

Luigi Ghirri's "Atlante": deconstructing and dissolving the cartographic rules

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This article offers considerations on the conventional nature of the representation of maps, based on the first editorial product, 'Atlante', created in 1973 by Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri. The implications of this operation are examined from various points of view. The first part of the text involves recent history and the theory of art and photography in Italy. The second one offers a succinct overview of graphic design's field of action in Italy at the time that 'Atlante' was produced. Finally, a further critical reading of the work is inspired by texts written years later by Giovanni Anceschi and Giovanni Lussu, two theoreticians who have made a fundamental contribution to the development of the graphic design discipline in Italy.

1 Introduction

This article offers considerations on the conventional nature of the representation of maps, based on the first editorial product created in 1973 by Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri. Atlante – that is the name of the book – reproduces a selection of images taken from a schoolbook: the details of geographic representations, when isolated from their original context, produce an alienating effect. To bring this project to term, he almost certainly photographed the atlas he himself had used when he was in school, which probably lay on a bookshelf at home somewhere.

The result is a new graphic and cartographic narrative, in which the figures and signs are given prominence thanks to the lines, colours and typography that define them. The implications of this operation are examined from various points of view. The first involves recent history and the theory of art and photography in Italy, with the intent to illustrate the photographer's goals in terms of culture and design, and provide a summarized critical reading of the operation, based on the comments of experts in the field. The second part of the text offers a succinct overview of graphic design's field of action in Italy at the time that Atlante was produced, considering the social changes that were underway. This can lead to an understanding of how the photographer's thinking stood in opposition to mainstream culture and graphic production which, in response to the "massification" of society, aimed towards the maximum codification and standardization of communication. Finally, a further critical reading of the work is inspired by texts

written years later by Giovanni Anceschi and Giovanni Lussu, two theoreticians who have made a fundamental contribution to the development of the graphic design discipline in Italy.

There are at least two reasons that make it worthwhile today to look back at this work by Ghirri – which had little or no impact at the time, either in the field of photography or that of graphic design/information design. On the one hand because, from a historical point of view, this book is one of the relatively few “voices of dissent” to be heard in Italy against a culture that tended to identify the values of modern society with those of standardization and homologation. On the other hand, because it contains considerations on the conventional nature of representation, which wavers between conservative factors and the need for advancement that distinguish every form of synthetic representation of information or writing.

2 Atlante: the making and the photographic criticism

Born in Scandiano, Modena in 1943, a draftsman by profession, in 1973 Luigi Ghirri produced his first collection of photography: *Atlante*.

To bring this project to term, he almost certainly photographed the atlas he himself had used when he was in school, which probably lay on a bookshelf at home somewhere. He made a selection of pages that featured maps and photographed them. He deliberately excluded the idea of re-photographing pages of photographs. He probably added a few maps he found in booklets or other printed matter, such as the plan of Evergreen Park in Chicago, which was hardly likely to have come from a school book.

To make the book he almost certainly used: a 35mm reflex camera, a tripod, natural light. The technique consisted in blowing up details of the map. No filters. He took the images to be developed and printed. The sequence of photographic operations is as follows: choice of pages to photograph, the angle of the shot, print, crop.

When the prints were ready, he personally worked on the graphic design phases: choice of images, definition of the sequence, assembly (he glued the photographs onto white matt board), title: *Atlante*. The mock-up was complete. Some time later he printed one copy of the book, which would contain minimal variations, but would be printed under a different name: *Weekend*.

On various occasions, he presented it to “experts”. Nobody paid any attention to him. It ended up lying on a bookshelf, like his schoolbook. On the meaning of this process, Ghirri himself asserted:

“The atlas is the book, the place in which all the signs of the earth, both natural and cultural, are represented in a conventional manner: mountains, lakes, pyramids, oceans, cities, villages, stars, islands. In this totality of writing and description, we find the place where we live, where we would like to go, the road to take. [...] in this work I chose to travel to the place that cancels this very journey, for the very reason that

all the possible journeys are already described, and the itineraries already traced. [...] Thus similarly the only possible journey seems at this point to lie inside the signs, the images: in the destruction of direct experience. [...] It is photography in this case that, having the power to change the relationship with reality, always shifts the terms of the problem to evoke an "illusionary" sense of nature". Reality and its conventional representation in this case seem to coincide, the formulation of the problem shifts from signification to imagination. The journey is thus inside the image, inside the book" (Ghirri, 1999, plate without number).

