



Delft University of Technology

The Atlas of Thresholds

Decoding and Reassembling the Atlas as a Critical Spatial Investigation

Dinçer, D.

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DDR STATEMENT

My research, situated in-between disciplines, using a context that I defined as migrant territories, uses mixed techniques and cartographic variants, timelines, official statements, photographic documentation and satellite imagery to make spatial and scalar links between territorial entities. The Atlas, as an objective of the research, is a twofold device for its researcher and reader: methodological research and an instrument for critical thinking through critical cartography. It problematises the shortcomings of current terminology and methodologies used to analyse, classify, reflect or project spatial conditions in the design disciplines. It does not aim to produce a factual representation of territories of migration or precise visualisation of any data regarding these territories. Instead, it seeks to reformulate the modes of representation from an architectural perspective to open the present body of knowledge towards differentiation, multiplicity and complexity through multiple and multiscalar readings from a specific territory. It uses counter-mapping as a tool to understand emerging spatialities. Atlas allows acting within this area, which contains different readings of the parts of the territory, making it remarkably versatile to representing the multiple and intersecting elements that create a place. By not totalising, reducing, or alleging to be the single mode of presentation; creative, explorative, speculative and projective approach adopted in this project makes the research remain open to differentiate multiple interpretations. Therefore, it will address a crucial challenge that architecture as a discipline faces today: To adequately address the contemporary spatial challenges and conditions today, scholars should combine spatial imaginations with a critical and interdisciplinary approach through which designing becomes an integral part of the research process.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

DISPLACEMENT, BORDERING, COUNTERMAPPING, ATLAS

ABSTRACT

This research explores the emerging spatial conditions in a migrant territory heavily transformed by the bordering practices. It focuses on Turkey's two border cities, Antep and Izmir as the fields of the dispersed bordering practices and multiscalar spatial transformations in the post-2011 context. The Atlas, as the research frame, comprises a series of mappings and a conceptual matrix that enables revising the pervasive codings of mapping practices. With a consistent graphical language elaborated by deliberate editing of mappings, the Atlas's sections become interrelated readings of the territory in which the emergent complexity is beyond the representational capacity of a single map. It uses mixed techniques and cartographic variants, timelines, official statements, visual documentation and satellite imagery to render visible the spatial and scalar links between the territorial entities. It is a twofold device for its researcher and reader: methodological research and an instrument for critical thinking with a post-topological understanding of the migrant territories.

'Hidayet, my boy, the country looks like a map.'

'What do dashed, I mean, dotted lines look like, uncle Hikmet?'

'Dotted lines look like nothing. Dotted lines, as borders, reside in our borders. All along borders, the tall buildings denote the dashes, and the dots denote the watchtowers placed in between those tall buildings.'

Oğuz Atay¹

"Human beings forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination."

Vilém Flusser²

In 2015, visual artist and filmmaker Stefan Kruse Jørgensen investigated the technical production of images portraying the refugee movement towards Europe throughout the year 2015 in his short film, *The Migrating Image*. Through his inquiry, Jørgensen directs viewers' attention to how images create their own realities even before the migration occurs. Starting with the advertisements of smugglers and other facilitators posted on Facebook, the short film goes through the different points of the journey: the Mediterranean Sea through the images produced by the earth monitoring systems of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), and the images as documentation of the operations of Italian Coastguard (Marina Militare) posted on its Youtube channels. In the investigation, Jørgensen argues that the mediums being used for visualisation profoundly impacted the message delivered to the viewer. Like the images, data visualisations and maps used to construct the realities have played a dominant role in determining the visual perception. The visual statements and narratives were produced, organised, and redistributed by exclusions by selecting what to depict or not, by over-simplifying, categorising and narrating the topics they attempt to show. The fundamental challenges that penetrated the understanding of place are **geopolitical and cartographical perspectives**: the essentialist understanding of homogenous identities rooted in places, and the traditional approaches towards representing conditions although the emergent complexity is beyond the representational capacity of a single visual, image or map.



figure 1: omnipresent and recurring use of media, from the *Migrating Image*, by Stefan Kruse Jørgensen 2015

As a country bridging between the beginning and the desired end of the contemporary movements, on the other hand, **Turkey** provides a paradigmatic case to address these challenges. The recent journey of migrants from Syria has recreated this in-between zone with a wide variety of physical manifestations throughout the country whose history is already full of internal and external displacements, population exchanges, pogroms, state of emergencies.³ In the absence of legal status of refugee and up-down spatial strategies, 92% of the migrants (3,5 million people, according to official statements) in Turkey live outside the camps. They are scattered across the country, mostly in urban areas, living among the local population. Therefore, urban contexts have exhibited rationales and mechanisms of bordering practices which usually investigated at the macro levels and the edges of countries. Shifting the gaze to **urban contexts** shows that bordering is a complex process of socio-spatial distinctions within society with variations of intensity. These multiple spatialities show that migrants' will-to-move precedes a migrant territory, a fragmented, unsteady, and discontinuous one grasped by neither the traditional notions of territory nor analysing the static, fixed, and merely physical boundaries attached to it.

