Mapping Morse

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Standfirst:

Inspector Morse fans who visit Oxford to follow in the footsteps of their detective hero demonstrate an imaginative overlapping between place and character which can also be illustrated by user-generated online maps and photo-sharing services.

In a pandemic era when tourist activity has suddenly halted, residents and businesses based in tourist hotspots such as Oxford are in a unique position to reflect upon what tourism has brought to their cities and what it might bring in the future. With an eye to recovering valuable income, policymakers and destination managers must go back to basics to establish what makes their tourism offer special. So why do people want to come to Oxford? The most obvious answer to this question is the city's visual appeal: the 'dreaming spires' described by Victorian poet Matthew Arnold and featured on countless postcards, photographs and social media posts. But Arnold's oft-quoted line is not just a visual description, it is also an imaginative one. It implies that the value of the architecture in a place like Oxford is what it has inspired in the minds of its visitors, be they artists, students, or even humble day-trippers. According to contemporary author Philip Pullman, Oxford is a place where "the real and the unreal jostle in the streets… where windows open into other worlds." (Pullman: i) Both Arnold and Pullman's visions of Oxford are of a place which is made not just of beautiful buildings, but also of stories: dreams, works of literature, and films and television shows. These stories are vital for attracting tourism because they offer a lively vision of a place packed with incident and drama, as well as powerful emotional connections with characters whose personalities have become synonymous with the spires themselves. Over the last half a century, the character who has come to stand for the city most successfully is the fictional detective Inspector Morse.

The Inspector Morse franchise, made up of Colin Dexter's novels written between 1975 and 1999 and the TV drama series *Inspector Morse* (1987-2000), *Lewis* (2006-2015) and *Endeavour* (2012-) has been a potent and consistent driver of tourism to Oxford for many reasons. Firstly, the international success of the TV series mean that Morse is a character known to audiences all over the world. At its peak, the show's global audience was estimated to be around 1bn viewers in over 200 countries. Secondly, just as important as the series' international reach is its strong local flavor. The show makes extensive use of location shooting in and around Oxford, and this is an important element of its high production values. The original *Inspector Morse*'s convoluted murder mystery plotlines typically rely upon the city's eccentricities, such as 'The Wolvercote Tongue' (first transmitted on Christmas Day in 1988) which builds Oxford tourism into its plotline, as suspicion falls upon tourists, tour guides and employees of the Ashmolean Museum. However perhaps the most important explanation for Morse's appeal to tourist fans is that, like many detective narratives, Morse's plotlines are about investigating both people *and* places. Detectives are typically characters with agency in a very real physical sense. They have the freedom to move around their local area with impunity, to find clues, to locate and follow suspects, and finally to apprehend the guilty parties. This vital spatial element of detective narratives mean that fans can literally follow in the footsteps of their beloved heroes or heroines, looking for their own signs or clues, such as locations used within their favourite show. This process can form intense relationships between story and place, through the detective who is inseparable from the place he or she investigates. By exploring the visited location in detail, sometimes going back over the same spots many times, tourist fans can find signs which accumulate into a kind of cartography of character: personality as action which takes place on a map.

Oxford's tourist brand relies heavily upon the University, both in terms of its intellectual reputation and its striking architecture and green spaces. However, as visitors to Oxford quickly discover, the University-owned land which dominates the city centre is often inaccessible. Whilst walking around the city, college life with its dorms, dining halls and quads can only be glimpsed through locked gates carrying signs that unambiguously state "Closed to Tourists". This is a rude reminder that Oxford's

intellectualism functions as an exclusive club, wonderful and empowering for those inside but opaque and impenetrable to those who are not. In a similar vein, Morse also has an interestingly ambivalent relationship with the University. Whist he was an Oxford undergraduate, Morse failed his degree in mysterious circumstances, making him half insider and half outsider in relation to the city's privileged elite. Behind closed college doors, secrets lurk, and secrets lead to corruption. The show's plotlines famously depict this powerful elite as corrupt in murderous ways. For example, in the first episode of series two of *Lewis*, 'And the Moonbeams Kissed the Sea' (first broadcast in February 2008) two apparently unrelated victims, an undergraduate art student and a custodian at the Bodleian Library, are both killed by an English Professor because of their involvement in a scheme to sell forged manuscripts. Morse's physical access behind the closed doors of the University may be challenging for tourist fans to fully recreate, but the snobbery and social barriers which he also encounters are surely easier points of identification for visitors to Oxford.

