THE ART OF BEING LOST: AN ALTERNATE APPROACH TO MAPPING

Associate Professor Laurene Vaughan
School of Media & Communication
RMIT University
GPO Box 2476
Melbourne 3001
Australia
laurene.vaughan@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

This paper presents a proposition for thinking about and for challenging the basic premise, that the role of cartographic devices such as maps or atlases is to enable us to be placed. Conceived of as the Art of Being Lost, the proposition explores different ways for conceptualising and structuring the experience of being lost. From artistic interventions that explore the nature of place and region, where play and confusion challenge the users sense of location, to the mythological origins of the labyrinth and the experience of the labyrinthine, the following discussion takes on a journey to rethink the Art of Mapping, and the potential of being lost.

Introduction

It is interesting to consider the relationship between the Art of Being Lost and the creation of maps and atlases. Although it is generally assumed that maps, atlases and other cartographic way-finding devices are designed to help us find clarity, there are many who see the value of breaking this rule. For the readers of maps there is a belief that what lies within a map is true. Maps and atlases have authority. They are designed and presented in a manner that reassures the reader of their validity, that truth lies within their representation; for this is what a map is, a representation, a visualisation of something else. A map is not a place, a map is an thematic articulation of somewhere (Ackerman & Karrow 2007, Harley 2001). It is by reading maps that we can make sense of our world and place ourselves, we create some sense of *here* in relation to *there* (Noble Wilford 2002, p.6); and it by reading maps that we translate these representations to create our own meaning and understanding of *where* we are. We trust that maps will enable us to find our way, that we can place ourselves along or within their marks and from there move toward our destiny (this is true whether it is a map of a place or a thing). Through the tracing of our gaze or our finger across the surface of its representation we place ourselves there (literally or through

association); we trust the integrity of the visualization until we are told or discover otherwise. This is the measure of 'success' for a way-finding device: its ability to assure us of where we are, it has the ability to enable us to know that we are here. At the same time that this is the layperson's belief about maps, within the field of cartography there is recognition that this may not be the case. Maps are socio-cultural artefacts and our ability to engage with has evolved over time (Thrower 1999, Dorling & Faribairn 2001). Through design and communication devices the content of maps can be distorted or manipulated, what is represented may not be what is (Monmier 1996). In fact the distortion of reality in the form of map projections, are in themselves essential for cartographic readability and with time have become the conventional representation of the world (ibid. 8). Monmier goes on to argue that all maps are distortions of truth, they are representations of something created as a means to communicate something. '(M)aps like speeches and paintings, are authored collections of information and are also subject to distortions arising from ignorance, greed, ideological ignorance and malice' (p.2). In this way it is both the nature and intention of the communication that is essential to the maps design and subsequent use, and this is a tension that exists. Maps are artefacts of science, and at the same time, maps are subject to all the vagaries of the human condition. 'Cartographic disorientation, which challenges the rationalised perspective that so many were used to, emphasises the human dimension of mapmaking and demonstrates that all maps rely on rhetoric and artifice parading around as objective science' (Bulson 2007, p. 122).

First – lostness

What does it mean to be lost? Why would we want to be lost and what devices and mechanisms, in form and concept, can we use when designing spaces and systems to be lost in? The Art of Being Lost, and the art of designing maps and atlases that enable people to be lost is the focus of this discussion.

If the conventional expectation of a way finding device is that it will enable the reader/user to find their way, to gain clarity and certainty about their place in the world; then what is the benefit of getting lost, of being mis-placed?

There are a number of different ways that we understand the experience of being lost. Usually lostness is understood to be a negative thing. For example, to be lost and wandering the desert forever, to be discarded, to be outside and, even though we can be lost in a group, there is a sense of aloneness and abandonment with the lost. Whether it is a sock, a cat or person, to break the set, the connection or the family through unknown absence causes levels of anxiety and uncertainty. If someone cared, then they would seek you out. If you are beyond or outside of the desired membership then you are left destitute, you are alone you must find your own way. Lostness is disorderly, careless even; it disrupts

order and expectation, in an odd way it is confrontational. In societies and contexts where order and conformity are highly valued, to be lost is to break that order, it is to bring attention to the self and it creates discomfort for others. Even if we are comfortable in our own mis-placement, our absence can cause such distress for others, that they must seek us out in order to try to re-place us, and thereby re-create the known, and re-establish the norm.

