



The Non-Hierarchical Turn. Hacker Cartography as an Image of the World: the Syrian Civil War Case

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Abstract

Between 2012 and 2014, Syrian rebels have used the crowdsourcing service Map Maker to change the names of streets and geographical places. For example, on the Hafiz Al-Assad highway appeared the name of the dissident musician Ibrahim al-Kashosh, Lake Assad has been renamed Revolution Lake, etc. The event is a significant demonstration of a critical approach to the online/offline relation, exploring the interdependence between the two spheres to question the concept of authority. Paradoxically, this agency is expressed through geolocation technologies that are, as this paper will argue, intimately authoritarian (Mirzoeff 2015).

Though a media-related approach, this essay will interpret this clash in terms of an appropriation, or a sabotage, of offline physical spaces through online virtual practices. By one hand, in historical perspective, it will reflect on how media history has always been a history of the changes in the perception and appropriation of the space (Harvey 1989, Giddens, 1990), modifying the “situational geography” of social life and compromising the traditional relations between physical environment and social situation (Meyrowitz 1985, Thompson 1995). By the other, through the analysis of the aforementioned case study, I will show how digital technologies have promoted an ontological turn of the image environments. Stressing this concept to the extreme, I will demonstrate how this process could lead to a short-circuit between the virtual and the real, highlighting how material reality can be conceived as none but an endless and dynamic overlapping of virtualisations.

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Introduction

Between 2012 and 2014, Syrian rebels have used the crowdsourcing service Map Maker to change the names of streets and geographical places. For example, on the Hafez Al-Assad highway the name of the dissident musician Ibraheem Al Kashosh appeared, Lake Assad has been renamed Revolution Lake, etc.

The event is a significant example of a critical approach to the online/offline relationship, exploring the interdependence between the two environments to question the concept of authority. Paradoxically, this agency is expressed through a technology that is intimately authoritarian: the geolocation and geovisualization software that we use are none, as we will see, as a cartographic appendix of the institutional power; at the same time, they generate an illusion of reality, originated by heterogeneous sources. This ambiguity seems to have an impact, to some extent, in contemporary visual culture, for it is characterised by an increasingly conflictual nature of digital images, with relevant consequences, both propagandistic (Mitchell 2011) and aesthetics (Vernallis 2013), on the offline environment.

The interaction with and through these technologies has involved, and characterised, also the production and distribution of images. A discipline like film studies, for instance, is actually questioning these issues, as it is engaged in re-thinking not only the notion of cinema, but also the discipline itself, multiplying methodological approaches and interdisciplinary perspectives, at the risk of erasing its own thresholds. Many recent studies in that field try to recognise, for instance, the 'cinematographic' features of the 'non-cinematographic' forms of expression (or, by contrast, the 'non-cinematographic' features of the 'cinematographic' forms of expression) (Brown 2016, 104-30). The debate is wide, as it goes from the most peremptory positions - 'cinema is a medium of the past' (Rodowick 2007), 'cinema is an entr'acte in history' (Zielinski 1999), 'films have become files' (Bordwell 2012), 'media have become software' (Manovich 2013), etc. - to the most conservative ones - according to which cinema is essentially a particular kind of sight (Aumont 2012), or an evolving environment (Casetti 2019), and film studies have codified concepts and methodologies that need to be preserved (Andrew 2010). To sum up, film studies are more and more re-questioning the nature of images, and their ontological status, as the very existence of the discipline turns out to be undermined.

From this start point, this essay will aim to interpret the Syrian case study, previously exposed, describing that clash in terms of an appropriation, or a sabotage, of offline physical spaces through online virtual practices. This conflict may imply two theoretical discussions, that will be analysed in the next paragraphs: by one hand, I will reflect on how the history of media can be conceived as a history of the changes in the perception and appropriation of the space (Giddens 1990; Harvey 1989), as they modify the situational geography of social life, compromising the traditional relations between physical environment and social situation (Thompson, 1995). By the other, I will try to explain how this change of perception may lead to a questioning of the authority, as any image of space may be seen, for its own nature of discipline and domination of the world, essentially as a *form of control*.

