Situated Knowledges and Shifting Grounds:
Questioning the Reality Effect of High-resolution Imagery

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Donna Haraway has formulated the concept of "situated knowledges" to argue that the perception of any situation is always a matter of an embodied, located subject and their geographically and historically specific perspective, a perspective constantly being structured and restructured by the current conditions. The aim of this paper is to examine different ways of seeing the refugees of the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan through the lens of situated knowledges. It will present high-resolution aerial photos of their settlements as if they could be "anywhere" and it will look at a Virtual Reality short film which provides the viewers with a 360-degree view of the camp, promising an immersive experience, to argue that high-resolution images create distance and generic visions that scarcely foster engagement and situatedness.

Introduction

> Vision requires instruments of vision; an optics is a politics of positioning. Instruments of vision mediate standpoints; there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated. Identity, including self-identity, does not produce science; critical positioning does, that is, objectivity.[1]

In *Situated Knowledges*, Donna Haraway criticizes the theories of "disembodied scientific objectivity",[2] arguing for the embodied nature of all vision and a form of objectivity which takes into account both the agency of the person producing the knowledge and the object of study. Knowledge is determined and framed by the social situation of the epistemic agent, their race, gender, class, etc., and becomes body-specific and site-specific. And since perception is always specifically grounded and socially situated, the view of infinite vision and the construction of a transcendent objectivity become an illusion. Vision, according to Haraway, is always mediated and cannot be understood without its instruments:

> There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds.[3]

If vision is always a matter and a politics of situatedness, then the process of acquiring knowledge begins as standpoints, partial perspectives and specific ways of seeing emerge. The more of such partial perspectives and cultural narratives we gather, the closer we get to objective observations. Situated knowledges, therefore, stand against the unlocatable, the disembodied, and the irresponsible. The aim of this paper is to examine different ways of seeing refugees through the lens of Haraway's situated knowledges. It will present high-resolution aerial photos of refugees and their settlements which look as if they could be "anywhere", and it will look at a short film that promises an immersive experience of a refugee camp through its 360-degree Virtual Reality view. These examples will be juxtaposed with hastily captured, sometimes blurry or unclear mobile phone snapshots of people who find themselves in the midst of the action to argue that high-resolution images often create distance and generic visions that can hardly call for engagement and situatedness, despite their ambitious claims. The question of reality will frame this discussion. What makes our understanding of the real world today? And is there one true story of reality today?[4] Situated knowledges open up space for unexpected situations, unsettling possibilities, and many different lived realities. The feminist objectivity that Haraway proposes allows surprises and ironies to come into play in knowledge production and unexpected realities to emerge. It is interesting to pose the question of reality in the context of the current visualization technologies and devices that make a range of "realities" possible: from virtual reality to augmented reality to

1   Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, at 586.

2   Ibid., 576.

3   Ibid., 583.

4   Quoting Jane Flax, "Gender as a Problem: In and for Feminist Theory," *Amerikanstudien/ American Studies* 31 (Fall 1986): 193–213, Sandra Harding argues that reality can only have one, single structure when seen from the universalising perspective of the privileged, and calls for the abandonment of all kinds of universal claims. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 28.

mixed reality. What is the role and agency of new technologies in the (re) construction of new and hybrid forms of terrains, knowledges, and realities? And are such realities site- and body-specific? This essay questions this site-and-body specificity in the production of knowledge in increasingly unstable grounds and with increasingly mobile bodies in the context of the European refugee crisis.

