

Research Article

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Migrant Images. Refugees between Pathos and Montage

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0047>

Received April 24, 2018; accepted November 7, 2018

Abstract: The article is an attempt to explain the basic methodological principles behind the project of the online visual platform called Refugee Atlas. The crucial issue discussed here is the relation between the work on the atlas and the legacy of German art historian Aby Warburg's *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*. The author explains how he applied central notions, such as *Pathosformeln*, *Nachleben*, the polarity of the symbol, used by Warburg, to work concerning visual representation of the “refugee crisis” and long cultural history of migration. Besides, the text contains numerous remarks about anthropological research recently devoted to the issue of migration and its possible convergence with Warburg's outstanding explorations in the domain of iconology.

Keywords: anthropology of images, formulas of pathos, the figure of the refugee, history of migration, Aby Warburg

When one is trying to give an account of the cultural sense of the experience of migration, it is appropriate to recognise that the primary force responsible for cultural evolution is migration itself—the movement of symbols, cultural motifs, concepts, customs, bodily gestures, etc. Therefore, one cannot seriously discuss migration as a “crisis” since the very term presupposes some possible uncontaminated and complete form of society—the idea hardly sustainable in the perspective of modern history. Therefore, the discourse that creates the motif of the “migrant crisis” should itself be examined as a symptom of a cultural backlash, an ideological formation trying to repress cultural complexity and hide its own ideological nature.

Therefore, any serious debate about the current representation of refugees should start with two basic statements. First, culture is migration. There is no cultural phenomenon or cultural formation today that is not a mixture of heterogeneous elements and an impure combination of disparate material (see Appadurai). The idea of a one-dimensional, uncontaminated and self-evident identity is not only dangerous but also a narrow-minded fantasy. Second, there is no migration in culture without migration in time, since culture gathers heterogeneous elements both synchronically and diachronically. These two principles form a basis for my work on the *Refugee Atlas*, an online visual platform that I completed in 2016 (see Mościcki).

The direct source of inspiration for the attempt to create a visual atlas of the contemporary experience of migration and the destiny of refugees in today's Europe was the famous *Mnemosyne Atlas*, initiated—though never finished—by Aby Warburg in the 1920s (Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*). His idea that images are entities in constant movement, and that culture consists of the tensions and migrations of motifs, was also crucial to the thinking behind my work. Warburg, a German art historian, claimed that every image is in fact not a singular phenomenon but a combination of elements, a clash of conflicting forces that create its meaning and value. Thus, in his analysis, images are never explained in isolation, but they speak mostly through their correlations and associations with other images, as well as via a displacement and condensation of literary themes (see Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*). This

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could be the reason why he often called his method “an iconology of the intervals” (Michaud 251-52), a close and erudite reading of the tectonic movements of cultural strata encrypted in visual representations. Warburg’s methodology exceeds the narrow limits of art history and creates a new kind of “nameless science” (Agamben 98), which encompasses the totality of culture in its material and spiritual dimensions, its stability and transformability. The ultimate goal of his work, which consists of the preparation of over sixty plates gathering together reproductions of paintings, drawings, architecture, stamps, maps, etc., was to show the evolution of the human psyche from ancient times to the present. In the juxtapositions of various images, Warburg was trying to investigate temporal and spatial migrations of cultural motifs and formulas of expression and to analyse the complex processes of their metamorphosis and continuity.

In Warburg scholarship, it was often underscored that his methodology could cross disciplines and his image analyses overcome limitations imposed by different media (Raulff). His very concept of the image is not reducible to a single object regarded within the framework of the specific medium but always refers to the energetic aspect allowing images to circulate through the complex cultural field. Philippe-Alain Michaud showed in his groundbreaking study that Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas* opened a way for the most advanced montage techniques in cinema, especially to *Histoire(s) du cinéma* by Jean-Luc Godard, which itself is not just a film but also an atlas comprising images, gestures and dynamograms constituting the inner power of cinematographic history (Michaud 277-293). Karl Sierek went further and showed that Warburg’s procedures of image analysis correspond to the vision of cultural communication based on the functioning of the internet, which finally questioned the idea of the image as a window and concentrates on the image as a tool (Sierek 141). According to him Warburg, even in his classical interpretations of renaissance paintings, always showed the power of images in their mobility and the capacity to condense and transform external elements. The energy of the image lies not in its interiority but in its potential to migrate through social, cultural and political tensions exposing them all in its movement. Thus the affective intensity of the image is correlated with “energetic interventions” (154) that it activates in the cultural sphere. This constant movement across space and time makes the form of the atlas a tool for orientation in the chaotic realities of contemporary history, as Georges Didi-Huberman showed in his book and exhibition devoted to the status of the atlas in the twentieth-century art (Didi-Huberman, *Atlas*).

