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Sous la frontière, l'ancrage. Rapports au temps sur les routes des Balkans
Bajo la frontera, el anclaje. Relaciones al tiempo en las rutas balcánicas

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Beneath the Border, Anchorage: Relations to Time on the Balkan Routes¹

Sous la frontière, l'ancrage. Rapports au temps sur les routes des Balkans
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My warmest thanks go to Maxime Demartin for his help in selecting and harmonising the collection of images.

- 1 Photography accompanied my PhD thesis on the migration control system externalised by the European Union (EU) in the Balkans (Dujmovic, 2019). My work with images fed into the theoretical project of documenting border mechanisms that are both material and mental, and which I defined as *anchorages* and *mirages* of the control system. The use of photography enabled me both to retrace how the logics of control are materially anchored in social space and to deconstruct the visual and graphic processes that support the imagery of an invaded limes at the border.
- 2 This contribution is part of a body of work that has helped to qualify the paradigm of the 2015 so-called “migration crisis” (Calabrese *et al.*, 2022; Cantat *et al.*, 2019; Dujmovic and Sintès, 2017; Kasperek, 2016; Lendaro *et al.*, 2019) and suggests a reinterpretation of this notion, based on consideration of image and temporality. On the Balkan routes, the consolidation of a discourse associating migration with invasion, subversion and even contamination (Bernardot, 2011) peaked between summer 2015 and spring 2016. The increase in the estimated number of crossings in 2015 (834,000 according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) led to the concentration of resources for the supervision of exiles and the multiplication of actors interacting at the borders (Bužinkić and Hameršak, 2017; Dujmovic, 2018; Šelo Šabić and Borić, 2016).
- 3 This episode in the externalisation of EU migration control was accompanied by a proliferation of images. Those that circulated most used powerful graphic codes,

depicting seemingly massive and uncontrollable arrivals, in both photography and cartography (Lambert, 2015; Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020). Between the *mirage* of a flood to be brought under control and the *anchorage* of new material resources, the semiology of the emergency contributed to the legitimisation of a “crisis” border arrangement, before the Balkan routes were once again consigned to relative media invisibility following the EU-Turkey agreement (18 March 2016).

- 4 In contrast to the majority of images disseminated during this period, those in this portfolio focus on situations of pause, waiting, daily routines and ordinary moments at the border (De Certeau, 1990; Kobelinsky, 2010). Far from the pictures that portray the border as a “snapshot”, they explore the meaning of the experience(s) of time in border spaces. These “freeze-frames” taken against the backdrop of media and political “crisis” communication (Triandafyllidou, 2018) invite us to decipher how the control system is staged and what the migratory phenomenon means over the longer term in border societies.
- 5 This project is to be seen in the context in which the images were produced and the relationship to time that I myself placed behind each photograph. My PhD research was conducive to immersive observations through a number of negotiated access points in both institutional and informal settings, as a researcher, NGO (non-governmental organisation) volunteer, resident and descendant of a Yugoslav emigrant. Although the following series is limited to fieldwork carried out between September and December 2015 in transit camps on the border between Serbia and Croatia, it is part of a vast body of observations that enabled me to historicise the so-called “crisis” episode and to extend my gaze durably to all the paths taken through the Balkans.
- 6 This approach made it possible to gain the distance needed to photograph the actors left in the shadows of a “migration corridor” made highly visible, the subject of several series of photographs that focused primarily on exiles and the most notorious migration intermediaries (authorities and international and/or humanitarian organisations).² There are fewer traces of the myriad of individuals who live in the border localities crossed by these routes. Like Ružica (Photographs 6 and 7), those I met told me how the arrivals of 2015 resonated with their own experience of exile and conflict, during the Balkan wars of the 1990s (Dujmovic, 2022). Photographing their living space therefore meant simultaneously summoning up several different temporalities of migration in the Balkans.
- 7 The images that follow transcribe the progression of my gaze on the ground and the variation in scale that I applied between the micro-local level of border interactions and their setting in the international plot. They focus on singular relationships to time, captured at the level of individuals, each with a different conjunction of time, space and action: through the prisms of waiting and daily life, unusual interactions are revealed between groups that are *a priori* antagonistic (Photographs 1, 2a and 2b); the routine rhythms that become established in the so-called “emergency” situation make it possible to detect practices of collaboration and dissuasion that establish a power of humanitarian-security control (Photographs 3 and 4); moreover, time represents a strategic variable for informal groups seeking to produce up-to-date information on open border points (Photograph 5). This archaeology of the “corridor” culminates in the footsteps of a woman resident employed in a camp, where she has methodically collected personal belongings left behind by other women, an act that recalls the story of her own exile twenty years earlier (Photographs 6 and 7).

