Narrative Maps in History

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Maps have long been used to represent historical knowledge. Lately, this use has been widely diffused, with the publishing of several new works which emphasize cartography as a language for historians. The approaches are diverse and the research problems addressed to these methodologies are numerous. The purpose of this text is to highlight a specific type of cartographic production in history: the use of narrative maps.

Under the expression "narrative maps" there are at least two possibilities of approach. The first concerns the mapping of narratives, that is, converting texts to maps, something close to Franco Moretti's work called "Atlas of the European Novel". The possibilities within this perspective are broad, allowing both the spatial representation of a specific work and that of a single variable in a set of works. In this case, the texts are read and, through various procedures, decomposed in the form of maps, from certain variables chosen by the one who analyzes. It is possible to "map" the course of a certain character in a given source, for instance.

The second approach concerns a different purpose: the representation of the results of the historians' researches in the form of maps oriented simultaneously in time and space. Although this visualization is commonly associated with economic data, it can also be used to describe and analyze other processes, such as population displacements, political movements, pilgrimages, conflicts, circulation in urban spaces, among others. The paper presents the first steps in this field to indicate the innumerable challenges of cartography applied to historical narrative.

Some reference works on the subject have to be highlighted, especially the works of Jacques Bertin and Edward Tufte. Bertin was a geographer and the creator of the "Semiology of graphics", through which he sought to create "useful" and efficient visualizations of data resulting from research. Tufte, a designer with a background in statistics, sought throughout his career to present models of visual representation that came out of what he called "flatland", the flat information landscape. His goal had always been the creation of representations that combined multiple variables of analysis with clarity and beauty.

There are at least six two-dimensional forms of cartographic representation of narratives: a) series of images (like cinema), b) sequential arts (like comics), c) vector animations, d) small multiples, e)anamorphosis, f) traditional static maps, provided they have features that represent the narrative, usually through arrows, lines or other elements that indicate spatio-temporal dynamics.

A conceptual apparatus taken from statistics may be important in understanding the visual processes of narrative mapping. Considering that cartography is a language, we can understand that narrative maps have their own dialect. There are several non-traditional elements to take into account and these elements are quite important: rhythm, speed, linearity, continuity and interpolation. In addition, traditional elements such as colors and shapes acquire a different meaning, a particular accent. These elements may allow for clearer communication in the production of maps, especially animated maps.