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Blick as the Border of Authenticity in Christoph Ransmayr's *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*

William M. Mahan

Questions concerning humanity central to Christoph Ransmayr in his earlier novels find new expression and meaning some thirty years later in the wake of a rapidly digitizing society. Long after the publication of *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, which posits, in Dora Osborne's words, a "symptomatology of visual dysfunction" in relation to history and memory that becomes even more pronounced in *Morbus Kitahara*, Ransmayr identifies renewed symptoms in present-day society (see Osborne 11). He does this by a means of a retrospection that, ironically, remains relatively indifferent to time and the linear advancement of history and consistently rejects precision in its recording of geographical spaces, rarely divulging exact location or GPS coordinates. In doing so, Ransmayr shows concern over the erasing of cultural histories. In his 2012 travelogue *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*, Ransmayr presents a sustained meditation on the *Blick*, the tourist gaze, as argued in a recent essay entitled "Der Blick des Touristen" by Wolfgang Struck. I seek to contribute to this discussion by showing how, in Ransmayr's *Atlas*, the autobiographically narrated tourist gaze is marked by pluralistic ambivalence. Furthermore, I argue that Ransmayr deploys struggles of perspective and orientation characteristic of the postmodernist style established in his earlier works now with a newfound sense of anxiety concerning humanity and embodied metaphorically in the institution of tourism. The narrative of *Atlas*, as a result of this style, is marked by "blind spots," as Osborne argues of Ransmayr's earlier novels in her seminal book *Traces of Trauma in W. G. Sebald and Christoph Ransmayr*. These features of the gaze heighten the overall

sensation of touristic anxiety by questioning the authenticity of the primarily visual touristic experience as well as its preservation in memory. Drawing on insights from Osborne's work, I read *Atlas* as a follow-up to Ransmayr's earlier postmodernist style in which the post-Holocaust undertones of his early texts have expanded to address the historicity of humanity in the relationship between events and the exactitude of recorded memory. Whereas Ransmayr's earlier protagonists embody a bifurcated attitude toward a Deleuzean conception of humanity as becoming-machine, such as in *Morbus Kitahara* (as Osborne points out), in *Atlas* Ransmayr assumes a more critical stance toward such transformations.

Ransmayr's retrospective, autobiographical narrator strives to depict the places he revisits in *Atlas*, according to Struck, as "sinnlich erfahrbare Totalitäten" (189) and as spaces where humanity and nature collide.¹ Struck discerns in the tourist gaze a metaphorical, embodied representation of these collision spaces (182) and a distancing function, which gives the tourist a feeling of being "bewaffnet."² This dual sense of protection and distancing is heightened (for Ransmayr-as-tourist) when the gaze is mediated through a viewing instrument, such as a telescope. The increasingly technological enhancement of the tourist gaze serves on the one hand to improve the touristic experience, while on the other hand it separates humans further from a "natural" mode of apprehending the environment, signaling a becoming-machine in terms of increasing dependence on technology. While Struck focuses on humanity's transgression of the borders of nature, I establish the role of the gaze in this transgression as the *catalyst* for border and collision-space creation. Inspired by John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, which follows a tradition of tourism theory to argue that there is "no single gaze as such" (2), I address the issue of the plurality of the gaze, taking into account the augmentation of the tourist gaze by technology in various stages of individual and collective experience, and then consider the gaze's relationship to Ransmayr's problematization of authenticity. I support my application of Urry's centrality of the gaze as the paradigm of tourist behavior with evidence from recent studies, which reveal that the present-day touristic experience has become increasingly ocular with the advent of newly introduced social media and information technologies of recent years. Ransmayr's rather indirect engagement with such technologies within *Atlas* and his caution in the sharing of information with his readers

about his precise locations or his use of technological devices, even as the work is shadowed by their presence, reflects a larger stylistic determination featuring a tension between erasure and preservation of memory.³

In terms of both history and narration, retrospection as a type of gazing into the past creates gaps in memory and limits its holistic, accurate preservation. Ransmayr deploys a perspectival questioning of the authenticity of remembered experience as he explores humanity via his own touristic memories in the episodic *Atlas*. Osborne convincingly illustrates how vision, especially in relation to memory, is a leitmotif in Ransmayr's writing and becomes a central part of his post-Holocaust agenda. Perspective, furthermore, separates the viewer from the viewed and is the component of the tourist gaze that allows Struck to identify its 'arming' function. After focusing on issues of pluralistic identity, perspective, and technological mediation, I draw on Linda K. Hammarfelt's theory of the deconstruction of mappability in "Literatur an der Grenze der Kartierbarkeit: Ransmayrs *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*" to analyze the struggle between absolute orientation and approximation in Ransmayr's gaze in terms of distance, location, and other quantifiable measurements. As opposed to perspective, which emphasizes the viewer over the viewed, orientation involves a viewer's attempt to place himself in relation to the other. From their on-site observations of tourists, Brown and Chalmers point out that, when using a map, "tourists might not know where they were, might have little idea about their orientation, might not know where they were going, and might even be unsure about what they were looking for" (346). Hence, the standardization inherent in a map "can make strange places feel considerably safer to tourists by reducing their uncertainty" (343)—even when one can't immediately locate oneself on it. Ransmayr's decision to write, as Hammarfelt puts it, on the border of chartability in many ways refuses his reader the familiarity of an orienting starting point, yet still encourages his reader to follow his journey as an individualistic undertaking, offering his "narrative photographs" as an alternative to the collective sharing of the touristic experience through conventional images and time-location stamps.⁴ My essay thus enters previously "uncharted" territory by examining the plurality, perspective, and orientation of the tourist gaze, to reveal in three different ways the connections between authenticity, mediation, and the overall mood of anxiety in Ransmayr's *Atlas*.

1. Plurality (and the “Authentic” Tourist)

In *Atlas*, the tourist gaze represents a polyvalent constellation of viewpoints: networks form among Ransmayr’s various perspectives, and uncertain relationships emerge between Ransmayr’s own *Blick* and that of other tourists present in many episodes. “Ich sah”—the locution with which the narrator opens his accounts of every place visited in the seventy episodes of *Atlas*—initiates the gaze and involves multiple components. The coloring of the seen as it is filtered by the “Ich” paradoxically removes the narrator from what he is trying to scrutinize, because the tourist gaze is, as Stuck suggests, armed. Ransmayr’s iteration of the declarative phrase “Ich sah” implements what Urry terms the *spectatorial* sociality within the narration of his travels. In Urry’s scheme, diverse gazes such as this *spectatorial* gaze are defined by particular “socialities” implied in their respective “discourses” (19). Yet in all these various discourses (touristic situations), the sociality of the tourist has a visual nature, which, Urry points out, “mirrors the general privileging of the eye within the history of western societies” (127). However, globalized tourism imposes the privileging of the eye beyond the westerner onto all tourists. As Buhalis and O’Connor point out in “Information Communication Technology Revolutionizing Tourism,” “Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been revolutionizing tourism globally,” driving a “new paradigm-shift” within the industry (7). As early as 2005, e-tourism already reflected “the digitization of all processes and value chains in the tourism, travel, hospitality and catering industries” (11). This is not to mention the impact that the social phenomenon of photo-sharing has had on travel, beginning as early as 2004 with the appearance of Flickr, and increasingly in 2010 with Instagram and Pinterest. In many ways, Ransmayr grapples with such visual consumerism in a manner that mirrors his remarkably indirect (especially in *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, less so in *Morbus Kitahara*) approach to the Holocaust as well as his necessarily frustrated attempts to explore the role of vision in the erasure and preservation of history and memory in his previous works (see Osborne).

These themes seem to resurface from beneath the ice of *Die Schrecken* and come to focus again after the blindness of *Morbus Kitahara* in Ransmayr’s own recollected journeys in *Atlas*. Indeed, even the titles of many episodes are intextual references to Ransmayr’s previous work: “Gespenster,” “In der Tiefe,” “Die Schönheit der Finsternis,” “Ein Schatten der Rettung,” “Nack-

ter im Schatten,” “Der Eisgott,” “Ein Weltuntergang,” “Im Schatten des Vogelmannes,” and so forth. Osborne discusses the significance of Ransmayr’s bird-man motif in her discussion of *Morbus Kitahara*, as well as darkness and blindness with reference to both *Die Schrecken* and *Morbus Kitahara*. Even peaceful-sounding chapter titles in *Atlas* can reveal a bittersweet irony, as, for example, “Stille Nacht,” in which seventy thousand homeless people are killed by a monsoon.⁵ Ransmayr contemplates elsewhere the destructive power of water, especially waves, and its capacity to erase human traces. In “Das Erlöschen einer Stadt,” he describes feeling the aftershocks of an earthquake in Kalamata, Greece. Though not stated in the text, it seems likely that this was the earthquake of September 1986, but to infer this is already to orient oneself beyond the information that Ransmayr volunteers. Ransmayr’s narrated-self interrupts his gazing at the constellations with consideration of the accompanying Greek myths: “Taygetos: Die Kartographen hatten diese lichtlosen Silhouetten nach der unglücklichen Nymphe Taygete getauft, eine der sieben Töchter des Titanen Atlas, die sich aus Verzweiflung in diesen Bergen erhängte, nachdem Zeus, der Vater aller Unsterblichen, sie verführt hatte” (57). One of several references to the mythological figure Atlas in the travelogue, this situation is particularly telling of the *Angst* of the book’s anxious man. Ransmayr continues: “Als ich dennoch unwillkürlich nach ihr und ihren ebenfalls an das Firmament versetzten Schwestern, den Plejaden, Ausschau hielt, wurde mir plötzlich und erschreckend klar, was an diesem Himmel bedrohlich war: die ungebrochene Schwärze” (57). Unlike the lights that obstruct his alpine nocturnal star photography in another episode involving an imposition of technology on the darkness of the mountain sky, which I discuss later, the darkness of the Grecian sky in this episode is particularly ominous precisely because of the absence of interference from mankind’s artificial lighting. Significantly, Osborne points out that Ransmayr’s most successful novel, *Die letzte Welt*, is “seen as paradigmatically postmodern for its reworking of classical myth (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), its thematization of the writer and his work, and the performative inscription and erasure of this writing” (8). The writer and his work, along with myth, find voice again in *Atlas*—moreover, in an age of rapid global travel, when, as Jahan Ramazani argues in “Poetry and Tourism in a Global Age,” writers “all the more frequently double as tourists and tourists as poets” (459).