- 8 These discreet but repeated interactions embody the slow construction of a relationship with the Other and counterbalance the *mirage* of so-called “transit” migration that is commonly considered without any connection or *anchorage* to the territories and populations of the Balkans.

Photograph 1: Waiting for the Train: Pauses and Tactics in the “Corridor”



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 3 October 2015, Tovarnik.

- 9 In September 2015, the Tovarnik railway station was thrust into the headlines of the international media by becoming one of the main points of entry into the EU, on the Serbia-Croatia border. The transport of exiles to Slovenia was organised by the authorities at such a “frenetic” pace (Griffiths, 2014) that some did not even know the name of the country they were crossing. There are few images showing any pauses in this section of the “corridor”.
- 10 While waiting for the train in Tovarnik, distances and similarities can be observed between each group. Recognisable by their yellow bibs, the unaffiliated international volunteers (known as “free” volunteers) are more likely to rub shoulders with freelance journalists than Croatian Red Cross teams, considered to be official operators. On the right-hand side of the station, police officers supervise the group that will board the next train.
- 11 These places are renegotiated through daily interactions and tactics. To gain access to the exiles before they are taken to the train carriages, the volunteers ask the escorting police officers questions and offer them food from the food stall. Serving tea, beer or *rakija* helps to maintain a form of harmony to ensure the continuity of the distributions. This method of seduction can lead to festive moments, when the difficult conditions on the ground—fatigue, cold, worries about the number of arrivals expected

the next day—are discussed. Sometimes information is exchanged informally. Everyone shares the same extra-ordinary situation.

Photographs 2a and 2b (diptych): Construction of the Transit Camp



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 30 September 2015, Opatovac.

- 12 On 20 September 2015, a “transit centre” was set up north of Tovarnik, in the village of Opatovac. With a capacity to take in 5,000 people, it is made up of tents hastily erected to cope with the scale of daily arrivals. As a result, the camp’s architecture evolves according to arrivals rather than preceding them. All the local logistical resources are mobilised and reinforced. Supervised by the National Civil Protection Department (DUZS), the municipal services are busy every day cleaning up the muddy areas, reinforcing and securing the buildings. Although spectacular, these efforts form part of the landscape of the camp as a routine activity, sometimes barely noticed.
- 13 Although Opatovac has been the subject of a great deal of visual production, this local workforce has been photographed very little, unlike the exiles, the police, international organisations (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM),³ NGOs and journalists. Yet these staff are an important link in the camp system, ensuring that the camps are set up, maintained and fenced off. Like the cleaning and translation staff, they also play an important role in the flow of information between the inside and outside of the camp.

Photograph 3: The Humanitarian-Security Continuum



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 30 September 2015, Opatovac.

- 14 The more than twenty accredited humanitarian organisations in the camp can be identified by their multicoloured bibs and logos. Among them, the Croatian Red Cross is the backbone of the “crisis” camp system. Having been mandated before 2015 to implement the psychosocial aspects of the European asylum system, its position has been strengthened by its role as “humanitarian coordinator” of the Opatovac camp, alongside the Ministry of the Interior (MUP), which is responsible for “security coordination”.
- 15 This humanitarian-security continuum is embodied in the practices of the Red Cross-MUP officers, who work hand in hand and jointly ensure the issuing of accreditations and the detection of “vulnerable” groups. This power of biopolitical classification establishes a hierarchy with the exiles and the other actors in the camp. This hierarchy is also exercised symbolically through the control of images, since the accredited media crudely manipulate images of exiles, whereas they are instructed not to photograph the MUP or the Croatian Red Cross.

