

SHAPING THE BORDER AREA

BY JENS KASTNER

“In the beginning all the world was America.” John Locke, *The Two Treatises of Government* (1690)

The control of migration knows no limits. The satellite surveillance system that was announced by the Spanish defense ministry in April 2007 should be up and running by 2010. Both new satellites monitor the entire territory of the Spanish state as well as northern Africa. They are being installed to improve the fight against illegal immigration. The ministry, by its own admission, is set to pay an estimated 325 million Euros for the control and observation of its borders from outer space. ⁽¹⁾ It is not only the fences of the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla that are a disputed territory. The description of the border itself is already being fought over. The way this sense of order is described not only portrays this, but it itself intervenes. It uncovers blind spots or conceals them again, makes objects of human beings or tries to defy this dis-subjectification.

Over the last few years, the sea between the African mainland and the Canary Islands, the Strait of Gibraltar as well as the border fences around the Spanish cities on the African continent have increasingly been the subject of both media and political interest. In this border area the number of human dramas and the effort that goes into surveillance measures seem to intensify one another continually: after the control measures on the Moroccan coast were stepped up, many refugee boats are now setting sail from the shores of Mauretania or Senegal. According to official estimates only 40 per cent of them reach their destination. Nevertheless, between the beginning of 2006 and the end of June of the same year, 11,000 people who took that route were seized both on and in the waters around the Canary Islands. ⁽²⁾ Several Human Rights and Refugee Aid Organisations estimate that from the beginning of the '90s up until 2004 between 12,000 and 14,000 people lost their lives in this stretch of water attempting to reach Spain and with it the European Union. It is for this reason that Helmut Dietrich of the Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht und Migration (FFM, Research Association for Migration) in Berlin refers to the Strait of Gibraltar as the “biggest mass grave of post-war Europe”. ⁽³⁾

However, in describing the border simply as a static line that hundred of thousands fail to cross each year you are also restricting the perception of it. Firstly, you reduce the many individuals who constantly try to get across that border to a mass of passive victims. Secondly, you lose sight of the complex dynamics of situations that are shaped not only by people who drown or are stranded at the border fence but also those who are exploited on fruit and vegetable plantations or as servants or sex workers. The multiple consequences of this migration not only consist of tales of repres-

(1) SEE JUNGLE WORLD, NR. 15, BERLIN, 11.04.2007, P.7. (2) SEE KREIENBRINK, AXEL 2006: SPANIEN. VOM AUSWANDERUNGSLAND ZUM EINWANDERUNGSLAND, IN: MIGRATION RESEARCH GROUP (MRG), HAMBURGISCHES WELTWIRTSCHAFTSINSTITUT (HWWI) (ED.): FOCUS MIGRATION, NR. 6, LÄNDERPROFIL SPANIEN, HAMBURG, OKTOBER 2006, [HTTP://WWW.FOCUS-MIGRATION.DE/TYP03_UPLOAD/GROUPS/3/FOCUS_MIGRATION_PUBLIKATIONEN/LAENDERPROFILE/LP_06_SPANIEN.PDF](http://www.focus-migration.de/typo3_upload/groups/3/focus_migration_publicationen/laenderprofile/lp_06_spaien.pdf) (3) DIETRICH, HELMUT 2005: DAS MITTELMEER ALS NEUER RAUM DER ABSCHRECKUNG. FLÜCHTLINGE UND MIGRANTINNEN AN DER SÜDLICHEN EU-AUSSENGRENZE, IN: [HTTP://WWW.FFM-BERLIN.DE/MITTELMEER.HTML](http://www.ffm-berlin.de/mittelmeer.html), 24.04.2007 (4) SEE N.N.: MIGRATION UND DAS GESCHÄFT MIT DER ARMUT, IN: LE MONDE DIPLOMATIQUE (ED.): ATLAS DER GLOBALISIERUNG. DIE NEUEN DATEN UND FAKTEN ZUR LAGE DER WELT, BERLIN 2006, TAZ VERLAG, P.78-79, P.79. SEEN IN THIS WAY, REFUGEES ARE NOT MERELY “HUMAN WASTE, WITH NO USEFUL FUNCTION TO PLAY IN THE PLACE THEY ARRIVE IN AND WHERE THEY

sion: it is not uncommon that the possibility of employing a nanny enables Spanish women to start working again. The fact that this emancipation of Spanish middle class women happens at the expense of migrant women in the end confirms that they actively participate in shaping the border territory (on the side of the target country), even if it is not deliberate. Another form of structuring comes from money transfers from working migrants to their relatives in their home countries, which often gives them a small piece of dignity. These money transfers gain importance in a world that increasingly opens up barriers for commodities and capital while more frequently closing them for human beings. The global value of those transfers rose between 1999 and 2005 from 70 to 230 billion US dollars. (4)

