

Visual Images of Framing Borders from Migration to Pandemic Crises

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Representations of critical geography and border studies have developed concepts and methodologies for exploring the multifaceted and contradictory image of contemporary borders. Artists, scholars and social activists show increased interest in the narrative and visual documenting of border's closures. The border's visibility becomes a supporting argument for dissent and protest, giving the 'visual evidence' of the extremely quick border's re-territoriality. As a result, important events allow one 'to extract sameness even from what is unique' (W. Benjamin). The mass migration and the pandemic return us to the reality of the human world with their non-freedom and illness. In the migration case, Europe has dealt with an 'alien body', and in the pandemic, with an 'infected or sick body'. The relationship between the image and the viewer is an important starting point in the representation of mass migration and pandemic. Mitchell's metaphor of 'live images' help us better understand the sense and reasons of new biological and politic events. Nowadays, the development, materialisation, and embodiment of European borders are the stable visual symbol of our existence.

Keywords: activism, border, crisis, pandemic, protest, re-territorialisation, visual evidence

INTRODUCTION OR TWO VISUALITIES IN THE CRISIS TIME

To artists, border is not just a physical reality imposed on the landscape by political forces, but also a subject for imagination and creativity, representation and visualisation. Presentation of migration, refugees, growing new ethnic and religious communities and the pandemic is important for visual arts. Our task is to discuss the correlativeness between the new form of city bordering and their materialised visual image, to reflect the balance between claims of difference and sameness and the dynamics between dominant perceptions and refugees' self-representations. Methods from humanities, social and cultural sciences give us access to the analysis of the image. We look at visualisation as the practice and a powerful vehicle for developing and deconstructing so quickly changing reality. Images, if they convey a message, are doing much more successfully in the explanation of borders events and their interpretation. If the image refers to the current important social narratives such as pandemics and migration, it resurrects previously existing fears and influences future expectations. Whereby the image becomes filled with a content, it appears close and real. The motto 'visual turn' was used to analyse images and to find their place in social reality, culture, and art variety.

The new image of border sporadic change starts to be visible in the second decade of the 21st century. Postmodern art intuitively felt a process towards strengthening the borders which were previously weakened and reflected it. The subject of borders, refugees, security and humanism became popular and visible in museum and gallery activity.

The mass migration crisis and the visual border image create a wider puncture of migration as such and show its new characteristics. Migration starts to be an important philosophical and sociological site, the historical constant, and it influenced and relativised such entities as civilization, race, ethnicity security and border.

During the last ten years, humanity has observed the three general faces of the crisis: the pandemics (2020–2022), war in Ukraine (2022) and two waves of mass migration of people (2015–2017 and 2022). Two of them have developed on the ground of deep ecological crises. All of them became a symbol of crises and future catastrophes. In many researchers' opinion, biotechnology is not just a brand-new technology. COVID-19 expresses a certain new understanding of many standard conclusions about the healthcare system, border scenario, sense of social protest, style of job and education, the deepest level of isolation and distance. From another side, philosophical futurological pessimism underlines a new sense of such definitions as 'human' and 'bare life'. All humanity's experience over the last years actualised such M. Foucault's and G. Agamben's definitions as 'the permanent state of exception', 'the bare life' and 'biopolitical paradigm'.

A necessity for more pluralised or sometimes alternative views about the place of borders in postmodern life became visible. N. Vaughan-Williams finds that the above meaning 'offers significant, yet untapped, implications for analyzing borders across a global bio-political terrain' (Vaughan-Williams 2009: 733). At the same time, destroying barriers between the sciences and the humanities, narrative and visual art mass migration and the pandemics increasingly have come to offer a new vocabulary and an innovative conceptual framework for human identity and sociality.

Nowadays, the global capital and the new immigrant workforce are two major actors of the transnational expansion that each of them cross borders internally, and find themselves in contestation with each other inside global centers. In a global context of fear and uncertainty, borders as such may generate an emotion of protection, stability, and a desperate need to regain legitimacy and trust to them. In the situation of the mass migration and pandemic crisis, appeal to borders as powerful symbols of political order and stability intensified on our eyes.

What is common between a situation on the borders during the mass migration and pandemic? The choosing answer opens the door to different ways of the struggle with pandemics. But the objects of restriction are different: mass migration has a problem with an 'alien body'. The own 'infected sick body' has 'greatly divided' state citizens and foreigners. Nevertheless, both start to be the object of re-examining the idea and image of home, community and territory in the context of global media and communication.