The View from Above

The Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan, is one of the largest temporary settlements for refugees in the world, counting at the moment of writing 79,900 Syrian refugees.[5] Set up in July 2012, the camp is comparable in size to some of the largest cities in Jordan and is run jointly by the Jordanian government and UNHCR, comprising twelve different districts, schools and hospitals and an extensive market. Numerous documentaries focusing on the life of the refugees have been filmed on the site (we will look closely at one in the following section), and the camp has become very popular in the news media, with politicians and diplomats, celebrities and journalists visiting and reporting from it. The camp is primarily represented in articles and film using views from above: high-resolution aerial photographs, bird's-eye views and even satellite photographs

Fig. 1 A close-up view of the Zaatari camp in Jordan for Syrian refugees as seen on July 18, 2013, from a helicopter carrying U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh. Credit: U.S. Government Works

proliferate on the Internet, emphasizing mainly the scale and organization of the site (although it could also be argued that aerial imagery best portrays the isolation of the site from its surroundings and its clear separation from any urban context). In recent times, the phenomenon of mass migration, the spaces of refugees and their visualization have come to the fore of architectural research, with events such as the Venice Biennale in 2016 and numerous international competitions engaging design in response to the crisis. Very often in such contexts refugee camps around the world are represented in the media in ways that highlight the arrangement of the tents and the homogeneity of the site, and one can even

[5] "Syria Regional Refugee Response - Jordan - Mafraq Governorate - Zaatari Refugee Camp," UNHCR. http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176&region=77&country=107 (accessed 15 October 2016).

find applications and platforms that map out such sites. A "story map" by the software company ESRI,[6] for example, presents highly detailed satellite views of the world's fifty most populous refugee camps, where one can see their exact location on the map, their demographics, and their comparison in size to a – usually random – American city.

From the bird's-eye view and the city portraits of the Renaissance to modernity's experience of flight and today's Google Earth, which represents the earth's surface as a multi-media surface, the aerial view has been associated with ideas of infinite vision and the all-knowing observer, with distance and "objectivity", with exemption from any engagement with things, and with dreams of omniscience. In his essay "On Google Earth", Mark Dorrian talks about the "politics of resolution" that Google Earth facilitates with its images. Since the release of Google Earth, all sorts of interferences, from national security to privacy issues, from censorship to efforts to camouflage, and in the service of both economic and political interests, have shaped the degree to which specific terrains reach us:

> Google Earth might present us with a new kind of political map, one structured according to a different logic than those coloured political cartographies, organised by the vectors of national boundaries, with which we are all familiar. Instead with Google Earth the implication is that we have a politics of resolution, or definition, of the image, a new popular political map structured through image resolutions and the upload periodicity of data sets.[7]

In the context of digitization, places that are accessible, public, available are projected in great detail, while places of conflict, of security issues, of high privacy are blurred in a complex play of high and low definition and of proximity and distance. Aiming to take us as close to the situation as possible, many of the images of the Zaatari refugee camp are uncannily detailed, yet people and buildings are thinned into an abstraction of the kind critiqued by Siegfried Kracauer in "The Mass Ornament".[8]

The visual distance is also supported by other digital means. Andrew Herscher regards the new practices by which refugees are managed and sheltered by the United Nations and the other agents involved in the process as "voucher humanitarianism".[9] With the help of telecommunication companies and banks – at its most extreme applications using iris scanners in ATM machines to replace credit cards and PIN numbers[10] – "digital food" and "digital shelter" allowances tend to replace the refugee camps. In this situation the refugee becomes dissociated from the refuge and humanitarianism disconnects from architecture. According to Herscher, when the spatial residence is replaced by "digital controls", the making of any site-specific and

6   "Fifty Largest Refugee Camps - A Story Map Presented by ESRI," ESRI. http://storymaps.esri.com/stories/2013/refugee-camps (accessed 15 October 2016).

7   Mark Dorrian, "On Google Earth," in *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*, ed. Mark Dorrian and Frederic Pousin (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 290–307, at 301.

8   The placelessness and the detachment from any specific situation described here bring to mind Siegfried Kracauer's critique of the Tiller Girls in "The Mass Ornament." The Tiller Girls for Kracauer are not perceived as individual human beings but as clusters of bodies who perform their routines with the same geometric precision at any place and in any theater: "in a vacuum." Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75-86, at 77. This process reflects the capitalist thinking that deprives human minds, lives, and bodies of their concrete reality and substance and turns people into empty abstractions.

