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Publication Date

2016-05-01

Peer reviewed

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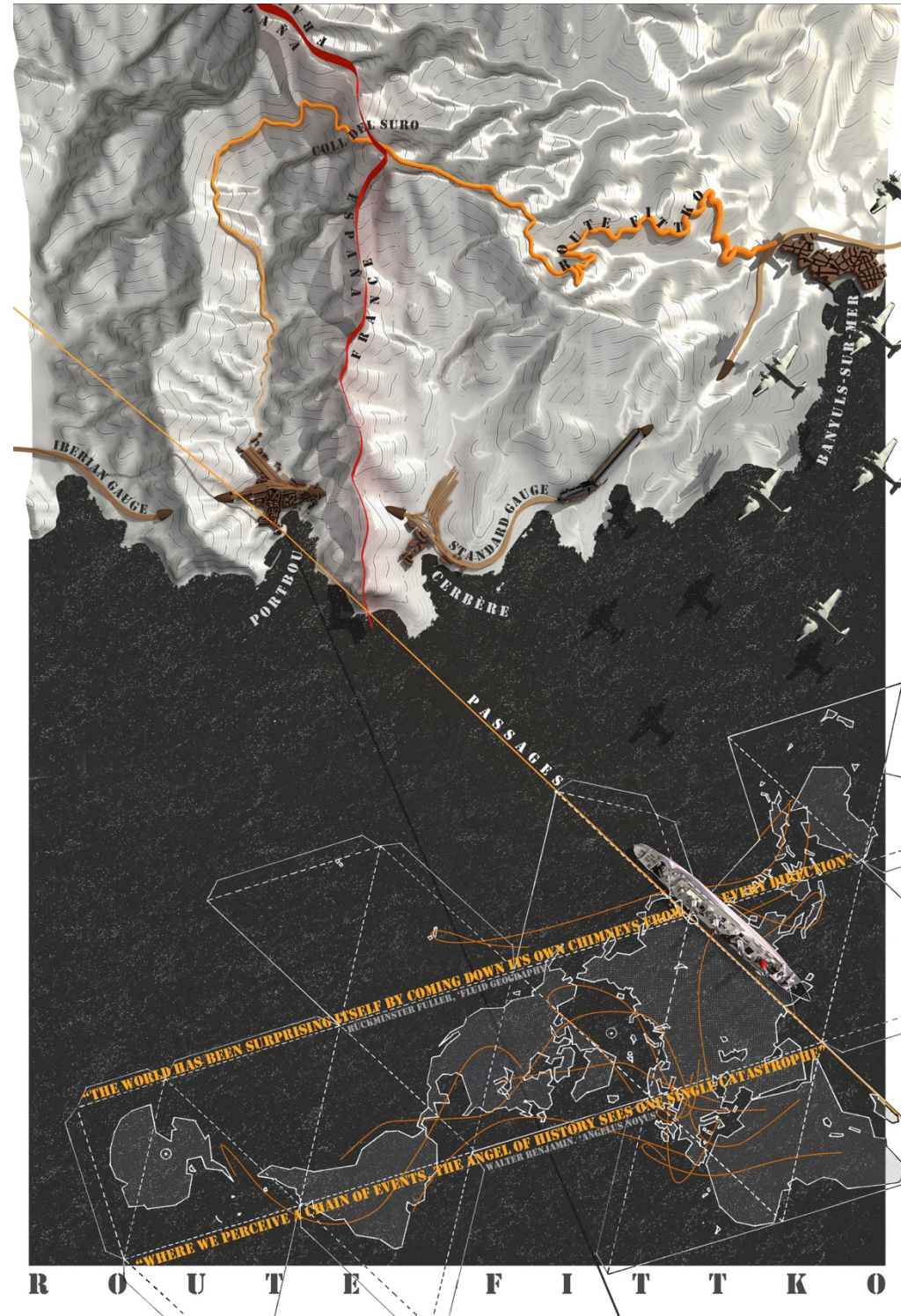
Tracing Walter Benjamin's path of no return

Karl Kullmann

2016, *Ground Up (Delineations) 5*: 70–75

Tunnels present us with a dilemma. By definition, a tunnel supplies a shortcut between two locations separated by an obstacle. While these obstacles are typically geomorphic, tunnels are also likely to circumvent socio-economic rifts within cities, or geo-political frontiers between nation-states. The tunnel allows us to defy gravity and to evade situations above ground that inconvenience or challenge us. Even the most inconspicuous tunnel acts like a wormhole as it compresses time and space and brings the distant close to hand.

