EMBODIED SPACE IN GOOGLE EARTH:
CRISIS IN DARFUR

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Google Earth is a web application used by many people for exploring the world around them. The satellite images of earth can be viewed from different perspectives and from different altitudes. The interactive design of Google Earth allows viewers to feel control over what they are seeing, to tag places significant to them, and to join in a community of other enthusiasts. A viewer can save her "own" version of Google Earth, as if it were another Web 2.0 personalized social networking website. In this paper I interrogate one way in which the digital machine, through the lens of Google Earth, can be considered as a convergent part of our social and biological selves. My case study is a human rights activist website called "Crisis in Darfur," which was created via a collaboration between Google Earth and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This site presents to us images, sound and written texts that bear witness to the 60 years of war in the Sudan.[1] As part of this case study, I include my own, subjective experience of accessing this site as a pathway to describing the experience of recognizing that the unfamiliar and the familiar exist within the one time/space world of Google Earth.

I propose that our perceived conflation of time and space when viewing the images found in Google Earth, results in a simulated form of hyper-real immediacy in communication. Our sense of the "far away" is particularly affected. We view Google Earth on our own small, personalized computer screens: the same screens through which we immerse ourselves in private correspondence. I suggest that we interact with Google Earth with a similar sense of immersion and that our engagements with people and places through

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[1] This war is now technically over, as in January 2011 the people of southern Sudan voted in a referendum to separate from the north. The inauguration of Southern Sudan as a separate nation holds promise that war will end and that atrocities will cease. Interestingly, the actor George Clooney's activist foundation "Not on Our Watch" has collaborated with Google on a project called the Sentinel Satellite Project. The aim of this project is to monitor areas of continuing conflict during and after the referendum.

Google Earth are embodied and emotively charged. They exist not only in the simulated world of "as if" existence in the "virtual space" of software applications, but alongside our other active, bodily engagements with the world around us. Through a bioconvergence between the personal computer loaded with Google Earth and our human perceptual apparatus, we can use the illusion of the ever-present to engage with people who are far away in distance and time, in a more powerful way from what we have before.

My use of the term "bioconvergence" lies in the context of thinking about human embodiment in digital space. In this sense, bioconvergence manifests through the way we perceive the world around us via digital technologies and how we assimilate these perceptions as "everyday," "normal," and "natural" to our human state of being. The living human body assimilates as part of itself the powers of perception that some digital technologies seem to make possible. The bioconvergent perceptual effects that machinic technologies have on our human lives accumulate with every current development in these technologies.

While we explicitly incorporate digital machines into the very fabric of our bodies via medical prostheses and computerized procedures, we also use personal computer technologies as part of our everyday awareness of the world around us, of what is now socially necessary for living both our private and public lives. Our computers enable and augment all earlier modes of representation. Kindles, iPads, iPhones, Blackberries and all other portable digital devices allow us a sense of being able to contain our lives, what is important to us, within sleek, aesthetically minimalist objects of plastic and microchips. In this paper I argue that through our use of personalized digital computers, at the same time we nevertheless also are experiencing another much "messier," emotive life aesthetic. The complex communication patterns enabled by Web 2.0 software together with the shiny digital devices most of us carry around with us on a daily basis, come together to allow contact between people in a new way. We experience this new kind of contact as immediate both in time and space. With our new personalized digital intelligence, we perceive the far as near. There is now a growing intensity of bioconvergence between the human body's sensual, perceptual apparatus for thinking and feeling, and our machinic companions. My premise is that such a bioconvergent crossing of boundaries between far and near in the dimensions of time and space, can also extend across the even more inaccessible boundaries of cultural difference.

Intimate Companions—Our Machinic Bodies

> The "eyes" made available in modern technological sciences
> shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show
> us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active
> perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *ways* of
> seeing, that is ways of life…[2] (Donna Haraway)

Haraway's idea of cybernetic prostheses aligns well with Felix Guattari's
suggestion of a computerized "machinic" production of subjectivity—another
recent contribution towards how we can understand the ways that digital
technologies work with us in the production of new modes of understanding
and agency. Guattari asks the following questions:

> What processes unfold in a consciousness affected by the shock
> of the unexpected? How can a mode of thought, a capacity to
> apprehend, be modified when the surrounding world itself is in
> the throes of change?[3]

The ideas presented in this paper begin with Guattari's questions as a premise
for investigating how we perceive the content we find when looking into
Google Earth, how our explorative uses for Google Earth can shed light on the
new kinds of what Haraway calls "active perceptual systems" made available to
us through digital technologies of the web and remote sensing. Guattari speaks
of subjectification in the context of psychotherapy, of the Conscious and the
Unconscious; he confronts what he names as "the massive development of
machinic productions of subjectivity."[4] My interest here is in Google Earth as a
portal into a new form of subjectivity via a particular kind of "bioconvergence,"
i.e., a convergence between our machinic companions (the personalized
computer, satellite technologies, software applications) and our knowing
bodies. The following discussion explores a trope of vision in Haraway's sense,
as embodied, but a vision not only belonging to our "naked" eyes and their
machinic prostheses but also to the wider sensorium of the body.[5] This kind of

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[2] Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free
Association Books, 1991), 190.

[3] Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm* (Sydney: Power Publications,
1995), 11-12.

[4] ibid., 2.

