Inverting the Panopticon: Google Earth, Wonder and Earthly Delights

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Abstract
This essay considers the user experience of Google Earth, comparing the world it presents with other world views including static print maps, medieval mappaemundi, and Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights. It also considers the scopic environment of Google Earth in relation to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a theoretical prison design intended to provide a single guard the ability to view every inmate while remaining unobserved. The Google Earth interface generates wonder and geographic longing, but also empowers the user by granting new and flexible controls that differ from those available to users of print and manuscript maps. Ultimately, Google Earth is not an application that provides great utility, as traditionally defined – it does not help us navigate the physical world. Instead, it does something much more powerful: it gives us a new way to contemplate the world in which we live.

Floating in Dark Sea

The sky is a flat black, dotted with stars that stand out as single white pixels. It is an inanimate, undifferentiated surface, without depth, without life. Then out of the darkness looms a bright marble, a growing sphere: planet earth, or rather, Google Earth, an entity bearing only fragmentary similarity to our world. In comparison with the dull field behind it, the globe is stunning, riveting, arresting. With the slightest pressure of the index finger, and the smallest flick of the wrist, we set the world spinning – along the conventional polar axis if we so wish, but along any other, if we prefer. The earth we see is at once individual and multiple, self-evidently an integral unit and simultaneously composed of a multitude of individual images. Hundreds? Thousands. Hundreds of thousands.

Another click, another flick, and we soar inward toward earth, more in than down. The sensation is far less the alarm of falling than of the excitement of approaching, or better, of pulling the earth toward us. How far in can we go, how close to our home? The image of mine was shot in 2007, before we bought the house, before we tore out the lawn, and with someone else’s car in the driveway. There is an inevitable tension, as we doubt that we will be able to truly penetrate the atmosphere, to transcend global, continental, or even national contexts to arrive at the deeply local – our city, our neighborhood, our street, our block, our house. The prospect of instantaneous access to detailed satellite photography of a location is no longer a technical marvel. We expect this when looking up directions to a friend’s house for a dinner party, wishing no longer merely to know in advance where her house is, but what it looks like, and if the street looks like the sort of place likely to have ample parking. But the experience of operating Google Earth is different, owing to both the fluidity of motion and the presence, at all times, of the totality of the earth, regardless of the depth of focus. We can, in an instant, without reloading a page, launch outward, returning to the position of an omniscient deity.
Let’s take a trip to the Museo del Prado to see one of the more familiar, if puzzling, images of the Northern Renaissance: the Garden of Earthly Delights, painted by the imaginative master Hieronymus Bosch around 1504. We soar to Madrid and turn on the 3D Buildings Layer so that we can hover down and then stand before the museum. Click on it, and then on the thumbnail of the Garden that pops up. The center panel of this triptych is the most well-known and frequently reproduced portion, showing a riveting series of gambols, many sexual in nature and several involving unusual partners: giant birds, berries and bivalves.

Lean in toward the painting. Closer, closer. Here, you can press your nose against the painting without alarming a guard, in order to see every daub of paint on every berry, every scale on each winged fish, every glint on each of the flames of hell, all fractured by the craquelure of age. The best reproduction ever made available of the Garden is surely this one contained within Google Earth, itself. Unfortunately, even this astonishing 14 gigapixel reproduction will not allow us to close the wings of the triptych – hiding the glorious, if ultimately condemnatory, Garden. But then, even if you were physically there rather than virtually, you couldn’t either. So let me close it for you.

When the triptych is closed, we are confronted by a radically different tone (Fig. 1). The exterior presents the Third Day of Creation. Bosch’s Planet Earth looms out of a blackness that recalls the opening moments of Google Earth. Here, though, the globe is painted in grisaille and so seems, unlike the Technicolor image of Google Earth, cold,
dead, and utterly still. The landscape is visible in surprising detail, as if we are at once seeing the whole and have also zoomed in to great depth; we can see the entire orb of the earth, and at the same time individual plants and rocks, emerging as the waters recede. It is as if the planet might be traversed in half a day’s sturdy walking. Still, storm clouds seem to gather ominously overhead, as if suggesting impending cataclysm, though these are only the remnants of the separation of the light and the darkness.

