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# On the Contemporary Visual Experience Part Three: Oblique Strategies

**Jorge de La Barre**

## **Abstract**

As an attempt to critically engage with the contemporary visual experience, this paper in three parts explores the horizontal, vertical, and virtual viewpoints. Its main purpose is to question the virtual realm as a place where technology allows for various visual experiences including new, digital and oblique perspectives on both horizontality and verticality. Various visual examples are taken from: selfie-taking, augmented and virtual realities (“Part One: Vir(tu)al Horizon(tal)”); architectural landscapes, aerial views, panoramas (“Part Two: The Vertical Gaze”); the photographic works of Sebastião Salgado, Yann Arthus-Bertrand, and Terry Boddie (“Part Three: Oblique Strategies”).

## Part Three: Oblique Strategies

The view was splendid, the whole city was visible and far away Guéré mangue, to the east. Curiously, the panorama made him sad. Looking at others from above, like ants, one came to question nature in general.

—Nicolas Mathieu

### God's Eye View and The Human Gaze

I want now to move towards exploring some of the photographic works of Sebastião Salgado, Yann Arthus-Bertrand. Their biography and career are quite well-known; both are rock star photographers with a unique touch and heartbreaking looks at all the wonders and miseries of this world, yet with their respective ways that are in fact literally opposite. I am interested in typifying their works as follows: while Salgado is the photographer of human eye contact (the horizontal, anthropological gaze), Arthus-Bertrand is a photographer of God's (or bird's) eye views. Significantly, Salgado has called his organization "Terra dos homens—Man's Land," while Arthus-Bertrand built his name on capturing no man's lands and wide spaces, seen from above.

I consider three pictorial moments here: firstly, I consider horizontality and verticality respectively, with photographers Sebastião Salgado and Yann Arthus-Bertrand; secondly, I consider a combination of both horizontality and verticality, with photographer and visual artist Terry Boddie. Then thirdly, I come back to Salgado, Arthus-Bertrand, and Boddie, to reflect on some virtuality aspects that are based on the possible combinations and expansion of horizontality and verticality:

- 1) While the visual experience provided by Salgado's photographs is direct and immediate, Arthus-Bertrand's is distant and mediated. Salgado's portraits of the human condition are the best examples for the photographer looking at his subject in the eyes (see Figure 1). There is a case in Arthus-Bertrand's vertical photographs: seeing/looking at the "Earth from Above" (the name for his most famous book, one of the best-selling photographic books ever) is always about escaping; it is about extracting oneself from both horizontality and gravity; ultimately it is about pure verticality, visual, or aestheticized solutionism (Figures 2 and 3).
- 2) Terry Boddie's "Blueprint" is a frame that interestingly captures both horizontal and vertical plans, and combines them to suggest a shortcut history of the black diaspora (Figure 4).
- 3) I am now "expanding" Salgado's, Arthus-Bertrand's, and Boddie's horizontal and vertical plans into cyberspace, where all boundaries are blurred and

both horizontality and verticality merge into a certain form of virtual immediacy (Figure 5).



Fig. 1. Sebastião Salgado, Coal Workers, India, 1989 (from the 1993 book *Workers: Archaeology of the Industrial Age*). Image source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/100892/coal-workers-india-sebastiao-salgado>.

The photograph above (Figure 1), by Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado is an example of the horizontal, anthropological gaze or viewpoint, the closest to our natural way in the world when we are interacting with others. Here, Salgado is looking at his subjects in the eyes (through the lens of this camera), as if he were interacting with them (naturally, photographing is also a form of interaction). About the *Workers* book, writer Gabriel García Márquez has said: “This book is the photography of humanity.” In this book, Salgado, an economist by training, documents the faces of workers at their jobs around the world. Salgado has been awarded virtually every major photographic prize in France, Germany, Holland, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. A former member of Magnum Photos and recipient of the W. Eugene Smith Grant in Humanistic Photography, he has twice been named Photographer of the Year by the International Center of Photography. He has been a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador since 2001.



Fig. 2. Yann Arthus-Bertrand, *The Heart of Voh*, New Caledonia, France, 1990 (from the 1999 book *Earth from Above*). Image source: <http://www.yellowcorner.com/gben/p/coeur-de-voh-france/3662657333404.html>.