9   Daniel Bertrand Monk and Andrew Herscher, "The New Universalism: Refuges and Refugees between Global History and Voucher Humanitarianism," *Grey Room 61* (Fall 2015), 71–80 on 71.

10 Andrew Herscher, "Humanitarianism's Housing Question: From Slum Reform to Digital Shelter," *e-flux*, 66 (2015).

11   Monk and Herscher, "The
       New Universalism," 76.

12   Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 581.

13   *Clouds Over Sidra*. Directed by
       Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman.
       USA: VRSE.works (Within), 2015,
       http://with.in/watch/clouds-over-
       sidra (accessed 5 January 2017).

body-specific architecture becomes unnecessary and, by extension, this "dearchitecturalization"[11] of humanitarianism takes us to a new form of universalism: a humanitarianism that could be anywhere, with refugees too being placed anywhere, or equally nowhere. Through the lens of both Kracauer's line of study and Herscher's "voucher humanitarianism" that detaches the refugee crisis from any specific situation, the arrangements of refugees and their camps take an abstract, representational form despite the high resolution of their imagery. The extreme detail of the photographs plays a different role here: it aims at transforming the subjective image (subjective because it carries within itself hundreds of stories of expatriation, war, and trauma) into "objective" information: data to be registered, analyzed, processed, and compared. The visual field translates into an informational field and technologies of perception are employed to interpret the place into a model. Vision in this context becomes "unregulated gluttony".[12] The most recent visualizing technologies come without apparent limit, carrying within themselves the inheritor of the god's-eye view of the Middle Ages: the dreams of total knowledge and total seeing. And the domestication of such tools through the multiple devices that we possess and use increases the illusion of seeing everything from nowhere. But is this "long view" truthful and objective? And would detail be able to position us on the spot, even if we had the means to infinitely zoom in?

Virtual Reality

Clouds over Sidra[13] is a Virtual Reality short film directed by Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman that takes us inside the Zaatari refugee camp through the eyes of Sidra, a twelve-year-old girl who has lived there for eighteen months. Sidra presents the viewers with a day from her life as it has been re-established in Jordan: from the family's accommodation to the streets of the camp, to the school, to a space where boys of her age play computer games, to the gym, to the football pitch. The spaces that we previously observed from above now appear for us from another perspective: we are placed inside and we have the possibility to examine them in close detail. The movie is designed to be watched with the help of Virtual Reality headsets that provide a 360-degree view of the scenes, aiming at indulging the viewers with a truly immersive experience. By moving their heads around, they can see not only what Sidra sees when walking to school, but also the sky and the ground, the schoolteacher and the other children around her looking back at them. The film was commissioned by the United Nations (UN) and sponsored by Samsung; it was launched before the prestigious participants at the World Economic Forum in Davos, at the outbreak of the refugee crisis in January 2015. During the opening of the forum, politicians, corporate business leaders and academics, among others, were invited to this experience in order to be mobilized on the situation. The footage of this unique "screening" offers some rather surreal

Fig. 2 Sidra's accommodation, still from *Clouds Over Sidra,* Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman (dir.), 2015 (courtesy of Within)

Fig. 3 Going to school, still from *Clouds Over Sidra,* Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman (dir.), 2015 (courtesy of Within)

Fig. 4 The boys playing video games, still from *Clouds Over Sidra,* Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman (dir.), 2015 (courtesy of Within)

moments, with Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, describing the film as "deeply moving" and Mitchell Toomey, Director of the UN Millennium Campaign, arguing that with such media "we can create solidarity with those who are normally excluded and overlooked, amplifying their voices and explaining their situations".[14]