During my work on the *Refugee Atlas*, I followed in Warburg’s footsteps primarily with regard to the form of presentation. The basic unit of the atlas is also a plate, although it is a virtual one, which is not presented in the context of a library (as was the case with Warburg’s sketches and the first versions of his plates) but in the space of the internet. The *Refugee Atlas* consists of 20 plates comprising various kinds of images (photography, films, drawings, maps, diagrams, etc.), texts and music. Every plate not only presents an encounter between different figures and ideas but also allows separate modes of visual communication to intermingle. The *Atlas* is divided into four parts—*Topoi*, *Knowledge of the Body*, *Tensions* and *Visions*—with two additional plates, which function as an introduction (*Sources*) and a coda (*Grassroots Atlases*). On every plate, the viewer is confronted with a particular issue, track the evolution of a cultural motif, or create a space of tension revealing dramatic contradictions within European history. The *Atlas* is thus a tool for creating knowledge through montage, based on free associations, juxtapositions and the sense of dialectic short-circuits. It is neither very scholarly nor directly artistic. It does not have any claim to exhaustiveness or objectivity, but also tries to avoid purely aesthetic analogies. Since it is an attempt to create a kind of knowledge of suffering, an experimental version of the ancient *pathei mathos* (learn from the suffering), it has to seek a dynamic balance between provocation and empathy, distanced analysis and emotional involvement. This kind of approach could not be impartial because impartiality is impossible in the case of problems pertaining to the very definition of humanity and explorations of its vulnerability. And the experience of migration—for those who undergo it, as well as for those who observe it from a greater or lesser distance—is at its core a practical way of finding out what it means to be, or stay, human.

The anthropological dimension of *Refugee Atlas* could already be discerned from the two framing plates. The first one, *Sources*, demonstrates that all the crucial religious narratives that dominate in the European culture since centuries are in fact based on the motive of the exile and wandering. I put together not only images showing the story of the expulsion from paradise, the flight from Egypt or Mohhamed’s flight from Mekka but also bring into one plate many different visual media and techniques: fresco,

miniature or postcard. The migration is not only the subject of every image but also something that defines its form. In short: it is tantamount to the dynamic of culture as such. The last plate of the *Atlas*, titled *Grassroots Atlases*, show, on the other hand, the inherent need for seeking orientation in the world through the montage of images. Putting different images one next to the other is an anthropological act of getting along with the chaotic reality. Whether on the cabin in the camp in Calais, where migrants used to stick fragments of images found in posters or newspapers or on the wall filled with graffiti in the asylum center in Patras, these gestures of montage bear witness to the struggle for recognition and understanding. Thus, *Refugee Atlas* opens with the vision of culture as seeking refuge and ends with the view of making atlas as a way to remain human.

The phenomenon of mass migration often cuts across traditional cultural formations, revealing hidden tensions or unmasking shameful historical continuities of violence, injustice and hatred. It catches culture in its dynamic fluctuations and shows its perpetual incompleteness and irrevocable unrest. The composition of the *Refugee Atlas* is thus at odds with every attempt at an encyclopaedic order that would try to repress or solve these contradictions. This is also why making a visual atlas about the experience of migration requires a particular attitude towards the present and its dominant ideological practices. This work is impossible without stepping outside the journalistic news culture, which changes the “refugee crisis” into yet another viral celebration of ignorance. On the other hand, one should distance oneself from the injunction always to associate the suffering of the oppressed with the demand to lean on a documentary sensibility and “innocent” transmission. One should adhere neither to clichés of the “public debate” nor the logic of humanitarianism. The latter, although based on universal moral and legal standards offering indispensable help to the most helpless, often encloses refugees in the identity of the passive victim, entirely dependent on the system of care and thus keeps them socially and politically vulnerable (see Harrell-Bond and Verdirame).

Trying to define what is at stake in *Refugee Atlas* we could refer to the distinction made by Jacques Rancière, between the “democratic stage” and the “humanitarian stage” (Rancière 126). While the former is a social field in which different political subjects can defend their positions and redefine the framework of their own functioning, the latter defines its subjects univocally as victims exposed to violence and demanding protection. In the *Atlas* not only is the disparate visual material of the atlas not subsumed under any unified procedure but the construction of the narrative also ensures that all possible symbolic affiliations are equally available. The idea behind my work is that migrants should preserve their human density with all the political, historical and cultural contradictions this may produce. Every attempt at discerning regularities should thus remain faithful primarily to the test of singularity—it should be dictated by physical movement or figurative force rather than any abstract concepts, be they legal, sociological or aesthetic.