Ransmayr’s re-contextualization of myth in *Atlas*, including the Medusa figure, which I discuss below, can be seen to follow a similar postmodern pat-

tern in which the figures bear the weight of history on their shoulders for an increasingly indifferent humanity threatening to grow beyond its genealogy. Ransmayr continues:

In den vielen Nächten, in denen ich auf dieser Bergstraße schon zu Christos' Taverne hochgefahren war, schimmerte über den Höhenzügen im Nordwesten stets der Lichtbogen Kalamatas, der Hauptstadt Messeniens, ein Abglanz, der viele Sterne, die nun den nordwestlichen Himmel durchsprengten, überstrahlt und unsichtbar gemacht hatte.

Aber jetzt erhellte kein noch so schwacher, künstlicher Lichtschein die sternübersäte Dunkelheit über dem Ort, an dem in diesen Jahren etwa fünfzigtausend Menschen wohnten. Kalamata war erloschen (57).

He describes himself as if in flight from this unexplainable phenomenon when he experiences it further: The seismic waves of the earthquake reach him on a far-removed, serpentine mountain road and almost cause him to tumble. The episode diverges to his later observation of locals gathered around a television at the tavern in a communal experience of concern, juxtaposed to his own anxious confusion. What Ransmayr does not mention here, although his gaze is probably retrospectively directed toward it to some extent, is that this earthquake killed about twenty people and left another ten thousand homeless. The displacement of people, the destruction by (and of) nature, and the *Erlöschen* of culture are continuing themes in *Atlas* and reflect the leitmotif of erasure in Ransmayr's authorship.

The narrator of *Atlas* gathers together the perspectives of the various socialities of the tourist gaze that Urry distinguishes. But at the same time, the narrator's identity displays an anxious tension with these stereotypes. As Buhalis and O'Connor point out, each tourist is different, "carrying a unique blend of motivations, experiences and desires" (11). Yet touristic behavior is increasingly algorithmically predictable, and tourists are the primary contributors to this process through the (online) sharing of their gaze, as Kádár and Gede point out in their article on tourists and geotagging. Ransmayr appears to incorporate the tension between sharing and withholding of experience—or memory—on an individualistic level in his role as narrator of *Atlas*. To this extent, his narrated gaze, when occasionally juxtaposed to the narrating gaze or the gaze of another character, reflects both blurring and the distancing

emphasized by Struck. Sometimes one of Urry's modes of sociality characterizes the narrator's gaze more specifically than others; considered in relation to the narrator's gaze over the course of *Atlas*, these specific employments of one gaze or another reveal plurality throughout the travelogue. Urry determines that the *spectatorial* gaze is dominant in the touristic system; he describes it as the "glancing at and collecting of different signs that have been very briefly seen in passing," such as the collecting of glances from a bus window or cruise ships that "enable visitors to see 'Norway in a Nutshell'" (20). Urry argues that this fleeting, *spectatorial* gaze might be the least "intrusive" of the socialities, "since it is likely to be mobile and will soon pass by (although the endlessly anonymous traffic may itself be overwhelming)" (23). Here, Urry does not account for the intrusive by-products of *spectatorial* traffic such as touristification. Intrusion is a prominent theme in Ransmayr's *Atlas*, as Ransmayr contemplates the impact of traces (*Spuren*) that he and other tourists leave behind—human traces that, just as in *Die Schrecken*, can be arbitrarily preserved or erased by nature, and that perhaps impose over other historical traces, in effect erasing them (cf. Osborne).

On the other end of the spectrum of intrusion, Urry identifies the *anthropological* gaze, employed by tourists who "insist on staying for lengthy periods within the host community in order to get to know it 'authentically'" (23). In *Atlas*, the reader does not know exactly how long Ransmayr has been in the place visited within a given episode, let alone (more often than not, as day, month, or year are never explicitly stated) when the episode takes place. The compulsion for authenticity in the *anthropological* form of the gaze, commensurate with Struck's identification of the tourist gaze's "Sehnsucht nach Authentizität," is compromised because, whatever the level of welcome on the part of the "host community" may be, the tourist does not experience the host environment "authentically" as a native (181).⁶ Yet in his tendency to befriend locals and hear their stories and histories, Ransmayr's narrated-self ventures beyond the *spectatorial* gaze, perhaps reflecting anxieties of cultural encroachment: When compared to active participation in a community (whether human or otherwise), first-hand observation of an environment can only appear as vicarious experience. Ironically, the compulsion for authenticity constructs borders between the gaze of Ransmayr's narrator and its objects, in turn adding to his anxiety concerning the authenticity of the human experience writ large. Ransmayr's narrator is similarly ambivalent about sharing the specifics of his episodes, especially concerning location, time, and

images—photographs he sometimes writes about taking but never includes for the reader, a gesture evocative, once again, of Ransmayr's earlier novels. Osborne cites Silke Horstkotte's identification of Ransmayr's "narrative photographs," which serve as his replacement of the actual image (10).⁷

Ransmayr mentions mobile phones three times in *Atlas*: Two of these are cursory observations of others, but in the third instance, he describes an episode in which he secretly photographs another visitor to the *Reichstag* in Berlin with his phone. In the episode "Parlamentsbesucher," Ransmayr covertly records the memory of another tourist, in contrast to his frequent avoidance (or narrative elision) of photography in locations with high tourist volume such as in the episode "Gespenster," in which he watches another tourist taking pictures while he himself abstains. At the *Reichstag*, Ransmayr does not engage with German history but instead outwardly performs a simulation of conventional visitor behavior and historical intrigue, while internally he is wholly consumed with another visitor who is barefoot and the reactions he causes. He writes:

Ich tat, als betrachtete ich bloß das monströse Gebäude, das vor der Schlange mit jedem Schritt, der in ihr getan wurde, höher in den Winterhimmel aufwuchs, blickte mich um wie einer, der, was er sieht, mit seinem Stadtplan, seinen Erwartungen oder Erinnerungen vergleicht, hantierte an der Kamerafunktion meines Mobiltelefons und schielte dabei doch und ebenso verstohlen wie dieser und jener aus der Warteschlange auf den grauen Mann mit den nackten Füßen. Ich würde spät zu meiner Verabredung kommen, aber sein Anblick ließ mich nicht los. (246)

Thus, to Ransmayr, the conventional city guide map, as well as his expectations and memories in relation to the history of the German government, are rendered invisible to him and to the reader. His gaze also causes him to be late to his next appointment. It is almost as though the traces of history are, in a sense, erased (much as in Ransmayr's earlier novels) or replaced with this spectacle of a barefoot man at the *Reichstag* (cf. Osbourne). He even considers the capturing of the barefoot man in a photo image by himself and the others in line to be a sort of theft. He asks himself what reason such an armed and powerful country as Germany could have to fear this man: "Was hatte ein gut gerüstetes, von Polizei, Armee und Geheimdienst beschütztes Land, das noch dazu Waffen in solchen Massen produzierte, daß es mittlerweile die

dritte Stelle unter den größten Waffenexporteuren der Welt einnahm, von einem barfüßigen alten Mann zu fürchten?" (248). He continues to think to himself: "Und mußte man vor den Sicherheitsschleusen die Schuhe nicht ohnedies ausziehen, wenn zirpende Metalldetektoren anders nicht zu beruhigen waren?" (248). This rhetorical question expresses Ransmayr's disdain for the violent nature of this control society in correlation with the German government, its physical embodiment in this building, and its connection to history. While narrating his thoughts on the Reichstag's construction, especially its glass dome, Ransmayr falls back on the motif of aviation, of man-becoming-bird-becoming-machine, present also in *Morbus Kitahara*: "Mehr als eintausend Tonnen wog die scheinbare Leichtigkeit dieser Konstruktion. Ein Flugzeug, das in der Ferne zum Himmel stieg, schien plötzlich im Inneren der Kuppel dahinzudröhnen" (249; cf. Osborne 89). The threatening invasion of the airplane into the glass dome of the Reichstag is coupled with the barefoot man's barred entry. Ransmayr laments that the barefoot man will only ever see the building from the outside and observes the man who had made a scene about the barefoot visitor: "Barfuß! Sagte der Dicke jetzt fast triumphierend und wie einer, der soeben den Schlüssel entdeckt hatte, der einem Menschen nicht nur das Parlament eines Landes, sondern die Gemeinschaft der Landesbewohner öffnen—oder ihn davon ausschließen konnte: Barfuß! Weil er barfuß ist" (249). Ransmayr reveals his anxiety over the fading of history when, at one of the most visited tourist attractions in Berlin, he senses a staunch motive of fascistic nationalism (or classism) in the man who calls attention to the outsider. The situation in this episode represents some of the problems that Ransmayr sees in society's approach to history as well as the violence of its gaze in the perspectival engendering of outsiders.