But this convenience comes at a price. Whereas surface paths are readily traversed for the experience of their own meandering enjoyment, tunnels always imply a dangerous passage, a high-risk venture undertaken for the reward of the ends and not the experience of the means. In these conduits, our bodies are often restricted and contorted in uncomfortable and claustrophobic ways—we associate tunnels with hunching, crawling, tripping, and bumping in the darkness. Even the transportation capsules designed to insulate us from the experience of tunnel traversal are exposed in all their fragility when something goes wrong.





When exiting a tunnel, we are abruptly confronted with new conditions on the other side. As our night-eyes readapt to the sunlight, we scramble to re-assimilate our cognitive maps with our cartographic ones. As anyone who has exited an unfamiliar subway knows, we are vulnerable in this disorientated state to all manner of threats that stand between our onward passage and us. Moreover, since tunnels are inherently unidirectional, those who congregate around our point of exit may seek to make the reverse journey. This impulse—coupled with the sheer effort required to bore a tunnel through rock and space/time—means that to retain potency, tunnels must be conceived and controlled with discipline. When these filters break down and a tunnel is inundated, the fates of the territories at each end are irrevocably entangled.

In 1940, Walter Benjamin encountered a tunnel when escaping occupied Europe for the comparative safety of Franco's 'non-belligerent' Spain and, eventually, America. Set at the Mediterranean toe of the Pyrenees, this particular tunnel served a dual geomorphic and geopolitical purpose: to bore through the foothill shales and to forge a direct conduit between France and Spain. At each end of the tunnel, the paired bureaucratic border towns of Cerbère and Portbou were intensified by elaborate infrastructures for switching trains between the Iberian and Standard railroad gauges. Within this microcosm, the stone tunnel remained, for the time being, under the vigilant control of the Spanish and Vichy border guards. Divested of the full complement of required documents, Benjamin was permitted to exit this tunnel in Spain, but not to enter it in France. Presented with this Hobson's choice, he chose the high path over the Pyrenees.

