

# Kenyon College

## Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture

---

Volume 2 | Issue 3

1-8

---

2009

### The Panopticon. Google Earth, Omnipotence and Earthly Delights

Asa Mittman

*California State University, Chico*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

---

#### Recommended Citation

Mittman, Asa. "The Panopticon. Google Earth, Omnipotence and Earthly Delights." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 2, 3 (2009): 1-8. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol2/iss3/10>

This Short Notice is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).



## SHORT NOTICES & ANNOUNCEMENTS

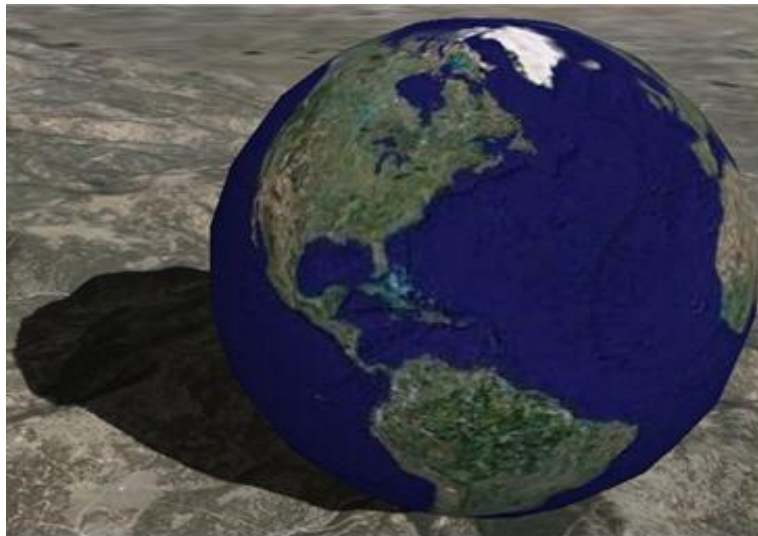
### **The Panopticon Google Earth, Omnipotence and Earthly Delights**

By Asa Simon Mittman, California State University at Chico

#### **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.

Another flick, and we toward earth, down. The less of alarm of the excitement or better, of earth toward can we go, how home? There tension, as we will be able to the transcend continental, or



click, another soar inward more in than sensation is far falling than of of approaching, pulling the us. How far in close to our is an inevitable doubt that we truly penetrate atmosphere, to global, 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.

### Earthly Delights

Among the more familiar, if puzzling, images of the Northern Renaissance is the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, by the imaginative master, Hieronymus Bosch. The center panel of this triptych is the most well-known and frequently reproduced portion, showing a riveting series of gambols, many sexual in implication and several involving unusual partners: giant birds, berries



Exterior wings of Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Prado Museum.

and bivalves. But if we close the wings of the triptych—hiding the glorious, if ultimately condemnatory, Garden—we are confronted by a radically different tone. The image presents the Third Day of Creation. Planet Earth looms out of a blackness which recalls that 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, so 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

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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 it is one of power, certainly, and also of pleasure, of earthly delight.

### **Power**

The God of the Torah is omniscient, and so he is defined by his ability to see all of the world. Just so, with Google Earth open before us on our monitors, we can spy on any corner of the world we wish. We do this 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: “Because they are almost always above human sightlines, and because people . . . rarely look up, they don’t see . . . them . . . but they see us.”<sup>3</sup> 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 still photographs, taken at specified moments in the recent past (the Digital Global Coverage option displays the quadrants covered by each individual photograph, and provides the exact date of every one, all of which were taken in the last few years). 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 browser-based systems of Mapquest and the like far behind, never mind those increasingly

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter S. Beagle, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (New York: Viking, 1982), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Beagle, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen King, *Nightmares in the Sky: Gargoyles and Grotesques* (New York: Viking Studio Books, 1988), 9, quoting Marc Glimcher.

antiquated 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, intended) breaks down as we are, instead, reduced and elevated to the state of wonder. Google Earth lists 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.<sup>4</sup>

In this grand list, “get driving directions” seems rather an afterthought, far secondary to the *jouissance* inspired by the interface.

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, then for what can we use it? For analogues, 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 prize gall wasp. In contrast, the world presented by Google Earth is a whirl of dynamism and motion, of infinite potential. If we showed our children Google Earth instead of the woefully out-of-date and ignorantly misused Mercator Projection Map, they 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 to gain 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, to get to Easter Island, though it might stir in them longings to eventually find their way hence. 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. 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.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> “Explore, Search and Discover,” *Google Earth* (Google, 2007) <<http://earth.google.com/>> (accessed 2/7/2007).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Signet Classics reprint: New American Library 1902), 70-71.

This is a passage redolent with what Sylvia Tomasch has called “geographical desire,”<sup>6</sup> with the raw and urgent craving not merely 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. 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.

