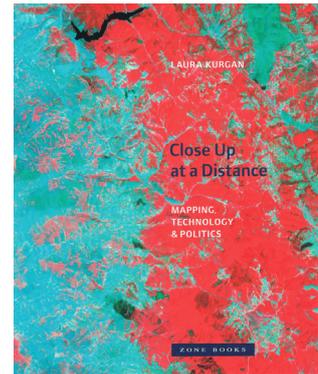


Laura Kurgan:
***Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology
 and Politics***

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Laura Kurgan's book is a pioneer's guidebook to post-critical technology. It distils her disruptions of satellite imagery, assembling nine lusciously illustrated re-appropriations of the orbiting panopticon for aesthetic social commentary. And, as it turns out, both this practice and her theoretical positions shine a torch forward for those of us grappling with the new hegemony of big data and algorithmic vision.

Her most trenchant message is that insights emerge through engaged experimentation. While there is a theoretical framework in the book, it has been derived from the ways the projects have unfolded. This is not proposed as a preference for the practical but as an inescapable corollary of the fact that we cannot distance ourselves; we are already embedded in and entangled with these technologies. Kurgan rejects what she calls the ideology and the security of critical distance, and affirms a commitment to an intimacy with technologies that explores them from within. To me, her book articulates Deleuze's dictum that 'practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another...No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall'.

She is hyper-aware that the tools of her trade were forged for military purposes. In that sense, working with satellite imagery is a virtue because the military-industrial complex is up front. It is a truth forgotten by many who delight in the affordances of GPS-enabled smartphones without accounting for the fact that GPS was originally developed to target missiles, to say nothing of the partially military roots of the internet itself. But these new ways of seeing open up new spaces and the book is a testament to the task of reclaiming tech, using it to memorialise and politicise through critical and propositional projects.

The book is also concerned with a critical theory of representation; the mode and manner by which the most distant views become embroiled in the most earthly of politics. Her position on the critique of representation is refreshing and forceful; it does not mean that no reality exists or that it is unknowable, only that there is no privileged ground of meaning that guarantees an objective truth independent of subjects. She makes it clear that, for her, there is no relativistic abandonment of politics. Rather, the deconstruction of truth outside representation makes politics a relational necessity, and any claim to knowing a truth directly becomes an act of authoritarian seizure.

It is a shame that Kurgan makes no reference to the work of Donna Haraway, who also combines an account of the radical contingency of knowledge claims with a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a real world. Haraway's subject is always embodied and material, a feminist objectivity that means quite simply situated knowledge; for her, only a partial perspective can promise objective vision. The claim to universal knowledge is 'the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere'. Haraway puts the all-seeing (satellite) view in the context of wider knowledge structures and strengthens the situated and embodied politics implied in 'Close Up at a Distance'. This is also a good example of why Kurgan's work is a guide to more than just orbiting technologies; the overlap with Haraway makes a link to science and therefore to contemporary practices like citizen science. I will return to the wider implications of Kurgan's approach at the end of this review.

But first and most of all this is a work of critical cartography. And in that way it benefits as a book from the richness of imagery that cartography brings; in this case, the satellite images themselves. As the author presents one contested example after another, she is explicit about her debt to critical cartography and the fact that, as with all maps, power is the productive force behind the vision. She shows, for example, how the early satellite mapping of Kuwait served both to guide the airborne destructiveness of the US military and then, through the same spatial database, to target the millions of dollars of reconstruction activity.

Probably the most chilling images are of a newly dug mass grave in Kosovo in the spring of 1999. The first images from April showed the grave and were used to evidence claims of war crimes, and a second set in June showed that it had been destroyed, probably in response to the first images. Although neither NATO nor the Pentagon released data with the images, Kurgan was able to correlate them with an image taken by a German military drone. The image SPOT 083-264 memorialises the longitude and latitude of what Kurgan's calls a double erasure; a massacre and then a grave removed. As she says, 'it is digitized and remembered here, by military surveillance satellites. The black is presented to us as the black of freshly upturned soil in the village of Izbica. Absorbing more heat than the adjacent grasslands, it is distinguished and recorded by the implacable sensors of the satellites. It would take only the next rain to wipe away the evidence, and then the grass would start growing again. But not on this image.' In an uncanny alignment, I had taken the book with me on a trip to Kosovo and read her chapter more or less at the same time as talking to a young man whose DNA had been used to identify older relatives from one of those mass reburials, where the bodies were deliberately mingled by the Serb militias to make forensics difficult. Thus, the situated knowledge meets the satellite view.

The last example in the book is probably the most immediately useful for practitioners in a contemporary space smothered by superficial data visualisation. Kurgan shows vivid maps of what she calls the Million-Dollar Blocks. Criminal justice data is mapped to show that huge percentages of the prison population in New York State come from a tiny number of neighbourhoods. Connecting these localities with the amount of money spent keeping inmates from them incarcerated allows Kurgan and her Spatial Information Design Lab to identify city blocks where the costs of imprisonment are more than a million dollars per year. In a nice piece of cartographic ju-jitsu, the Million-Dollar Blocks project uses obscure but available data to "borrow and invert the language of crime hot spot maps". It's also important to note that the origins of this insight were the account of former prisoner Eddie Ellis, who had been part of a self-organised prisoners research group while he served his twenty year sentence in a State prison. It was the critical pedagogy of these prisoners which discovered 'the hard fact that 75 percent of the state's entire prison population comes from just seven neighbourhoods in New York City'. Thus, an implicit trajectory of Kurgan's book is also from solo art practice to participatory action research; another sense in which it is a handbook for the next stage.

