

How Useful Is Thematic Cartography of Literature?

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By discussing selected examples from literary geography, this article addresses the following questions: What is the difference between maps in fiction and maps of fiction? How mappable is fiction in general? How useful is an author's geography? What is the benefit of the distant reading enabled by literary maps as opposed to the close reading of literary texts? Should literary scholars, if they decide to map, prefer to map single texts or large groups of texts?

Keywords: literary geography / thematic cartography / fiction / mapping / maps / distant reading / toponyms

The topic of this volume is the spatial turn in literary studies in general. My contribution, similar to Robert Stockhammer's, addresses only a small segment of this spatial turn in particular: whether it is reasonable and beneficial to produce maps of literature.

In order to clarify what I am discussing here, I have to introduce a basic differentiation. I refrain from talking about those maps that are themselves part of literary works—that is, maps *in* literature—such as the map of Felsenburg Island that has been attached to the novel *Insel Felsenburg* (Rock Castle Island) by Johann Gottfried Schnabel since 1731 (Schnabel 99; see Figure 1). In the words of Gérard Genette, these are peritexts of literature (Genette 16 ff.). In this context, it is not important whether authors of fiction are also producers of corresponding maps. These maps are peritexts because they are provided together with the book as a unit. Their function can only be determined with respect to each individual case. In most cases, these maps relate to the texts as illustrations. This implies that they are supposed to enable readers to orient themselves in a fiction's space of action. This strategy aims at topographically validating the consistency of a narrative—regardless of whether, say, Felsenburg Island actually exists or not. In fact, this island does not exist—it is a fictional island loosely situated within the real world's geographical space of the South Atlantic. However, readers are able to visualize the island very precisely. The island should be vivid even with respect to the relations of the space of action.

Much more could be said on this topic, and the most important points have been presented in Stockhammer’s book *Die Kartierung der Erde. Macht und Lust in Karten und Literatur* (Mapping the Earth. Power and Passion in Maps and Literature; see Stockhammer). However, I do not deal here with such maps *in literature*.

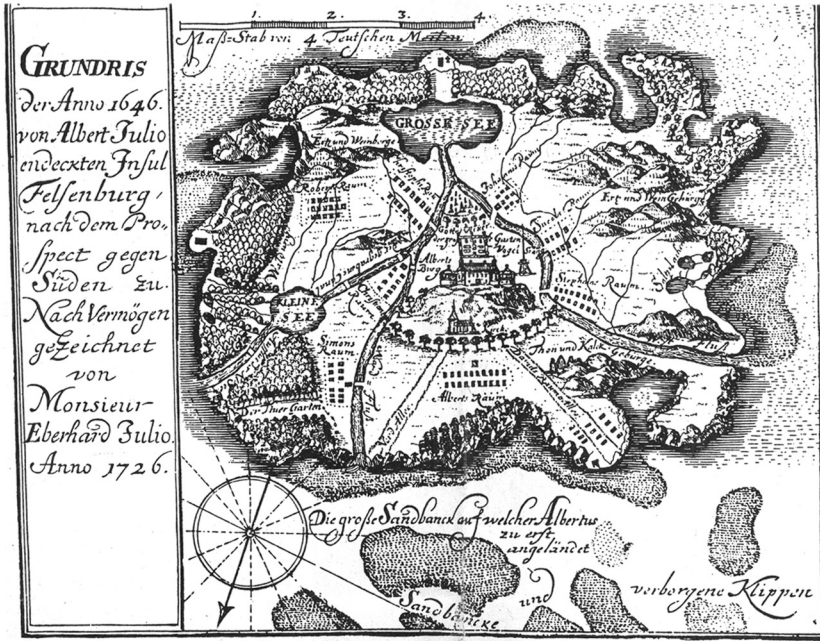


Figure 1: Johann Gottfried Schnabel, *Felsenburg Island*

Instead, I focus exclusively on maps *of literature*. By this I mean maps that are not literary peritexts, but which were subsequently produced by literary scholars. For more than a hundred years now, one has been able to find occasional experiments of this kind. Since Franco Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel*—which Stockhammer recently referred to as “non-theory”¹—there has been a small boom in maps of literature. Perhaps, or rather certainly, this is one reason why there has been so much talk of a spatial turn in literary studies. In all honesty, though, one may wonder how literary scholars even came up with the idea of producing maps or even entire atlases, for it appears to be a rather unlikely approach. Why should literary scholars become cartographers? Why should one move from the field of literature to geography? Does this make any sense, and does it have any analytical value?

