

ALPIA: A Contemporary Portrait of a Super-National Territory



Screenshot from the documentary "*Alpi*" by Armin Linke, 2010

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Intro

The following paper will discuss the complex contemporary representation of the Alps beyond the crystalized imaginary of idyllic landscape and the *terra incognita*, to a more complex definition of a “laboratory for modernity” (A.Linke, 2012): the Alpine territory is in fact at the same time one of the widest natural eco-systems and the world’s most anthropised mountain environment. The Alps are a key place to observe and study the complexity of the political, economic and social relations that contribute to the alteration both of the landscape and the perception we have of it.

I will seek to reflect on these questions by analysing *Alpi*, a documentary by the photographer Armin Linke and the architect and anthropologist Piero Zanini completed in 2011, rewarded at the 14. *Venice Architecture Biennale* in 2014 and the same year at the *Graz Film and Architecture Festival*. It is the result of seven years of research on the contemporary perception of the Alpine landscape, across eight nations and four languages, where Alpine nature has been filmed in a successful way, visualizing the complex theoretical and political interrogations in a seemingly simple manner.

These issues have serious implications in what we define as ecological crisis, swaying the concept of nature, challenging the dichotomy human-non human invented by modernity and finally questioning the means of representation.

The “geo-political” installation *Italian Limes* curated by Folder and simultaneously presented with *Alpi* at the 14.th Architecture Biennale in Venice inquires the nature of the border between nations and deals with the issue of representation of a territory that is constantly subjected to its physical alterations, depicting the Alps not only as a highly technologized environment but also unveiling the political issues at stake in a territory still highly perceived as a natural *arcadia*.

The tradition, the apocalypse and the sublime

The mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire

Descriptive Sketches by William Wordsworth, 1793

The Alps, the largest mountain system in Europe, cover a territory, which is 800 km wide and 1200 km long, bridging eight different countries. Europeans share a collective imaginary about this territory, composed of a picture gallery strictly linked to the idea of “nature”: the Alps are a frequent summer and winter holiday destination, making tourism both Alps’ top industry and the major drive for urbanisation, but at the same time leading to an ecologic devastation.

At first glance, though, this area does not seem neither to suffer nor to be linked to the major conflicts or aversion and seems completely cut off from the global issues that metropolis are facing.

The agreed imaginary of the territory that we still have as a backdrop when we think about the Alps, origins in modernity, when first nature has been represented as autonomous and interesting in its own right. Landscapes, songs, poems or paintings from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries show the slow transformation of the Alps from the exaltation of sublime, the untouched arcadia to the nature moulded and inhabited by humans. The Romantic image of the Alps as an idyllic place follows upon a radical different feeling; the Alps were known as the *terra incognita*, a land that was instilling almost terror and fear, as we can denote in the passage from the autobiographical poem by Wordsworth (1805), *The Prelude*¹, where the poet recalls his staying in the French Alps stressing on the apocalyptic and terrorising essence of the natural landscape. The wilderness is conceived here as the hostility of nature to any human settlement: the Alps were not supposed to be inhabited, nor conquered, nor contemplated.

The inhuman beauty of the Alps is illustrated differently in several paintings, from the one by Philip James de Loutherbourg “*Avalanche in the Alps*” (1803) depicting the terrorising nature, [fig. 1] to the exaltation of the alpine sublime, participating in the construction of a myth about “*the mountains as a cathedral [...] moving from the status of the house of the devil to that of a sacred temple*”, (Cronon, W. 1996: 75) from which our present admiration for nature has derived.

¹ Excerpt from the poem « The Prelude »[...] « *The immeasurable height // of woods decaying, never to be decayed, //the stationary blasts of waterfalls, //and in the narrow rent at every turn //winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn, // the torrents shooting from the clear blue sky, //the rocks that muttered close upon our ears, //black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side //as if a voice in them, the sick sight //and giddy prospect of the raving stream, // the unfettered clouds and region of the heavens, // tumult and peace, the darkness and the light [...] //characters of the great apocalypse, //the types and symbols of eternity, //of first, and last, and midst, and without end*»

Man is outside nature, staring at the landscape as in the famous painting by C. David Friedrich, *Traveller Above the Sea of Clouds*, or *Wanderer Contemplating the Sea of Fog* (1818) [fig. 2]. This relation to nature is invariably given a precise iconographic expression through the landscape genre, which is, even if it now seems obvious, an actual iconographic invention, specific to what is known as modernity: the exaltation of the individual autonomous identity (Hash, E. 2013). This new genre is the result of the new philosophical interest toward nature, depicting the *homogeneous and infinite space of the Cartesian res extensa*, (Hash, E. 2013), trying to imitate the smallest detail of the material world, aiming to portray an objective view.