Urry's prioritization of the gaze in the touristic experience has not been received without criticism. In "Gazing or Performing? Reflections on Urry's Tourist Gaze in the Context of Contemporary Experience in the Antipodes," Perkins and Thorns argue that the gaze is only one component of the touristic experience and that Urry's gazing does not account for the active bodily involvement and physical activity of touristic performance. While they cite Urry's claim that all travel is performance and acknowledge Urry's concessions, their argument is that his downplay of performance and overplay of the gaze is reductive. Yet at the same time, taking recent technology into account, their claim that "the gaze metaphor is too passive to encapsulate the full range of touristic experience" (186) in fact does not give the gaze enough credit or

consider the extent to which tourism, as a process of consuming, always has a passive component in the spongelike absorption of surroundings. Moreover, as I have argued, emphasis of the visual in tourism has followed the exponential pattern of information technologies, which are increasingly woven into the tourism industry. Brown and Chalmers, in "Tourism and Mobile Technology," consider a wider range of "tourist activity" than either Urry or Perkins and Thorns: they examine "how tourists both 'pre-visit' and 'post-visit' places" (336). As they point out, tourists spend considerable time (online) planning activities both before and during their visits to various destinations. It is furthermore obvious that, given the increasing popularity of social media, availability of mobile technology, and improved performance of cellular networks, tourists will spend more time examining the photos of others during the pre-visit phase and sharing and comparing their own images in their après-visit. As can be expected, mobile technologies play an even larger role in planning when tourists are visiting urban settings. Unlike Perkins and Thorns, who emphasize social class divisions as parameters for tourism, Brown and Chalmers emphasize how almost "all individuals in the western world take some sort of holiday away from home every year, although the number of days differs across and within different countries" (336). Ramazani, similarly, argues that as early as modernity, tourism transitioned from an activity of the elite to an expression of ever-more-affordable mass travel (459). Although to an extent Brown and Chalmers are subject to the same criticism that Perkins and Thorns make of Urry, that he is "too Eurocentric" in his approach (193), more recent studies including that of Kàdàr and Gede show that western paradigms are being imposed on a global scale by way of the World Wide Web. Despite their western focus, Brown and Chalmers, citing Apostolopoulos's study of touristification, emphasize that "[t]ourism is also an activity that can divide rich and poor, through a negative or parasitical effect" (336). This danger could perhaps account for some of the anxiety of Ransmayr's narrator as well as provide some of the reason that Ransmayr refuses conventions of geotagging and other means of orientation in *Atlas*, at times focusing on the misfortunes and displacements of others (often homeless), such as the barefoot man at the Reichstag or collective groups of displaced persons.

Further socialities theorized by Urry, alongside the spectatorial and anthropological, also find expression in Ransmayr's *Atlas*, which he incidentally derived from his diary: the *romantic gaze*, in which "solitude, privacy and a

personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze are emphasized,” and which occurs in cases when “tourists expect to look at the object privately or at least only with ‘significant others’” (19); the *reverential* (“*pilgrimage*”) gaze, “used to describe how, for example, Muslims spiritually consume the sacred site of the Taj Mahal” (20); the *environmental* (or eco-critical) gaze; and the *mediatized* gaze. He describes this final sociality—“the gaze of so-called movie-induced tourism”—as “a collective gaze where particular sites famous for their ‘mediated’ nature are viewed” (20). The mediatized gaze, thus, has much to do with the increasingly visual nature of the tourist experience, as I have previously described. Urry’s description of the mediatized gaze provides apt support for my argument that “mainstreamed” mediations of the tourist gaze construct metaphorical and physical borders that contribute to the narrator’s anxiety in *Atlas*. Such mediations exacerbate the ambivalence of identity that a traveler such as Ransmayr experiences, both resisting and embodying the various socialities of Urry’s typology. This is even more the case given Ransmayr’s literary fixation with the generational impacts of memory and history as a member of the post-Holocaust generation. Moreover, the inward struggle of identification with and refusal of certain labels—for example, “tourist” or “adventurer”—further mediates the traveling experience and contributes to the narrator’s anxiety.⁸

In the episode “Die Übergabe,” as well as in “Pacífico, Atlántico,” Ransmayr’s protagonist observes multiple “Wallfahrer.” Yet he remains in tension with such a generic identity for himself: In “Pacífico, Atlántico,” Ransmayr even describes the “Blick” (297) that the pilgrims have of a volcano (a view he shares without acknowledging it); he is also a passenger on the same “Wallfahrerbus” (296). He paraphrases what one of the *Wallfahrer* says, implying, in this identification of the “other,” an opposition to his own belonging to the “pilgrim” identity.⁹ It appears as though he is using the term *Wallfahrer* for those around him but not for himself, yet then he introduces a collective *we*: “Vielleicht, sagte einer der Wallfahrer, ein Lehrer aus Alajuele, als *wir* im Nebel vom Kraterrand zum Parkplatz zurückgehen, vielleicht würde ich mit der Beobachtung des Quezal in den Tälern von San Gerardo nicht mehr Glück haben als hier oben mit dem großen Blick auf den Pazifik, den Atlantik” (297, emphasis added). Nonetheless, this identification of one of the pilgrims reveals much less fidelity than if Ransmayr had identified him as one of the *other* pilgrims (thereby including himself among the ranks). In *Atlas*, the recurring word *vielleicht* often signals Ransmayr’s contemplative, mixed

feelings.¹⁰ Another episode, actually entitled “Wallfahrer,” reflects plurality in its title, with its lack of any article signifying either a single pilgrim *or* plural pilgrims, as the German is the same for the singular and plural: Is this episode about Ransmayr the *Wallfahrer*, about the minor character Sameera the *Wallfahrer*, or about them both as two *Wallfahrer* among others? At any rate, the two of them share a memory; Ransmayr writes:

Sosehr sich die Schauplätze von Sameeras und meinem Leben bis zu diesem Augenblick auch voneinander unterschieden hatten, so unvermittelt und ausgerechnet zwischen den Resten eines zerstörten Hauses teilten wir plötzlich die Erinnerung an einen Berg, der uns bei der ersten Annäherung als ein von Lichtspuren, Lichtadern durchzogener schwarzer Koloß erschienen war, der zu den Sternen zeigte. (343)

The sharing of this memory of a mountain (and their *Wallfahrer* identity) points to Ransmayr’s experiencing of a sentiment of *sonder*—realizing, perhaps, that all tourists’ lives are as complex as his own, and that the *Wallfahrer* identity is communal for travelers in search of meaning. Urry ties the pilgrim figure inextricably to the *reverential* sociality. In this episode, Ransmayr’s description of Sri Pada features the religious element of the reverential gaze (which Urry also denotes as “pilgrimage”). He characterizes Sri Pada as the holiest mountain of its country, constructing it as a totem shared by multiple cultures of diverse religious doctrines. Ransmayr writes, “Menschen vier verschiedener Religionen erstiegen diesen Berg, um dankbar oder verzweifelt zu ihren Göttern zu beten, aber auch, wenn etwas geschehen war, das ihr Leben in seinen Fundamenten erschüttert hatte, und sie nach einem neuen Halt suchten, Rat suchten, Ruhe, *vielleicht* Trost” (341, emphasis added). As for himself, Ransmayr avoids any explicit indication that he, too, was perhaps seeking comfort like these “pilgrims” who climb the mountain, although he is able to muse further about the mountain’s ability to relieve anxiety. He continues:

Vielleicht lag ja der Trost dieses Berges tatsächlich darin, daß jeder, der ihn erstieg, ob zur Monsunzeit oder in einer klaren, windstillen Sternennacht, Erinnerungen, Gefühle, Erschütterung, Begeisterung mit so vielen anderen teilen konnte, die sich gemeinsam mit ihm und *vielleicht* aus ähnlichen Gründen auf den Weg gemacht hatten. (347, emphasis added)

The ambivalence that marks Ransmayr's relationship to the *Wallfahrer* label also characterizes his relationships to the identities indicated in the titles of the episodes "Parlamentsbesucher" and "Der Schreiber," in which Ransmayr observes a particular parliament visitor and a particular writer, while ironically also embodying these identities himself.

Previously "caught between a contemporary espousal of postmodernist gestures and a nostalgic or melancholic attachment to modernist ones," in Osborne's words, Ransmayr is still "bound to 'the longer history of modernity' and reflects the difficulties of writing after 1945," (9) but now must reposition himself in what might become a post-postmodernist (or post-post-Holocaust) engagement with an evolved version of the same difficulties. In a review of Osborne's *Traces of Trauma*, Lynn Wolff emphasizes that "the identity position of these authors [Ransmayr and Sebald]—the fact that they were born after the Second World War—marks their works with a certain *belatedness*" (254, emphasis in original). Thus, while he negotiated in his previous works "between personal and historical trauma," (Osborne 31) Ransmayr must in *Atlas* consider the lingering effects of such historical belatedness for yet-further-removed generations, especially as the exactitude of preserved memory threatens to fade over time.

