LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Unraveling the Spatio-Political-Aesthetic Relationship: A Literary Geographical Approach

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No one can doubt that the word 'geopolitics' is one of the most frequently mentioned terms when discussing problems of international relations nowadays, ranging from the Sino-US rivalry in Asia-Pacific to the NATO-Russia tension in Europe. The post-Cold War world has witnessed the revival of classical geopolitical concepts such as 'pivots' or 'sea and land powers' (Doyle and Rumley 2019: 2). Although geopolitics can broadly be defined as the study of the 'the interrelationship between the territorial interests and power of the state and geographical environments,' its status as a scientific discipline is far from uncontroversial, not to mention its naïve environmental determinism and associations with German National Socialism (Dodds 2019: 4, 16-17). This is why geographers have proposed a 'critical geopolitics' which, by questioning 'objectivity and timelessness of the effects of geography on political process' (Sharp 2013: 534), aims to deconstruct the essentialist thinking of geopolitics. This short article proposes an approach that is largely commensurate with critical geopolitics, yet it seeks to deconstruct geopolitics by turning readers' eyes to the relationship between aesthetics and geopolitics, and the role literary geography can play in interpreting geopolitics as an aesthetic

practice. In other words, the article seeks to open up the conversations between aesthetics, geopolitics, and literary geography.

There has already been an attempt to initiate conversations between political science and literary geography by analyzing political texts as a type of literature with certain geographical imaginations (Madomitsu 2023). This article takes one more step forward and aims to incorporate aesthetics into such interdisciplinary dialogue. To establish the role of literary geography in the spatio-political-aesthetic analysis, the rest of the article is structured as follows. First, the relationship between geopolitics and aesthetics as a particular way of 'seeing' is identified through reference to some of the classical geopolitical writings. Second, *Land and Sea* by Carl Schmitt is introduced as an example case that analyzes literary works as representing a particular way of 'seeing' space. Finally, how the spatio-political-aesthetic analysis using a literary geographical approach contributes to the deconstruction of essentialism in geopolitical discourse is discussed.

In his recently published book on the Atlantic history of geopolitical discourse, Specter (2022) articulates the problem of environmental determinism in classical geopolitics. Alfred Mahan, an American strategist known for his writing on sea power, was influenced by Social Darwinism and went so far as to argue that '[m]ore and more civilized man is needing and seeking ground to occupy, room over which to expand and in which to live' (Mahan 1917: 165, also quoted in Specter 2022: 41), which makes the task of '[o]ptimizing the "use" of the Earth . . . the world-historical duty of the "superior races"'; an idea similar to this was later formulated by German geographer Friedrich Ratzel as 'Lebensraum,' or living space (Specter 2022: 41). The idea of 'Lebensraum' was eventually popularized by Karl Haushofer, German geographer and tutor to Adolf Hitler, to give theoretical ground to Nazi expansionist policy. Not surprisingly, geopolitics was considered taboo after World War II, and American geographer Isaiah Bowman, for instance, made every effort to cast a veil over his previous associations with German geography, even though he used to study Ratzel and closely followed Haushofer's career (Specter 2022: 55, 121).

Yet, it is worth attending to Haushofer's account. When discussing the importance of geopolitical training for statesmen, Haushofer described geopolitics as the 'art of politics' (Kunst der Politik) and geopolitical training as 'artistic teaching' (Kunstlehre), believing that such training 'would give the geopolitician a privileged tool for seeing things' (Specter 2022: 66-67). Indeed, geopolitics had taught various interwar Atlantic leaders 'a specific way of seeing' political situations, geographic conditions, and the world (Specter 2022: 136); even after the war, when 'geopolitics' was renamed 'realistic politics' in the US, Hans Morgenthau regarded it as 'a mode of seeing' and that which is 'connected to questions of aesthetic truth and representation' as well as 'artistic feeling for the political possibilities' (Specter 2022: 162).

Why, then, is geopolitics connected to aesthetics and art? What is the relationship between aesthetics and a way of 'seeing' things? According to Nassar (2022: 106), Baumgarten's classical notion of aesthetics is concerned with 'all things perceived'; aesthetics is thus about our perceptual and cognitive capacities. This is why Goethe viewed the goal of aesthetic education as the transformation of our perception by 'learning to see' the world differently (Nassar 2022: 111). For Goethe, both the creation and appreciation of art give

people opportunities to learn their way of 'seeing'. Through Goethe's experience in Rome, he came to believe that sketching plants allowed him to gain deeper insight into their metamorphosis, while attending to artworks made him capable of discerning how the individual works influence each other, which eventually led him to realize that he had actually 'learned to see for the first time' (Nassar 2022: 110-111). If, just as Haushofer and Morgenthau argue, geopolitics is also concerned with an aesthetic practice of 'seeing' things, and geopolitical training is artistic training in learning a particular way a particular way of 'seeing', then, are there any artworks that can be understood as geopolitical discourse? If so, what kind of approach is possible for analyzing geopolitics through artworks?

