroit, this is an affective map of social space as well, in a way that parallels ideology. For in all likelihood the person from the suburbs of whom I write is white, and Detroit is largely African American, and this split is of course overwritten by a class divide, so emotions about Detroit as a space are, for these suburban residents, inevitably also emotions about class and “race” and racism. In short, it is not just ideologies or cognitive maps that shape our behavior and practices in the world but also the affects we have about the relevant social structures of our world. The term affective map in this sense is meant to indicate the pictures we all carry around with us on which are recorded the affective values of the various sites and situations that constitute our social worlds.

I should perhaps reemphasize here that “map” is meant in a particular, metaphorical sense, a metaphorics that I hope does not too seriously limit the concept. The affective map, like Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic map, is neither fixed nor stable: “The rhizome refers to a map that must be produced or constructed, is always detachable, connectable, reversible, and modifiable, with multiple entrances and exits, with its lines of flight. The tracings are what must be transferred onto the maps and not the reverse.”12 Such maps must be able to incorporate new information as one has new experiences in new environments; but this does not mean they are entirely self-invented. Rather the maps are cobbled together in processes of accretion and palimpsestic rewriting from other persons’ maps, first of all those defined in infancy by one’s parents, and later the maps that come to one by way of one’s historical context and the social formations one lives in.

Just as the lack of a cognitive map of one’s social space is crippling for effective political activity, so too is the lack of an affective map, for
several reasons. Our most enduring and basic social formations—patriarchy, say, or capitalism itself—can only be enduring to the extent that they are woven into our emotional lives in the most fundamental way. Gender differences or class distinctions are not just tools we use to make sense of our worlds, they are things about which and in relation to which we all have a whole range of emotions, from the teenager’s shame among his wealthier classmates at the shabbiness of his family’s car or his parent’s working-class accent to the particular anxiety of a woman alone on a city street at night. Whole sets of affects—about family, profession, sexual practices, physical appearance, eating habits, and so forth—come into being only through categories of class and gender. Social hierarchies surely could not work without the depression, cynicism, or despair produced among poor persons by unemployment, discrimination, or not being able to pay one’s bills or, alternatively, without the joy that accompanies the purchase of a big new house or a fancy car or the pleasurable sense of achievement and entitlement the high school student feels on admission to an Ivy League university. Because our social formations work through affect, resistance to them must as well. Substitute objects of positive affective attachment must be provided where necessary, counter-moods evoked, and the emotional valence of various objects and ideas changed through processes of rearticulation and recontextualization.

And if we want to form politically agential collectives, this is most directly a question of moods, structures of feeling, and affects; anxieties must be overcome, alliances must seem not just logical but emotionally compelling. Insights about one’s political oppression are unlikely to motivate resistance unless they can be made interesting and affectively rewarding. This is why Aristotle directed himself toward the affects in his Rhetoric, so he could figure out what situations produced which affects in whom; the politician above all must know how to make and use the moods of his audiences. In short, without an affective map, the most basic political acts—the distinction of friend from foe, danger from safety, despair-inducing from interest-enhancing experiences—become impossible; we are reduced to operating as if dumb or blind.

Our affective maps are likely to be especially in need of revision, repair, or invention at moments of rapid social change or upheaval. Just as modernity made the production of cognitive maps more difficult, it also made the assessment of one’s affective surroundings more difficult, not least because of the new scale and scope of the experience of loss. Emigrating to a new country, learning a different kind of work, or los-
ing one’s parents in war are likely to render one’s environment emotionally confusing. Unexpected fears, surprising disappointments, and new enjoyments must all be processed in one way or another. And then one must figure out how to negotiate the new affective terrain, to exert some agency in it.

Here, however, I am concerned not with the creation of affective maps in general but with the ways an aesthetic practice might help with this process of affective mapping. My argument is that it does this not primarily through a realist representation of a social space in the world, but through a representation of the affective life of the reader herself or himself. Such a representation is accomplished by way of a self-estrangement that allows one to see oneself in relation to one’s affective environment in its historicity, in relation to the relevant social-political anchors or landmarks in that environment, and to see the others who inhabit this landscape with one. The texts of James, Du Bois, and Platonov function as affective maps to the extent that they work as machines of self-estrangement. By this term, as I mentioned in the Introduction, I mean a self-distancing that allows one to see oneself as if from outside. But I also mean estrangement in the sense of defamiliarization, making one’s emotional life—one’s range of moods, set of structures of feeling, and collection of affective attachments—appear weird, surprising, unusual, and thus capable of a new kind of recognition, interest, and analysis.

