

# Thesis Proposal

Emiel Verté

December 2025

The question “What is a map?” remains one of the most fundamental yet unresolved debates in cartography. Throughout the history of the discipline, the definition of “map” has evolved along with methodological, technological, and philosophical developments, shifting from representation and communication to cognition, critical theory, and interactive geospatial interfaces. Although these debates are well acknowledged, there is no systematic comparison of how the meaning of “map” differs across the major cartographic paradigms.

This lack of conceptual clarity creates challenges for cartographic theory. Existing work has discussed epistemic tensions within cartography. Still, it has not explicitly focused on the concept of map within each paradigm, nor attempted a structured comparison of paradigm-specific definitions. This thesis will aim to analyse what constitutes a map within different cartographic paradigms.

The outcome of this thesis has not yet been determined, but the following are some possibilities.

1. Well-evidenced definitions of what constitutes a map within each cartographic paradigm.
2. A comparative analysis of overlaps and divergences.
3. Identification of irreconcilable differences.
4. A pluralistic, paradigm-sensitive or conditional understanding of “map”.
5. Exploration of shortcomings (if any) in current paradigms.

What is not the goal of this thesis:

1. A final, ultimate definition of “map”.
2. Reconciliation of all four (five) paradigms.
3. Invention of a new theory of cartography.

## Possible Research Questions

1. How have major cartographic paradigms defined or implicitly conceptualised the map?
2. What (ontological, epistemological, and functional) assumptions about maps are characteristic of each paradigm?
3. Where do definitions across paradigms overlap, diverge, or conflict?
4. Can these insights be integrated into a coherent, multi-dimensional framework for understanding what a map is today?