

The Atlas as Stage – Contemporary Atlas Practices and the Reconfiguration of Spatial Knowledge.

Eric Losang^a

^a Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig, Germany

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Abstract:

Since the early modern period, the atlas has functioned as a central medium for the organization and transmission of geographical knowledge. Works such as the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* established a model in which the world could be systematically ordered, visualized, and rendered legible through cartographic representation. Classical atlases rely on principles such as scale, projection, and regional classification, presenting maps as epistemic tools that enable orientation, comparison, and the stabilization of spatial knowledge.

However, as has been extensively argued by J. B. Harley and Denis Wood, such representations are neither neutral nor complete. Rather, they are inherently selective constructions that encode power relations, cultural assumptions, and ideological frameworks. This perspective is further developed by Philippe Rekacewicz, who conceptualizes maps as interpretative and political acts rather than direct representations of reality. Cartographic representations emerge from an interaction between empirical data and the cognitive processes of the cartographer, rendering visible that which would otherwise remain obscured.

The present paper builds on this critical framework to examine contemporary publications that reconfigure the atlas form. Works such as *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln* (2009) and *Extraordinary Islands* (2025) retain formal conventions of the atlas—its bounded format, serial structure, and integration of map and text—while departing from its traditional epistemological claims. Rather than aspiring to systematic coverage or completeness, these atlases present curated selections of places organized according to narrative or conceptual criteria. The atlas thus shifts from an instrument of spatial ordering to a medium of narrative construction.

This transformation can be described as a shift from a spatial to a semantic logic of representation. While classical atlases define places through location, scale, and physical characteristics, contemporary atlases foreground meaning, experience, and interpretation. Islands, in particular, function as condensed stages on which cultural, historical, and existential narratives unfold. In this sense, the atlas reactivates—albeit in a reflexive manner—the early modern notion of a *theatrum mundi*, where representation and staging are inseparable.

At the same time, contemporary atlases make visible what earlier cartographic traditions tended to obscure: the role of selection, mediation, and constraint. According to Michel Foucault, epistemic ordering is the concept that knowledge is organized in a hierarchical structure (1966 [2005]: xxii and xxiv). In this sense, the atlas can be regarded as a container of spatial information, but it also functions as a *dispositif*, or a tool, that produces specific forms of knowledge. Decisions regarding scale, format, and design act as epistemic filters that determine what becomes visible. The atlas thus emerges as a selective and constructive apparatus rather than a transparent representation of a pre-existing world.

From this perspective, the atlas becomes a site of what Rekacewicz describes as “cartographic intention” (2021:220). Each atlas is shaped by decisions about inclusion and exclusion that are never neutral but oriented toward making certain aspects of the world visible while obscuring others. Maps therefore do not simply communicate knowledge; they construct it.

Within this broader transformation, the paper proposes a typology of contemporary atlas practices as a heuristic framework for analyzing how atlases produce spatial knowledge beyond representational paradigms. It distinguishes between (1) narrative–aesthetic atlases, which foreground literary condensation and visual form; (2) analytical–critical atlases, which contextualize and correct spatial knowledge through empirical inquiry; (3) ironic–deconstructive atlases, which undermine cartographic authority through satire; and (4) participatory–counter atlases, which redistribute cartographic agency by incorporating situated and collective forms of knowledge. While these categories are not mutually exclusive, they reflect different epistemic strategies through which contemporary atlases operate.

These modes can be understood as part of a broader shift away from the illusion of neutral representation toward an acknowledgment of maps as situated, intentional, and often political constructions. In this sense, even narrative or aesthetic atlases participate—albeit in different ways—in a wider field of critical cartography.

The different approaches can be illustrated through selected examples. Bonnett's work represents an analytical–critical approach that challenges reductive representations of places through empirically informed case studies. Schalansky's atlas exemplifies a narrative–aesthetic mode that foregrounds the mediated and imaginative character of geographical knowledge. Defoe's *An Atlas of Extinct Countries* represents an ironic–deconstructive approach that abandons spatial ordering in favor of narrative classification, thereby exposing the contingency of political geographies.

Participatory and critical mapping practices introduce a participatory–counter model of the atlas. By shifting the production of cartographic knowledge to local actors and communities, these projects foreground lived experience, contested spatial claims, and alternative forms of knowledge. Their heterogeneous forms position the atlas as a site of negotiation rather than representation and challenge the historically centralized control of cartographic production. In this sense, mapping becomes a tool of counter-power, capable of exposing hidden structures and inequalities.

Projects such as *This Is Not an Atlas* further illustrate this development by assembling a plurality of counter-mapping practices. Rather than presenting a unified alternative, they emphasize the diversity of situated approaches and reinforce the idea that contemporary atlas forms operate across a spectrum of epistemic, aesthetic, and political strategies.

Taken together, these developments point to a redefinition of the atlas as a hybrid medium at the intersection of cartography, literature, and visual culture. Contemporary atlases no longer aim to provide a unified representation of the world but foreground the conditions under which spatial knowledge is selected, structured, and communicated.

The paper argues that contemporary atlases should be understood as distinct epistemic practices that do not simply represent a pre-existing world but actively participate in the production, narration, and contestation of spatial knowledge. In this sense, the atlas emerges as a post-representational medium that shapes how space is imagined, interpreted, and contested.

Following Rekacewicz, this transformation can be seen as part of a broader shift toward critical cartography. Maps are no longer conceived as mirrors of reality but as instruments for making visible hidden structures, power relations, and alternative spatial imaginaries. The contemporary atlas thus becomes not only a narrative or aesthetic form, but also a critical practice that intervenes in how the world is seen and understood.

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