The pandemic situation due to COVID-19 has slowed down many activities, including artists' work: closed museums and art galleries, minimised cultural intercommunication. But with efforts and creativity, it shall not be a serious obstacle. The artifacts in the form of street murals and posters are the richness of the dominant visual elements as objects in the work, in addition to idioms and objects that support its delivery visually. At the same time, the activation of visual creativity is supported by two psychological emotions: the need of an artist himself to overcome the fear, loneliness, and the desire to overcome the feeling unpredictability of both personal and collective future. For street artists, it was a possibility through art images to

help themselves and the viewer to feel that they are not alone with their own fear, loneliness, and nostalgia about past normality.

'THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY'

The new pandemic reality has created many new borders inside the EU and simultaneously become the chance to change the relation of the EU states regarding such problems as asylum and irregular migration. This chance is unstable and depends on many concrete socio-economic events and possible new migration and pandemic dynamics. Nevertheless, people try to create their own maps and depict the enduring changes that the pandemic has wrought on our physical and mental landscapes, to chart their psychological topography. We are witnesses of growing interest to the map in a non-traditional sense. 'The map is not a real description of the place, but an imaginary representation of the places I love', wrote one of the mapmakers. The labyrinth of cartographic postmodern strategies reflects this metamorphosis of cartography and argues that the ongoing reworking of the map renders it a performative metaphor of the 21st century.

This process was sporadically started by Alfred Korzybski, an early 20th-century semantics scientist and philosopher who stated and explained why the map is not the territory. He believed that individuals do not have the absolute knowledge of reality and, as a result, they have only a set of beliefs grounded up far from it. People's imagination about reality and their maps is not reality itself. The map is an example of one of the simplest and more popular visualisations of territory.

In long years of peaceful Europe until the war in Ukraine, we mostly looked on the map not from the view of state territory but as a source for new multilevel, pragmatic information of ecological, migration and pandemic changes, the moving status of borders, concerts, sports arenas, and others. Someone looks on the map as the way to observe and describe territory, another reads the map as a key to the understanding of the intentions of those who produced the image of the world. Supporters of the last opinion think that such an approach does not consider a map as a representation for some reason. The map as such has no authorship and it reflects only a figurative representation and has no semantic content.

In the famous book *The Map is not the Territory. The Territory is You* M. de Souza wrote that all our life we are struggling to tell the difference between the map and territory. He invited readers to the journey in the end of which 'you understand the metaphor that "the map is not the territory, the territory is you", surely your self-awareness will be different from the one you are able to achieve today' (De Souza 2020: 33). Nevertheless, this personalised approach does not give us an answer to the important question: how does this visualisation represent those power relations without that border? In the view of B. Siegert, 'the map is the territory. In this case this means that as the materiality of the map interferes with its contents, and as the medium of representation interferes with the representation of the territory, the map as a representation is deterritorialized by the map as a medium' (Siegert 2011: 16). Analysing such definitions as simulacra and simulation Baudrillard believes that in this case we try to find the difference between the map and territory. According to him, contemporary society lives through different kinds of models and maps. As a result, it just lost a contact with the reality of the world that preceded the map. The importance of the map generates a new trend that has merely begun to imitate the model: 'Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes

the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory’ (Baudrillard 1994: 1). He concluded that the contemporary visibility acts through the circulation of images and ways of seeing and being seen. Baudrillard used the metaphor that the map preceding the territory is the map that engenders the territory.

E. Said argued that ‘maps are instruments of conquest’ and they are ‘first drawn only by the victors’. In this sense ‘geography can be the art of resistance’. Both prepared a theoretical explanation of the border instability and porosity in the historical context. For them, in the case of any kind of border, the map has only illustrative function and reflects mostly the political reality. In the beginning of the 21st century, ‘this dialectical process means that there exist simultaneous conditions for the opening up of any borders, as well as for the closing down in order to ensure the security of those flows through control and filtering’ (Szary 2017: 18).

PLACE AND NON-PLACE: SAMENESS AND UNIQUE

The meaning of *non-places* (factories, department stores, sport complexes, airports, railway stations, etc.) during many years was an example of absence and denial of cultural references. In the pandemic the value of these closed non-places radically changed and acquired a positive social dimension, becoming a symbol of the freedom of movement, communication and choice of human activity. In the pandemic time, the visualisation of borders gives a sense of the emotive image and opens its expressive, symbolic, or affective dimensions.