Like the hard-boiled detectives of Hollywood crime cinema, Morse is placed somewhat outside of mainstream society. He struggles to maintain romantic relationships and becomes involved with alluring but deadly *femme fatales*. The hard-boiled genre is a clear influence upon Colin Dexter's creation of Inspector Morse, whose international appeal surely rests upon the translation of these familiar cliches into a very different genteel English setting. Hard-boiled detectives are also usually alcoholics, and this stereotype at least is easy to translate: from smoky bars serving neat bourbon to oak-beamed pubs and pints of bitter for lunch. Morse's penchant for Oxford pubs is a gift to those canny operators who offer Morse-inspired walking tours around the city, always calling at well-known Oxford haunts such as the Turf Tavern. The Turf used to be famously difficult to find, but in the era of *Google Maps* and ubiquitous smartphones this 'hidden gem' appeal is somewhat diminished. Figure 1 shows an example of a user-modified *Google Map* of Morse's Oxford including places described in Colin Dexter's original novels, shooting locations from the television series and even walking routes (and pub crawls) which can enable Morse fans to explore the city just as their hero does. When used with a smartphone these maps are

capable of displaying the tourist's real location within Morse's fictional world, further blurring the boundaries between place, story and character.

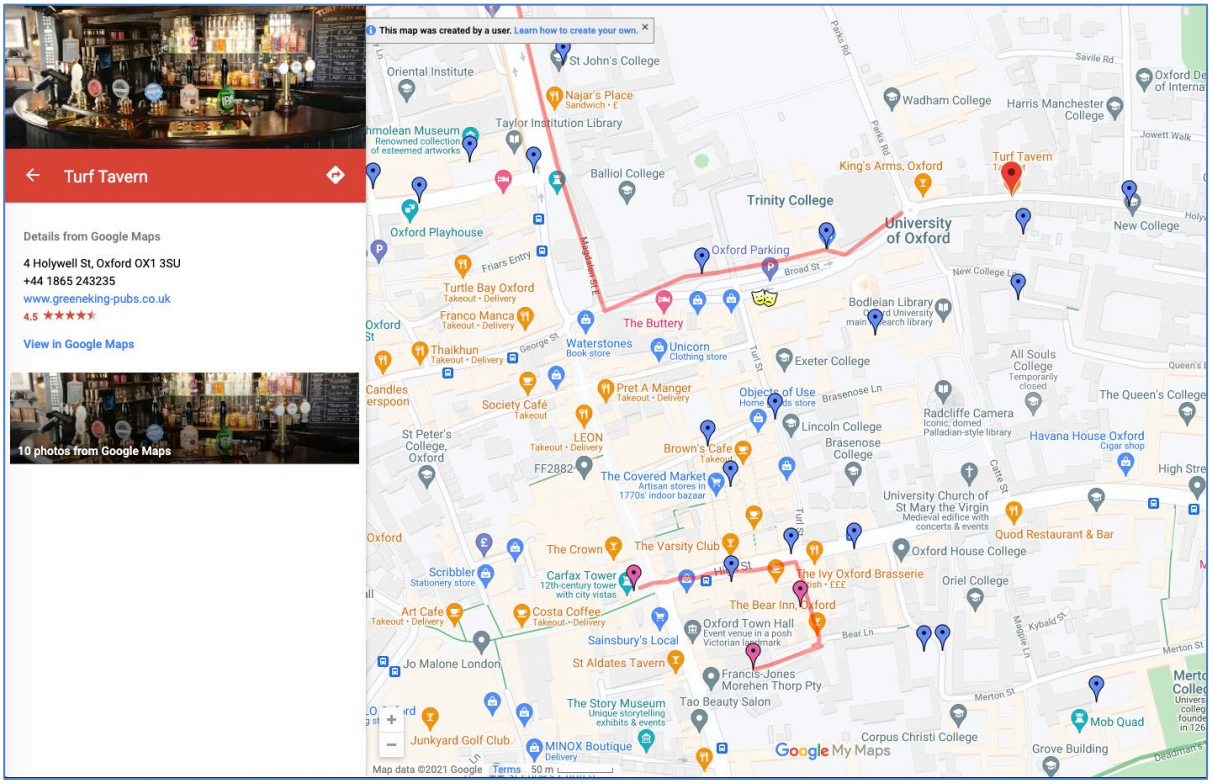

Figure 1. User-modified *Google Map* of 'Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse'. ©2021 Google.

It is also important to remember that the Morse franchise is not just an archive of old material to be repurposed by fans as *Google Maps*. As *Endeavor*, it remains a hit TV show and glossy period drama which continues to be shot on location around the city of Oxford. For tourist fans who are lucky enough to stumble across the show being shot, often it is another key element of Morse iconography which is spotted first: the classic cars driven by the detective throughout his career. Evidence of such encounters between Morse fans and location shooting for *Endeavour* are rife across social media, but they take on a particularly interesting visual form on *Flickr*, a photo sharing service used by keen amateur and semi-professional photographers. Because most images taken with modern devices are 'geo-tagged' (i.e. marked with geographical data indicating where there were taken), *Flickr* can present the publicly-shared photographs in the form of a searchable map. Each of the pink dots on the map can be selected to display

a preview of the image, which when clicked is opened in higher definition and with comments by users and fans. Figure 2 demonstrates the results of a search for the keywords ‘Inspector Morse’ as displayed on a geo-tagged map of Oxford. In this example the possibilities of the internet to enable the imaginative maps required by the television tourist is clear. This map captures images which were inspired by stories; written as novels, adapted onto television screens and then played and replayed around the world. The images it relays are in themselves tiny stories of tourists’ experiences and fans engagement with fictional heroes.