One thing that is somewhat missing from Kurgan's book is a more in-depth description of the mechanics of the technology. While she is ever alert to the nature of images as data, as numbers that must be reconstructed into vision, there is not much said about the many intermediary steps. I suggest the book be read in conjunction with texts that get closer to the material manipulations, such as Susan Schuppli's paper 'Atmospheric Correction' on the technopolitics of glitches in Landsat data (Schuppli, 2013). Schuppli is also concerned with the ways satellite images are used to establish truth claims for action, but she spends more time looking at the technical and specifically algorithmic processing that lies between acquisition and human analysis. In these details, and the explicit and implicit decisions made at each stage, Schuppli finds a 'micro-politics' of satellite imaging which greatly complements Kurgan's more aesthetic meditations.

Another stark difference between Kurgan's work and the current situation is the role of social media as a massive experiment in collective auto-cartography. One fact about the satellite's 'God view' that pops up time and again in the book is the difficulty in finding unobscured, cloud-free images of the relevant patches of earth. In the whole of NATO's Kosovo campaign, for example, there were only two cloudless days. This limitation does not apply to social media where the image acquisition is a constant, eye-level stream of mutual

co-surveillance. The most important change here is not only the volume, velocity and variety of the images and data but the algorithmic processing that is used to make sense of it. In the book, both the original act of authoritarian truth-making and the author's unsettling of it imply focused, human agency in the interpretation and re-interpretation of satellite images. In the pervasive data space of social media, smart phones and the internet of things, the majority of the meaning-making is through the algorithmic steps of data mining and machine learning. Computational pattern finding and anomaly detection are not only a form of pre-processing served up to human masters but are increasingly connected directly to other forms of computational intervention (credit approval, no-fly list) without direct human intervention. In an image-space where machines talk to machines, Kurgan's insights will require adaptation as well as application.

Nevertheless, 'Close up at a Distance' has much to offer to those of us wanting to continue the task of engaged critical practice in the world of big data. Her narrative about the evolution of the 'Blue Marble', the image of the globe that was originally snapped by Apollo 17 astronauts in December 1972, is already a metaphor for our emerging algorithmic reality. Whereas the original image is a colour photo, NASA's 2002 version is actually a composite of four months' worth of satellite images, and the 2012 version uses data from six orbits of the Visible/Infrared Imager Radiometer Suite on the Suomi NPP satellite. But of course the version we all have to hand, and which is also the data base-layer for innumerable purposes, is the digital globe in Google Earth. Way more than NASA's images, this is a digital palimpsest, mashing up data from diverse sources (satellite, aerial, cartographic and historical) and algorithmically transforming them in to a seamless platform for instant panopticism. Of Google Earth, Kurgan prompts us to ask questions about the aerial views that make it up: 'How has this come about? Why are they in the database, anyway? How did they get to be freely viewable online from 2005 on?'. She warns that 'in the ease of the Google Earth interface, as in the simplifications of a map, the political, military, and economic stakes that underwrite the creation and expansion of the database can often disappear', a caveat that should apply to all of the hype around open data and data visualisation. On the nature of data itself, her strong position can be ported directly to the present. She coins the term 'para-empiricism' to draw attention to the fact that what is shown by data is not as obvious as it may first seem; that it is not a substitute for reality and carries a sense of incompleteness. Data is never raw, it is always translated such that it can be presented. As Kurgan says in her most telling phrase on the subject, "the phrase 'data visualization' is redundant: data are already a visualization".

Kurgan concludes with a call to continue the softening of hegemonic truths. Her projects are neither top-down nor bottom-up maps, she tells us; they zoom in to examine specifics and zoom out to consider scale. "The resulting image is no longer hard data. It is a soft map that is infinitely scalable, absolutely contingent, open to vision and hence revision". Satellites cannot take photos of the future so Kurgan's work can be seen as a form of reclaiming the past. Having read her book, I think she does this with a purpose that Schuppli also shares, and which the latter illustrates with a quote from Elizabeth Grosz: "The question of history remains a volatile one, not simply tied to getting the facts of the past sorted out and agreed on. It is about the production of conceivable futures, the future understood not as that which is simply constituted in the present, but rather, as what diverges from the present." My concern is how much these explorations could be closed down by the new algorithmic elements. The teleology of today's machine learning is the prediction of the future and the pre-emption of certain parts of it. How can we create a narrative terrain from the intensive and machinic data flows of our big data and algorithmic environments, so that we can continue to map out stories of alternative futures?

Schuppli, Susan. "Atmospheric Correction & The Politics of Remote Image Processing." *On the Verge of Photography: Imaging Beyond Representation*. Eds. Rubinstein, Daniel, Johnny Golding and Andrew Fisher. Birmingham: Birmingham Article Press 2013. 16-32