Virtual Reality technology has only recently escaped the confines of video games to be used for the purposes of film-making. "Empathy" and "immersion" are the key terms that are repeatedly used to describe the impact of the movies that have been produced.[15] Unlike conventional film-making, the process requires a cluster of cameras, bound together and pointing in all directions from a single source. The footage then goes through a highly complex post-production in order to create a wraparound environment, with the viewer positioned at the very center. For the filmmaker to stay out of shot, they need to set up their camera rig, begin recording and then quickly run and hide behind an object, hoping that the action will unfold as planned. Thus the viewer is placed at the center of every scene, even though the filmmaker is absent when he/she is filming it. The protagonist too is seemingly absent from the scene, as the viewer is supposed to be in their place, embodying them.
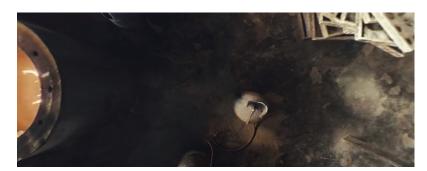

Fig. 5 Looking down, still from *Clouds Over Sidra*, Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman (dir.), 2015 (courtesy of Within)

At the beginning we see Sidra introducing herself to us, after which we never get to see her again – since we experience the camp having taken over her eyes. As shown when looking downward, the viewer confronts the ground rather than a human body, a void, and is left with a feeling of invisibility and suspension. This fictional situation brings to mind Louis Marin's map analysis in "The City in Its Map and Portrait."[16] In this essay, Marin studies three sixteenth century maps of Strasbourg to argue that a city map is the representation of a production of a specific discourse on the city (rather than one of the pure "reality" of the city) and, therefore, the deconstruction of this representation brings out all the preconceptions on which this discourse has been formed. In each of the maps Marin questions the place, the symbolism, and the power of what he calls "the delegate of enunciation":[17] this is a figure who often appears on the representation of the city, usually shown standing outside the map, and represents the city's viewer outside the representation. The third of Marin's maps is an

14 UN_SDG_ACTION_CAMPAIGN. "Virtual Reality and Vulnerable Communities," https://sdgactioncampaign.org/virtualreality (accessed 14 October 2016).

15 Chris Milk, "How Virtual Reality Can Create the Ultimate Empathy Machine." TED talk, TED2015, Vancouver, Canada, March 16-20, 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine?language=en (accessed 5 October 2016).

16 Louis Marin, "The City in Its Map and Portrait," in *On Representation*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 202–18.

17 Ibid., 211.

Fig. 6 Plan Morant, not dated, credit: Archives de Strasbourg, 1 Pl 1

extraordinary example of the construction of a fictional viewing point and the power of its representation. The map takes the form of a bird's-eye view, but the concentric arrangement of the buildings reveals that the map is viewed from above the white space at its center:

> as if the viewer of the map were contemplating the whole city from "there", that is, from a celestial place whose projection onto the surface of the ground represented could be inscribed only by default, in the form of an absence, a central blind spot.[18]

The emptiness of this central blind spot is confirmed by the fact that it becomes the space for inscription of a text, so that the ground becomes thinned into an abstraction. The only structure missing from this representation is the spire of the cathedral, and the empty space on the map is what signifies its absence.[19] Instead of displaying the "delegate of enunciation" in this case, the map is erasing that presence: it is instead the empty space on the map that creates the fiction that produces the figures of the representation. According to Marin, the only way to make the spire of the cathedral visible as an operator in this process of representation is to make it disappear and to inscribe its very absence.

In a not dissimilar way, Sidra's presence is manifested as an absence from the representation of the life in the camp. The position of the viewer in the center of the blind spot and in suspension illustrates on the one hand the place of the subject/viewer and reveals on the other the mechanism that produces the representation – another form of fiction here. Then mediation becomes central; getting back to Situated Knowledges,[20] it is impossible to have an unmediated view from the

18   Ibid., 214.

19   Ibid., 215.

20   Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 586.

standpoints of the subjugated. Instruments of vision always inevitably mediate standpoints and define our positioning. The camera rig that produces this 360-degree view, the absence of the film-makers from the time of the filming, the headset that projects the movie as an immersive experience, as well as the conference room in Davos where this screening of the film took place, all define in a complex way the viewers' positioning and their perception of what is represented.