To produce this work, Franco Vaccari – an art critic and "arte povera" artist – remembers that Ghirri moved like a homemade astronaut, photographing progressively smaller areas of the map. The effect seems to zoom in gradually towards the surface of the earth:

"Thus, while on the one hand disrupting some of the subconscious conventions that preside over the act of photographing (one of them is distinguishing objects on the basis of a supposed 'photogenic' scale), it makes it clear how the very notion of object is tenuous. In fact, we see that what is initially easy to perceive as a hyper-codified object (the atlas, editor's note), so conventional as to be absolutely transparent, is subject to a shift in the code that forces us to continuously adjust our perception". (Vaccari, 1983, p. 5)

This work focuses attention on the

"accelerated transformation of reality into purely representative surrogates. [...] Ghirri confronts the enemy (the sign) where it seems to have achieved one of its greatest successes. And discovers that: even signs that appear more stabilized participate in the general process of metamorphosis. And signs, like every other aspect of reality, are shifting and shimmering, and contrary to what we usually think, salvation should be sought in precariousness" (Vaccari, 1983, p. 5).

Gianni Celati, an author and Ghirri's friend, remembers how impressed the photographer was by the first photo of the Earth taken from the Moon, the photo of our planet seen from the spacecraft in 1969. For the first time, man saw an image of the global world. But for Ghirri it also represented the idea of a:

"total duplication of the world, through images. And this reasonably led to consider how the whole world today is known, catalogued, standardized. [...] And so he turned in the opposite direction [...], he was interested in everything that was partial, fragmentary...Everything that showed the infinite diversity of the points in space... Everything that eluded standardization through the images of the world" (Celati, 2010, p. 257).

Having completed his work, he travelled to display the collection of images, even in France at the Festival in Arles. Everyone looked at the first photos, then closed the album. His friend Olivio Barbieri, who was there to serve as his French interpreter, could no longer stand his stubborn obstinacy. Ghirri grumbled: 'They'll understand me in twenty years' (Celati, 2010, p. 257).

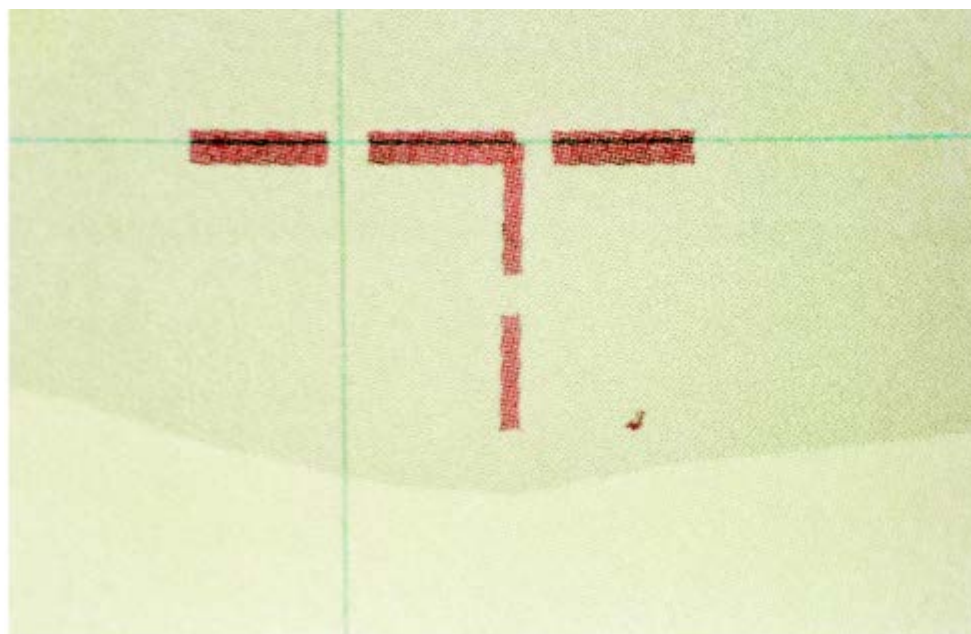
Figure 1 Book cover of 'Atlante', Charta, Milano



Figure 2 Atlante, plate without number. © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri



Figure 3 Atlante, plate without number. © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri



3 The cultural context, graphic and cartographic coding

The Italian economy boomed in the 1960s, and quickly gave rise to a mass consumer society was established. The design disciplines sought to leave their mark on reality with a strong sense of rationality. Both product and graphic design were viewed as regulating, systemising principles.

Under pressure from the US-inspired advertising agencies that opened branch offices in Italy in the late 1940s, Italian visual designers promoted the theory of the 'coordinated image', increasingly important in many different spheres, from corporations to political parties, local administrations, institutions, editorial design and books series, cultural events.

Even Olivetti, which in the 1950s had inaugurated a model of soft corporate identity (Anceschi, 1988), adopted more rigid models of communication – see for example the work of Hans von Klier, who came to Italy following his experience at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. The image, not only as an instrumentation of design methods, but also as a theoretical basis that precedes any practical intervention, is the result of mature industrialization (Anceschi, 1988).