It is impossible to point to the complex and dramatic condition of exile without questioning its identitarian limitations. It requires something that Michel Agier has called the “anthropology of the subject” (Agier 113), which entails not only decentring one’s vision of the world via the application of anthropological methods but also decentring anthropology itself through a fair view of the compound and globalised world.

In the situations mentioned above, subjects exist by detaching themselves from their social condition, and from the assigned identity (racial, ethnic, humanitarian) and eventually from the suffering self. This is how the question of the subject interpellates social sciences in the field, and this is how we could start to talk about anthropology of the subject: if there are spaces and conditions, scenes and situations necessary for the emergence of subjectivation, ritual, aesthetics, politics, there are also “people” who exist as subjects under certain conditions and in the given situations. This is what we should think of: there are not only subjectivations but also the formation of a subject in the given space and time, and it is there that things become more complicated and more interesting (Agier 201).

A visual atlas could take an active part in the construction of this anthropology in motion, referring to crucial aspects of the human condition without any recourse to national, ethnic or cultural essentialism. The reference to Warburg is essential because he too tried to find a necessary link and a dialectical mode of relation between suffering and cultural forms of expression. The vision of culture presented in *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* shows human history as a constant effort to symbolise suffering and to deal with

the contradictions of human destiny. Since every experience of pain draws the subject to the limits of expression, where all forms of communication seem to be deactivated, new forms are necessary to contain the profoundness of the situation. Thus, suffering plays both a destructive and transformative role in the history of cultural expression, functioning like a fold that continually complicates all the gestural, linguistic and artistic fabric used to symbolise human existence. It is never fully embedded in its context, yet it also cannot step outside it—it is precisely this paradoxical position that makes it so central both for Warburg and for today's discussions in anthropology.

The same dialectical dynamic should be ascribed to how every migrant subject refers to his or her limitations and conditions. In every practical situation, cultural, ethnic, political, linguistic, etc. norms (including the position of the victim) are both called for and questioned by the very singularity of human experience. For there are no such people as refugees, since being an asylum-seeker is not an identity. There are individuals who have been forced to undergo a harrowing and arduous experience with far-reaching consequences not only for themselves but also for the totality of the population in which they exist or used to exist. And this fleeting and fragmented image of the tormented world—in a cultural, political, ethical and aesthetic sense—is something one should also look for in the *Refugee Atlas*.

It is impossible to think about Aby Warburg's legacy—and its possible use in the context of migration—without referring to the central concept guiding his intellectual explorations: *Pathosformel*. For in the very definition of this notion, questions of the status of cultural artefacts and of the experience of the exile intermingle. In short, the formula of pathos means that there is no expression of emotion—and pathos is an incredibly intense affective state—without recurrent formal elements. It “designates an indissoluble intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula in which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content,” as Giorgio Agamben puts it (90). There is a particular vocabulary of expression not only in its conventional use but also—or even above all—in moments of utmost suffering and ecstatic expression. Of course, Warburg's research was not an attempt to create a simple grammar of transhistorically valid schemata, but to observe this expressive language in its full spatial and temporal complexity and variability. *Pathosformeln* differ from archetypes in the exact way they converge with history. They not only evolve, due to various cultural, political and artistic transformations, but they also change in a discontinuous way by filling the cultural space with numerous ruptures, aporias and inversions.

To find a form, affect has to encounter a limitation, since there is no form without a shape with a more or less (to the limits of the formless understood as a form in itself) definite outline. Extreme emotion—such as that involved in the experience of suffering—is restricted through both social and individual constraints or by the very thing that causes the pain. This is the case with the famous Roman marble statue the *Laocoon Group*, which Warburg analyses following essays by Lessing and Goethe (Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante* 203-212). It depicts the tormented body of a man punished by the gods, literally shaped by the clash between the force of his suffering and the snakes that suffocate him. The expression of pathos appears when this limit becomes a formative element. In the course of history, this shape, gesture or pose resulting from the clash between the body and its limitation could be repeated in a literal or modified form and thus evolve into the formula of pathos.