A subsequent transformation of the image of the Alps has occurred during the emergence of the romantic sublime, when nature is imagined as the place where to find the origins of the uncorrupted human civilization. This re-imagination developed through Albrecht von Haller's poetry and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, before crystallising in the Romantic movement, widely credited with providing the visual foundation of modern alpine tourism. During the same period, poets began to describe mountains with terms of praise rather than disparagement (Nicholson, M.H. 1963). Thanks to the effort to facilitate the travels across the Alps, these insights by painters and poems contributed to the reversal of attitudes to mountains from the general public perspective, leading to the appreciation of the Alpine landscape as the apotheosis of sublime, infusing the image with a new set of values (Tuan, Y. F. 1974).

By the late eighteenth century the picturesque concept was not only a guide for painting, but also a schemata to experience nature, defining what constituted a proper landscape, and nature was exalted when artificially portrayed. Still the image was maintaining a certain distance from the viewer, an invisible barrier, reflecting the political attitude toward this territory.

However, Armin Linke's *Alpi*, is very distant from this imaginary. His Alps are neither desolate nor sublime. The depiction of this territory in the film is more a vision of a landscape inhabited and moulded by a series of activities, even if he plays with the romantic portrait of the Alps. The following paragraphs will investigate how Linke succeeds in creating this new type of image with his camera.



Fig. 1. Philip James De Loutherbourg 'An Avalanche in the Alps', 1803



Fig. 2. Caspar David Friedrich "The Traveler Above a Sea of Clouds", 1818

Anti Sublime

“In the Europe of today, the Alps are a hotbed for modernity and its illusions”

Armin Linke, 2010

We would imagine watching a film about the Alps, to stare at snowy mountains, enjoy virtual trekking in nature or dream about retiring to small rural villages where the idyllic mountain life has preserved the human being to be pure and happy. But this is exactly what does not happen in *Alpi*, where the main focus is not about nature: he succeeded to make a film about the Alps without the landscape, or better, the landscape is not the focus.

In the narrative of the film, the mountain chain is the pretext and the unifying factor of a series of filmic sequences aiming at exploring the contemporary nature of the Alps, combining scenes depicting machinery for material extraction, police base camps, touristic trains reaching the highest peaks, constantly stating that the idea of a immaculate nature only exists in the dioramas and in the paintings preserved in the museums. Regularly negating the traditional image of the Alps, very little attention is given to nature, and this is particularly clear from the soundtrack: a series of computerised voices and mechanical noises.

The ambivalence between reality and fiction is what lies as the background of the film. Most of the shots, even being explicit about the Alps, portray devices that mediate or replicate our knowledge about this region: through detailed shots of scaled models, dioramas and screens, the images substitute nature and its representation, linking together reality and fiction, original and copy, natural and artificial, blurring the dichotomy that has been crucial so far for the representation of landscape. This delivers an almost baroque idea of the Alps, as if the image was the product of cross-referenced overlapping wings that the film is unfolding to unveil the contradictions of these stereotypes.

Apparently very little remains of the extreme climbs in the comfortable touristic train escapism, in which nature is transformed in a theme park, but the relevance of the film is more complex than this, where several levels of interpretation are possible, leaving out any nostalgia.

There are particular methods the director achieves this shift: first of all, if there is a main subject of the film, this is the human and machine activity, be it the monitoring of avalanche, stone extraction, spa-massage, pasture, sport training, etc. All the activities are shown contemporary to the viewer, avoiding any hierarchy, and most importantly, anchoring the Alps in the present and not in the suspended mythic past.

