Vilém Flusser
My Atlas[1]

The days when atlases were books must have been beautiful. You could leisurely turn the pages, either in order to localise a certain place or aimlessly, just to watch countries and seas drifting by. My grandfather told me that he used to own two such printed atlases. One of them was placed on his desk (these were tables which served as a surface supporting papers which were to be covered in letters). He kept the other one in his sitting room, usually buried under big piles of printed matter. (People used to differentiate between books, journals, newspapers, letters, leaflets and a lot of other mechanically blackened pieces of paper.)

He used the first atlas for work (he was a writer, i.e. he produced texts). He referred to it in order to situate the events he was describing in their geographical context. He browsed through the second atlas to "keep his distance from the world", as he put it. He said that the first atlas gave him the feeling of falling out of an abstract reflexion and diving into reality; the second one allowed him to peel off the short-sightedness which arose from reality's stickiness.

However, my grandfather explained, even in those days the crisis of confidence had already started affecting atlases. The traditional Mercator projection (from 1569) was no longer considered to be reliable enough. It was said to distort the actual situation: Greenland for example appeared to be bigger than South America, and it was impossible to represent Antarctica in it. They started to alter these supposed distortions. In 1913, Winkel proposed a projection which aimed to reduce all distortions to a minimum. In it, North America bowed down to the right towards Europe, Greenland became small and wide, and New Zealand was squeezed in with the rest of the world, so to speak. Then they took the next step: in 1977, Peters suggested a projection which inversed Mercator's distortions. Thus the continents were pulled from north to south like jelly babies; Africa and South America became long thin tongues, whereas Asia and North America turned into fat lumps. This second distortion was meant to compensate the first one.

The meddling with the projections meant that the earth's surface became increasingly uncanny (you could not feel at home in any of the projections). Yet at first, nobody realised what was actually happening. They thought it was all due to the technical problem of projecting a spherical surface onto a plane one. And they thought they had to solve this issue because in the second half of the twentieth century, people started flying across the North Pole from Europe to North America; in other words, they took a route which had been perfectly distorted by tradi-

[1] Translated from the German by Judith Kahl.

tional projections. So at first they thought that all they had to do was bring the projections in line with so-called "concrete experience". Yet soon objections against the atlas's orientating function were raised. It was pointed out that this was more than just a technical problem.

My grandfather told me how atlases began to spread in unexpected directions. In one direction they became colourful. The sea ceased to be of a uniform blue; instead, different shades of blue depicted the ocean relief. So-called "geographical maps" differentiated between fertile and infertile planes or between low, high and glaciated mountains by means of green, yellow, brown and grey colours. So-called "political maps" differentiated between individual so-called "independent" states, between different national territories, and the few remaining colonies by depicting them in different colours. The reader was expected to learn these codes which were difficult to decipher. What is more, he had to train his inner eye to make the "political maps" transparent for the "geographical maps". The times when the sea was blue and the British Empire was red had come to an end. You had to learn complicated, not necessarily universal colour codes in order to orientate yourself in the world. The currently overwhelmed "new imagination" was called upon.

In another direction, the atlas began to "zoom" closer to the world's surface. As a consequence, series of maps were established: for example, on the first map you could see the United States, on the second one the state of New York, on the third one the City of New York, on the fourth one the island of Manhattan, and on the fifth one Central Park. This "zooming" should allow the reader to mentally embed a geographical phenomenon which was accessible to human matter[2], for example Central Park, into a super-human dimension such as the United States. So-called "comparative maps" served a similar purpose. Here, French readers could examine the map of France as projected onto the map of India on the same scale, for example. Both techniques and other similar ones were borrowed from film production which played an important role in those days. Yet this had two unexpected consequences. First of all, in the series of maps one cipher could serve as two different symbols: a line which represented a river in the map of the United States would mark a footpath in Central Park. Thus the conventionalism, the intention inherent in cartographical representation became apparent to the reader. The map would show him not only Central Park but also the projector's intentions. Secondly, the reader could not leaf through the atlas at will anymore. That is to say, he could no longer skip the map of the "State of New York" in said series of maps if he wanted to grasp the position of Central Park in

[2] In German „menschliche Masse". This term is ambiguous and could refer to a "mass of humans" or "human mass"/"human matter", in other words the body. Given the topic and the overall storyline, a reference to the body seems more plausible.

the United States. He became aware that he was not controlling the atlas; the atlas was controlling him.