The iconology of the “interval” proves every time that “the problem is in between”: it is neither revealed nor solved in a single image but rather constructed or formulated in a flash of imagination that signals a certain resonance between the multiplicity of heterogeneous elements. *Pathosformeln* appear in the “moment-interval” (Didi-Huberman 208) between the already fixed posture and a new, unprecedented transformation, between remembrance and anticipation. The historian who wants to analyse and present the dynamics of these moments over the long perspective of cultural evolution should be ready to cope with the rhythm of the persistent latencies and sudden reappearances, cuts and oddities that inhabit gestural and visual expression. In his, *Bilderatlas* Warburg decided to present all these long durations and displacements in the form of a montage. *Refugee Atlas* takes the same tack. What these plates show are not problems that can be formulated or solved. For the only form of their expression resides in these gestures of montage (see Didi-Huberman, *Atlas* 255-72). This is why the *Atlas* does not recount history but rather reads it against the grain. It shows it instead of telling it. This is where the work of the historian needs to refer to the work of the imagination, this “almost divine faculty, which perceives immediately and without

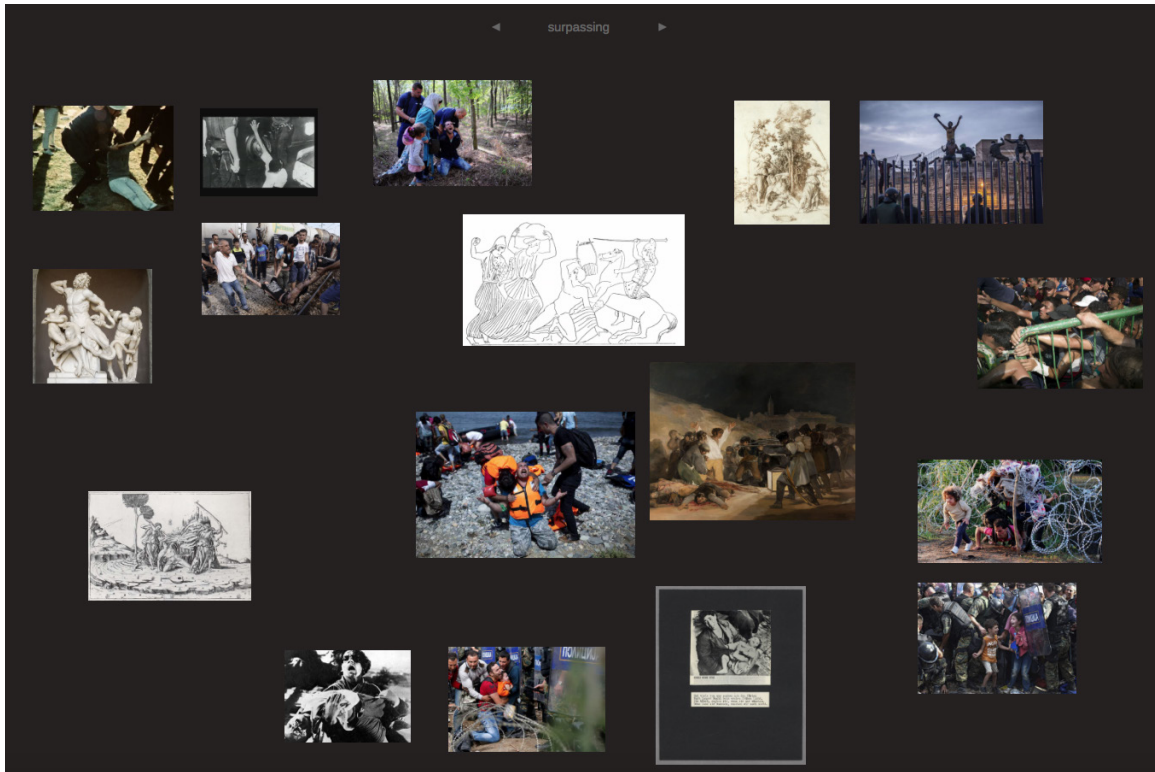
philosophical methods the inner and secret relations of things, the correspondences and the analogies” (Baudelaire 127).