Fig. 3. Yann Arthus-Bertrand, *Jalousie*, a shantytown on the edge of Pétionville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince, Haiti (from the 2015 *Human* movie). Parts of Jalousie were repainted in bright colors in 2013 as part of the Haitian government's Beauty versus Poverty initiative. Most houses still do not have water or electricity. The earthquake in 2010 left 1.3 million homeless. Many were relocated to camps, but reconstruction is slow-going. Worldwide, shantytowns shelter nearly one billion people; 27 million people are added to these numbers every year. Image source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/09/what-it-means-to-be-human-by-yannarthus-bertrand/407200/>.

An environmentalist, activist, journalist and photographer, Yann Arthus-Bertrand has also directed films about the impact of humans on the planet. He is especially well known for his book *Earth from Above* (1999) and his films *Home* (2009), *Human* (2015), and *Woman* (2019). It is because of his commitment that Yann Arthus-Bertrand was designated Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Environment Programme on Earth Day (April 22, 2009).

These photographic images – of a heart-shaped mangrove swamps, or brightly painted shantytowns – suggest that verticality (God’s eye view, or bird’s eye view) is full of wonders to the human eye, and that by extracting oneself from gravity and horizontality, one immediately gains a different, renewed point of view:

Seen from above, everything looks both beautiful and in control. There may be a secret, hidden politics of verticality at play, a form of aestheticized vigilance over humans and their earthly businesses. During the Rio + 20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012, French photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand displayed in one of Rio’s most famous plaza his best-selling exhibit ‘Earth from Above’. Environmental awareness was de rigueur, and the public was entertained with the both conscious and breathtaking aerial views of Mother Earth. In fact, our problems were crystal clear, and the message coming from above was an urgent cry: a change in point of view is needed; we have to train our ability to extract, uproot ourselves and gain (momentarily at least) a new global, vertical vision. Then only may we, (post-)humans, begin to initiate real change, looking at the world differently, and questioning whether we like what we see or not... Exactly one year before in July 2011, a brand-new cable car flying over Rio’s largest favela complex was inaugurated. So much for Rio + 20’s global sustainability bonanza, the favela from above had already been made desirable. A new, glocal, vertical vision had been taking shape, allowing at least hip tourists (if not the favela dwellers themselves) for new perspectives over their environment... Like in God’s or bird’s eyes or the satellite’s views, verticality is an invitation to magical-thinking: a mere change in point of view looks like a real change in life conditions.” (La Barre 2017).

Terry Boddie is a photographer and mixed media artist who migrated from his native island Navis in the Caribbean to the United States when he was fifteen years old. “Blueprint” combines a vertical plan seen from aside (a modern-day “project” building), with a horizontal plan seen from above (slaves cramped in a ship that looks like the Brookes slave ship) (Figure 4).

