

Geocriticism: Mapping the Spaces of Literature
(book review)

Bertrand Westphal. *La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2007. Pp. 304. Price 20 €.

Literature abounds with the description and exploration of spaces. The writer maps the world, combining a representation of real places with the imaginary space of fiction. In some cases, what I have elsewhere called *literary cartography* serves to map a well known space (e.g., Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg or Twain's Mississippi River); in others, the places mapped may be wholly imaginary (More's Utopia or Tolkien's Middle Earth). Most often, the two combine, as the literary representation of a seemingly real place is never the purely mimetic image of that space. In a sense, all writing partakes in a form of cartography, since even the most realistic map does not truly depict the space, but, like literature, figures it forth in a complex skein of imaginary relations.

In *La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace*, Bertrand Westphal provides a theory and a method for analyzing this interplay of spatial practices in literary texts. Westphal directs the Espaces Humains et Interactions Culturelles research team at the Université de Limoges, which has produced several "geocritical" projects; *La Géocritique* is a programmatic statement of the theoretical and practical foundations for this novel approach to literature. The term *géocritique* calls to mind Gilles Deleuze's idea of *geophilosophy*, and Deleuze is one of the theorists with whom Westphal engages. But Westphal's argument also draws from many disciplinary formations and cultural discourses, including architecture, urban studies, film, philosophy, sociology, postcolonial theory, gender studies, and, of course, geography and literary criticism.

The wide-ranging argument befits the topic, as geocriticism seeks to explore that spaces of literature in multiple senses. Westphal's first three chapters lay out a landscape of theoretical positions. Modernism and postmodernism fundamentally altered the ways in which we understand space, no longer as a stable or inert category but rather as complex, heterogeneous practice. This concept of space allows for a more dynamic or transgressive movement that literature explores in the always problematic representation of space, in which the lines between fictional and real spaces are constantly crossed and recrossed.

This sets the stage for the methodological discussion of geocriticism, which—according to Westphal—has four elements: (1) Multifocalization, in which many different points of view are needed to establish the literary space; (2) Polysensoriality, inasmuch as the space may not be perceived by vision alone, but also by smell, sound, and so on; (3) Stratographic Vision, in which the *topos* is understood to comprise multiple layers of meaning, deterritorialized and reterritorialized; and (4) Intertextuality, such that all textual spaces necessarily encompass, "interface" with, or relate to other spaces in literature and in reality. The geocritical approach thus pries criticism loose from an egocentrism (*vis-à-vis* the writer or the reader) and opens literary studies to a polyvalent interaction of spatial and discursive practices.

La Géocritique is an impressive book, surveying a rich, interdisciplinary field while providing elegant readings of a number of texts. A geocritical approach offers new insights to literary studies, while also establishing fruitful connections to other areas of cultural and social theory.

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