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L'Atlas des géographesd'Orbae by François Place :*The cartographic eye as poetics of the discovery of geography*

by Christophe Meunier

Abstract :

Whatever form the map takes, a special geographic image in so far as it lets us see what cannot be seen from anywhere, it is in and of itself an iconic narrative of space. It is the transcription of an eye that would be, according to Christine Buci-Glucksmann, icarian, allegorical, tautological, or entropic¹. For François Place, author and illustrator of children's books, the profound project of his Atlas des géographesd'Orbae, published in three volumes between 1996 and 2000, is, in his own terms, a reflection on time and space, on the grand notions tied to the perception of the world and its history, on the relationship of man with his immediate environment.

The Atlas functions as a collection of stories gathered into a single album which hopes to comprise a finite world: the world of Orbae. The 26 maps of the Atlas form an alphabet book, an historical account of cartography from the post-Columbian codices to the ordinance survey map of the nineteenth century. They use a same cartographic vocabulary.

What I would like to propose in my intervention is a morphological and functional analysis of the maps of this book which contribute to make it "poetics of the discovery of geography," according to the expression of geographer Eric Dardel.²

Keywords :

Map – Spatiality – Territory – Ideology – Transfert.

In December 2012, while I had invited François Place to present his work in public, I asked him what had motivated his interest for maps and journeys, so present in all his work of children's book's as author and illustrator. He responded:

Actually, when I began to write for a collection called "Découverte Cadet", I spent a lot of time in libraries taking notes about atlases and travel diaries. I noticed an evolution of the map and that illustrations which accompanied travel logs changed according to mentalities and time. I became interested in knowing how people perceived each other. That reveals a lot about the way we meet and understand each other.

In the three picturebooks constituting L'Atlas des géographesd'Orbae, published in France between 1996 and 2000, and only the first volume of which has been translated in English in 1999, Map occupies a special place. It even forms the driving element of the dynamics of the narrative. But what is this really about ?

* The Atlas des géographesd'Orbae is a collection of stories, each story taking place in a fictitious land. The collection of the 26 maps which accompany each narrative constitutes an alphabet primer. In 2012, in a continuation of this trilogy, François Place creates a presentation box containing two novels, a map of Orbae's lands and a collection of 18 pictures. Each of these novels relates the journey of a character of the Atlas: Cornelius Van Horn, a character who appears in The Isles Indigo ; and Ziyara, who appears in Candâa Bay. Both narratives end with the characters meeting each other.

In this short presentation, I would like to show how François Place's work is of interest to both spatial theory and the geographer that I am. The aesthetic, plastic, literary and socio-spatial analysis to which I wish to submit myself could characterize the shape, the functions and the use of Map in these picturebooks. So I will begin by questioning the choice of the title and the form of the Atlas. I will then go on to demonstrate that François Place reminds us with this work that there are two possible readings for an Atlas, two different but

¹Buci-Glucksmann, Christine (1996). *L'œil cartographique de l'art*. Paris: Galilée.

²Dardel, Eric (1990). *L'homme et la terre. Nature de la réalité géographique*. Paris: Editions du CHRS (1st edition: 1952).

not contradictory ways of reading this book: one of them plays with distraction and musing and consists in a collection of narratives of spaces; the other one plays with speculation and reasoning and consists in the construction of a coherent spatial system.

1. An Atlas between Dream and Reason

1.1. Atlas sive cosmographicae meditationes

In 1985, Gallimard Jeunesse Publisher asked Francois Place to illustrate a collection of five documentaries: *The Book of the Discovery of the World*, *The Book of the Conquerors*, *The Book of the Navigators* and *The Book of the Explorers*. The writing of the text of the first two books was entrusted to Bernard Planche. It is really in the glossary that we can find the origin of the Atlas. Francois Place created 26 ornate drop caps or initials that look like little maps.