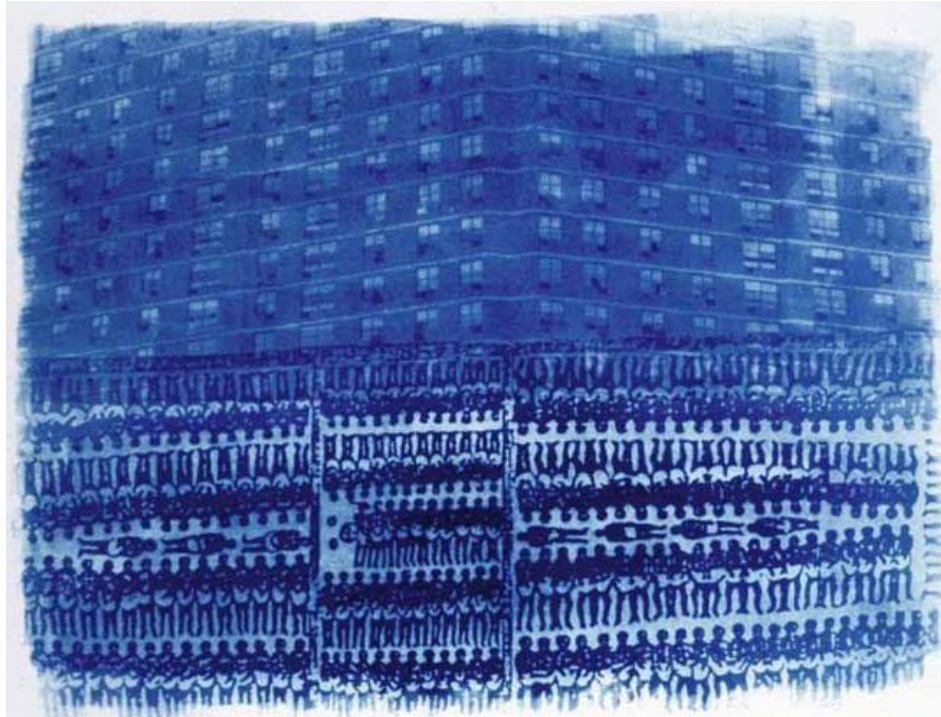


Fig. 4. Terry Boddie, "Blueprint" (n.d.). Image source: <http://blog.uprising-art.com/en/residueof-memory-terry-boddie-nevis-photography/>.

"Blueprint" suggests that the marginalization of people in today's society can be methodically traced back to abuse in history. In their juxtaposition, the vertical and horizontal plans evoke a story of forced displacement from the African continent (the slave ship located in the lower part evokes the historical roots of enslavement of the Afro-American people), to the "New World" (the American "project" building in the upper part suggests the fate of re-location in American cities as the Afro-American people gained their freedom to participate in the modern capitalist economy). Also, the fact that the piece is titled "Blueprint" suggests that the tragic history of displacement and replacement is part of the DNA of the Afro-American people. This connects and echoes particularly well with Paul Gilroy's seminal 1993 book, *The Black Atlantic*.

"Blueprint" is part of Terry Boddie's "Residual Memory" series, where ideas of displacement, cultural history, remembrance and dis-remembrance are displayed, in an interrogation of myth, history and identity. In Terry Boddie's own words:

These images represent the exploration of ideas regarding place, history, memory, migration, exile, birth and rebirth. They trace the development of these ideas over a period of fifteen years. As you look at the images you will notice the development of the ideas in the images themselves. As the images go through these various states of transformation, they accumulate technical processes, iconographies and narratives. Africa, the Caribbean, the Atlantic Ocean, North America, Space, Time are all points of departure. Alternative photographic processes, such as cyanotype, Platinum Palladium, Liquid Light, gum bichromate in combination with traditional materials such as pastels, oil

stick, graphite, ink; and more recent processes such as digital photo transfer all combine to create a unique visual iconography. ("The Residue of Memory by Terry Boddie").

The "Residual Memory" series, according to art critic Natasha Guzman, also tries to investigate the role of photography and the way in which we look at memory.

Photographs provide us with the ability to focus, analyze, and dwell on moments that have been frozen, giving us the ability to apply much more meaning and depth to the images we are seeing. Boddie refers to this as photograph's ability to "mythologize" memory. "When you return to an image, sometimes it changes. Your relationship to it changes," he says. (Guzman).

About the color blue, prevalent in several of Boddie's works, especially in the "Residual Memory" series, the artist says:

That color is cyanotype. This is the original process that we use to make copies of blueprint. When I use it in the work, I do it to kind of allude to that tradition, but I also do it to allude to this idea of the blues, this sort of tragic history and circumstances. (Guzman).

Here I am thinking also of John Akomfrah's documentary film on Jamaican social scientist Stuart Hall (*The Stuart Hall Project*).

There are of course many possible illustrations for cyberspace, which is not something that can be pictured *per se*. Here, cyberspace is pictured in color blue; it is neither horizontal nor vertical, rather tubular, and the view looks like it is taken from (or are we?) inside the tube (Figure 5).

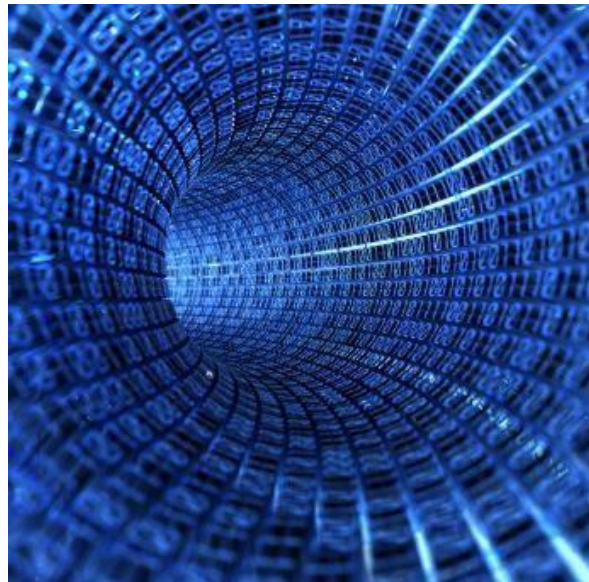


Fig. 5. Cyberspace: who knows what it actually looks like?