2. Perspective (and Mediations of Technology)

As I turn now to the perspective of the gaze and its impact on mediation, I emphasize the "powerful 'compulsion to proximity' that makes [the] travel seem absolutely necessary" (Urry 20). What Urry expresses here is a traditional touristic trope: one of the ironies inherent in travel is that this proximity to nature or to an environment is compromised by various sorts of mediation (even in the *anthropological* gaze, Urry's most "authentic" touristic sociality). In a review of Ransmayr's *Atlas* entitled "Am Ende der Entdeckungen," Andreas Breitenstein focuses, like Struck in "Der Blick eines Touristen," on the borders between "Natur und Zivilisation" (1). Breitenstein argues that these borders become blurred, that they "verschwimmen" (1). However, when one attends to the mediated nature of the gaze, these blurred and pressed borders between humanity and nature come into perspectival focus. Osborne tellingly notes Ransmayr's push for publication of the manuscript of Sebald's long poem *Nach der Natur* (7). With consideration of Ransmayr's *Die Schrecken* and *Strahlender Untergang: Ein Entwässerungsprojekt oder*

Die Entdeckung des Wesentlichen, Osborne argues that Ransmayr shares the “apocalyptic vision evoked in the title of *After Nature*,” namely “his skepticism towards the idea of human progress” (8). Thus, notions of impending apocalypse in Ransmayr’s writings concern a discourse of destruction between human and nature, in which “natural” disasters incurred by humanity’s usurpation of the environment in turn wipe out communities without a trace.

In Ransmayr’s *Atlas*, the narrator’s gaze is mediated on endless levels, down to the very narrations of the gaze. By dint of its autobiographical mode, this narrative is retrospective. Emphasizing the third syllable of *retro-spect*, one understands that the act of narration of the past employs a cognitive process of spectating one’s memories. Like both the natural and the artificial spaces mediated by Ransmayr’s gazing perspective, separating the viewer from the viewed, retrospection on the part of the narrating self involves mediation of the gaze and a struggle of temporal orientation. Time’s mediation of the narrative gaze is analogous to the mediation of the tourist gaze by a viewing instrument—in particular, when the means of mediation literally (spatially) distance the viewer from the observed object. Appropriate especially to the Medusa episode that I shall discuss later, Jutta Landa notes associations between Ransmayr’s “cold gaze” and *Versteinerung* (petrification) in the descriptions of critical reception of *Morbus Kitahara* (136). Landa argues that intense mediation occurs within Ransmayr’s gaze in this work. She writes, “As the postmodernist literary tourist *par excellence* Ransmayr claims to adopt in his works a telescopic vision,” described by Herbert Ohrling in *Die Presse* as “der Blick durch die Optik eines Fernglass, in dem Dinge, die in Wirklichkeit nahe beieinander sind, noch näher zusammenrücken” (Landa 138, 144). Noting that such a gaze “fragments cohesion and continuity,” Landa shows that “perceptual holes” mediate meaning in Ransmayr’s writing (138). Reading *Morbus Kitahara*, Landa argues that Ransmayr “posits the danger of staring at a spectacle until the gaze refracts off the object and literally and figuratively burns a hole into the beholder’s retina” (138). The self-inflicted damage of the postmodern gaze, which was the “fractured and perforated [. . .] organizing principle” of *Morbus Kitahara*, shifts increasingly to the belated effects of memory in *Atlas*, in the narrator’s retrospective relationship to his gazing self (Landa 138).

In an interview with Ransmayr, Norbert Mayer questions the author about the gaze that he portrays in *Atlas*. When asked, “Ist dieser Blick für Sie auch schrecklich?” Ransmayr responds with an answer that does not exactly

convey whether this gaze is indeed terrible for him as for others but instead emphasizes mankind's state of confrontation with absolute borders:

Das Konfrontiertsein mit der absoluten Grenze der sichtbaren Welt, mit dem Ende aller Worte und aller Sprache, mit einem Raum, in dem nur noch mathematische Formeln Beschreibungen ersetzen können, ist immer auch mit dem Schrecken über die Ungeheuerlichkeit jenes Rätsels verbunden, warum es—wie die Philosophen immer wieder gefragt haben—überhaupt etwas gibt und nicht vielmehr nichts. (1)¹¹

According to Ransmayr, absolute borders are mediated (or, in Breitenstein's term, blurred) by the gaze. Ransmayr continues: "Es gibt wohl kein Bild in der Tiefe des Raumes, das nicht auch etwas Beklemmendes hat, etwas, das einen zwingt, weit, weit über die eigenen Grenzen, auch das eigene Leben hinauszudenken" (1). Ransmayr suggests that there is no picture in the vastness of space that does not, also, when it comes under the gaze, contain something "nightmarish" that compels the viewer to think beyond absolute borders, including those of one's own life. A liminal zone is entered—the borders are approached or perhaps even transgressed—in the struggle for orientation within the traveling gaze. This is also the case in the world of narration, as in Ransmayr's narrating role, where one notes that the borders of first- and secondhand experience and the significance of mathematical precision fade away (he admits in the preface that one of the episodes describes a place that he has never visited, as its narrative is constructed from his wife's descriptions), adding to the disquietude of *Atlas*.

Before any possibility of crossing the absolute border (of the visible world) of which Ransmayr speaks, a tourist or adventurer must first approach or perceive such a border, discerning it in his or her gaze. I will now, therefore, examine the way in which artificial devices mediate perception of the narrated gaze in *Atlas*. Reminiscent of Urry's modes of sociality, Struck presents a particular arrival scene in Carmen Stephan's novel *Mal Aria* as a collection of stereotypes that problematizes the figure of the tourist. The scene involves the clichéd gesture of a camera's "Klick, klick," which, Struck argues, reflects a "Sehnsucht nach Authentizität" (181). Struck claims further that the gesture of photography redirects the gaze towards a never-reachable future: "jene Zukunft, wo man endlich die Fotos sortiert und in einem Album eingeklebt haben wird" (181). In other words, the gesture of photography shifts

the gaze forward in a direction opposite to the orientation of narrative retrospection. Struck describes another function of the camera, however, that distances the gaze not only temporally but also spatially. He explains that the camera “arms” the photographer with (sometimes false) convictions of invincibility and empowerment, expressed by the sentiment “*Mir kann nichts passieren,*” such that one is “weder bereit noch in der Lage, sich einzulassen, einzutauchen in die Fremde” (181). The camera’s lens reflects (and refracts) the tension between universality and singularity in the juxtaposition of man and nature (“Auseinandersetzung des Menschen mit der Natur”), as well as the desire for authenticity (“Sehnsucht nach Authentizität”), encouraging the observer’s ambivalence between identification with and renouncement of the stereotypical tourist identity (Struck 181).

The mediating function of the camera follows a tradition of literary representation, permeated by mediation—not only between universal and individual, but also in the divide between first- and secondhand natures of experience. For example, in Heinrich Böll’s short story “Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral” (1963), the touristic protagonist photographs a dozing fisherman with a similar “Klick” to the one in Stephan’s *Mal Aria*. In Böll’s story, the tourist’s photographing initiates a conversation in which he redirects the gaze toward the future (as described by Struck), contriving a hypothetical, secondhand experience of the fisherman’s life as it could potentially play out. In the *Atlas* episode “Ein Fotograf,” Ransmayr himself is clearly not the photographer—instead, he is the observer of another observer. He narrates three clicks, just as in Böll’s story, although in his case they are silent rather than intrusively loud. He writes: “Der Straßenarbeiter hielt die Kamera mit ausgestreckten Armen vor seiner Brust wie eine Monstranz und drückte einen unhörbaren Auslöser. Noch einmal, ein zweites Bild! Die Frau wollte sichergehen. Auf der Stirn des Fotografen glänzten Schweißperlen. Noch ein unhörbares *Klick*” (292, emphasis in original). The issue of first- and secondhand perspective is problematized on two levels: The lens of the camera symbolically represents the issue, and observing another person photographing, rather than taking pictures oneself, mediates the object of the photographic gaze on another (narrative) level. This form of mediation presented by problems of first- and secondhand experience occurs in other scenarios in which Ransmayr gazes at others. It also accentuates the tensions between Ransmayr’s identities as adventurer, observer, and tourist.

Among all the objects that mediate the perspective of the gaze in *Atlas*,

the telescope is perhaps the most ironic, because its 'distancing' effect (to borrow Struck's term) is created by the illusion of closeness. Telescopes receive more widespread attention in *Atlas* than cameras or any other mediating artificial lens, suggesting a merging of what Landa calls Ransmayr's "telescopic vision" with what Horstkotte calls his "narrative photographs." Ransmayr refers to his personal telescopes more than thirty times throughout the various episodes of *Atlas* as either "Fernglas," "Teleskop," or "Fernrohr." In addition to enhancing perception of the gazed-upon object, the telescope alters the experience of the gazer and the object of the gaze (like other artificial lenses of mediation in *Atlas*, including the camera).¹² The issues of proximity and authenticity resulting from the employment of mediating lenses contribute to the mood of anxiety: How authentic is a tourist's experience of an extreme environment if it is observed from afar through a telescope?