[5] This present paper complements my study of "Crisis in Darfur" in another earlier paper where
I focused on how the interactive nature of our engagement with this site opens up the possibility
for the experience of compassion. In that paper I drew particularly on how the philosopher
Martha Nussbaum describes one of the ways in which compassion can operate as knowledge: as
"entering into … lives with empathy and seeing the human meaning of the issues at stake in
them." See Martha Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion," in *The*

vision comes from a merging of apparatus, a bioconvergence which does not incorporate two different kinds of entities so much as a dialectical moment of awareness: of affective knowledge.

My investigation of "Crisis in Darfur" interrogates in particular the subjective nature of our engagement in terms of "distance" and its disappearance. I examine our active, interactive "digital" gaze for the perceptual framing of distance involved in the experience of Google Earth. Although others have quite rightly critiqued Google Earth for its military prehistory and for the "fly over" aesthetic of its moving images,[6] other responses are possible, and they raise new questions. In Parks's words regarding the televisual image, "We need to devise ways of seeing and knowing difference across distances that complicate rather than reinforce militaristic and scientific rational paradigms."[7] Can Google Earth, for example, also be considered a site for dialogic communication between us, the users of Google Earth, and the people we see within its content? Such a thought seems both fanciful yet obvious at first glance, until the enormity of the suffering that we see through the images of "Crisis in Darfur" confronts us with a need to understand how and why we look at these images. If our engagement with Google Earth is (inter)active, not passive, and if, through our searching of this website, we can actually construct the very images that we see, then we can also understand ourselves to be "performing" the content of Google Earth. This paper works towards describing this kind of performance of sight (and sound) and how it contributes to what Sherry Turkle calls "a new form of sociality in which the isolation of our physical bodies does not indicate our state of connectedness but may be its precondition."[8]

Google Earth

Google Earth was launched in June 2005 by the company Google Inc. (better known to the world by its URL, Google.com) after it had acquired Keyhole and its application Earth View in 2004. Google provides its history and vital

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Communitarian Challenge to Liberalism, eds. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53.

[6] See Roger Stahl, "Becoming Bombs: 3D Animated Satellite Imagery and the Weaponization of the Civic Eye," *MediaTropes*, 2.2 (2009): 65-93; and Lisa Parks, "Digging into Google Earth: An Analysis of 'Crisis in Darfur'," *Geoforum*, 40.4 (2009): 535-545.

[7] Lisa Parks, *Cultures (Satellites and the Televisual) in Orbit* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 107.

[8] Sherry Turkle, "Tethering," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2006), 222.

statistics through its own homepage, which can be accessed via the link
http://www.google.com/corporate/history.html.

Google Earth is a major and the most publicly accessible player in those
mapping activities and data visualization that cartographer Jeremy W.
Crampton describes as the "geoweb" or "spatial media":

> distinctly public and citizen orientated mapmaking efforts,
> which raises interesting questions not only about access and
> control of the geographic information but of the possibilities for
> counter-mapping and counter-knowledge.[9]

The site is an instance of Haraway's "god-trick," the illusion of infinite vision,
available to download for free. It even contains "time-line functionality
allowing elements with temporal information to be encoded (KMLv2.1) and
then selected and filtered by the user"[10] and "data can also be streamed from a
server in response to changes in the visible area of the viewing window sent by
Google Earth."[11]

My initial approach to the aesthetic of Google Earth can perhaps best be
understood as "Dionysian" in the sense ascribed by Paul Kingsbury and John
Paul Jones III in their discussion of Google Earth as "the projection of an
uncertain orb spangled with vertiginous paranoia, frenzied navigation,
jubilatory dissolution, and intoxicating giddiness."[12]

Although Google Earth has some of the interactive attributes of a "first
person shooter computer game," as noted in Roger Stahl's[13] detailed critique of
vision via the technologies developed by Keyhole and used in Google Earth,
these very attributes also contribute to constructive communal ways in which
the application offers opportunities for interacting with information via its
technology; such attributes are certainly associated with the immersive nature
of the environments that we create when we are searching for and thereby
constructing a sense of place and time during our individual and usually private
uses of Google Earth. Indeed, one of the illusions of Google Earth is that it is a

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[9] Jeremy W. Crampton, "Cartography: Maps 2.0," *Progress in Human Geography* 33.1 (2009),
91.

[10] Jo Wood, Jason Dykes, Aidan Slingsby and Keith Clarke, "Interactive Visual Exploration of
a Large Spatio-Temporal Dataset: Reflections on a Geovisualization Mashup," *IEEE
Transactions on Visualization and Computer Graphics*, 13.6 (November/December 2007),
1177.

[11] ibid.

[12] Paul Kingsbury and John Paul Jones III, "Walter Benjamin's Dionysian Adventures on
Google Earth," *Geoforum*, 40.4 (2009).

[13] Stahl, 84-85.

static site, that the information it offers has an indexical relationship to time and space. This illusion that the status of the geographical information is beyond rational argument is common to all mapping enterprises. Google Earth's holistic aesthetic, as exemplified by the blue globe of earth/Gaia, suggests to our perceptual gaze an even stronger connection between seeing and believing the information available in this site. In Google Earth, however, we only see those satellite images Google makes available at any particular time. So the images might not be the same as those we saw on a previous viewing, and these changes are not announced in the site itself apart from the time and space coordinates noted in very small print on the bottom of the images. We can return to a particular place on earth but we are not returning necessarily to the same time/space image, even if it does seem that we are looking at the earth as an ever-present space.