One distinctive argument has been continuously raised in favor of this unlikely approach: the benefit of any map of literature has to be that it visualizes things that would otherwise remain invisible. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, literary geography is an open-ended experiment. The map can provide new insights: something that one would not have seen with alternative analytical methods. In this case, it is worth the effort. However, if the map does not reveal new insights but merely illustrates literature, the mapping experiment has failed. Such maps of literature are redundant—a conclusion that has also been reached by supporters and active proponents of literary cartography such as Franco Moretti and Barbara Piatti.

Because this is the case, because one can only start from a concrete example of mapping in order to see whether such a map of literature makes sense or not, I present and comment on three (and a half) such maps.

At this point, I only want to mention one additional restriction: looking at the history of literary cartography, which has been around for more than a century now, on the one hand there are maps that relate to the authors—for instance, by showing the spaces of their origin or activities. One such example is “Deutsche Dichter im Todesjahr Goethes” (“German Poets in the Year of Goethe’s Death”), a map published in 1907 as part of the first edition of Siegfried Robert Nagel’s *Deutscher Literaturatlas* (Atlas of German Literature; Nagel 12; see Figure 2). One can immediately see what literary geography means in this context: it is an authors’ geography. The map shows the authors’ spaces of living and creativity, thereby aiming at marking “the relations between landscape and literature” (Nagel 12). Given the spatial information it provides, it is a “thematic” map. It consists solely of the parameters of regions, cities, and poets’ names, using the color blue for the regions, red non-italic text for the cities, and italicized black text for the names of German poets in the year of Goethe’s death (and one has to bear in mind that the map took into consideration only a certain number of writers). With that said, I have named almost all of the map’s means of visualization. In other words, the cartographer works very reductively or even ascetically. What can be seen with a map equipped so selectively is that every single element of spatial information attains distinction: the dominance of the centers Vienna and Berlin, the sub-centers Leipzig and Munich, the isolation of the humorist Bogumil Goltz in the void-like expanses of West Prussia, and so on. This example allows me to spell out an important point: due to their unavoidable selectivity, maps—and by this I mean all maps, not only those in or of literature—always refer to concealed, or rather silenced, information; they implicitly involve spatial information that has been excluded and withheld from the reader

(on this, see also Monmonier). In my case, this accounts for political borders: it appears that the empire of the “German poets’ tongue” can do without such borders, and this is also what this literary map states.

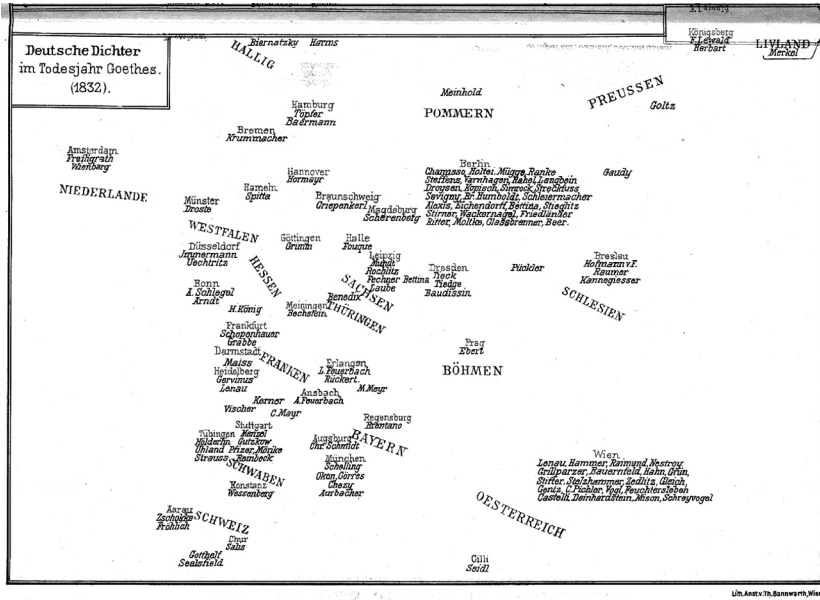


Figure 2: Robert Nagel, *Deutscher Literaturatlas*

Such maps of literature, insofar as they refer to the narratives of an author’s origin or the circulation of his or her work, are only valuable if one believes in an interrelation between earth and spirit, between landscape and literature.

