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'En gros and out of focus': History's Bird's-eye Media Metaphors

Abstract

Since the early nineteenth century, fiction writers, philosophers, and historians alike have consistently appealed to two connected ideas in theorizing historical experience: 1) media metaphors and 2) an opposition between totalizing bird's-eye views and fractional ground-level views. This paper scrutinizes the prevalence of these metaphors to elaborate the enduring interactions between historical theory and popular media.

They “deliberately prefer ... to see things *en gros* and out of focus, rather than minutely.”[1] This is what William James thinks of those who aim for sweeping, bird's-eye views of history. As much as one might want to “take in the whole of time and space at a single glance,” seeing “instantaneously all the infinite lines of convergence towards a given result,” James admits that such an effort is a lost cause. He claims that “the human mind is essentially partial,”[2] and that “no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene.”[3] For James, to look past its irrecoverable, indeterminate details toward history's faceless averages is to look at “a dead and stagnant thing.” His indeterminate world is alive, unpredictable, and operates on unstable ground. And crucially, it bears all these descriptions for the better rather than for the worse.

James dismisses historiographical strategies dependent on averages and devoid of details. To do so he appeals here to the rhetorical combination of bird's-eye metaphor and media metaphors. Those who depend on averages and shun details adopt a bird's-eye perspective on history, he says, and in so doing they produce an image of history that falls short of photographic legibility: they

“see things *en gros* and out of focus.” Regardless of just what optical device James had in mind here (photographic camera, magic lantern, microscope, possibly anything with a lens), and regardless of just what kind of historical vision he supports (whether bird's-eye and all-encompassing or nitty-gritty, detail-oriented, ground-level looking), what is important for the present moment is that he appeals to an optical device at all. James's bird's-eye media metaphor for seeing history is just one of many. Whether popular or scholarly, philosophies of history since the early nineteenth century have likewise appealed to panoramas, magic lanterns, stereographs, movies, and the like. And so too have they appealed, as James does, to the metaphorical differentiation between bird's-eye and ground-level looking. This paper asks what do all these bird's-eye media metaphors for envisioning totality look like, and what can a twenty-first century media historian or theorist take away from these metaphors from the nineteenth century?

Many media metaphors of history differ from William James in one important regard: they adopt the much more optimistic notion that an era's new media *do* afford legitimate bird's-eye views of the past. Where James argues that a history that

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purports to see everything in focus ultimately sees everything *out* of focus, this other class of media metaphors claims that bird's-eye visions of history indeed have the capacity to bring both the whole of history and the tiniest detail of history into sharp focus. And they rely on various media—panoramas, photographs, etc.—to provide the metaphorical embodiment of what an encompassing historical vision might resemble. In the second half of the nineteenth-century, for instance, descriptions of the Apocalypse and of revelatory history often appealed figuratively to the medium of the painted moving panorama. Following St. John's banishment to the island Patmos, says one writer, "God took the matter in charge, [and] opened upon his enraptured vision the gorgeous panorama of time and eternity." [4] God's revelation, say other writers, appeared to St. John as "a brilliant panorama," [5] "a pictorial representation or vast moving panorama," [6] a "continued living panorama presented in succession," [7] "one long drawn-out panorama," [8] a "grand and solemn panorama of things temporal and eternal," [9] "a pictorial panorama of the progress of the war between truth and falsehood," [10] a "series of visions, which the ministering angel unrolled ... like a great panorama," [11] and "Panorama of Omniscience." [12] These theologians claimed that St. John bore witness to the most infinite of sublime visions, and yet, given his god's-eye perch, managed to suppress these visions' presumed incomprehensibility. Nothing of this vision remained unknowable, undifferentiated, contingent, or irreducible, these writers say. St. John experienced what one writer calls, in his book *Foregleams of Immortality*, a "closing up of the natural sight, and the opening of a new eye to a light that never strikes our fleshly eyeballs." [13] According to these media-metaphorical interpretations, John's very being, and not just his vision, changed qualitatively.

As the Book of Revelation was often described in the nineteenth century as a "panoramic Apocalypse of the future," [14] so too was the academic history likewise often described as a "panorama of the past." This makes the comparatively unspectacular history book bear a close alliance to totalized, supernatural revelation. The preponderance of bird's-eye panoramic

metaphors for all-encompassing historical vision reveals an unacknowledged yet rampant correlation between notions of apocalyptic/postmortem access to eternal history and notions of fully recuperative, all-encompassing academic history. Consider these examples, culled from both well-known and lesser-known historians in the nineteenth-century United States. In the 1850s the American historian Marcius Willson wrote that history "may be so portrayed as to present a vivid panorama of the whole, finished to the sight," requiring "the artistic labor of the painter or sculptor." [15] Elsewhere, Willson said that his histories "are designed to present to the mind of the pupil a moving panorama of a real, busy life," or "one local, fixed picture, a moving panorama of events." [16] In the mid-1870s, in a preface to Charles Augustus Goodrich's *History of the United States*, a school principal likewise insisted that historians should aim "to draw out before the mind such a view of history as shall make it a real panorama of the past." [17] And around the turn of the nineteenth century, the Universalist historian John Hill Walbridge wrote a little history of the town of Wilmington, Vermont—a relatively modest undertaking. In it, though, he offered a bold lamentation. Dreaming of a time when his discipline could accomplish totalized historical recuperation, he wrote,