In what follows I have tried to schematize the operation of this self-estranging machine, mostly by way of an extrapolation of certain elements of the aesthetic theories of Adorno and Benjamin, particularly regarding the logic of the moment of aesthetic experience and the role of the shudder therein, which Adorno valued so highly.

The affective mapping function is achieved by means of the noncoincidence of two moments in the experience of what, following Adorno, we might call “the work of art,” so long as we mean that phrase in a fairly broad sense. On the one hand, one has a perceptual and cognitive apprehension of the artwork in its otherness, which has certain effects: “As a musical composition compresses time, and as a painting folds spaces into one another, so the possibility is concretized that the world could be other than it is. Space, time, and causality are maintained, their power is not denied, but they are divested of their compulsiveness”
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For a moment at least, listening to a recording of Jimi Hendrix playing the “Star-Spangled Banner” or to Beethoven’s late string quartets in a concert hall, reading Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, walking at Maya Lin’s Vietnam War Memorial, or beholding one of Donald Judd’s reflective aluminum boxes, one finds oneself in a world that does not exist, or that exists only in this space at this moment. This otherness is not liberatory in itself, but inasmuch as the relationships between space and time, for example, that we are used to in our everyday lives are altered in some way or another, we may see that the logic of the world we live in is not compulsory. Things might work differently.

On the other hand, but simultaneously, one has an affective response in this other world defined by the work. The artwork provides both the context and the objects affects need in order to come into existence. The logic is a transferential one: like psychoanalysis, the work provides a scene in which past affects can reappear as (what Freud called) new editions or as facsimiles of old ones. However, the work can only do this to the extent that the objects or moments within it recall earlier affectively charged experiences. Similarity is the key principle here; and as we know, even (or especially) in therapy, the slightest similarity will suffice if there are affects itching to find objects. One may be surprised by the affects that come out in the space of therapy, and so too with the work of art: by creating a kind of mood atmosphere with its own objects, artworks bring affects into existence in forms and in relation to objects that otherwise might not exist.

In an important sense, we never experience an affect for the first time; every affect contains within it an archive of its previous objects. Or, more exactly, there is a secret archive of objects out in the world in which our affects are residing. Like Proust with his madeleine, we do not necessarily know when or how we will encounter such objects. Benjamin recounts one such discovery in relation to a painting by Cezanne he saw during his 1927 visit to Moscow. He writes that “various very specific spots” immediately “thrust themselves” out at him. The space of the painting “opens up in corners and angles in which we believe we can localize crucial experiences of the past; there is something inexplicably familiar about these spots.” The painting provides a site for affects from Benjamin’s past to reenter existence, and consequently for his archive of affective objects to open up, and perhaps, to become visible as such as if for the first time. By way of these affects, the world, and indeed history itself, makes its way into aesthetic experience. Affect is the shuttle on which history makes its way into the aesthetic, and it is also
what brings one back from the work into the world. The affect that one has in the space of the artwork (which hovers alongside the cognitive experience as what Adorno calls a “trans-aesthetic subject”) links one back to the world like a rubber band or the bungee on a bungee jumper, pulling one back from the artwork into the world, but pulling one back through a strange parabola which has altered one’s view of the world and unsettled one’s relation to it. To use the Heideggerian metaphor, it is as if we have been rethrown.