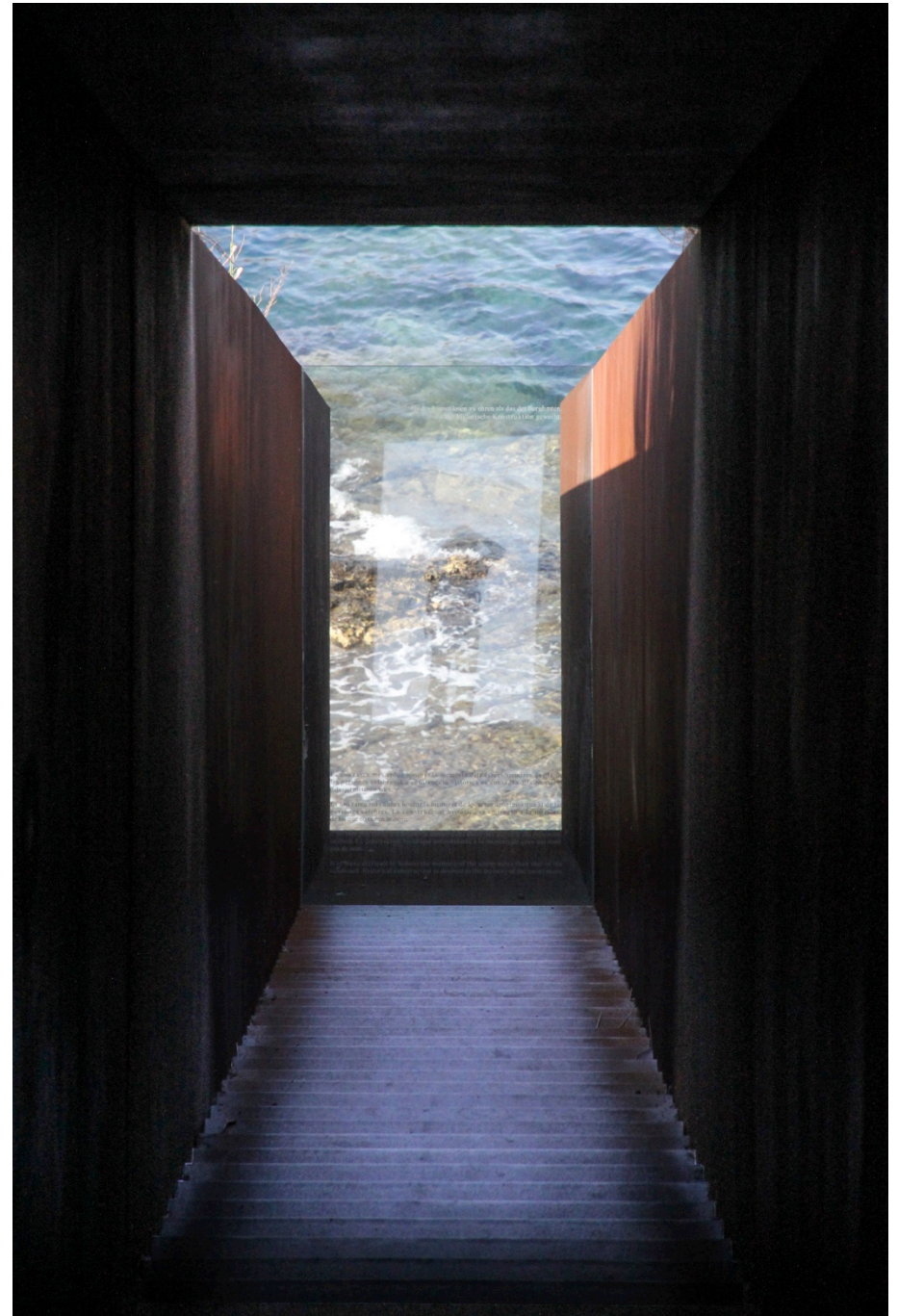
Escaping over the mountains was not without peril; near the more popular and less physically demanding coastal routes, the ridgeline-border swarmed with Gardes Mobiles ready to capture fleeing refugees. Evading this fate necessitated traversing much higher and less guarded ground. Benjamin was guided along this high route by the

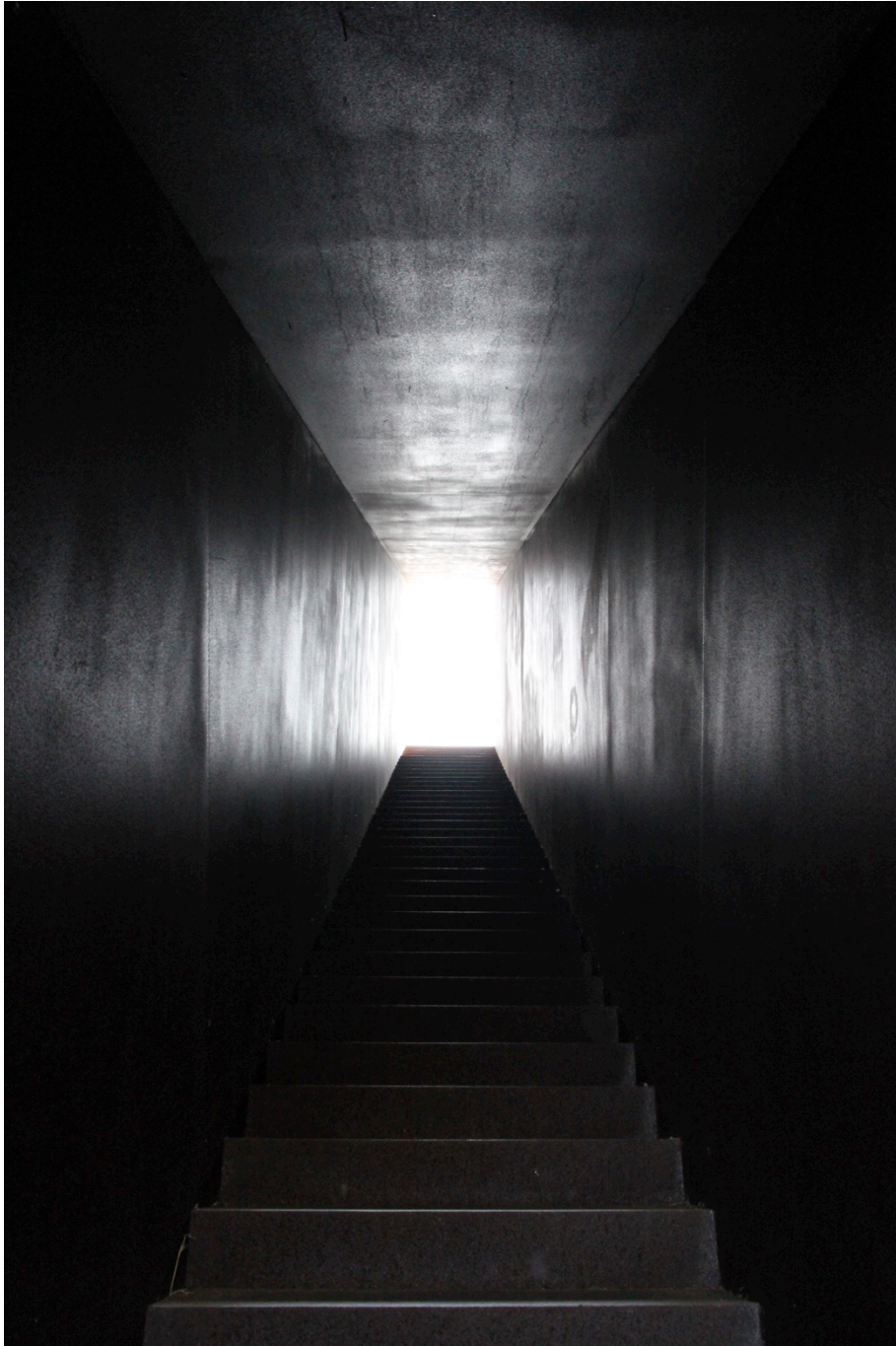
resistance passeur Lisa Fittko, who in turn followed a rudimentary map sketched by the sympathetic mayor of Banyuls-sur-Mer. In places barely formed, the old smuggler's path had previously been used in the reverse direction to evacuate Republican Army troops into exile at the end of the Spanish Civil War.

