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The End and the Beginning

After every war
someone has to tidy up.
Things won't pick
themselves up, after all.

"No sound bites, no photo opportunities,
and it takes years.
All the cameras have gone
to other wars.

"Someone, broom in hand,
still remembers how it was.
Someone else listens, nodding
his unshattered head.

"Those who knew
what this was all about
must make way for those
who know little.
And less than that.
And, at last, nothing less than nothing.

Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.

The rise and fall of borders

Visible absence. That was the feeling I had when I first had the chance to look at the photos in this extraordinary book by Roger Eberhard. Almost without exception, the images show a visible presence of absence. It is as if the camera has shed light on sites of seemingly unremarkable interest, sites in which—in most cases—there is nothing extraordinary for the untrained eye to see, yet that also present the viewer with a disquieting atmosphere, as if something is not shown, or remains unseen. As the poem above tells us—which was written by the late Wisława Szymborska who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1996 for her delightful and sharp take on the transcendent fragility and elusiveness of life—it is as if the cameras have gone to other more immediately telling sites and the spectacle, the visible drama of the site that we know must have been there, has disappeared and has been exchanged for an obstinate void: the “nothing less than nothing”. It is perhaps already for this reason alone that I find the photos so incredibly intriguing. All the photographs show images of borders whose locations, or their entire meaning, have changed. They “re-present” and “re-visualize” the demise of a formerly evocative and omni-visible political *mise-en-scène* and spatial imaginary².

To visualize the fading of borders, and with such global scope as is done in this book, is an unusual and most interesting enterprise. Typically, visual representations of the world's borders in popular media and politics only show the world's current borders, and often in a vigorous manner, thereby implicitly suggesting that today's borders are the logical and potent outcome of a long history. As if there would be some kind of natural order that can be logically explained, and will remain unchanged for a long time to come. Yet, as we know, but often seem to forget—perhaps even more so in the “now culture” that we live in—the map of the world has been redrawn countless times. There are some interesting films on the Internet that show the extent to which the number of countries, and hence the current location of the world's borders, has changed throughout human history³. To watch these borders on the map alter, as time elapses from the Earth's beginnings to the present day, is like watching a choreographed dance of geographic lines. It shows the obvious, namely that global history is full of violent and “unnatural” serendipities, and that most of the temporary spatio-temporal freezings that we call borders are, in fact, fairly recent when compared to the long track of human history. What this also tells us is that we are part of the history of tomorrow, which means that the borders we deem logical or even natural and essential today will unquestionably change again in the future—which is perhaps why this is seldom alluded to in national textbooks or political speech acts. It may be a truism to say that today's map will be different from tomorrow's, but it is, arguably, a greatly underestimated fact that can help us understand the importance of human territoriality and borders. Certainly, some borders will change faster than others, but no border that was ever created by human beings has remained the same. In other words, it is not the fixing of borders and identities that is the constant factor in geopolitical history, but their perpetual change.

The visibility of borders

Looking at all the broken borders in this remarkable book, what fascinates me is precisely this: the communicative visibility of today's borders. For if there is anything that this book of former borders makes abundantly clear, it is that what helps to explain the power of an active border is that it is a spectacle and it is also meant to be one⁴. In many ways, a border should be understood as a performative sign of power, a spatial exclamation mark designed to visibly impress. Internally, it aspires to communicate and showcase safety, security and control to an electorate. And externally, a border aims to communicate the power of exclusion, to say: “keep your distance, because from here on, we are in charge and we have control over you and your belongings”.

The spectacle of the border should give the impression of a clearly identifiable entity with objective and unchangeable borders that is meant to last for eternity. Knowing, at the same time, that there is no border in history that has not disappeared, the creation of a border is hence, as philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argues in his book *Spheres*, precisely this: a big NO against the death of the nation⁵. It is a testament to the desire for eternal life: the border gate as a gate to heaven on earth. Seen in this light, a territorial border is, in fact, a faith or a belief; a border is an ideology that is believed in. A great deal of the attractiveness of the border ideology seems to be that, through such visible co-constructing and bordering of a community, especially if one has the opportunity to act as a co-maker, to have a voice, in the collective outcome and direction of the common narrative, the self gains the shelter of a meaningful, collective identity in the world. It creates a national home, a refuge with doors that can be closed, and thus a reassuring, comforting and secure distance from what is imagined to be a chaotic or hostile outside world. So, even though it is often

² Latour, B. (2012), “Introduction: Paris, invisible city: The plasma”, in *City, Culture and Society*, 3(2), pp. 91–93.