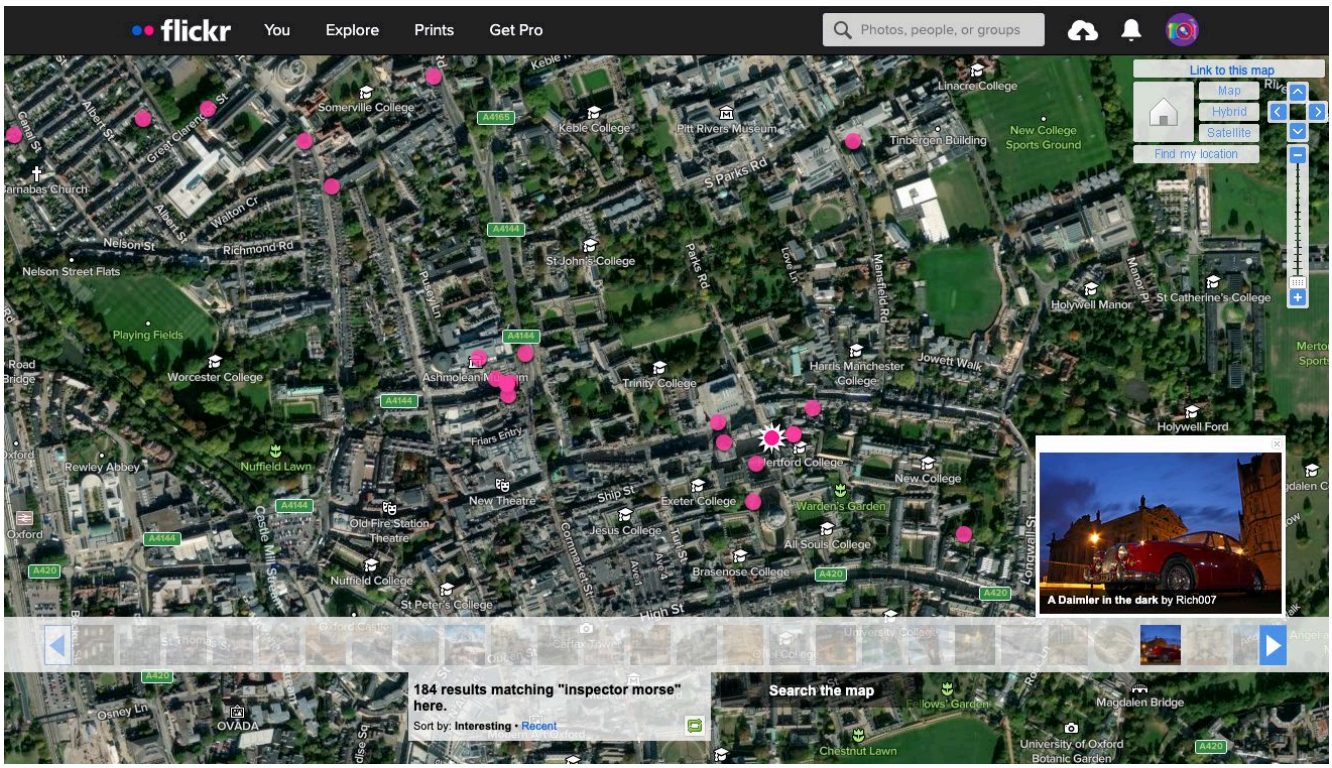

Figure 2. *Flickr*’s Oxford map of images found by searching for “Inspector Morse”. © 2021 DigitalGlobe.

Conclusion

All maps are an argument about space, and all maps have a purpose. Most obviously, maps help us to navigate unfamiliar terrain and avoid getting lost. They lead us to places which we want to see and help us find places which fulfill our basic needs. They may also demarcate territories and reinforce

political power. But as historian of cartography Jerry Brotton argues, maps also fulfill a deeper imaginative function, as they are "always images of elsewhere, imaginatively transporting their viewers to faraway, unknown places" (Brotton: 15). Considering the map as an instrument of fantasy brings us back to the particular focus of this chapter: tourists to Oxford who are motivated to travel by their powerful identification with fictional characters such as Inspector Morse. When the must-see object is less a building or place than a fictional character that inhabits it, a traditional map is just not fit for purpose. What is required is a deeper engagement between place and narrative, a space where stories are just as important as history, and where history has many of the best stories. Oxford, as imagined by Morse fans and then mapped in creative ways through the possibilities of user-modified media and social sharing, is such a place. May its tourists return happily and healthily very soon.

References:

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Pullman, Phillip (2003) Lyra's Oxford. London: Corgi Books.

About the contributor:

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