

Denis Wood, Mapmaker

Denis Wood (Figure 3.17) is one of America's pre-eminent experts on the significance and meaning of maps. Wood loves maps and loves to talk about them, though he is skeptical about many of the uses to which they continue to be put. His bestselling book *The Power of Maps*—originally published in 1992—successively analyzes how maps work by serving interests, and describes how the selective nature of representation overwhelmingly serves the objectives of vested interests that use them to maintain or further distort the status quo. Some consider that GIS makes this process more transparent, while others suggest the opposite. Elsewhere in this chapter we very much take the former view, consistent with Denis's recent work (with John Krygier) that emphasizes the importance of good GIS design principles.

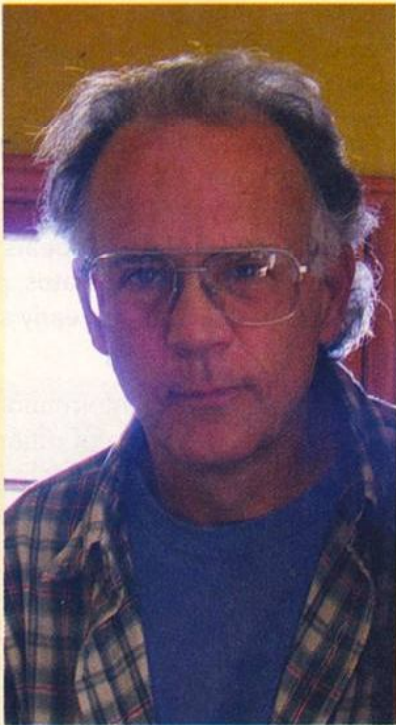


Figure 3.17 Denis Wood, critic of “re-presentation.”
(Courtesy of Denis Wood)

Denis has challenged our taken-for-granted ways of thinking about geographic representations, especially maps. During the 1980s and 1990s, he was among those committed to foregrounding the interests—political, economic, and other—that motivated even the most apparently dispassionate of representations. In 1986 he and John Fels published a seminal analysis of the way that the North Carolina State highway map served the mass of interests—economic, political, and racial—that gave that map its form. In 1992 and 1994 Denis curated a path-breaking exhibition for Smithsonian Institution museums in New York and Washington. This helped visitors to understand the interests informing Napoleon's mapping of the Middle East and the U.S. mapping of its West; the profound economic interests motivating topographic surveys; the interests of the automobile industry, big oil, and big rubber behind highway maps; and the interests, often personal, that arguably underlie every map.

During the 1990s Denis gradually shifted his attention from the interests shaping maps to the nature of cartographic representation itself, increasingly arguing that far from being “re-presentations,” maps are actually systems of propositions that are rhetorically structured to make arguments about the nature of the world. It is through these propositions, his argument goes, that one worldview is advanced at the expense of another. This case is persuasively made in *The Natures of Maps*, that Denis also co-authored with John Fels, which explores the propositional logic of the map in the context of cartographic representation of the natural world.

Denis was born in 1945 in Cleveland, Ohio. He was educated at Case-Western Reserve and Clark Universities and taught landscape history, environmental psychology, and design for 23 years at North Carolina State University.

Check out Denis's Narrative Atlas of Boylan Heights at makingmaps.net.

6. Is it socially acceptable to make available any observations of uniquely identifiable individuals—especially if they might be undertaking behavior that might be construed as socially unacceptable)?
7. Is the information date-stamped, as an indicator of its provenance and current liability?

3.9 Conclusion

Representation, or more broadly *ontology*, is a fundamental issue in GIS, since it underlies all of our efforts to express useful information about the surface of the Earth in a digital computer. The fact