



Figure 03

## ELASTIC BODIES

### A way of seeing about volume, through volume, with volume

How has the visual and aesthetic representation of the landscape, as a way of seeing - and therefore visualizing, depicting, representing, and therefore managing - conditioned the meaning of boundary?

#### THE MYTH OF "NATURAL" BORDERS

The border and its relations with the land have always constituted a complex architecture. To date, the border is understood, in its simplest form, as a static and fixed dividing line of zero thickness (Ferrari, Pasqual, and Bagnato 2019). The distinction between "natural" borders (coasts, deserts, mountains, and rivers) and "artificial" ones (parallels and meridians) has many historical lineages. In the seventeenth century, Cardinal Richelieu proposed that France had natural limits to which the country should expand, but not go further. (Elden 2013b) This has been a common practice since the early modern period, everywhere in the mountain ranges - particularly way the watershed - were used as territorial boundaries (the Pyrenees and the Andes, among others): although the ridge line would generally be easier to locate topographically, the watershed was favoured for the creation of boundaries for a key economic factor, i.e. the exclusive authority on the use of water.

The border is symbolic as well as physical, and the symbolism of the crest line and its separation of peoples, languages, and genes are a powerful trope. Take Alps and Italy, for example: the Alpine watershed galvanized the political imagination in the creation of Italy. Emerged in the maps of the 1840s as a "natural" border, the watershed was *"presented by the Italians as a rational and obvious natural feature that could put an end to the question of where Italy ended up"* (Armiero 2013). As a corollary, the claim of all the southern territories as necessarily Italian was also legitimized. In fact, a fairly common narrative is to identify Italy as an island rather than a peninsula; the borders are almost completely natural and almost entirely defined by water: liquid in the east, south and west, frozen in the north.

## A DYNAMIC LAND

*"Ice complicates a world view where solid, stable land is positioned opposite liquid, mobile water. Ice melts and freezes; it breaks apart and moves; it has both land-like and water-like social properties; its edges are unclear. Ice is as challenging for international lawyers, boundary practitioners, and political theorists as it is for geoscientists and global environmental policymakers." (ICE LAW Project, 2019)*

But what happens when the alleged fixity of the "natural" border meets the instability of the physical landscape on which it is based? When glaciers melt, seas rise, and mountains erode? The complexity of the earth today challenges the static, fixed and two-dimensional contemporary vision of the border (Elden 2013b). The planet is in motion; therefore, also the boundaries that cross it must be recast as dynamic, not static, changing and even indeterminate processes.

It goes without saying that the Earth is dynamic and human action also influences the transformation of physical landscapes. And it is precisely the anthropic contribution, through the increase in atmospheric emissions, that has led to an acceleration of these phenomena at a global level. Glaciers become the materialization of the "space of repercussion" (Lahoud 2014) and melting at speeds never encountered in the past reveal a dynamic earth.

In key sections of Italy's northern border, the limits of its sovereignty are defined by glaciers which are now rapidly shrinking; as a result, their geometry is changing. Here, the watershed has shifted so much that the natural line no longer corresponds to the political line agreed and officially represented on the maps. The Italian Military Geographical Institute (IGM) has estimated that this inconsistency occurs in more than 100 points along the Alps; sometimes the gap between the two lines amounts to a few meters, sometimes more than a hundred. (IGM, 2017) This shift is likely to increase as natural boundaries contend for the effects of global warming, posing several problems as to how we understand the territory, its representations and their political implications.

While the practical and political effects of trans-territorial processes, such as the shifting of borders, are (still) negligible, we have come to realize their unique conceptual and symbolic value. The invisible schedule that emerges from the melting of glaciers undermines the logic of stable and fixed borders, while at the same time challenging the possibility of a "natural border" - the idea that certain geographical features can clearly embody a political division. IGM holds the original record of the current Italian border line and retains historical documentation of all past border investigations (Ferrari, Pasqual, and Bagnato 2019). Archives like this have long since shaped and ensured modern notions of boundaries and their materialization on the ground; digging these stories -by asking how the "natural" was conceptualized, represented, and exploited in the nation building- is a way to highlight the extent to which Western political history and planetary environmental change are intertwined.