These maps ascribe specific features to the spaces that are supposed to have influenced the literature that has emerged from them. In short, such maps only make very vague statements about the aesthetics of production. Moreover, because all this is based on a sociology of the author, it risks being rejected as spatially deterministic. One may ask whether it is still possible to find such statements in any way convincing today.

These kinds of literary maps—assuming that they present an “authors’ geography”—could still easily be created. However, what can one actually read in such an authors’ geography? There seems to be hardly any analytical value in it.

Hence, I restrict my deliberations to those maps that do not refer to authors, but rather to texts themselves. These maps show either geographic scenes of individual texts or geographic scenes of text clusters. Such maps

are better suited for a kind of Moretti trial: do they show new insights that would have been invisible without the mapping? Or, in Moretti's precise phrasing: "What do they do that cannot be done with words . . . ; because if it can be done with words, then maps are superfluous" (Moretti 2005: 35).

Let me start with a map created by Franco Moretti himself: "Jane Austen's Britain" (Moretti, *Atlas* 12; see Figure 3). (This must have passed the Moretti test, otherwise he would not have included it in his *Atlas of the European Novel*.) The map shows the spaces of action in six Jane Austen novels; more precisely, it only shows the locations of the narratives' beginnings and relates them to the locations of the novels' endings. Thanks to the subtle choice of map parameters, the map does not merely offer information on the dramaturgy of each individual novel's space of action. Instead, it puts the narrative geographies of an entire text cluster on top of each other like transparent layers. If one had mapped the novels' years of publication, one could even make statements on the gradual development of Austen's spaces of action. For Moretti, maps such as this one belong to experimental arrangements of literary studies. Out of all the available spatial information, he only selects specific parameters and in doing so he translates particular aspects of literature into the language of the map. Simply through this simplification and generalization, one gains an overview as an analytic form emerges that would have remained invisible without the map. On this map of the spaces of action in Austen's novels, one can see a specific England evolve from the narrative scopes of the novels, a core-England without the "Celtic fringe"; that is, one that excludes Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland. To the extent to which the nation-state establishes itself as a conglomerate of diverse languages and ethnicities—what one should infer according to Moretti—the literature satisfies a claim for some kind of core-England. It simply amputates the Celtic periphery and, with a sovereign self-limitation, only concerns itself with a selective territory.²



Figure 3: Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*

What critical objection could one pose to this map? In particular, one might say that it reduces the complex spatial circumstances of the texts to a single point where one places a literary toponym in the physical geo-space. The map does not allow one to infer from such a marker exactly what narrative significance the respective space of action possesses in Austen's work. Is the space only a backdrop or does it become a protagonist of the story? The map does not give any indication of the semantic relevance of textual spatial information. This relates back to the concept of the map in general. Its statement is usually pointed and acuminate to such an extent that it systematically disregards most of the parameters that attribute meaning to a text. For literary scholars and close reading specialists, this is a huge provocation: Moretti's map exposes a distant reading that reduces complex spatial relations of texts to location markers. Whoever rejects such a map would only have to show in what way it might be based on an inadequate reading of Jane Austen.