Mingling silently with the vineyard workers under the cover of pre-dawn darkness, the route ushered its human cargo up into the hills above Banyuls-sur-Mer. The rapidly contorted switchbacks of the initial stages of the path cartographically delineate the evasive maneuvers taken by those who sought its freedom. Higher up, the route levels out and tracks stealthily below the ridgeline, just out of sight of the border patrols. After crossing the frontier at Coll del Suro (elevation 2,000-feet), the path contours around the valley before dropping down and following the valley floor to reach Portbou by late afternoon.

As Fittko recounts in her memoirs, the journey presented an immense challenge to Benjamin's cerebral constitution. Cognizant of the task ahead, he gauged the amount of energy needed for the journey and expended it in calculated amounts. This self-pacing extended to their initial reconnaissance, where he insisted on sleeping alone and exposed on the ground rather than returning to the village and repeating the first third of the journey over. Even so, as Fittko's small party of émigrés scrambled between boulders and up vineyard terraces, Benjamin's fading energy budget was tested to its limits. The heavy black briefcase that he hauled along the route only compounded an already demanding traverse.

After parting ways with Fittko near the border, Benjamin and his briefcase did make it down to Portbou. But in a cruel bureaucratic miscommunication, stateless apatrides with entry papers to Spain—but without exit papers from France—were, for a brief window in time, to be returned whence they came. The rail tunnel that a day earlier Benjamin could exit but not enter was now inverted, with its inescapable entrance disgorging into a landscape of annihilation.





As history records, Benjamin's body was discovered in his cheap Portbou hotel room the next morning. The contents of the briefcase—which Fittko recalls contained a manuscript more important to Benjamin than his life—were never recovered.

From the unmarked grave, mislaid body, and lost manuscript of an unknown and penniless intellectual, Benjamin became posthumously influential. Following Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt's introduction of his extant work to German and American readers, respectively, Benjamin's narrative and celebrity rose to the lofty status of memorialization. While Benjamin's life is commemorated in several locations, it is the memorial at Portbou by Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan that most embodies Benjamin's journey. Situated just out of town at the entrance to the cemetery where Benjamin is interred, Passages comprises a 100-foot-long weathered steel tunnel that descends through the headland before terminating precariously out over the sea below.