The counter side to this understanding of lostness as absence (waiting to be placed) is lostness as freedom; this is lostness as a space or experience of potential. It is possible to actively engage with being lost. To embrace the freedom of the unknown and the uncertain, and to seek out in this the possibility of where we are and where we could be, rather than where we should be. Embracing the potential of being lost has been central to some of the creative fields of art and literature. Bulson (2007) in his investigation into *Novels, Maps, Modernity; The spatial imagination, 1850 – 2000* explores the relationship between disorientation and modernity, maps and knowing places through literature, arguing that the ability of novels to both enable us to 'read' places and to become familiar can equally be a process of finding and loosing. Losing oneself and of getting lost. This desire to both, know and to deliberately not know was also integral to some of the place-based interventions of Guy Debord and the *Situationist International*. In this case Debord deliberately manipulates the relationship between the individual, the map and the city as a means to confront notions of certainty and efficiency, of placed-ness (Careri 2003).

Wandering is one way that we describe this kind of approach to positive lostness. To wander or meander from here to there, suggests a freedom of transition and the ability to move from place to place (Solnit 2000) without a focus on arriving. Physically this can be realised as a walk through a forest or city streets. It can be the aimless Sunday afternoon drive where there is no destination, just time and motion and a sense of going from here to there. To randomly meander in this way is to let go of (or confront) expectations of certainty. The focus of our trust has to shift from being in the object or thing that we expect to guide us, to the integrity and possibility of the process that we are in. In this way we loose ourselves, our attention shifts and ideally we are open to the unexpected. There are many ways that we hand over our control and loose ourselves in the world or the context of another. We can become lost and flow through random connections to find new ones. For example, beyond meanderings along roads or pathways, there is the deliciousness of hours spent with unknown books in a library or a bookshop moving from shelf to shelf: mindlessly following links within the Internet or listening to the play lists of others on Internet radio. These are all examples of us loosing ourselves to the structure of another – roads, bookshelves, computer code and taste. In this way, lostness is generative, pleasurable and opens up our world.

This positive perspective on the creative potential of being lost is a theme that often finds its way into publications, films and recently in Australia, tourism campaigns. Stevenson (2007) in his guidebook titled *Lost and Found, New York* uses the richness of these two states to open up understandings of the city for others. Presented as a picture book he uses narrative, historical facts and chance observations to engage others in the city through his eyes. His interpretation of New York expands our experience of that place, but it does not make it ours, his devices are his, the experience is his, all we can do is add to it through our own. The form of the text doesn't allow us to share this with him or others directly; this is only possible through our own connections, conversations and materialised artefacts. Being lost in Australia is a potent theme for films, literature and the cultural psyche. Our history is full of lost explorers and settlers, of foreign and dangerous people and landscapes. Then there are those who came to this southern land because they were lost to civilised society (convicts), there are those who had lost all that they had and, those who wish to be lost (refugees, immigrants and travellers). The potential for lostness to rejuvenate is, and has been in the past, the focus of national tourism campaigns. Australia, a county, a place so large, foreign and full of potential, that you can come and loose yourself here (but preferably don't get to lost!).

As we can see from these alternate perspectives, lostness has a wondrous power about it. There is a productive tension in the complexity of our experiences and expectations of the fear, anxiety, adventure and discovery that are held within it.

Subversive cartographies

Many artists and designers have explored methods and methodologies for facilitating 'lostness', ambiguity and confusion within their creative production: for example there are the *Dada* or *Situationist* interventions into the experience of the city and place (Careri 2003). Similar to the tradition of 'treasure maps', through the use of devices such as maps or itineraries, that are designed to confuse and de-locate; these subversive cartographies use clues such as wrong directions and false markers in order to engage participants in exploring the nature of place and mobility through characteristics such as uncertainty, frustration and play. Notions of reality and the factualness of place are confronted, as are assumptions of maps as the conveyors of truth challenged and manipulated (Bulson 2007).