Secondly, the scene is always concentrated on the action and the viewer is taking part of the activity itself. The artist does not film from an off-camera position, but nearly all the scenes are filmed from the interior where the action takes place.

The film brings the viewer to experience what Alps mean today, being pushed inside, deep inside a meteorological laboratory, in a spa, in the local museum, in an hydraulic station, in hidden mountain bunkers, and from this perspective the film leads the observer to rapidly abandon his nostalgic portrait of the Alps. Linke stresses the gesture to such a point that it takes few seconds before realizing where one is and what the action is about. In fact, the camera firstly captures a detail, be it a material or a gesture, and then opens up revealing the environment around. The shots provide the illusion that we are seeing a stage onto which we might wander.

The landscape does not seem distant anymore, it is deeply involved and merged with human labour and it inseparable from the machinery that orders, monitors and transforms it. This is a radical statement by Linke, representing at the same level both human and non-human interactions. Landscape becomes a *techno-nature* (Picon, A. 2010: 98) in which everything interacts with everything, challenging once again traditional frontiers such as the distinction between human and non-human, between natural and artificial, between inside and outside. "*There is no clear cut boundary between men and their environment, territory and landscape*" (Picon, A. 2010:98), there is no outside perspective because there is no exterior from which the earth and its various part can be contemplated (Sloterdijk, P. 2003)

Having started the film in 2003, when HD video was not in use, the documentary has been shot in film, using Kodak Vision 550, but as Linke states, this is also a deliberate choice: the alpine representation is traditionally static and he wanted to represent the movements and the actions (Linke, A. 2010) The whole film has been shot with the same 50 mm lens, instilling an almost claustrophobic feeling; there is never a scenic view on the Alps, there is no open horizon.

In wanting to focus on the movements and actions inhabiting and transforming the landscape, Linke is recalling the aims of the early films portraying landscape, violating the contemplative beauty that the picturesque introduced with the motion. Early twentieth century films started to exalt the human artifice in nature, following roads and railways penetrating into the landscape: nature appears as an industrialized and man driven territory (Harper, G. Rayner, J. R.)

The immobile landscape was irrevocably challenged by new technologies and so it was its representation raising the fascination for travel, danger, motion, variety, transition and succession.

Even if for both cinema and painting the *frame* is crucial, its role is radically different. The act of framing in films is to enhance the perception, to make possible interpretation and understandings, in the form of an *enabling device* in which movement is one of the substantive indicators of meaning. (Harper, G. Rayner, J.)

The soundscape of Alpi is a mix of mechanic sounds, background noises, language melting pot and conversations among tourists, scientific presentations and promotional mottos, recalling the urgency of a territory that needs to be mapped out, disclosing the multiple relations between the heterogeneous beings inhabiting the same territory.

“The city is everywhere and in everything”

If any confusion between nature and the Alps has been cleared, questions can now be raised about the inhabitants of this territory and the politics at stake. Right from the very beginning of the film, it is evident that the interest is not about the national aspect of the territory: the film’s first sequence is an attempt to shift the perspective, de-localising the entrance and, from there, start a journey without easy references. The film opens with an Indian troupe shooting a Bollywood film, with Indian actors and the typical Bollywood dance scene. [fig. 3] This scene is genuinely disturbing, since the natural scenario of the Alps is used as a background for what we might define an exotic movie, but at the same time it creates a state of confusion and surprise because the Alpine landscape is in this case used as an exotic attribute, creating a telescopic effect between the two contexts that are not expected to cross each other without cancelling each other out.

In paraphrasing Edward Said, we might state that this sequence, recalling a form of “orientalism”, is confirming the construction of the Alpine identity and it is also playing with this: the Indian film director is using the Western cliché image of the Alps to perpetuate the bucolic construction to Indian audience.

Linke gives visibility to the global geopolitical implications in the microcosms, showing how, in an interconnected and reticular environment, even the apparently remote and marginal area is indeed central, strictly connected to very far geographical realities. The culmination of this tendency is explicit in the sequence shot in a in-door ice palace in the Emirates, where an accurate replica of an alpine ski resort has been built in the desert.

