

2 Centers of Europe

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Chantal Akerman's film, *D'Est*, makes a journey from eastern Germany, across Poland and the Baltics, to Moscow, from the end of summer to an ice cold winter. Presenting scenes from everyday life in the former Eastern Bloc in 1993 in a neutral style, without comment, narration or dialogue, the film shows the "real" Eastern Europe; yet in a way, that is somehow disturbing. The title, together with the journey of the camera, quickly brings into play the familiar image of the hierarchical relation in which the positive West assumes the role of a model for the negative East, the latter taking the position of the good student: the developing economy or the democratizing mentality. However, the journey that Akerman's film retraces does not slide toward barbarism. With their lightness of touch, the film's visual representations, pictures of city streets, apartment interiors or faces of people waiting in a bus terminal, jar with the popular image of "the East". Immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the viewers are left alone with the troubling pictures of a journey eastwards, pictures which are not stable and given, but uncertain and mobile just like the tracking shots in the film, when the camera effectively never stops moving.

It is precisely this movement in relation to which the stability of geographic positions can be represented. The concept of Central Europe, redefined and propagated among others by Kundera in the 1980s, is a good example of the popular geographic imaginary mentioned above. For Kundera, the part of Europe that is situated geographically in the center is "culturally in the West and politically in the East" (Kundera 1984: 33). Eastern Europe is not European, because of the conception of the East. The tragedy of Central Europe is that "After 1945, the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East" (Kundera 1984: 33). It is thus the historical displacement of the East–West border of civilizations, in relation to which the concept of Central Europe is formulated. According to Kundera's expectations of the early 1980s with the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the border would at one blow shift back to where it was originally and the nations that always considered themselves as Western would finally find themselves in the West, that is, in Europe. The "essential tragedy" of Central Europe – that its countries "have vanished from the map of the West" would be over. What is not over is the process of

drawing the map whose “borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation” (Kundera 1984: 35).

Certainly, the collapse of the bipolar world order in Europe was just such a historical situation Kundera envisaged. However, the historical situation is continuously changing, which means that the cultural cartographers of Europe have no chance to lean back with the satisfaction of completing a job well done. All the more that the different cartographies compete in an unequal playing field and are most often mutually exclusive. After the fall of the European state socialist regimes, the historical situation continued as the geopolitical game of European enlargement, a long process of cultural cartography in which different sides – western European countries and supranational organizations on the one hand, and countries aspiring to membership in those organizations on the other – struggled with unequal resources for the definition of Europe(anness). The border of civilizations dividing East and West began to move again, this time, a few hundred kilometers eastwards. From one point of view, what happened was “European integration”: the unification of a long-separated continent through supposedly universal values. These values were then applied as criteria of judgment of eligibility of the applicants. From another perspective, the process was “returning to Europe”. This idea is inseparable from the concept of Central Europe. Returning to Europe without movement means being capable of becoming European, that is, sharing European values in economics, politics, and mentality. According to Kundera and other proponents of the Central Europe discourse, this part of the continent has always remained culturally Western – and thus European – despite the fact that the “East” kidnapped it from Europe.

The intellectual movement around the concept of Central Europe, by constructing and imposing it most of all as cultural heritage in the Cold War geopolitical context, was a more or less successful strategy to participate in drawing the map of Europe(anness). With the accession of the region’s countries to the European Union, however, the discourse on Central Europe lost its significance, since it had achieved its main goals. Or rather, it had lost its weapon: one cannot be more European than being a member of the EU. It is as if Central Europe has dissolved inside the “official borders” of Europe. The “in-between part” of the continent moved away to the southeast (Módos 2005). The fact that the “great enemy”, the occupying Soviet Union, no longer existed required the redefinition of the Central European position. Although the geopolitical-seismographic turmoil of Europe abated after 2004 and 2006, it did not end conclusively. The struggle for the definition of Europe continued, as the current popularity of the question of the “specificity” of the region well demonstrates. From the outside of the EU, the Europeanness of the candidates was at stake, from the inside, the equality of united Europeans.