Fig.1. Screen shot of Google Earth (accessed 30/9/2010)

Jason Farman's recent critique of Google Earth in the context of cartography well describes the implications for embodied responses to new media practices that arise from engaging with "a new form of spatial interaction"[14] that emerges from the nexus of human responses to digital, yet

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[14] Jason Farman, "Mapping the Digital Empire: Google Earth and the Process of Postmodern Cartography," *New Media and Society*, 12.6 (2010), 885.

indexically linked, representations of "real space." His analysis focuses on Google's creation of the Google Earth Community (via the Bulletin Board System) that allows a community of users to interact with each other, to manipulate and mark/tag data from Google Earth as they illustrate and engage their own individual agendas as well as those of a broader socio-political nature.

Another inherent link between the user of the application and its makers needs to be kept in mind: that of the consumer to a promoted product. This particular aspect must be noted, even if briefly, because Google Earth invites people to use it for commercial purposes, just as it offers "grants" to non-profit organizations to develop sites within its Google Earth Outreach Program. For all its beauty and military might, Google Earth is a product intended for corporate profit.[15] For example, Google insists on its branding logo being included in any images copied from the site: reasonable, perhaps, but also a reminder that data from Google Earth is derived from corporate interests whose agenda must embrace the knowledge that, in Lisa Parks's words, "Satellite image data only becomes a document of the 'real' and an index of the 'historical' if there is reason to suspect it has relevance to current affairs."[16] For example, although Google Earth has been used to trace human rights violations in Burma via satellite images,[17] Google Earth's branding of this kind of data as its own quickly followed.

Having used the satellite images of Google Earth to trace the ravages of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Google introduced Google Earth Outreach in June 2007.[18] Google Earth Outreach also provides what it calls "Google Earth Awareness Layers" that can be used to view within the Google Earth website, tagged information about people and places.[19] The Google Earth Outreach website itself, http://earth.google.com/outreach/index.html (accessed 24/2/11) currently offers a showcase of materials (videos, photographs, and text) that have been included as recent Google Earth Awareness Layers, together with information about how to obtain funding from Google Earth to make these

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[15] For a critique on this aspect of "branded information" see Lisa Parks, "Digging into Google Earth."

[16] Parks, *Cultures*, 91.

[17] See Crampton, 93.

[18] See http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2007/06/introducing-google-earth-outreach.html (accessed 24/2/11).

[19] These layers are enabled by clicking a box on the sidebar viewed on the left of the screen image which comes up in the Google Earth application. Once the Layers are turned on, the user is then able to view icons that appear over images of the earth.

Layers and how to make them. Google Earth's Global Awareness Layers can be up-dated by their creators.

The sporadic or even constant updating of images and information that make up Google Earth, as well the updating of the Layers, means that the whole site is always changing. However, the meanings that we derive through this site are vulnerable to the illusion that times and places are denoted as static phenomena. As noted before, the conflation of time and space into the ever-present of the viewing moment, may offer the chance of intimacy with people far away: an emotional proximity whereby the far becomes near. Since 2007, many more Google Earth Awareness Layers have emerged, some as a result of funding provided by Google Earth Outreach to non-profit human rights or environmental activist organizations. But none are so complex as "Crisis in Darfur."

"Crisis in Darfur"

The most famous Google Earth Awareness Layer, the human rights activist site "Crisis in Darfur," was launched in 2007, only two years after the launch of Google Earth itself. Produced in collaboration with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), "Crisis in Darfur" is a complex, multi-layered document of the massacres, massive displacement of people, and the destruction of villages occurring in Darfur as a result of the 1983 civil war in the Sudan. Through this site we gain access to stories, photographs, statistics, and videos that are laid over/embedded in a vast topography of human destruction, with some icons introducing us to higher resolution shots of the earth, zooming across landscapes of burnt villages and tent cities.

In the "Crisis in Darfur" layer we see images of cameras (for photographs), quotation marks (for written testimony), clapperboards (for audiovisual material), small blue pyramids (for refugee tent cities), and different coloured flames to denote the various levels of devastation of specific villages. These various icons act as hyperlink points to other sites of information that occur either as part of the Google Earth site itself (links to photographs and text) or to other websites.

The site is a very "messy" one at first glance (see Figure 2). There is so much embedded information that the icons slip over and under each other and it is sometimes impossible to find the same link again during consecutive viewings. After examining 99% of the site, it is clear that there are over 230 primary links denoted by as many icons. These links are associated with particular villages or refugee camps. There are also 30 testimonies from people

who were victim to the *janjaweed*, the government-backed armed militias that ravaged the people and countryside of Sudan during the most recent phase of the civil war.
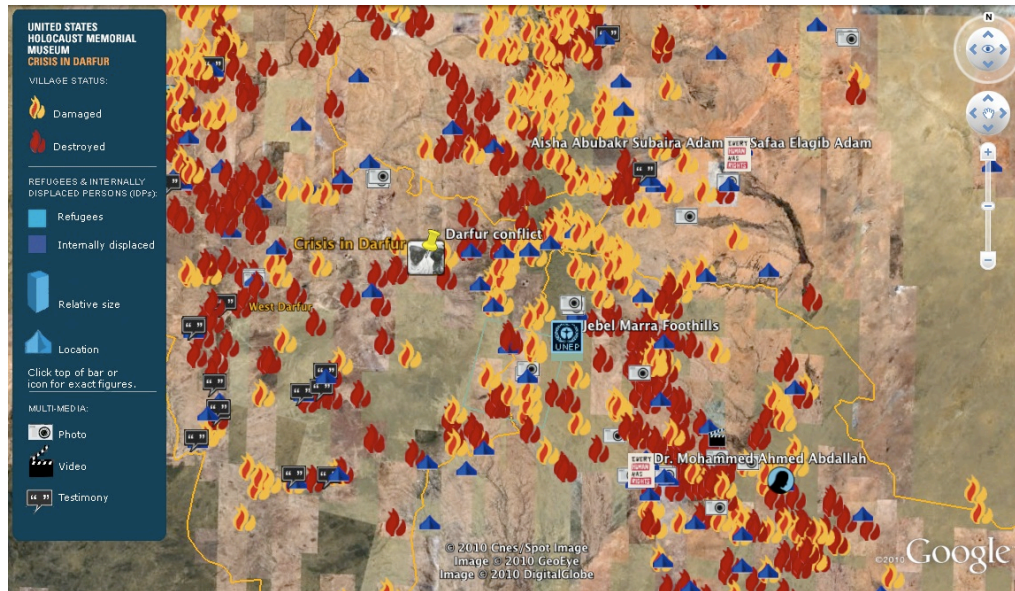