Again, the misleading stratagem of the director is to capture the scene without being explicit of the overall indoor context, followed by a camera zoom out that unveils that the scene has been shot by a window frame beside a traditionally dressed Arab man. [fig.4]

The sequence is followed by an interview with Ski Dubai manager, who is defending the project affirming the supremacy of the artificial nature, which is not subject to weather changes, underlining the magical character of creating nature.

The core of the project are the Alps, but at the same time the film is telling us that it could be about any other place in world that is linked to a system of images that builds upon our imaginary, establishing a constant reference with the picturesque tradition.

Even when the film is presenting the famous Segantini painting *Life, Nature and Death* in the Segantini museum in St. Moritz Linke is playing with cross references that link the global and local context. The mentioned painting is in fact part of a triptych that the artist was preparing in 1897 for the 1900 Paris Expo, a sort of panoptic scene 220 metres long of the Engadin valley landscape, a proto-cinema piece, commissioned by a group of local hotels. For financial reasons, the piece had to be scaled down and redesigned into a large triptych, which had been refused because considered not in tune with the touristic image the client wanted to deliver. Linke is here recalling the same mechanism repeated over the centuries.

The result is that there is neither a homogeneous image of the Alps, nor a totality, but what emerges from the film is a network, and the film is used as a “mapping device” that describes not only the territory but also the activities, behaviour, transitions and cross references (Brook, R. Dunn, N. 2011) providing a *basis for motions around fix locations*, as Andrew Webber describes it, defining the moving image as *an advanced cartographic apparatus, combining the act of motion and locomotion* (Webber, A. and Wilson, E. 2008) able to represent the urban as a *quintessential floating signifier* (Brenner, N. 2013). In his essay about the urban theory debate of the twenty-first century, Brenner is clearly stating that the extended urbanisation has no cartographic fixity, no clear margins and parameters and no morphological coherence, but it represents movements and process of socio-spatial contingencies. A succinct description of this states as following:

“The city is everywhere and in everything. If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication [...] then what is not the urban? [...] The footprints of the city are all over, in the form of city commuters, tourists, teleworking, the media, and the urbanization of lifestyles. The traditional divide between the city and the countryside has been perforated”

(Ash A. Thrift, N. 2002: 1)



Fig. 3 Screenshot from the first scene of the documentary “Alpi” by Armin Linke, 2010



Fig. 4 Screenshot from the documentary “Alpi” by Armin Linke, 2010

Alpi successfully represents the process of extended urbanisation, densely crossing and transforming the perception and the use of the territory. Such a formation cannot be grasped following the traditional dichotomy of countryside-city, rural- metropolitan because is missing any coherent areal separation (Ash, A. Thrift, N. 2002). Brenner is also warning against understanding this process on the basis of concepts of global and globalising cities, because these latter presuppose a territory bounded in urban units, linked together via networks of capitals, labour and communication infrastructures (Brenner, N. 2013). Paradoxically, he states, at the very moment in which urban appears as the strategic key in understanding territory, its definition is extremely perilous. This debate is undermining the state of urban theory itself because, “*if the urban can no longer be understood as a particular kind of place then what could possibly justify the existence of an intellectual field devoted to its investigation?*” (Brenner, N. 2013 : 8).

Possibly, the debate about the means of correct representation of these instances are a key area of investigation for urban studies, introducing new challenges in cartography, which is struggling at achieving a convincing mapping of these hybrid landscapes.

Questions of representation

The construction of territory coincided with the birth of modern nation states in the eighteenth century and since then it is a place mastered and created by institutions, being from the start inseparable from practices such as surveys and cartography that were meant to provide a panoptic-like overview of what was available, in what quantity and where (Picon, A. 2010): the representation of the territory is strictly linked to the political forces that operate on the area.

“*Landscape appears as the production of distance*” (Picon, A. 2010: 97): In fact, especially from sixteenth century on, the perception and representation of territory was made possible from the physical distance that separated the administrator and the various geographical places. It is undelayable to recognize this, if we want to understand the political implications embedded in the contemporary representation of the territory: Linke’s message is only visible if we keep in mind the binds between representation and politics.

The first explorations conducted to map the Alps have been led by sixteenth-century alpine explorers such as Conrad Gesner, replacing the monsters and demons of the medieval Alps with new, more positive imagery (Wilson, E. 2003) presenting the act of mapping the Alps as a practice and a performance, leading to eighteenth century’s great national mapping projects.