Another intellectual current aiming to participate in the drawing of the European map, and less influential in regional terms, criticized the Central European discourse heavily, pointing to the fact that this latter was mainly the practice of exclusion, alienating the other as the negatively constructed East by taking the position of the positive West. This mechanism worked even to the south (Todorova

1997). The principal target here was “the West”, which was accused of imposing the hierarchical East–West scheme on Eastern Europe as the other. Applying elements of post-colonial critique to Eastern Europe, intellectuals of the region rightly pointed to the unequal power relations between the Western and Eastern countries and institutions during the enlargement process (Böröcz and Kovács 2001). This criticism is often restricted, however, merely to a practice of representing oneself as the victim of Western “orientalism”. The problem, of course, is not the fact that Central and Eastern Europe has never been colonized by modern Western Europe; rather, it is that often this discourse merely targets the culpability of the West to be able to speak in the name of the subordinated Eastern Europe.

Both types of intellectual claims can be considered as strategic attempts to construct a regional position in the European or world scene of cultural cartography. Certainly, Central and Eastern Europe participates in the construction of Europe, not only subjected to Western manipulations. How to conceive this unequal and cooperative struggle? Spatial practices that are responsible for the change or the continual maintenance of an agent’s position on the geographic and civilizational-cultural map, especially by constructing the memory of the past, are practices of localization (Zombory 2012). The context of localization is always spatial reorganization, of which the transformation of the geopolitical world order after 1989 is an example. A position can be represented as fixed and permanent in relation to the continual spatial dynamics conceived recently as the movement of the East–West border above our very heads, we who suddenly find ourselves being inside or outside Europe without moving an inch. Cultural cartography means those practices of localization in geographic space that produce places of belonging, meanings of identification and demonstrate the power of classification.

In the social space where the geographic cultural map of Europe is drawn, every position is claimed and debated. In this field of power relations, the social struggle is around the monopoly over the legitimate definition of categories of belonging, be it the nation, the race or the region. As Bourdieu put it regarding the concepts of region: “The *regio* and its frontiers (*fines*) are merely the dead trace of the act of authority which consists in circumscribing the country, the territory (which is also called *fines*), in imposing the legitimate, known and recognized definition (another sense of *fines*) of frontiers and territory – in short, the source of legitimate division of the social world” (Bourdieu 1991: 222). The question is, then, how the different participants in the struggle over the definition of Europe legitimate their vision and division of the social space called Europe.

A strategy of spatial self-representation operates with the symbolic effectiveness of the concept of center. Interestingly, neither of the intellectual movements mentioned above have relied consistently on it. For the former, the center is simply a geographic matter of secondary importance in relation to cultural Westernness, while for the latter, it does not exist at all, unless in a Wallersteinian sense where center and periphery are inseparable relational concepts defined by economic criteria and not fixed geographically. Yet the idea of the center is saturated with symbolic meanings. The center is identical, powerful and sacred. In an anthropological sense, a center is a place of home and the source of identity; its

singularity and symmetry makes it transcendental. As József Kakas, one of the hosts and an informant of Edit Fél and Tamás Hofer, authors of the book *Proper Peasants*, related, as a schoolboy he went to the church of the village Átány, and he had the following conversation with some friends: “We know that Hungary is in the center of the world, Átány is the center of Hungary, the church stands in the very center of the village. Thus, we stand in the center of the world” (Fél and Hofer 1969: 17). Being in the center is a source of pride. Additionally, in a political sense, the center is a place of power, from where authority is derived.

In what follows, I will examine how certain actors have applied the idea of the center as localization in the context of the European spatial dynamic: the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the spatial reorganization represented as the movement of the East–West civilizational border eastwards caused by the enlargement process. How can the idea of the center be a strategy of localization? Is it not evident where the center of Europe is situated? Considering the fact that there are dozens of signs and monuments marking the center of Europe, nothing seems to be less evident. The definition of the center of Europe depends on where its borders are. Therefore, defining its center means defining Europe.