The Place beyond the Sense of Place

The first thought, in this sense, goes to Heidegger and his concept of *Weltanschauung*, literally "image of the World" (Heidegger 1977), often taken over by visual studies. The image of the world, for Heidegger, must be understood not as a representation of the world, but as the constitution of the world as an image. This process constitutes for Heidegger a metaphysics, which as every metaphysics gives foundation to an epoch (in this case, the modern epoch, characterised by the development of the experimental sciences), determining a conception and an interpretation of truth; as such, it must be deconstructed. From Descartes, who begins to conceive man as a subject, everything is intimately objective and subjective at the same time: the object exists, but only in relation to the subject, "principle of every measure", which creates, in fact, a representation of the world, and on the basis of that representation is, in turn, oriented. The difference between perception and representation, according to Heidegger, is precisely that in the latter the object,

the world, is determined by the possibility of man to represent it. The representation of the world, said otherwise, responds to a will of domination that fails regardless of the empirical judgement; The human being, failing to grasp the world in its broad ontological reality, represented it as an *image* (or 'entified', to use the Heideggerian lexicon).

In this sense, the works of Meyrowitz are crucial, as they develop this debate demonstrating how it could lead not only to a re-definition of the place in a relational sense (for instance, a travel account could sensibly vary according to the audience: a friend, a relative, a colleague, etc.) (1985, 1), but also, to quote the title of his most famous book, to a veritable loss of the *sense of place*. In this book, the author integrates and problematises both McLuhan's approach (every media mutation, being media an extension of human senses, changes, in turn, social structures) (McLuhan 1964, 1967) and Goffman's model (social interactions consist in individuals actively involved in many different social representations: what change is not that much a behaviour model, but the ability to adapt to them) (Goffman 1959, 1974). Synthesising the two approaches, Meyrowitz propose to conceive both face-to-face interaction and mediated interaction in structural terms, that is, a perpetual structuring and re-structuring of social stages (1985, 4): this intuition is central to our analysis. As Meyrowitz argues, "electronic media [...] have rearranged many social forums so that most people now find themselves in contact with others in new ways. And unlike the merged situations in face-to-face interaction, the combined situations of electronic media are relatively lasting and inescapable, and they therefore have a much greater effect on social behavior" (1985, 5). We could interpret this reflection in terms of a *situational geography*, in which media have the capacity to overlap and redefine the stages, the roles and the perception of the information itself. As the author writes:

"perhaps the best analogy for the process of change described in this book is an architectural one. Imagine that many of the walls that separate rooms, offices, and houses in our society were suddenly moved or removed and that many once distinct situations were suddenly combined. Under such circumstances, the distinctions between our private and public selves and between the different selves we project in different situations might not entirely disappear, but they would certainly change. We might still manage to act differently with different people, but our ability to segregate encounters would be greatly diminished. We could not play very different roles in different situations because the clear spatial segregation of situations would no longer exist." (1985, 6)

The concept of the spatial segregation of situations, thus, reveals to be, in Meyrowitz's thought, a necessary feature for the differentiation of communication. When that segregation lacks, what is missing, as well, is the diversity of roles that individuals can play. To rephrase it in a critical perspective, the lack of segregation could unmask the person who is communicating, forcing him to redefine its content: that is what happened – if we want to make an anachronistic interpretation of Meyrowitz's insight – with reality television and, more recently and widely, with social media. As the author writes, once again, when the mask collapses "we would have trouble projecting a very different definition of ourselves to different people when so much other information about us was available to each of our audiences" (1985, 6). Once again, in an anachronistic way, we could see the debate on the right to be forgotten, that in Europe gave birth to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)¹, as none but an attempt to re-establish a hierarchy of social stages. As this and other contemporary examples suggest, Meyrowitz's framework is valid both as a hermeneutic tool, i.e. as a possible interpretation of the history of media in its entirety, and a pragmatic goal, i.e. as a way of developing alternatives communication practices. With the demolition of the walls, Meyrowitz writes, 'certain behaviour patterns that never existed before [...] would come into being. In the combined setting, some behaviours that were once kept in the 'backstage' of each performance would, of necessity, emerge into the enlarged "onstage" area' (1985, 6). In this context, we will be forced to say and do things differently: 'the behaviour exhibited in this mixed setting would have many elements of behaviours from previously distinct encounters, but would involve a new synthesis, a new pattern – in effect, a new social order' (1985, 6).

