Map and Land in Media and Reality (2000)

Peter Weibel questions anti-democratic trends

Maps tend to swallow up land - this is something we have known ever since Jorge Luis Borges, Jean Baudrillard and Günther Anders. The media would seem to simulate reality with such perfection that we can no longer tell the difference between the map, the medium of representation, and the land, reality. But this model still holds the covert assumption of an original difference, a residual core of ontology.

However, events since 1989, a cipher standing for the demise of Communist blueprints of society and for the rise of Neo-Liberalism in combination with global media conglomerates and multinationals, suggest that the map itself not only maps, but also constructs the land. The map does not tend to swallow up the land (if it did, we would still know what the land is or was), rather the map tends to create the land.

The media construct reality. Where no reality exists, the way the media want it to be, the media force this reality to exist. Nor is that, by drawing a false picture of reality, as they used to, but rather by actually creating this reality. Paparazzi photography sets a trap, for example by using a paid strip tease dancer, for an aristocratic husband to stumble into in front of carefully located cameras, is equally just a symptom of the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Jürgen Habermas, 1962), of the Fall of Public Man (Richard Sennett, 1974), as is the global media success of special investigator Kenneth Starr.

Not only the media as a whole are becoming paparazzi media, politics itself is evoking itself of paparazzi methods to succeed in a media society. Special investigator Starr metamorphosed from a court official into a paparazzi in order to bring down President Clinton. Politics and blackmail in the style of paparazzi methods demonstrates the dominance of media over society, the role and hegemony of media over reality.

The so-called fact that the German sociologist Oskar Negt raises in his book Warum SPD7 Argumente für eine alternative Mach- und Politikwende (Why the SPD 7 arguments for a profound change of power and policy) (1989). It is in fact that there is a "reality below the public sphere that is conveyed by the media," is reminiscent of the old metaphor of the map and the land, in which the land is covered by the map. But the question today is, is there anything beyond the media? In view of the limited sociologically construct reality, it is no longer so easy to tell apart the elements of the map and the land as clear as it was yesterday. In a process of mutual adaptation and blackmail, no longer just by means of false coverage and "false awareness," it is rather by means of mutually accorded resolutions that the media and politics create reality.

The globalisation of the media, desired by politics and the media, serves precisely this aim of achieving a different kind of reality in which all news, be it false or true, is of concerted observation. It is false or true, has its irreverent effect in reality, be it in appeal proceedings, elections or share prices. The fact that the mechanisms of the social construction of reality are increasingly being replaced by the mechanisms of media construction of reality and that, as a result, the model of the map and the land now only works to a limited extent is all part of the effects of the global media as a 1990s phenomenon on culture and economy, politics and society.

Is there anything beyond the media? It is all the more important to be informed about the social construction mechanisms of reality (Neoliberalism, i.e. the rise and construction mechanisms of society and to critically make people realise and visualise the changes and constructions of reality by the media. Particularly as the rise of Neo-Liberalism since the late 1980s has, and is, inseparably linked to the establishment of a global media network. In liberalism, the capitalist variation on democracy, politics and the media enter into a new association. Neo-Liberalism has made use of the global media as an accomplice in order to push through the false equation of liberalism and democracy. After all, liberalism only demands the freedom of the individual to the liberal, to trade goods freely, etc. This has nothing to do with the basic democratic rights of freedom of contract, freedom of assembly, free speech, etc. The missionaries of capital are increasingly coming to recognise the significance of a global media culture, the liberal economy as the mass media support liberalism in its anti-democratic trends. Naturally enough, the media, striving as they do to maximise profit like any other group of companies in liberalism, support the logic of capital and thus the anti-democratic trends of Neo-Liberalism. Equality and emancipation, basic democratic rights once intended to safeguard the bourgeois public, ideally free of state and commercial interests, can no longer be restored in a public sphere in which privatised or state-held mass media link profit-oriented private interests with unfathomable general interests.