# WHY MARGINS ALWAYS ARE THE CENTRE: SHIFTING PLACES

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the question of centre and margins. It deciphers the position of the margin in the maps of cities and in **Google Earth**. It compares [illegible] of the globe with the [illegible] position of cities like Istanbul. How does the traditional [illegible] react to the disappearance of both border and margin?

## Centre and Margins

Some years ago I saw, in Holland, [illegible] of the city plan? Why not in the middle of the page [illegible]

If we compare this [illegible] with the everyday use of the term **margin** which usually implies a less [illegible] place than the centre, the [illegible] of the margin should [illegible] be reconsidered. Because [illegible] we could say [illegible] the margin [illegible] something opposite [illegible] A margin [illegible] on the [illegible]

When we [illegible] the most modern [illegible] tools to find a place [illegible] map, we come across **Google Earth**. This programme shows us a different angle to the world [illegible] of the world. The programme starts [illegible] the location where you [illegible] unless you have changed your settings. When you start the programme an image of the world pops up [illegible] and stops at a [illegible] view of [illegible] your own country. When I used it for the first time the programme [illegible] with more [illegible] I zoomed in [illegible] the Netherlands [illegible] the [illegible] of the [illegible]

*My point is not so much the progress shown by this (still) amazing technique but something else. Both methods of finding your way show that something is at stake with the centre. In the first case you almost always end up in the margin and you discover that the centre is always rather small, and in that way perhaps irrelevant. In the second case you always stay in the centre without even the possibility of entering into the margin, that is, you may enter the margin but it becomes immediately a centre. Wherever you point you stay in the middle (at least when you use the pointer, something the programme asks for). Is this just a matter of the architecture of the programming or does it point at something else?*

*Due to* ***Google Earth*** *people can now also construct their own world by inscribing their photographs into their viewing the world. The result is that one can find images everywhere in* ***Google Earth****: people have left their marks on the map itself:* ***I was there****. So many 'I was there's' make up a realistic – i.e. photographed – picture of the world. Fantasising about the spots you are looking at becomes a lot more tangible due to the countless photographs. Musing about unknown places that used to be only represented by colours and certain graphics seems to be over. Musing becomes an act within the reality of photography, a reality that anonymous camera-owners have produced together. Map making has become image making: images of the eyewitnesses. The globe is not to be conquered anymore; it is already completely conquered for it is completely imaged.*

*It is, in this respect, interesting to see how maps in general have developed through the ages. The oldest (still) existing ones, date from the Middle Ages and always put Jerusalem at its epicentre. This means that religious qualities were the main reason for ordering the geographical world. The religious standpoint was* ***literally*** *dominant. In the Renaissance the quest for the world delivered more information and resulted in a more detailed map, that nevertheless still was mainly symbolically motivated, at least to our eyes. The oldest surviving terrestrial globe is attributed to a German geographer, Martin Behaim, and was made in 1492, the same year that Columbus set of for Asia and finally found America instead. Since the Renaissance economic motives became increasingly important for the development of the map. A map is always symbolic of the power behind its appearance (which can be also the quest for knowledge…). There are no images or representations that wholly exist for their own sake. Imaging is an act that needs a kind of backing. What kind of backup, however, depends on the purpose of the image.*

*The 'invention' of the globe as visual model of the world did not imply that the heliocentric view of Copernicus was adopted. On the contrary, the model of the globe was already developed before his view came to the fore. It could represent and stress the earth as nucleus of the universe. The global manifestation of the earth is thus a residue of a pre-renaissance world. It could stay in this general outlook because it could easily be adapted in the later heliocentric world without losing its round form. The form of the earth could be literally contextualised within new contexts. The same earth could go round the sun or vice versa.*

***From Go Between to Transition***

*This reasoning is, perhaps, also the case with the mental and sometimes factual image that accompanied Istanbul for a very long time. Istanbul was seen as the* ***go between*** *Europe and Asia; Istanbul was seen as the place where East and West meet. It cannot indeed be denied that Istanbul is situated at the Bosporus and that two continents convene (when were they identified as such?). The idea that the city is therefore split up in two parts, each belonging to a different world is something easy to comprehend.*

*Is the idea of the* ***go between****, however, really true? As an endlessly repeated idea it is, but did it also func-*

tion that way? Did east and west indeed meet? According to the website of the Turkey institute in the Netherlands, there is for instance a lot of critique with regard to Istanbul's activities in relation to being European Capital of Culture 2010. The image Istanbul wants to express is its tradition of being a melting pot of cultures and of the Ottoman past. But how multicultural is Istanbul? Many prominent cultural players object for instance the official poster that shows an oriental view on Istanbul. (1) The lack of any modernity in the image is indeed remarkable. The image shows no place for its **go between** status, be it as **trait d'union** between Asia and Europe or between past and present. (2) The recent image of Istanbul is, therefore, not at all directed towards the image of a mixture of European and Asian trends. (3)

When we return to the earlier idea of the centre and its margins, it is quite obvious that the image of Istanbul does not want to represent a centre position, but rather the margin that consists of – primarily – Asian content. This means a shift towards the margin that, perhaps, will become centre. It is a shift towards the past, that is, tradition. Modernity is absent. This is a strange position of a city that is said to be both.

