

## DIGITAL FICTION AND READING CARTOGRAPHERS OF URBANITY

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**Abstract:** The interface between literary fiction and digital technologies is creating new forms of cultural phenomena and enabling new channels of interaction between the text and the reader. This paper deals with locative digital fiction and, more particularly, James Attlee's 2017 award-winning work titled *The Cartographer's Confession*, produced as a smartphone application. The work is considered within the context of urban communication and the framework of Walter Benjamin's writings concerning the urban stroller, Robert Tally's literary cartography, and reader-response criticism (Wolfgang Iser). The paper addresses the issue of gaps, both cartographic and narrative, and examines the potential of digital fiction to overcome them and thus facilitate communication between the text (as map) and its reader, participant in the process of urban communication.

**Keywords:** digital fiction, smartphone application, *The Cartographer's Confession*, literary cartography, flâneur, narrative gaps, blank spaces

### 1. Introduction: urban communication

As a relatively new and increasingly developing field of study, urban communication explores the exchange between people and cities, within which urban experience is conceived as crucial to various forms of communication in which modern man takes part. Cities are largely perceived as stages, producers, products – or all of these – of cultural and social practices, interactions, and narratives. Reading urban surroundings in respect of the forms of communication they perform positions the city as context, medium, or content: content refers to the stories emerging from the city and stories about the city; medium refers to what the city communicates, either symbolically or materially, such as its rhythms, sounds, or smells; context refers to the image of the city produced by various communication practices that it gives rise to (Aiello and Tosoni, 2016).

This broadly outlined scope of the field encompasses a range of practices, different media, and a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches applied to the phenomena pertaining to urban communication. The practice which this paper deals with is that of urban walking; the medium is locative digital fiction, and the approach that of literary cartography. Digital fiction refers to "fiction whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with, the digital context in which it is produced and received (Bell, Ensslin and Rustad, 2013: 4); the *locative* property implies that the story is told at the very place where it is happening. As a method of analysis, literary cartography assumes an inherent similarity between storytelling and mapmaking. Constructing a story or a map, their creators rely on the principles of selection and omission, namely, certain elements of both are necessarily presented as gaps – the unnarrated or unnarratable as regards the story, and the uncharted as

regards the map. This paper poses the question of how digital fiction can address those gaps in communication and what role the reader (or participant, as the reader of digital fiction is usually referred to) acquires in the process. In order to discuss this question, the paper looks into James Attlee's 2017 work titled *The Cartographer's Confession*, produced as a smartphone application and part of the Ambient Literature project, a collaborative research programme carried out by the University of the West of England in Bristol, Bath Spa University, and the University of Birmingham.<sup>i</sup> Considering the questions of narrative and cartography and the role of the reader in the context of *The Cartographer's Confession* calls for a prior conceptual determination of the storyteller-mapmaker role.

## 2. Practice: walking in the city

*The Cartographer's Confession* opens with a video account by fictional storyteller and filmmaker Catriona Schilling, in which the frame story is set. In this curiously metafictional introduction, Catriona Schilling provides details on how she came to compile what readers, as they immerse themselves into the application immediately after Schilling's talk, will soon reveal to be the archive of fragments – photographs, letters, tapes, book excerpts – that constitutes *The Cartographer's Confession*. A couple of years after moving to London, Catriona Schilling started working in an unnamed map shop, which dealt in a variety of maps and with customers ranging from taxi drivers, through tourists and long-distance walkers, to historians. It was there that she discovered that a city can be contained within the pages of a book and every street memorized and rendered knowable. Map business, however, soon became unprofitable due to the increasingly more digitalized experience of the world in which we live, characterized by the versatile application of technologies such as the Global Positioning System and the rise of companies such as Uber. Instead of living inside pages, people now live as blue dots on the screen, as Catriona Schilling states, not quite lost, but not knowing precisely where they are. With printed maps no longer profitable and not even perceived as needed, Schilling's boss at the map shop decides to stage a flood and claim insurance, and it is from the bulk of soaked maps and atlases that Catriona Schilling salvages a box with some documentary material, a book, and a map of London hand-drawn by fictional cartographer Thomas Andersen. The map is a puzzle to Catriona Schilling: it is of London, but much of this London is omitted in it; it prominently features certain selected parts of the city, near the river, while many logistically important streets are left incomplete; it is, as Schilling puts it, "a cabbie's nightmare" as it leads the user into the past, pre-GPS world, where every single location omitted by the cartographer induces the loss of bearings on the part of users and, equally, their immersion into an entirely new spatial experience. When, after several years, Catriona Schilling turns again to the legacy of Thomas Andersen, now accidentally in her possession, she discovers that the map has disappeared and starts wondering whether it could be reconstructed, recreated from the fragments of various documents that accompanied it. Her recreation of Thomas Andersen's map is in fact the main story of *The Cartographer's Confession*, the retracing of steps in the life of this child immigrant in post-World War Two London.