During the crisis, non-space begins to acquire new meanings, and starts to have the status of values and this temporality may become the commons of the future. ‘If the paradigm spaces of neoliberalism were non-places, like airports, malls and amusement parks, the space of disjuncture is the concrete park where sitting is not allowed, the side of the road where there is nowhere for people to walk, the subway station with no elevator and all those other notionally public spaces that are no one’s land’ (Mirzoeff 2020: 12).

N. Mirzoeff in his essay *Notes from the Necropolis* showing a bright pessimistic image of New York City, used the meanings *necropolis* and *non-place* as synonymous. He admits that the city which was the capital of the 20th century now looks like the memorial to the spectacular incompetence. He names it ‘the new necropolis’, ‘the city of the dead’ where a new spatial, visual image of the death formatted. ‘*Density is destiny*’. The coronavirus first afflicted the cities that are international megapolis and capitals in most countries in the world. New York is a more famous case of a ‘dying from globalization city’, which through decades ignored human infrastructure in favour of networked communications.

For Mirzoeff ‘the signature creations of the world-city were the blue-glassed supertall buildings that have sprouted in the past decades, where the super-wealthy were already self-isolating as a lifestyle and the epidemic has spread fastest in the structures built to warehouse people, above all places for older people and prisons’ (Mirzoeff 2020). He summarises the situation: ‘the point is not to escape the necropolis; the point is to change it’ (Mirzoeff 2020).

EMANCIPATIVE POTENTIALITY OF VISUALITY AND THE AESTHETICISATION OF THE GLOBAL PROTEST

According to R. Barthes, image and text are not very different; a word already creates a visual image with the condition that the social context is known. The visualization process uses metaphor theory as an important part of the thinking and interpretation process and as a mirroring way of narrative. For example, during the pandemic such short phrases as ‘Stay home’,

‘Keep distance’, ‘Science is our exit strategy’, ‘Be safe, be smart, be kind’, ‘The pandemic reinforces what we already know’ or ‘Black lives matter’ start to be a word which creates and enhances every optical image. Metaphors translate the visual into language and *vice versa*.

Visuality as such includes three types of potential acting: political dissent, art activism, and the formation of visual communities. With the help of visuality were created such innovative acting functions as supporting voices of dissent, the circulation of ‘visual evidence’, and creation of the ‘imagined’ community as a new cohort of social actors.

A famous example of such forms of visual communities is Banksy’s graffiti and most of them begin to be the visual symbols of pandemics. Banksy impacted the creation of a positive image, first of all, the nurses and healthcare workers as the real pandemic heroes. In the pandemics times his mural ‘Super Nurse!’ became one of more popular symbols of human care. The Banksy’s newest piece of street art is the iconic illustration of Cosette from *Les Misérables*. Using such details as the yellowy tears running from her eyes, and gas clouding her body, Banksy dedicates this symbolic image for those forgotten and weak, who are socially defenseless. At the same time, it contains protest against the treatment of immigrants and the dangers of xenophobia. The fact that Banksy uses the QR code really caught every eye and makes us thinking about how it really can work, using the connection between streets public and something genuinely interesting, astonished, unexpected and important.

Digital photography and the QR code show us a way of the mass replication of something that has social slogans and visual images connected with human emotions. A theoretic of visual art S. E. Jones wrote in ‘The Emergence of the Digital Humanities’ that Banksy’s QR code connects the viewer with media news feed and shows the same event that he presents. The technics of overlays art on reality or painting on video image make a close connection between the viewer, artist and the frightening pandemic and migration reality. ‘This multi-medial and multiexperiential film witnesses a few, harrowing minutes in the lives of people just 100 miles away from London. In a strange way, Banksy’s painting makes this live footage become “real”, rather than the other way around’ (Jones 2016). The Banksy’s case is an example that it is not only material cultural artefacts for the viewer. It is the way how such images interact with the ‘pictures in our heads’ (Lippmann 1922).

These mental images guide how we see the world and how we place ourselves within social spaces. Derrida’s theory of absence suggests that completeness or perfection is not achievement. There are many cases of street art or graffiti with minimum artistic techniques. ‘The absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognizable forms of presence can have. Social relations are performed not only around what is there but sometimes also around the presence of what is not. Indeed, the category of absence can have a significance presence in social relations and in material culture’ (Hetherington 2004: 159). On the ground of many social processes during the last two years the category of absence has started to be more popular from the reason of negation of such reality as the pandemic COVID-19 or the necessity of vaccination. In the pandemic, the absentness of something developed to the kaleidoscope of different protest movement and events. Emancipative potentiality of visuality helps to see what the nature of these changes is and its political implications associated with them.