My next example reveals another problem of maps of literature. In 2008, Barbara Piatti (Piatti Karte 9; see Figure 4 in the Appendix) produced a map that may be seen as a prototype of a future *Literary Atlas of Europe*, which is presently being prepared at the ETH Zürich. Piatti is a

literary scholar working on such maps in cooperation with Swiss cartographers that are considered among the best in the world. In this sense, one can hardly say that the problems of this type of map are the result of the fact that they were created by amateur cartographers. So what does this map show? As anyone can see, it is much more complex than Moretti's map. Piatti has the ambition to show more than the mere geography of the author's story. Her goal is to visualize an entire literary "meta-space," as she calls it. To this end, she had to collect all the literature written between 1477 and 2004 in a specific European region—in this case, the region around the global tourist hot spot of Lake Lucerne and the Gotthard Massif in central Switzerland. The sample consists of exactly 150 texts. The space of action with regard to this literary meta-space is inscribed in a topographically rich basic map-layer of Switzerland (in Moretti's case, this kind of basic map layer was blank). The small numeral signatures refer to a table in the appendix that lists the 150 texts. In addition, one has to differentiate between signatures of spots and of surfaces: the spotty signatures point, quite precisely, to locatable spaces of action within the literary corpus; the elliptic areas, however, are a cartographic remedy for those cases where a precise localization was impossible. Instead of a distinct location, they show a geographic zone where the story is supposed to be set. Eventually, it is necessary to differentiate between the diverse color layers on the map: orange is used as a basic color for localizing the entire literary corpus on the topographic map, and purple has been chosen as a contrastive color marking an extract of the corpus that is topically dominant on the map.

The interrelation of these (admittedly very complex) cartographic representations proves itself analytically with regard to this map as follows. The topic is "Exogenous Fictionalization 1800–2004." "Exogenous" refers here to literature by authors that are not from Switzerland. Therefore, those texts of the corpus that are colored purple were written between 1899 and 2004 by foreign authors that chose the model region as space of action. What can such a map show? According to Piatti, it represents "a kind of 'colonization' of space by foreign authors" (Piatti 217). A considerable amount of the intensity of literary spaces of action within the model region traces back to impulses from foreign literature during a specific period. Although this is interesting, it is not surprising because this area has enjoyed an immense amount of tourist attention. The map allows one to see any potential agglomeration of exogenous fictionalization within this region and period. Moreover, the map also allows one to substantiate the geo-spatial features of these centers. One can only identify these aspects here because the basic map layer is much more informative than

it was in the case of Moretti's map. Hence, one can see that the foreign authors that chose this region as a literary space of action focus on tourist highlights (such as Lucerne, Lake Lucerne, Rütli, Lake Uri, and Gotthard); in contrast, the native authors tend to evoke rather remote spots of the hinterland in their literature. Although this analytical output of the map is perhaps not that intriguing, one may now quantify and visualize such a hypothesis by means of the map and the literary corpus.

However, there is one decisive problem that cannot be solved by such a purely cartographic approach to extensive amounts of texts: the problem of diachrony within the corpus.

The map claims to layer literary insights of 500 years of literary history on top of each other. A basic topographic map, however, can only present a single moment in the history of a geo-space. In this case, it is the ministerially measured geo-spatial excerpt of central Switzerland from 2004. Hence, the map itself is marvelously rich in detail, but interferes with the historical layers which it intends to expose. As soon as one looks through the cartographic signatures of areas, one sees, for instance, the airport at Buochs, Lucerne's city highway, and the railway track to Engelberg. In other words, a specific form of a historically concrete geo-spatial reference in literature (say, literature from around 1800 that refers to the city of Lucerne) can only be shown to a very limited extent by such a contemporary topographic map. Thus, a reader of the map has to abstract from the cultural and spatial developments shown on the map. Dealing with the mapping of Schiller's *William Tell*, one has to neglect the airport at Buochs and basically imagine that it is not there. However, once one is forced to abstract in such detail, what kind of value does the geographic profundity of the basic map layer have?

On the one hand, therefore, it is precisely the capability of managing large amounts of text that makes a quantifying approach such as topical cartography appealing. On the other hand, should one say that cartography can only deal insufficiently with the aforementioned diachrony? And in which cases can literary scholars disregard this diachrony?

One solution might be to map discrete texts only; that is, texts that are not too diachronic in themselves, and whose meaning is constituted by a narrative geography. In particular, this situation means that the position of spatial circumstances looms large because that is exactly what the concept of the map involves because it declares that indications of positions in texts are more important than any other kind of spatial information.