What is striking about *The Cartographer's Confession* is its literariness, as seen in the employment of the above described frame story, intertextual references (to, for example, Thomas De Quincey's 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*), the

pervasive metaphor of migratory birds, or the formalist technique of defamiliarization, enabled by the digital juxtaposition of photographs from the past onto the places of the present. Due to these pronouncedly literary traits, reading the application as an actual novel is not at all unimaginable.<sup>ii</sup> For readers not located in London, the application features armchair mode, in which the story remains equally compelling. However, the story is essentially the content generated and communicated by the city, focusing on the themes of immigration, homelessness, loneliness, and unbelonging, and the original purpose of the story requires the reader to take the fully charged mobile phone and headphones and venture out into parts of London, mostly Southwark. The story, therefore, recreates the reader as the stroller or flâneur, a figure introduced by Charles Baudelaire and made part of urban mythology in the more academic writings of Walter Benjamin. It is this figure that is paradigmatic in analysing the inter-relations of urban communication, literary cartography, and digital fiction.

The late-nineteenth century flâneur was established by Baudelaire and Benjamin as the emblem of modernity. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire brings into focus the type which he compares to an artist, a child, or a convalescent, due to “the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things” (1965: 7) and seeing “everything in a state of newness; [because] he is always *drunk*.” (1965: 8) This faculty is specifically related with the commotion of life on the streets of the cities such as Paris and London, which by the end of the nineteenth century had witnessed an unprecedented growth of urban areas and increase in their population. The flâneur is the man of the crowd, who stands apart from the crowd: his background and social status allow him enough free time to simply walk lazily along the streets, observing those less fortunate people whose entire lives unfold on the streets. He is intoxicated by the life in which he does not actually wish to participate – his interaction with it is limited to his ambition to gain knowledge about the people he passes on the street and classify them into types according to their physiognomy and supposed background and status (Benjamin, 2002: 430). However, according to Walter Benjamin, such detachment, disinterest in and distance from real life are inherently impossible due to the very nature of the streets where the flâneur soon starts feeling at home. At the time when Walter Benjamin collected his thoughts on the flâneur, during the 1930s, the second industrial revolution had given rise to mass production, which in turn, among other things, transformed the streets first into passageways under the arcades, with merchandise of various sorts luring from the shop windows lining the covered streets, and subsequently into department stores – or shopping malls more recently. To the detached stroller, the quantity of available goods is initially a gap: as a passionate spectator, he continues to poeticize it by observation and description, but any interaction through which the flâneur would become a consumer would compromise his position of the connoisseur of the crowd. This position, however, is inevitably compromised with the increase of commercial goods on offer and the transformation of the street. With the construction of the arcades, the street comes to be experienced by the stroller as the interior, which it effectively becomes once the department store is conceptualized. But the interior of the department store is then metaphorically conceived of as a street, the street made equal with merchandise, and the flâneur able to roam “through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city” (Benjamin, 1985: 54). His immersion into the thus far forbidden gap – the market – marks his evolution in respect of his communication with the city.

As the second industrial revolution gives way to the third, contemporary urban strollers remain immersed in the commercial, now primarily through their reliance on smartphones. This is the first instance at which the digital revolution contributes to filling the gaps in communication: hardly anything is left unknown, untold, or unlocatable with the help of a smartphone or a similar device. But on yet another level, the digital allows smartphone users to withdraw, perhaps paradoxically, to the status of the original detached stroller, observer, classifier or archivist, and – perhaps in not an inconvenient designation – cartographer of urbanity.<sup>iii</sup>

### 3. Method: the cartographer's attachment

If Baudelaire's and Benjamin's original concept regards the flâneur as a poetic figure, with Baudelaire's poems, in Benjamin's view, recording "the ambulatory gaze that the flâneur directs on Paris" (Friedberg, 1991: 420), it is methodologically tempting to assign this figure with the role of cartographer – to justify, in other words, the idleness of the flâneur by explaining his walking and observing practices as an effort of the urban mapmaker. To this effect, the field of literary cartography offers some useful insights.