To the upper left, we see the Creator. He is, like the world he has made, without color and without animation, as if frozen in the vast emptiness of space. He seems to be buoyed up on a cloud, though clearly the clouds of earth are contained within its shining, glassy atmospheric dome. The vantage point afforded by Bosch to the supreme deity is the very viewpoint presented by Google Earth as we hover, held aloft by an unseen force, as far above or as close to the surface of the planet as we wish.

While this is a moment of creation, in which God begins to fill the world with life, he nonetheless seems so distant and remote from his “great and wearisome effort,” as if already sensing the disgust he will (in the mind of Bosch) eventually feel toward the world and its inhabitants (Beagle 39). He also seems, in comparison to the user of Google Earth, impotent. As Peter Beagle writes, “God seems very small and far away, already retreating from the consequences of his world” (39). What, then, is our position in regard to the world, when we view it through the interface of Google Earth, rather than through the interface of “real” life? I would argue that, unlike Bosch’s receding God, we are advancing, swelling with power and also with pleasure, with the wonder of earthly delight.

Power

The God of the Torah is omniscient, and so he is defined by his ability to see all the world. Just so, with Google Earth open before us on our monitors, we can spy on any corner of the world we wish. I am now touring the famously closed nation of North Korea. While dropping down to ground-level in Pyongyang does not provide the same detail I find in Manhattan, nonetheless I do see three-dimensional renderings of Kim Il-sung Stadium, The Arch of Triumph, Rungnado May Day Stadium, and the sharp pinnacle of the Ryugyong Hotel, among other structures (Fig. 2).

And with a flick of my finger, I am again back in the sky, looking not at the oddly repeating image of spectators gazing with rapt attention at nothing in particular within Kim Il-sung Stadium – the stands are full but the playing field is empty – but at the whole of the capital city (Fig. 3).

As I gaze on Pyongyang, I do so with the tremendous power of the unfettered gaze. Looking in from above, from the position of the Creator, we can gaze without any concern that we might, in turn be seen. There are two reasons for this. First, we are presumably high in the sky. We are given the vantage point of the gargoyles. As Stephen King – who knows a thing or two about monsters – writes: “Because they are almost always above human sightlines, and because people … rarely look up, they don’t see … them … but they see us” (9). Second, and more important, despite the great sense of presence of the luminous image before us, we are not there, and the photographs do not show the current moment. Even if we are to call up the very address at which we sit, and haul our laptops out into the street, despite a strong wireless signal we will of course not see ourselves standing there, in the dizzying vertigo of mise-en-abyme – at least not yet. These are static photographs, taken at specified moments in the recent past. The Digital Global Coverage layer option displays the quadrant covered by each individual photograph, and provides the exact date of every one, as well as the cloud
coverage at the time. In a moment’s sinuous flight, I am viewing the quadrant containing my office, which has been photographed eight times, between 1998 and 2009; by clicking the clock in the status bar, I can scroll back and forth across the timeline. I can turn on the 3D Buildings layer, and see my building pop out of the ground in a digital rendering. I slip downward to the ground, and then am suddenly in Street View, sliding and strafing. The rendered building is replaced by a photograph of the actual building I am standing in front of, while I stand here. My office was photographed in 2011, and for all I know, I was indeed there at the time – I have twice spied a Google Street View vehicle making its slow way through, it would seem, every block in the world. But if I stand in the very spot I am seeing, I find myself missing. Everything else is right, even the tone of the sky, by chance, but no me. Still, it is hard
to imagine that we will not be granted the greater power of the immediate and contemporary gaze at some time in the near future, merging the voyeuristic effects of the Webcam with the panoptical gaze of Google Earth.