Therefore, by questioning the landscape aesthetics of the representation of the border on the basis of the work of Stuart Elden and Eyal Weizman, I question the visual and aesthetic dimension of the landscape, as a way of seeing (visualizing, depicting, representing, and therefore managing and shaping) the border. Therefore, it becomes necessary to problematize the conventional representation of borders: when and how did the Alps become an acceptable border between states? What does it mean to think of a border - what are the policies behind it?

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF CONSENT - SENSE

To begin this reasoning, I would first like to understand the idea of the Alpine territory, of static borders and dynamic processes and of the relationship between them. The modern notion of boundary is linked to a limited and two-dimensional conception of space (Elden 2013a); however, this conception is a rather recent construct linked to the formation of territorial states. This is indicated by Agnew and Corbridge (1994 p.83) as the "territorial trap", that avoid the actual elasticity (Weizman 2019) states and their borders.

Through the representations of the Alps, the visual research questions how the glacier has been incorporated into the construction of modern Italy, in political discourse, as in social practices, becoming at the same time a symbolic and material resource. The mountain, as a territory and as a landscape, has thus been used and interpreted from time to time as a place of degradation (of the territory as well as of people), a place of a contradictory "otherness" (sometimes celebrated, sometimes repressed), a place of rebellion and resistance to a "domestication" seen as an element of

progress (for which the inhabitants are tamed, after having tamed the mountain - for example, with fascist forest policies or hydroelectric conquest-), a place of heroism and reservoir of nationalist memory and patriotic (through the politicization of the places of the Great War), a place that generates, in fascist rhetoric, a new type of Italian and a new landscape. (Armiero 2013)

**OBJECT / BACKGROUND.** For a long time, the Alpine landscape was not at the center of the imagination, but it was not the background either. The construction of an imaginary around the Alps and the mountains is the result of an elaborate historical and cultural process that has roots in the history of Western thought itself. (De Rossi 2014) The first description of the mountain appears with Leonardo da Vinci in the Renaissance and is the background of many of his works. Here is a mountain made of materiality, rocks, lights, and shadows, at a time when it was represented in an idealized, symbolic way, as a single rock seat of divinity. (Pesci 2000) These representations were strongly influenced by both the Christian religion and classical Greek thought. Both conceptions saw the mountain as the seat of divinity, but at the same time as an inaccessible place reserved for the gods themselves; the mountain landscape is therefore a hostile and enemy landscape par-excellence.

**EXTERNAL / INTERNAL.** Leonardo will remain an isolated case until 1700 when, through the culture of the Enlightenment, a different, "scientific" eye develops towards the landscape and begins to head towards the Alps with a curious and inquiring eye (De Rossi 2014). The mountain's Otherness, previously repressed, is now being celebrated; in particular, the Alps present themselves as the ideal terrain for scientists seeking answers on the origin of the world: a gigantic open-air library in the heart of Europe. We are still far from an "aesthetic" gaze towards the mountain, but slowly the Alps break away from the background of human events and impose their image in the philosophical and aesthetic discourse. In this period everything can become significant, "as long as it arouses an emotion" (Brevini 1987); Goethe reminds us of this by writing pages full of poetry dedicated to the poor villages of Alto Adige described as "a romantic arcadia and lost".

**WILD / TAMED.** In 1731, the scientist and botanist Albert Van Alop published a sort of diary of a journey he made in the Swiss Alps, a few years earlier: he describes the inhabitants of the mountain as poor "good savages", but in harmony with nature; with a "political" and moral conscience that derives from the difficulty of living in such an extreme environment. From this moment on, the "plain" will take possession of the imaginary of the mountain. Here nature is tamed through the pictures of the picturesque and the description of good savages in harmony with nature (De Rossi 2014). The mountain is reduced to an inclined surface to be conquered. The representation of the mountains, therefore, assumes verticality and materiality; however, it remains an extremely static and two-dimensional vision far from the concept of "volume" (Weizman 2017).