Over recent years these experiments have continued through designers playing with our familiarity with particular methods and styles of representation and form in map design (Crampton & Krygier 2006, p. 17). A particularly popular icon is the London Tube map, noted for its design and the way that it changed our understanding of the representation of place, distance and the relationship between things. This map is transformed to become a device for mapping relationships between non-place based things. An example of this is the

Great Bear Map of London - a map of people and professions lay out as the London Tube Map. When reading the *Great Bear Map*, we intuitively seek out the name of a place, which familiarity and experience lead us to think that we know. Based on standard design tools, we have expectations of what will be where through devices such as the colour of a line or a relative position within a composition; and instead of finding the name of the expected place, we find someone other name, placed. In this way something 'other' replaces the name that we seek; and we are left without our place, and confusion, anxiety or interest are aroused.

These creative interpretations of maps are designed to confront and challenge our sense of the 'norm'. They open our eyes to the map that we read; their distortions force us to see the site a new. In this way the strange or unfamiliar re-acquaints with the known. It is this practice of opening the eyes afresh to the features and the places that we are in, that has informed the practices of many art or social movements whose practice is based on walking. In the latter part of the 20th century, a body of artists evolved who have built upon the work of the Surrealists and Situationists. The curator Julianna Engburg classifies these artists as 'walkers'. These are artists (e.g. Richard Long) whose creative practice is embodied in walking (Engburg 2003). Walking is their creative act that may or may not be recorded, any marks or constructions or associated documentation directly relating to the walk is just that, documentation of an ephemeral act of experience. The documentation is a secondary construct and an interpretation, it is another aspect of the work, and it is not lesser nor is it the focus. The walk it is not a source of inspiration for the documentation, and the documentation is not secondary or an after thought; they are different aspects of the one and creations unto themselves. In this way like the Sunday driver or the bookshelf surfer, it is the being in the process of discovery that is the focus of the creative or generative act. It is possible that through these walks or meanderings, that maps will be created, and like the maps of the Flaneurs, these maps are records of paths traced rather than directions of paths to take.

Enter the labyrinth

In this proposition of the Art of Being Lost, I am interested in what happens when maps or plans are deliberately designed to create confusion, a sense of being lost, and then the possibility of discovery. In the past I have explored the 'labyrinth' and the 'labyrinthine' as methods for experiencing and articulating this. Many have turned to the labyrinth in their efforts to make meaning of the abstraction of experience. Reference to the labyrinth and the labyrinthine can be found in science, the humanities and the arts. Often the focus within these labyrinthine discussions is on the maze, with reference to the structure that imprisoned Theseus's Minotaur, but this is not my only area of interest. The labyrinth of

this proposition includes what some suggest is the pattern of Ariadne's golden thread; this is the labyrinth as represented by a single circuitous path that leads towards a central space and considers the relationship between this and the multi-linear labyrinth, more commonly known as the maze.

Like many ancient Greek myths many have endeavoured to make sense of the meaning of the tale of Theseus and the Minotaur and its implications for our understanding of the human condition. At its heart this is a tale of love, lust, control, ambition, deceit and power. The maze is built to hold the outcome of illicit love/lust, the Minotaur. The consequence of an unnatural union the creature matures and ceases to be acceptable within society, it becomes violent and must be hidden or contained. Rather than just killing it outright a convoluted structure and process are put in place to bring the Minotaur to its demise. At this point youth, Theseus, with the requisite pride and valor enters the scene. Others have tried before and become lost in the meandering paths of the maze or been killed by the raging creature yet believing in his ability to conquer the maze and overpower of the Minotaur, despite this he takes on the challenge of entering the maze to destroy the Minotaur. At the same time Ariadne, the counter aspect of youth, the feminine and belief in love and integrity becomes part of the narrative. She fears for the safety of Theseus and gives him a gift, a ball of yellow string, so that he can find his way out and not become lost in the ramblings of the maze. This thread will be the tie, the consistent line that will enable him (logic, youth and power) to overcome the potentially treacherous adventure that lies ahead. It is said that the pattern he created with this thread is what we now know as the unlinear Cretan labyrinth – a single meandering path that takes the user to the centre (a point of discovery) which they then trace their way back out from. His mission is successful and in this victory we can see that good overcomes evil, and logic overcomes passion.