*After the success, in 1992, of his first picturebook *The Last Giants*, Place then submitted to his editor the project of a future picturebook which would be an atlas with 26 maps corresponding to the 26 head letters of the alphabet for describing the whole world, accompanied by several documentary boards where costumes, animals and plants would be represented. Brigitte Ventrillon, his editor, told him that after the success of *The Last Giants* such a simple project would not suffice. She suggested that he enrich the illustrations represented by maps of each of the countries with narratives.

*As we can see, the central idea of this project born in the 1990's is the creation of an Atlas. I would like now to stop on this special object, this device of geographic knowledge. The first map collection called « Atlas » was the one which was produced by Gérard Mercator in 1595: *Atlas sive cosmographicae meditationes de fabrica mundi et fabricati figura*, that is Atlas or cosmographic meditations on the fabric of the world and the figures of the fabric. The reference to the Titan Atlas is totally clear in the frontispiece of this work and, if Atlas supported the Earth by his physical strength, for Mercator, Atlas succeeds thanks to science, arithmetic and astronomy.

Mercator's Atlas is a description of the World which gathers a set of significant using different languages to express a representation of the World, seen as an inhabited space. In its form, this first Atlas is composed of maps, sketches, drawings, comments, tables... organized on folio pages in chapters and referring to the statements, measures, and relation of preliminary journeys. Mercator's Atlas is dedicated to his cartographer friend Abraham Ortelius, who published *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, in 1570.

Thus, the Atlas d'Orbae intends to be attached to these cartographic and cosmographic traditions, but not only this. In fact, the object doesn't respect the portrait format of the Mercator Atlas but the landscape format of Abraham Ortelius' *Album Amicorum* that he completed between 1573 and 1579 and in which the cartographer registered his own friends' drawings and messages across Europe. The Atlas d'Orbae is thus hybridization in which maps, drawings, and narratives cross and mix in a picturebook shared between friends. This interpretation is to be considered as serious as far as one of the main characters of the Place's Atlas is named Ortelius...

1.2. Architecture of the Atlas des géographes d'Orbae

Francois Place's trilogy obeys in its macrostructure rigorous algebraic standards: three equivalent volumes, dividing the alphabet into nine, eight, and nine « countries ». Through this architecture, Francois Place establishes a mythic world constituted at the same time in closed and porous territories.

*To elaborate on this fictitious world, the Creator must, at first, define limits. So, each book opens, on a double-page, on the simultaneous presentation of the countries, mountains, kingdoms and isles that it contains, a sort of illustrated and informative summary, since each country is presented by its head letter, its name and some narrative landmarks. The attentive reading of these three components then allows the reader to begin to dream, to open an anticipated horizon.

*The letter, at first, is worked as a calligram, playing on the inside and the outside, filled and empty spaces, either by inscribing in a world as the river in *L of the Land of

Lotuses, or by shaping it as the rocky ring in Quinookta Isles. Place-names are all presented in the same syntactical form but with variations as to the mode of designation: scientific latin terms for Orbae, Ultima, linguistic inventions with suggestive consonances indicating places or people as Baïlabaïkal, Nilandâr; descriptive names for the Land of the Red River; connoted referents for the Land of Jade or Mountains of the Mandragor; finally, characters stemming from a common culture for the Land of the Amazons or the Land of the Giants.

The imaginative beacons which follow the letter enter an echo game with these names. They contribute to strengthen the coherence of the suggested world and to prick the curiosity of the reader. It is about narrative episodes, with characters (Jade Emperor,...), of mythical animals, of symbolic objects or symbolic places (Lagoon of three perfumes, Black Earth).

1.3. Horizon of Anticipation

*The Atlas is conceived as a finished world. It constitutes a « transitional object » which is used to create individual and collective identity. As French geographer Denis Retailié said, « by wanderings, receiving others « here » by narratives or pictures, by a codified knowledge, the reader of the Atlas experiences the world ».