As a methodological approach, literary cartography relies on the similarity between stories, or narratives, and maps (Tally, 2012). It implies that storytelling involves mapping, and that maps also tell stories. The inter-relation between space as a map and writing as storytelling tends to generate new places and new narratives. One of the postulates of literary cartography is that a "sense of 'homelessness' occasions the need for a kind of mapping, and the artistic forms associated with literary cartography undoubtedly derive their force and their desirability from the general unease with respect to our sense of place" (Tally, 2012: 63-64). Mapping, therefore, either spatial or narrative, tends to give shape to the otherwise shattered experience of many people. This sense of homelessness is, in the case of *The Cartographer's Confession*, provided by the very content the application communicates: the story of Thomas Andersen, who is, upon his arrival in London in 1945, without home (a fragment of the story reveals that he wistfully looks at the city of his grandparents in a map of Norway, the country which he lost) and only with the memories of the difficult crossing to England and the feeling of guilt for being there in the first place – a product of the marriage between a Norwegian woman and a German man intoxicated with Nazi ideology, Thomas could find no place for himself in either Norway or Germany, and neither could his mother. The tapes found among the belongings of Thomas Andersen offer fragments that all indicate anxiety or outright trauma: his mother Ellen's head having been shaved in Norway, for example, because of her relationship with a German, Thomas's escape from Germany in a suitcase, or the troubled arrival by barge from the East Coast of England to London. Once he ends up in such a large city, Thomas starts attempting to make sense of his life by making sense of the places he becomes attached to. London appears as a labyrinth in which Thomas and Ellen sometimes walk in circles, and in order to grasp the city and root himself firmly in it, he starts charting his own map – the one that would survive him, the very strange map of London Catriona Schilling would find and lose. This initial cartographer's impulse would drive him toward becoming a real cartographer, as well as (through his tapes and other saved documents) a storytelling one.

Literary cartography assumes that either the writer or the narrator – or both and, in the present case, Catriona Schilling and Thomas Andersen respectively – are cartographers, and their efforts at narrating-mapping are based on certain principles, the first two among them selection and omission. This is what communication is essentially based on, too, and the two principles work with equal importance on both the spatial and narrative level. Selection and omission are, of course, interdependent, and describing the selected is comparatively easy. What is more intriguing is the omitted, the gap in spatial and narrative communication. As Wolfgang Iser claims, “no tale can ever be told in its entirety” and “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (1972: 284) – hence the importance of the gap. In terms of the narrative, a gap is an unwritten implication, an element of the story which is not explicated but rather left for the reader to construe (Iser, 1974). When it comes to spatial gaps, these are conceived as perforations, voids or holes in material space, structures that disappear, or “certain place[s] nowhere to be found in the maps.” (García, 2015: 40) Such places can sometimes be located experientially, but they are never symbolically represented in maps, and in fiction, they form the essence of the so-called “pierced map” motif (García, 2015: 40).

Following the previously posited conception of the cartographer as the archetypal flâneur, it might be assumed that he necessarily gravitates towards the gaps. As in the case of merchandise, he is initially detached from such gaps, perhaps merely observing them, but as soon as he starts drawing the map of his urban walks, the gaps might be turned inside out and become places imbued with meaningful stories. This idea is given a subtle metaphorical shape through a fragment of *The Cartographer's Confession* text. A short while after Thomas and Ellen settle to live with Benny in Southwark, Ellen announces to her son that she needs to go away for some time. She promises to write letters, which she indeed does, but her son does not receive them before Benny's death. Thomas has effectively lost his mother, and her disappearance is featured as a narrative gap in which it remains – at least temporarily – unrevealed why she has gone. After some time, Thomas receives from a photographer friend a photo of his mother with a stranger, taken at Waterloo Place. The photograph haunts him as evidence that she is certainly somewhere in the city, somewhere to be found; what also haunts him is the fact that she looks unhappy in it. Working at Leicester Square one day and thinking still about the photo, he reads the words on the statue of William Shakespeare: “There is no darkness but ignorance.” It is when it dawns on him that “knowing can't be worse than not knowing” and he heads immediately to Stanfords to buy a map that would help him find his mother – locate her in the urban labyrinth and also discover the gap in her story, that is, the reason why she left. With a map (to either read or write), his walks about the city acquire a purpose: to know and ultimately bring back, which signals that his detachment from the surrounding space, holes in it included, is unsustainable.

