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Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics by Laura Kurgan

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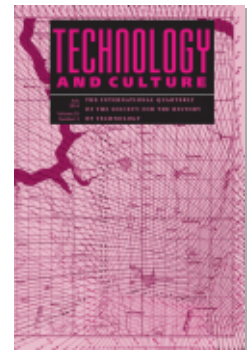
Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics by
Laura Kurgan (review)

Jennifer S. Light

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Yeang is clearly indebted to Andrew Warwick's *Masters of Theory* (2003) for his treatment of the mathematical physicists, especially their culture in which mathematical expressions represented real phenomena and where terms were related to assumptions about nature and its processes. Moreover, the episodic return to theory throughout the book underscores an insight into how the radio physicists understood their evolving science, how they conceived of the earth and the atmosphere as radio conductors, and how they worked through their problems.

DAVID P. MUNNS

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Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics.

By Laura Kurgan. New York: Zone Books/MIT Press, 2013.
Pp. 232. \$36.95.

Laura Kurgan's *Close Up at a Distance* examines the politics of digital spatial technologies, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and remote sensing—many with roots in American military and national security agency programs but now freely available as civilian tools. Kurgan, whose intellectual biography spans both the theory and practice of architecture and design, is particularly interested in questions about the relationship between reality and representation, especially the tensions between precision and ambiguity, raised by these technological tools. Her analysis proceeds on two fronts.

The first, which comprises her book's three introductory chapters, orients readers to key details of these technologies, including their historical origins, how they work, and the invisible or near-invisible politics embedded within. The analytical contributions of these chapters are clear, if occasionally repetitive, and well-illustrated with supporting images. Although not chiefly aimed at an audience of historians of science and technology, this first section covers familiar terrain to readers in these disciplines, including citations of scholars such as Bruno Latour and Peter Galison that reflect the inroads that limited aspects of history of science and technology have made in the design professions.

The strength of these three chapters for their primary audience—they introduce design professionals to a new form of media literacy—is a limitation for a potential readership within the history of science and technology. For there are many points in the book that might have offered opportunities for deeper engagement with our discipline, which would enrich both the book's account of its fascinating subject and in turn the multidisciplinary conversation about new technologies that is proceeding in parallel in these fields. Thus, Kurgan might have amplified her critique of the

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“para-empiricism” of the data produced by spatial imaging technologies—in particular her analysis of their claims to objectivity—in dialog with the rich body of historical literature on the politics of quantification and objectivity across fields of scientific and technological inquiry. Her observations about the growth of military support for commercial satellite operations would fit nicely with recent work on new models of procurement such as the “military-entertainment complex” described by Timothy Lenoir and Henry Lowood. And her call to interrogate the “military-political origins” of technologies now in the civilian domain might have benefited from engagement with John Cloud’s work on the history of military geographic information systems—in particular his discussion of how imagery from classified data-collection systems long ago made their way into the civilian realm, even as the reconnaissance equipment itself remained a state secret.

The second front for Kurgan’s analysis, which reflects her professional training outside of the history of science and technology, will likely strike *Technology and Culture* readers as the most innovative contribution here. For the next nine chapters move beyond textual analysis of her subject and associated images to present a new analytic method. Kurgan uses spatial technologies to explore the politics of those very spatial technologies, and does so with a writing style whose accessibility makes her claims easy to digest. These chapters span topics from mapping the area around the former World Trade Center site to satellite imaging of Kuwait. Each, the subject of an art installation or related project, is presented in its original form, accompanied by updated reflections that nicely link it back to the major themes of the book.

JENNIFER S. LIGHT

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NASA in the World: Fifty Years of International Collaboration in Space.

By John Krige, Angelina Long Callahan, and Ashok Maharaj.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xviii+353. \$35.

Congress embedded international collaboration in NASA’s founding legislation, but as this book reveals, carrying out that objective is far from a simple task. The Space Act of 1958 sets as the agency’s other goal the preeminence of the United States in aerospace science and technology, leaving it the challenge of reconciling the two objectives. Working with, and often building up, foreign space programs, while supporting U.S. foreign policy and preventing unwanted technology transfer that could threaten American national security or corporate competitiveness enmeshes NASA in a complex web of relations with the State, Defense and/or Commerce Departments, even as it engages in often complicated negotiations with na-