This dynamic (in which, for instance, the history of social media can be inscribed), has been

¹ GDPR. Accessed June 23, 2019. URL: <https://eugdpr.org/>

often interpreted in terms of dis-intermediation and re-intermediation (Baschiera 2017) (or de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation) (Bay-Cheng et al. 2010). Both couple of terms recall another point of contact between physical and mediatic spaces (what is the 'demolition of the wall' if not a de-territorialisation, in fact?): the crisis of the sense of place could be explained, in these terms, as an interference of 'electronic media' in communication strategies, that originated new networks and new virtual, transitional communities. The ability of media users to establish communications that are, paradoxically, both mediated and im-mediate (Castells, to this regard, coins the paradigm of 'mass self-communication') (Castells 2009) may lead to a rupture of the relation between community and space. That same relation, though, could be recomposed on new basis, both technological and social. In this sense, Meyrowitz's work, once again, is particularly relevant, as it

"explores a new conception of social situations that includes both physical settings such as rooms and buildings and the 'informational settings' that are created by media. For media, like physical places, include and exclude participants. Media, like walls and windows, can hide and they can reveal. Media can create a sense of sharing and belonging or a feeling of exclusion and isolation. Media can reinforce a 'them vs. us' feeling or they can undermine it. [...] Electronic media thereby tend to redefine the notions of social 'position' and social 'place'" (1985, 8).

For what concerns our case studies, this thought could be summarised as follows: media redefine places, as they are, themselves, *places* that include and exclude persons. The notion of community, to this extent, seems to depend on the same spatial redefinition, as it is essentially a process of *social segregation* that divides 'Us' and 'Them': "an important issue to consider in predicting the effects of new media on group identities is how the new medium alters 'who shares social information with whom'. As social information-systems merge or divide, so will group identities" (1985, 55). The access to information, as Horton Cooley's paradigm of the 'mirrored self' (1922) and Mead's concept of the 'generalised other' (1934) point out, has a strong relation, indeed, with personal identity: individuals develop their social selves from the moment where they integrate the point of view of the others, judging themselves as the others are supposed to do. The value of those to which we are exposed have a profound impact on how we perceive ourselves: social segregation, in this sense, may lead to a heterogeneity of group identities, that sometimes collide (as it is in our case). To say it differently, to demolish the social segregation of situational geography always implies a new synthesis, a term which, in its Aristotelian acceptance, is always, in itself, a partial choice, which may reveal, in a culturological approach, a determined ideology.

Applying this reflection to the de-construction and re-construction of geography through images, we could say that this process, being a synthesis of a real and a mediated perception of the space, is *intrinsically ideological*. The deconstruction of geographical images, in this sense, could reveal and undermine the ideology that encoded them, and promoted them as 'institutional'. If geography is always a mediated and shared perception, to impose an idea of geography becomes, essentially, a question of power. That is where the construction of space through images becomes, or may become, a political act; the so called 'cyberspace', a term that has itself a geographical connotation, has curiously been the object of colonisation by some 'independentists', that saw in this new 'promised land' a sort of radical redefinition of the physical space rules (Barlow 2002). The question is controversial: paradoxically, as Gitelman and Pingree point out, the best medium is the one that *mediates* less (Gitelman 2003); though, for its own nature, it *has* to mediate. In the light of last paragraph, we can maybe interpret this utopia in terms of an appropriation of offline environments through online practices, in a process which may lead to a short-circuit between real and virtual images. To paraphrase and extremise Meyrowitz's reflection, we may come to say that physical reality has become nothing but a dynamic and endless overlapping of virtualisations. Where could this approach lead, if it is a viable one? The next paragraph will try to deepen this relation, proposing an analytical framework and applying it to our case study.

Geolocation as a Negotiated Practice

The connection between mediated communication, geographical perception and community building, as we have seen, is crucial, and the event considered seems to imply a new relation between those concepts. Online and offline environments are set in a new dialectic, a short-circuit that underlines the strong interdependence between the two spheres (Finocchi 2017). Many scholars have tackled those issues, recently, interpreting the city as an interface for political trajectories of urban societies (consumption, identity, community and action) (Georgiou 2010); as a place of encounter with urban screens as events of media consumption (Krajina 2014); as a cold environment that individuals can ‘warm up’ through portable musical devices (Bull 2007, Gopinath and Stanyek 2014). Among others, we could quote the concept of ‘sentient city’, coined by Rossiter to define the place “where the topography of spatial scales and borders gives way to the topology of ubiquitous computing and predictive analytics in which the digital is integrated with the motion of experience” (2016, xiii); or still, that of ‘screen city’, intended as the new place where the web and the city, both intended as macro-mediums, overlap and hybridise (Weibel 2006). Our cities, according to these frames, are the place of re-location of audio-visual products (Casetti 2015): like computers, they re-appropriate all already-existing media, constraining every textuality to their own way of coding and decoding images (thus, mutating their ADN) (Manovich 2013). These and other perspectives seem to share an identical constructivist conception of the urban space, in which its perception seems to prevail on its physical and structural features. That perception, indeed, is also, more and more invasively, mediated; as such, it carries, considering Meyrowitz’s reflection, electronic systems of representations that redetermine (or aim to redetermine) new processes of inclusion and exclusion.

