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**Cartographies of the absolute: an aesthetics of the economy for the twenty-first century**, by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, Alresford, Zero Books, 2015, xiv + 296 pp., \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-7809-9275-4.

*Cartographies of the Absolute* deals with the tricky “aesthetic problem” (p.24) of how to map, or represent and make visible, the world system of late capitalism – arguing such mapping is needed for cognisant interventions into social structure (p.13-14, 176). The book recognises that understandings of the economic system rely on representation for their existence. In addition, the form of cultural artefacts, for example Virginia Woolf’s poems, are in part shaped by their (in this case imperialist) material spatial context. However, the ‘cartography’ of the title, drawing from Frederic Jameson, largely refers to the authors’ recognition of attempts to “cognitively map” the workings of capitalism within a selection of books, films, one television show and contemporary art, suggesting that these sources “depict and present a visual and narrative proposition about the social forces that shape their present” (p.21). The range of cultural works explored, together with the aesthetic and geographical focus, is relevant to cultural geographers and others interested in the role that culture has in understanding and shaping social conditions. Many sources, including *The Wire* (2002-2008), communicate the difficulty of grasping and representing totalities. Along with Kanye West, the text acknowledges that diamonds may be forever but they (alongside other commodities) are not always produced in (exploitative circumstances such as those in) Sierra Leone.

Despite coming from a cultural studies and critical theory perspective the text is replete with illustrations grounded in geography. The geographical and technical underpinnings of ‘cartography’ are acknowledged and usefully distinguished from Jameson’s theoretical interventions, but the understanding of ‘absolute’ is partial and vague: “[T]he ‘absolute’ is a theological and then a philosophical category, gesturing towards that which defies representation, which, contrasted to our mortal perception, is infinite and unencompassed” (p.23). This Newton-esque characterisation neglects the association between ‘absolute space’ and capitalism identified by a long line of geographers’ including Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Neil Smith. In their usage, the Cartesian representation of space as ‘absolute’ or empty supports spatial demarcation and thus rights to land and property required for capitalism’s functioning, it is the basis of territory and spatial science. Thus, ‘absolute space’ is often understood by critical and cultural geographers as the conception of space that is inextricably bound up with the emergence of capitalism. By side-stepping these debates the authors’ miss an opportunity to deepen and update the understanding of ‘absolute space’.

The book sits slightly uneasily between an accessible populist form and the academic, the latter evident through use of some highly complex language (such as Jeremiad, lapidary, etiolated). The chapter structure is stylistically irregular: content chapters’ present material in a thematic manner, pivot around a single work, or present list overviews of a series of works. The first two chapters of part one engage deeply with an exploration of the aesthetics of the economy and its literal and metaphorical relationship to a ‘vision’ of late capitalism. Chapter 3, *Werewolf Hunger*, contains an extensive discussion of the film *Wolfen* (1981) asserting the connection between the “ruins” of New York’s South Bronx and the financial centre at Wall Street. Linking the discussion to cultural geography counter perspectives offered by others such as Tim Edensor (2005) would enrich the understanding of the affective and sensuous capacities of this landscape. Chapter 5, *Filming the Crisis* (2008- ), claims to examine movies from 2008 onward but is prefaced by examples of films documenting earlier crises. The text laments the lack of representations of the working of the stock market but its limited remit (2008-2015) excludes the very popular *Trading Places* (1983), which has an explanation of

the futures market integral to its plot, and 2015's *The Big Short*. The list like presentation means discussion of some individual films in this section lacks depth.

Cultural works are themselves part of a system of economic relations: attention to inequalities of their production is relegated to a short discussion of Lowry's paintings of industrial Britain in relation to his "privileged" role as a rent collector (p.219). Surely the consumption, the private collection and thus investment potential, of Isaac Julien's contemporary art works (p.178-183) are worthy of mention? Self-reflexivity is only hinted at in the conclusion's reiteration of Italian poet Franco Fortini's words, "In the list of your enemies, write your own name first" (p.237). Despite my criticisms, the book is packed with references to intriguing cultural sources to follow up, including William Bunge's (1971) renderings of Fitzgerald and Patrick Keiller's films. Connecting these and the other works discussed to a fuller exploration of absolute space would provide reflection on how capital, and its impacts, are indivisible from the ways in which we represent, and thus think about, space.

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## **References**

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