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On the Contemporary Visual Experience Part Two: The Vertical Gaze

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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 Two: The Vertical Gaze

> To close the mass, the organist played a usual Bach toccata. The chords rose very high, precipitous, tubular, vaguely metaphysical. Anthony did not believe in this biblical fantasy, yet the slenderness of the stone, the blue of the stained glass, this verticality, it was still something.
>
> —Nicolas Mathieu

From Above or Below: The Vertical Gaze

In common language, "top-down" usually refers to some official authority coming "from above" (the State or else); while "bottom-up" is considered grassroots, organic, "from the people." "From below" indicates usually some kind of underground activity—a form of resistance perhaps—, certainly not something official, approved by the government or the State. While verticality may represent the authority of God, the State, or the Father, it is highly symbolic; horizontality on the contrary refers to flow, movement, and imagination. The flag, the church, the State are all things considered "to stand for;" it is opposed to the somewhat ambiguous, flexible horizontal fraternity.

There is a practice of viewing that is specific to verticality. Almost immediately, the practice of verticality translates in an aesthetics of verticality; there is a form of vertical fascination: literally, vertigo is a vertical high. Vertical wonders have been aestheticized, branded, and streamlined. Here again, the New York skyline immediately comes to mind. Panoramic views—natural or built—are always powerful; they should remind us that the production of visuality has relied immensely on verticality.

In urbanism and architecture, the production of space translates horizontally and vertically; there is a higher value—all puns intended—attached to the production of vertical space usually, than there is to the so-called urban sprawl. Horizontal expansion implies that the value of land is accessible, while urban verticalization refers to the centralization of power and money. Obviously, when "the visual" is highly valued, verticality becomes inevitably a source of speculation: real-estate promoters are indeed "selling the view." There is a specific imaginary attached to living in a penthouse: whomever can afford a penthouse separates from the mob and lives closer to heaven—or God perhaps, as suggested in the Brazilian documentary film *Um lugar ao sol (A Place in The Sun—High-Rise)* which documents the narratives and imaginations of penthouse residents (see also Figure 1).

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Fig. 1. A picture from the 2009 documentary film *Um lugar ao sol (High-Rise).* The picture suggests the verticalization of Brazilian cities, one of the consequences of which is… the limited space for sunbathing on the beach (here at Boa Viagem, in the Northeastern city of Recife). Image source: https://screenanarchy.com/2016/04/interview-brazilian-filmmaker-gabriel-mascaro-discusses-hiswork.html.

There is a form of aestheticized "solutionism" (Morozov) attached to the construction of cable-cars above slums (La Barre). In Medellin or Rio de Janeiro, public transportation has been "solved from above:" while the inextricable labyrinths of tiny streets and alleys could never be destroyed entirely, they have been dealt with the flyover approach, and a form of vertical "aestheticization of poverty" (Harvey). Now that the famed "favela tours" have also expanded vertically, territories of survival long abandoned by the State are somehow being mapped and controlled through vertical visuality. The attractiveness of seeing the world from above has been applied to flying over the immense favelas by cable-car, which is another way of claiming that "view sells."

Verticality may be protected by "air rights," which are literally virtual rights, protecting the air above a property—say, a four-story building.

> Air rights are the property interest in the "space" above the earth's surface. Generally speaking, owning, or renting, land or a building includes the right to use and develop the space above the land without interference by others. This legal concept is encoded in the Latin phrase *Cuius est solum, eius est usque ad coelum et ad inferos* ("Whoever owns the soil, it is theirs up to Heaven and down to Hell."), which appears in medieval Roman law and is credited to 13thcentury glossator Accursius; it was notably popularized in common law in Commentaries on the Laws of England (1766) by William Blackstone. ("Air Rights"—see Figure 2).

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Fig. 2. An example of air rights in use: a high-rise building extends over a four-story building in Manhattan, 2010.
Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_rights.

In the highly-profitable New York real-estate market, these rights can be sold, as we have seen recently with "NYCHA 2.0"—Mayor de Blasio's plan to raise some $23.7 billion. These are the rights to build based on the square feet of space above the New York City Housing Authority buildings that could be developed; the developers would use them to expand the size of their existing properties (Smith).

