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ARTS & CULTURE

The Grand Map

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RV890, Norway 2011.

Toward the end of Lewis Carroll's endlessly unfurling saga *Sylvie & Bruno*, we find the duo sitting at the feet of Mein Herr, an impish fellow endowed with a giant cranium. The quirky little man regales the children with stories about life on his mysterious home planet.

"And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!"

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr. "The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."

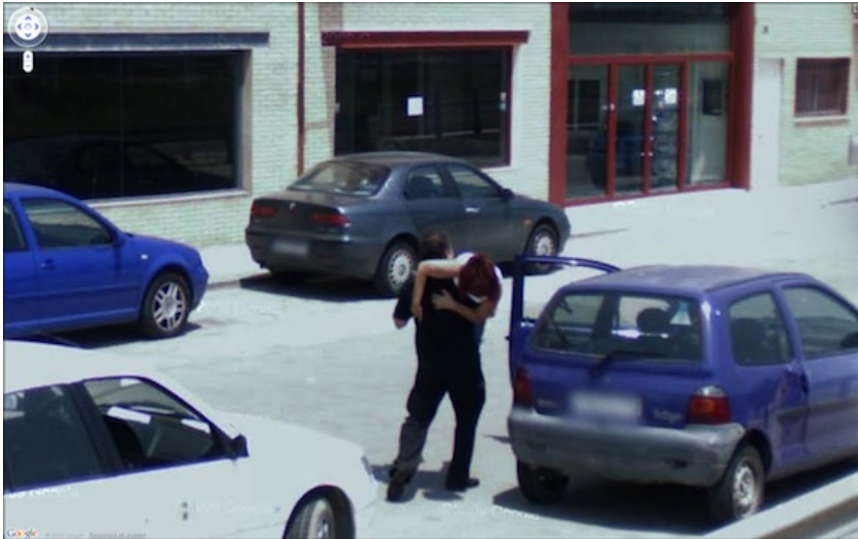
Among Mein Herr's many big ideas, none is as familiar to us as the Grand Map. We use it, or a version of it, on a daily basis. With Google Street View, which allows us to traverse instantly from a schematic road map into the tumult of the road itself, we boldly zoom from the map to the territory and back. As the Herr said, "we now use the country itself as its own map." Of course it's still a hopeless work-in-progress and may always remain so. Like Sylvie and Bruno, we are attracted to this map precisely for the particular pleasure of imagining something so impossibly useful and, at the same time, so deeply counterproductive. Still, we have succeeded at folding many unruly miles of earth, from Manhattan to the Arctic Circle, into our own Grand Map. And, using our newfound ability to step through the cartographic looking glass, we began making discoveries.

First, we noticed the fantastical creatures. The boxes with legs, the transcendent weirdos, the off-duty robots and headless zombies, the sad-sack centaur. Then things got a bit more serious. Sin entered the map.



80 Rua Giulio Eremita, São Paulo, Brasil, 2010.

Midday house break-ins and hillbillies with guns. Butt-cheek cleavage, kidnappings, dozens of burning cars, hosts of faceless men emerging from brothels, scores of citizens peeing on things.



Carrer Martimo, Beniparrell, Valencia, España, 2009.

Then there was bloodshed. Sometimes, the violence appeared as a kind of parable. The Firetruck and the Bicycle:



Or the parable of the Lady in the Trunk:



On occasion, it was truly dreadful. There were anonymous bodies, bloody corpses, the full-color horror of midday slaughter.



Finally, there was the question of the mapmakers' role in all of this.

On a rural road we found a clue. A Google Street View car, its patented panoramic nine-lens camera mounted seven feet high, was making its cartographic rounds through upstate New York. The [visual record of what happened next](#) was posted live. First, we saw a panicked doe run into the road. In the next shot we witnessed the doe cut down, crumpled on the pavement under the passing shadow of the all-seeing car. In the final frame, a rear-view, the doe was pictured at the side of the road, lifeless and forlorn.

A blog-fueled furor followed (“Google Killed Bambi!” “Stop the Corporate Baby Killers” “When are we going to hear that Google has killed a pedestrian?”), prompting Google to remove the images and issue a statement in which they twice referred to the roadkill incident as “sad” and explained that “the driver was understandably upset.” Still, they noted, it was a common type of accident.

The incident was only the most direct illustration of how the mapmaking camera is implicated in the messy world it charts and, worse, how it implicates us. A person seeking directions to Starbucks generally does not want to be told to “take a left at the homeless child.” To truly use the country as its own map, it turns out, involves weaving discomfiting images of the country directly into the fabric of the map. The result is not a tidy diagram of the world abstracted onto a blank slab—as nearly all maps since Mesopotamia have been—but rather a patchwork that chronicles, among many other things, the troubling process by which the map was composed.