In terms of Struck's argument for the *Blick* as "bewaffnet," it is worth noting Sigmund Freud's theory for what Urry refers to as the "privileging of the eye within the history of western societies," (127) as discussed earlier. In his famous 1919 essay "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud relates the eyes to (castration) anxiety. In his examination of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, Freud finds that Hoffmann encourages the reader to look through Coppola's glass instruments with the protagonist Nathanael. Following the logic of contiguity explained in Freud's article "Fetishism" (1927), one could argue that, if the eyes symbolize the testicles, then the telescope might in turn symbolize a phallus, completing the ocular metaphor for male genitalia. This somewhat stretched appropriation of Freudian fetishism is influenced by Freud's designation of Coppola's instrument as a *Taschenperspektive* that is constructed to place in one's pocket. Returning to Struck's terminology, one sees how Nathanael's gaze is "bewaffnet" with this extra appendage. In a review of Osborne's *Traces of Trauma*, Mark McCollough encourages the reader to determine the relevance of Osborne's persistent use of Freudian theory in the analysis of Sebald and Ransmayr's works, noting that these are "consistent throughout and backed up by copious citations of Freud and related secondary sources" (151). The identification of the telescope as a phallic power symbol reflects the distancing function of the gaze (according to Struck, Ransmayr "arms" himself with this "weapon"). One sees how the use of a telescope might alleviate some of the anxiety connected to limitations of the eye and of the gaze, but on the other hand, consciousness of this limitation might also cause anxiety.

In *Atlas*, the telescope is significant to the gaze not only in psychoanalytical but also in poetic terms. In the episode “Die Schönheit der Finsternis,” Ransmayr’s narrator has in fact two telescopes at his disposal: a “Spiegeltelskop” and a “Linsenteleskop.” It is interesting that Ransmayr’s novel *Die Schrecken* (1984) signals the terrors of ice and darkness, whereas this *Atlas* episode’s title announces the beauty of darkness. The episode is highly charged with the ocular motif, including the names of galaxies: Black Eye Galaxy and Evil Eye Galaxy. The motif of the gaze is expounded in such language as “Sternbild”—a more image-oriented and perception-centered word than its English equivalent, “constellation.” Ransmayr continues to describe his telescopic observations of constellations and galaxies:

Im Okular erschien ihre Ellipse wie ein leuchtendes, von einem dunklen Lid verhängtes Auge, das sich eben zu öffnen—oder zu schließen schien. Allein die Länge des Augenlids, eines sichelförmigen Bandes aus dunkler Materie, Gasschleiern und Sternenstaub, sollte mehr als fünftausend Lichtjahre betragen: auch dieses Maß galt als umstritten. Ich fluchte. (192)

The unfathomability of five thousand light years—despite mathematical measurability—indicates a blurring of the borders between the finite and the infinite.¹³ Furthermore, the quasi-deconstruction of physical borders by the telescope connects the gaze’s anxiety in terms of precise orientation to the mediated nature of the gaze. Once again, as in the first episode of *Atlas*, which Ransmayr opens with GPS coordinates (only to frustrate this expectation thereafter), measurements are a means of orientation but do not dispel the anxiety of disorientation inherent in travel. Ransmayr struggles with the capriciousness of Mother Nature in a “collision space” (to borrow Struck’s term once again) of sorts when he employs these two telescopes. He describes the added hindrance of atmospheric turbulences, forcing him to adjust the mirrors and lenses of his telescopes (Ransmayr 192). Here, nature interferes with the perspective offered by his mechanized forms of mediated observation, much as, we shall see, artificial presences also interfere with his gaze.

In this episode, Ransmayr’s position on the edge of a mountain range reveals his physical location, too, as a space of collision between man and nature—in this case, the mountain range is a more extreme manifestation of nature than its edge, and Ransmayr thus finds himself sitting on a border. He writes:

Ich saß in dieser Nacht der Sommersonnenwende auf einer weiten Lichtung des Hochwaldes am *Rand* des oberösterreichischen Hölleengebirges unter einem mondlosen, von Sternen übersäten Himmel hinter meinen Teleskopen und fluchte so laut, daß die Verwünschungen von einer Mauer schwarzer Bergfichten zurückschlügen. (192, emphasis added)

Ransmayr often finds himself in such border situations, as reflected by the title of another episode, “Am Rand der Wildnis.” The presence of a nearby artificial light in “Die Schönheit der Finsternis,” which provokes his rage, indicates that he is in an area of lesser authentic extremity, in which nature is mediated by humanity:

Ich hatte in dieser milden Sommernacht bereits die Areale des Skorpions und des Schlangenträgers und dort Doppelsterne, Kugelnhaufen und planetarische Nebel angesteuert und war dabei allmählich und einmal mehr in Wut darüber geraten, daß eine Seilbahnstation auf einem gegenüberliegenden Bergkamm von einer Scheinwerferbatterie in gleißendes Licht getaucht wurde. (193)

He continues to complain that this spotlight obstructs his view of the universe, causing the stars, which would otherwise shine like diamonds, to appear to him dull and faded. He also describes a bird that passes by, crossing through the path of his telescope lens, thereby transformed into “ein konturloses, sternfressendes Monster,” albeit a monster that “mit freiem Augen ebensowenig zu sehen war wie von einer fernen Galaxis” (196). This monstrosity formed by the bird’s shadow, just as invisible to the naked eye as a distant galaxy, conjures the “shadow of the bird-man,” to borrow a title of another of Ransmayr’s episodes. A leitmotif emphasized especially in *Morbus Kitahara*, the bird-man represents Ransmayr’s engagement with mankind’s Deleuzian becoming-machine, according to Osborne. The shadow of the bird in the episode examined here attends to the machinic nature of the human *Blick* as mediated by artificial devices.

Goggles are a third artificial lens that mediates the gaze in Ransmayr’s *Atlas*. Struck devotes much of his analysis of *Atlas* to the episode “In der Tiefe,” in which Ransmayr gazes through diving goggles.¹⁴ Drawing from Ransmayr’s description of the “Bühne des Lebens der Buckelwale,” Struck asserts that observation through the goggles constructs a “Bühnenkonstellation” (Rans-

mayr 124, Struck 190). In this “Bühnenkonstellation” the diving goggles and the ocean surface create the perspectival frame of observation. According to Struck, however, this frame ultimately fails at separating stage and audience. He argues that the deconstruction of this frame takes place because the whales, like the mosquito in Stephan’s *Mal Aria*, “sich [. . .] nicht an die Regeln des Theaters halten und die Bühnengrenze überschreiten” (190). Struck distinguishes Ransmayr’s text based on the anxiety of the narrator, for whom the distance between observation space and stage dissolves. He writes: “Allerdings zeichnet sich diese Übertretung bei Ransmayr, anders als bei Stephan, bereits vor dem Auftauchen des Wals ab in der Angst des Betrachters, dass die Distanz des Beobachtungsdispositivs aufgehoben werden, die Differenz von Bühne und Zuschauerraum oder die Tarnung des Voyeurs zusammenbrechen könnte” (191). In the reciprocity of gazes, when the whale returns Ransmayr’s, the “border” between worlds seems to collapse. However, this collapse is based on a postulatory “vielleicht,” as in many other *Atlas* episodes. For Struck, what remains is the recognition that man and whale share a space—a border—between gazer and gazed-upon, man and nature. But do they really “share” this space? Is the sharing of the space not merely an illusion granted to the swimmer by the diving goggles that mediate his experience? Without the mediation of the mask, the recognition of the shared space achieved through eye contact with a whale would perhaps not be achieved in the first place, as Ransmayr would have been unable to see as clearly underwater, his vision blurred. Furthermore, to what extent is this “border” actual and not merely a construct? It is obvious that Ransmayr does not naturally belong in this environment and could not survive “in der Tiefe” and that even his presence on the surface of the water without a boat would be limited to a few days at most. The whales, on the other hand, naturally occupy both the water and the air above the surface.

Camera, telescope and diving goggles all enhance observation, but also distance and de-authenticate the gaze. The “violence” of the three devices (a camera “shoots” a photo, the telescope ‘arms’ its owner, and the whale “blows up” the frame of the ocean in Ransmayr’s perception through the lens of the goggles) suggests that they all lessen the authenticity of perspective through their mediation of the object of the gaze. Recalling Urry’s anthropological gaze, the degree of involvement in the space of visitation requires a greater personal investment than other modes of sociality. The mediation provided by the lens of the diving goggles allows Ransmayr to conceive of a shared spa-

ce; whale and man do share a border zone, but there is an illusion of crossing this border—that a certain absolute has been dissolved, when in fact it has not—instead, it has been “blurred” like the vision that represents Ransmayr’s engagements with history and memory.