We may use, to deepen this process, the concept of visual culture. In the words of Jay, “insofar as we live in a culture whose technological advances abet the production and dissemination of such images at a hitherto unimagined level, it is necessary to focus on how they work and what they do, rather than move past them too quickly to the ideas they represent or the reality they purport to depict. In so doing, we necessarily have to ask questions about [...] technological mediations and extensions of visual experience” (2002). The work of Mirzoeff is particularly striking, as it begins in the 1990s (like *visual studies* themselves). The author, himself, offers a bold definition of visual culture, as something that “is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By visual technology, I mean any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the Internet” (Mirzoeff 1998, 3).

The temporal location of this new approach is not casual: even though the studies on the relation between visibility and knowledge, as mutual constitutive processes, have a long philosophical tradition, at the beginning of that decade a new tendency seems to emerge, that Mirzoeff defines “postmodern globalisation of the visual as everyday life” (1999, 3). As the author explains: “postmodernism marks the era in which visual images and the visualizing of things which are not necessarily visual has accelerated dramatically, so that the global circulation of images has become an end in itself, taking place at dramatic speed across the Internet” (1999, 8). The concept of visual culture, thus, is useful to analyse the dynamics of socialisation to images, as cultural autonomous forms. During the years, this analysis has been characterised by a constant decreasing abstraction, for the same images, as I have argued, have acquired a new centrality in redefining our relationship with the space, re-articulating our system of representations. Mirzoeff himself, more recently, in the closing lines of its *How To See The World*, resumes, critically, his own thought, redrawing visual studies not only as an analytical discipline, but as an active and extremely pragmatic one:

“in 1990, we could use visual culture to criticise and counter the way that we were depicted in art, film, and mass media. Today, we can actively use visual culture to create new self-images, new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world. (...) Once we have learned how to see the world, we have taken only one of the required steps. The point is to change it.” (2015, 297-8).

To change the world, as the author points out, it is necessary to be aware of the nature of contemporary images, as those images are both a representation and a hermeneutic of reality.

In social media studies field, this process has been explained in terms of a *coalescence* between online and offline environments (Baym and boyd 2012, 325): according to this principle, all digital mediation has re-articulated, somehow, the relation between interpersonal and mass communication (Couldry and Hepp 2017, Vittadini 2018). This, according to Meyrowitz's theory of media as social representations, has "modified the spatial and temporal circumstances of social interaction, and the sense of proximity", transforming Internet "in a daily context of the action, in a reality in which the immaterial has tangible outcomes on the material dimension" (Boccia Artieri et al. 2017, 16). All images, according to this principle, may be interpreted in terms of a "performance of the content" (2017, 95-8) and a "performance of the relation" (2017, 108-22), not in the Goffmanian sense of geographical space as social stage, but in that of a mediation of the self, in which "the intentionality of the subject must rely on performative repertoires pragmatically defined by praxis and meanings defined within the platform itself" (2017, 20). This performative character of contemporary images makes them susceptible to become, sometimes, *conflict areas*: this is, precisely, the thesis advanced in this paper.

Global Positioning System (GPS) and Google Maps services, in particular, are based, we may say, on a conception of geography as a media performance. As such, according to the principle formulated below, they carry, at least potentially, a certain degree of *conflict*. Mirzoeff, again, explains, from a media archaeological perspective, how GPS has been primarily a military technology. Google Earth and Google Maps are nothing but their cartographic appendix: like its predecessors, they generate an illusion of reality by a heterogeneity of sources. As Mirzoeff writes, to see the global city, with its interweaving and divisions, we have to see through maps, visualised on screens. The legacy of Cold War, according to him, has left a new way of constructing maps: "when the Soviet Sputnik satellite first went into orbit in 1957, it was something that had never been seen before. The United States felt in danger of being eclipsed technologically and made a huge investment in space" (2015, 134). That was the birth of the GPS: introduced as a project that, within a twenty-year period, would have localised the nuclear weapons of the Soviets, it became operative only after the end of the Cold War, in 1994. By property of US government, it includes twenty-four satellites, the use of which has gradually been extended from military to civil goals. A GPS receiver is able to calculate its own position measuring the time of the signal reception, coming from four orbiting satellites. As Mirzoeff writes, "for the first time in history, those who do have access to GPS can precisely locate themselves without requiring technical skills. Devices designed solely to access GPS are not reliant on phone service and so it's possible never to be lost. Or at least to know where you are, even if you're not sure where that is" (2015, 135). To fill these gaps, the author states,