My final example illustrates this aspect: I myself have mapped an individual text that complies with the aforementioned conditions: it is a map regarding the geography of the setting of Tim Staffel's 1998 Berlin

novel *Terrordrom* (Döring 614; see Figure 5 in the Appendix). Staffel's first novel is a dystopian, futuristic novel grasping the turn of the millennium in Berlin as an apocalyptic scenario. There is eternal winter, and street riots dominate daily life. Young people abandoned by their parents arm themselves and battle in the frosty urban jungle for their existence—it is a dog-eat-dog world. A stranger sends threatening letters to all households (Thomas Pynchon sends his regards) and propagates mass murder as the final act of resistance. In the end, cynical TV producers come up with the idea of marketing the ubiquitous terror in the media. They evacuate an extensive area of central Berlin, declaring it a crisis area in which anybody may riot according to his or her wishes and convictions. They build a new wall, demand an admission fee, and turn the spectacle of violence into a regulated leisure activity that is broadcast live on paid TV as “The Terrordrom,” “the centre of controlled escalation” (Staffel 197), a gigantic *Big Brother* container with a shoot-up license. For its inauguration, the Reichstag is blown up, and after six days the area within the wall is closed down: the war will no longer be declared, but administered.

Because the text's eponymous central metaphor refers to a territory whose boundaries are very precisely located, it stands to reason to create a map of this millennial Berlin. The city is once again divided by a wall; this time it is not divided into east and west, but into inside and outside. The inside corresponds more or less with the historical center—the Mitte district of Berlin—including the area where the government quarter is being built today in Berlin's real topography. It is said in the novel that “Bonn remains the capital city” (Staffel 197). One may also regard the novel's set boundaries regarding the “Terrordrom” as a literary commentary on the discussion on the capital city and the seat of government that continued to be disputed until the late 1990s. One might see it as a fantasy of empowerment by opponents of the capital city, who in turn perceived the rapid conversion of the city center and the government quarter as a “center of controlled escalation.” Within his fictional territory, Staffel allows the new (greater) German capital to be literally destroyed. At the same time, the ghetto-like coherence of the Terrordrom also produces a framing appearance. Looking at the map forces one to contemplate the other side of the boundary line, the outside of the Terrordrom, even more so than if one merely read the text. Inside, the violence is territorially immured: “Around it there is peace. . . . The quiet. The restored order” (Staffel 209). Residually, through the enclosure of excess a new idyll evolves. The map shows where one can feel like a war profiteer. It is striking that all the libidinous sub-centers of the old, beautiful West Berlin can count as pacified territory again: the two Kreuzbergs, the gay and red Schöneberg, and

the neat Charlottenburg, remain unaffected. Even in *Wedding* one can do well for oneself because all potentially violent perpetrators have been allocated their place of escalation in central Berlin. If the map demonstrates anything, it is that the literary fantasy of the Terrordrom may also be read as an idle wish and a rearguard battle continued by West Berlin's opponents of reunification.

Let me limit my conclusion on the three maps of literature by proposing the following two theses:

1) Robert Stockhammer's important differentiation between "mappable" and "unmappable" literature (Stockhammer 67 ff.) is still essential: some literature makes it possible to mark literary toponyms on a map, whereas other literature prohibits such an approach—and the only way to decide on this is the prior interpretation of a text.

2) Whether or not such a map of mappable literature (in Stockhammer's sense) is then analytically beneficial can only be decided on an individual, case-by-case basis. Literary cartography cannot be sweepingly prequalified or disqualified. However, its analytical advantage is highly uncertain and can by no means be guaranteed in advance. As with all real experiments, a certain amount of risk remains: in any case, to map literature involves great expenses that might turn out to be completely futile.

NOTES

¹ See Stockhammer's article in this volume.

² I do not want to comment here on the paratext of this map—a quote from Raymond Williams's interpretation of Jane Austen. One can see this often in Moretti's work: he combines his mapping visualizations with text excerpts; however, because these are part of the map's statement, the reader of the map must establish a correspondence between the pictorial map and the paratext.