Of course, Marlow’s voyage into the dark heart of Africa provides no such resolution. 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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. As observed by the manager’s servant, “he dead,” and with him, the fears that were once part and parcel of scopic engagement with the most distant of lands.<sup>9</sup>

### Google Earths

The image presented by Google Earth shows us not one, by many earths. In her riveting *Troll*, Johanna Sinisalo describes the same city, as seen from the perspectives of people of drastically different social groups:

Odd how there can be cities and cities. Cities within 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.<sup>10</sup>

---

<http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=ConDark.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1>

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Tomasch, “Medieval Geographical Desire,” *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998), entire, esp. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, 71.

<sup>8</sup> 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. See Ed Sheffner, “Landsat 7,” *Landsat Program* (October 5, 1999) <<http://geo.arc.nasa.gov/sge/landsat/17.html>> (accessed 2/6/2007)

<sup>9</sup> Conrad, 148.

<sup>10</sup> Johanna Sinisalo, *Troll*, trans. Hebert Lomas (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 105.

Sinisalo describes how the city is seen by dogs, by bus drivers, by members of a gay subculture. 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 Ages)<sup>11</sup> in shops, though we cannot yet isolate the finer variety. 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, able 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 the maps of the Middle Ages, we would see that they are almost invariably 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.

The centering of Google Earth, then, is of great interest. It is centered on the United States, which is not surprising. Most maps center on their country of origin. However, the precise point on which it centers is perhaps surprising. If we zoom in without panning at all, we will find ourselves in Lawrence, Kansas, at a small house on Regency Place, where it intersects with Windsor. This location has been marked by a user as "Center of the Earth," engendering some understandable animosity, 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."<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps a fair criticism, as the official National Atlas of the United States presents us with a series of maps demonstrating the U.S.'s centrality to global geography.<sup>13</sup> We see "World Geographic Expeditions from the United States," in which the US is not only centered, but highlighted, the only country to have any color and it is a bold one. Tendrils of exploration radiate out, to touch every corner of the world, from Easter Island to the Cape of Good Hope and beyond. Likewise, the images of "U.S. Exports and Imports" marks us as the center of global commerce, and the "United States Foreign Service" map inscribes our presence on literally every inch of every landmass in the world but Antarctica.

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

---

<sup>11</sup> We read, for example, "In certain land are men..." "Then is a certain island on which men are born..." "Then there are other women..."

<sup>12</sup> Andrés Puche, "Center of the Earth," post to *Google Earth Community*, 05/30/06.

<sup>13</sup> 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/ammem/gmdhtml/census3.html>> (accessed June 2005).

the National Atlas: We can re-center the map, so that it begins anywhere we choose. Our home town, the site 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. If compared to the great Hereford Map, the largest surviving medieval map, we can see the correspondences of Jerusalem at the center, above a vertical Mediterranean, with the British Isles clearly visible to the lower left corner, opposite the bifurcated Red Sea in the upper right. 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.<sup>14</sup> To do so in a given language is to emphasize one's dominion there over. 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," an option available in Google Earth. Such matters are not purely theoretical. 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 now a nationalist movement to rename the country Cymru, recovering the name by which it was known in its native language.

### **Flight**

Our flights throughout Google Earth are so 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, 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 am writing this, sitting in a plane halfway between O'Hare and Phoenix, that has my mind turning toward the drastic differences between my virtual flight, and my lived 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

---

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 386; Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 420. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John Hanhardt (Layton: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 86.



promises of airline ads of the 50s. It is exalted and glorious, as we revel at once in our amazement 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 served 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.

---

## **VIA FRANCIGENA** *All Roads Lead to Rome*

By Adelaide Trezzini (President, Association Internationale Via Francigena)

Julius Caesar opened this shortest route between the North Sea and Rome and during the Early Middle Ages in Italy, the route followed Roman and Longobard roads. Although it was first called Via Francigena for the first time in 876, over the centuries the Via changed its name according to the provenance of its users: it was “Via Francigena-Francisca” in Italy and Burgundy, “Chemin des Anglois” in the Frankish Kingdom (after the evangelisation of England in 607) and the “Chemin Romieux,” the road to Rome. An itinerary detailing 80 stages of the VF can be found in the oldest diary of an Anglo-Saxon pilgrim, Archbishop Sigeric the Serious of Canterbury, who journeyed that way when returning from Rome where he received the pallium from Pope John XV in 990.

In Italy the Via Francigena crosses the road to Santiago, which facilitates cooperation between the two itineraries. But for the rest of Europe, as this Vademecum, stage by stage, describes so well, the itinerary and the pilgrimage of one man, Sigeric, as documented in the diary where he describes the stages of his journey, crisscrosses the many routes used by those making their way to other centres of pilgrimage: Compostella, Rome and Jerusalem.

Depending on the time of year, the political situation and the popularity of certain saints’ shrines along the route, travellers may have taken one of three or four crossings of the Alps and the Apennines. The Lombards maintained and defended the road as a trading route to the north from Rome, avoiding enemy held cities such as Florence.

Following the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 640, Rome became the main destination for Christian pilgrimages until the tenth century (though it was superceded somewhat by the the pilgrimage veneration of St. James of Compostella in Galicia). Because of this, all kinds of travelers from popes, emperors, bankers, and merchants to highwaymen traversed the Via