

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Fact and Fiction: Metafictive Geography and Literary GIS

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During the past decades, the ontological and epistemological frameworks of literary geography have altered remarkably. J. N. L. Baker argued, back in 1931, how fictive literature can be perceived as a container of geographic facts – a viewpoint that prevailed for several decades. The cultural turn of the late 1980s was widely critical of this ‘naïve realism’, seeing it as an attempt to find ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ while at the same time ignoring the textual constructiveness completely, as if books were somehow ‘transparent’ (Brosseau 1995: 89-90). Ever since, the focus of geographical studies of literature has turned more towards the questions of how space is constructed, consumed and interpreted through different kinds of textual strategies and semiotic systems. Where this leads is to the primary question of how the concepts and connections of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ should be comprehended, a topic, which is particularly central and multidimensional in the studies of metafictive geography (see Ridanpää 2010a) and literary GIS. These are two distinct and very different theoretical approaches for understanding the connections of space and literature. In metafictive geography the attention is on how spatial imaginativeness and consciousness of a text’s own imaginativeness become merged, while in literary GIS the challenge is on how to make spatial imaginativeness and its literary representations coordinatable. What these two approaches demonstrate, each in their own unique way, is that reading literature is essentially an experimental process in which the categorical distinction between the frames of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ become blurred.

Referring to one feature of modernism and postmodernism, Patricia Waugh (1985: 28) uses the concept of ‘frame’ to expound how the historical world is organized and perceived through certain structural elements. In her view the process of ‘framing’, that is, organizing

the world through such basic structures as the ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’, is an all-encompassing characteristic of the world of literature, as well as of the experiences of everyday life. Arto Haapala (1989: 81-2) has pointed out that authors in their work rarely, if ever, strive for mimesis and that readers should accept this during their reading. On the other hand, Haapala also adds that readers are always aware of the fictional nature of literary reality, but they still do not question the truth-value of it. In a paradoxical manner, the world of literary fiction is always real, fictively. However, from the viewpoint of (socially critical) research, literature is considered as something ‘fictive’ which can construct something socially ‘real’ or be somehow linked with it. It is possible that the fictional may be moving towards the factual, and that literature is coming to be based on ‘reality’, on ‘true events’; it still operates as a form of distorted reflection of the ‘reality’ presented, but not as a depiction of what it ‘really’ is (see Hutcheon 1980: 88). But what if the text, in metafictional manner, constructs its meanings through pondering on its own discursiveness; what if the text is based on an analysis of its own literary structure and conventions?

The concept of ‘metafiction’ was used for the first time by William H. Gass in his work *Fiction and Figures of Life* (1970), where he defined it as fiction which draws attention to itself as artefact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (25). In metafiction the text is aware that its own content is not describing reality, but rather social and cultural discourses without which the text itself would not exist. In literary studies, metafiction has usually been attached to postmodern literature. The analysis has been focused on works such as John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1986), John Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* (1978), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), and so on. The general view in literary studies is that although there are metafictional elements in all literature, some works are just more metafictional than others, and that in metafictional (or postmodern) literature the process of defining and finding one’s position between the frames of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ is more explicitly present (Waugh 1985: 5).

A text which is based on questioning and speculating on its own apparent nature and artificiality (Hutcheon 1992: 120; Waugh 1985: 2) may develop in the reader an impression that ‘reality’ is more like imaginatively conceived social discourse than ‘reality’ itself. From the viewpoint of geography, metafictional reading means a process where all the facets of the human world become meaningful as a slide between the categorical and abstract frames of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. In metafictional reading, during the slide between the frames of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, it becomes evident that fiction is historically conditional and that history, on the other hand, is conditioned discursively (Hutcheon 1992: 120). At the same time, the dividing line between real and unreal loses its significance. Instead of objects in nature, culture or society, metafiction aims always to refer to discursive contexts (Hutcheon 1995: 86-7). As Waugh (1985: 100) formulates this, ‘metafictional texts show that literary fiction can never imitate or “represent” the world but always imitates or “represents” the discourses which in turn construct that world’. To be exact, all literary works represent constructive institutions in relation to their own contextual thematics, but in metafictional literature the story itself is

based on the consciousness of one's own fictiveness, literary discursiveness and social realism (Christensen 1981; McCaffery 1982; Waugh 1985; Hutcheon 1995).