Image source:

<https://exequy.wordpress.com/2010/12/30/cyberspace/>.



I am inclined to think of cyberspace (or the “virtual world”) as a third plan beyond the horizontal and vertical plans, where old narratives migrate or get transplanted, and new narratives emerge from such migrations or transplantations. Here, the color blue of cyberspace may help building a bridge with Terry Boddie’s “Blueprint” (see above, Figure 4). Again, cyberspace could represent metaphorically the location from where new narratives are being invented – a sort of techno-utopia. This idea connects well with John Akomfrah’s 1996 fiction documentary *The Last Angel of History*, that deals with concepts of Afrofuturism as a metaphor for the displacement of black culture and roots. As for a definition of cyberspace, this one is as good as any:

Cyberspace is a global domain within the information environment consisting of the interdependent network of information technology infrastructures (ITI) including the Internet, telecommunication networks, computer systems, and embedded processors and controllers. The term originates from science fiction, where it also includes various kinds of virtual reality (which is the experience of “being” in the alternate reality, or the simulated “being” in such a reality). (“Cyberspace”).

I am tempted to think of the virtual as a third plan, beyond the horizontal and vertical, where old narratives and experiences migrate or get transplanted, and new narratives and experiences emerge from such migrations or transplantations. More relevant than horizontality or verticality then, what matters the most in the virtual plan are: flow, circulation, and virality, as I will suggest with the example of selfie-taking and sharing online.

For a wall in Berlin had fallen. Since then, the story was made. It only remained to iron out the last difficulties with the help of office tools and organize the peaceful fusion of five billion human beings. On the horizon, the promise of interminable progress, the certainty of a confounding unity.

—Nicolas Mathieu

### Horizontal Revival: Back to (Super)Human?

We may now want to come back to the human, horizontal viewpoint, yet acknowledging the detours taken on the way. From the emotional and anthropological gaze of Salgado, we reached up to the aestheticized, vertical gaze of Arthus-Bertrand, and then to the permanent, integral gaze of us all in the virtual world, as we surf happily on the social networks. The politics of participation and the politics of (self)representation have become one and the same.

It is time now that we track back the routes and detours taken by both Salgado and Arthus-Bertrand, to realize that they have in fact moved in opposite directions, and yet managed to meet at the crossroads – still their perspectives remain quite different. With Salgado, the horizontal perspectives observed in *Workers: Archaeology of the Industrial Age* (1993), *Terra: Struggle of the Landless* (1997), or *Migrations: Humanity in Transition* (2000) have morphed into an all-encompassing project – *Genesis* (2013) –, where “haunting black-and-white photographs [...] record landscapes and people unchanged in the devastating onslaught of modern society and development.” (“Love Letter to Earth”). As it seems, an all-encompassing perspective on the origins of the world had to rise up, somehow, and gain a vertical bird’s eye view (Figure 6).



Fig. 6. Sebastião Salgado, image taken from the 2013 book *Genesis*. Image source: <https://focusfoto.com.br/a-jornada-de-sebastiao-salgado-registrada-em-fotografias/>.

One year after the publication of *Genesis*, the life and work of Salgado was brilliantly portrayed in a documentary directed by Wim Wenders and Juliano Ribeiro Salgado (son of Salgado himself): *The Salt of the Earth*. The *Genesis* project has in fact been a turning point in Salgado's work, suggesting an ascending, vertical perspective akin perhaps, to Arthus-Bertrand's *Earth from Above*. Taken from Taschen publishers' "Love Letter to Earth" webpage promoting Salgado's *Genesis* book, I have selected some comments and reviews that call for an urgent environmental awareness:

...What we have here are images that are seen as big as the life they depict, where the viewer becomes an integral part of the panorama, spread out in humongous majesty! What is shown in the book is what must be preserved and you understand that Salgado and TASCHEN are contributing to the awareness about the world we live in, and questioning how we live in it without giving something back...GENESIS is a photographic concerto from two men who took the risk of brining immortality to a morally wounded planet... - Force One, Monaco and French Riviera.