If the borders of Europe are easily identifiable, locating the center should not be a difficult task. One case is the reference to “natural borders”, which is an ideological attempt striving to legitimize borders by taking them out of the sphere of human action. Another is when a political entity has well-established control over its territory. Thus, the political borders of the EU are easily identifiable. Yet again the problem stems from the fact that borders are changing. According to the calculations of the French Institut Géographique National (IGN), between 1986 and 1995, the center of the twelve-member union was near Saint-André-le-Coq, in France, and it moved 25 km north to the village of Noireterre after the reunification of Germany in 1990. In 1995, the accession of Austria, Sweden, and Finland pushed Europe’s center to Viroinval in Belgium. A large movement of the center occurred in 2004 when ten countries, mostly from the former Eastern Bloc, joined; this time, it moved 140 km northeast, to Kleinmaischeid, Germany. With the accession of Romania and Bulgaria two years later, the center moved further east, by 115 km to Gelnhausen (for an inexhaustive collection of centers of Europe see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_midpoint_of_Europe). Most of these midpoints are marked with a monument. The same phenomenon can be observed if we take the eurozone for Europe: with the extension of the zone, its center changes location.

Neither the EU nor the eurozone has significant symbolic value compared to Europe as such, that is, to “geographic Europe”. This denomination is supposed to refer merely to the extension of the continent. However, the meanings of Europe as materiality, a piece of Earth, are inseparable from the significance of Europe as an idea and political problem. Geography is a mode of spatial representation, currently the dominant one. As de Certeau put it, the map is a “totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form a tableau of a state of geographical knowledge”; therefore, it represents this knowledge rather than reality as such (de Certeau 1984: 121). The reference to geographic Europe is a



Pictures 2.1 Centre géographique de l'Europe des 15, Viroinval, Oignies en Thiérache.



Pictures 2.2 Memorial Zirkelschlag in Kleinmaischeid represents the geographical center of the European Union from May 1, 2004 until December 31, 2006.

way of legitimizing an act of localization through the authority of modern science. This is why the question of the calculation of the center is so important in the definition struggles of the cultural cartography of Europe.

How can it be, that scientific geography is not capable of determining the center at a given moment? According to the common sense explanation, the different modes of calculations are responsible for the multiplicity of geographic centers. If not only continental Europe but also its islands are taken into account, such as Portugal's Azores, Russia's Franz Josef Land, or Iceland and Crete, then the center is located elsewhere, accordingly. What is more, there are different calculation procedures in use.

In 1989, Jean George Affholder, a scientist from IGN, determined that the geographical center of Europe is near Purnuškės, Lithuania. He explained to the *Radio Free Europe* (RFE) in 2002 that "A few definitions of 'center' exist. It is possible that certain countries have chosen, for instance, the average of the longitude extreme and latitude extreme. It can be a definition, but this is not ours. It is quite a simplistic definition. Ours is based on the notion of [a] center of gravity" (www.rferl.org/content/article/1101144.html). Lithuania took the opportunity and erected a Geographic Center Monument at the site, and established Europos Parkas, Open Air Museum of the Center of Europe, where tourists can see modern sculptures made of stone and wood. Lithuania can be proud that the Guinness Book of World Records officially listed the Purnuškės monument as the geographical center of Europe.

In the same program in RFE, an expert from the Polish Academy of Sciences was also asked, who contested Affholder's claim and declared that the center of Europe is in Suchowola, Poland. To be sure, in the center of the town, an iron column is set to mark the spot. And the list can go on.

One has to accept the fact that scientific knowledge is not helpful in undoubtedly providing a definitive measurement of the center of Europe. The position of the monument in Polotsk, Belarus, set up in 2008, was calculated by Belarusian geodesists and confirmed by the Russian Central Research Institute of Geodesy, Aerial Survey, and Cartography. However, in the same country, there are other centers of Europe, too. Similarly, the Geometric Centre of Europe in Tállya, Hungary was also defined by experts, in 1992. The monument, erected in 2000, is a four-meter-high wooden statue of a phoenix standing on a rock base.