So, for example, here I am at a concert of the Emerson String Quartet; they are playing one of Beethoven’s late string quartets. At a certain moment, some fragment of a motif being played on the viola, in the relationship it strikes with the development of the piece as a whole, surprises me, and I have that feeling of inexplicable familiarity. But it is vague; it is not as if I am somehow reminded of a specific experience. Nonetheless, a powerful sadness and sense of loss has latched onto that very specific viola moment in order to bring itself into being. I shudder. According to Adorno, such a shudder is generated not by the emotion evoked itself but by the transition from this emotion—experienced in this world of the quartet, that is to say, a world that bears no apparent referential relation to the world of everyday life—back to my subjectivity as I experience it in everyday life. At the moment of this return from the work, one has the sensation that one has just been temporarily dislocated from one’s subjectivity. This is because one has, for a moment, had an affect in a space not defined by one’s subjectivity, and then one is returned to that subjectivity, reminding one precisely of that subjectivity, and its limitedness. The return to the “self,” the subjectivity as we find it in our everyday lives, and its disjuncture with the affects and the mood we have experienced without a self, in a nonsel, is what produces, for Adorno, the shudder.15 “Shudder, radically opposed to the conventional idea of experience [Erlebnis], provides no particular satisfaction for the I; it bears no similarity to desire. Rather it is a memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude” (AT, 245). Put differently, we might say that one has a shudder about the limitedness and situatedness—which is also to say the historicity—of one’s affective life in toto.

Adorno suggests that the shudder is also the moment of contact with an other, with otherness as such. “The shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than
subordinating it” (AT, 331). The moment when one has an affective experience without being a subject, as if one exists for a moment in the Beethoven quartet, is one in which one loses oneself in this vague non-subject space of the work. I am not quite sure what Adorno means by “the other” here, but I take him to be referencing a moment of apprehending the basically plural nature of one’s emotional life. The work is something like a meeting place for an affective collectivity. In this sense, Adorno’s “aesthetic shudder” is akin to the shudder one experiences in a large crowd experiencing a common emotion at, for example, a political protest, sporting event, or concert. “Aesthetic comportment,” as Adorno puts it, is one place where one learns how to participate in a collectivity, to make contact with an other, based on a shared affective experience. While I do not think that the self-estrangement aspect of the affective mapping function necessarily or literally needs to produce a “shudder,” I do think that the mechanism described here is at work in the affective maps I analyze in this book.

That said, however, in the texts I write about here, this self-estrangement is only part of the project. Each of these texts—James’s Turn of The Screw, Du Bois’s Souls of Black Folk, and Platonov’s Chevengur—also have something to say about the very subjective experience from which a reader has been estranged. This allegorization of the experience that the aesthetic practice is itself promoting, the narration of the production of their own readers—this is the moment in which the text functions as an affective map for its readers. The effect is not unlike the moment in a therapy when the analyst says: “Hmm, well, perhaps this is about those early conflicts with your father.” You have had an experience, transferring some fears or anger about your father onto the therapist, and to be sure it is strange, and you have noticed perhaps already that your emotions really are unlikely to be about the analyst as such—but then, when it is pointed out to you, it can no longer be ignored, and the analysis of the emotions in question can begin. Similarly, in The Turn of the Screw, for example, the first text I look at here, James narrates a kind of epistemological desire on the part of the governess, and the pleasures as well as the disastrous results of this desire; at the same time the text solicits just such a will to knowledge from the reader. Or, in a more complex process, Platonov solicits a relationship from his reader that resembles nothing so much as a melancholic friendship, at the same time that he shows how socialism might be built on just such a friendship. In other words, what I am calling an affective map here is a care-
fully prepared aesthetic experience, an experience that is narrated—and connected up to collective, historical processes and events—even as it is produced.

Of course, for a textual practice to work in this way, it must be able to be attuned to the moods of various readers. It is not designed to produce a uniform experience, but rather to be able to estrange one from wherever one is in relation to one’s emotional world. It needs to be flexible enough to allow for readers to input different experience. In this, when it works, it is a portable map, a kind of global positioning device that tells you where you are at this particular moment, giving you a satellite view of your own life.

In sum, if an affective map is a representation of one’s affective life in its historicity, then this representation works in the following way. The moment of shudder is a reaction to the simultaneous rupture and connection between the affective experience one has within the world created by the work on the one hand and the affective attachments one has within the world of everyday life on the other. In this way the shudder opens up the space of self-estrangement that is necessary to get a distance on one’s affects. It also puts one into contact with others, a contact that is imaginary in one sense. But inasmuch as it is based on the shared historicity of that affective life, it is quite real.