Utility and Longing

What is Google Earth? Ostensibly, it is the most sophisticated mapping system available to the “average” person, far more elegant than any GPS device and leaving the now pedestrian, antique-feeling browser-based systems of Mapquest and the like far behind, never mind those increasingly obsolete printed maps on which we used to rely. But those foldout (never-to-be-properly-folded-back-in) maps in our glove compartments are, in many ways, far more useful, in that they very simply, with a minimum of fuss, help us to travel from one location to another. The interface of Google Earth, in sharp contrast, is elegant and stunning, so much so that its potential utility as a navigational device (as it was, in part, originally intended) breaks down as we are instead reduced and elevated to the state of wonder. Google Earth used to list four bulleted functions that “put the world’s geographic information at your fingertips”:

- Fly to your house. Just type in an address, press Search, and you’ll zoom right in.
- Search for schools, parks, restaurants, and hotels. Get driving directions.
- Tilt and rotate the view to see 3D terrain and buildings.
- Save and share your searches and favorites (“Explore”)

A page declaring far more ambitious – and less navigational – functionality has replaced the original “Explore, Search and Discover” page just quoted, though:

- Fly to your house. Just type in an address, press Search, and you’ll zoom right in.
- Google Earth lets you fly anywhere to view satellite imagery, maps, terrain, 3D buildings, galaxies in outer space, and the depths of the ocean.
- Fly from outer space down to Street View
- Explore 3D buildings and trees around the world
- Easily discover Historical Imagery
- Explore rich geographical content
- Search for business locations
- See 3D buildings and add your own models
- Visualize your GPS tracks and share with others
- Dive beneath the surface of the ocean (“Desktop”)

Most notably, “get driving directions” (which felt a bit like an afterthought in the earlier list) has been cut out, this prosaic role utterly subsumed by the jouissance inspired by the interface. We don’t plan practical journeys; we sit back in a state of wonder.

In his seminal essay New Historicism Stephen Greenblatt coined the pairing of “resonance” and “wonder” to describe the treatment of history and historical objects. He uses museum displays as a metaphor for the concepts:

By “resonance” I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which – as metaphor or, more simply, as metonymy – it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By “wonder” I mean the power of the object displayed to stop the
viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention. (Greenblatt 19–20)

Maps, too, are created somewhere on the spectrum between resonance and wonder. A GPS device tilts heavily toward resonance – the map is valued in so far as it reaches “beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world,” if not to evoke cultural forces than to help us find the spaces where they are enacted. The vast maps of the seventeenth century, like the great Klencke Atlas created by a consortium of Dutch merchants as a gift to King Charles II in 1660, with thirty-seven maps that stand about five feet square in a volume five feet nine inches high, on the other hand, leans heavily toward wonder (Pointer 115). Regarding its display in the British Library’s recent exhibition, Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda and Art, Tom Harper, the Library’s Curator of Antiquarian Mapping, noted “It is going to be quite a spectacle … Even standing beside it is quite unnerving” (Hansen and Harper). GPS devices are designed to be carried about by travelers, but most are small, bland, and utilitarian in feel. The Klencke Atlas, on the other hand, required six people just to move it a small distance for the exhibition (Hansen and Harper). Indeed, The Guardian ran a photograph of the Atlas upright between Peter Barber, Head of Map Collections, and Surekha Davies, a scholar of the history of cartography, in order to dramatize its size (Brown). Navigational utility was never its goal, though it was intended to have other forms of resonance.

Where might Google Earth sit on this spectrum? If we cannot or would not use Google Earth to learn how to get from Point A to Point B, at least not in any literal sense (even digital mapping tools designed for this purpose, like Mapquest, are often reduced to hard copy for use, so that printouts are what we bring into the car), then for what can we use it? For analogues in scope, we might turn to the walls of our elementary schools, where we invariably find world maps displaying the whole globe, though flattened out as if under a microscope slide, seemingly etherized and pinned like a dusty gall wasp. If these sorts of maps once induced a sense of wonder in children, that age is now largely passed. In contrast, the world presented by Google Earth is a whirl of dynamism and motion – more so than actual globes, though we can spin those as well. They work on a necessary principle of omission, whereas Google Earth promises (nearly) infinite detail. If we showed our children Google Earth instead of the problematic and misused sixteenth-century Mercator Projection Map that is all to common – indeed, it is on the wall of my daughter’s preschool – students might learn a great deal more about how the world is arranged, and we would no doubt find not only the computer science departments, but also the geography and cartography departments of our universities gaining healthy enrollments.