The crucial difference with regards to from Aby Warburg’s work is that *Refugee Atlas* is an Internet site with all the technical innovations that the German art historian could not use. However, it has not only been constructed *by means of* the internet, understood as a primary source of visual orientation in the present, but also *against* it, if one sees it as a machine to transform every act of imagination into a useful algorithm. There are no meaningful associations, nor provocative juxtapositions that emerge from the Internet alone, even if it may be the best place for their presentation. The work on the *Refugee Atlas* is thus an attempt to create a space in which the viewer is invited to critically process the visual material and actively complement the lines of thinking suggested by the montage. In addition, one could find a link here between my work and Warburg’s methodology. In his research, he continually underscored the coexistence of the extremes, the movement that he called *per monstra ad sphaeram*, from the monstrosity of the most visceral experiences to the cosmic combinations of destiny (see Warburg, *Per monstra ad sphaeram*). This polarity corresponds to the two contradictory dimensions of the materials gathered in the *Refugee Atlas*. On the one hand, there is a tension between the Internet as an equivalent of the anonymous celestial sphere and the real results of the workshops held with immigrants during the preparation of this project in various European cities (Warsaw, Antwerp, Bologna and Paris). What reaches us through the infinitely complex connections, which guarantee a constant circulation of knowledge and ignorance, is confronted here with what an individual person can say about his or her memories, draw on a sheet of paper or perform during theatrical improvisations. Moreover, the contradictory character of culture manifests itself here in the differences between various forms of visual media. The images in the *Refugee Atlas* skip continually between, on the one hand, maps, infographics, and symbols as examples of the “aerial view” of culture and images of suffering bodies or testimonies, which present, and build, culture “from below”, on the other. These juxtapositions of levels mean a constant co-presence of knowledge with pathos, critical analysis and suffering or the memory of the traumatic events; in short—starry heavens and the darkness of the nightmare. It also gives the opportunity to experiment with quite astonishing correspondences. As in the case of the plate *The Law of the Perspective* where the form of the liver used for divination in Babylon is juxtaposed with the plan of one of the biggest refugee camps in the world and then with the image referring to the organ trade to which refugees are often exposed. And all these short circuits are subsequently projected on the set of relationships established between the principles of visual representation invented in the Renaissance and the oppression of the people by political regimes. This plate contains a sort of divination about the future of the migrants in Europe, and it is based on the reading of historical and contemporary visual material against the grain.

The experience of migration consists, to a large extent, of various encounters with limits: physical borders (geographic and administrative), cultural differences, political conflicts, etc. The bodies of migrating people are subjected to various pronounced limitations: they are contained, blocked, wounded, starved, exhausted, bored, terrified, analysed, represented, hidden, etc. These concrete experiences often involve a wealth of intense emotions and thus are a large reservoir of forms of expression. This is why, in the *Refugee Atlas*, which is generally devoted to showing—through montage—how the experience of exile itself overcomes spatial and temporal limitations, there is also a separate part dealing with *Knowledge of the Body*, e.g. instances in which the suffering of the refugees enters into dialogue with cultural history and its forms of expression. Five plates that form this part of the *Atlas* refer to physical practices invented by refugees in critical moments of bodily constraint that they were forced to deal with.

Let us present certain ideas that stand behind the plate 11 in the *Atlas*, belonging to a section called *Surpassing* (Mościcki, *Refugee Atlas*). At first glance, one can say that the presentation is divided diagonally by three pictures that refer to another ancient motif crucial for Warburg’s work—the death of Orpheus (Warburg, *Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* 73). To be more precise, this set of images was meant to cut across it, rather than to divide it into separate sections or parts. On the one hand, this cut is the graphic sign of a border, to which the plate regularly alludes; on the other, it reminds the viewer that all the relations and correspondences established in the *Atlas* are contingent: they result from disruption no less than from connection. The montage of images from the present “migration crisis” with images from art history or

political history is thus not intended to show some noble, aesthetic background to the actual suffering, but rather aims to dramatise the artistic motifs, rediscovering their often hidden anthropological dimension and hence establishing contact between different historical periods and phenomena. Putting similar images next to each other does not mean their identification, but rather suggests a kind of tension emerging from the observed analogy. Instead of being an instrument of unification, analogy here serves as a dialectical archaeology sensitive to historical repetitions, variations, and amalgams (see Melandri 63-70). It is the viewer who should eventually decide which kind of possible relation between images should be treated as dominant.



The whole right side of the plate shows moments of overcoming physical boundedness, with the bodies of contemporary migrants physically breaking into the picture. Most of these scenes took place in the year 2015 when the massive migration to south-east Europe reached its climax and the governments of Hungary, Macedonia and Serbia initiated policies of regularly blocking and repressing the movement of people. In all the remaining images on this plate, one can discern three main physical states: collision, exposition, and consolation. In each of these moments, the relation between the flesh, suffering and a form (i.e., a limit) is negotiated in the current as well as the historical context.