He embarks on this mapping project from Waterloo Place, and in the fragment titled “Silent Friends” (a tape recording) the reader can understand one possible method of uncovering the unknown. His silent friends are the elements of the local landscape: a lamppost, a statue, and black iron gates – they alone are empty signifiers, bearing no meaning relevant to Thomas's life, and, what is more, they are unable to communicate any meaning by themselves. Waterloo Place *is not even marked* in the personalized map of London Thomas Andersen would draw – it is one of the blank places in it. However, juxtaposing the picture of his mother and a stranger

onto the place Thomas is observing, looking at the spot through the prism of the photograph, endows this place with stories: Thomas can immediately recall and relate to the words of Franklin and Scott, whose statues are located in the vicinity.

Thomas Andersen in the 1950s fills the gaps in his knowledge by visual means – the technology of photography at the time still perhaps had the allure of newness. When, led by the application, the modern reader finds himself at precisely the same spot where fictional Andersen stood seventy years ago, the gap is filled by means of the digitalized photograph shown on the smartphone.<sup>iv</sup> It is, arguably, such digital experience that nowadays can transform the fragmentary nature of narrative and spatial experience into a coherent whole.

#### 4. Medium: narrating the spatial gap

To show how digital technologies address pierced maps and narrative gaps, it is useful to refer more closely to Thomas Andersen's hand-drawn map, which constitutes the spatial framework for the narrative (for example, the map unfolds to show more parts of London as the story progresses from the first to the third chapter). As for the aspect of urban communication, the city is through *The Cartographer's Confession* presented as context "for a range of communication practices," addressing how these practices "relate to – and contribute to producing – urban space" (Aiello and Tosoni, 2016: 1256). The practice in question is the one of walking, carried out by the reader who moves through the city following Andersen's map.

Once the reader is guided to Waterloo Place, the corresponding part of the map does not contain this name. There are photographs and names of Franklin Memorial, Scott Memorial, and Duke of York Statue – those silent friends which orientate Thomas Andersen in his reconstruction of Ellen's whereabouts – but the identity of the uncharted toponym, which the reader visits, has to be reconstructed by the reader's simultaneous practices of listening to the application and walking in the city. In this process, the pierced map is complemented by the information provided by the narrative. Such is also the case with, for example, Benny's Flat. This location is featured in the map, together with the address: 9 Park Street. The location, however, is not one which would normally be visited by tourists or any purposeful walker. It is a hole in virtually any available map of London, but it is in *The Cartographer's Confession* filled with the story of the man who has allegedly migrated from Italy and settled here, subsequently providing accommodation for Thomas and Ellen. The story is sustained with photographs that are supposed to represent Benny and generally convey the atmosphere of the late 1940s neighbouring Borough Market. The place that, as Patricia García puts it in the previously given quote, is nowhere to be found in maps is made chartable, or readable, by means of the stories it is filled with. In order for these stories to become alive and locations to become mappable, the reader needs to undertake the practice of walking, and while this practice may be guided, it nevertheless puts the reader in the position of urban cartographer. Namely, what Thomas Andersen achieved in fiction – his struggle with the urban labyrinth – is recreated in the actual practice of urban strolling.

There is also the issue of narrative gaps. The major narrative gaps in the story refer to the disappearance (or several disappearances) of Ellen. The first time she disappears from Benny's apartment, both Thomas and the reader are left wondering about where she is. This is related in spatial terms, through an intertextual reference to

Thomas De Quincey: a card from Thomas Andersen's notes, transcribed by Catriona Schilling, reads: "IF SHE LIVED, DOUBTLESS WE MUST HAVE BEEN SOMETIMES IN SEARCH OF EACH OTHER, AT THE VERY SAME MOMENT, THROUGH THE MIGHTY LABYRINTHS OF LONDON: PERHAPS EVEN WITHIN A FEW FEET OF EACH OTHER – A BARRIER NO WIDER THAN A LONDON STREET..." This first of gaps is filled with the appearance of the photograph taken at Waterloo Place, which makes the relation between blank spaces and narrative gaps reciprocal – the knowledge of the location becomes crucial in neutralizing the narrative gap. When Thomas Andersen's finds his mother's letters after Benny's death, he receives complete information about where she disappeared, and this information is again contained within a blank space – Benny's Flat.

Ellen, as her son states, disappears again (without ever having been actually *found* and met by Thomas) when Thomas arranges a meeting with his father Hans at the Angel Pub and subsequently pushes the drunk and drugged man into the Thames. This takes place at the stairs near the pub, in Rotherhithe area, which are also not presented in Thomas Andersen's map and are thus preserved as a blank space. As his estranged father falls into the water, Thomas suddenly realizes that he has the Waterloo Place photograph in his pocket and laments over the fact that he has yet again lost any trace of his mother. Thomas Andersen's narrative thus ends with a gap, whereby both the protagonist and the reader are left to conjecture what might have happened to Ellen, and this gap is correspondingly presented as a void in Andersen's pierced map. The very lack of the Angel Stairs in it embodies the lack of certain knowledge about Ellen; the only thing Hans can tell Thomas is that one day she simply disappeared – he came home to find all her things gone.