Regardless of their effectiveness or appropriateness – the use of a sixteenth-century naval navigation device for the education of the children of the twenty-first century is dubious, at best – the function of large wall-mounted Mercator world maps is clearly not navigational. These maps have been hung to help in the education of our children. They are not designed to help students in Lawrence, Kansas, the slightly contentious “center” of Google Earth (Windows version), to get to Easter Island, though it might stir in them longings to eventually find their way hence (Mathis). But if the maps on classroom walls entice, they do so through their lack of specificity, through their strategic creation of tension between details and the lack thereof. Exotic names that conjure – or better still, are too wholly unfamiliar to conjure – images of a world far removed from our surroundings are paired with featureless expanses of color. Resonance can only be achieved in the context of information about the subject. Described merely by an unknown name and a
flatly colored shape, a region can only inspire wonder. As Marlow, the narrator of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, describes the maps of his childhood:

At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, “When I grow up I will go there.” The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven’t been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour’s off. Other places were scattered about the hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and … well, we won’t talk about that. But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after. (Conrad 70–71)

This is a passage redolent with what Sylvia Tomasch has called “geographical desire,” with the raw and urgent craving not only for travel – this is no mere itchy-footed wanderlust – but to know the world, to gain a greater understanding of the lacunae on our maps (esp. 3). This optimistic enterprise takes as its underlying and unvoiced assumption that once the world is fully mapped, fully named, fully known, it will become at last intelligible to us, not merely a frightening and overwhelming jumble of places, imperfectly linked. This desire is, at its root, utopian. Indeed, the basic project of mapmaking as a whole – and particularly of the making of world maps – is utopian. Maps present the world reconfigured for our gaze, positioning us in the place of God, and the organizing principle for these maps is our understanding. The result is, then, inevitably, a world of greater order, clarity and unity than the world we see when, blinking, we look away from the map and out the window. This is even true of medieval maps like the Psalter Map, a small gem of a map produced in England around 1262. While this oriented map presents a range of monstrosities – the “monstrous races,” confined to their orange and blue boxes in southern Africa, the hoards of Gog and Magog, implied by the great wall to the north-east – it is still a map that contains these chaotic beings and reduces them to mere elements of God’s perfect plan.

Of course, Marlow’s voyage into the dark heart of Africa provides no such comfort. Rather, it compounds our fears and doubts, so that the region “had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness” (Conrad 71). The journey marks it as permanently unknowable and worse, destroys our desire to ever return, to plot out the Congo once and for all.

But with Google Earth, all is mapped, and from the safe distance of the satellite, floating 438 miles over the surface of the earth and gazing down upon it with the same cold and detached eye of Bosch’s God (Sheffner). We may, indeed, look upon the Congo if we wish, following it through every winding turn and cataract, though without the fear of ever becoming ensnared in the psychological web of Kurtz (Fig. 4). There is a web to be seen, but it is a beautiful one consisting of blue-black water cut through with ribbons of green and orange islands.

A flythrough from mouth to source takes seconds, and is only dizzying if we zoom in too closely, if our Eye Altitude, as marked at the lower right edge of the window, drops down out of the celestial sphere. As the manager’s servant observes of Kurtz, “he dead,” and with him, the fears that were once part and parcel of scopic engagement with the most distant of lands (Conrad 148).

**Google Earths**

The image presented by Google Earth shows us not one but many earths. In her riveting *Troll: A Love Story*, Johanna Sinisalo describes the same city, as seem from the perspectives of people of drastically different social groups:
Odd how there can be cities and cities ... There’s the city of a certain kind of woman, who judges a street by the kinds of shops there are, the classiness of the fashion shops, the perfumeries, jewelers, shoe stores. An alcoholic’s city, on the other hand, consists of pubs, sausage stands, liquor stalls, alleys where you can piss without being picked up for indecent behavior ... And he doesn’t even notice the designer boutique because it’s got no function for him, just as the fashionable lady doesn’t see that sleazy dive – it doesn’t exist for her. (Sinisalo 105)