Whenever artistic practices intervene in this border area, they normally tend not to produce images of the existing reality. In terms of an empowering reading of the observation as well as of the subject, the artistic output in the border areas can be seen as a form of “visual politics” (Beatrice von Bismarck). This does not merely represent, but rather “sets the specific place with its characteristics and functions in motion.” (5) In applying this approach, artistic practices are not simply ennobled by attributing to them an effectiveness that far transcends the world of art. The actual players of migration are also perceived as subjects. Using the example of her own work as a filmmaker at the border of southern Spain and northern Morocco, Ursula Biemann describes how new “deeply intertwined microgeographies” emerge when observing concrete migration. (6) In comparison to the media coverage that is biased as a result of national political debates and the paradigm of the threatened “Fortress Europe”, artistic “Grenzbespielungen” (“performances of the border”, Beatrice von Bismarck) may be able to “cultivate an alternative imaginary sphere [...] that is based upon translocal existences and transformative cultural practices.” (7) Addressing the border area artistically can contribute to the development of the “specific scene of revelation” that, according to Jacques Rancière, is crucial for the emergence of the political sphere. (8) Art is becoming political in the sense that it visualises something that was, due to its lack of place, invisible and renders something audible that was soundless or simply noise before. In this way, the otherwise objectified human beings are intended for what Rancière called “the part of those who have no part”. (9)

Those who have no part, the migrant part of what Zygmunt Bauman describes as “human waste”, do not regroup and operate solely within the border areas in the southern part of the European Union. Indeed, society consists of numerous divisions that are not necessarily mirrored in political institutional forms: divisions of systems or political blocs, of status, of wealth and of class, ethnic and gender divisions. What these divisions have in common is that they become most apparent in relation to the geographical and social space they surround. Borders always have a shifting

TEMPORARILY STAY, AND WITH NO INTENTION OR REALISTIC PROSPECTS OF ASSIMILATION AND INCORPORATION INTO THE NEW SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT; [...]” BAUMAN, ZYGMUNT 2004: WASTED LIVES. MODERNITY AND ITS OUTCASTS, CAMBRIDGE, POLITY PRESS, P. 66. (5) VON BISMARCK, BEATRICE 2005: GRENZBESPIELUNGEN. VISUELLE POLITIK IN DER ÜBERGANGSZONE. EINE EINLEITUNG, IN: IBID. (ED.): GRENZBESPIELUNGEN. VISUELLE POLITIK IN DER ÜBERGANGSZONE, COLOGNE, VERLAG DER BUCHHANDLUNG WALTHER KÖNIG, P. 7–12, P. 11. (6) BIEMANN, URSULA 2005: VIDEOGEOGRAPHIEN, IN: IBID., P. 61–79, P. 63. (7) IBID., P. 68. (8) RANCIÈRE, JACQUES 1998: DISAGREEMENT. POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY, MINNEAPOLIS, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, P. 25. (9) IBID., P. 30. (10) BECKER, JOACHIM AND KOMLOSV, ANDREA: GRENZEN UND RÄUME – FORMEN UND WANDEL. GRENZTYPEN VON DER STADTMAUER BIS ZUM “EISERNEN VORHANG”, IN: IBID. (ED.): GRENZEN WELTWEIT. ZONEN, LINIEN, MAUERN IM HISTORISCHEN VERGLEICH, VIENNA 2004, PROMEDIA VERLAG, P. 21–54, P. 46.

relationship with the space – be it political, economical or cultural – that is in turn created by social action. Perhaps they not only form a relationship of reciprocal dependance, but also constitute a space themselves, a complex “relationship of place-human-movement” (Biemann) that is acted out in a performative way. In any case, it is not only the borders of political units that are modifiable and have been, as a result of internal and external balances of power, modified time and time again. However, there seems to be one main reason for the dispute about the course and the establishment of borders: border conflicts, according to Joachim Becker’s and Andrea Komlosy’s typological and chronological analysis of borders, are ignited primarily by questions about in- and exclusion over the “use of material resources”. (10)