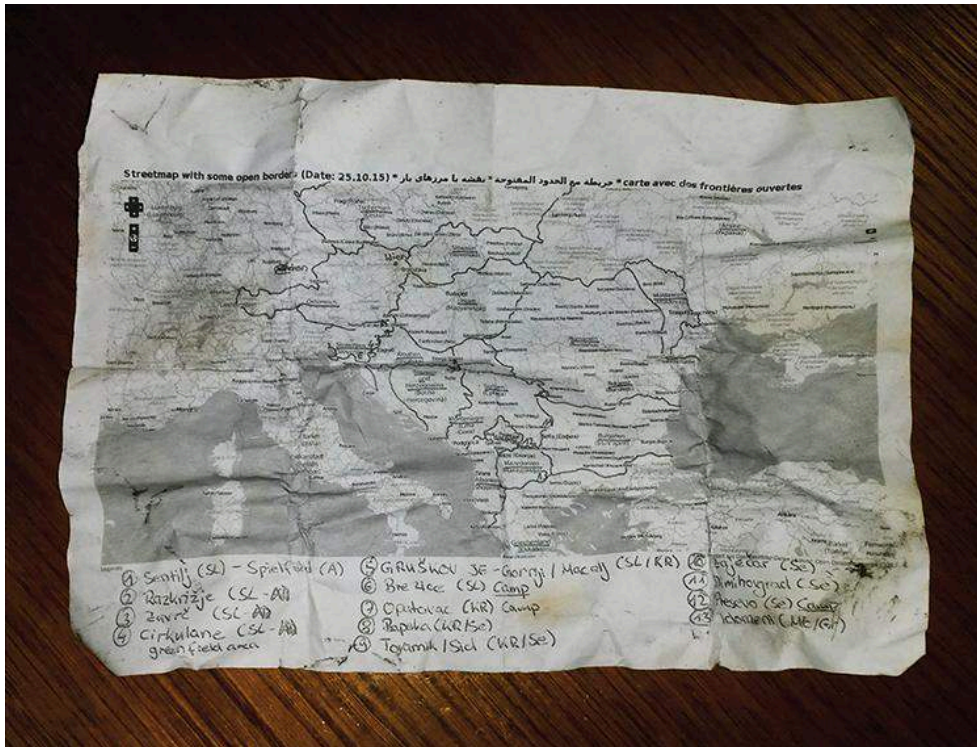
Photograph 4: Patrols along the Old Pipeline



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 3 October 2015, Opatovac.

- 16 Opatovac is a scene of intense police activity. Various professional bodies (local police, border police and special police) have been mobilised throughout Croatia and dispatched to this camp on the Croatian-Serbian border. Visible in the background, the accommodation areas formed by tents are surrounded by mounds of earth that give the patrols an overhead view of the exiles placed there. These distant but elevated silhouettes perform a surveillance and deterrence function to prevent escape attempts.
- 17 Traces of the old pipeline on which the camp was set up can still be seen next to these mounds. These remains provide a disturbing analogy with the authorities' aim of "channelling" exiles quickly and hermetically.

Photograph 5: "Map with Some Open Borders" Found in a Tent (Anonymous)



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 8 December 2015, Tovarnik.

- 18 Information is a crucial resource on routes marked by shifting border controls. This paper map dated 25 October 2015 shows the main border points open that day, from Idomeni (Northern Macedonia) to Spielfeld (Austria). Found in a tent in the Opatovac camp, its folded and crumpled appearance suggests that it was kept in a pocket and used many times.
- 19 At the end of 2015, local groups such as *Are You Syrious?* and the *No Border-Croatia* movement began producing more and more field reports, leaflets and maps. By putting together informal communication tools they were able to provide information on alternative routes to the one supervised by the authorities and inform exiles of their rights.

Photograph 6: Going to Work at the Camp



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 30 September 2015, Tovarnik.

- 20 The local population's complex and ambivalent relationship with migration is steeped in the history of the Balkan exiles of twenty-five years earlier. When thousands of exiles turned up at the eastern border of Syrmia, the memory of a war that was still vivid resonated with a strong tradition of Christian hospitality and charity.
- 21 After taking refuge in France in the 1990s and returning to her homeland after the war, Ružica became a cleaner at the Opatovac camp in 2015. Working for the "Civil Protection Service of the municipality of Tovarnik", as her uniform says, she is very much in favour of the camp, where around fifty of the village's residents are employed.