Cretan 7-cycle labyrinth

Overtime both of these forms of the labyrinth have gone on to become part of social practices. Expanding beyond their mythological origins they have transformed and the maze has become a device for play, and perhaps torture; and the unilinear labyrinth a tool for discovery and meditation. In the past and in the present each of these forms of the labyrinth touches an aspect of the lost: whether it is to deliberately loose, to fear loss, to

pretend to loose, or to seek and find. Lostness is central to the labyrinth, and as such the labyrinthine may be an effective means for being mis-placed, for enabling the Art of Being Lost.

Lostness and non-place

So far within this discussion I have focussed on the interpretation of lostness as a means to enable mis-placement. This connection between mis-placement and lostness embraces the potential of being somewhere else, somewhere outside of the norm or the expected; it embraces the possibility of not knowing. Mis-placement requires us to extend our interpretation of place and our sense of placement at a particular point in space and time. Many would argue that it is not possible for us to be mis-placed, for we are always somewhere and that where, is place. Misplacement is something that happens to a thing or something other than the self. 'I misplaced my pen' for example. We might misplace another being, but usually we would refer to this as lost; 'I lost you in the crowd.'

It could be thought that this lost place is what Augé (2000) would refer to as a non-place, but this would be incorrect. Non-places are typically described as spaces between defined places of meaning. For example Augé describes the medium strip between two pieces of road, the gap within the two defined trajectories of a highway as non-places; these two expanses of road enable us to go somewhere, the medium strip holds them apart and can be the breathing space between. This non-place is still a known space, a located experience and no matter how we end up there, we are still there, and there for a reason. To inhabit a non-place is to be in a holding pattern between things. In this way we are neither lost nor mis-placed.

To mis-place someone, including our selves, is to deliberately choose to loose control over our sense of a particular place. To be lost in a place is be disconnected from its placeness, it is to be located without existing personal meaning, whilst having the potential for meaning to be found. For the non-place this is not possible, it is always a location to pass through. I do not think that this is the same as Debord's investigations using maps of other locations as we explore the one that we are in (Bulson 2007, p.121). For example using a map of Santiago Spain to find our way around Santiago Chile. A labyrinthine approach to being lost in place would be to embrace both the disorder and uncertainty of the maze, whilst following the trajectory of a single path tracing Ariadne's golden thread.

Finding our way by getting lost

We live in what is referred to as the Information Age, dealing in the Knowledge Economy. Managing this information and transferring it into knowledge that has meaning is the challenge of our times. The atlas is one of the systems we use to engage in geoplaced knowledge. Atlases are conventionally understood to be a collection of maps, traditionally bound into a book form, and they may also be in multimedia formats. As well as geographic features and boundaries, many often features geopolitical, social, religious and

economic statistics (Noble Wilford 2002). In this proposition the atlas is conceived of as collection of parts, and these parts are the maps and other information that is contained or collected within it.

Conventionally a map is understood to be a representation on a flat surface of the features of an area of the earth or a portion of the heavens, which are shown in their respective forms, sizes and relationships according to some convention. A map may also be a representation or reflection of anything, a drawing, a sketch or a function. As Noble Wilford states, 'anything that can be spatialised can be mapped' (2002, p. 411) and the content and form of such maps varies across cultures and throughout history. The objective of a map is to visualize and communicate information as simply and concisely as possible. It captures and conveys information at a point of time, and as Seager (2004) argues, maps privilege place over process. Maps lead to action, they record action and they are made through action, but of themselves they are static.

There are many ways to make a map. From the informal sketch on the back of an envelope explaining how to get somewhere or locating where something is, to the cartographically 'true' map that depicts features of a place based on scientific data. In either case the creator of the map is the holder of power, the author of truth, the recorder of what is. Maps that are designed with the intention of enabling mis-placement confront this norm (Harmon 2004). Not only do they challenge notions of truth and authority, they also focus on the potential of the process of use, and of transitioning from place to place and the human presence in this actions. Mis-placement and lostness are active states, finding our way through being lost opens up possibilities for both the making and the use of maps individually or as a collection.

Designing affective way-finding devices for being lost

Let us return to the understanding that atlases are things that hold, bind or collect maps. Maps are representations of things, natural, actual or imagined (usually connected to places physical or ephemeral), and they are linked to actions and/or functions. In this way atlases are a means to hold representations of related 'data' created by someone for use in something. In this project this 'use' would be to disrupt the order of knowledge and our assumptions of ease and directness of access. A labyrinthine atlas, and the maps that it contains, would deliberately distort or challenge our access to information; it would take us on a circuitous journey, embracing the strange and the familiar in order to bring us to the potential of somewhere else. How this happens and how it is realised will vary depending on the form of the mapping device, particularly whether it is analogue or digital.