This amazing book is Salgado's love letter to the planet. I love the planet too. Look at the icebergs, at the mountains, at the forests, at the rivers: they take your breath away. But I am an architect, and I love challenging all this immense and frightening beauty by building shelters for human beings. -Renzo Piano. ("Love Letter to Earth").

Beyond the environmental call, other comments and reviews have emphasized a religious, biblical, almost godlike dimension in Salgado's images:

These pictures are a religious experience. They celebrate the preciousness of life.

-Stern, Hamburg.

*Genesis* honors its biblical antecedent... there could be no more powerful reminder of all that we stand to lose. -The New York Times.

Mr. Salgado's images have enormous gravity and sweep, an almost godlike omniscience. His black, white, and silver hues are so rich that his images seem to have been marinated in crude oil. -New York Times Holiday Gift Guide.

A genuine masterpiece from one of the greatest names in contemporary photography... For me it's almost a biblical work—at once epic and fundamental—that attains the pinnacle of the art. His contribution to photography is what Beethoven's Ninth is to music. It is a gift to humanity from a genius of image creation. It is perhaps the most amazing photography I have ever seen. A book for always. Quesabesde.com, Barcelona. ("Love Letter to Earth").

Last but not least, put more simply in Salgado's own words about his epic eight-year expedition trying to reach the essence of both Earth and humanity: "In *Genesis*, my camera allowed nature to speak to me. And it was my privilege to listen." ("Love Letter to Earth").

With Arthus-Bertrand, the trajectory seems opposite: from the vertical landscapes of *Earth from Above* (1999), we land home so to speak, and come back to classical, horizontal portrayal. The difference is that Arthus-Bertrand has in the meantime switched to filming and interviewing; four documentary films have been produced between 2003 and 2015: from *6 Billion Others: Portraits of Humanity Around the World* (2003 – soon upgraded six years later to *7 Billion Others*, in 2009), to *Home: A Stunning Visual Portrayal of Earth* (2009), to *Human: A Portrait of our World* (2015), to *Woman* (2019) (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Aïda, Senegal (from the 2015 *Human* movie). Image source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/09/what-it-means-to-behuman-by-yann-arthus-bertrand/407200/>.

The picture above (Figure 7) is taken from photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand's movie, *Human*. Well known for his *Earth from Above* project, Arthus-Bertrand has spent three years collecting stories from more than 2,000 people in 60 countries. The film recounts many of them, interspersed with stunning portraits and the sort of aerial imagery he is famous for, depicting the human condition and our interactions with the Earth. In the 2019 release *Woman*, directed with Anastasia Mikova, Arthus-Bertrand has crossed 40 countries, done 3000 interviews, and 50 shootings.

*Woman* was born of a desire to see the world through a woman's eyes. Then the questions started to flow. What are the stages marking a woman's passage from little girl to 80-year-old grandma? What are her dreams and hopes as well as her greatest fears and scars? What does she expect of life, society and men? What is a woman's relationship to her body and to seduction? What part do appearances and beauty play in her life? How does motherhood change her life? What do we know of female desire, and why do certain cultures find it so frightening? The position of women within a country is one of the best indicators of how healthy it is as a society. In broader terms, it might also be the most fitting symbol of humans' capacity to achieve incredible progress in a very short space of time and of our propensity to equally rapid regression. Weak, stupid, talkative, jealous, frivolous and hysterical, or else delicate, sweet, devoted, modest: all these things are allegedly part of a woman's 'nature'. But are they really? ('WOMAN' A new film by Yann Arthus-Bertrand & Anastasia Mikova).

So, it seems, Arthus-Bertrand has landed and returned to horizontality, after his vertical *Earth from Above* project. Interestingly, both *Human* and *Woman* document the common, shared humanity of thousands of people interviewed

(at the risk of shutting down their singularity, eventually), hence suggesting that, indeed, *the world is flat* – as Thomas L. Friedman would have had it.