Two ways of reading open to him. Either he decides to get lost and to dream through the various maps and the stories in a random and flexible itinerary or he decides to envisage the Atlas as a quite indivisible thing which gives him the impression of having a dominated world in his hands, put in maps, folded in the will of the people who dwells there.

In both ways, the Atlas reveals ways of dwelling in the world, that is « at the same time in the genealogy and the co-presence » Denis Retailié again tells us. The Atlas clarifies the practices of attachment to the world used by societies who at the same time stand with the generations which preceded them and also with their contemporaries to whom they are assigned. But it is also guided by geography and the quest of unity and difference.

2. The spatiogenetic narrative

The first practice of “attachment to the world”, an expression that I borrow from German geographer Benno Werlen (Weltbindung), is guided by History, traditions, myths and legends. We can find it throughout the standardized construction of each narrative that composes the Atlas.

2.1. Narrative of space

Indeed, each narrative appears in a regular way what constitutes a kind of stylistic composition, a poetic structure, that organizes the circulation and the construction of the meaning in an interactive reading of the text and the picture. The narrative opens on a title page that systematically contains a cartographic head-letter, the country name and a foreword to the reader.

*Then, follows an incipit where interdependence between text and pictures is fundamental. The text starts with the isolated representation of a reference element. It can be read in echo with the big panoramic view which accompanies it into which the reader is going to venture and find in space the elements staged by the text.

*Finally, the narrative closes, after a regular alternation of the text and the pictures, on a double spread of captioned sketches, a kind of picture-book of the world that closes. These three elements of opening and closing which give rhythm to picturebooks establish a system which Francois Place himself calls « reader hooks ». A repetitive and regular structure at first view but which escapes rigidity by the variations which it allows.

2.2. « The art of cartography »

« The geographers of the great Island of Orbae claimed that the art of cartography could in itself embrace the whole science of nature. » Whatever form map takes, it is by itself an iconic narrative of space. This geographic image is particular in that it shows what cannot be seen from anywhere. I want to distinguish the use of the map by Francois Place and its placement inside the book, its function.

In the Atlas, Map, which we can define as a symbolic representation characterized by the construction of an analog image of the represented space, takes two forms.

*The first form is the analog map. It refers to existing maps or those belonging to the history of cartography. The function of this kind of map is globally to precisely localize the action in Space and also in Time. It is narrative and it questions. It constitutes, as I already said, an horizon of anticipation.

The map of the Mountain of Esmeralda, for example, refers to post-Columbian codices. It visualizes the journey of three Amerindians who after a first dugout trip, and a second one across the green mountains, arrive before the wooden ramparts of a small Spanish or Portuguese fort. The conquistador inside is a real mystery: is he dreaming? Screaming? Shouting? Suffering? Narrative will tell us.

*The second type of map we find in the Atlas is a symbolic one, which I call topogram, referring to this kind of mindmap we see at the end of each narrative, on a double page. I borrow the term topogram from the British historian Frances Amelia Yates, and I could define it as a graphic representation referring to a specific space by ordering colors, keywords, symbols and pictures on a same page. This definition is also inspired by the concept of mind-mapping created by Tony Buzan in the 1970's. This British psychologist worked on the function of the memory, of learning and the brain. The function of this kind of map is thus to give a representation of the people who inhabit the mapped area inside the head-letter at the beginning of the narrative. We could associate this topogram with the long tradition of travel diaries in which notes, sketches, doodles and landscapes are mixed.

The topogram of Esmeralda gives us an extract of Itilamatulac's Codex telling of his expedition through the mountains of Esmeralda, of some people that he met on his journey, and a representation of the border which must protect the Five Cities from enemies.

Finally, the two « reader hooks » which frame the narrative of the expedition of Itilamatulac constitute two different and additional geographical looks that enclose the narrative in a permanence and immutability. On the one hand, the map, a zenithal view of a non-human eye, refers to a sort of transcendence and to the creation of the territory by an outside power. On the other hand, the topogram, a diffuse vision of a human eye, refers to a sort of immanence and to the creation of this same territory by the people who dwell there.