From the top of Mount Haystack the eye commands a magnificent panorama of maple crowned hills and smiling valleys. ... Would that we possessed the power to present to the mental eye of the reader such a bird's-eye view of the past history of the town with events in their right relationships and perspectives. [18]

By the time one facet of history has been conveyed, he implies, another has already escaped the reader's "mental eye," thus leaving him or her with an incomplete, perspectively skewed picture of history. Censuring historical writing for what he considered its incapacity to create in the reader's mind a totalized image of past time, Walbridge levies upon his academic discipline a responsibility to be panoramically encompassing in accuracy and scope.

Granted, the god's-eye view of apocalyptic vision and the bird's-eye view of historical vision register vastly different conceptions of scale—the latter is earthbound, for instance, while the former transcends earthly time and space altogether. The point, however, is that both our theologians and our historians put the moving panorama to a task whose scale and scope far exceed the representational limits of what any popular medium actually affords. The preponderance of their figurative appeals to the panorama—something akin to what the media theorist Mark Hansen calls *technesis*, or “the putting-into-discourse of technology”—demands the scrutinization of word/image interactions in historical representation.[19]

Also consider Oliver Wendell Holmes's prediction of an infinite stereographic library in the 1860s, in which everything was to be photographed “with camera-lenses of the same focal length, at the same distance, and viewed through stereoscopic lenses of the same pattern,” in order to produce a coherent corpus of forms—a totalized history spelled out in easily accessible images.[20] Or D. W. Griffith's dream of an infinite cinematic database of history: “You will merely seat yourself at a properly adjusted window, in a scientifically prepared room, press the button, and actually see what happened.”[21] Or think of Camille Flammarion's 1872 fictional dialogue *Lumen*. The book's main character flies through outer space, traveling back in time and watching segments of his life unfold from his extreme bird's-eye perch—a fully recuperative history of the mundane. Flammarion uses the moving panorama and the photograph to describe this practice metaphorically. It is possible to see the visible history of the earth, he says, “spread out as if on a scroll,” with the entire retrospective panorama appear[ing] in a succession of scenes.”[22] Or, retreating to the humbler side of things, consider this quotation from the 1850 *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*. It first posits a divine, panoramic vision of history and then, as William James himself might do, brings us back down to earth:

A philosophical history ... would be like a *telescope*, with powers to bring to view the past, and make it instructive to

the present; like a *panorama*, in which what has been is distinctly represented and made real. ... What we have in our present histories of New Jersey, with their acknowledged merits, is but a *bird's-eye view*, and that so distant and so dim, that the outlines can hardly be seen... [23]

Along with this bit of Garden State grandiosity, let's consider as well Emile Vander-Burch's 1825 play *Arlequin the Astronomer, or The Magic Lantern in the Moon*. Arlequin is an obsessive astronomer who, alas, finds himself paying more attention to his telescope than to his wife. In order to remedy this situation, the moon—that new object of Arlequin's affection—takes it upon herself to beam Arlequin up into space and conduct a sort of therapy session. “Look at my magic mirror!” the moon says. “It's not just a piece of furniture. This mirror reveals everything that happens on earth.” “Ah!” replies Arlequin. “It's like a magic lantern.” The moon ends up showing Arlequin, in her magic mirror / magic lantern, how it is that his late-night telescope habits might be testing his wife's last nerve. And Arlequin, anticipating the Christmas epiphanies of George Bailey and Ebenezer Scrooge, sees the error of his ways and vows to become a more attentive husband.[24]

We can see a conflict brewing here. On the one hand, bird's-eye or moon's-eye views permit us a view of everything, of all time past and, presumably, future. On the other hand, they de-center us. They de-anthropomorphize the world. They are defamiliarizing enough to remind us that the way *we* experience the world does not comprise *every* possible way of experiencing the world. The philosopher Karsten Harries writes of how the fifteenth-century cardinal Cusanus invited his readers to envision what the cosmos might look like to a person on the surface of the moon. He seeks to strip terrestrial perception of its centered groundedness, and positing truth as unstable and ultimately unobtainable—in a manner not so different from that of Copernicus. [25] The philosopher Frank Ankersmit likewise argues that “the world results from our interaction with the world as embodied by experience, and not from *looking at the world from the point of view of the moon*.”[26] Along with this bird's-eye