The narrative is from this point taken over by Catriona Schilling, who poses the question, regarding her research: "How do you uncover the progress of a life lived before the time we all started to leave a trail of digital markers behind us wherever we went?" The solution she offers is a search for any archives one might find, which indeed leads her to the Norwegian Church in Rotherhithe, where she discovers what happened to Ellen. The answer to her question is, however, contained in its very phrasing: in the era of digital traces, nothing is uncoverable. Thomas Andersen may have been unable to locate his mother and left his story with a gaping narrative void, but the reader to whom the story is mediated via Schilling's research and offered in a digital form (whether the film Catriona Schilling states she has made or the application the reader actually uses) manages to overcome all gaps, narrative and spatial. The reader receives the story in entirety and, coordinated by the Global Positioning System, also walks along the routes provided by Andersen's pierced map and visits those locations that the map avoids to feature.

## **5. Conclusion: digital reading, analogue mapping**

As Thomas and Hans observe London's skyline from the balcony of the Angel Pub and particularly the GPO (BT) Tower, whose construction has only just begun, Hans makes a comment that "a map can't tell you what something does to the eye... or to the skyline." Thomas agrees, admitting the implied failure of maps, and stating that he feels "like [he's] walked off the map onto the stage." This is a confirmation of the cartographer's attachment, as described above, in Section 3: the map that originates from Thomas Andersen's story and his walks through the labyrinth of London is only

possible because he participates in both the story and the surrounding space. The narrative can complement spatial gaps (as in the case of Waterloo Place) and the other way around (e.g. Benny's Flat, which contains the story of Ellen). However, finding one's way through the labyrinth, in the process during which nothing remains hidden, is only possible for the digital reader.

This conclusion is perhaps already implied by the nature of locative digital fiction, which is immersive – by definition, it places the reader directly in the story. Such active participation in the story, walking in the footsteps of its protagonist, also allows for a more complete immersion into the gaps, both narrative and spatial, which is made possible by the advances in digital technologies. This also provides the answer to the first question posed at the beginning of this paper, namely, of how digital fiction can address gaps in communication.

As for the second question, the role of the reader: as readers trace the steps of the protagonist, they literally become cartographers themselves, like Thomas Andersen. Based on his personal map, the London they draw is guided but also uniquely their own – for the simple reason that it is the 21<sup>st</sup>-century London, largely changed in comparison to the post-World War Two city. However, as readers fit every piece of the puzzle in its place during their immersion in the story, they arguably become more detached from it. The cartographer's impulse is to know everything; gaps, therefore, incite his involvement and interaction with space/narrative. This thirst for knowledge, as the analysis of the example shows, is satiated by means of digitalizing the walking experience, but as readers grasp the entire story of the London of the past and present times, they can resort to the traditional romanticized role of the urban stroller and his disinterested indulgence in the life, its sights and sounds, that goes on around him.

While stories such as *The Cartographer's Confession* provide ample opportunity for further practical and theoretical elaborations of the practices of urban communication and literary cartography, a major disadvantage of any further research would be the fact that such stories are still scarce.<sup>v</sup> What remains to be seen is whether the digital revolution will produce and stimulate the consumption of more material of this kind.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Cartographer's Confession* is the 2017 winner of the international New Media Writing Prize for digitally-born writing. More information about the Ambient Literature project can be found at its website:

<https://research.ambientlit.com/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Its author James Attlee admittedly favours the concepts of readers and readership over those of users or participants, as would be terminologically more acceptable in the application production and locative digital fiction respectively (Attlee and McMullan, 2018).

<sup>iii</sup> Cartographers are taken to be both those who make maps and those who study maps (Crampton, 2010: 2), the former operating within the field of production, the latter within the field of knowledge.

<sup>iv</sup> Through its usage of photographs, recordings, music, the map and other textual materials, *The Cartographer's Confession* employs the city as medium in the context of communication.

<sup>v</sup> While much of digital fiction experiments with the concepts of spatial immersion and blank spaces (for example, Andy Campbell's 2006 *The Flat* or J.R. Carpenter's 2008 *In Absentia*), the smartphone application format is still largely underexploited.