The “border” is not a natural part of the environment but an artificial construct brought about by human presence in the ocean. This is the gesture of the tourist gaze: In its mediated perspective, through time, space, and devices, there exists an illusion of crossing borders, but the illusion is only temporary and sometimes only possible with the application of mediating technology. Ransmayr describes a second “lens” in this maritime episode—that of the ocean—which also distorts. He writes: “Die Walkuh schwamm auf die von der Linse des Ozeans verzerrten Bilder von Kumulusstürmen” (127). It is strange, then, that Ransmayr is able to estimate at the beginning of this episode a depth of thirty meters that separates him from the whale, because the lens of the ocean distorts not only the clouds but also depth perception: from above the surface, he seeks to determine the blurred creature’s depth. Ransmayr also describes how the eyes of any whale allow for a simultaneous reception of two different pictures—“gleichzeitig zwei verschiedene Welten” (128). He continues to describe the whale’s gaze as if he can read it:

Die Riesin sah mich an, nein: streifte mich mit ihrem Blick und änderte dann ihren Kurs um einen Hauch, gerade so viel, daß wir einander nicht berührten. Aber obwohl sie mir mit dieser Andeutung einer Seitwärtsbegegnung auswich und damit mein Dasein immerhin wahrnahm und anerkannte, glaubte ich in ihrem Blick eine so abgrundtiefe Gleichgültigkeit zu sehen. . . . (128)

The whale then breaks through the “Meeresspiegel,” crossing the border of the ocean surface and blowing water into the air. Ransmayr writes that the whale’s breath reaches “in meine Welt” (128). Yet is this breach truly reaching into Ransmayr’s world? It would depend on the interpretation of “meine Welt”: Is this Ransmayr’s world of reality, of experiential perception? Is it the entire world, which is, indeed, Ransmayr’s world just as much as the whale’s? Or does Ransmayr appropriate the area above the border of the ocean surface as his own, when truly this space belongs to nature and he is merely a visitor? It seems the whale reaches into Ransmayr’s ‘world’ not only physically but also metaphorically. At any rate, the illusion created by the mediated perspective of the tourist gaze problematizes authenticity, such that goggles

allow Ransmayr to ‘enter’ the whale’s world. However, he does not truly belong to it, as revealed by the indifference that his imagination projects into the whale’s gaze.

3. Orientation and Angst

The anxious man of Ransmayr’s *Atlas* seeks to orient himself retrospectively for the reader while maintaining integrity in the face of memory’s distortions. In “Fractured Vision in Ransmayr,” Landa argues that “[i]n spite of this quest for *authenticity*, architectural space in Ransmayr’s novels is slightly askew and thus strangely disorienting to the reader who attempts as part of the reading process to construct a familiar world” (16, emphasis added). Like the reader of *Morbus Kitahara*, the reader of *Atlas* attempts such constructions more or less in vain, unless they apprehend Ransmayr’s proffered alternative to conventional expectations of narrative continuity, genre, and orientation. Such an alternative is to be found in its intertextualities with Ransmayr’s other works, and allusions to writers such as Benjamin, Freud, and Deleuze (if Osborne’s arguments of his previous novels hold for *Atlas* as well, which is strongly indicated), to mythology, and to other literary works.

By refusing straightforward guidance and remaining at what Hammarfelt aptly characterizes as the border of chartability, Ransmayr’s “atlas” bitersweetly denies orientation for any reader-as-tourist. Ransmayr necessitates a more intimate readership. Brown and Chalmers write that the “two most quintessential tourist publications are the guidebook and the map” (343). They reveal the profound extent to which tourists depend on these two documents for orientation.¹⁵ They further point out that games like “geo-caching” are becoming more popular for tourists, and Kádár and Gede note that “[m]ore and more photo-sharing sites let their users supplement their pictures with ‘geotags,’ that is, tags with geographical relevance” (79). Kádár and Gede discuss the significance of geotags for the tourist’s memories: that “the site of a particular memory becomes easy to remember, and images from specific locations visited during a journey easy to recall” (80). Ransmayr’s near-complete refusal of geotags resists the development of visualizations and “photo-maps” that allow companies to analyze and capitalize on predictable tourist photo-behaviors. Furthermore, Ransmayr’s exclusion of geotags, time stamps, and photographs bars his reader from either visually representing or physically following his photographic itinerary, a possibility other narratives

allow, such as Ilija Trojanow's 2011 book *EisTau*, an ice narrative that takes an alternate approach to the problem of humanity's (self-)destructive power.

Ransmayr seeks to undermine the notion of the representability or mapability of nature, both in earlier works and in *Atlas*. Osborne suggests that movement through the Arctic wasteland in *Die Schrecken* is an act of charting and of "inscribing the subject in relation to his environment" but that paradoxically the snowscape expands "beyond the limits of representation" (50). Osborne sees Mazzini's explorations in Ransmayr's novel as making the world larger rather than smaller for him, "so large that he finally disappeared in it" (50).¹⁶ Ransmayr uses the snowscape's capacity both to preserve and to erase human traces "strategically in order to show the tension between definitive (and implicitly violent) acts of separation and more persistent return" (Osborne 50). In a similar gesture (as I shall discuss), snow in *Atlas* permits footprints to trace one's path back but also threatens to cover them up. For Osborne, Ransmayr's relationship with snowy mountains is an allegory of his relationship with his homeland: His "love of travel and mountainous landscapes is indicative of a more ambivalent relationship to place, signaling both an attachment to his native Austria and his desire to escape it," which in turn creates a tension "between his 'would be postmodern rootlessness and visible rootedness'" (9). Returning in nine episodes within *Atlas* to his home country of Austria, Ransmayr reflects in new ways what Osborne identifies in his previous works as the inscribed desire for escape and apparent inevitable return.

In this ambivalent relationship to homeland, Ransmayr also responds to "a desire to cast off the burden of history" (Osborne 9). Ramazani shows in "Poetry and Tourism in a Global Age" that global literature as an analogue for tourism creates an ambiguous relationship to the homeland's analogue for national literature, pointing out, at the same time, that "under globalization, even a 'home' or 'homeland' is a site where 'foreign' products, images, and ideas meet" (461). Ransmayr's *Atlas* transcribes this approach to history and homeland into its allegory of man as tourist, with technology imposing on his gaze in the construction of borders between himself and nature. For Osborne, *Die Schrecken* "oscillates between [these] two positions in relation to traces, on the one hand using them as a means of recuperating loss and on the other using their eradication in the service of 'aus der Welt schaffen'" (51). Whereas, in *Die Schrecken* (as well as in *Morbus Kitahara*) "aus der Welt schaffen" seems to dominate over the recuperation of loss, *Atlas* remains in the state of questioning. While in previous works erasure "encapsulates Ransmayr's

narrative engagement with questions of topography, specifically, with the inscription of the subject in overwhelming spatial conditions,” (51) in *Atlas* one finds within the narrative’s reconstructive drive a more concrete return than in *Die Schrecken*, which “closes with only dispersed traces and without a body, so the case of the ice-man remains open” (51). Ransmayr’s *Atlas* offers narrative orientation in spite of the limits of retrospective precision in its production of meaning. Ransmayr as narrator determines this meaning in his retrospection, even as he withholds conventional means of way-finding.

The designation as an “atlas” also promises some form of orientation: The atlas structure presents Ransmayr’s narrative as seventy distinct episodes that hold their own significance and can be read in any order, much like the collection of maps offered in any atlas. However, *Atlas* as a whole acquires its own significance when the episodes are read in combination. Struck argues that Ransmayr’s goals include “eine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Atlas als dem Medium der Georeferentialisierbarkeit seit der frühen Neuzeit, und als der Kulturtechnik des *looking at*” (190). According to Struck, the “Ich sah” that begins each of the episodes defines the touristic writing project as one constituted by “Blickkonstellationen” (190). He maintains that in the constellations of the gaze, compass coordinates are deprecated: Their appearance in the first episode raises the reasonable but conspicuously unfulfilled expectation that the other episodes will be similarly “georeferentiell.” Nonetheless, leitmotifs present themselves with some consistency throughout Ransmayr’s work, contributing to its narrative wholeness. These sometimes appear in successive episodes, and in other instances in episodes that are separated by hundreds of pages but are in some other way thematically contiguous. The motifs are furthermore an alternative to a traditional organizing principle for an atlas, such as geographical or temporal sequence. If one does indeed begin with the first episode, then one reads: “Ich sah die Heimat eines Gottes auf 26°28’ südlicher Breite und 105°21’ westlicher Länge . . .” (11). Following this first sentence, in which coordinates are provided, the second sentence indicates another numerical measurement (“dreitausendzweihundert Kilometer”), but this number is only an approximation. Struck emphasizes above all the formulation that appears between the two numbers: “weit, weit draußen im Pazifik” (Struck 189). He argues that this formulation addresses the sensation of distance much *better* than the numerical coordinates, concluding: “Insofern ist die ungenaueste Angabe zugleich die anschaulichste, und deshalb wird der *Atlas* auch auf weitere GPS-Koordinaten verzichten” (189). Al-

though Ransmayr abandons the use of GPS coordinates after the first sentence, the struggle between precision and approximation continues throughout *Atlas* in other formulations.