"a variety of mapping services have appeared, from navigation systems for vehicles, to free services like Google Earth and Google Maps. Google Earth is a massive database that is rendered as if it were a seamless visual representation. Google Maps (and other such applications) is designed to be of practical use, offering directions, detailed indications of what each building at a given location does, and even the ability to 'see' a specific street via the Street View service. And if even this is too complicated, the software will give verbal directions [...]. Google Earth and Street View use a process called 'stitching' to link enormous numbers of individual images into what appears to be a continuous depiction (...). As Valla (2011) puts it on his website, Google Earth is "a new model of representation: not through indexical photographs but through automated data collection from a myriad of different sources constantly updated and endlessly combined to create a seamless illusion" (2015, 135).

Once again, then, we see how geographical continuity depends on crowdsourcing practices, i.e. users' performances that, as we have attempted to theorise, could be in conflict, both with each other and with the platform that allows them. This new visual culture, then, according to this interpretation, may hide, in itself, the seeds of its own subversion, and the case that I will consider in the next paragraph is paradigmatic. Geolocation and geovisualization technologies, indeed, reveal to be simultaneously authoritarian and democratizing, being both an extreme manifestation of politic, economic and ideological systems, and a subversion of those very systems. I will try to explore this essential ambiguity, demonstrating as follows: in the Internet, the freedom of

circulation of images reflects, and shares, the freedom of circulation of merchandise, with all the benefits and aberrations that such freedom implies.

The Geography of Participation as a War of Images: The Syrian Case

The aforementioned event, then, can be conceived as a net-activist practice, or as an appropriative process. It turns out to be, in the light of the reflection proposed, a manifestation of a crucial ambiguity: the conflicting nature of the image of space, as the combination of different performances may lead to the superposition of different social stages.

Between 2012 and 2014, Syrian anti-government activists have used a Google crowd-sourcing program, Map Maker, to rename streets, bridges and boulevards after their revolutionary heroes. The service, launched by Google in reaction to OpenStreetMap (and closed in 2017, substituted by the Local Guides project²) let users add or edit the name of the streets, in order to map the places where no good online reference datasets existed, with a review system to catch errors. The first time a Map Maker user makes edits to a map, those edits may require review and approval by publishers or other users before being published online. Once a Map Maker user has made a few approved edits, most of the subsequent edits will go online automatically. However, some types of edits in specific regions will always require review, regardless of how experienced the mapper is. In addition, some edits may require multiple reviews before they appear on Google Maps (Geens 2012). The firm has already been involved, previously, in other kind of political clashes: for instance, in North Africa, in 2011, when Google Egyptian employee, Wael Ghonim, took Part in pro-democracy demonstrations in Egypt, being arrested by the regime (Ghonim 2012). Another example concerns the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, the name of which is still a battleground where opposite forces collide: an offline clash that has been virtualised by crowdsourcing cartography (Geens 2005). Or still, in the Middle East, with the notification made by a Palestinian activist of Israeli settlements in the West Bank (the acceptance of this proposal exposed Google to accusations of being anti-Zionist) (Geens 2008). Moreover, when Palestine was recognised as a country by the United Nations, Google changed the name from 'Palestinian Territories' to 'Palestine'. Yigal Palmor, the then foreign ministry spokesman for Israel, commented as such: "this change raises questions about the reasons behind this surprising involvement of what is basically a private Internet company in international politics³". The involvement of the company is exactly what I am trying to explain, stating that contemporary geolocation and geovisualization tools, following Mirzoeff intuition, are essentially a military technology that turned civil. As such, it doesn't necessarily respond to any pre-determined power or institution; it is, on the contrary, a battlefield where many quests for authorities, or policymaking practices, may take place. The Syrian case, in this sense, is particularly fitting, as it represents, both on a symbolic and a pragmatic scale, a prosecution of war with other (visual) means.