The visible and invisible changes in the Turkish context also show that the anxiety to cover the whole story is the main representational challenge for migrant territories. They consist of many and various spatial and temporary fragments affected by relational systems and processes. How, then, the modes of representation become operative in complex historical and socio-political context to inform migrant territories continuously redefined by them? How representing enables and gives the central role to **autonomy** and **imagination** in investigating spatial conditions instead of being part of a pre-established system of meaning? To grasp the complexities of the tangible and intangible spatial practices employed by the migrating individuals and collectives, how vocabularies and methodologies used to analyse, classify, reflect or project spatial conditions in the design disciplines can be critically reformulated? This research investigates a set of relations emerging from migrant spatial practices in a multiscalar territory instead of following linear chronological, spatial or sequential order to explore these questions. It is helpful to visit some of the artistic projects that have extended the representational agency's capacity and have helped to widen the understanding of atlas by making use of this specific genre as a critical medium. In *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Aby Warburg offers a **non-linear vision** of history with the images by transforming the cartographic and scientific notions of "atlas." Warburg aimed to explore how the themes and styles form meaning and how it creates a dynamic in-between space, a "thought-space." Such spatial constellation allows its conceptually, geographically and temporally made up content to offer an anachronistic order which can be seen as against the ascendant art historical order. Hanna Darboven's work, *Cultural History 1880-1983*, shares similarities with *Mnemosyne Atlas* regarding the interconnectedness between the materials by proposing alternative modes of classification.

Darboven brought together various materials such as postcards, photographs, magazine covers, and other graphic materials in 1,590 sheets and 19 sculptures in a strictly ordered arrangement. Unlike Warburg, Darboven ordered her materials with data-based records, cross-sum calculations based on the day's date. Gerhard Richter's ongoing *Atlas* project, which he started in 1962, on the other hand, consists of diverse visual materials from photographs to sketches, drawings and collages combined in a way that reveals a potential to orderly yet open-ended heterogeneity. What connects these works, among others, is using a specific type of "ordering" to create a visual form of knowledge. The main question lies not necessarily in the form but also in the process, gathering different materials to produce an interconnected collection. This approach requires a system, and because of its complexity laden with various types of information, that system needs a code, a self-order that offers a possible ground for its fragments; not a dictating but an open one to allow room for changes and possibilities through editing, translating and organising. An atlas, structured as such, offers that foundation to render visible the complexities by enabling multiple and critical reading of its fragments. Inspired by the artistic projects helped to widen the understanding of it by using this specific genre as a critical medium, the atlas provides a matrix in which multiplicities, complexities, relational and fragmentary aspects produce, broadly defined, a constellation.

Based on flatness in the hierarchy and spatial adjacency of heterogeneous elements, *Atlas* goes beyond the categorical fetishisms profoundly criticised in migration and citizenship studies, which are considered forms of othering. Spatial representation and spatial research concerned with the means for the production of meaning through spatial relations provides a common ground for locals residing "here and now." *Atlas* allows for working in this intersection; as an anachronistic spatial constellation, it offers that common ground including the voices of marginalised, dispossessed, oppressed in the ongoing spatial research in an era where visuality becomes a "doctrine for the preservation of authority by means of permanent surveillance of all realms of life, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of necropolitics."⁴

figure 2: Hanne Darboven, *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983 (Cultural History 1880–1983, 1980–83)* installation view, Dia:Chelsea, NY, Hanne Darboven Foundation Hamburg



Given the research topic's constant emerging complexities, this *Atlas* uses mixed techniques and cartographic variants, timelines, official statements, photographic documentation, and satellite imagery to make spatial and scalar links between territorial entities. *Atlas* is a twofold device for its researcher and reader: methodological research and an instrument for critical thinking through critical cartography based on a migrant territory.

In this scope, counter-mapping as a practice and tactic is used to explore the potentials of such a system and open space for imagining alternatives by reconsidering it from an architectural perspective. Mapping as "a representation of a social construct within a spatial and temporal frame" offers to activate further investigations that any exploration that broader objective deals with. However, mapping contains a paradox: using cartographical means and tools might produce another instrument that distorts the realities or makes the subjects hyper-visible. Thus, they should be constantly questioned, criticised, and revised to make sure they reflect the purpose in the first place. Simply because of that, there is a need to have a system that enables to question them. In this research's scope, this system will be realised through consistent visual language elaborated by deliberate editing of mappings, making the sections of the *Atlas* interrelated readings of the territory. As part of this conference, I will address the currently being-developed structure and translating the conceptual insights into analytical maps and drawings. Moving beyond observing the world to interpreting it, I will discuss how to formulate a spatial notational system for such *Atlas*, informing and transforming maps and concepts through constant confrontations.

¹ Atay O. (1973) *Tehlikeli Oyunlar* [Dangerous Games]

² Flusser V. (2000) *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion, p. 10

³ Particularly, the southeastern cities such as Hatay, Kilis, Şanlıurfa, and Gaziantep have transformed by newly built camps after 2011, de facto buffer zones between two countries. Many settlements around border gates have emerged, and 24 reception and accommodation centres have been built.

⁴ Mirzoeff N. (2011) *The Right to Look*, p 34



Unlike the widely circulating images as part of the dominant visual narrative among refugees, crossing landscapes to reach out the international borders include multiple fields and "safer" solutions, including minefields. *mayın (tr): mine (en)

figure 3: from Turkey-Syria border, 2014, photograph: Kemal Vural Tarlan