One of the challenges of designing a digital mapping device that allows the user to be misplaced or to experience the possibility of lostness, is that it is almost impossible to design such an experience in its purest form. If we focus on the moves between things as we traverse from place to place, to be truly lost would be to not know where you are going and to have the possibility of going into the unknown. A digital environment relies on the links between things, unlike a book with a central bind and pages that I can flick through in any order (limited only by what is in the bind), the conventional navigational structure requires a more complex yet clear set of connections between things. As a user I may find myself on a path of the unknown but it is not an unknown path, it is a meandering that has been created by another. It has been devised by the builder(s) of the links who create the connections that make our path possible. I can wander only as far as someone else has planned for me. Although often described as a maze, the labyrinth of the web is more like Ariadne's golden thread; the links pace and connect as I make my journey along this path of connections. In this way my lostness returns to the meanderings of the Flaneur within a specific site and context and the plane of the screen becomes like the plane of the street, a surface that I meander across or through and my lostness is in my approach, my intention, rather than the structure, and my discoveries and the potential of my lostness are in the unexpected things I find there.

Conclusion

There are a number of different ways for conceptualising of the practices of mapping (cartographic and not) through the Art of Being Lost. In this particular discussion the labyrinth and the labyrinthine have been of particular interest; the two forms (the maze and the labyrinth) have historically and contemporaneously been used to explore or highlight the potential of uncertainty and confusion in increasing our sense of place in the world. These are tools of fear and enlightenment, capture and freedom, all of which are themes that different art practices have utlised as means for understanding located experience.

In attempting to conceive of this proposition a series of questions were used to help frame such an approach to the experience of place. These questions aimed to open up our expectations of way-finding and contemplated why we would want to be mis-placed through the process. If we design maps or atlases that confuse or break-up the known: maps that displace or misplace data during use or the like, then what would it mean to do this? How would such a device inform or influence a person? How would or could it be used?

To name something as 'an Art' is to accept that there is a level of mastery associated with its creation and use. To be artful is to have grace and expertise; it is to be able to do and to extend beyond. An Art of Being Lost in the practice of map making and cartography challenges the expectations of use, but not the integrity of form and manufacture. Like the

Art of Writing, Motorcycle Maintenance or Cooking, the Art of Being Lost is something that is potentially accessible to all, yet normally isn't. The way-finding device (map or atlas) of this 'art' embraces the potential of being lost and allows the user/reader to transition through the labyrinthine experience of being mis-placed.

References

Ackerman, J. R & Karrow, R. W. Jr 2007, Maps Finding Our Place in the World, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Augé, M 2000, Non-places, introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Verso, London.

Bulson, E 2007, Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination, 1850-2000, Routledge, New York.

Careri, F 2003, (translated by Piccolo, S & Hammond, P) Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice, Guastavo Gili SA, Barcelona.

Crampton, J. W 2006 'An Introduction to Critical Cartography,' ACME: AN International E-Journal for Critical Cartographies, 4 (1), 11-33

Dorling, D & Fairbairn, D 2001, Mapping Ways of Representing the World, Pearson, Prentice Hall, Essex.

Engburg, J 2003, The Labyrinthine Effect, Australian Centre For Contemporary Art, Victoria.

Harley, J. B 2001, The New Nature of Maps, Essay in the History of Cartography, (Paul Laxton Editor), John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Harmon, K 2004, You are Here, Personal Geographies, Princeton Architectural Press, New York.

Monmier, M 1996, How to Lie with Maps, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Noble Wilford, J 2002, The Mapmakers, Pimlico, London.

Seager, J 2004, Maps, University of Vermont, http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/mapsmain.html.

Solnit, R 2000, Wanderlust, A History of Walking, Penguin Putnam Inc, New York.

Stevenson, J 2007, Lost and Found in New York, Harper Collins, New York.

Thrower, N J W 1999, Maps and Civilisation; Cartography in Culture & Society, second Edition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.