

Touching at a distance: a response to Hind and Lammes

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In *Pandora's Hope*, Bruno Latour closes a story of soil science in Brazil by cutting to an image of himself in his office, smoking a cigar amidst the muddle of his reference material, overlooked by “an immense map of the Amazon Basin” (Latour 1999, 78). Having returned from the field he has spent a chapter describing the ongoing production and extension (at both ends) of the chains of reference that produce as epiphenomena the material stuff of soil science and the readers of scientific knowledge, precisely those products which the Moderns, he argues, habitually misrecognise as objects and subjects. Back in Paris, he celebrates the conjunction of the map and the index finger: “by pointing ... we can, through a series of uniformly discontinuous transformations, link ourselves to Boa Vista. Let us rejoice ...” (Latour 1999, 78). My response to Hind and Lammes’ article focuses on just this: Latour’s celebration of touching at a distance.

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Latour has regularly turned to maps and mapping for parables on the ways in which knowledge is gathered and accrues, the ways in which we achieve reference to the world, the ways in which we misunderstand these processes, and the profound effects of those misunderstandings, “the false propagation of a catalogue of Cartesian divides” as the authors of this article put it (p2). Hind and Lammes’ essay is a welcome addition to the literature on Bruno Latour from scholars dealing with cartography and its current proliferation of digital forms and practices. In part, it is a survey of the different uses of mapping stories in Latour’s work, incorporating also his references to the remote survey photography that we increasingly take for granted as being bound up with cartography through their conflation in geoweb platforms like those provided by Google. In a collaboratively authored paper, Latour himself has ventured some statements on the significance of digital mapping platforms (November, Camacho-Hübner, and Latour 2010), and a survey of the sort that Hind and Lammes have produced helps to bring into focus what his ideas can bring to the study of geomeia as a formation beyond cartography per se.

The authors’ most distinctive contribution is an extension of Latour’s vocabulary to take into account the touchscreen interfaces and mobile devices with which we now often access maps. Their main argument is that these interfaces exacerbate our modern bind. In *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, Latour imagines a seductive

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pantomime villain, the “evil genius” Double Click – a personification of the compounded category errors that fool us into believing we can achieve “free, indisputable, and immediate access to pure *untransformed* information” (Latour 2013, 93). For Hind and Lammes, Latour’s antagonist figure requires updating for mobile computing due to two factors: the shift from peripheral user input devices to touchscreens and their distinctive combination of hand and eye, and the opportunity to interact with location-based data in situ (the authors note that Double Click makes its first appearance in 2003). Distanced technologies of vision are increasingly becoming situated technologies of touch, and this process, they argue, is compounding our free-lunch fantasies of unmediated access to the world and its entities.

This extension has value, but the authors miss an opportunity to qualify and enrich it by considering Latour’s own statements about touch, particularly with regards to the business of knowledge and inscription, and the extension of chains of reference through the world. Just as he does in the passage I referred to at the beginning of this response, Latour celebrates touching at a distance in chapter 4 of AIME:

In the end, when everything works, when the network is in place, access is indeed obtained; you put your finger on a map, a document, a screen, and you have in your hand for real, incontestably, a crater of the Moon, a cancerous cell

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deep within a liver, a model of the origin of the universe. You

really do have the world at your fingertips. (Latour 2013, 109)

The access that we obtain, the reference to the world and its things, is access for real. Though they are forced through the tiny windows of our inscriptions and transformed at every stage by their mediators, the meagre gifts of data (to play on the etymology of datum) that remain constant through those transformations are still gifts, and Latour is unambiguous in his gratitude for them. This access, however, is not that sort dreamed of by the Moderns, the sort that Hind and Lammes see in the everyday mapping practices enacted by smartphone and tablet users.

The difference between these versions of access comes down to how we conceive of the relationship between vision and touch.

Throughout his writing, Latour downplays vision in favour of a more groping, haptic way of encountering the world; he regularly invokes blind insects, not just the famous ANT of actor network theory but also a recurring metaphor that likens chains of reference to termite galleries (Latour 1987, 232, 1988, 171, 2005, 242). Access depends on a relay of mediators, each of which touches the next. For Hind and Lammes, vision and touch are bound up with each other in the operation of touchscreens in such a way that the latter secures the former. A question that isn't explored or answered here is whether or not we can conceive of these glassy interfaces in a way more attuned to Latour's celebration of "the world at your fingertips."

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In AIME, Latour clarifies issues of access and reference in relation to one of his signature concepts, the immutable mobile. He tells us that the tension in this oxymoron (for there is no transportation without transformation) can be taken in two ways: it either emphasises the project, for the historian or sociologist of science, of documenting all those innovations in visualisation and inscription that allow for the maximisation of those opposing qualities in the transport of constants, or alternatively it can be taken to refer to the effect of a successful network of reference chains. If we misunderstand our technologies as permitting unmediated access to the world, it is because we have forgotten the centuries of work that went into creating that effect. So do our mobile computing devices allow us to forget all that work, all that shoe leather, all the expeditions and instruments and paper? Or do they in fact remind us, through their often-tortuous negotiations with communications infrastructure, through the time it takes for cartographic and survey photography data to load on their screens, through their regular failure to work as we dream they might?

The concept of the immutable mobile is itself something that I believe needs clarifying in relation to digital mapping. Hind and Lammes, among others, use the concept in a way that seems quite different from that initially intended by Latour; they read mutability in terms of the volatile and open-ended nature of digital mapping

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systems, our ability to interact with them, edit their data and change their interfaces. The authors mention the story of Jean-Françoise de La Pérouse's mission and the fixing of a Sakhalin islander's ephemeral tracing of the shape of that island in the explorer's notebooks, a tracing which survived the journey back to the court of Louis XVI without deformation: this is the anecdote with which Latour introduces the concept in more than one of his texts (Latour 1986, 1987). But while that tracing and its fixing were undoubtedly rudimentary maps, does it make sense to discuss systems like Open Street Map in terms of either mutability or immutability? The Latour of Science in Action and the Latour of AIME are in agreement that the thing – or being – that fulfills the contradictory requirements of mutability and attainability is a meagre gift of data, a small set of geometrical constants that correspond to features in the world. The immutable mobile describes transports of data that may or may not be mappings, it isn't a description of the map as a system or a framework for the integration of those constants into a picture of knowledge about the world. It remains relevant for explaining how each act of mapping (for Open Street Map, perhaps the shape of a participant mapper's journey) abstracts data from the world and sends it on a journey which demonstrates a system's – or network's – propensity to support the transport of small constants without deformation.

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