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formulation, Ankersmit has argued that images, just as much as literary conventions, serve as the prefigurations by which historians conceive their narratives. The ubiquity of visual metaphors—"we like to speak of 'images of the past', of the 'point of view' from which the historian 'looks' at the past, of the 'distortions' of historical reality which an incorrect 'viewpoint' is liable to create—demands what Ankersmit calls "a strong argument in favor of the pictorial interpretation of the study of history," or what the media theorist Wolfgang Ernst calls "a precise media archaeology of the historical imagination."^[27] So too does the film historian Leo Braudy use the idea of the "God's-eye view of the director in the sky" to elaborate his distinction between closed films and open films. Where the closed film maps out a narrative's every motivation and stylistic pattern from above, the open film refuses to "elicit order from the world" and maintains "a contingent relation" to the world.^[28] We see, then, how bird's-eye or moon's-eye views stand in metaphorically for two vastly different conceptions of knowledge, narrative control, and historical recoverability. Seeing from the moon is both totalizing and de-centering; closed and open; stable and flux-filled. It's both a way to conceive of recuperating total knowledge of past time *and* of retaining a constructive blindness to knowledge.

So, media contribute to a de-centering, a reminder that we are in fact blind to most operations of the world, micro and macro alike. Think of the untold levels of microcinematic temporal details that film affords—slow motion, fast motion, etc.—or the infinite amount of information that resides in even the most out-of-focus of photographs—all those things of the world that are irrecuperable to our unaided senses. At the same time, media are also the primary means by which philosophers of history posit a totalizing recuperation of past time—Arlequin the astronomer's seeing history unfold in the moon's magic lantern, for instance, or Flammarion's star-hopping history-seer, or the New Jersey Historical Society's telescopic, panoramic, and all-encompassing history.

Abundant as they are, bird's-eye media metaphors of a totalizing, fully recuperative history end up committing a logical error: they beg the question. They neglect to see how media themselves are historical subjects, and, what's more,

how they are often "*reflexive* historical subjects," as the media historian Lisa Gitelman puts it.^[29] Media are immersed in history and, by virtue of this position, cannot help but foreground the question of what history is. Nor can they help but *determine* history—that is, create the means by which we imagine it. Those who use media metaphors to describe a philosophy of history—*any* philosophy of history—fail to recognize that media metaphors might actually be *more* than metaphors. I am thinking of Vivian Sobchack's description of her tingly experience of watching the out-of-focus opening to *The Piano*—how her fingers *felt* the film before her eyes managed to clue her in to what she was seeing. This experience suggested to her that calling a film "touching" or "moving" usually exceeds its intended metaphorical usage.^[30] So too can we now see how media metaphors of history exceed the status of metaphor. It is imperative that we complicate media metaphors of history. It is imperative because media really do permit us to see history (even if only in an incomplete, indeterminate fashion), and because they really do shape our conceptions of the *idea* of history—and of temporality and memory, and the representations thereof. If Sobchack was blind to what her fingers felt, then perhaps we can find something useful in recognizing our blindness to what so many bird's-eye visions of history have purported to give us: unfiltered access to the past. Blindness is the opposite of bird's-eye: it is what historian John Kasson calls mole's-eye, the underground view of that which goes unrepresented.^[31] A recognition of the unrepresentable interstices that compose history is what this constructive blindness affords us. It's Jean-Louis Comolli's reminder that there is a "blindness at the heart of the visible," frenzied and bountiful as that "visible" may be.^[32] What a wonderful task it is to try to uncover a history of spectatorial experiences with the very media that have so often been metaphorized as stable, reliably lifeless, knowable, graspable stand-ins for an all-encompassing, timeless, bird's-eye view of history. We want to look at mole's-eye aesthetic experiences that people have had with bird's-eye representations of history. This is one way to conceptualize the search for continuities between the forgotten media of a past era (the old new media) and the prominent media of today.

From the magic lantern to the photograph to the panorama to the cinema, those media that we tend to associate with proto- or para-cinematic culture have all been appropriated as the metaphorical means of comprehending an unfiltered, totalizing, wholly recuperative view of history. The contradictions inherent to bird's-eye media metaphors present an opportunity to keep dead media alive—by remembering just how vibrant and unpredictable and rich their histories of aesthetic experiences might be, as long as we continue to dig for them. Demystifying media metaphors of history permits us a constructive defamiliarizing of media themselves, and a recognition of the infinite complexity that resides in their inscription and reception alike. Anne

Friedberg has said something like this: Confined as they may often be to a frame, such disparate media as lithographs, magic-lantern projections, and movies alike are nevertheless more *imago* than *pictura*.^[33] This means that they invite contemplation of the unknown as much as they confirm suppositions of knowledge. Images have a different material substrate than pictures. Images are processes whereas pictures are objects. Images have a temporal dimension. Images are experienced in active, multiplicative ways. Images can inhabit a state of perpetual change and an openness to scrutiny and discovery. Herein, I think, lies an opportunity to assess just how productive it has been and will be to rescue these media from their lifeless, all-seeing metaphorical status.