2.3. Function of the map in the narrative

*As we have seen, Map is present in several places inside the picturebooks. We find it in the table of contents, at the beginning and at the end of each story, sometimes inside a picture. For each of these places, it seems that it corresponds to a special function.

The eight or nine maps that compose each of the three tables of contents offer a first encyclopedic approach to the world which the reader is about to enter. This first synoptic vision allows him to distinguish a bit more the head-letters than the maps they contain.

*Map, at the beginning of each narrative, is programmatic. *As I said, it constitutes an horizon of anticipation. As for the topogram at the end, it is there to leave some trace of the narrative, of the voyage into one of the numerous regions of Orbae that the reader has just traveled through with the hero.

*Map can also be inside a picture and take a small place, just as a quotation, an artistic pattern, a kind of « image of image » as Christine Buci-Glucksmann wrote. In the topogram of the Island of Giants, Francois Place shows us a map of the island taken by an admiral of Candâa; a picture inside the narrative of The Island of Orbae represents the Mother-Map on the floor of the Big Room of Cartography where, by the way, other maps are also hung all around the room. I could evoke here the expression « Carte-signe » (map-sign), used by Louis Marin in 1980. The presence of the form of the image Map refers to the totality of what it represents.

3. The Lands of Orbae, a geographical finite world

*In *Le Secret d'Orabe*, published in 2012, Francois Place gives us a map intitled: « Carte établie par Cornélius Van Horn montrant les parties du monde connu » (Map established by Cornelius Van Horn showing parts of the known world). Referring to the maps of the 16th century, this map represents the 26 regions of the Atlas on a same map. The Island of Orbae takes the place of the Terra Non Dum Cognita of the 16th century maps. This land

of geographers and cosmographers is the counterweight of the other emerged lands at the south antipode of the globe. Thus, the world designed by the geographers of Orbae is a measured, finite and dominated world.

3.1. The Geographers of Orbae

*This Atlas would be all that survives of the ambitious work of the Geographers of the great Island of Orbae, now disappeared. Orbae is a round island, round like the world, a « crown placed on the sea », as Place wrote. Its name comes from its form: the latin word *orbs*, *orbis* referring to the round form of the Earth. Orbae has « only one access, only one city, only one harbor, open to the only foreign ships. [...] Vast interior lands that haven't yet given up their secret. An impassable ring of fog turns between the Interior Lands and the crown of white cliffs », François Place writes.

*Reading the story of Orbae, we learn that women cartographers, from the Office of Illuminations spend their time drawing what explorers told of having seen during their travel to the Interior World. Women cartographers compose a sacred document called the Mother-Map, a huge round parchment, wrapped in silk. Their work is supervised by the Old-Man-Hundred-Names. François Place specifies that « it is a ten year old child who is in charge of reading the Map because his eyes can decipher the tiniest details and make out, under the ink of the recent texts, the murmur of those whom they have covered. He is called the Palimpsest-Child ».

*The Map of the Island of Orbae, which is also the Mother-Map, gives us a representation of the world as the scholastic Christian Cartography did. It is an aphyllactic map, that is without respect to scale or to the real contours of the continents. The Map is influenced by the maps of the 14th century: at the same time those which represented the world as organized by the Holy Bible like the Map of Erbtorf and also those which represented Europe, organized by the plan of sea routes like the Catalan Atlas by Abraham Cresques (1375).

The Mother-Map is intended to be the knowledge of the Known World, inscribed inside a big circle (*enkuklos*, in Ancient Greek) and produced in order to teach the people (*paideia*): thus an Encyclopedia of the Known World. Orbae's Mother-Map is undoubtedly inspired by the Patron Real, this secret document that was kept in the Casa de Contratación in Sevilla (circa 1503). It was a map that the kings of Spain added to as discoveries were made and whose disclosure would have been punished by death.