Like most axial tunnels, the entrance portal reveals little about the price or reward of entry. At Vaux-le-Vicomte, André Le Nôtre shrewdly exploited this ambivalence by contriving the grand axis as a tunnel that lures the visitor away from the palace. But instead of presenting a worthy revelation at its conclusion, the axis terminates with a strategic retreat into the shadows. At this juncture, the visitor's attention is rotated around for the rhetorical revelation of an overview of the palace itself. Like Vaux-le-Vicomte, Passages' axis is also a lure, enticing the curious down its stairs toward a diminutive promise of the sea. But about three-fifths of the way down—like passing over the pivot on a seesaw—the experience starts to destabilize.

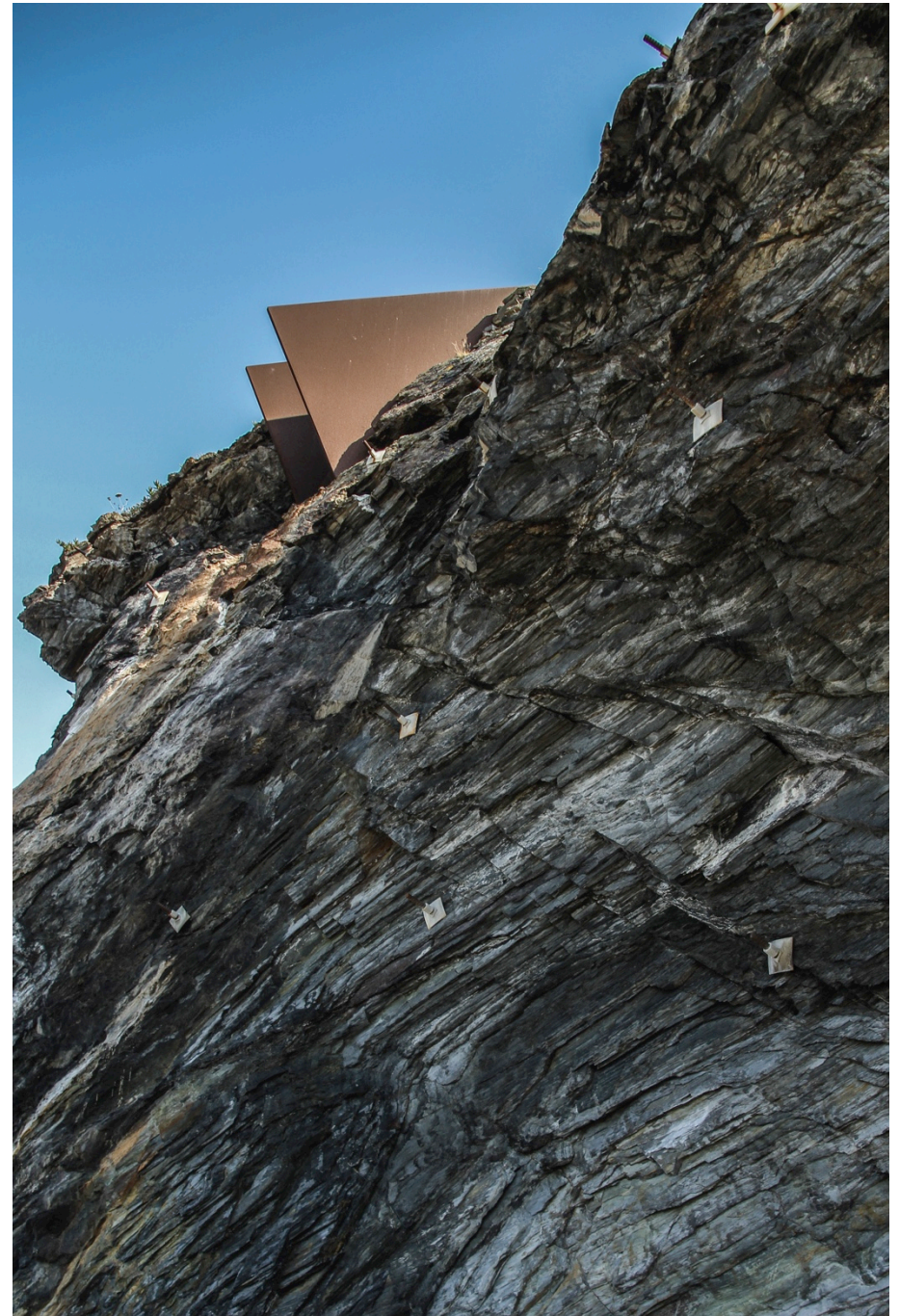
Momentarily caught in this position, the promise of a conduit to the sea is withheld. Turning around, the point of origin is now substituted with framed sky. In between, the world tilts up at an impossible angle, the water is replaced by atmosphere, and the weather resembling the