As suggested by the title of Hammarfelt's essay, "Literatur an der Grenze der Kartierbarkeit," *Atlas* finds itself at the border of "chartability." She writes that Ransmayr's text moves (like the other literary examples she provides) "gattungstechnisch in einem Grenzland—hier zwischen Autobiographie, Erzählband, Reisebericht und Reportage—und ein Vorzug des Kartographischen scheint gerade darin zu bestehen, dass es verschiedene Dimensionen zu vereinen vermag" (68). Hammarfelt's description of this genre-technical movement in a "borderland"¹⁷ suggests a reason for the narrator's anxiety—the movement between autobiography, narrative, travelogue, diary, episodic series, and novel-like continuity¹⁸ highlights a refusal of absolute narrative "orientation," instead vouching for generic plurality. In "Die Welt ist voller Wunder," her review of *Atlas*, Gisela von Wysocki points out that its generic form reflects a "hyperaktives Formbewusstsein," suggesting a consciousness of multiple narrative forms (1). As previously discussed, retrospective narration also plays a role in the struggle for orientation reflected formally in *Atlas*. By eschewing explicit temporal (and spatial) indicators, Ransmayr keeps the sense of orientation an atlas should provide from ever becoming consolidated. As Osborne notes, Ransmayr's texts "resist genre categories, blurring the boundaries between history and memory, fact and fiction" (8). Ransmayr's nine visits to Austria in *Atlas*, for example, may or may not appear in their true historical-temporal order and deny engagement with the theme of homeland. The observation of Hale-Bopp comet in a southwestern United States desert is the one of the closest approximations of chronological time, followed by the earthquake in Greece, which may or may not have been the one that occurred in 1986. The narrator's observation of would-be orienting celestial bodies such as stars, human indices such as footprints, or way-markers such as cairns sometimes contributes to, rather than dispels, the anxious mood.

Discrepancies or variations in the reporting of numbers is another key leitmotif in *Atlas*. Ransmayr begins the episode "Gespenster," for example: "Ich sah Gespenster. Es waren sieben, nein: acht! Nahezu gestaltlos, baumhoch, turmhoch und dicht nebeneinander wirbelten sie über eine der Lava- und Steinwüsten, die das zentrale, menschenleere Hochplateau Islands bedeckten" (Ransmayr 50). A similar interjection ostensibly correcting an erroneous number also occurs in "Mädchen in Gewitter," in which Ransmayr

writes, “Ich sah ein sechsjähriges, nein: siebenjähriges Mädchen . . .” (441). The fluctuating numbers reveal that the gaze *must* approximate (or perhaps it exaggerates), while paradoxically also striving for exactness. In “Tod in Sevilla,” Ransmayr guesses “fünf oder sechs Pferdelängen” (44), and in “Umbettung” he second-guesses himself in his description of Isla Robinsón Crusoe’s location relative to himself (113), deciding on seven hundred meters rather than six hundred. In the previously examined episode “In der Tiefe,” as well, Ransmayr guesses whether the whale calf is five or six meters long (126). Such instances of an adding of one digit can be found throughout *Atlas* alongside other leitmotifs.

In the episode “Gespenster,” the orienting markers that Ransmayr and his companions follow reveal a history. He describes how ancient way-markers are merged with the new paths: “Wir waren uralten, seit Jahrhunderten befahrenen, aber auch längst aufgegebenen, von neuen Pistenführungen ersetzten Routen gefolgt” (51). Although the ancient markers have been replaced by new trails, Ransmayr recognizes their humble origins. Such “Wegzeichen” in *Atlas* are at times a crucial aspect for Ransmayr’s sense of orientation. They offer a pivot for his metaphorical musings about the “trail” that a world tourist travels. The irony of the way-markers is manifest in his commentary on a tourist who photographs the markers, rather than using them for their original, pragmatic intention—the same tourist who misses the ghostly plumes of smoke that rise and then vanish again. The markers are also ghosts—of a time when orientation, in many ways, was simpler. “Mädchen im Wintergewitter” reveals our dependency on unreliable markers by showing how snow allows for a trail of footprints as arbitrarily as it covers it again. In the episode “Der Untote,” Ransmayr describes the sensation of following his own traces in the snow. He writes, “Vom Tor des Mausoleums führte nach wie vor keine andere als unsere eigene Spur hinaus auf den beschneiten Platz. In dieser Spur schritten wir, steif vor Kälte und wortlos, als gehorchen wir immer noch dem Schweigebefehl eines Totenwächters, in die Welt der Lebenden zurück” (243). Ransmayr acknowledges that the space he has visited is one to which he does not belong, and the reader notices that, without these traces (for example, if it had continued to snow), Ransmayr might have gotten lost. This final recognition reflects the anxiety associated with orientation and traces; the anxiety lies in the possibility that the (historical) traces one has left behind earlier to follow back might vanish, and also that one might, oneself, disappear without a trace.

The anxiety of vanishing furthermore reflects the fate of displaced people and of dying cultures, as well as the larger, ultimate fate of humanity. Just as pronounced as Ransmayr's anxiety concerning his own vanishing is his solemn reverence of both loved ones and entire communities who vanish beneath the waves of natural disaster. In the episode "Wallfahrer," Ransmayr writes of how his friend Sameera's relatives vanished without a trace (*spurlos*) beneath the force of a tsunami: "Unter den Toten waren auch eine seiner Schwestern, die Mutter seiner Frau und zwei seiner Brüder, die, wie so viele andere Opfer, spurlos in der Flut verschwunden waren" (337–38). In "Ein Schatten der Rettung" (a further leitmotif, "shadow" figures in the titles of two other episodes), Ransmayr again contemplates possibilities of humans vanishing without a trace:

Denn daß Fischerboote, ja ganze Konvois spurlos verschwinden konnten . . . daß Trawler im Sturm kenterten, gegen Riffe trieben, leck schlugen oder auseinanderbrachen und zum Meeresgrund sanken, ohne etwas anderes als Ölsuren zu hinterlassen, und daß die Hütten und windschiefen Häuser der Armen von Port Louis sich unter der Gewalt des Windes einfach in die Luft erhoben, während die fest gebauten Häuser der Reichen jedem Unwetter standhielten—alles das folgte den Gesetzen eines Zyklons, aber daß die Besatzung eines gutausgerüsteten Schiffes, das seiner Mannschaft doch besseren Schutz vor einem Orkan bieten konnte als jede Fischerhütte auf festem Land, einfach verschwand, blieb ein Rätsel, durch das sich King Fish allmählich in ein Geisterschiff zu verwandeln begann. (234–35)

As in other cases in the *Atlas*, the wealthy class of society is at the least risk of disaster and displacement, and the poor are at the greatest risk of devastation. There is an interesting tension here between a figure of speech describing vanishing without a trace (*spurlos*) and the traces left behind by the oil, hinting that traces (and history) also exist where none are perceived (as also with a ghost ship on the ocean's floor).

Orientation is the process of finding one's place relative to one's surroundings. The gaze must turn away from one setting, always leaving something behind as one is reoriented with a new viewpoint. Departing from one place to move on to the next is one mark of an itinerant world traveler. In the first episode, "Fernstes Land," Ransmayr considers the "gaze" of Easter Island's Moai statues. He discusses how, by gazing "ins Landesinnere und damit viel-

leicht sogar ins Innerste ihrer Bewohner” the Moais were placed with their backs to the sea. Gazing involves an anxiety of sacrificed opportunity—in focusing the gaze on one image, one forfeits the chance to observe another (15). Near the end of *Atlas*, in the episode “Im Schatten des Vogelmannes,” the gaze of the Moais comes under Ransmayr’s own gaze. In both episodes taking place on Easter Island, the Moais connect “die Gegenwart mit der Ewigkeit,” their gazes playing with concepts of death, reflection, and eternity (15). In “Im Schatten des Vogelmannes,” Ransmayr observes that the Moais direct their obsidian eyes, now and forever, “niemals in die Weite, niemals gegen den Wasserhorizont, sondern stets nur ins Innere der Insel” (401). Tellingly, microbiologists such as Frank Fenner have recently likened the fate of humanity at large, given our patterns of consumption, to the phenomenon of Easter Island. Ransmayr perhaps anticipates mankind’s downfall as well, in this episode whose title evokes *Morbus Kitahara*’s bird-man motif. Like the Moais, who turn their backs to the sea to watch over the islanders and who, perhaps, mirror Ransmayr’s touristic emotions, and like Ransmayr, too, the photographer he describes in the episode “Gespenster” must turn his back—yet this refocusing also reflects a certain blindness. Preoccupied with his tripod, the touristic photographer turns his back to Ransmayr and the “ghosts.” Ransmayr calls to him, “schnell!, dort!,” but he is not fast enough to redirect his gaze toward the swirling plumes. The episodes “Der Untote” and “Anglerin,” among others, reflect anxiety concerning what is lost in the gaze when one must turn one’s back (on nature), because a tourist seeks to gain rich experiences of places he or she visits but must ultimately leave.

4. Conclusion

The Moais are the sole witnesses of their creators’ demise; the natives of the island expired without leaving any other trace. Yet even the seemingly eternal Moais reflect temporal limitation in their gaze, because, as Ransmayr notes, they will eventually decay like those that have already fallen. Ransmayr writes, “Auch entlang der von hohem Gras überwucherten Prozessionsstraßen standen und lagen Moais, als seien sie von ihren Schöpfern an einem einzigen Tag für immer verlassen und so von Symbolen der Macht zu bloßen Meilensteinen des Verschwindens geworden” (409). Calling to mind the sole Moai that has been taken from the island and that now stands in a British museum, Ransmayr turns *his* back to the stone wall that he is observing

and continues on his way (Ransmayr spent many years living living in West Cork, although he now resides in Austria, and this incidental mention of a British museum reflects his tenuous relationship to *Heimat*; cf. Osborne 9). Ransmayr evades conceptual engagement with his own homeland in *Atlas*, especially in the episodes that take place in Austria. Even as he evokes the *Heimat* of mythological gods and of the natives he meets during his travels (such as when he recounts a childhood memory of his guide in “Der Untote”), he considers his own Austrian *Heimat* explicitly only once, when he compares music he hears abroad to that played at weddings and dance festivals in Austrian villages.