9 Rua Pereira da Costa, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, 2010.

Google’s removal of upsetting images doesn’t change the fact that the shots were initially posted there. Daniel Ratner, the chief engineer of Street View’s ingenious camera car, told me that images posted on Street View run through editing software that systematically blurs human—and occasionally dog—faces and license-plate numbers, all in the name of privacy. But, said Ratner, there are just way too many digital files for mere mortals to review. The images are captured, tagged, selectively blurred, and posted by computers. Most of these photos aren’t viewed by human eyes until they are live online—which doesn’t mean, however, that there aren’t a few interludes of human intentionality.

If you decide to [Google-walk along Sampsonia Way](#) on Pittsburgh’s Northside, for example, you’ll run in to a festival of happy quirks. After passing a marching band and parade, you’ll discover a proverbial rope of bed linens hanging from a third-story window. Further down the road, you’ll encounter two geeks sword fighting in full Dungeons & Dragons regalia. The photos captured on the street are the result of a project organized by local artists to produce

representative street tableaux, little performance-art pieces, specially designed for the Google Street View cameras. Some of the shots are intentionally banal: the images of people unloading a U-Haul truck, for example, and the shot of local yuppies stretching before running a marathon were also staged. The project was undertaken with the help of Google—as it must, since Google keeps the schedules and routes of its camera cars a strict secret. Google understandably prefers this wholesome, controlled type of eccentricity to the bare balls and bloody bodies variety—and it surely prefers this harmless playacting to other, more aggressive, more spontaneous acts of performance art that Google’s camera cars occasionally inspire.



The random boys flipping off the camera, the villagers in England who formed a human chain to block the entry of the camera car, the ongoing debates in some countries over whether to ban Street View for perceived privacy violations—and even the street art project in Pittsburgh—all get at the problematic core of using the country as its own map. Lewis Carroll imagined the problem comically, as an objection put forth by farmers (it will block the sun!). In “On Exactitude in Science,” Borges offers a dark gloss to Carroll’s map. “The Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, coinciding point for point with it,” writes Borges, will become “useless and permitted to decay and fray under the Sun and winters.” The 1:1 map, Carroll’s exuberant Grand Idea, is, to Borges, the work of an empire on the verge of decline, with nothing left to do, nowhere left to go. “In the Deserts of the West, still today,” he reports, “there are Tattered Ruins of the Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars.” If Borges is right, the unwillingness of Street View’s skeptics to be captured in the grand map may be the refusal of people to be a part of just such an empire.



RV888, 2010.

Then there are those who choose to redraw the thing, to take it for the raw material that it is and make something of it for themselves. The result can be stunning, as seen in this curated collection of [Street View shots by artist Jon Rafman](#). “Although the Google search engine may be seen as benevolent,” writes Rafman, “Google Street View presents a universe observed by the detached gaze of an indifferent Being. Its cameras witness but do not act in history.” Rafman ends up being less interested in the detached mapmakers than in the individual who can explore the map for personal meanings and somehow reclaim the territory. Rafman accomplishes this himself by discovering accidental images marvelously embedded in the map. Wild horses running through a coastal cemetery. A nude woman standing by a rocky shore, contemplating the sea. A little boy hiding. These images are only more powerful for

having Google's imprimatur on them, for being captured at random and buried within the maze of images.



B5, Jurby West, United Kingdom, 2011.

This happens to be how many of us enter the great map. One night, you locate a distant childhood intersection. You leave the street map and enter the scene, passing seamlessly from map to territory. But there are no goofy hijinks or bloody corpses there. No sublime horses. Just a bright, sunny street with uneven sidewalks, lined with parked cars—a place that once contained everything that you knew and needed to know, which once held the entire range of possible truths. Then you take a Google-step back, and suddenly it's a bit less sunny and a bit more populated. You swing around to your left, and now the sky is overcast and foreboding. A step forward and a neighborhood man you once knew, who was pictured sitting on his porch a frame ago, has vanished. Now the sun is out again, but setting. This private territory, with its radically shifting light, its dreamlike angles, and its specters popping in and out of view—that odd combination of detailed recollection and ever-thickening fog—resembles the structure of memory itself. It's like visiting a lost place. It's not the grandest idea but, at certain moments in life, it's the best we've got.



58 Lungomare 9 Maggio, Bari Puglia, Italia, 2009.

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Images Courtesy [Jon Rafman](#).

TAGS cartography, Daniel Ratner, Google, Google Street View, Jon Rafman, Jorge Luis Borges, Lewis Carroll, map, Mein Herr, Mesopotamia, On Exactitude in Science, Sampsonia Way, Street View camera, Sylvie & Bruno

In the land of serendip says:

October 6, 2011 at 3:27 am

[...] Luigi briefly drew attention to the latest offering from our friends at Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security: the Adaptation and Mitigation Knowledge Network. And that — along with all the other maps that seem to have been springing up whenever one's back is turned — reminded me of a map passage from a little-known Lewis Carroll book, Sylvie and Bruno.¹ Looking for the exact quote, I discovered that it had appeared yesterday in the daily blog of the august Paris Review.² [...]