Fig. 2. Screen shot of "Crisis in Darfur," Google Earth (accessed 30/9/2010)

The information found via these links are primarily from the USHMM website, including these internal links and updates: "Mapping Initiatives: Crisis in Darfur (2009 Update)," "Mapping Initiatives: Be A Witness," "Speaker Series," "Responding to Genocide To-Day," "Take Action," and "Who is at Risk?" Other linked sites include those created by filmmakers, Doctors Without Borders, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Physicians for Human Rights, the United Nations Environment Program, Global Grass Roots, UNHCR—the United Nations Refugee Agency, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and Amnesty International.

Institutions and sometimes individuals are named as sources of the information embedded beneath the icons. The nature of this information is sometimes more drily presented, through maps or the statement of statistics. More often the information comes through images and testimonies of great suffering. This is an example of the latter:

> The attack took place at 8am on 29 February 2004 when soldiers arrived by car, camels and horses. The Janjawid were inside the houses and the soldiers outside. Some 15 women and girls who had not fled quickly enough were raped in different huts in the village. The Janjawid broke the limbs (arms or legs) of some women and girls to prevent them from escaping. The Janjawid remained in the village for six or seven days. After the rapes, the Janjawid looted the houses.[20]

These testimonies, together with photographs and films, constitute the "intolerable" images that I discuss further on.

I will now relate my own initial engagement with Google Earth and how it drew me into considering an even closer link between digital imaging and the human/machinic sensorium. The following discussion traces my own subjectivity as I roamed through Google Earth, moving from a terrain full of familiar places, times, and memories to a time and place that defied my imagination.

A Finite Private Vision

There is a road between where I live in Canberra and the house I also live in as often as I can "down the coast." I find it difficult, tedious to drive. It goes down from the escarpment in steep twists and tight bends, resolving into an even more frustrating looping pathway through the foothills, over a large river and on to the forests and beaches of southern New South Wales, Australia. After years of driving this road I wanted to see why it is like it is and thought I could do this by seeing it from above, as a pattern on the earth. Post-2005, a friend referred me to Google Earth. So I began a personal exploration of a place on earth that was already very familiar. Using Google Earth's "directions" compass, I could run my mouse over this road at a low enough viewing height to see the forest on either side of it and the valleys and hills around which the road travelled. I could also create a short, embedded (KMZ) video clip (Figure 3) that very slowly "drove" the road for me, keeping the point of view in the centre of the screen and swinging the road around and back again through the road's bends. This movement in the screen to some extent mimicked the movement of my body as I steered my driving along the actual road itself.

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[20] This testimony lay under the icon over the village of Um Baru. It was from a "30 year old woman." Information was provided by Amnesty International and the USHMM. The date of site set-up is not given (accessed 3/2/11).
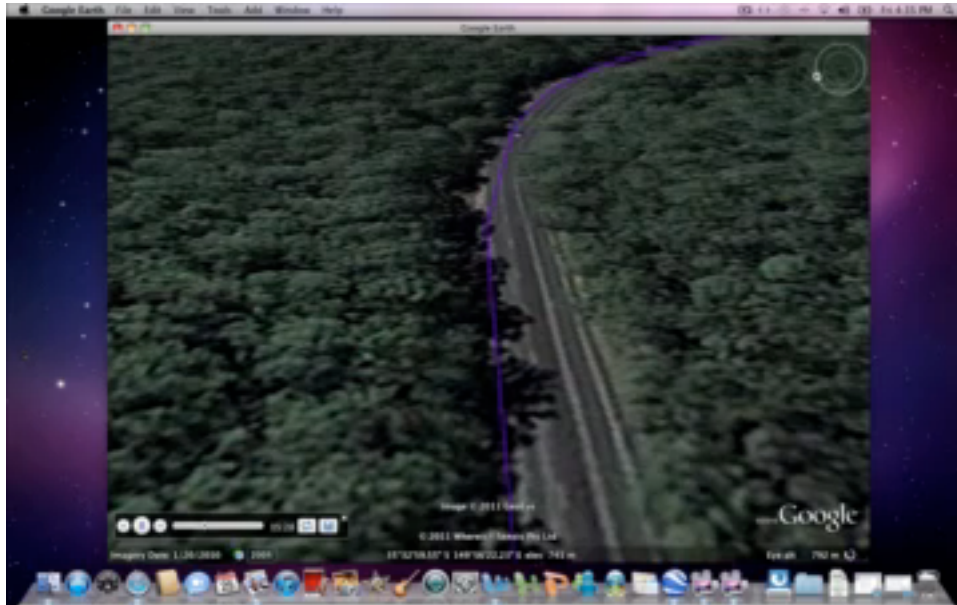
Fig. 3. "The coast road" (accessed 25/2/2011)
—CLICK HERE TO PLAY THE VIDEO IN YOUR WEB BROWSER—