Other good examples for the contemporary production of vertical space and its highly-valued visuality are some recently-built museums, such as the New Whitney (New York), the MUCEM (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations, Marseilles), or the MAR (Museum or Art of Rio, Rio de Janeiro)—where visitors may enjoy taking selfies from the gift shop or terrace, more than looking at the actual exhibitions. As contemporary museums tend to become "rooms with a view," sometimes the visual beats the collection. Contemporary museums may be seen as interfaces (Grossmann); it is then all too normal that they should provide with an extraordinary visual experience towards their surroundings. As much as contemporary museums are becoming (that is, are being produced as) interactive and immersive spaces, the terrace, rooftop or

glass floors with a stunning view is almost inevitable. Significantly, one major exhibit at recently-built MUCEM, was precisely about panoramas: "J'aime les panoramas" ("I Love Panoramas"), in 2015-16.

Walter Benjamin, who had been interested several times in panoramas (in "Berlin Childhood," and in "Paris, capital of the nineteenth century"), wrote that they "announce an evolution from art to technique," and "at the same time reflect a new sense of life." (Albera). There is indeed a certain paradox in the development of a free and open look that ends up being directed:

> there is in fact in the panorama the construction of the point of view. There is a panorama only with the exact determination of the location of the viewer and the definition of the point of view. Thus, there is a whole set of promontories, belvederes, terraces, stairs, balconies, benches, but also optical instruments and pictograms that direct the eye. A definition of panorama: from the Greek *pan-horama:* vision of the whole, of everything. Circular construction that unfolds horizontally 360° around the viewer, presenting a landscape or a historical scene of a stated realism. Vast landscape that can be seen from all sides. Overview, complete study. ("J'aime les panoramas"—see Figure 3).
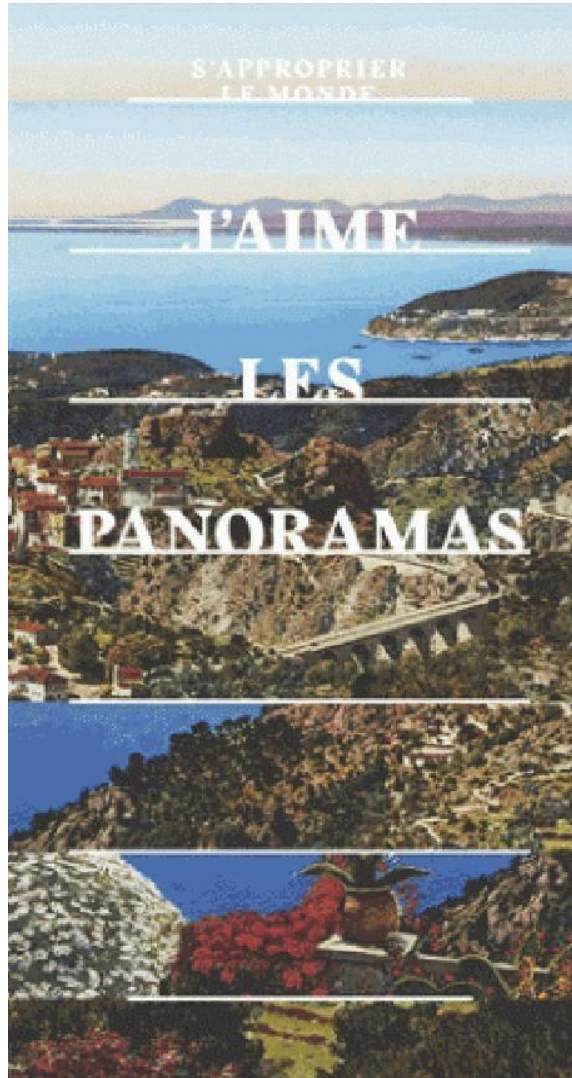
Fig. 3. Catalogue cover for the "J'aime les panoramas" ("I Love Panoramas") exhibition, MUCEM, Marseilles, 2016. The legend above the title says: "S'approprier le monde" ("To appropriate the world"). Image source: https://www.dessinoriginal.com/fr/catalogue-dexposition/6800-catalogue-d-exposition-j-aime-les-panoramasmucem-9782081363304.html.