In a third direction, the atlas began to integrate history into geography. "Historical atlases" were established. For example, a series of maps of Italy would begin with a map depicting the invasion of the peninsula by Italic people and end with a map which showed the division of the Italian Republic at the end of the 20th Century. Such maps required the development of specific codes. For example, they needed a symbol for "battle", or one for "migration", or yet another one for "capital". These codes were indecipherable unless the maps were given a key, a legend to be learned by the reader. The intention behind these atlases was to represent history, which had always been understood in a linear way, in a visual, two-dimensional way. Indeed, historical atlases caused a revolutionary change in the reader's approach to history. Instead of swimming in it, he was facing it. Yet these atlases had other effects too. First of all, it was technically difficult to capture events on surfaces and processes in situations. What you saw was not history but history hacked into chunks. Rather than showing a film, a sequence of photographs was presented. It offered not a procedural but a quantified view. The flow of history became a mass of grains of sand. Secondly, it was almost impossible to capture the connections between geographically separate regions. The reader was expected to constantly turn the pages between the series of maps of Italy, back to the map of Greece and forth to the map of Spain. In other words, he had to make the connections himself. This way, the dynamic of history shifted away from history and into the reader: it was he who "played" history. Thirdly, the reader realized that in these atlases, some events were taken out of the flow of history, and the only criterion for choosing the events was whether or not they could be codified on maps. This criterion was in no way connected to history itself; it emerged from the atlas. As it could not represent "everything", it simply represented whatever it was able to represent. This kind of choice was not "ideological" but "technical". Fourthly, the atlas began to include maps which were unfamiliar to the reader. These maps would, for example, concern the history of Nigeria. The intention behind this was to overcome the Eurocentrism of traditional conceptions of history and to open our eyes to a conception of history which did not concentrate on the occident alone. Yet the new atlas had the opposite effect of its alleged intention. The reader realised that all interesting events were shown on maps of Western countries; the rest of the maps were only relevant because they commented on the events in the West. Now the reader had to ask himself if this was due to the fact that the production of historical atlases was an essentially Western activity. Finally, the main effect of the new atlas was that the reader became increasingly aware of the problems involved in the production of atlases and that his interests shifted away from the product of representation and towards the

activity of representing. Not history, but the act of visually transcoding history, became interesting.

In a fourth direction, the atlas began to include people into geography. So-called "encyclopaedic atlases" were established. You could see population maps which represented the distribution of humans on the earth's surface, for example. The scale was not in kilometres but in numbers of inhabitants of a country. And yet countries had to keep their approximate geographic shape and position in relation to other countries. Thus a "demographic map" would show India in its usual place and shape but it was three times as big as the United States, and it showed China to take over a quarter of all continental surfaces. In addition to this, every country bore a colour which represented its annual population growth. Green meant weak growth, brown stood for very strong growth. The occident was green; the Third World was depicted in different shades of brown. It was a distressing read. You could see that you were about to be devoured by the South. The intention behind these maps was to present this point of view. Other maps used similar methods to show the military and economic power of certain territories as well as their political structures, the cultural state, social classes, the unrest and revolutions which were occurring there. In other words, you were looking at prospective statistics in imaginary form. My grandfather used to say that the atlas had realised Shaw's lament that you had to cry when reading statistics. However, these maps had even further effects. Thanks to them you could see humanity sprawling on the surface of the earth like a kind of moss. It was impossible to recognise yourself amongst the statistic masses of re-codified society. Reading these atlases, you could exclude yourself from society. You did not see yourself as part of the represented masses but as part of those who contribute to the production of such atlases.

My grandfather was at once terrified and fascinated by the new atlas. He was terrified because he could feel how more and more obscuring screens were appearing between him and the world; at the same time though it became impossible to get a sense of orientation in the world without them. He was fascinated because they revealed how conceptual thinking was transformed into imaginary seeing and how the picture with its shapes and colours was about to supersede the grey of conceptual thinking. My grandfather often told me that for him, looking at an atlas was like opening a door leading towards a dreaded and at the same time desired future. It allowed him to see into a future in which it would be impossible to orientate yourself and in which art, science and politics were melting together, just like they did on his maps. However, he said, he would return to his old atlases with the familiar Mercator projection time and again; he wanted to maintain a sensible connection to the world outside.