After I had investigated the coast road, I swung over the seas towards Africa, as part of my Google trip around the world. I had clicked on the Google Earth Awareness Layers without knowing what they were. In the Sudan area in the north of Africa the bright flames of the site "Crisis in Darfur" drew my eyes and, as I zoomed down, I began to unravel some of the images and stories contained within that site. My journey through the information of "Crisis in Darfur" was even more confused than my first attempts to drive my mouse over the coast road southwest of Canberra. It is not an easy task to work through the various icons and find the images and words that are buried beneath them. I have returned many times to the Sudan through Google Earth and every trip is different. The numbers of displaced people overwhelm with their magnitude and the photographs of the refugee camps ground this information fairly well. The images, though, always affect me strongly: the photography is very good and I find myself virtually face-to-face with people who have suffered atrocities and who are presented to me within that context of suffering. On the other hand, the video clips that can be accessed via links to the USHMM site pull me back to myself as I listen to other people translating the suffering or, in voice

over, telling me, for example, about the drawings children made in their refugee camps—drawings depicting their parents and families being massacred.[21]

The combination of written, translated testimonies by the victims themselves, together with illustrating imagery, affect me the most, pulling me back into a dialogic space where they and I exist together—they, through their representation, their images and stories, and me, through my affective knowledge of what has happened to them, of what they are describing to me as I sit in front of my computer screen. For the time of my finding and witnessing their trouble, they are in my live embodied space, my domestic space, and I have to deal with that. Later, I confront the question of how the knowledge that I gain from such human rights media through my engagement with Google Earth differs from that accessed through other media formats. How might this knowledge be different from that gained directly from activist websites, like that of the USHMM? I instigated the search for something I did not know was there and then followed through. I looked at this site with the same body that could drive the coast road on and off screen. I played Google Earth with my own body in order to understand places and situations I knew of previously either at a great distance (with little affect) or at too close a distance (with a great degree of affect). So I asked myself, how could I deal with an affective knowledge of people with whom I had no live, "face-to-face" engagement? How to name such knowledge and how far could I go in defining this interaction as a new kind of face-to-face engagement mediated by the disappearance of distance, both actual and perceptual?

Here, the term "bioconvergence" is an apt description of such an interaction between my own body and the body of someone far away. Indeed, two ways of understanding how we can use the term "bioconvergence" are evident in this scenario. There is the convergence between two biological bodies that are not inhabiting the same time and space. This is a convergence that has puzzled us since the advent of photography. There is also the bioconvergence between human and machine, whereby our vision of another person is not simply a machine-mediated gaze, but an emotionally sensed perception enabled by computer technology. This bioconvergence manifests as a corporeal presence that is not limited by existence in the same time and space. Can we speak, then, of a bioconvergent vision which is not necessarily the emotionally detached gaze of the empowered at the dis-empowered?

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[21] To view this clip, "The Smallest Witness," follow this link: http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/analysis/details.php?content=2005-06-03 (accessed 29/9/2010).

The Intolerable Image

> Vision is *always* a question of power to see—and perhaps of
> the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose
> blood were my eyes crafted?[22] (Donna Haraway)

Haraway concisely refers to the ethical dilemmas of vision as inherently a
political act. Even the word "vision" is laden with all the debates in academe
about voyeurism: of enjoying the spectacles we look at without reference to the
socio-political consequences of "the gaze," of looking at people who cannot
look back, of the power of looking when others cannot, of finding out
information unavailable to others, and so on. But there are also other,
constructive acts of vision that include ways of "looking at" that constitute acts
of imagination and reflection, and the kinds of looking that are not so readily
available using only our "naked eyes." These include searching, "looking for"
something or for someone, using whatever tools are available. These tools are
not necessarily single entities; they come into existence by combining our eyes
and ears with the microscope, telescope, the algorithms of mathematics and
digital modelling technologies, microphones, earphones—augmenting and
changing our "naked eyes" to include any machine that helps extends our vision
towards a more expansive experience of self and the agendas of that self, a
more expansive subjectivity. This is a subjectivity only available to a
bioconvergent being.

The variables in our physical acts of searching are several, including the
chronology of how we follow links, where we begin, where we end, and what
level of viewing we use via the zoom and tilt tools. Our interpretative acts of
vision through searching encompass all of the above but include many more:
our prior knowledge of the situation described by the website's content, our
digital literacy, our patience, our curiosity, our fascination, how and why we
begin and end our search, whether or not we return and what form that return
takes. The knowledge we gain from looking at human rights activist sites also
includes our responses to what Rancière names "the intolerable image."[23] What
makes an image intolerable? His reply is in the form of two additional
questions: "what features make us unable to view an image without

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[22] Haraway, 192.
[23] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 83.

experiencing pain or indignation," and then, "is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others?"[24]

The responses of "pain and indignation" to the intolerable image are directed towards what is deemed abject to society, "too intolerably real to be offered in the form of an image." Rancière goes on to say that "This is not a simple matter of respect for personal dignity."[25] In his essay, "The Intolerable Image," he writes how this denial of vision is not so much a matter of respect for the embodied human who is represented as disempowered through the violence of pain, as a matter of damning such representation because this representational practice is embedded in a regime of vision which is the same as that of the "view of the dead child in the beautiful apartment,"[26] where the photographically indexical image of a brutalized child becomes a work of art that in turn can become part of the décor of an expensively appointed domestic living room.