³ See, for instance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Wu0Q7x5D0>

⁴ See also Debord, G. (1967/1995), *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by D. Nichols Smith, New York: Zone Books; De Genova, N. (2013), “Spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’: The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion”, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(7), pp. 1180–1198.

⁵ Houtum van, H. (2011), “The Mask of the Border”, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by D. Wastl-Walter, Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 49–62.

realized that the nation, created and bounded by borders, is an imagined community⁶, a fantasy of the collective, and doomed to disappear, it is still seen as a necessary one by many.

Yet, what is seen as truth in one domain can be a lie in the space and/or eyes of an Other⁷. And whatever conventional reality exists in one's own domain may be a doomed image or fantasy in the domains and/or eyes of the Other. It implies that the constitution of a shared space – with a shared narrative, and fantasy, and a shared truth – may create an immediate satisfaction, and temporarily fill an existential void or emptiness in us, but, as our interaction with others is inherently dynamic, the consequence is a never-ending desire for appropriation and control of one's own truth.

Maybe it is precisely because of this dependency on persistent symbolic and discursive communication that borders are often landmarked with great morphological and spectacular presence. Clearly, this visibility strategy is successful. Because the borders that uphold the national temple are a favorite object of admiration, curiosity, worry and anxiety and thus an attention-grabbing spectacle that attracts media stories and camera clicks. In some cases, photography is not allowed, which only serves to increase the holy power, secrecy and anxiety that these socially constructed lines drawn in the sand provoke. Interestingly, although there is no ur-border in terms of its morphological appearance or imaginary status – a wall, a gate, a door, a tree, a river, a line in the sand can all be borders – borders often seem to be built in the same recognizable form and shape: as thick walls or spiky fences. It is as if a secret, universal agreement had been made to decide what a border should look like and how it should be built, notwithstanding its actual effectiveness, namely as tough and potent obstructions that evoke classic images of mighty fortresses and castles.

At the same time, the photos of these broken borders are also a good reminder of how we train our eyes perhaps too much on the spectacle and physical materiality of borders – the fences and the walls – and on the discursive and often violent practices and meanings that occur at or are attached to borders. In many ways, this is understandable. Our time is witnessing an exponential growth in the number of border walls, something that indeed demands a thorough academic investigation and explanation. In this age of globalization, shifting borders, rising conflicts and migration there seems to be much longing to nostalgia for the imagined loss of shared values and norms, and much emphasis on the control and protection of borders. Loud calls for "thick and beautiful walls", or claims that ever-higher walls are needed to protect "ourselves", no matter whether they are effective or not, often come across as clear and attractive electoral messages to many.

Yet, what this zooming in on the material manifestations – which often coincides with rhetorical blasts by populist leaders – does not show, is the much more latent and invisible paper reality of visa borders, that are not guarded by men with guns but by bureaucrats with pencils. It is these paper borders that help sustain a powerful feudal inequality in the mobility of human beings. Clearly, some passports are more equal than others. So, it is in these mundane embassies that most of the actual border violence takes place. For this is where people are being discriminated against on the basis of a lottery of birth and condemned to journeys of life and death even, paradoxically, when they wish to seek refuge. The toughest borders on this planet are thus not made of iron fences or concrete walls, but made of paper, created and decided upon in ordinary offices of embassies across the world, far away from the media's zoom lens and the populist eye of political leaders.

The end and a new beginning

In sum, what this wonderful photo book shows is a collection of remnants, the ruins of former sturdy border spectacles, dramatic mise-en-scènes, territorial temples that people believed in and possibly even fought for, and perhaps others were killed at in the attempt to cross them. Clearly, that violence has left the scene. To travel back in time, to look away from the border spectacles of today and, instead, look at the leftovers of a spectacle that was, is a remarkable and interesting move by the photographer. In doing so, he shines new light on these spaces that were once, but no longer are, in the spotlight. Interestingly, what he does is cast a double gaze: he uses his lens to zoom in on a window on the world that was once so meaningful to people, and thereby reframes, literally so, the old frame. The result is a refreshing light that is shed on the often taken-for-granted essentialization and normalization of borders in our hectic everyday lives. The photos visualize and make clear how normal it is for borders to be created, but also for them to disappear again, too.

And so, to end, the photos also make one realize that borders indeed are human constructs, not natural, nor eternal. And that new meanings and new beginnings are always on the horizon. Or, as Szymborska suggests in her poem, every border inherently covers different layers of worlds that are now past and allows for blue-sky imaginings of new and other worlds that are possible:

“Someone has to lie there
in the grass that covers up
the causes and effects
with a cornstalk in his teeth,
gawking at clouds.

⁶ Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

⁷ Houtum van, H. (2011), “The mask of the border”, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by D. Wastl-Walter, Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 49–62.