That is why territory borders, particularly state borders, have especially extensive and far-reaching functions. The state created both the preconditions for the dissemination of wage labour and the discharge of labour, and a standardisation of space brought about by a legal and cultural standardisation. These homogenisations are not solely about work discipline and abiding by the law. Ultimately, the guarantee of a whole conglomeration of privileged, middle-class ways of living is at stake. The simple fact that the exclusions and repressions of one go hand in hand with the privileges of the other explains the stability and longevity of this way of organising border spaces. In academic research this connection results increasingly in linking migration and tourism in a plausible way (11): the increasingly rigid border regulations of the external borders of the European Union and the US go hand in hand with the “open passenger traffic” for their respective citizens. (12) Given that privileges are also not static, those who have the right to them could therefore change or go missing. So it becomes clear that issues concerning territories and borders are always issues concerning power and authority: about disputed territories that are attacked and defended, undermined and crossed or consolidated and stabilised by various means. Even if single acts of solidarity between tourists and boat people occur on the Canary Islands, they remain primarily the “waste of a world [...] that is committed to serving the tourist.” (13) The way the border spaces are shaped is based upon the interest and demands of “tourists” (understood according to Bauman’s as a way of life), and upon the existing distribution structures of symbolic and material goods. The afore-mentioned satellites serve as their safeguard, which is why they are meant to be used – alongside their main purpose as to guard against refugees – to fight forest fires, other natural disasters and, needless to say, terrorism. In the face of surveillance structuring the space, the “space-generating potential of images” (14) – especially in relation to artistic production – is, however, shrinking to a rather small extent. (15)

John Locke, the Enlightenment philosopher, regarded the unlimited vastness identified with “America” as a space that had to be simultaneously shaped and controlled. It was in “America” that the

(11) SEE BAUMAN, ZYGMUNT 1996: GLOKALISIERUNG ODER WAS FÜR DIE EINEN GLOBALISIERUNG, IST FÜR DIE ANDEREN LOKALISIERUNG, IN: DAS ARGUMENT, NR. 217, BERLIN 1996, P. 653–664 AND HOLERT, TOM AND MARK TERKESIDIS: FLIECHKRAFT. GESELLSCHAFT IN BEWEGUNG. VON MIGRANTEN UND TOURISTEN, COLOGNE 2006, VERLAG KIEPENHEUER UND WITSCH. (12) THE COMMON SAYING ABOUT THE DISINTEGRATION OF BORDERS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION IS ULTIMATELY NOTHING BUT PART OF ITS OWN IDEOLOGY, AS GERALD RAUNIG JUSTIFIABLY NOTES: “INSTEAD OF ENTHUSIASM ABOUT THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF BORDERS, WHAT BECOMES MORE PRESSING IS THE QUESTION OF HOW THE EVIDENT AND CONSTANTLY EVOLVING NEW BORDERS ARE TO BE ADDRESSED, FORMULATED AND VISUALIZED, DEALT WITH AND THOUGHT OF AS A PRECONDITION OF A SELF-DETERMINED ARRANGEMENT OF SPACE.” RAUNIG, GERALD 2005: KUNST UND REVOLUTION. KÜNSTLERISCHER AKTIVISMUS IM LANGEN 20. JAHRHUNDERT, VIENNA, VERLAG TURIA+KANT, P. 228. (13) BAUMAN, ZYGMUNT 1996,

colonialist ideology of the uninhabited land – or the land merely populated by savages – that needed to be reclaimed and civilised reached its peak. “America” was the future and the new beginning. For people from Europe “America” was always the horizon and the hope. The boundlessness of dreams of a better life were met by territory that allegedly had no borders. These borders were themselves a space that could be expanded according to the courage and ability of the individual. That is in any case what the ideology envisaged, the individualistic myth of the land of endless opportunities.

If the debate about border spaces should nevertheless be tied in with hope and the horizon, then it is about adhering to the process of shaping them using both everyday and artistic means. With that aim in mind, “social constructivist” approaches that focus on the performative creation of those spaces are on the one hand very helpful. They plumb the depths of spaces that are created by real action. In this way they do not get caught up with continuing the work of the border police and de-subjectifying the migrating players yet again. On the other hand though, we must not lose sight of the systematic brutality or rather the brutal system of the border regime. In the face of huge suffering the emphasis of the possibilities of shaping the border areas easily turns into cynicism. Hence “materialistic” categories like structure and power – alongside “place-human-movement” – are essential in order to adequately describe areas of (prevented) passage such as the border region of southern Spain.

P. 662. (14) VON BISMARCK, BEATRICE 2005, P. 12. (15) ON THE SUBJECT OF ATTEMPTS AT ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS WITHIN THESE BORDER AREAS SEE ALSO ZIAJA, LUISA 2005: FADAIAT IN SPANIEN UND MAROKKO. GRENZREALITÄTEN ZWISCHEN TOURISTISCHER UND MIGRANTISCHER BEWEGUNG, IN: BILDPUNKT. ZEITSCHRIFT DER IG BILDENDE KUNST, VIENNA, WINTER 2006, P. 22–23.