At the same time, graphic design tended to address issues related to the design and management of information in large structures (such as train stations, airports, etc.), of orientation and the architecture of information.

The manual became a universal all-encompassing instrument that defined the visual representation, in terms of time and

aesthetics, of the body to which it referred, whether public or private/commercial:

“the preliminary study of a series of graphic and chromatic elements (brand, logo, colours, etc.), established as a series of specimens to guarantee constancy in reproduction and fabrication, accompanied by a series of models or rules for applying the various programmes of communication artefacts/stationary, indoor or outdoor signage, rotary press material, advertising material, packaging, etc.” (Anceschi, 1988, p. 152).

The major companies in Milan, Turin and Genoa, which had begun to attract large numbers of workers from southern Italy during the 1950s, were contributing to the definition of new human, social and regional geographies: depopulated towns in the South and large urban conglomerates in the North, the decline of agriculture and the development of industry and the tertiary sector. In those years tourism became a mass phenomenon, supported by a rising generalized wellbeing. Italian beaches, including the Romagna coast near Ghirri's Modena, modified their configurations and geared up to prepare for mass tourism from Italy and abroad.

In this context, all the leading figures in Italian graphic design worked in both design and professional advertising.

In 1967, Mimmo Castellano - whose clients over the course of his career included RAI, Montedison, Italsider, Alitalia, iGuzzini and Boffi among others - took on the monumental job of constructing an icon system for the International Tourism Exchange (BIT). The programme's first product was the design of the image and signage system for the Aeolian islands. It was published in the Art Director's Club Milano eighth annual in 1977.

Between 1967 and 1979 Albe Steiner – who belonged to an earlier generation of graphic designers, working for a variety of companies such as La Rinascente, Agfa, publishers, etc.– discussed the issue of the city's image with the students of ISIA Urbino e.g. the municipality's brand, the city magazine, urban transport signage, the visual codification of services and businesses. In 1968, he served as a consultant to the Touring Club Italiano for the launch of the new book series “Grandi città del mondo” and for the association's newsletter, known as “Qui Touring” and published without interruption since 1971.

The Touring Club Italiano was established in 1894. Originally founded to promote bicycle tourism in Italy, its information, educational activities and travel guides became the association's main priorities starting in the late 1960s. The production of maps and publications have been a vital element since the very beginning, consisting over the years in an array of monthly magazines for its members, travel guidebooks, indexes and photography books, that have identified the TCI as a truly specialized publisher.

TCI's moment of maximum development occurred during its years of collaboration with graphic designer Bob Noorda, born in Holland and “a designer who gave a major contribution to defining

the identity of the Club and the democratic and cultural revolution it carried out to spread the culture of tourism as an instrument of knowledge" (Ferrara, 2011, p. 32).

Noorda's best-known professional experience was his work with Unimark, a design agency that he co-founded with Massimo Vignelli, among others. His projects included various urban transport signage systems, highlighting his familiarity with the fields of automobiles, transport and travel, based on his long-established collaboration with Pirelli (Piazza, 2011). His design project for the subway system in Milan in 1964 was fundamental to Unimark's project for the NYC Transit Authority and the signage for the subway system in São Paulo. The Metropolitana Milanese is an important case study for three reasons:

"On the level of its systemic graphic design and signage, it summarizes and builds upon the most advanced international experiences, in particular in the sector of air transportation. On the level of the overall image, it succeeded in merging the need to identify the service in relation to the context of other city services with the functional and graphic needs of the service itself. And finally (but this is probably one of the factors that led to the precision he achieved in the results) it is the product of an effective complementary use of differentiated design skills (Anceschi, 1988, pp. 156-157).

Noorda conceived and redesigned the entire "Annuario Generale", published by TCI in 1980 after no less than seven years of development and data updates, which included 250 pictograms (half of which have been applied and printed). The goal of the Touring Club, however, was to use the pictograms at different scales for different purposes, from maps and travel guides to signage in holiday camps. And even as a proposal for the Alliance Internationale de Tourisme, with which the TCI was affiliated (Piazza, 2011).

4 Considerations based on the theory of visual communication

In breaking down, deconstructing and progressively dissolving "cartographic reason", for those of us who deal in visual communication, Ghirri seems to want to remind us that a map is nothing more than a synthetic two-dimensional representation, chosen among the many possible ways of representing things, and that "everything indicated in it appears to the detriment of what is not in it" (Lussu, 2014, p. 49). The process of visually translating the variety of phenomenology into a map can only be a process of abstraction, which adopts a coding system that necessarily simplifies, excludes, "typifies".