Note that the last floor of MUCEM does offer a stunning 360° view over its coastal and maritime surroundings (see Figure 4).

Fig. 4. View from Le Môle Passedat restaurant, on the top floor of MUCEM, Marseilles. "Perched on the roof of the MuCEM, Le Môle Passedat offers an unbeatable view of the Mediterranean and Marseille Cathedral La Major." ("Le Môle Passedat"). Image source: http://www.mucem.org/en/your-visit/bookshop-restaurants-shops/le-molepassedat.

Likewise, Rio de Janeiro's most recent Museum of Tomorrow, which has a 360° view (also the case for Rio's older MAC—Museum of Contemporary Art), yet from the ground floor. With its structure made of iron and glass, the Museum of Tomorrow is entirely open towards its surroundings. More than a museum of art *per se,* it is rather a container for global, environmental knowledge. Through vivid and highly visualized demonstrations of technological power, it is explicitly designed as a tool for raising consciousness about the universal connectedness of the newly discovered Anthropocene blurb. Now with immersion and interactivity more than ever before, the production of contemporary museum space suggests that they are still central to our phantasmagories (Berdet).

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> The governments of these early states attempted to entrench their politics and ideologies vertically into all the institutions that comprised their political communities, as governments still do. They expanded horizontally at the expense of the autonomy of neighbors, as powerful states still often do.
>
> —Donald V. Kurtz

Landscapes of Power in The Drones Age

When horizontality applies to displacement and speed (the bullet train), verticality is immediacy and permanence—a permanent immanence, perhaps. There is a powerful symbol attached to verticality: it is the idea of the "vertical entrenchment of the State" (Kurz), and the properties attached—hierarchy, power, surveillance. In the drones age, these features have become all too banal.

A drone, in technological terms, is an unmanned aircraft. Drones are more formally known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or unmanned aircraft systems (UASes). Essentially, a drone is a flying robot that can be remotely controlled or fly autonomously through software-controlled flight plans in their embedded systems, working in conjunction with onboard sensors and GPS. In the recent past, UAVs were most often associated with the military, where they were used initially for anti-aircraft target practice, intelligence gathering and then, more controversially, as weapons platforms. Drones are now also used in a wide range of civilian roles ranging from search and rescue, surveillance, traffic monitoring, weather monitoring and firefighting, to personal drones and business drone-based photography, as well as videography, agriculture and even delivery services. (Rouse—see Figure 5).

Fig. 5. New York City aerial drone footage, 2017. Image source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgE8izEPle4.

While viewing their aerial footage may provide fun and excitement, drones are in fact used primarily by the State to control activities and defend territories (Chamayou); there is, indeed, a "politics of verticality" (Weizman) where territory is key, defense paramount. As camera technology reaches incredible milestones, it is in fact bound to be used primarily for mass surveillance. We have seen recently the amazing sophistication of the "big pixel" photo of Shanghai by a new Chinese satellite quantum technology (Figure 6), and can easily imagine how this translates already, in terms of surveillance from above. "This 195-gigapixel photo of Shanghai is so huge you can zoom in from miles away and see people's faces," says one news headline (Wehner; see also Borines). Note that the photograph shown here is only a portion of the panorama shot by China's Jingkun Technology (calling themselves "Big Pixel"). An online tool to zoom in and out is available at the company's website: http://www.bigpixel.cn/t/5834170785f26b37002af46d (accessed on 24 Mar. 2019)

Fig. 6. 195-gigapixel photo taken from high on the Oriental Pearl Tower in Shanghai, 2018. Image source: https://bgr.com/2018/12/22/bigpixel-shanghai-photo-195-gigapixels/.

