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## Book Review: Geografia

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# reviews in brief

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**Geografia.** By Franco Farinelli. Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Filosofia. 2003. 237 pp. £16.50 paper. ISBN 88 06 1620 6.

*Geografia*: the title is biblically simple. Its subtitle could have been: ‘the rise and fall of cartographic reason’. The author is one of the leaders of contemporary Italian geography and the book is published in a renowned collection of contemporary philosophy. The sum of all this is a book containing the obsessions and creative flashes of Franco Farinelli. Those familiar with his work have been (often impatiently) awaiting the arrival of this very book for some time now.

The readers of *Geografia* will not be disappointed: it is a great book. One of those works that you pass on to friends and colleagues with the excitement felt when offering a rare present. Its overarching theme is Farinelli’s main obsession: cartographic reason. The style of *Geografia* is quasi-aphoristic: it is composed of 98 chapters, each of them exactly two pages long. Such a layout is of course self-consciously autoreferential: the mathematical equivalence of the chapters mirrors the cartographic grid as if telling the reader: ‘look how difficult it is to escape from Flatland.’

Reading *Geografia* may prove at the same time very easy and very difficult. The book manages to be at the same time very abstract (when Farinelli, for instance, shows the continuity between the triangulation of the surveyors and the semiotic triangle) and very concrete (when the author summarizes in a few pages the structure of traditional Italian landscape). In general, though, the abundance of examples and anecdotes (my favourite being when the author shows the homology between Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* and Biagio Rossetti’s plan for the city of Ferrara, pp. 140–41) offer an efficient helping hand into the complex strands of thought of the author.

The book is organized in three parts: *the pyramid and the triangle*, dealing with the origins of geography and its role as a matrix of modern Western thought; *the landscape and the icon*, dealing with different arguments revolving around vision and images (landscape as an idea and as a strategy, especially in German geography, the impoverishment of geographical thought after Ritter and Ratzel or the illusion of a cartography of the human genome); and *city, map, space*, dealing . . . precisely with what the title promises and also with the challenges of a geography of informational space.

The thesis running through these four parts is, on the one hand, that modern Western history can be considered as the moulding of the world according to a cartographic

logic and, on the other, that this logic has become obsolete for the understanding and organization of the world in present times. The map is defined by the author as 'a formidable ontological device, a silent tool for the implicit – and therefore unreflexive – definition of the nature of things in the world' (p. 85). Farinelli leads us through the labyrinthine origins of this device, from Homer to Hippodamos and Alberti. A device through which the world is 'curarized': movement is frozen into solid matter, process into form, people into things. Geography as a discipline has been, Farinelli argues, of critical importance in this 'mappification' of our ways of thinking, and consequently for the transformation of the material world.

The thesis itself will not surprise readers of *Geografia* familiar with work in the history of geography and cartography of the past two decades. What is dazzling, however, is how the author moves smoothly, in the spaces defined by his rigid cartographic grid, from Hobbes to Hippodamos, from Humboldt to Alberti, from Dolly to Mike Davis or from the Italian soccer star Alessandro Totti to ... Anaximander, creating unexpected and illuminating relations.

Too enthusiastic this review? Okay, let's come with a critique then. Franco Farinelli remains very much the heir of German phenomenology. This is manifest in his (Heideggerian) passion for origins and etymology as well as in his critique of modernity as a disenchantment of the world. I sometimes wonder, however, in the company of a few others, whether we have ever really been modern, if the world was ever really disenchanted and, therefore, if the critique of modernity should not be replaced (or at least complemented) by the careful analysis of the heterogeneous associations that we day by day fabricate with pieces of beings and technology, nature and culture, symbols and stones, maps and subversions of the maps. Because of this 'German idealist' positioning *Geografia* does not completely live up to one of its proclaimed ambitions: 'to be a first step towards the only possible global geography: that of senses, viewpoints and models of the world' (p. 37). Farinelli's book is more often a brilliant critique than a proposal.

This being said, for anyone only remotely interested in the discourse of geography, reading *Geografia* is a constant jubilation.

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**Architecture and nature: creating the American landscape.** By Christine Macy and Sarah Bonnemaïson. London and New York: Routledge. 2003. 372 pp. £65.00 cloth; £27.50 paper. ISBN 0 415 28358 2 cloth; 0 415 28359 0 paper.

This book explores four moments in the changing architectural expression of the relationship between nation and nature in the United States: the closing of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of conservation; the economic depression of the 1930s and ideals of a return to nature; the atomic age in the aftermath of the Second World War associated with hubris and paranoia; and ecopolitics in the 1970s and movements for alternative living. For each moment the authors focus on