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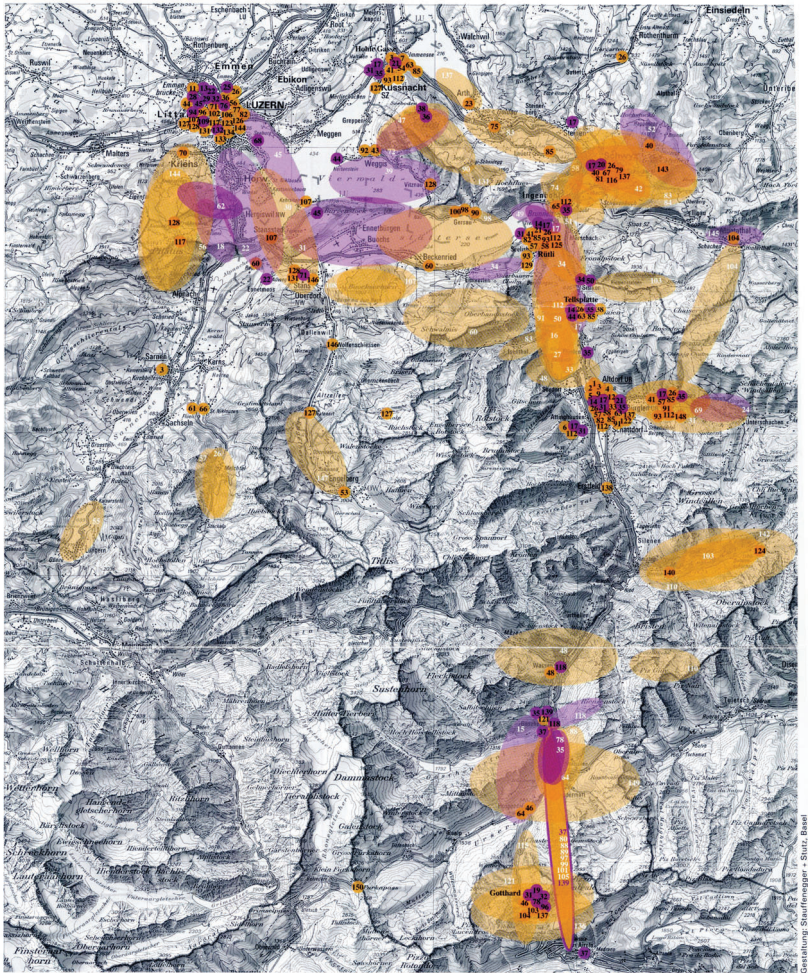
Kako uporabna je tematska kartografija literature?

Ključne besede: literarna geografija / tematska kartografija / literatura / kartiranje / zemljevidi / oddaljeno branje / toponimi

Članek ob izbranih primerih iz polja literarne geografije najprej vpelje razlikovanje med »zemljevidi v fikciji« in »zemljevidi fikcij«. Tematska kartografija literature se nanaša le na »zemljevide fikcije«, nastale pozneje kakor literarni teksti in večinoma predstavljene kot novo analitično orodje za tekstno interpretacijo. Vse od izida Morettijeve knjige *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998) poteka razprava o doveznosti fikcije za kartiranje, ki pa le redko dejansko proizvede zemljevide. Posvetil se bom kartiranjem, ki smo jih opravili Franco Moretti, Barbara Piatti in jaz, ter zastavil tale vprašanja: Kako uporabna je avtorjeva geografija? V čem je korist t. i. oddaljenega branja, ki ga omogočijo literarni zemljevidi, v primerjavi s t. i. natančnim branjem literarnih tekstov? In ali bi morali raziskovalci literature, ki se lotijo kartiranja, kartirati posamezne tekste ali velike skupine tekstov?

April 2013

Jörg Döring: How Useful is Thematic Cartography of Literature?



Karte 9: Exogene Fiktionalisierung 1800-2004 (violett)

● Schauplätze, punktgenau
 ○ Schauplätze, zonal / Handlungszonen

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44
 Nicht exakt lokalisierbare Texte mit vagem Bezug zur Vierwaldstättersee- und Gotthardgegend

Kommentar zu dieser Karte: S. 217 ff.

© Barbara Piatti: Die Geographie der Literatur. Göttingen: Wallstein 2008. Basiskarte reproduziert mit Bewilligung von swisstopo (BA071528)

Figure 4: Barbara Piatti, Exogenous Fictionalisation 1800-2004



Figure 5: Jörg Döring, Tim Staffels *Terrordrom*