Let us see what other sources of legitimacy are relied upon besides the authority of scientific geography. Poland can refer to the historical fact that Suchowola was first calculated as the center of Europe in 1775 by the royal astronomer Szymon Antoni Sobiekranski. Great figures of European history can put places on the civilizational map, as the example of the European Center in Dyleń (Tillenberg in the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) demonstrates. According to local tradition, in 1813 Napoleon proclaimed the 939-meter-high mountain to be the geographical center of Europe. The stone pillar, erected in 1862, is now located in the Czech Republic, but it is promoted as a tourist site by the nearby German town of Neualbenreuth as well. History is an important source of authority: not only national heroes, but the amount of time that has passed can lend weight to the



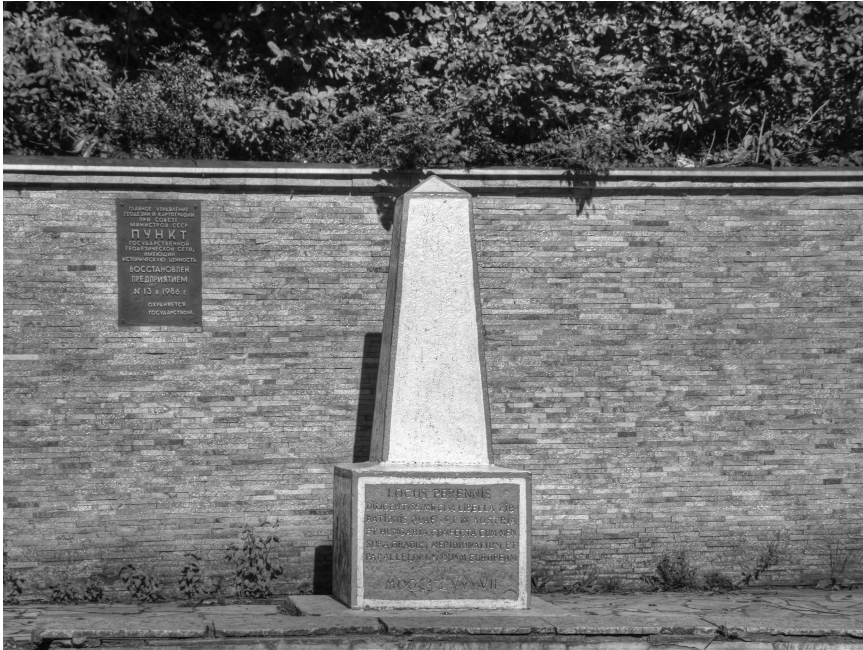
Picture 2.3 Center of Europe, Lithuania.



Picture 2.4 Boulder symbolizing Suchowola geographic center of Europe located at a town park by Kościuszki sq. street in Suchowola, gmina Suchowola, podlaskie, Poland



Picture 2.5 The monument “Polotsk – the center of Europe”.



Picture 2.6 Geographical midpoint of Europe in Kruhlyj, Rakhiv Raion, Zakarpattia Oblast, Ukraine.

Source: © Raimond Spekking/CC BY-SA 4.0 (via Wikimedia Commons) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Center_of_Europe_-_monument_-_nearby_Rakhiv_-_Ukraine_%285647-49%29.jpg

legitimacy of a claim to be for the center. The best would be eternity, of course. *Locus perennis* – everlasting place: this is the name of a historical marker that was measured by experts of the Austro-Hungarian Military Geographical Institute in 1887. Today it is located in the village of Dilove, near Rakhiv, Ukraine. According to Rakhiv’s official guide book, the obelisk’s inscription in Latin says: “The center of Europe was determined very precisely, with a special apparatus produced in Austria and Hungary, with the dial of meridians and parallels. 1887” (<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB108976264032863020,00.html>).

The current Austrian Geographical Society asserted to *The Wall Street Journal* in 2004 that the obelisk has nothing to do with the center of Europe. In fact, the marker is one of seven that geographers of the Habsburg Empire established as fixed points from which to measure altitude. It is hard to translate the inscription on the monument, because parts have been worn off and painted over incorrectly. An Oxford University classics professor, after having consulted with another scholar who found an earlier transcript of the Rakhiv inscription, translated the inscription for *The Wall Street Journal* as follows: “Main fixed point of exact height-leveling carried out in Austria-Hungary in connection with the European measurement of meridional and parallel degrees 1887”.