I am often reminded of these conversations with my grandfather when I am using my own atlas, and sweet nostalgia overcomes me. How safe my grandfather must have felt, despite the rising crisis of confidence. How childish and naïve his almost perfectly justified concerns about my present, his future, had been. Here I am, sitting in front of my electronic screen and I order it to recall the section "atlas" from the memory hidden behind it. The screen immediately shows the index of my Video discothèque[3], the section "Atlas" is highlighted. I press the appropriate button and Central Park in Manhattan, as seen from the point of view of a balloon hovering above it, appears. To be precise, it first appears in a summery, then in a wintry fashion. I capture the wintry one and ask the screen to focalise[4] on a type of shrubbery that I am interested in right now. When it appears isolated on the screen I cannot recognise it. I therefore command the screen to identify the type of shrubbery in my Videodiscothèque, section "Botanic". It is first shown as a picture, then as a structure, then as a branch of biological evolution. Simultaneously, the question whether I am interested in more details on physiology, genetics and aesthetic aspects of this shrubbery appears on the screen. I negate the question and tell the screen to concentrate on Central Park again. I want to see what Central Park looked like in the Seventeenth Century AD, then BC. In the picture of Central Park in the Seventeenth Century AD a pretty girl catches my eye. Of course I know that this is not the picture of a person but that of a model and I tell the screen to trace this model. The screen refers me to a study carried out by a fashion historian, and another study by a historian who specialises in English Protestantism. I order the screen to look for information on the girl's hat in the study by the fashion historian. I get a series of hats in both horizontal (in geographical direction) and vertical (in historical directions) sequences. First of all, I tell the screen to project these sequences into the future. The possible hats of the future appear; lighting distinguishes the more likely from the less likely forms. Then I command the screen to put a notable hat in from the Twelfth Century into its context. A series of pictures showing Paris in the Twelfth Century appears. Now I demand to focalise on Paris. I see it as a reconstruction, as a map, embedded in the map of France and Europe in the Twelfth Century, and these again embedded in a map of the world in that century. For now I am content to have captured an aspect of Central Park with "new imagination".

It goes without saying that playing with my atlas is infinitely more beautiful, deeper and richer than my grandfather's browsing in his atlas. I must admit that I find it almost impossible to tear away from my atlas and return to the comparatively boring so-called "concrete environment". Though like most drugs, the game leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I am aware that this

[3] In German, Flusser uses the neologism "Videodiskothek".
[4] In German: "fokalisieren" (not "fokussieren"). "Fokalisieren"/focalising seems to be the Atlas's function for focussing or zooming.

is only a game of shadows, a game of models. This awareness gets only stronger whenever I contribute to the program in a "creative" way, for example by adding a video of Central Park which I shot myself. I have long since lost my grandfather's naïveté and stopped wondering about the ontological hierarchy of the models in relation to that which they represent. I have accepted the impossibility of any ontological question at all. Still I cannot get rid of the bitter aftertaste which tells me that I am only a shadow myself, while I am standing above the shadows, playing with them.

It does not help if you say that even my grandfather was yet another shadow because when he was browsing in his atlas, he was controlling shadows and controlled by shadows. It does not help if you say that being a shadow is a basic characteristic of human beings; that the human is at once player of and game piece to models. There is a fundamental difference between me and my grandfather: When he was playing, he was holding paper in his hands, whereas I am looking at insubstantial pictures. He used his hand to play; I use my fingertips at best. My children will not even go this far anymore: the screen will follow the command of their spoken word. The absence of hands and resulting impossibility of handling a situation[5], translates our awareness of being a shadow from reflection into concrete existence. Now that the atlas is a game of electronic pictures, we cannot escape the awareness of our own existence's shadiness any longer. The days when atlases were books must have been beautiful.

[5] In German: "Handlungslosigkeit". "Handlung" can mean "action" or "initiative" as well as "storyline" or "plot". A literal translation would therefore be either "lack of action" or "lack of storyline". The unusual choice of words suggests that Flusser wanted to repeat and thus reinforce the importance of "hands" which I tried to keep in this translation.