On his path on the island Rapa Nui, Ransmayr finds another solitary, fallen Moai, disintegrating in the grass rather than standing up to the test of time like the others. With time, nature’s absolute power will erase the traces left by civilization, and there is no crossing this absolute border. In *Atlas*, the protagonist realizes this truth as a result of his own (eco-critical) gaze: “Hier kroch die Wildnis gnädig über alle Beweise menschlicher Gewalt und Zerstörungswut hinweg, bedeckte sie mit Blättern und Flechten und ließ Gesichtszüge von der Erosion abschleifen, bis ein Kopf vom nackten Fels nicht mehr zu unterscheiden war” (411). For Ransmayr, it is as though this Moai is an example of a disappointed god, turning away from the people and their island and toward the Pacific expanse. This lone Moai’s gaze is an inversion of that of the others—in Ransmayr’s depiction, turning its back to the islanders rather than keeping protective watch over them, while nature brings about its decay and covers the traces of man’s violence.

In *Atlas*, the role of literary and technological lenses that mediate the perspective of the tourist gaze can shift from a refraction of the apprehended image to a reflection: The ocean lens described in the episode “In der Tiefe” can quickly become a “Meeresspiegel,” metaphorically dividing and bridging two worlds (128). One is reminded of the borders between humanity and nature discussed by Struck as well as the visible and invisible worlds Ransmayr identifies in his interview. It is no mystery why the gazing tourist senses anxiety regarding the authenticity of his experience when a lens can suddenly become a mirror. In the episode “Im Säulenwald,” which the curious reader might presume to take place at the Basilica Cistern in Istanbul, Ransmayr watches another tourist crossing a “spiegelglatte Wasserfläche” (183) and reflects on the visitor’s approach of a monument. The smoothness of this mirror surface is broken by the steps of the man’s feet, and Ransmayr observes

that the surface consists of water—“und nicht aus schwarzem Glas” (183). The man jumps in after his coin. Ransmayr writes, “Er hatte mit der versunkenen Münze sein Schicksal in die Hand genommen. Und er hatte dieses Schicksal unter den an Dunkelheit und Finsternis gewöhnten Augen bleicher Karpfen und Goldfische und zum Erschrecken einiger Tagesgäste in der Unterwelt—gewendet” (189–90). The message conveyed in this episode remains cryptic, swimming around the notions of fate and eternity. The hiker acts as if to change his fate by taking the coin from the riparian floor and turning it over, placing the other side face-up, and in doing so, startles the other tourists by entering the “underworld,” a taboo tourist space in terms of societal expectations and culturally and historically ascribed value. This episode invokes the Medusa myth, just as Ransmayr’s title (*Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes*) and several oblique references in the text evoke the mythological Atlas. For the man who carries the world on his shoulders (embodied in the Atlas of mythology), anxiety weighs heavily.

According to Ransmayr, the builders of the cistern conceived the two Medusa statues such that their gazes imprint a lasting memory in their viewers, much as they symbolically petrify one another:

Die Baumeister der Zisterne hatten die Medusenhäupter als Säulensockel verwendet und dabei einen der Köpfe verkehrt, den anderen liegend auf den Grund des Wasserspeichers gesetzt, als ob sie die Medusen zur immerwährenden Betrachtung der Säulenreihen und des Gewölbes zwingen und durch die versteinernde Wirkung dieses Blicks die Dauerhaftigkeit von Marmor und Granit noch erhöhen wollten. (188)

The stone composite of the Medusas reinforces the stone structure of the columns and metaphorical permanence, but the Medusas’ gazes essentially turn each other to stone. Connecting the gaze to reflection and also to permanence in this Medusa reference, Ransmayr suggests that we can learn about the tourist gaze from the myth. Significantly—especially considering Ransmayr’s engagement with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in *Die letzte Welt*—in Ovid’s version of the myth Perseus turns Atlas into a part of the landscape (a mountain) by showing him Medusa’s head. The touristic gaze, in paradoxical irony, makes places more permanent, turning them to “stone,” while at the same time degrading “nature” and culture by the impact of high-volume visits. Just as an-

cient way-markers are replaced by the new “Pistenführungen” in the episode “Gespenster,” local populations are displaced by touristification, and history is replaced or blurred in collective memory. Like the mirroring effect of the ocean surface in the episode “in der Tiefe” and the inversion of the Moai gaze by the final of these statues, the mirrored gaze of Medusa also reflects a deep anxiety in the atlas of an anxious man. The Medusa and Moai statues, by reflecting the gaze and by symbolizing that the gaze also turns its back to something, show what “borders” the *Blick* both physically and figuratively. Osborne observes that Ransmayr’s belated perspective is concerned with “the way in which the past is available to a later generation only in mediated form” (10). Ransmayr’s narrative form in *Atlas*, engaging retrospectively with his own memories, represents this larger problematic of historicity. That which borders the tourist *Blick* in *Atlas* is mediation, which, as I have argued, creates a crisis of authenticity through constraints of plurality, perspective, and orientation.

William M. Mahan received his MA from the University of Oregon in 2013 and is now a PhD candidate in the German Department at UC Davis. His literary interests include authors of the modernist era, balanced with attention to contemporary narratives. William’s dissertation focuses on literal and metaphorical ghosts in German and Austrian literature and film, exploring the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Modernist works examined include those by Arthur Schnitzler, Alfred Döblin, Frank Wedekind, and Robert Musil, along with Fritz Lang’s films. The postmodernist works examined are primarily by Thomas Bernhard, Christoph Ransmayr, and W. G. Sebald, as well as the films of Christian Petzold. The study examines how these narratives trace ideological engagements of successive generations, pointing to three ruptures in society: the first as disenchantment at the turn of the twentieth century, the second as the Holocaust, and the third as a burgeoning rupture connected to globalized capitalism and the internet, emerging in the later works of Ransmayr and Petzold.

Notes

1. Although the episodic completion of each of the places visited in *Atlas* indeed allows for their description as sensually experienced totalities, Ransmayr’s narrated-self does not, as Struck suggests, observe nature in every case (describing urban settings in some episodes).

2. Struck introduces this distinction of the modern tourist *Blick*, along with its “Sehnsucht nach Authentizität,” in his discussion of Carmen Stephan’s *Mal Aria* (181).

3. The single sharing of coordinates with the reader, for example, reveals that Ransmayr himself at least sometimes had access to this information. However, we do not know whether he always had a GPS device with him or how frequently he recorded his coordinates when traveling.

4. As I discuss later, this term is introduced by Silke Horstkotte to describe Ransmayr’s narrative style (Osborne 10).

5. As Ransmayr writes, “Aber nicht nur der Krieg schien in diesen feuchtheißen Weihnachtstagen über alle bisherigen Grenzen hinwegzuschlagen, sondern auch das Wasser, die Flut: ein Nordostmonsun, wie er seit sieben Jahren—Fischer an der Arugam Bay behaupteten: seit zehn!—nicht mehr gewütet hatte, verwüstete nach dem nördlichen Hochland nun auch weite Küstenstriche im Osten. Wolkenbrüche, Sturmfluten, Dammbüche: Mehr als siebzigtausend Obdachlose waren in den letzten Tagen gezählt worden und zweiundzwanzig geborstene Dämme, darunter auch eine jahrhundertalte Deiche der künstlichen Seen singhalischer Könige. Viele Tote, hieß es, würden noch im Schlamm begraben liegen” (438).

6. This remains the case up to the point in which one ceases to be a tourist and is wholly immersed, in which case one no longer employs the anthropological *tourist gaze*.

7. Osborne likens this gesture to W. G. Sebald’s use of questionably sourced photographs in order to undermine authenticity of history and memory within his narratives.

8. Cf. Urry: “A characteristically upper-class view that ‘other people are tourists, while I am a traveller’” (10).

9. In comparison to, for example, paraphrasing what one of the *other* pilgrims says.

10. For other passages beginning with *vielleicht*, see *Atlas* 13, 15, 16.

11. This is of course “the” question for Heidegger in “Was ist Metaphysik?”

12. The camera’s relationship to authenticity vis-à-vis the photograph calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.”

13. Cf. Ransmayr, as previously quoted: “mit einem Raum, in dem nur noch mathematische Formeln Beschreibungen erstersten können.”

14. Struck qualifies his identification of the narrator as Ransmayr: “wenn man denn das namenslose *Ich*, aus dessen Blick jede Episode und jeder ‚Spielraum‘ emergiert, mit seinem Autor identifizieren will und darf” (190)—however, Ransmayr does not leave this up to speculation, confirming in his preface that he is the narrating authority with his initials “C.R.”

15. They argue that even when places tourists were going were not visible to them, “they turned so as to see where they were going” (347). For Brown and Chalmers, this represents our “embodied sense of position and location,” both “in and beyond our visual field” (347).

16. Citation of *Terrors of Ice and Darkness* 11; 3 in Osborne.

17. Translation my own.

18. Some reviews even refer to *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* as a novel, but it is fundamentally a travel book.

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