



Cities as media

Description

Iâ??ve been searching for a way to transition from alien communications (as an exercise in cryptography) back to earth-bound cities. (See [previous post](#).) Shannon Matternâ??s interesting book *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media* helps. It includes an aerial image of a geoglyph figure in the Nazca Desert (Peru) of a bird . Hereâ??s a similar Creative Commons picture from CC BY-SA 4.0 of Nazsca in Peru [Link](#).



Mattern provides the following account to emphasise how the land and earth are complicit in the formation of communications media.

“These geoglyphs of flora, fauna, everyday objects, and geometric forms were once imagined to serve as gigantic astronomical calendars, yet the Nazca Lines are now believed to have been used as part of ritual procession routes or in religious rites” (90).

That sober account takes me back to the more sensational prospect that these markings across landscapes were a means of communication with space aliens, who were in turn progenitors of human civilisation. We didn’t need the Internet to promote such dubious accounts. A book (*Chariots of the Gods*) by Erich von Däniken, a few tv documentaries about historical cover-ups, and schoolyard rumours about UFO sightings seeded the enthusiasm for space communication.

Cities of mud

Mattern’s book is not about that of course, but about the influence of writing, voice, text, printing and their media of steel, stone, mud, clay, wood and paper in the formation of cities – and vice versa. I’m taken by her attempt to position concepts of the contemporary smart city in this broader historical and cultural context.

Today's smart cities don't have a monopoly on urban intelligence. In fact, we can trace that smart genome all the way back to ancient Rome, Uruk, and Athens (xi).

The metaphor of city as medium is powerful and worth pursuing in the context of hidden messaging (cryptography).

For millennia, our cities have been designed to foster broadcast; they've been wired for transmission; they've hosted architectures for the production and distribution of various forms of intelligence and served as hubs for records-management; they've rendered themselves readable to humans and machines; they've even written their source code, their operating instructions, on their facades and into the urban form itself. They've coded themselves both for the administrative technologies, or proto-algorithms, that oversee their operation and for the people who have built and inhabit and maintain them (xi).

The reference to codes and algorithms is helpful to me as I navigate the idea of the cryptographic city. See post: [Place is the code](#).

References

- Mattern, Shannon. 2017. *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Parks, Lisa. 2005. *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites in the Televisual*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cities
2. cryptography
3. media

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