First of all, Syrian geolocative sabotage has a systematic character, at least in the activists' intents. The idea, they say, was to erase the memories of Assad's family forty-years government, and to commemorate its opponents who died in the uprising. This urgency gave birth to a political instance to change the names of the streets, that have generated subversive acts both offline, such as the physical removal of names from the walls, and online, with user proposals addressed to Google Maps. These proposals have been considered and eventually validated by the editors of the enterprise. As a result, Syrian maps have become a patchwork of both Assad-era names and revolutionary names, sometimes present simultaneously. The campaign was launched on Facebook, and rapidly gained the attention of the Syrian government. Syrian's envoy to the United Nations, Bashar Jaafari, accused Google of participating in a foreign plot to subvert Syrian authorities, seeing in its topographic choice a flagrant violation of United Nations General Assembly, the resolution of the Arab League pertaining to the standardisation of the geographic

² 'Google Map Maker has closed'. Accessed June 23, 2019. URL:

<https://support.google.com/mapmaker/answer/7195127?hl=en>

³ 'Google Grants Palestinian Statehood', *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 May 2013. Accessed June 23, 2019. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/diplomacy-and-politics/google-recognizes-palestine-through-tagline-311981>

nomenclature⁴. Google’s spokeswoman Deanna Yick, in turn, said the company build its maps from “a wide range of authoritative sources, ranging from the public and commercial data providers, user contributions and imagery references” (Lynch 2012a).

Stefan Geens, author of Ogle Earth blog, a webpage which tracked Google Maps changings, says that renaming Syrian streets and other landmarks represents the latest front in efforts to use crowdsourcing geography to promote political views. In the Syrian uprising, for the first time, activists have used online mapping programs to rewrite history. The effort to explore the Internet has been, effectively, more critical in Syria: the government has imposed measures of censorship that were tougher than those of the other countries that were actively involved in the so-called ‘Arab Spring’. Protesters have hacked government websites, sent mobile images around the world – evidence of government crackdown – and broadcast live from several cities. Maps renaming, thus, can be inscribed in the context of a wider sabotage of media censorship.



Figure 1. Ibraheem Al Kashosh/Hafez Al-Assad street; Assad Lake/Revolution Lake.

The renaming acts have been conducted repeatedly, between 2012 and 2014. In 2012, for instance, Hafez Al-Assad Avenue also appeared with the name of Ibraheem Al Kashosh, a singer who satirised the regime and was assassinated (fig. 1). Ibraheem Al Kashosh was a Syrian firefighter who earned the enmity of the regime when he wrote the song “Come on, Leave, Bashar”: he was found dead in July 2011, in a river, his throat cut, and his vocal cords ripped out (Lynch 2012b, 1). Another example: in 2014, ‘Lake Assad’, an artificial lake in northern Syria, has been renamed ‘Revolution Lake’ (fig. 1). The lake, 40 kilometres east of the city of Raqqa, was

⁴ ‘Protesters Rename, Reclaim the Streets in Syria’, *Syria Untold*, 13 February 2013. Accessed June 23, 2019. URL: <http://syriauntold.com/2013/02/protesters-rename-reclaim-the-streets-in-syria/>

completed in 1974 under the rule of Hafez Al-Assad, father of current President Bashar al-Assad⁵, then fell under control of the Islamic State. Raqqa is Being Silently Slaughtered, an activist group that documented abuses inside the Islamic State base, thanked Google for renaming the lake, a move hailed as 'symbolic'. To quote a third example, in the city of Latakia, '8 March Street' – whose name refers to the military coup of 1963, which brought the Baath Party to power and appointed President Hafez Al-Assad, the current ruler's father – has been renamed '15 March Street', an apparent reference to the official birth of the 2010 popular uprising in the country. Contrary to what Google's spokeswoman says, then, Maps review process may actually reveal a political instance, as it doesn't recognise *a priori* any established authority; though, its policymaking is effectively quite complicated: names are changed as maps are updated by user submissions, which are approved by other users and publishers of the company. All the edit processes are now offline, as the service closed in 2017. In one of the few archived ones, that related to the abovementioned 8/15 March *querelle* (fig. 2), we may recognise a practical demonstration of the negotiation on which such decisions are taken, that we can interpret, as this paper is doing, as a conflict of images, that geolocation services need in order to supply the lack of a pre-established authority.