For over 300 years, mountain regions became extensively explored, portrayed and, most importantly, mapped. Over the last decades, though, not only the classical image of the Alps has been put under question, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, but also the cartography itself has encountered some troubles.

In fact, contemporary technologies allow for a very precise and constantly updated report of the status of mountains, their glaciers, vegetation dynamics, transportations and expanded settlement leading to the increasing use of the computerization and the broad availability of remote sensing images. Together with the growing importance of the mountain areas, the demand for adequate cartography is increasing (Häberling, C. Hurni, L. 2002)

This has highlighted a crucial issue: the territory is under constant change and its representation as well because *“contemporary digital maps are both territorial markers and datascape, inseparable from landscape effects”* (Picon, A. 2010:98)

We can argue, at this point, considering film as a mapping device, that maps and films have a possible analogy: the cinematic landscape is merging reality, construction and representation into an order that evolves according to the new technologies, radically changing the interpretation and the communication of landscape.

In support of this, it is relevant to report the main idea of the documentary: Linke aimed at transforming the camera in “Google Earth experience” (Linke, A. 2010), in which the viewer navigates without exactly knowing the location, crossing borders of eight nations, overviewing and connecting different places. This is a very interesting aspect of the film: it is very physical but at the same time it disclosed the intrinsic transformation of perception and provided an answer to the request of alternative methods of territory’s representation. The public needs a constant re-interrogation and re-planning about what kind of representation is being offered and if this kind of representation corresponds to the given imaginary.

The Mobile Border or the Technological Sublime

Geographers and politicians found themselves in a paradoxical situation in 2005. In fact, a study based on data collected by the World Glacier Inventory reported the constant mutation and shrinking of the major Alpine glaciers. If this at first sight seems only a matter of environmental attention, it has relevant repercussions in the representation of the territory.

The border among Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Slovenia, Lichtenstein and France runs for over 1200 km, following the natural watersheds through the entire Alpine arc. This line is materialized through 8.043 boundary stones set on snowfields during the nineteenth century and the continuous alteration of the territory created a controversy, resolved only recently in 2009.

This topic was illustrated by the installation *Italian Limes* [Fig. 5] curated by Folder exhibited at the 14. Architecture Venice Biennale in 2014, in which the border between Italy and Austria was the pretext to put under question the nature of contemporary borders, revealing their volatile nature. In fact the glacier, since 1850, has experienced a 50% decrease in overall extension and the pace of shrinkage has tripled between 1970 and 2000 due to global warming, causing significant drifts of the watershed line, where physical permanent markers have been set, and, as a result, of the coinciding national borders, unveiling the bio-geo-physical-political nature of borders.

The Istituto Geografico Militare acknowledged the problematic uncertainty of the limits between Italy, Switzerland and Austria, and pushed these countries to achieve the agreement of a new definition of movable border, approved by the Italian Parliament in 2009.

The installation monitored one kilometre of the border between Italy and Austria [Fig.6] where GPS units were set on the surface of the glacier, broadcasting their position into an automated representation of the real-time shifts in the borders. The mechanism was then drawing a line on a map provided to any visitor, as a manifesto of the questionability of the notion of borders [Fig. 7]. This installation depicted not only that national borders are questionable entities, but also the political dimension intrinsic to the problem of the representation of territory. The issue about natural borders is that they are constantly subject to ecological processes, but more interestingly, they depends on the technologies and norms we use to represent and measure them. As the text accompanying the installation is stating, today, “*as human ambition approaches the verge of complete environmental control, geology becomes both our ultimate playground and our technological sublime.*”

This contingent and normative aspect offers the reflection about the abstract value of tracing a univocal division, even if on effective physical limits. This installation challenges, as the documentary *Alpi* does, the statics of the Alps, providing a representation of a regularly remodelled, re-thought and reconfigured territory.