M. Stocchetti’s motto that visualisation leaves a place for imagination starts to be the keyword for visual art researchers. Using V. Mosco’s central myths Stocchetti puts in this list additional three new myths which are obvious today: the myth of the ‘power’ of images, the myth of the visual community and the myth of the digital revolution. Following this idea, Stocchetti told that *to change the world, one should first change the way we look at it* (Stocchetti 2014).

Nowadays in the pandemic grey everyday life we found that a new round of the aestheticisation of political and social protest becomes more visible. J. Aulich describes this relationship as 'the aesthetic form of the protest in the present' and 'the aesthetic of the trace of media'. For him, the 'phenomenon' and its 'image' are in an entangled relationship (Aulich 2019: 272–273). The migration and pandemic crises immediately became the platform for art protest and should be designed and aestheticised.

What are the subjects of epidemic protest through 2019–2021 years? The pandemics destroyed all kind of consumption (art, food, fashion, music, tourism), restrictions for minimum local movement, closure state and local borders, civic space, interpersonal communication excluding family ties, compulsory wearing of masks and social distancing, job closures and mass unemployment. Through the global protest trackers in 2021, we underline only that what is mostly connected with the pandemic: coronavirus restrictions, lockdown, health, and protest against vaccination.

Street artists often use public information and reflect them. In this sense street art acts as a product, result and significant media part. The street art becomes a platform of the public opinion about the pandemic. Its advantage is the absence of any control and permission to be expressed. The source for street artists is mostly not only artistic fantasy but information and real stories. Street art becomes to be a part of the opinions about the pandemic, migration crises and refugees. Street artists often show something that potentially might be excluded from the official narrative. Social activism of an artist in the time of pandemic helps to show the widely accepted and popular opinions. T. Mitman rightly emphasises that 'during pandemics the spirit of the Bakhtin carnival as the event that is felt into street art and also important as it creates a sense of the hope, belief in the better future and carnivalesque' (Mitman 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The emancipatory potential of visuality becomes the 'visual evidence' of a new reality. Its function is to create the image of new normality and reflects it through media context. Using methodological approach gives the explanation of how visual communication builds a relationship between the artist, image and viewer.

The difficult condition of pandemics, mass migration and war in Ukraine makes visible a new tendency: borders start to generate the emotions of protection, stability and trust to them. The appeal to borders as powerful symbols of political order, security and stability has intensified in our eyes.

The non-space has started to gain an important value and these temporality tendencies may become the commons of the future. The map function has become much more illustrative and obviously represents not the territory but the political condition of existence.

The general similarity between a situation on the borders during the mass migration, pandemic and the war in Ukraine is the reterritorialisation. The objects of restriction are different and sometimes multidimension. The contemporary visualisation of protest acts through the circulation of images and aspiration to see and be seen.

Received 12 May 2022

Accepted 7 July 2022

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Sienų vizualizacija: nuo masinės migracijos iki pandeminės krizės

Santrauka

Kritinę geografiją ir sienas nagrinėjantys mokslininkai sukūrė koncepcijas ir metodologiją, kaip tyrinėti daugialypį ir prieštarinę šiuolaikinių sienų įvaizdį. Menininkai, tyrinėtojai ir visuomenės aktyvistai vis labiau domisi naratyviniu ir vizualiu sienų uždarymo dokumentavimu. Sienos vizualumas tampa esminiu argumentu nesutarimams ir protestui, kuris suteikia „vizualinį įrodymą“ apie itin greitą sienos reteritorializavimą. Todėl svarbūs įvykiai leidžia „išgauti vienodumą net iš to, kas unikalų“ (W. Benjaminas). Masinė migracija ir pandemija grąžina mus į žmonijos pasaulio tikrovę, kurioje egzistuoja nelaisvė ir ligos. Migracijos atveju Europa susidūrė su „svetimu kūnu“, pandemijos atveju – su „užkrėstu ar sergančiu kūnu“. Atvaizdo ir žiūrovo santykis yra svarbus atspirties taškas reprezentuojant masinę migraciją ir pandemiją. W. J. T. Mitchello „gyvų vaizdų“ metafora padeda geriau suprasti naujų biologinių bei politinių įvykių prasmę ir priežastis. Šiandien Europos sienų raida, materializacija ir įsikūnijimas yra stabilus vizualinis mūsų egzistencijos simbolis.

Raktažodžiai: aktyvizmas, siena, krizė, vizualumas, pandemija, protestas, vaizdiniai įrodymai