Sinisalo describes how the city is seen by dogs, by bus drivers, by members of a partially concealed gay community. Each eye sees different aspects of the world. So too, with Google Earth. We can choose not only what region we see, but what details interest us. We might be interested, as is Sinisalo’s “certain kind of woman” (a phrase that echoes precisely the descriptions of the geographically obsessive *Wonders of the East* of the Middle Ages7) in shops, though we cannot yet isolate the finer variety (Mittman and Kim chapter 7). Likewise, we can highlight hotels, restaurants, transportation systems, geographical features, churches, even crime statistics. At the tick of a box, we know how many assaults and murders were recorded in Manhattan in 2000 (7952 and 129, respectively). These sets of information are referred to as “Layers,” suggesting well the presence of multiple cities, multiple worlds, existing on top of one another, available to be navigated at will.

**Centering and Orienting the World**

Centering is perhaps the most contentious issue in map design. All printed maps must be centered somewhere, and this grants to a given locale tremendous importance. If we were to turn to world maps of the Middle Ages, we would see that they are often centered on Jerusalem. This is because Jerusalem was literally believed to be the center of the world, but also because of its great holiness, its centrality to the medieval Christian worldview, most clearly suggested by the Crusades, waged routinely for two hundred years to gain access to it (Mittman 34–44 and Higgins).
The centering of Google Earth, then, is of great interest. It is centered on the United States, which is typical. Many world maps center on their country or region of origin. However, the precise point on which it centers is perhaps surprising. If I zoom in without panning at all, I (using the Mac version) will find myself in Chanute, Kansas, in the middle of the intersection of West Main Street and South Lincoln Avenue. As the lead engineer for the project writes, “you’re probably wondering – why Chanute? … The most important reason is that I was born and raised there” (Webb). Touching down on earth, here, we find it to be a curious place, at once all American, with an old brick post office, and global, with the equally stout Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum, housing ethnographic, artistic and natural collections from Africa, Borneo and the South Seas.

This is, though, not the only center of the world, so to speak. The Windows version of Googe Earth drops us down in Lawrence, Kansas, a location that had been marked by a user as “Center of the Earth,” engendering some understandable indignation, including a post from Andrés Puche, of Montréal, who writes in angry capital letters, “THAT IS THE CENTER OF UNITED STATES ON GOOGLE EARTH, NOT THE CENTER OF THE KNOWN UNIVERSE. THAT JUST SHOWS HOW EGOCENTRIC YOU AMERICAN PEOPLE TEND TO BE SOMETIMES” (Puche). This is perhaps a fair criticism, as the official National Atlas of the United States presents us with a series of maps intended to demonstrate the US’s centrality to global geography (United States Department of the Interior). We see “World Geographic Expeditions from the United States,” in which the US is not only centered but also highlighted, the only country to have any color – and it is a bold red (Fig. 5).

Tendrils of exploration radiate out, touching every corner of the world, from Easter Island to the Cape, and marking the US as the center of global commerce. Similarly, the

Fig. 5. “World Geographic Expeditions from the United States.” Source: United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey, The 1970 National Atlas of the United States of America, print version 1970, online version October 2000 http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/map_item.pl?data=/home/www/data/gmd/gmd370m/g3701m/g3701gm/gct00013/ca000108.jp2&style=setlmap&itemLink=?ammem/gmd:@file(req(@field(NUMBER+@band(g3701gm+gct00013))+@field(COLLID+setlmap))&title=The%20National%20Atlas%20of%20the%20United%20States%20of%20America.%20%20(2011). (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division).

“United States Imports and Exports” and “United States Foreign Service” maps inscribes our presence on literally every inch of every landmass in the world but Antarctica (Figs. 6 and 7).

While of course Mr. Puche is correct, he has overlooked another moment of empowerment provided by Google Earth, which allows us to move beyond the conventions of the National Atlas: We can re-center the map, so that it begins anywhere we choose. Our home town, the cite of our research, anywhere. We likewise can reorient the world, breaking five-hundred years of Eurocentric convention so that, for example, our map of the world may be centered on Jerusalem, and oriented toward the East, following medieval convention and producing an image surprisingly similar to the great world maps of the period (Fig. 8).