In the top left corner of the plate, five images are gathered together: a photograph of the *Laocoon Group*; a still from the film *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (dir. Chris Marker 1977) showing police intervening during an anti-war demonstration in the US in the 70s; a still from Santiago Alvares' *Now* (1965) depicting police violence committed against the black community in America a decade earlier; and two pictures from 2015—a group of migrants carrying an injured friend in Gevgelija (Macedonia) and the arrest of a young refugee in Roszke (at the Hungarian-Serbian border). The collision is always between violence used against a vulnerable individual body and its expressive response, an attempt to break free, which forms the gestures of pathos. The more violent the force of the oppression is the more intense and ecstatic the expression it causes in response. By putting these pictures together, I wanted to suggest, among other things, that today's repression of refugees has a long history and well-established genealogy. It is not mythical but historico-political and is intimately bound with the history of colonisation and slavery. The proximity of the representations of Orpheus underscores that there is no victim without a possible resistance, no injustice

without a potential reward or at least a struggle for liberation. The latter can be initiated collectively and develop into a political movement (as in the 1960s and '70s), but it also occurs in those fleeting moments when vulnerable bodies try simply to oppose their oppressors.

Another thing worth mentioning here is that almost identical figurative patterns can be part of images that show not only different but even contradictory affective states. The scene from Marker's film and the photograph from Gevgelija are iconographically very similar and yet they show a violent clash on the one hand and a collective act of care on the other. As Warburg showed, *Pathosformeln* never reappear in the same form but instead gain a different meaning by showing, at times, almost exactly opposite significances via the same formal elements.

This polarisation of gestures is also underlined in the juxtaposition of the two central images on the plate. On the one hand, *The Third of May 1808*, the famous painting by Francisco Goya showing the execution of Spanish rebels trying to fight the army of Napoleon; on the other a Syrian refugee kneeling on the shore of Lesbos Island just after disembarking from the boat that carried him from Turkey—two gestures of exposure in which bodies gain their full singularity as they face their ultimate fate. The Spanish insurgent is depicted at a moment of utmost tension, probably his last. In this situation, there is no form of expression left other than spreading his arms, which seem to present his body to the death squad, as if it wanted to appear independently and vividly for the last time. This central gesture in Goya's painting is also the exposing of vulnerability and helplessness that accompanies every form of pathos. Between this body and destiny, there is just one tiny gap and it is precisely this moment that is captured by the painting. The opposite "decisive moment" appears in the picture from Lesbos, where the same gesture of self-exposure relates not to the instant of death but to a moment of deliverance. In Goya's painting the critical moment was imminent, and it is its coming that set up the inner dramaturgy of the image; in the latter case the moment of utmost danger is just gone and what we see is a body that liberates itself from the tension. Of course, the expression and posture of the Syrian migrant could contain more complex meanings, taking into account the fact that in this moment of breakthrough all his repressed experiences of suffering (or memories of witnessed atrocities) may come into play. Ultimately, this scene shows the tension within every form of pathos: a mixture of contradictory forces leading to the provisional combination, or one could say montage, of lamentation and triumph that is taking place on a beach in Lesbos. This dialogue of gestures across time and space is a crucial method of the montage that I wanted to put into practice in the *Atlas*. It is also something that could (and eventually should) be continued: in reality (through workshops or other forms of montage-based practices) or at least in the viewer's imagination.

The lower part of the plate documents another physical act that occurs in confrontations with violence. A still from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* shows a mother carrying a child victim of a confrontation between protesters and troops; the picture of a father holding a baby in front of a police squad at the Greek-Macedonian border is a clash of sorts; and finally, the image from Bertolt Brecht's *Kriegsfiel* refers to a quite recent "migratory crisis" that affected Europe at the outbreak of the Second World War. In each of these cases we observe a body that creates a protective shield for another body—whether it is alive or not—and thus helps it in a confrontation with an obstacle created by a state apparatus. This is a symbolic act in which a collective defies the authorities: it happens in the aftermath of a tragedy (Eisenstein), in the very moment of a clash (the refugee at the Greek-Macedonian border), or refers to a potential decision to let Jews emigrate to escape otherwise inevitable extermination (Brecht). It is yet more proof that every form of pathos is involved in a struggle not only with historical examples of politics, culture, and art but also with time itself. In this confrontation, no one is alone (just as no one invents expressive forms from scratch), but also—everyone has to deal with it on their own.

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