Rancière then describes how a specific authoritative voice of society emerges to tell us that it is immoral to view such images without taking action to reverse the wrongs that are represented within them: "Action is presented as the only answer to the evil of the image and the guilt of the spectator."[27] He shows how such moral action is made impossible, however, by the spectator's guilty immersion in the "false existence" of the "unrepresentable." Rancière thereby distinguishes between "the intolerable image" and what he names as a shift to the "intolerability of images."[28] So it becomes an issue yet again of what can be seen and what cannot be seen, although this time it is a "lose-lose" situation for the would-be spectator. In the digital age, it is possible perhaps to draw an analogy between the "expensively appointed apartment" and the comfortably appointed viewing space of the personal computer, and to deny the morality of looking at pictures of suffering because they come from the same envisioned regime of the spectacle.

When dealing with the subject matter of human rights abuse and war, however, the un-representable is always in play under the guise of the "unthinkable," and that is the challenge offered by "Crisis in Darfur." As we search and find by happenstance some of the terrible things humans do to each other, we are confronted with having to think and imagine at a new level. To form a constructive political act of seeing and watching without fearing

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[24] ibid.
[25] ibid.
[26] ibid., 85.
[27] ibid., 87.
[28] ibid., 84.

associated feelings of fascination, we need to use this emotional imagination to embrace the people and places that are *inside* the image.[29]

Framing the "Disappeared"

> It is to the stranger that we are bound, the one, or the ones, we never knew and never chose. To kill the other is to deny my life, not just mine alone, but that sense of my life, which is, from the start, and invariably, social life.[30] (Judith Butler)

With these words, Judith Butler cuts through any prevarication inherent to the morality, what I would call a "false" morality in this context, which denies our looking at the intolerable suffering of others, when such a denial disguises a desire "not to think," not to contemplate the suffering of others. While Butler is talking about the literal killing of people in war, her emphasis that if we kill another we also kill the "sense of my life which, is from the start, and invariably, social life" speaks directly to a social need to affirm life and the links we have through this life to other people, via whatever mediation we have available. We look at the stranger and draw them into our space as they draw us into theirs. This space then become a dialogical one in which, using Michael Holquist's words,

> all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying *simultaneous but different* space [italics mine], where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies).[31]

Holquist's understanding of Bakhtin's dialogical communication clearly refers to the possible creation of meaning between physical bodies "occupying *simultaneous but different* space." In this sense, it is "far" distance which disappears. The people we see/hear through the textual practices of film and photography are present, not absent in this communication space. Their images refer to their presence, not absence, in the joined space through which we

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[29] For a comprehensive discussion of how images can style spectators as political agents, see Lilie Chouliaraki, "The Media as Moral Education: Mediation and Action," *Media, Culture and Society*, 30.6 (2008): 831-852.

[30] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), xxvi.

[31] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 22.

engage our social life, a life which includes them. How then to explain why distances of the far still inform so powerfully society's understanding of computer-mediated communication? A destructive relativist response still exists in our viewing of the "stranger" who suffers: "that is their business, not mine," closely followed by the fearful response, "it couldn't/shouldn't happen to me, I am different." Martha Nussbaum's definition of compassion includes such fear as a constructive affective force[32] as I will discuss shortly. First, though, I want to consider aesthetic reasons that might contribute to this fear as a destructive response to the "other."

In his essay "Kriegstrasse," Paul Virilio writes about the "telepresence of terror"[33] and proposes that terrorism in the twentieth century is marked by the trope of disappearance. While the last century was marked by an "aesthetics of disappearance," the twenty-first century, he argues, is now developing an "ethics of disappearance."[34] Virilio suggests that today society is striving for immediacy, for speed and mass affect to which end individual morality and emotional affect will be lost—a pessimistic view indeed. But what is actually disappearing at such speed? Are we disappearing from each other as embodied beings? Perceptions of distance between people are certainly changing. Online communication allows people far away to communicate as if in the same live space and time, echoing the immediacy of telephony and yet through the accessibility of Web 2.0 and email, also massively increasing this kind of communications traffic. In this case, "far" becomes near. Has the idea of "far" subsequently disappeared, then, in the realm of interactions between individual people? And has the distance of cultural difference disappeared? What has disappeared, I think, is that the perception of distance, between the far and the near, is no longer of the same significance in how we now understand the world around us. The "distance of difference," however, is as strong as ever, contrary to Virilio's teleological account of the "ethics of disappearance" and a homogenized future.

Cultural contexts of difference may, perhaps, be disappearing more slowly than we think, but I suggest that it is far too early to say that the social apparatus for individual subjectivity has disappeared. It is changing. In McLuhan's words,

> Our sensory modes are constituents, not classifications. I am
> simply identifying modes of experience. We need new

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[32] Nussbaum, 35-36.

[33] Paul Virilio, "Kriegstrasse," in *City of Panic*, trans. Julie Rose (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 55.

[34] ibid., 56.

> perceptions to cope. Our technologies are generations ahead of
> our thinking.[35]

McLuhan explains that by investigating how technologies affect our understanding of ourselves we are in fact "dealing with the present as the future."[36] And this is a key point in considering new media texts: digital media algorithmically models the world, speculation is the very material of digital technologies. Such speculation is mediated human activity—we still program the computers that program the computers that…. The "new perceptions" that we need "to cope" with the present and the speculative future require a fundamental change in our understanding of who we are as humans. Our subjectivities grow out of these changes, perhaps towards an acknowledgment that "out of sight" can no longer be "out of mind," that our ideas about who we are are no longer constrained by what we know, but by what we *can* know.