Suddenly the conventional nature of cartographic, and graphic representation in general, becomes clear for all to see.

The signs of the elements that constitute the plates of the atlas – icons, typography, lines, colours – take on a new role. Ghirri produces

a new sort of writing, that works on two levels: on the choice and meanings of the signs, as well as their position, in the space of the page and the narrative sequence (Lussu, 2003). The photographer's work seems to want to underscore how, like in typography, the progressive codification of the notational system in cartography also structures and narrows thought: acting on the micro-level – on type, signs – and on the macro level – how they are arranged in space – can trigger new thoughts, critical considerations on the present and a search for adequate forms of visual representation (Lussu, 2003).

The signs, positioned in new contexts, allude to new meanings. The visual narrative structure, free of the standardizing control of cartographic codification, can be ordered in new ways.

“Knowledge (whatever form it takes, mental or materialized, verbal or figural) expects to be arranged in a place that gives it order, and must hence possess a configuration” (Anceschi, 1992, p. 101). “To give place” means to *confer existence*. To make the object of the representation exist, or rather to make it happen, take place, occur.

So Ghirri, in the midst of an ontological transformation, having photographed his new objects, gives them place. As a graphic designer, he organizes the sequence of images, their orientation in space, their layout.

And thus a series of compromises is enacted between the layout and the *mise-en-scene* of the representation, between the two-dimensional aspects of the graphic objects and their illusionary spatial function: once the scene has been established and the actors have been summoned, the manoeuvre to “dovetail” them begins (Anceschi, 1992). But the apparently neutral operations of placement and technical manipulation, typical of visual representation, are the ones that lead to the discursive and rhetorical transformation of representation (Anceschi, 1988).

However, Ghirri's work does not seem limited to a specific graphic strategy, acting only at the level of visual grammar. The photographer anticipates and organizes the way the user will enjoy his book over time, through the reading order, the perusal of the pages.

“I believe that photography essentially consists of cancelling out the outside world. That is why I prefer a white edge to a black one. The framing of a shot is a cancellation of reality that I view as a return to white, not to black. And the image tends to expand. In my opinion, photography is basically a sequential narrative. Mental. Of course, photographs are taken one at a time and should be seen one at a time, but I have always conceived a sort of narration that continues beyond the individual image (photo). That is why, in my images, I always leave points or ways to escape; I never try to lock myself within an image” (Bizzarri & Barbaro, 2010, p. 192).

Now it is the photographer who plays with the rules of visual representation – and seems almost to make a game of it: he presents the Atlas of a world that exists (because it is represented), finally open for discovery.

By removing parts of the visual representation from its context, isolating some of the details, building new visual sequences compared to those contained in the original textbook, Ghirri opens to everything that was not there before: imagination, memory, a journey through time. Notation and timing seem to be intimately connected (Anceschi, 1992, p. 141).

“notation is the conservation of the past in that it is a materialization of memory, control of the course of the present time in the present, it is the anticipation of the future that is about to be performed. But notation is also intimately linked to space: to note can also mean to arrange a series of artifices for spatial orientation . [...] even the layout grid is an orientation system (Anceschi, 1992, p. 142).

The photographer therefore brings us a new world which he has invented with its own system of representation that, as a document, serves to stabilize information and preserve it over time.

Figure 4 Atlante, internal double page. plate without number. © Eredi di Luigi Ghirri



5 Conclusions

The writing so far has aimed to underscore the originality of Ghirri's thinking, as opposed to the “dominant thought” of his time. To this end, it began by offering comments and considerations by critics of photography and the arts of his time.

Furthermore, it sought to position his work within the context of the society, the culture and the graphic design of the earlier and later decades. Though the graphic and artistic experiences of the time were many and quite different, we wanted to underscore how the design of visual communication works to define a cultural practice of design– an authentic sort of protocol – that aims at the highest codification and standardization of information.

The photographer's point of departure, the end of the journey, because everything has already been discovered, traced and represented, constitutes the starting point for fertile considerations on the field of graphic design. Playing with the grammar of visual composition, at the micro level – the level of signs, symbols, type and colours – and the macro level – the angle of the shots, the sequence – sheds new light on the constituent aspects of graphic design. At the same time, because “the props” were taken out of their context

and suspended, Ghirri's work makes it possible to think about the constant, repetitive and homogenizing nature of visual communication and in particular of the system of cartographic representation. While this certainly has positive aspects, which include making it easier to progressively introduce new concepts into visual representation systems and have users learn them, on the other hand excessive uniformity and standardization could lead to an impoverishment of cultural and scientific thought. These consequences are not limited to a specific time in history, but continue to be valid today, despite the changes in the social, technological and scientific contexts, and the multiplication of the possibilities and tools of visual representation.

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