Moreover, geographer have expanded their idea of political borders as frozen lines, considering boundaries more as institutions, symbols and discourses (Paasi, A. 1996). An intriguing interest in contemporary geography is also the recently born border studies, at the intersection of geography, anthropology and political science, which focuses also on the boundary-drawing practices, where the conceptual and cartographic, imaginary and actual or social and aesthetic merge together. (O' Tuathail, G. Dalby, S. 1998)



Fig. 5 Installation *Italian Limes*



Fig. 6 Italian Border on the Glaciers

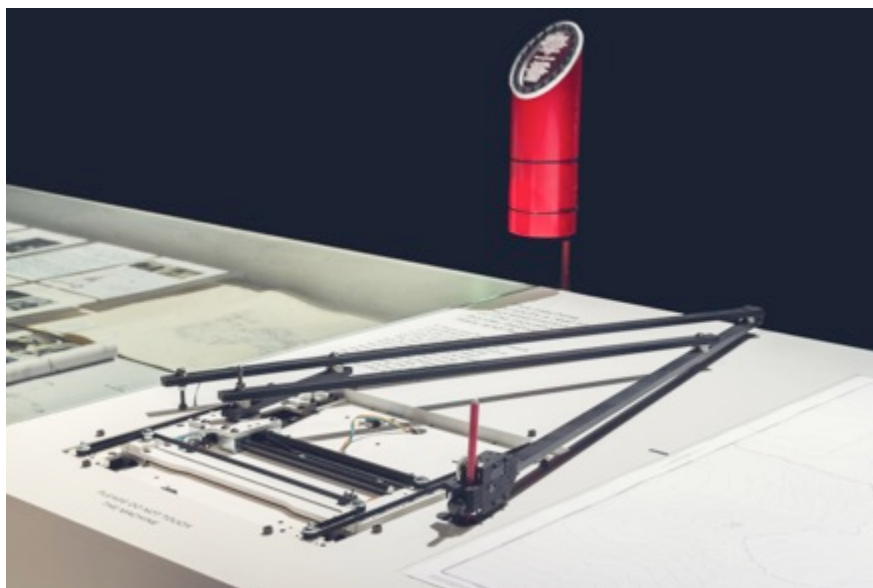


Fig. 7 Detail of the Drawing Machine

A valid example of this new practice is represented by the map of the Swiss urban landscape produced by the ETH Studio Basel in 2005, [Fig. 8] which replaces the traditional urban/rural representation of the territory, in a more expanded and complex network and overlap of metropolitan regions, city networks, quiet zones, alpine resorts, and alpine fallow lands, and most importantly, the regional's transnational connections showing that maps should not only be maps of state boundaries but also maps of meanings. (Brenner, N. 2012)