As Harvard Business School professor Soshana Zuboff shows in a revealing new book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, surveillance has become the business model of the internet (see Naughton). In the age of "surveillance capitalism," the once ironical "Big Brother is watching you," or "Smile, you are being filmed," have never been so true. Zuboff argues that the combination of state surveillance and its capitalist counterpart means that digital technology is separating the citizens in all societies into two groups: the watchers (invisible, unknown and unaccountable) and the watched. This has profound consequences for democracy because asymmetry of knowledge translates into

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asymmetries of power. What Walter Benjamin commented in his seminal 1935 text "Paris, Capital of the 19th century" about modern phantasmagorias and the people's perpetual search for newness—the lust to savor their own alienation—has now sophisticatedly extended to the tip of the selfie-stick every time one shares a selfie, hoping that it would "go viral."

In her 1991 book significantly titled *Landscapes of Power,* urban sociologist Sharon Zukin has explored the strong intricacies that exist between architectural verticality and power.

> The landscapes of power are the features of the built environment that perform political functions—including establishing the hegemony of a governing entity or an ideological creed in a particular territory and cultivating a sense of pride in place in residents of a territory. (…) There are four functions of landscape of power: 1) to show who owns what; 2) for nation building; 3) to create identity; and 4) to show who is in power. More commonplace landscapes of power might include monuments, memorials and, as Sharon Zukin argues, even cities themselves. ("Landscapes of power").

A landscape of power invariably implies the concentration of vertical buildings, or "skyscrapers." Quite significantly, the restaurant located on the 106th and 107th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center before 9/11 was called "Windows on the World." There is still, midtown, the restaurant "View of the World Terrace Club," to be visited for thrilling vertical sensations. On top of the actual World Trade Center there is also the "One World Observatory" which provides, according to its website, "an experience above New York and beyond all expectations:"

> There are a million things to experience in New York City and only one way to truly see them all. Start by ascending to the top of the tallest building in the Western Hemisphere in less than 60 seconds; look toward the horizon and feel the City's invincible spirit. Explore three levels filled with innovation and inspiration at One World Observatory, located in the top three floors of One World Trade Center. ("One World Observatory").

"Windows on the World," "View of the World," "One World Observatory:" indeed, the world seems to come as one when seen from above; one also feels like he/she is "sitting on top of the world"—that is, detached from the world, in control, fueled by objectivity. The famous New York skyline epitomizes the idea of a panorama of power (Figure 7).

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Fig. 7. An archetypical landscape of power: the New York skyline before September 11, 2001 (with the Twin Towers). Image source: http://do-you-know-about.blogspot.com/2010/08/new-york-city-skyline-with-twintowers.html.

One of New York's bestselling photographic books is called precisely *New York Vertical* (Hammann). An award-winning pictorial tribute to the world's most vertical city, *New York Vertical,* by German photographer Horst Hammann, offers a unique introduction to New York's spectacular architecture:

> All the photographs are set off with observations from Woody Allen, E. B. White and other writers, artists and working people. Together, the quotations and photographs manage to convey with tension and eloquence the obvious but unavoidable metaphor inherent in such a thematic treatment of New York. The skyscrapers, the bridges, the not-so-grand buildings are nothing if not the architectural embodiment of the vertiginous passions that define life in the vertical city. (Macneille—see Figure 8).
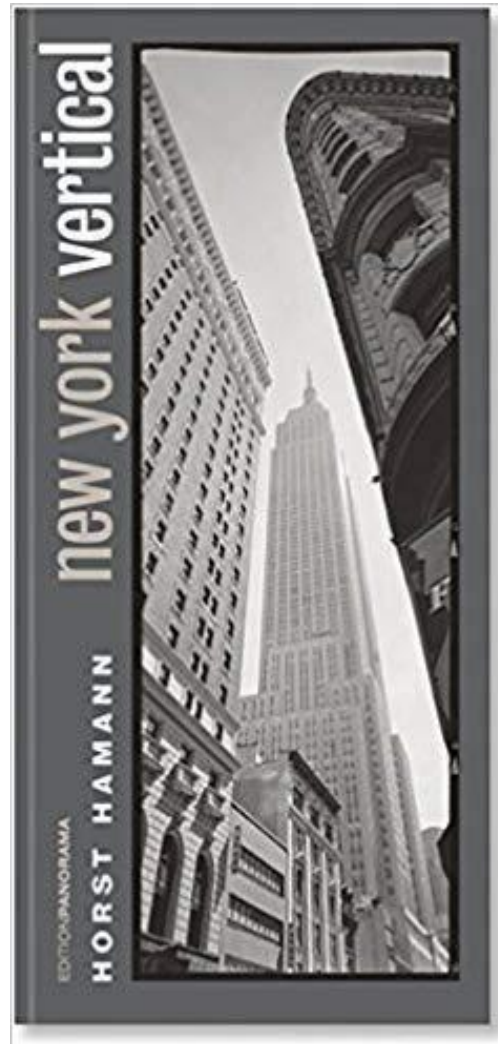
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Fig. 8. Horst Hammann, *New York Vertical* book cover, 1996. Image source: https://www.amazon.com/New-YorkVertical-Horst-Hamann/dp/389823200X.

