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### **Paper:**

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**Book Review for: *Social & Cultural Geography*** (ISSN: 1464-9365 Print; 1470-1197 Online).  
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**Christian Abrahamsson, 2018, *Topoi/Graphein: Mapping the Middle in Spatial Thought***, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, pp. xxv + 164. ISBN 978-1-4962-0419-6 (hardback), 978-1-4962-0577-3 (paperback), 978-1-4962-0608-4 (eBook PDF), 978-1-4962-0606-0 (eBook EPUB)

Christian Abrahamsson's *Topoi/Graphein* is the first book to be published in the University of Nebraska Press's 'Cultural Geographies + Rewriting the Earth' series, edited by Paul Kingsbury and Arun Saldanha, which is intended to provide "a forum for cutting-edge research that embraces theoretical creativity, methodological experimentation, and ethico-political urgency." This book certainly lives up to that ambition. By foregrounding and problematizing the space 'in-between,' the slash of the book's title and the plus sign of the series' title make perfect bedfellows, and the weird-sounding phrase 'topoi graphein' is undoubtedly a thought-provoking re-writing of the all-too-familiar and taken-for-granted word 'geography,' whose criticality has arguably become dulled through endless repetition. Merely inserting a slash or a plus sign into the word geography would probably have been an insufficiently jolting or shocking gesture. I wager that 'geo/graphy' or 'geo+graphy' would be easily recuperated by the customary forms of 'earth writing,' and I suspect that few would-be readers would have stumbled upon let alone been tripped up by such a title. Switching 'topoi' for 'geo-' and 'graphein' for '-graphy,' is arguably a much more disconcerting and bewildering gesture, defamiliarizing and estranging the work of geography in at least three dimensions at once: in the world, in the writing, and in the in-between. Moreover, the strangeness of the title is accompanied by an evocative yet enigmatic subtitle, 'mapping the middle in spatial thought,' and the book's cover sports an arresting yet incongruous photograph of the first detonation of a nuclear weapon at the Trinity test site in New Mexico on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1945. The puzzling combination of 'topoi/graphein,' 'mapping the middle,' and an eerie mushroom cloud promises a work that is theoretically creative, methodologically experimental, and ethico-politically urgent, and from which there is likely to be "much to ponder and much to learn," as Gunnar Olsson says in his inspiring foreword (p. xv).

*Topoi/Graphein* begins and ends in the middle, amid the horror of Abu Ghraib and amidst the abysmal remains of horror vacui, respectively, and aspires to remain in the middle for the duration of the text, cleaving to the slash between *topoi* and *graphein*, all the while attempting "to map the paradoxical limit of the in-between" (p. xxiv). The middle, or the in-between, is paradoxical because it is the space or place of relationality and relativity that draws together and holds apart, where not only identity and difference but also truth, knowledge, certainty, and sense are rigged to break down. Building on the extraordinary oeuvre of Gunnar Olsson, from *Birds in Egg* (1975) to *Abysmal* (2007), Abrahamsson's theoretical creativity involves taking the all-too-familiar geographical trilogy of *points/locations*, *lines/limits*, and *planes/surfaces*, and reworks them from the middle—from the inside out and the outside in—, thereby delimiting, deranging, and deconstructing each in the process. "It is a question of approaching the limit *in* the limit, to simultaneously demarcate its inside and outside. And to draw a set of provisional maps of that strange terrain *where* and *when* meaning turns *to* matter and matter turns *to* meaning" (p. xxii, emphasis in original). The in-between is the space or place of transformation and translation, of contortion and distortion, and of separation and dissipation. The in-between is where humanity dwells, "where you and I are held together and apart" (p. 125).

Although there is no escaping the fact that the argument advanced in *Topoi/Graphein* is incredibly difficult to express and to comprehend, not least because its focus—the in-between—is forever out of place and out of kilter, Abrahamsson has nevertheless done a marvellous job of making it feel entirely accessible. His accomplishment is all the more remarkable given the brevity of the volume. The

argument itself is presented in three distinct forms. First, the in-between is mapped out in a succinct introduction that foregrounds Samuel Beckett, Primo Levi, and Georges Perec. Then, in the bulk of the book, the in-between is mapped out through an inspired analysis of three seminal films: Michael Hanake's *Code Inconnu* (2000); Peter Brook's *Lord of the Flies* (1963); and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Abrahamsson judiciously selects and presents excerpts from these films to serve as the *topoi* to be worked over by the *graphein* of his own interpretation: the breaking down of fixed points in *Code Inconnu*; the breaking down of lines and limits in *Lord of the Flies*; and the breaking down of everything in *Apocalypse Now*. "Rephrased, the three parts enact a journey that starts within a fixed spatiality in which human thought and action is anchored in the given of identity. It then moves *through* a social world in which the spatiotemporal transformations are neither fixed nor taken for granted. Finally it edges *into* a pure temporality that lies beyond the maps of fixed points and social relations" (p. xxv, emphasis in original). Finally, the argument is briefly re-presented in the epilogue (under the title 'Geographein') as a set of nine minimalist and formalist figures with accompanying text, the last of which is simply a blank page—the in-between qua horror vacui. Readers with an interest in spatial theory or cinematic geography should obviously appreciate this work, but so should anyone who wants to understand how a world falls apart and continues to fall apart. Accordingly, I have shelved my copy of *Topoi/Graphein* between my copies of Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).

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