Photograph 7: Ružica's Treasure Box



Credit: M. Dujmovic, 8 December 2015, Tovarnik.

- 22 The channelling of exiles through the “corridor” reduces the possibility of contact with the local population; paradoxically, it is in the confined space of the camps that most of the interaction between these two groups takes place. To recount to me the connections she has forged from her experience at Opatovac, Ružica carefully lays out on the table a number of forgotten, perhaps abandoned, objects that she has gleaned from the tents: jewellery, watches, tweezers, and so on. By collecting them in what she calls her “treasure box”, she hopes to preserve the memory of the women exiled in this camp.
- 23 The process of staging the image, combining my gesture in photographing the objects and Ružica’s in arranging them on the table, prompted her to recount her own experience of exile. In this case, the photograph acted as a “border object” mediating between expert and non-expert knowledge (Trompette and Vinck, 2009).

Conclusion: The Time of the Balkans, the Tempo of “Crises”

- 24 This portfolio illustrates how the migration control system improvised along the Balkan routes in 2015 was intermediated by officials, volunteers and employees who gradually introduced routine socio-spatial practices. Going against emergency decorum, this series focuses on border situations that combine present interactions, memory processes and future projections arising from encounters with exiles. The attention paid to the inhabitants of border localities is a reminder that migration policies unfold in a social space built over a long period of time, where in places they

reactivate traumatic memories of exile and combat—like a palimpsest preserving “the imprint of past human activities” (Šakaja, 2015: 98)—and where successive societies continually inscribe “the blurred interplay of identity and relationship” (Augé, 1992: 101). The use of images makes it possible to convey the desire for relations with the Other that are more harmonious than in the past, synonymous with autonomy for some and hospitality for others (Gotman, 2001).

- 25 These photographs also prompt reflection on the strategic uses of time by different intermediaries in European migration policies. For the authorities in the Balkan states, controlling the duration of crossings on their territory strengthens their capacity to negotiate with neighbouring states and European institutions: by leveraging their “geographical rent” (El Qadim, 2010) in south-eastern Europe and exploiting “governmental mobility” (Gill, 2009) organised within the Balkan “corridor”, they consolidate their position as an “intermediary state” (Greenhill, 2010). However, competing uses of time encourage forms of social interaction and anchorage: gaining time, mapping an ephemeral journey, recalling the presence of exiles are tactics aimed at thwarting border logics that separate and de-territorialise.
- 26 Finally, this contribution proposes a critical reinterpretation of the “crisis” paradigm through an analysis based on images and temporalities. On the one hand, photographing a diversity of actors who have remained in the shadows of the main media filters makes it possible to move away from sensationalist representations and modes of visibility and intelligibility that contribute to the figuration of an emergency. On the other hand, the analysis of individual and subjective temporalities leads us to understand the 2015-2016 episode as an accumulation of “singular divisions of time” placing individuals in “absolute rupture with traditional time”, according to the principle of Foucauldian heterochronies (Foucault, 2009: 30). The Balkan “corridor” did indeed juxtapose antinomian rhythms - from the “sticky time” of transit camps to the “frenzied time” of border crossings (Griffiths, 2014). From this point of view, the gradual return to ordinary temporalities suggests that the 2015 situation was the result of a momentary loss of control by the monitoring institutions. We can therefore distance ourselves from the dominant narrative of the “crisis”, which suggests that “refugees/migrants” themselves are the “crisis”, but also enrich the work that opposes this vision with that of a “crisis of reception” or “of European policies”. Instead, this portfolio opens the discussion on the dominant representations of borders as immediate and de-historicised realities, to which the manipulation and dissemination of images undoubtedly contribute.

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NOTES

1. The French title of this article, “Sous la frontière, l’ancrage” (Beneath the border, anchorage), refers to a slogan from the May 1968 movement in France, “Sous les pavés, la plage !” (Beneath the pavement, the beach!).
2. See in particular the work of Alberto Campi, Danilo Balducci, Francesco Malavolta, Sara Prestianni and Olivier Sarrazin.
3. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, International Organisation for Migration.

INDEX

Geographical index: Balkans

Keywords: temporality, camp, corridor, Balkans

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