The answers to these questions may lie in the writings of Carl Schmitt, a controversial yet intriguing figure in legal and political philosophy. Notwithstanding his association with the Nazi regime, contemporary geographers are increasingly interested in his spatial writings (Minca and Rowan 2015). In his short treatise on geopolitics *Land and Sea*, Schmitt gave a detailed account of how artists in the medieval and Renaissance periods saw the world differently:

> Renaissance painting forsook the space of the medieval Gothic art. From then on, the painters would place their human models and material objects in a space, which through perspective, attained a hollow depth. People and objects were now sitting and moving in space. It is in fact a different world, when compared to the space of a Gothic painting. The simple fact that the painters began to see differently, that the way they looked at things changed is full of significance for us. (Schmitt 1997: 36)

For Schmitt, the way people 'see' the world is a major issue in geopolitics, because '[e]very important change in the image of Earth is inseparable from a political transformation' (Schmitt 1997: 38). He intuited that it was artists who were most sensitive to the particular way of 'seeing' conditioned by a geopolitical landscape in a certain time period.

This explains why Schmitt referred to literary works when discussing the changing geopolitical landscapes in world history. In *Land and Sea*, Schmitt drew on a number of literary literary works including Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Seneca's *Medea*, and Shakespeare's *Richard II* to analyze how people in different periods had different spatial conceptions that eventually led to major geopolitical events such as the Age of Discovery, European colonization, and the birth of of the British Empire (Schmitt 1997: 13-16, 31-32, 50). The analytical method Schmitt employed here is indeed nothing but a kind of literary geographical approach, an approach that interprets literary works as representing people's spatial experience. Taking such an approach was possible for Schmitt because he understood these literary works as forms of geopolitical discourse, each of which represented a particular way of 'seeing' the world adopted by the author and people at the time.

An attentive reader may raise a question here: if geopolitics is about a particular way of 'seeing' things, does it not follow that, an artwork as geopolitical discourse actively induces readers to take that way of 'seeing', rather than just passively representing a way of 'seeing' adopted by authors? To answer this question, one has to take a literary geographical

perspective. Literary geography is often interested in exploring the two-way interactions between literary and physical geographies, in which 'actual-world places' not only shape 'the reading of the text' but are also 'shaped by the reading of the text' (Thurgill and Lovell 2019: 18). When, therefore, a literary work represents a way of 'seeing' adopted by authors, it always already induces readers to adopt that particular way of 'seeing.' Of course, these works are not entirely secure from political exploitation; authors can sometimes internalize political values that serve the powerful, making their works instrumental in spreading and reinforcing such values.

Geopolitics as a particular way of 'seeing' is still lingering today, and one of the hotspots for competing geopolitical discourse is the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific region is strategically important not only for major powers like the US and China, but also for various regional countries, mainly due to its significance in world trade as communication lines and shipping lanes. Therefore, different countries seek to instill different ways of 'seeing' the region in the domestic and international audience so that the region is imagined in such a way that best increases their status and influence. For instance, India creates a map of an historical Indian Ocean and emphasizes India's civilizational linkages around the area to appeal to their soft power; the US, on the other hand, represents the Indo-Pacific Ocean as a *liquid continuum*, a space without territorialization, to legitimize US intrusions into the area (Doyle and Rumley 2019: 20-21, 73).

Of course, one should not deny the importance of physical geographies. Quantitative studies show that 'the presence of land or sea contiguity significantly increases the probability of war' (Bremer 1992: 327), and a country located between two other rivaling states is, *ceteris paribus*, more vulnerable to conquest and annexation than countries without such a condition (Fazal 2004). Physical geographies, therefore, do matter. Nevertheless, geopolitics is not only about locations and land features, but it is also about narratives and discourse that shape our reality. One may look as far back as 1839 to reflect on the British invasion of Afghanistan. For Britain, the imminent Russian threat and the value of Afghanistan as a buffer were more or less a pretext; they sent troops there largely because of their imperial ambitions (Partem 1983). The notion of a threatened buffer area was not an inherent characteristic of Afghanistan; rather, Afghanistan was made to be 'seen' as such through British storytelling, representing it as 'geographies of exception', 'violent geographies', or 'zones of contestation' (Bayly 2015: 817).

Geopolitical reality is, thus, a type of literary work. A literary geographical approach to geopolitics can deconstruct the ethnic/nationalistic/imperial essentialism often inherent in such discourse, for equating geopolitical discourse with artworks reduces geopolitics to a purely epistemological dimension. There indeed exists nothing like an objective, immovable geopolitical reality out there. The conversations between aesthetics, geopolitics, and literary geography can thus be a reminder that today's narrative of harsh geopolitical reality is no more than what is constructed through ceaselessly functioning aesthetic apparatus that induce people to take a particular way of 'seeing' the world.

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