Face-to-Face

> Other voices insist that the body cannot be left behind, that the
> specificities of embodiment matter … bodies can never be made
> of information alone, no matter which side of the computer
> screen they are on.[37] (N. Katherine Hayles)

Earlier I noted the moral need to embrace the people and places that are *inside* the image. I suggest that the testimonies that suffering people offer through their photographic and written re-presentations on activist websites need to be considered as what they are *per se*, not only through the trope of ethical dilemmas of vision, mediated or not. We accept our role of witness, whilst still embracing debates about the ethics of vision. I am interested here in how the re-presented body can look back at us.

Paul Willemen defines a "look back at the viewer" as the fourth "look" in cinema.[38] Willemen's idea extracts the body of the filmed person from the space of the screen to look at us the viewers with eyes that stare down the lens of the camera. The fourth look is when the people we see on the screen confront

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[35] Marshall McLuhan, "A Dialogue: Gerald E. Stearn and Marshall McLuhan," in *McLuhan Hot and Cool* (Harmondworth, Middlesex, UK; Ringwood, Victoria, Australia: Penguin Books, 1968), 336.

[36] ibid., 337.

[37] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 246.

[38] Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London and Bloomington: BFI Publishing and Indiana University Press, 1994), 107.

us with our act of looking at them, by looking back at us via the same camera through which we see them. He extends his definition of this look to include the sense with which a whole filmic text can confront an audience with their act of looking, through reflexivity in story, sound, music, characterization, location, set design or camera style. In describing the active subjectivity of a person viewing a film, Vivian Sobchack well describes how this confrontation takes place from the point of view of the spectator:

> From the perspective of the subject of vision, that body (the spectator's) is not passive or "empty." It is a lived-body, informed by its particular sensible experience and charged with its own intentional impetus.[39]

Such representational audio/visual practices that confront us through the *framing* of image content unsettle the hegemonic status of vision by offering the possibility for what Haraway calls "situated knowledges." These kinds of knowledge refer to bodies located in specified places; they support an understanding of our eyes as embodied organic tools of vision, and not as signifiers of, in Haraway's words, "a perverse capacity to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power."[40]

When looking at "Crisis in Darfur" with our "naked eyes" via our capacity for computer vision, I literally know through the technology of Google Earth the spatial and temporal co-ordinates of the people I see and hear. My knowledge is literally situated in space and time, and depending on my response to these images, my knowledge can deepen into what Nussbaum defines as compassion: "a certain sort of reasoning," "a certain sort of thought about the well-being of others."[41] Recalling Butler's argument about "the stranger," Nussbaum argues that pity/compassion towards suffering people is requisite to social justice, that compassion is a form of affective, imaginative social knowledge that brings the spectator into an engagement with the suffering person, which is based on a sense of what human well-being should encompass together with the fear that as humans, suffering can come to us as well. She writes:

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[39] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 305. This quotation is from Sobchack's phenomenological exploration of vision through the experience of film. Although my present discussion draws on these ideas, and to some extent they under-pin my theory, I do not explicitly engage with them here. My arguments here are grounded more in the context of representational practice.
[40] Haraway, 188.
[41] Nussbaum, 28.

> The good of others means nothing to us in the abstract or
> antecedently. Only when it is brought into relation with that
> which we already understand—with our intense love of a parent,
> our passionate need for comfort and security—does such a thing
> start to matter deeply.[42]

I suggest that Google Earth offers an opportunity to extend the compassionate correlation between what we already understand and what is happening to people we do not personally know. This opportunity is through a simple device achieved via the complex technologies of Google Earth: we can tag or otherwise mark our personal domestic times and spaces on the same animated space as we find the marked spaces of others. We are performing inside the same social space as those with whom we engage in "Crisis in Darfur."

Stahl focuses his investigation into how Google Earth acts "as a kind of text, a powerful public screen onto which a political landscape is projected and thereby made sensible."[43] Our growing intelligence concerning interactivity and immersion factor into how we interpret such explicitly interactive texts by engaging the fraught, ambiguously determined domain of how we might to be said to "perform" these texts. And if we employ the trope of performance to our textual interpretations then we also must confront the possibilities of feeling and emotion, of affect, of the knowledge that these interpretations might bring us.

An Augmented Reality—Performing with our Naked Eyes

> All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of
> infinite mobility and interchangeability, but of elaborate
> specificity and difference and the loving care people might take
> to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view, even
> when the other is our own machine.[44] (Donna Haraway)

Our performance of engagement with images of suffering most often involves to some degree the experience of fear and of SHOCK: shocking reportage and spectacle as triggers for compassion, or the actual contextualization of such images and words with each other, but also in the contact of massive representation, along the lines of holocaust representation with all the sober discourse associated with this, and the way that we know about these stories.

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[42] ibid., 48.
[43] Stahl, 67.
[44] Haraway, 190.

