

# Mind over matter

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An early atlas does more than chart creeks – like photography, it tracks our obsessions, writes **Veronica Horwell**

## The Atlas Maior of 1665

by Joan Blaeu  
594pp, Taschen, £100

## The Ongoing Moment

by Geoff Dyer  
285pp, Little, Brown, £20

At first it was hard to get a grasp on the facsimile Amsterdam atlas and not only because each page of this mighty book is far nearer broadsheet than the one you are reading. The scale of the maps fluctuates wildly, rendering Malta and Moscow close up on about the same acreage of paper used for a complete province of China. This zoom-lens effect is due to the repro's enthusiasm for enlarging gorgeous details, combined with its need to diminish other lands to fit in captions and commentary; and is even more the result of the early atlas trade's unstandardised approach to dimension. A German "mile" of 7.4km is drawn in many map cartouches, but its chief use is as a display stand for an arrangement of fantasy inhabitants attended by armadillos and ostriches.

After a while, though, leafing from a magnified Isle of Wight to a miniaturised Japan, the plates began to make a sense. The maps are drawn from God's vantage point, which presumes that all topographical data is accorded equal respect, but they are actually closer to Saul Steinberg's New Yorker cartoon, "View of the World from 9th Avenue", with whatever is important to the cartographer looming large, and all else diminishing to myth. Atlases were originally anthologies of whatever information was available on the knowledge market, replated to fit a saleable format with no mitigation of the preoccupations of the artists, let alone those of surveyors of the ground.

Since maps are only visible answers to questions posed by their makers, the pleasure of this atlas lies in reconstructing the forgotten queries, which are seldom the modern ones of how far, high, deep, or connected – there were no roads worth marking in the 17th century, but every wiggle of river or



Gorgeous details... the Low Countries from Joan Blaeu's 1665 Atlas Maior

tidal anchorage is delineated in a world of waterborne trade. Blaeu appropriated, among others, John Speed's Jacobean maps of Great Britain, which asked: "Who owns this land?" Speed had satisfied patrons by ceding space to their heraldry, and devised an ideograph of stylised palings to encircle their newly enclosed parklands: the post-1630 history of England is foreseen in those fences of possession.

Some maps prefigure the economic future – those of Pernambuco and Paraiba in Brazil abandoning the hinterland to a panorama of a sugar mill operated by black slaves. Others were evidence of a paradise lost even by the time Blaeu printed them: one of the few North American entries is John Smith's 1608 exploration map of Chesapeake Bay, on which he noted scores of populous Native American hamlets in an inhabited realm lately annexed as Virginia. Geographical glory is fleeting: Gothia, the puissant

late 17th-century Swedish kingdom, is rendered in full, with a martial pageant on the march along the baseline; a couple of generations after Blaeu, the same ground would have been entitled to not much more than a few of the tree and mole-heap symbols that denote forest and mountains throughout the atlas.

I was enjoying the atlas while reading Geoff Dyer's explorations of the mental geography of photographers, so I envisaged Dyer's recurring images as map symbols, aids to navigation. A trilby hat. A long dark overcoat. A barber's striped pole. A Speed-style fence of pointed palings. A park bench. A gas pump. An inverted V signifying the open road (if in a frame, as seen through a windscreen). Dyer has approached the all-too-charted history of photography, mostly American although with excursions into Atget's Paris and Fox Talbot's England, through such glyphs tracked across

place and time. He has a haunting idea that the same images reappear time and again, passed on from one photographer to another: that the brief opening of an individual aperture is also an ongoing moment. That hat, for example: keep an eye on the trilby in Dorothea Lange's Great Depression pictures, as it becomes more battered from head to head down through breadlines and skid rows, until it ends, debased, in the hands of a blind beggar, falls in despair lower than the head of the man who wore it or, in an odd modern coda about James Nachtwey's photoreportage, is doffed on the floor, the memento mori of a civilian killed in the Balkan wars.

Or consider the filling-station gas pumps – isolated in the 1930s landscape, but which aggregate and expand until, in 1970s pictures of Los Angeles, they become the landscape; or follow Paul Strand's 1916 white fence, shot because it was "very American – you wouldn't find a fence like that in Mexico or Europe", until it finishes, pickets staved in, failing to enclose a park in a 1980s Michael Ormerod view.

Dyer's preoccupations lead to Steinberg-like effects. He claims that his research is "restricted to the forms of knowledge that are intrinsic to photographs, that can be intimated or extrapolated from them", but supplies detailed contexts for certain sequences – particularly the erotic activities of Alfred Steiglitz and Edward Weston, which heave up in the foreground – while leaving other sequences empty except for a few speculations in the distant vista. These are sometimes lovely, especially his monologue on the inner life of a park bench, or his understanding of the use of location to make time itself visible, receding down the side-alleys of the years.

He gets near to saying that time is the fourth dimension of place that substitutes in photographs for the third, depth, which the camera can only map, not reproduce; the greatest images make the future, especially death, visible in the present moment – what you might call photomancy.

A big complaint: apart from a few colour plates that catch exactly what a Walker Evans' Polaroid makes of a coffee shop hallway, which is a universe, the illustrations are reproduced smaller than happy snaps, printed on paper as absorbent as a nappy: you have to take his words for what's in them.

To order *The Atlas Maior of 1665* for £90, and *The Ongoing Moment* for £18, both with free UK p&p, go to [guardian.co.uk/bookshop](http://guardian.co.uk/bookshop) or call 0870 836 0875 or go to [guardian.co.uk/bookshop](http://guardian.co.uk/bookshop)