When we take in that a very large part of Asia is occupied by China, we even get a stronger view of this position. What becomes clear in contemporary China is the endeavour to become modern; innovation is exploding in all major Chinese cities. This modernization that goes hand-in-hand with an unprecedented economic growth, makes clear that Istanbul does – in its outer image at least – not represent this side of what is regarded **Asian**. The eastern part of Asia as **margin of Asia** tells a complete other story than we should expect from, for instance, the scenes at the poster.

But also China has a special relation towards tradition. When I visited several art schools in China and also in Turkey, the existence of traditional departments in the art academies surprised me. These kinds of departments have almost all gone in the northern part of Europe. The more southern you come the more traditional departments appear. This is interesting because it gives us a clue to the relation between past and present. China and Turkey both share their interest in tradition, but does this mean that they act the same? Apparently. When we compare the posters of the World Expo 2010, however, it becomes clear, that a whole other message is communicated. China seems to say: we are modern and we know what is best for the future. They want to have 'better cities' to produce 'better life'.(4) This is of course only a slogan, just like Istanbul's poster. But the function of China's 'coming out' is to show the power of the future and not that of the past, although in Chinese traditional thinking past and present belong to the same world, in a way there is no past only a present.

This last observation is, perhaps, a difference between Turkey and China. Whereas China does not acknowledge a principal difference between past and present, Turkey does. The modernization process that started with Atatürk was the consequence of a deeply rooted historicised worldview with a strong nationalistic inclination. It followed the general line in the European development of nation states. This is not the line that China pursued.

If Istanbul is seen as the **go between** Asia and Europe, the picture that arises becomes confusing. If Asia is also China or if China is also Asia what than is connected? Not the typical Chinese modernization trend, but something else. Is China therefore Asia's margin? Or is it its centre? What is Asia, and as a consequence, what is Europe? If we take Istanbul as the starting point (**as its centre**) of answering these questions, both Europe and Asia become unrecognizable. The 'old map' position does not work anymore. If we take the **Google Earth** position we are moving through as many centres as we want to. We do not, however, arrive anywhere. Everything else becomes margin as soon as we have chosen another spot. In this way **Google Earth** symbolizes the

changing role of so called centres and, as in Istanbul's case, transition places. Every centre has now become a **transition** place. If everything has become transition than a go between is not exceptional anymore.

### Framing the Unframed

If we want to compare this shifting of centre and margins we have to look into the status of one image or 'image form' that became epitomic in the history of art: the pictorial frame. The frame was, since the Middle Ages, the border of the image. The image was the centre, framed into what was **not image**. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant was the founder of the aesthetic value of this framing in, and called it the **parergon**: the outside of the work: that what does not belong to the work itself but constitutes its borders.(5) Another contemporary of Kant, the Dutch philosopher Frans Hemsterhuis, mused in one of his letters about the design of a new book in which the margins were rather large. He reacted: if everything could be margin than everything would be better! He implied the ironic idea that the bigger the margin the less nonsense would be spread into the world. In another letter he condemned the use of borders and colours on maps that were used to teach children geography at school. By doing that children would be indoctrinated by the false, i.e. artificial idea of borders. **If anything would be margin, borders will disappear**, he seems to conclude.(6)

So the idea of margins and centres were at the very heart of the late eighteenth century discussions that preceded the impending idea of national borders that became so important at the start of nineteenth century. The fact alone that the idea of borders and thus centres and margins, were discussed showed that a change of values was well underway. This is happening nowadays as well. We are at least experiencing a strong globalisation in which trusted borders become blurred and do not function anymore as they did. Every thing, or better, every place now could become centre. In this sense the complement of Hemsterhuis's proposal would read as follows: **if anything would be centre, borders will disappear**. Since the circular form of the globe will not change, it will again absorb this new set of values. If the idea of Istanbul as go between is capable of doing the same, has become doubtful.

### References

1. http://www.largeinvitation.com/artists
2. Another interpretation, however, might be that being the European Capital of Culture (for two) the ambitiously main task consisting of creating and fostering a shared image failed (the image).
3. [Cf.] W.J.T. Mitchell, What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago London, 2005, p. 105. 'Images' are active players in the game of establishing and changing values. They are capable of introducing new values into the world and shaping (hegemonic) views.
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parergon
5. Kant's explanation of parergon in the frame is an example of parergon.
6. Cf. P.C. Sanders, Het sculptuale denken, de esthetica van Frans Hemsterhuis, Ipso Facto, Utrecht, 2000.

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