When entering into a website such as "Crisis in Darfur" we are not opening a book, a newspaper, a computer, or watching a television. We are looking for information within a new kind of context, one which we need to make for ourselves through our navigation of ever-changing website design and content. We are tracking these horrors and people via a personalized surveillance technology. Yes, we can use what we find for other (pitiless) purposes, but because the images, sounds, and stories are open to different kinds of interpretation, it cannot be ruled out that one might be the act of pity, of compassion, which "is, above all, a certain sort of thought about the well-being of others … a certain sort of reasoning."[45]

When I see the flames of "Crisis in Darfur" growing larger on my computer screen as I roll my mouse towards a closer focus, I feel a sense of dread and fascination. Why fascination? Perhaps it is not only towards a spectacle of destruction in which happily I am not directly involved (as in the experience car accident gazing). Perhaps such a fascination and dread is also a result from recognition through "sympathetic identification."[46] In other words, I know I am looking at pain, that I will be looking at pain, if I move any closer, and I might allow or be surprised into allowing myself to feel the pain of compassion and the pairing with another that is inherent to this kind of knowledge in my perception of what I see and hear on this eclectic site. That pain might have been mine if I was in the same circumstances. If compassion as affective, emotional knowledge denies Descartes's "mind/body split," then we are left again with bodies, theirs and ours. And these bodies are situated in both our life stories and theirs. We scramble after these connections between lives in places and times. The connections are not made obvious, we need to work at them in order to reach the position of compassionate understanding. We cannot reduce this kind of engagement to that which might be described by television theory's "glance" or even through the Dionysian gaze of the wandering *flâneur* of Baudelaire and Benjamin.[47] As Tara McPherson suggests:

> We move from the glance-or-gaze that theorists have named as
> our primary engagements with television (or film) toward the
> scan-and-search … a fear of missing the next experience or the
> next piece of data.[48]

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[45] Nussbaum, 28.

[46] ibid., 39.

[47] See again Kingsbury and Jones, "Walter Benjamin's Dionysian Adventures."

[48] Tara McPherson, "Reload: Liveness, Mobility, and the Web," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, eds. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 204.

McPherson notes that our engagement with the web "is not just channel-surfing: it feels like we're wedding space and time….The scan-and-search feels more active than the glance-or-gaze".[49] This particular "feel" is the result of another much interrogated new media term: interactivity. In using Google Earth Earth's "Google Earth Awareness Layers" I can interact with a high level of engagement, which in turn has the potential for immersing me in the content being examined. All this through the satellite technologies of remote sensors, which the artist Caroline Bassett claims "make it possible to touch a surface, to interrogate it, without being in direct contact with it. This is touch at a distance…."[50] Bassett goes on to say the following:

> Remote sensing thus suggests profound transformations in human sense perception, part of a broader series of (technologically influenced) shifts that are having an impact not only on scientific processes, but also on everyday life.[51]

Through remote sensing, then, we find a new way of disappearing far distance; we are enabled in a new way to experience what Nussbaum calls "the thought experiment of compassion."[52]

Changing Time in Space

Google Earth is a vehicle for communicating annotated information about what the earth (as world) looks like and what happens on this earth. This information is not coherent in form or style and has the same problematic status of a "truth saying platform" that necessarily uses technologies of representation, as do all other visual and audio-visual texts. Added to this is the paradox of the index, inherent to all "non-fictional" texts: Google Earth still (2011) has the utopian aura of transparent representation that cinema and photography possessed for at least the first 100 years of their invention—this aura is reinforced by Google Earth's iconic, brand image of our planet earth as a spinning globe: Gaia in blue and white, spinning in space for our aesthetic appreciation of its beauty. Add to this beauty the incredulity associated with our everyday sense of the ephemeral images taken in what is still for most people "outer space," as well as seductive offerings to zoom and fly through and over our planet as never before in history or in any other virtual space—then it becomes clearer why Google Earth can be

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[49] ibid.
[50] Caroline Bassett, "Remote Sensing," in *Sensorium. Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2006), 200.
[51] ibid.
[52] Nussbaum, 52.

imagined and used as itself a creature of "outer space": not quite a game, not quite an encyclopaedia, definitely, or perhaps, a tool for surveillance and control and correspondingly a site of resistance but also for (almost) untrammelled imaginings of place and time, depending on the user's skill and knowledge of the application.

"Crisis in Darfur" is a moving, plastic, shape-changing sub-text that we can use in many ways. Consequently, it can be understood as a particular kind of object: a medium of communication and representation. But in McLuhan's words again. "Objects are unobservable. Only relationships between objects are observable."[53] The human, the machine, compassion and grief—all of these are part of the experience of engaging with suffering people in the Sudan. Political implications? In Butler's words,

> Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential. It is, after all, one of the reasons Plato wanted to ban the poets from the Republic.[54]

Can we understand Google Earth as a site that can elicit a responsive performance of compassion? If so, then Google Earth offers a certain kind of embodied, and therefore a haptic, experience that plays across our senses, which can be described as one that is socially useful, and to a degree necessary for further political action. This question of compassion in turn requires a consideration of knowledge and power at an individual level, and of compassion as an active state of "knowledge [which] is based on embodied subjectivity and that this form of knowledge is action."[55] Google Earth is surely a machinic vehicle for communications in the realms of both the sublime and the ridiculous—a vehicle, perhaps dangerous to some agendas, that allows humans both to play and to grieve. The simulations of Google Earth augment our imaginations and perceptions of the world in a new and powerful way. Both the illusions and actual indexicality integral to remote sensing, mapping, animation, and web technologies, are yet contained within the time/space of a single web space. Google Earth is now part of our perceptive apparatus, a new part of the ever-changing embodiment of the bioconvergent human creature.

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[53] McLuhan, 337.

[54] Butler, 39.

[55] Kathy Marmor, "Bird Watching: An Introduction to Amateur Satellite Spotting," *Leonardo*, 41.4 (2008), 322.