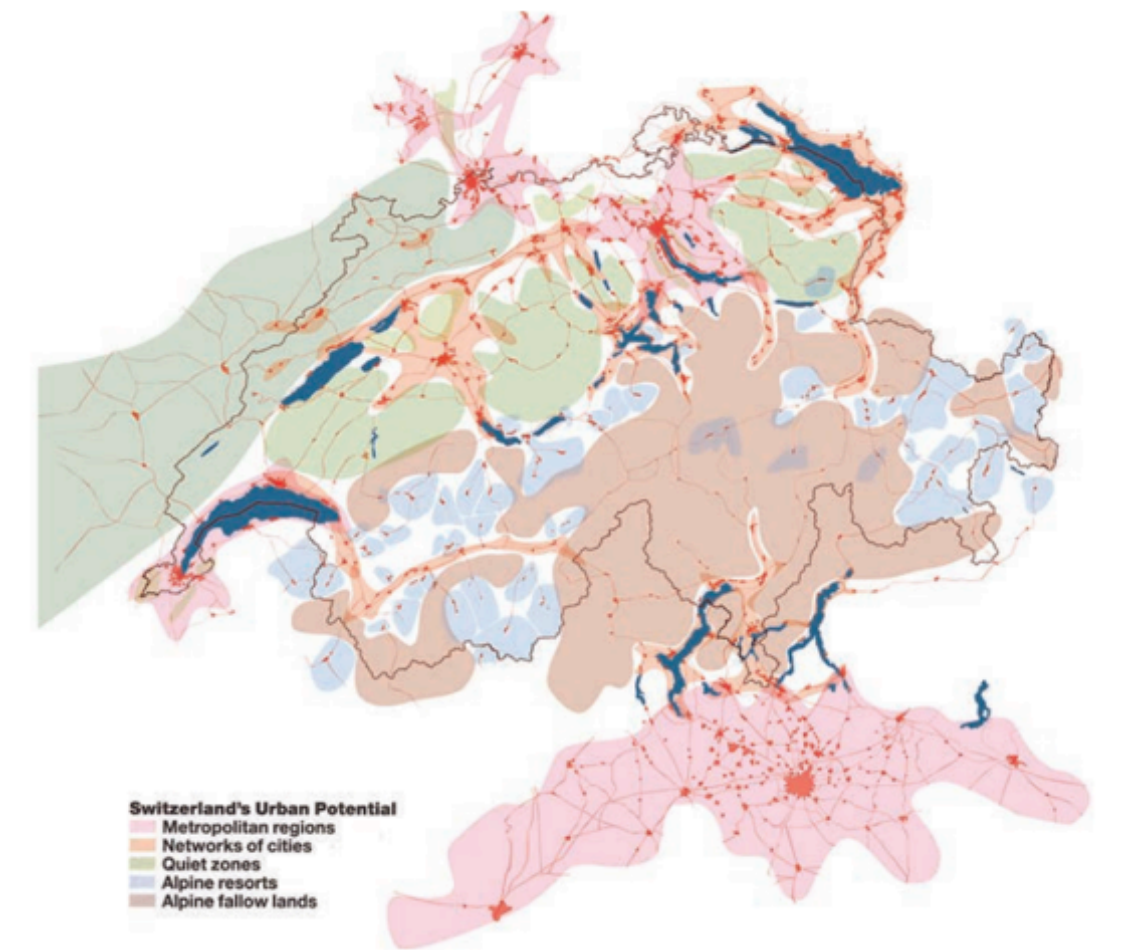


Fig. 8 ETH Studio Basel Map of Switzerland, ETH 2005

This innovative approach to borders is also showing that they are more social constructs rather than stable entities, and both *Italian Limes* and *Alpi* are insisting on this point. In *Alpi*, in fact, is never clear whether a certain scene is filmed in Switzerland, Italy or Austria, is not the peculiar geography that differentiates the territory, even though to a sensitive eye this is lightly understandable from the whispering or from the language signs or sometimes from the architecture features, depicting the essence of a transnational territory. Both representations succeed in following the recent shift in the geographical understanding of the notion of border: the erosion of nation-states supporting the statement that contemporary society is deeply transnational, involving

relations that freely cross national boundaries. The key argument is in fact that territories are not vanishing but operating in a new, global context in which new forms of re-scaled governance will gradually emerge. (Mann, M.1996)

If much of the globalization discourse has to be understood as rhetorical and metaphoric, especially the one related to boundaries, in which the "*borderless world in the global marketplace is a competitive map of real flows of financial and industrial activities*" (Ohmae, K.1995), geographers have commented on the very ambivalent nature of borders, revealing the multiplicity of views regarding the role of state-nations, underlining that borders should not be taken for granted. This statement is stressing on a often hidden aspect of the contemporary rhetoric about global markets and hyper connectivity: even though digitalisation removed the material ties, we still live in a context intrinsically linked to the eighteenth century logic of the sovereignty of national institutions (Wilson T. M. Hastings D. 2012)

Conclusion

In both *Alpi* and *Italian Limes*, what is perceived from the margins as a barrier, physically and culturally, appears to be an interdisciplinary and transnational and space, where the limits (borders and mountains) and the limitations (image constructs) are blurring and shifting, and there seems to be a deliberate move forward from the historical battles that this territory witnessed, putting itself above the political, historical and geographical divisions.

The conclusion of this paper and the argument of *Alpi* and *Italian Limes* suggest that, when dealing with territory, representation should offer, paraphrasing Sloterdijk, a polyvalent grammar on shared situation that could be the drive not only for orientation but also for invention. The challenge is in fact to find the right means to develop a critical creativity that could shift the approach towards a multi dimensional understanding and communication of territory and boundaries, creating the space for the new ambiguity of the political dimension (Picon, A. 2010), accepting the hybrid condition of territory and giving visibility to the links between too often separated instances.

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