The same quest for authority seems to involve other kind of institutions, such as the academic ones, with the hack of databases like JSTOR (Scheiber 2013) or the creation of new 'clandestine' ones (MacDonald 2016). The museum environment, to mention another case, could be another battleground of images, where their clash may lead to a subversion of the traditional logics of inclusion and exclusion, as in the case of hacking practices made through Augmented Reality (Katz 2018): re-interpreting pragmatically Meyrowitz's thoughts, we may conceive this redefinition of community as a consequence of the re-conceptualisation, through electronic media, of physical spaces. In these cases, like in the previous one, images defined through and by a screen can subvert, or attempt to subvert, physical reality. We might deepen and summarise these concepts in the last paragraph, where I will propose an interpretative framework for the analysis of those practices.

The Aesthetic of Conflict: Non-Hierarchical Images as a Hermeneutical Tool

In the case exposed, there seems to be a lack of a universal law able to solve the question about who owns the virtual representation of reality, and whether who controls the tools of this virtualisation (i.e. Google, in the specific case) have a role in such practices of digital sabotage. We have seen, for instance, how Syrian government have accused Google in front of the UN General Assembly, referring to the legislative acts of the Assembly itself. The question, thus, is to control online representations of reality, as they are essentially a symbolisation through which policymakers may invest the place with values. We may, at this point, connect this conflict with the reflection about the participative geography, and the sense of place as both an individual and collective construction. In other words, if we conceive offline representation as a virtualisation in itself, like we stated in the previous paragraphs, there would not be much difference between online and offline strategies of appropriations, as they are both essentially a *re-semiotisation* and a *re-symbolisation of the space*.

⁵ 'Google Maps Renames "Lake Assad" in Syria "Revolution Lake"', *Middle East Eye*, 18 December 2014. Accessed June 23, 2019. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/google-renames-lake-assad-syria-revolution-lake-1331300429>