tides. Somehow simultaneously below and above ground, we lose the horizon as an orienting datum and begin to take leave of our senses. Left suspended vulnerably off the cliff, we entertain our own private vertigo.

We might imagine that this unbalancing catapults us from the tunnel like Benjamin's Angelus Novus; face turned to the past, wings flung back in the storm of history. The reality, however, is far less furious as we tentatively retrace our steps and emerge back out through the portal. Here in the daylight—released from the tunnel's constructed horizon—we rush to re-establish our bearings by locking back onto the real horizon that lies out across the Mediterranean Sea. In a fleeting moment of transfer between the two, neither horizon predominates. In this instant, our fragile sensing apparatus is primed for recalibrating the horizon's terms of engagement. Insofar as we customarily perceive the future as being dispensed 'over the horizon,' we are habituated to the real horizon's elusive delineation of time and space. But while momentarily untethered, we dare to disregard time as a linear and receding chain of events.

In short time—with our eyes re-adapted to the daylight and bodily gyroscopes re-assimilated to the real horizon—we are ready to continue onward with our journey. A tunnel that initially appeared as a shortcut turned out to be a detour. But somehow, we can't just casually compartmentalize the experience; like the caged fox that decides it is free while the rest of the world is incarcerated, are we actually still in the tunnel without comprehending it?

It was tunneling at a global scale that thrust Benjamin to Portbou in the first place. The mass ballistics of total war fundamentally warped spatial relations, as aerial bombers leapfrogged the middle ground to almost instantly apply their distant force onto the local milieu. Here, the cardinal conventions of left/right and up/down became



redundant, as peril was more likely to materialize from over the North Pole or under the Atlantic Ocean, than to respect the latitudinal bias of the Cartesian map. In *Fluid Geography*, Buckminster Fuller captures this transformation, noting “the world has been surprising itself by coming in its own back doors and down its own chimneys from every unlooked-for direction.” Fuller concludes that this new spatial and temporal order requires novel cartographic methods for “peeling data off the globe and for assembling the peelings in such a manner as to gain useful knowledge of the spherical coursings.”

In the absence of Fuller’s ‘one continent’ Dymaxion map (which would not be disseminated for another decade) refugees were stuck with obsolete Mercator projections of the world; static maps that still assumed north was up and the ground was beneath their feet. Today, with the convenience of handheld geo-positioning devices, we are habituated to making and remaking our own individual maps in any way we wish. But in 1940, a self-made map was an act of subterfuge; falling under the wrong eyes, sketch maps like the one drawn by the mayor and carried by Fittko were likely to prove perilous for their handler. In the war of maps, only one was meant to prevail.

In the postwar Dymaxion world order, continents teamed up, and many borders were dismantled. After the Cold War, even the most intransigent walls and fences dividing cities and nations fell, and for a time a fluid interconnected world appeared to be a geographical—as well as digital—reality. The hibernated border bureaucracies of Portbou and Cerbère echoed this order; with undefended tunnels and no documents to validate, both towns devolved into rail sidings and seaside resorts. But outside of this bubble, borderless tranquility is illusory; passage remains highly selective overall, with more miles of urban walls and fortified and surveilled frontiers in the world now than at any time in the history of nation states. The fertile liminal zone of the ‘borderland’ has been almost entirely expunged, as the global map is zippered shut.

To circumvent these impregnable edifices, today Benjamin’s passage takes the form of a listing vessel on the Mediterranean or Timor Seas, a refrigerated truck across the Steppe, a long walk through the Balkans, a perilous fording of the Darien Gap, or a desperate dash over the Rio Grande. As new tunnels open up on a massive scale, the Dymaxion world map is once more deconstructed, rotated and re-composited. To trace Fittko’s Route in this context is to discover the difficulty in distinguishing a path from a tunnel—they are, in effect, one and the same.

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