If this image is compared to the Psalter Map, discussed above, we can see the correspondences of Jerusalem at the center, above a vertical Mediterranean, with the British Isles visible to the lower left corner, opposite the bifurcated Red Sea in the upper right (British Library). Yes, Google Earth is set to begin centered at a given point, with a given orientation, both of which favor the US, but the user, though His or Her power, may center the world as seems pleasing.

**Naming**

To name is to grant a measure of control over a people or region, as has been discussed by Derrida, Foucault and Althusser, among others (Derrida 386, Foucault, “Subject and Power” 420 and Althusser 86). To do so in a given language is to emphasize one’s dominion. A measure of conquest is entailed in inscribing the capital of the eastern archipelago of Asia with the appellation “Tokyo,” as opposed to “東京都,” an option available in Google Earth (the “Local Place Names” layer). Other nomenclature is more contentious. For example, the “Welsh,” still bear the pejorative nomenclatorial stamp imposed upon them by the English at least thirteen hundred years ago (their name meaning not only “foreigner,” but also “shameless person” and “slave” in Old English). Among the “Welsh” people, there is a nationalist movement to rename the country Cymru, recover-
And here, Google Earth falters. Clicking Local Place Names merely causes locations in Cymru/Wales to appear in duplicate. We ought see Hwlffordd/Haverfordwest, but instead see Haverfordwest/Haverfordwest, and the astounding Cymraeg toponym of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch does not appear, at all.

Flight

Our flights throughout Google Earth are smooth, effortless and nearly instant (the speed is adjustable, of course). One moment, we are in New York, and not merely looking at a black dot beside which is written “New York.” Rather, we are at the corner of 5th Avenue and West 34th Street, looking down at the Empire State Building (or up at it, if we prefer to use the 3D Buildings feature), and with a flick, can soar uptown along 5th to West 50th, where we can count the pier buttresses of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Seconds later, following a beautifully sinuous and seemingly unhurried launch into the stratosphere and back (speed controllable in the Navigation preferences), we are in Uttar Pradesh, gazing at the formal symmetry of the gardens of the Taj Mahal, and then at the Great Wall of China, once considered to be the only manmade structure visible from space. Now that your house is clearly visible, this honor is rather pallid.

Perhaps it is that I began writing this sitting in a plane halfway between O’Hare and Phoenix that brought me to consider the drastic differences between my virtual flight, and my live experience of actual flight. Our flight from locale to locale in Google Earth (give yourself a nonstop flight to the other side of the world or, better yet, plot a series of destinations, alighting momentarily in each before ascending again, like Christ into the heavens) is so very different from our actual flights. It is smooth, swift and beautiful, as if at last living up to the promises of airline ads of the 50s. It is exalted and glorious, as we revel at once in our wonder inspired by the program, of course, but by the world, as well. In comparison, our “real” journeys are a series of humiliations, of removed shoes and three-ounce shampoos in quart-sized clear baggies. Only in Google Earth are more stopovers a plus, enhancing our voyage rather than detracting from it.

If the great world maps of the Middle Ages aim to remind us of the plan of God (as they saw it), and the work of Bosch emphasizes our great distance from Him (as he saw it), Google Earth allows us to sit on his throne, if only briefly, before our freefall back to the world around us. Can we be surprised if we experience a bit of turbulence upon reentry? I, therefore, prefer to return to Google Earth, calling up my world, made to order, oriented and centered as I wish, layered to my personal interests. And then, with a flick of my wrist, I set the world to spin.

Panopticon Inverted

While the world spins, while we have the complete view before us, and as I conclude, it seems worth questioning the glory of this system. Is there a darker side to this power of total observation? Whenever the specter of sinister observation is raised, so is the metaphor of the Panopticon, a theoretical prison design that was conceived by Jeremy Bentham and published as a series of letters in 1787 (Fig. 9). It operates on the principle of total observation by an unseen observer. The first letter outlines the operative principle:

It is obvious that, in all these instances, the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of
the establishment have been attained. Ideal perfection, if that were the object, would require that each person should actually be in that predicament, during every instant of time. This being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so. (Bentham)

Michel Foucault summarizes succinctly in *Discipline and Punish*: “Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere.” In Foucault’s discussion, the Panopticon is the ultimate sinister state force for observation and control of the individual. The structure, never realized, consists of an outer ring of cells in multiple stories, surrounding a central tower.

