

Houtum, H. van (2020), The rise and fall of borders, in: Eberhard R., [Human Territoriality](#), Patrick Frey: Zurich, pp 7-9

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## The rise and fall of borders

**Henk van Houtum**

### *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.*

**Wisława Szymborska,**

*View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995*

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 were 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 ironic 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 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 imaginary.

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, thereby implicitly suggesting that today’s borders are the logical and inevitable 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. This persistent illusion is impressively visualized and envisioned by the photographs in this book. Of course, because of their contemporariness, the images only scratch the surface in terms of the multiple layers of borders that will have been created in the places that were photographed.<sup>1</sup> 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 history.<sup>2</sup> 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”

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<sup>1</sup> Latour, B. 2012. “Introduction: Paris, invisible city: The plasma.” In *City, Culture and Society*, 3(2), pp.91-93.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6Wu0Q7x5D0>

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 the fact that they constantly change.

### **The border as spectacle**

Looking at all the broken borders in this remarkable book, what fascinates me is precisely this: the spectacularism of borders. For if there is anything that this book makes abundantly clear, it is that the power of borders can partly be explained by the fact that borders are a spectacle, and that they are meant to be a spectacle.<sup>3</sup> A border is, after all, a performative sign of power, a spatial strategy that, internally, aspires to communicate and showcase safety, security and control to an electorate. 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”. Even though it is often realized that the nation, created and bounded by borders, is an imagined community,<sup>4</sup> a fantasy of the collective, it is still seen as a necessary one. It is through the bordered community that the self gains a collective value. One becomes part of a powerful and meaningful national narrative; one gains a national belonging, a meaningful identity in the world. Constructing and bordering the 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, feeds into the desire to have spatial beacons and priorities in daily life. A border provides a lens, a perspective on the world. It creates a national home, a refuge

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<sup>3</sup> See also Debord, G. 1967/1995. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Nicholson-Smith, D. New York: Zone Books; De Genova, N. 2013. “Spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’: The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion”. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(7), pp.1180-1198.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

with doors that can be closed, and thus a reassuring, comforting and secure distance from what is perceived to be a chaotic or hostile outside world.

Yet, what is seen as truth in one domain can be a lie in the space and/or eyes of an Other.<sup>5</sup> 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. This implies that the constitution of a shared space – with a shared narrative, and fantasy, and a shared truth – may create an immediate satisfaction, or 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.

This may help to explain why, in this age of globalization, shifting borders and migration, there is so much longing to nostalgia for the imagined loss of shared values and norms, and why there is so much emphasis on the control and protection of borders. To many, the openness feels as an intruder. It clouds and troubles the comfortable mental b/ordering of the world and imagined purity of one's own (comm)unity. Helping to uphold the borders of the nation – be it in active terms, such as the reporting or co-arresting of unwanted border crossers by American civilian groupings in the borderland of Mexico–United States, or the fanatical cheering of the national football team, or, in more passive terms, such as the accepting of restrictive border controls or the accepting of civic integration examinations for immigrants – maintains and reproduces a national ordering and purification.<sup>6</sup>

### **Borders as temples**

Maybe precisely because of their dependency on persistent symbolic and discursive communication, borders are often landmarked with great morphological and spectacular presence. Put differently, a border is, in many ways, a spatial exclamation mark designed to visibly impress. The spectacle of the border should give the impression of a clearly identifiable entity with objective and unchangeable borders that are 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

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<sup>5</sup> Houtum van, H. 2011. "The mask of the border". In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Wastl-Walter, D. Farnham, UK: Ashgate. pp.49-62.

<sup>6</sup> Van Houtum, H., and van Naerssen, T. 2002. "Bordering, Ordering and Othering". *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* (TESG), 93(2), pp.125-36.

against the death of the nation.<sup>7</sup> 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, with the walls and pillars acting as the fundament of one's own temple. This may explain why the supports that uphold this 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 lines drawn in the sand provoke. This performative aspect is perhaps also why 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. But 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 – these can all be borders. A border has no original model, it is a simulation of a model. It is, as the French philosopher Baudrillard would argue, a simulacrum, a manifestation of a copy, but with its own reality. This also means that the form and shape of a border does not necessarily equal the influence of that border. Obviously, the Berlin Wall was more difficult to cross by foot, car or bike than an average linguistic border, but the influence of the material reality of the border is independent of the force and interpretation of the border. It is the symbolic meaning attributed to the appearance of the line which must be seen as constructor of the normative form. This makes clear why declarations such as the promise to build a “thick and beautiful wall”, or that ever-higher walls are needed to protect ourselves, no matter whether they are effective or not, are often used as clear and attractive electoral messages. And that a border will have an impact, not just on the physical landscape in which the visibly striking border is placed, but also on the mental landscapes and horizons of people who find themselves either side of this border. Perhaps this is also why the border landscape, once the border has no function anymore, is also so visibly absent.

### **The end and a new beginning**

Hence, what we are in fact looking at in this wonderful photo book is a collection of remnants, the ruins of former border spectacles, territorial temples that people believed in, and possibly even died for. Clearly, that violence has left the scene. To travel back in time, to look away

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<sup>7</sup> Houtum van, H. 2011. “The Mask of the Border”. In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Wastl-Walter, D. Farnham, UK: Ashgate. pp.49-62.

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. Without nostalgia, he fixes and freezes the fluidity of time itself. 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 how easily they can disappear, too.

In addition, the photos are 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. We are all children of our time, of today's politics. And our time is witnessing an exponential growth in the number of border walls, something that indeed demands a thorough academic investigation and explanation. Yet, what this zooming in on the material manifestations does not show – which also often coincides with rhetorical blasts by populist leaders – is the often-invisible paper reality of visa borders, created and decided upon in murky offices of embassies across the world, far away from the media's zoom lens and the populist eye of political leaders. And 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 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. Such borders are not guarded by men with guns but by bureaucrats with pencils. This realization, added to the normalization of change of borders, be it physical or paper, casts a different light on the ruins of border spectacles. What is left, is more than only a less of more visible past of a violent and dramatic ending of a territory. And so, to end, for me, the photos also demonstrate new openings. New beginnings. Visible absence as a chance for new meanings, or a borderscape that is, as Szymborska put it, open to new and, hopefully, less violent and serene imaginings:

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*Someone has to lie there*

*in the grass that covers up  
the causes and effects  
with a cornstalk in his teeth,  
gawking at clouds.*