Sometimes there is not even any need for a geographic calculation for the declaration to be the center. It is sufficient, as in the case of Átány, to apply the anthropological mystery of its idea. That is, to declare to be the center of the center. Countries aiming to prove their European qualities tend to consider themselves as the center, or in an anthropomorphic sense, the heart of Europe. Thus, the center of Europe is proved as the geometrical center of a country supposed to be situated in the middle of Europe – as in the case of Číhošť in the Czech Republic, Kremnica in Slovakia, or Piątek in Poland.

Every geographic center of Europe is a national center as well. The centers are defined in the power relations of the nation-state system. Due to the national symbolism of landscape, the nation that has the center of Europe in its territory can claim to be more European than others, even the most European one – which is not to be underestimated in the context of the competition in “returning to Europe” in the two decades after 1989. And because of the singularity of the idea, each center excludes all the others. There is no European tolerance in this matter. As one website puts it on the Dilove center: “This [that the center of Europe can be found here] alone could differentiate our land from others in Europe” (green-ukraine.com). Localizing the center in the national territory means tracing the borders of Europe along nation-state borders. What remains outside is less or non-European.

Having the geographic center of Europe in one’s territory means that the European quality or mentality of the nation is eternal, since, according to the ahistorical representation of the modern map, it is believed that geographic positions do not change. The changes are thought to stem from the incorrect or undeveloped calculations. This sense of eternity is an important element in the touristic promotion of the Lithuanian center of Europe: “The geographical location never let Lithuania to distance from the main European events, and this is not surprising as it is the real scientifically agreed geographical center of Europe”. As we can see, national history proves geographic calculations, and vice versa: the geographic location of the nation “caused many problems and disasters to Lithuanians”. The center, moreover, is the condensational site of Europeanness: “It is generally agreed that every European must visit it at least one time per life as this is an important place, where the whole strength of Europe centralizes” (ways2lithuanina.com). This national localization then produces an eternal and sacred place for Lithuanians in the civilizational map of Europe and the world. This permanent rootedness in one and the same place can only be represented in relation to the movement of the East–West border generated by the storms of history.

What we have here is the nationalization of Europe, rather than the Europeanization of the nation. It is no accident, however, that the geographical centers of Europe are mostly located in post-communist Europe, since this is the region that was the most involved in the politics of cultural cartography over the last decades. Besides the competition for the title of the “most European nation”, these events also show the rivalry of the countries of this region with the culturally and politically well-established central position of “the West”, in fact with the Western European countries and supranational institutions that successfully monopolized and imposed the definition of Europe. In this rivalry, the countries striving for Europeanness fought with the means of the Center. As Balibar argued, the

European balance of power and the corresponding popular national sovereignty are inseparable from the hegemonic position of Europe in the world from the 17th to the first half of the 20th century. “Drawing ‘political’ borders in the European sphere, which considered itself and attempted to appoint itself the *center of the world*, was also originally and principally a way to *divide up the Earth*; thus, it was a way at once to organize the world’s exploitation and to export the ‘border form’ to the periphery, in an attempt to transform the whole universe into an extension of Europe, later into ‘another Europe’, built on the same political model” (Balibar 2002: 75). State actors of the EU candidate countries thus applied the nation-state model of the West and re-appropriated its practices as the center of the world. Of course, the more one has to insist on centrality, the more uncertain is the central position.

How to escape from this circle of center powering? By acknowledging the plurality of centers, and what comes with it, with the fact that geographical reality is dynamic, and maps are not static and stable. There is constant self-positioning instead of representing “being the center”, as in the documentary film of Stanisław Mucha, *Die Mitte* (2004), in which the crew visits some Europe’s monuments of geographic center. It only gives the relative coordinates of the centers in relation to each other, so again and again, at each midpoint, the viewer has to redefine the borders of Europe, that is, redefine Europe. This procedure breaks up the singular and sacred meaning of “the center” as the source of power and constraints the subject to position himself continually.

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