In the case of literary geography, a shift towards metafictionality means that the purpose of finding reality from fantasy turns into a new thematic issue for deeper philosophical analysis. Metafictional reading can also be used as a (Foucauldian) method for the critical analysis of spatial power-relations. In my previous studies I have discussed how metafiction and metafictional reading, especially literary irony and reading ironically, can be used as emancipatory 'tools' with which to contest and deconstruct spatial stereotypes, otherness and sexism (Ridanpää 2007; 2010b; 2014). Irony, among other textual strategies used in metafiction, can 'wake up' readers; it can direct them towards the consciousness of that reality and make them aware that the spatial and social dimensions of it are not 'real' in the conventional sense of the word, but rather historically, discursively and textually conditioned constructions.

Although in metafiction the text is retreating from realism, blurring the categorical division of 'fact' and 'fiction', it does not mean that the connection between the text and 'geo' is particularly blurred. Metafiction may wake up the reader, for example, to notice how the social and cultural stereotypes and power-relations behind a text divert their spatial conceptions, but it won't make the maps disappear. The question of where the stories are situated is not forgotten in metafiction – metafictional narratives always, or at least usually, take place somewhere. Where stories are situated and how their location connects with the frames of 'fact' and 'fiction', is particularly central in recently evolved research on literary GIS. Literary GIS has usually been introduced as a branch of the so-called 'spatial turn' in literary studies, which can be traced back to Raymond Williams' classic *The Country and the City* (1973). This study of spatial images within English fiction encouraged a general interest in the spatiality of fiction, whereas in literary GIS the main focus was directed to how fiction becomes situated in real-world coordinatable locations.

David Cooper and Ian Gregory (2011: 89) describe literary GIS as 'a shift towards a form of digital map-making that is predicated on processual self-reflexiveness and a conceptual sensitivity to the way in which GIS is inextricably embedded within the social space it endeavors to represent'. As an example of the research conducted in literary GIS, one highly ambitious interdisciplinary project, *A Literary Atlas of Europe*, launched by Barbara Piatti, has aimed to 'develop an interactive atlas as a research tool for spatial analysis of literature' (Reuschel and Hurni 2011: 293). The purpose of the project has been to produce an enormous database through which the systematic evaluation of literary spaces can proceed. The project sets two primary questions: how to map narratives and their complex spatial structure, and secondly, what is achieved by mapping literature (Piatti et. al. 2009)? This approach also contains the interesting concept of 'fictional data', which in a certain way crystallizes the very essence of literary GIS. 'Fictional data' refers to interactions between literary spaces and the real space, or put another way, the cartographic information of fragmentary narrative spaces with vague boundaries, which is often hard to localize (Reuschel and Hurni 2011).

If early literary geographers have been criticized for how paradoxical it was to try to find fact from fiction and to map literary narratives, should a similar criticism be directed towards the studies conducted in literary GIS, and to the growing field of digital humanities in general? Not necessarily. As Peta Mitchell (2017: 90) argues, ‘the positivist language of GIS and its inherent claim to mimeticism are not easy to reconcile with a literary-cartographic endeavor that stresses the subjective, experiential nature of space and place and that, as often as not, must grapple with geovisualising fictional locations that simply do not correspond with locations in the “real world” as represented in the map space’. Although the idea of mapping fiction may sound similar to what early geographers were doing, there are major differences between them as well, especially in terms of how the method of ‘mapping’ is comprehended today. ‘Map’ and ‘mapping’ are multidimensional concepts and metaphors that have been approached through several varying epistemological perspectives, both in geographical studies and in literary criticism (see Travis 2017).¹ As Sara Luchetta (2018) argues, literary mapping is not simply a map ‘telling us about the connection between the world and the text; it is not a graphic reduction of textual elements. Literary maps provide a way of seizing literary texts as well as a method for conceiving of the space and its relationship with the actual world’ (8).

For many children, and why not adults too, both literature and maps function as representations through which the world becomes visualized and imagined. Literature and maps offer very different routes for our imaginary adventures around the world, but in literary GIS these two routes meet. Positioning fiction into real-world maps does not mean that the imaginary aspect of fiction disappears, but on the contrary, it may create alternate forms of imagination. This can be exemplified with the place-based game *Pokémon Go*, where the addictive world of fantasy and real-world geo-information blend together, offering a completely new kind of imaginary, virtual space that becomes meaningful during the slide between the categorical frames of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. The point I am making is not that the study conducted in literary GIS should focus on developing entertaining digital applications, but instead that it needs to be more cautious in how it places literary narratives on real-world coordinates, for it somehow blurs the categorical distinction between the frames of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. To sum up, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ are multidimensional and extremely complex concepts and no matter from what perspective we are approaching the connection of literature and space in our studies, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ should not be separated in any other respect than in terms of theoretical abstractions.

Notes

¹ For example, Peter Jackson in his classic *Maps of Meaning* (1989) uses the word ‘map’ as a metaphor for perceiving the wide spectrum of spatial diversities in culture, culture politics and politics of culture.

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