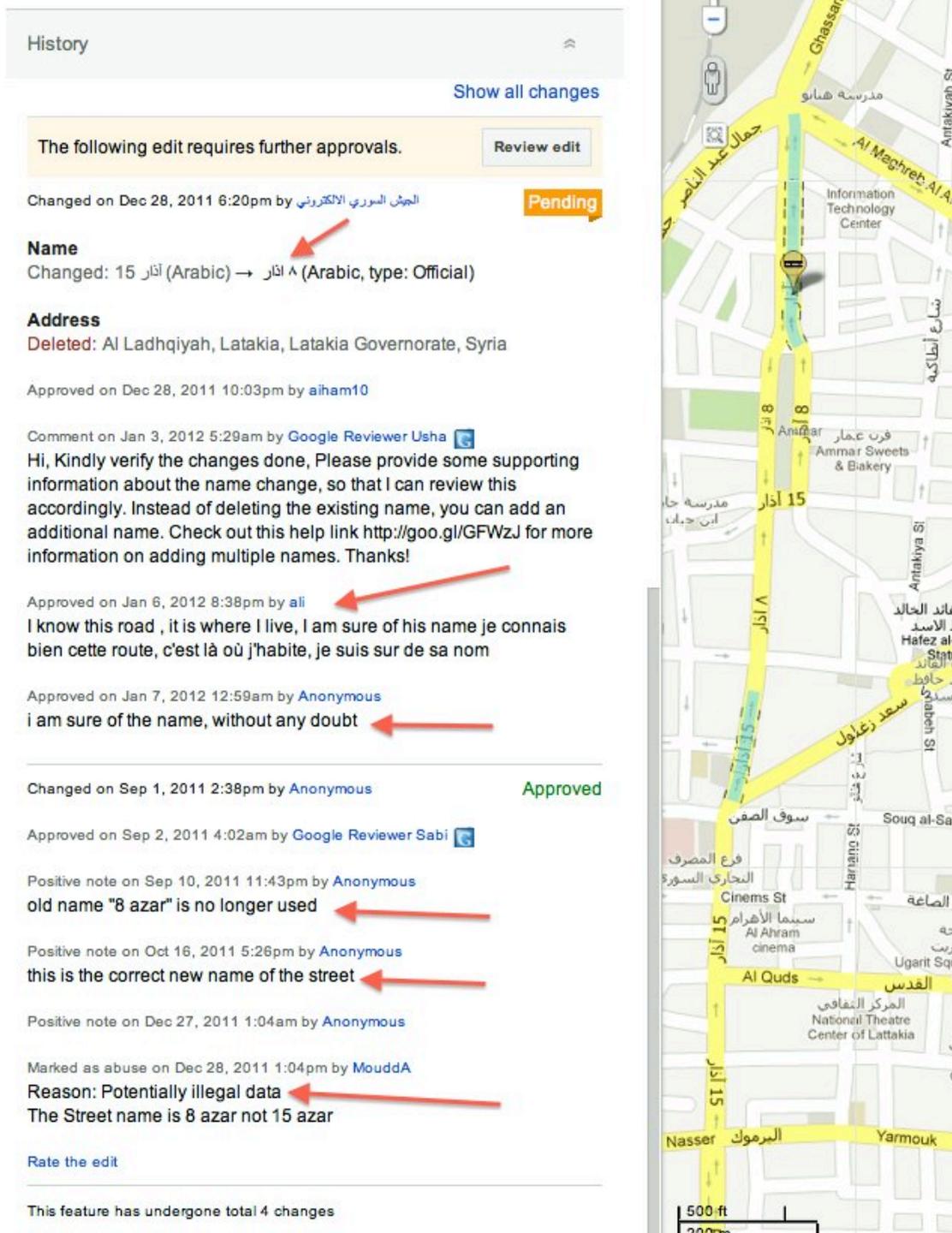


Figure 2. Edit History of 8 azar/15 azar Street, in Latakia⁶.

The construction and deconstruction of places through these new technologies, to rephrase this concept, could lead to a construction and deconstruction of a certain system of values, as these technologies do not recognise any pre-established authority; as a consequence, they do not recognise any pre-established ideology other than that, transnational, of the free market. According to that ideology, every technology customer can be a potential contributor, and even their antagonist strategies could be, paradoxically, a part of the collective intelligence needed to develop and reinforce a technological asset. As we have seen, this calls into account the concept

⁶ Currently offline. URL: <https://support.google.com/mapmaker/answer/7195127>

of authority, and the legitimacy not just of the physical objects, but also of the images related to them. Images, as we have seen in the last paragraph, can establish or suggest new ownerships (i.e. 'the streets belong to the rebels'), criticising the legitimacy of the previous ones, and defining, re-actualising Meyrowitz, new social situation and human behaviours. The situational geography of social life is nowhere clearer than in the case study exposed: the struggle against spatial segregation of situation, induced by new technologies, has reinforced new group identities (the opponents to Syrian government), through a new relation between inclusion and exclusion.

Visual culture, in this sense, is intimately permeated by an ever-present quest for authority, revealing a conflict frame where every single policymaker could transform physical reality offering an alternative virtualisation of it. This is not only a relatively new path for activist practices, but could lead to theoretical advances that would enhance visual, media and film studies, as well: if traditional images were the expression of a more or less well-established hierarchy, the disruptive feature of new technologies is re-shaping contemporary images as non-hierarchical structures (well emblematised by a 'post-war' technology like GPS), where new actors may struggle to establish new hierarchies, modifying or demolishing the already-existing ones. We may talk, to develop a hermeneutical concept, of a *non-hierarchical turn* of contemporary images, and, consequently, of a *non-hierarchical turn* of the places that those images aim to represent. In this sense, to quote Meyrowitz's formula once again, there is a place after the sense of place, but it is, precisely, a destabilised one. We will see if this destabilisation is just a historical turn towards new hierarchies, or an everlasting condition of digitally-produced images, where their production process will continue to prevail on their referential quality: in this case, we will not be interested anymore in what images show, but in how images are made, who has made it, and for what purpose. This is the challenge of contemporary visual culture, that the case studies considered somehow emblematised: the *non-hierarchical turn* of images is leading to a *crisis of representation*, that, as such, may reveal to be temporary or perpetual. If we accept, according to Meyrowitz's theory of communication as a continuous *de-* and *re-*structuring of social stages, that our perception of reality is itself a representation, a perpetual or a temporary crisis of representation could lead to a perpetual or temporary ontological crisis. In any case, now, more than ever, our ontology is defined by the images that surround us, and the conflict for controlling the virtual representation of reality is, above all, an ontological one. This could be a new frame to study both how to see the word and – sharing Mirzoeff's optimistic approach – how to *change it*. Film studies, here too, could play a key role.

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