Blind maps and blue dots: the blurring of the producer–user divide in the production of visual information
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EN   Summary

This book explores the question of what contemporary mapmaking practices can reveal about the ever-evolving field of graphic design. The shift towards digital modes of production has fundamentally changed the field. The computer as universal tool, the interactive possibilities of digital media and the direct exchange of visual information through networks have led to a different relationship between the producers and users of visual information, to the extent that a clear distinction between the producers and users no longer exists.

In my view, the evaluation of graphic design's recent developments is too strongly focused on what happened to the persona of the graphic designer. In this research, I propose an alternative model that focuses on the technologies that have shaped the field. My model is a timeline of technological thresholds, that is, an overview of the technologies for creating, recording, editing, producing, distributing and accessing visual information. The thresholds generate a series of consecutive conditions for different kinds of practices, formats of production and models of use.

Graphic design and cartography have different origins and concerns, but their contemporary practices have much in common. Both use similar tools and the digitization of those tools has enabled new players to enter the fields. The impact of digital technologies on mapmaking seems greater and clearer than on graphic design. In this research, I considered cartography a testing ground to understand the transformations of graphic design. Three mapmaking practices were selected to survey, analyse and test that transformation: The Blue Dot, the location function in Google Maps; the Strava Global Heatmap, a world map showing the activities of users of the fitness app Strava; and the 'situation in Syria' maps, a regularly updated map of the Syrian conflict made by an Amsterdam teenager.

In this research, I have adopted notions from post-representational cartography, which regards a map as a process rather than a fixed spatial representation. According to this theory, a map is in a constant state of becoming: 'producing' and 'using' are not consecutive processes but parallel tracks. My position differs from post-representational cartography in that I pay as much attention to the ever-changing position of the producer-user as to the processual nature of the map.

Theoretical research into post-representational cartography and insights from the case studies enabled me to formulate two visual concepts: the Blind Map and the Blue Dot. Both address the fundamental processual and dynamic status of respectively the graphic product and its producer-user. Both are also transdisciplinary and applicable to other forms of graphic representation. Together they constitute a post-representational approach to graphic design.

A Blind Map is a graphic product that is in a permanent state of emergence. It is never fully formed, but completed every time a user engages with it. A Blue

Dot is a graphic sign indicating the user's location on a digital map. It is also a symbol marking the blurring of the binary distinction between producing and using. The two concepts are interrelated. The Blue Dot gives the user a presence in the process of graphic representation, but to take on this role the user needs to be given room and agency to co-produce. The Blind Map offers this space.

The use of a graphic product is an encounter between the ever-emergent product and its producer-user, who is constantly oscillating between producing and using. The dynamics of varying oblique positions of formats, users and producers result in misunderstandings and false expectations of the information contained in a graphic product, such as disinformation and fake news, or of the presumed knowledge and authority of a participant in the exchange. An ever-changing graphic product gains authority when it is embedded in a public debate about its process and sources.

Because the status of the graphic product and that of the participants in the information chain is dynamic, the mediating technologies between them gain importance. This is reinforced by the decreasing expertise of users who lack training but do have access to digital means of production, and to the design knowledge incorporated in digital graphic tools. This gives the producers of design software a dominant position in the design field, which is reinforced by the significant presence of their products in the curricula of design education.

Language can play an obstructing role in advancing a field. Specialist language employed by the practitioners of a field, such as technical jargon, enables the exchange of ideas within a field, but it also functions as a form of gatekeeping for people outside of it. While the tools of graphic design have been democratized, its terminology has not. Language thus becomes an obstacle in opening up the field to new players. An expanded understanding of the field needs to address the modes of communication used to characterize it.

In my design practice, I have developed strategies of incorporating ambiguity as an antidote to the misalignments in the encounters between the producer-user and the graphic product. By incorporating the ambiguity and uncertainty of data, I highlight and challenge the manipulations in the design of visual information.

I did something similar in the artistic part of this research in which a series of visualizations embody an alternative documentation of the research. The development of alternative and complementary languages is, in my opinion, an essential aspect of artistic research. This parallel visual documentation of the research questions the discursive text, and all the prejudices and histories contained within it.