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ABSTRACT & KEYWORDS

…And Action! Adapting Film Theory to Analyze Map Meaning and Narrative Form

Maps are a form of visual communication. Historically, our understanding of how maps work and how they communicate information has benefited through the application of theories falling outside the realm of cartography. Theories from graphic design, psychology, scientific visualization, and music have been used, to name but a few. In this paper it is argued that our analysis of how maps are composed – including their form, meaning, narrative style, and aesthetics – can be enhanced by exploring and adapting concepts from yet another realm – film. One unique feature of film theory is that it eschews the analysis of information richness, accuracy, and clarity, to instead focus on narrative, form, and aesthetic. Film theory also dismisses the idea that media present facts (i.e., information is never neutral), something that cartographers have often been reluctant to do. This paper reviews a handful of concepts from film theory – narrative, form, meaning, aesthetic, and genre – and adapts them for use in map analysis. Using these adapted concepts to critically analyze several maps, the author demonstrates how they can shed light on what maps actually communicate and how they do so. Based on the results, an argument is made that it may be beneficial for us to start classifying maps based on narrative genres, similar to those found in film (e.g., drama, comedy, action), in addition to their techniques of data visualization (e.g., choropleth, flow, isarithmic, reference).

Keywords: map analysis, film studies, map design, map narrative, map form