What a journey! In a superhuman attempt to perhaps deliver the ultimate photographic experience of the world, Arthus-Bertrand forces to combine, in both *Human* and *Woman*, portrayal *and* landscaping, vertical infinity *and* horizontal diversity. Such project of documenting the entire world exhaustively is in itself exhausting – is it divine or diabolic? It is certainly encyclopedic, positivistic!

Over the course of nearly three decades, Arthus-Bertrand has proven a fatigueless voyager, a wanderer for images from planet Earth to be captured, and stories to be told on “what it means to be human” (Taylor). While Salgado reaches up to a godlike perspective on planet Earth and humanity with *Genesis*, Arthus-Bertrand’s movies *Human* and *Woman* claim visual insights and narratives about virtually anyone, anywhere, suggesting that in the end we are all the same.

Over the course of nearly three decades, the works of Salgado and Arthus-Bertrand will have crossed, interestingly: one moving from horizontality (*Workers*) to verticality (*Genesis*), and the other from verticality (*The Earth from Above*) to horizontality (*Human*, and *Woman*). Yet, both Salgado’s and Arthus-Bertrand’s horizontality and verticality remain different. One is specific, the other generic. While *Human* and *Woman* speak about everyone and no one in particular, *Genesis* is a superhuman attempt to catch the world’s irreducible singularity.

The ideal, all-encompassing, bird's eye view constantly reminds us of our reality as humans and as individuals: we are somewhat partial and trivial, a fraction of the universe, inconsequential to the world we desire to understand. The Panorama evokes the classic, incurably romantic yearning to attain a sense of belonging by tangibly grasping the world where we exist. Notice that this sounds almost like that's what visual art essentially is all about.

—Hitomi Iwasaki

-Let's go out and have a look at some of the... all the old medieval buildings and that. Because I bet, they look even better at night all lit up.

—In Bruges

### **(In)Conclusion: Beyond VR? On Regimes of Visuality**

The expansion from-horizontality-to-verticality-to-virtuality may inform a recent history of visuality; it certainly helps define a contemporary visual experience that has been marked increasingly by a virtually endless patchwork of the horizontal, the vertical, and the virtual.

While horizontality has been the name for geographical mobility, social imitation, and fraternal imagination, verticality has proven an enduring force of territoriality, exteriority, and coercion: the vertical intrenchment of the State remains a powerful narrative and reality against the indistinctive dreams claiming that “the world is flat.” As Gilles Deleuze once said, it is important to first learn how to paint a landscape, before you can draw a portrait. He implied that landscaping is randomly generic, while portrayal is eminently personal.

As we have seen, verticalization, virtualization, and aestheticization, have walked hand in hand along a process that has visually translated as follows: there is a solutionist folly about some vertical surveillance that calls for pacification, in the midst of a short to mid-term process of diversification and renewal (to picture this, let us remember Arthus-Bertrand's view of the Jalousie shantytown – Figure 3). Here again, the politics of verticality have been doubled by an immersive experience that is now almost impossible to escape – as it is itself the utmost escapist experience. If surveillance implies the colonization of private life by technological devices (it certainly does!), then the image of the *Panopticon* is now complete: we have achieved an almost perfect blurring of horizontality and verticality, now that they have both merged into a permanent, virtual connectedness.

There was a specific, anthropological way of seeing horizontally. Now with both vertical and virtual viewings, we have reached a point beyond the infinite, precisely because we are being told – and telling ourselves – the same stories about the eye of the beholder, or the technique that allows us to actually view the world and understand ourselves. Horizontality was about direct (eye and other) contact, here and now, and memory also. Verticality was always about (the visual and other pleasures of) symbolic control and allegiance. Now with the virtual multiplication of both verticality and virtuality combined, we get the permanent immanence of an eternal present, of which the selfie is a perfect symbol, and symptom: the viral and horizontal spread on the social networks, of a vertical entrenchment of self's hyper-identity.

What will be left when the whole world has been “shot?” As we see, going back to the natural, anthropological horizontal gaze might prove impossible: it is now filled with ups and downs, vertical hick-ups, pitfalls, and downfalls. Before we even know it, the technological apparatuses become the main relation – the most stable and secured one. More than created by them, we end up interacting with them – and this becomes our world, or the world we live in. Without even knowing, we give everything we got to surveillance capitalism, and all of its techno-visual wonders.

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