*The representation and the place of the Island of Orbae in *Le Secret d'Orbae* make of this island the land which carries the World. The position of The Indigo Isles, in the middle of Orbae, allows me to see them as an *omphalos* (navel) of this fantasy world, its origin and its end.

3.2. A Global History of Orbae

The main character of The Island of Orbae is named Ortelius. We find him back in the last story of the third volume, The Land of the Zizotls. Ortelius is supposed to belong to the dominant caste of the Orbae's Cosmographers. Above all, François Place presents him as a traveler and a discoverer: « Lieutenant of numerous expeditions in the Interior Lands, honored with the title of Great Discoverer », he tells us. Like every explorer, he brings back from his expeditions diaries and a « big portfolio with maps and notes ».

We know that reference to the Travel Diary is recurring in the Atlas. We can quote from Nohyk's in the Land of the Yaleoutes, Isaac de Bulan's or Ulysse de Nalandès' in Indigo Isles or even Itilamatulac's Codex in the Mountains of Esmeralda. Thus, the double-page at the end of each story can be considered as a travel diary, a « story in kit » as François Place says.

The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who was interested in the process of globalization of space, shows that the discoverer takes a new space over by exporting some well known schemes and following five principles that Sloterdijk names the « Five Canopies of Globalization ». On the one hand, the control of the new space is associated with a travel mythology: for example, the Orbae's Explorers are subject to a lot of beliefs. On the other hand, this control is linked to a founding myth, a religion; then attached to the loyalty of the

princes of the country of origin: for example, the Empire of Jade is quoted three times in the three volumes and seen as a colonizing state. Finally, the control is associated with the scientific recognition of the bare space (the construction of the Mother-Map) and with a linguistic transposition of the toponymy. By these different ways, the outside becomes livable and easy to dominate. According to Sloterdijk, Cartography is a testimony to the claims of sovereignty of a people.

According to Ortelius, who is judged for « geographical heresy » because he drew on the Mother-map black lands he has never seen, Map creates the world. In their conception, Francois Place's picture-stories follow this rule. The readers is brought into the story by the map. It guides him inside another world that the illustrator explains and gives him something to take with or to think about in finishing the story by travel notes that the reader has just made. It is really the frontispiece-map which creates the world it contains.

Finally, the Atlas is a collection of picture-stories, a picture-book or an album which gathers different components of a finite world. All the frontispiece-maps constitute quotations, references to the history of cartography. *For example, the map of Esmeralda is a reference to Miller's Atlas realized in 1519;*Nilandâr's to the 17th century Persian miniatures;*Ultima's to the 19th century military maps.

If the Atlas evokes the world history, it evokes too the different continents of the Earth. The Wallawa River crosses a city which looks like Venice. Ultima could be found in Oceania, the Land Of the Yaleoutes in North America ; the Island of Selva in South America ; the Land of Jade in Asia and the Country of Konakar in Africa. In this fantasy world, three cities are very often noted. Candâa seems to be the economic center ; Jade, a political capital and the utopian Orbae, a cultural and spiritual center. Economy, Politics, Culture: a trilogy, the three pillars of a civilization according to Georges Dumezil!

*In conclusion, the Atlas of Orbae's Geographers offers numerous possible readings. Some readers could pick by chance a story and could read it as a picturebook itself. Other readers could make a complete reading, from A to Z, enjoying discovering games of echo between narratives.

Anyway, in the end, both ways proposed by the atlas form are rich enough to bring geography to life for readers, in that this discipline has for ambition to think of the world with the Earth as a reference. The picturebook-Atlas is a representation of a finite world with its internal architecture, its myths, its controlled space. The reader could discover newer and newer adventures by building numerous horizons of anticipation thanks to the « readers-hooks » and enter into the narratives. The passionate reader will be able to taste the pleasure of re-reading, entering in this « long reading », as Francois Place says, to explore infinite spaces of interpretation, approach the « Faded Mountain of the Indigo Isles » and pass beyond this « period at the end of this strange alphabet ».

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