Verticality has in fact been one of the most defining characteristics for the Big Apple since at least the 1930s when the Empire State Building was erected, and New York's famous skyline has been regularly updated with new buildings ever since. Tower Fifth may well be soon the 18th "supertall" skyscraper to occupy one of the world's most famous urban landscape:

> For decades, the New York City skyline was dominated by one building, the 1,250-foot-tall Empire State Building. But 17 "supertall" skyscrapers — defined as over 984 feet in height by the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat — have been started or completed since the Great Recession, completely remaking the city's traditional silhouette. If the developer Harry B. Macklowe has his way, an 18th will soon join them. On Friday, Mr. Macklowe submitted a preliminary application to the Department of City Planning outlining his intention to build a new super tower, east of Fifth Avenue between 51st and

52nd streets, overlooking St. Patrick's Cathedral. If approved at 1,551 feet tall, his skyscraper, known as Tower Fifth, would rank as the second-tallest building not only in New York, but in the Western Hemisphere. (…) Mr. Macklowe is asking for special permits, zoning changes and approvals to build a tower in East Midtown that is 66 percent bigger than would be allowed under the current zoning. (…) Advances in engineering and technology, new zoning, developer ego and the potential for fantastic profits have propelled new towers ever higher. The only city in the world where the march of supertall towers has moved more swiftly than New York is Dubai, where 29 supertalls have been erected since 2008, according to the Council on Tall Buildings. (…) The proliferation of supertalls puts the city at risk of becoming "darker, drearier and more austere than its denizens deserve," the Municipal Art Society, a 125-year-old nonprofit organization, wrote in its 2017 report "The Accidental Skyline," which was critical of what it called "loopholes in the city's existing regulations, which have been exploited to create larger buildings than ever intended by zoning. (…) Mr. Macklowe believes that Tower Fifth will surpass what he used to regard as his crowning achievement, 432 Park Avenue, a supertall tower completed in 2015, that helped solidify the transformation of New York into a real estate-driven city that, like London or Hong Kong, has become a pricey pied-à-terre for the super wealthy. The critic Aaron Betsky, in Architect magazine, described 432 as "a refreshing alternative to the mediocrity of the buildings around it." Michael Kimmelman, The New York Times's architecture critic, was more acerbic, describing the skyscraper as a "middle finger stuck up at the city. (…) Mr. Macklowe (…) contended that his project "validates the wisdom" of the city's rezoning. "Tall buildings are a reality," he said. "The days of restrictions on buildings are really over. This is a building that's never been built before, a 21st-century building." (Bagli—see Figure 9).

Fig. 9. A rendering shows how Tower Fifth would look soaring over Manhattan. Image source: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/18/nyregion/harry-macklowe-skyscrapernyc.html.

While horizontal cities like Los Angeles or São Paulo seem just like endless places to drive through, there is a vertical wonder that informs the spectacularity of cities like New York or Rio de Janeiro.

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