**STATIC / DYNAMIC.** If the first explorations of the Alps took place under the pressure of the French-trained Enlightenment intellectuals, starting from the mid-18th century it was the Anglo-Saxon culture that inspired a new aesthetic observation point on the Alps. From here, throughout the 19th century, the representation of the Alps in European culture moves from the "forbidden, dangerous area" to a "*source of aesthetic inspiration and visible self-affirmation*" (De Rossi 2014). The Alps are the last "terra incognita" to be conquered in Europe.

John Ruskin introduces the wonders of the glacier to the English-speaking world with his 1856 book "Of Mountain Beauty". In the wake of his publication, an ever-increasing chain of explorers and climbers headed into the mountains in search of the sublime. In his watercolour *Glacier des Bois*, John Ruskin paints a fallen birch branch in the foreground, its leaves are leaf-shaped, clearly visible against a dark rock. A passing bird is also bird-shaped. But the glacier beyond is a vortex that folds ice, sky, and purple light together with a rusty red break in the center. Ruskin was one of the first to claim that the Alps - and glaciers - were fluid rather than solid, their motion simply too slow to be perceived. The dynamism of the Alps lies not only in the endemic mobility of glaciers, but also in its long history of permanent residence: since ancient times, the Alps have facilitated passage, communication, and exchange.

**VOLUMETRIC / BIDIMENSIONAL.** Therefore, the construction of the political (cons)-sense through an aesthetic of the glacier has made it possible to re-territorialize the Alps; in addition, the Italian nationalist narrative took over.

Thanks to this, the transition from a "natural region" to a "natural border" was easy (Farinelli 2009).

The maps produced from the 1840s (before the unification of Italy -1861-) began to emphasize the Alpine watershed, depicting Italy as a unified mass long before this happened in practice. This reductionism exemplifies the flat picture of the world through which Western power has asserted itself. This cartographic imagination hides the ground as a two-dimensional entity, devoid of depth, fixed in time and without any sensitive evolution, thus making unstable phenomena, such as the motion of glaciers, hardly visible to the European political mind. (Elden 2013b) This was how nationalist aspirations were naturalized. (Ferrari, Pasqual, and Bagnato 2019)

The Italian expansionists represented territorial acquisitions as examples of "reconquest" of lands that were "naturally" Italian. Although these lands were only partially inhabited by Italian-speaking people, through the lens of nationalism, they seemed Italian in their essence, and therefore in their entirety. Consequently, the expansion of the Italian border has resulted in the suppression of any non-Italian linguistic and ethnic elements: Serbian, Slovenian and Croatian in the east and German and Ladin in the north. Lands that had never been part of Italy in theory became totally Italian, all remaining inhabited, in practice, by majority groups that were now oppressed. Even now, a century and a half later (and only a century in the case of Alto Adige / Südtirol), the complex adjustments of linguistic practices and ethnic classifications precipitated by these abrupt border changes are incomplete, as attested by bilingual signage throughout the Region. (Armiero 2013)

In understanding and governing the territories, maps were the main tools. As stated by Weizman "*Maps are two-dimensional. By trying to represent reality on two-dimensional surfaces, they not only mirror it, but also shape the thing they represent. As far as they describe the world, they create it*" (Weizman 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Considering Italy's northernmost border from the point of view of its colonial history shows how this border is, in a sense, the opposite of what appears to be in Italian atlases and textbooks: an arbitrary external border for a new status rather than a marker destined forever. The border seems to be engraved on the top of the mountain, but it is impermanent as are other landmarks of nature, especially those affected by climate change; with it also the symbolic fixity of the nation-state that linked its border to the Alpine ridges.

The work produced by Italian Limes provides an example of representation that draws attention to the ongoing dilemma between static and mobile illustrations. These combined studies of the boundary, the glacier and their representation in maps can allow us to better understand contemporary trans-territorial conflicts, such as that of border shifts. New representations are needed to begin to dispel the myth of stable territorial units. This indicates possible future research on how maps could better convey mobility.

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