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End Notes

- [1] William James, “The Importance of Individuals,” in *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 259.
- [2] William James, “Great Men and Their Environment,” in *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 218–219.
- [3] William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 177.
- [4] “Government of God,” *The Freewill Baptist Quarterly* 10 (July 1862): 334.
- [5] John Cumming, “No More Sea,” in *The Great Tribulation: Or, The Things Coming on the Earth* (London: Richard Bentley, 1860), 291.
- [6] David Logan Shirres, *An Exposition of The Apocalypse: On a New Principle of A Literal Interpretation* (London: Longman, 1871), 139.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 200.
- [8] W. B. Brown, “Illustrated Sermons, Or Truth Addressed to the Eye,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 35 (July 1878): 564.
- [9] Charles Beecher, *Redeemer and Redeemed: An Investigation of the Atonement and of Eternal Judgment* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 184), 302.
- [10] D. W. Phillips, “The Apocalypse: Its Authorship and Its Date,” *The Baptist Quarterly Review* 3, no. 11 (1881): 288.
- [11] William J. Reid, *Lectures on the Revelation* (Pittsburgh: Stevenson, Foster & Co., 1878), 25.
- [12] Christopher Wordsworth, *New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, In the Original Greek: with Introductions and Notes*, vol. 2 (London: Rivington, 1875), 192. There are dozens more of these, accessible by searching for “panorama” and “apocalypse” on Google Books.
- [13] Edmund Hamilton Sears, *Foregleams of Immortality* (London: Allman and Son, 1859), 46.
- [14] George D. Boardman, *Studies in the Creative Week* (New York: D. Appleton, 1880), 21.
- [15] Marcius Willson, *Outlines of History* (New York: Ivison and Phinney, 1854), 765.
- [16] Marcius Willson, *The Second Reader of the School and Family Series* (New York: Harper, 1863), vi. *History of the United States, For the Use of Schools* (New York: Newman, 1849), 9.
- [17] A. P. Stone, “Hints on the Method of Teaching History,” in Charles A. Goodrich, *History of the United States of America: For the Use of Schools* (1876), 5.

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- [18] John Hill Walbridge, *Wilmington, Vermont* (Wilmington: The Time Press, 1900), 5.
- [19] Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). Writing of twentieth-century cultural criticism and theory, Hansen argues, "Technology must not be construed as a mere figure or metaphor; its role within thought must not be reductively equated with its far more robust ontological status as 'agent' of material complexification," 19. In place of this "putting-into-discourse of technology," Hansen explores the way "technologies structure our lifeworlds and influence our embodied lives at a level, as it were, below the 'threshold' of representation itself," 4.
- [20] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in *Soundings from The Atlantic* (Cambridge: University Press, 1863), 163-164.
- [21] D. W. Griffith, "Five Dollar 'Movies' Prophesied," *The Editor* (24 April, 1915). Quoted in Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 242, and Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 181.
- [22] Camille Flammarion, *Lumen*, trans. Brian Stableford (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 141 and 29.
- [23] Abraham Messier, "The Hollanders in New Jersey," in *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 4, no. 2 (1850): 76.
- [24] Emile Vander-Burch, "Arlequin Astronome, ou la lanterne magique dans la lune," in *Le petit neveu de Berquin: Théâtre d'éducation pour le second age* (Paris: Aug. Imbert, 1825), 279-318.
- [25] Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 45.
- [26] Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 248. Also see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). He argues that Ankersmit's "contextualist clouds," those things that preclude contemplation of tiny ground-level experience, treat both history and the art object as "fully fixed, self-sufficient, and inviolable." In so doing, they pose themselves as "static" and "closed." In this case, we might posit "active" and "open" as opposites of static and closed. Active and open aesthetic experience has everything to do with integrating art and life, rather than treating art as infallible representation of life.
- [27] Frank Ankersmit, "Statements, Texts and Pictures," in *A New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 212-240. Wolfgang Ernst, "Let There Be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archaeology in Parallel Lines," *Art History* 28, no. 5 (November 2005): 583. Ernst wrote his article in honor of Stephen Bann, whose extensive body of work—especially *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)—has helped establish the stakes of these arguments.
- [28] Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 44-88.
- [29] Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 3-20.
- [30] Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 53-84.
- [31] John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 72-80.
- [32] Jean Louis-Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 121-142.
- [33] Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 8-11.