“The Panopticon is a machine,” in Foucault’s formulation, “for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*). Bentham himself has, since his death, figured this same dyad: at his instructions, his skeleton is covered in wax, clothed as he was in life, seated in his armchair, and sits, sightless but on perpetual view, in a wooden case in the South Cloisters of University College London (Bentham Project). But this “real” Bentham – which his will instructs to be called the “Auto Icon” – has been treated much as the Earth has, digitized, zoomable, and able to be spun around and around at will, as it appears in the “Virtual Auto-
The inventor of the Panopticon, then, is subject to the perpetual gaze of unseen observers at a scale unimaginable at the time of his writings. Google Earth also provides a Panopticon, of sorts, but it is inverted; the inmates of that largest of all pens are the ones able to see everything while remaining unobserved. Instead of a single guard, there are millions of viewers. In a Geoweb keynote in 2008, Michael Jones, Google Earth Chief Technology Officer, claimed that there were already 400 million Google Earth users, using conservative (if imperfect) estimations (Geens). Any of us with an internet connection is now granted the power to cast our gaze as widely as we wish, for as long as we desire.

The convex sphere of the earth, as it curves away from us, is the inverse of the concave inner curve of the Panopticon, and it is the inmates granted the scopic power. We can look and look without being seen because we are not there, and there is not now. I would contrast this with other recent efforts at total observation, such as that pioneered by the UK anti-shoplifting firm Internet Eyes, which allows Orwellian-sounding “Viewers” to pay £1.99 in order to watch CCTV footage live. Through a points scheme, Viewers vie for a chance at £1000 at the end of each month. These Viewers are not present, but their spectatorship is synchronous with the actions they are watching as they volunteer their time to help enhance and privatize an already powerful surveillance state (University of Leeds’ Profession Ethics Network).

On Google Earth, in contrast, illicit activities are scrubbed out, such as the nude sunbathers found by enterprising and patient users (Turnbull). The world, as configured by Google Earth is for the most part, empty, open, available for our scopic delight without the clutter (and interest) of individual lives. Since we are all the viewers, all the unseen guard – and, according to Bentham, his family! – hiding behind a blind in his tower, we cannot also be on view as the prisoners. As Bentham writes:

A very material point is, that room be allotted to the lodge, sufficient to adapt it to the purpose of a complete and constant habitation for the principal inspector or head-keeper, and his family. The more numerous also the family, the better; since, by this means, there will in fact be as many inspectors, as the family consists of persons, though only one be paid for it. Neither the orders of the inspector himself, nor any interest which they may feel, or not feel, in the regular performance of his duty, would be requisite to find them motives adequate to the purpose. Secluded oftentimes, by their situation, from every other object, they will naturally, and in a manner unavoidably, give their eyes a direction conformable to that purpose, in every momentary interval of their ordinary occupations. It will supply in their instance the place of that great and constant fund of entertainment to the sedentary and vacant in towns – the looking out of the window. The scene, though a confined, would be a very various, and therefore, perhaps, not altogether an unamusing one. (Bentham)

Bentham’s “inspector” is, then, along with his unpaid family, essentially the primary and central inmate of the Panopticon, locked within the tower at its heart. Ironically, the actual inmates have pairs of windows in their cells, and so can glimpse outside world, but the inspector and his family are prohibited any view but that of the inmates, in order that they spend more time observing their charges.

The view provided by Google Earth has more in common with Bentham’s diagram of the Panopticon than it would with any functioning version of the structure, since the diagram presents an orderly series of empty rooms, just as the images of Google Earth have been scrubbed of its inmate-inspectors. It lacks the riotous bacchanal of Bosch’s Garden. And yet moving through its world is not grim, not at all like gazing on the decaying Presidio Modelo in Cuba, the pockmarked remains of an attempt to run an actual panopti-
conic prison. This structure – closed in 1967 and now a museum – is suffused with resonance in the way of all monuments to human suffering.