The Reality Effect of New Media

Sensory-input devices, space simulators and primitive head-mounted displays were invented more than half a century ago, and Virtual Reality was discussed a lot in the 1980s and then again in the 1990s. It became very popular after 2000 with games such as World of Warcraft and social worlds such as Second Life. Neither the positioning of the player in relation to the screen nor the visual representation and resolution of the computer graphics of such early examples can begin to compare to the sophistication of the technological means applied to Virtual Reality today. However, one could become immersed in such worlds despite (and perhaps due to the) poor graphics. I argue that the user became so emotionally and mentally engaged with the digital world through their avatar that they would disregard the fact that the world on display was artificial and imperfect.[21] Such worlds were then worth investigating not as visually perfect representations but rather as environments that, despite their imperfections, had the ability to trigger the imagination of their users to supplement and complete their experience. In the same sense, the avatar body also became a field of investigation. As an object and a vehicle of the self intrinsically linked to its creator, it not only revealed but also extended and supplemented the character of the user and questioned "situatedness" within the context of digitization.

The form that Virtual Reality takes today, conversely, abolishes the distance between the user and the screen, is saturated with detail, and situates the viewer at a predetermined place inside the high definition scene that it produces. The question of realism, however, arises here: does this create a real, life-like experience, or does it, instead, produce a more-than-real, a hyper-real condition, increasingly immersing us in a realm of virtualization, which transforms things into idealized images of themselves? Is realism indeed a poor way of engaging with things and with the world's active agency, as argued by Haraway,[22] especially when we are experiencing more and more video-game-like environments in our everyday life?

In his essay written in 1968, "The Reality Effect", Roland Barthes argues that the analysis of any text cannot be considered complete unless it takes into account the seemingly insignificant, scandalous, details of the narrative.[23] According to Barthes, the untheorized descriptive details of the

[21] In her essay *Will the Real Body Please Stand Up*, Allucquère Rosanne Stone discusses a primitive military simulation called SIMNET, which, despite its poor graphics, appeared to have a particular reality effect on its users: "the simulation is astonishingly effective, and participants become thoroughly caught up in it. SIMNET's designers believe it may be the lack of resolution itself that is responsible, since it requires participants to actively engage their own imaginations to fill the holes in the illusion!". Allucquère Rosanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?", in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 81–118, at 96.

[22] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 593.

[23] Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 141–48, at 143.

24   Ibid., 146.

25   Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 581.

26   Stefano Boeri, "Eclectic atlases:
four possible ways of seeing the
city," *Daidalos* 69/70 (December
1998/ January 1999), 102– 13.

text are the ones that produce effects of reality, disengaging themselves from any signifier.[24] Representations of reality, he argues, cannot produce any meaning, and thus their sole purpose is to authenticate the real and to signify the concept of realism itself. Visualizing technologies today have, according to Haraway, no apparent limits, reaching any scale from the micro to the macro and any environment from the most domestic to the most universal.[25] Vision within this context of technological advancement comes as pure excess and omnipotence. The two examples that we have examined are ample in detail. None of this detail, however, seems to be in excess: every single element has a very specific purpose, to create an unlocatable and disembodied, not a real but a more-than-real perspective and a fixed image. On the other hand, the thousands of snapshots from the refugee camps one may find in the social media expose a very different reality: that of the refugees themselves, or the people who accompany them. Such incomplete, multiple and interweaving viewpoints, in the form of "eclectic atlases",[26] bring out multiple realities and unexplored worlds, and stand against the dream of an all-embracing vision from a predetermined point of view. Low resolution, limited connectivity and the camera of a mobile phone, do not signify the absence of the necessary unnecessary detail here, but bring together information that situates us in the action. The ability to position the device in relation to one's body and to the scene makes them instruments for us to see the refugees as they are, and for them to see the world.

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