But, as Bentham writes, for the inspector, the view should be “perhaps, not altogether an unamusing one.” The empty territory of our personal worlds, as we find them in Google Earth, are enticing, like those far more empty spaces on Marlow’s maps. They invite our inspection, our imagination, and invite us to step into the virtual world before us. Looking at this sanitized world, Bosch’s deity might well find less to repel him, less to encourage him to drift off into the darkness around the grisaille sphere before him. And yet I find more than enough to draw me in.

Short Biography

I am an Associate Professor of Art History at California State University, Chico. I have written Maps and Monsters in Medieval England (Routledge, 2006; paperback 2008), co-written with Susan Kim Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript (ACMRS, forthcoming), and a number of articles on the subject of monstrousity and marginality in the Middle Ages. I coedited with Peter Dendle a Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous (Ashgate, 2012), and am the president of MEARCSTAPA (Monsters: the Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology through Scholarly Theory And Practical Application), accidentally founded at Kalamazoo in 2008 to create a home for walkers in the margins of academia. I am co-director of the Virtual Mappa, with Martin Foys and Shannon Bradshaw. I am now at work on articles on Satan in the Junius 11 manuscript and images of Jews on medieval world maps. I was born and raised in New York, the son and grandson of artists, and in a family of writers of one sort and another. My work with manuscripts, primarily those in the collections of Cambridge, Oxford and the British Library, has given me a sense of tangible connection to the distant past. The charge I feel as my fingers gently touch the edges of folios, where the vellum has been darkened by the touch of hundreds of readers over a thousand years, is incomparable.

Notes

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1 Note that an earlier version of this essay appeared as “The Panopticon: Google Earth, Omnipotence and Earthly Delight,” Peregrinations 2:3 (Summer 2009) http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/vol2_3/current/s.pdf (accessed August 8, 2011). My thanks to Susan Kim, who told me I had to write this essay, after I gave her a tour of Google Earth several years ago.

2 To locate the image, search in Google Earth for Museo del Prado. Click on the building and then on the link for the Garden of Earthly Delights. This will bring up a 14 gigapixel image far superior to that provided on the Museo Nacional del Prado’s own website: http://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/galeria-on-line/galeria-on-line/zoom/1/obra/el-jardin-de-las-delicias-o-la-pintura-del-madrono/oimg/0/ (accessed August 8, 2011).


4 In the latter part of the quote, King is quoting Marc Glimcher, who commissioned the essay.


6 The images on Google Earth come from TerraMetrics, Inc., which in turn uses the Landsat 7 satellite, which orbits at 705 kilometers, or 438 miles.

7 We read, for example, “In certain land are men…” “Then is a certain island on which men are born…” “Then there are other women…”

Inverting the Panopticon

8 Many airline advertisements can be found at http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/. A National Airlines advertisement is at http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/airlines-and-aircraft-ads-1950s/3 (accessed August 3, 2011). It reads: “So you were born under a luck Star. That’s how you feel when you are borne on The STAR – National Airlines’ famed flights that combine 5-mile-a-minute speed with DC-6 luxury PLUS! Filet mignon on your individual table … the spacious Starlight Lounge … flowers, music … and a red carpet rolled out on departure and arrival.”

9 In the discussion following Geens’ post, Jones clarifies his methodology for the estimate. Google Earth’s own page merely claims “millions of people all over the world” (“Who uses Google Earth”).

10 The great prevalence of CCTV technology throughout the UK does not seem to be slowing the violence that has erupted throughout the capital and the nation, as I complete the edits on this essay. The Guardian provides an interactive digital map of “UK riots: every verified incident”: Simon Rogers and Ami Sedghi (August 2011) http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/interactive/2011/au0/09/uk-riots-incident-map (accessed August 10, 2011).

11 Note that these ten blurry and almost illegible images (one caption reads “topless sunbather, this one is definitely female, I think”) have all now been removed from Google Earth, though the screenshots remain on the post.

Works Cited


