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On the Contemporary Visual Experience Part One: Vir(tu)al Horizon(tal)

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 One: Vir(tu)al Horizon(tal)

- Coming up?
- What's up there?
- The view.
- The view of what? The view of down here? I can see that from down here.
- Ray, you're about the worst tourist in the whole world.

—*In Bruges*

Introduction

The contemporary visual experience is defined by a permanent, endless combination of the horizontal, vertical, oblique, and virtual viewpoints. Technology has orchestrated our escape from the way we see the world when we are standing and looking around—the anthropological, horizontal viewpoint. From mountain to satellite views, we have experienced verticality; the God's or bird's eye views are in fact tightly connected with questions of power and surveillance. Powerful indeed whomever gets to look at others without being noticed; empowered indeed whomever gains a standpoint above the horizon. If verticality has amplified our field of vision, then virtuality has multiplied it, virally. Now that Jeremy Bentham's oblique *Panopticon* has fractally expanded through satellite views and surveillance data, the virtual is evermore the definitive domain of power and control.

In this paper I explore some aspects of a new visual experience primarily mediated by technology. As everyday life becomes increasingly virtual (in the sense that our daily activities are routinely mediated by technological devices such as smartphones and computers), it is also marked by an equally banal co-existence of the horizontal, vertical, oblique, and virtual plans—all viewpoints combining in fact permanently. As an attempt to critically engage with such kaleidoscopic visual experience, my aim here is to decompose its various plans and trace back, if possible, some basic regimes of visibility: the elementary forms of horizontality and verticality, so to speak. Yet, upfront, I will engage with the virtual realm, a place where technology allows for various visual experiences including new, digital and oblique perspectives on both horizontality and verticality.

This paper is in three parts. In “Part One: Vir(tu)al Horizon(tal),” I dig in the viral visualities of selfie-taking, augmented and virtual realities; in “Part Two: The Vertical Gaze,” I explore visual examples taken from architectural landscapes, aerial views, panoramas; and in “Part Three: Oblique Strategies,” I look at specific horizontalities and verticalities in some works of photographers Sebastião Salgado and Yann Arthus-Bertrand, and visual artist Terry Boddie.

Stop taking pictures, pick a sign!

—A sign seen during the Occupy Wall
Street movement in 2011

Virtual Surfing: The Vortex of Visual Narratives

My concern here is trying to understand the co-existence of two distinct visual experiences—one direct and horizontal, the other distant and vertical—, and their implications in contemporary visual experience. Here, the space—and the very idea—of the museum may help see the changes at play.

Traditionally, the Museum of *Fine Arts* was a depository for *The Beautiful*. This implied that the museum space was designed in radical opposition to its surroundings; the inside was the negation of the outside. When the museum becomes an interface designed to interact with its surroundings, the boundaries between the inside and the outside become blurred; space itself becomes flexible and subject to different rearrangements according to the needs of the moment: this is the idea of the open-doors museum, opposed to the museum as a closed temple. The contemporary museum is no longer a sanctuary for the aesthetically beautiful. Rather—and this is itself an incantatory phantasmagoria for our times—, it has become an interactive hub filled with technologies of immersion; more than just a sum of passive individuals, its public is now a collective of conscious, connected agents. There is indeed a politics of immersion, where the design of space is also, in sympathy, a form of “designing people” (Fraga).

When the space of the museum becomes porous and its public perfectly *conformed* within, then visibility is itself closer to inner vision. Key to an understanding of the nature of immersive worlds, such *conformity* between spaces and their publics allows for the emergence of a series of mediated arrangements, performances, *mises en scène*, and narratives—always singular, yet always pre-formatted, over-determined by their technological apparatuses.

As for the mediated performances, nothing is more relevant here than the example of the selfie practice. The selfie offers a narrative that encapsulates and combines both verticality and horizontality: the verticality of the agent and his device (the hybrid *self + cellphone* in the here and now of selfie-taking), and the horizontality of the social network (where the selfie itself as a product, a virtual object, is bound to circulate, spread, be shared and liked—eventually go viral). Both and indistinctively vertical and horizontal, the selfie is both and at the same time portrait and landscape; it is the matrix, the crucible for contemporary visual culture. When the selfie narrative always and invariably says “I was here,” it is the vertical entrenchment of the self: “Why do we go to high places? What do we want from them? We want to see. What do we want to see? A large part of what we want to see, it turns out, is ourselves seeing.” (Anderson). At the same time, it is meant to be shared and liked on the social networks—undoubtedly selfie’s irremediable destiny. When it spreads immediately among the virtually endless landscape of the social networks, the selfie also tells a story of horizontality (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. The hybrid self + cellphone—may also use a selfie stick. Image source: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/05/magazine/new-yorklife.html?module=inline#/on-observation-decks-selfies-empire-state-building>.

A change in visibility is much more than what it seems; it certainly induces a change of perspective on the environment, on people and things. It is the embodiment of an attempt to change everyone's narratives about their daily lives. Recently during the 2016 Olympics, Rio de Janeiro was "selling the view" for the selfie: a big sign standing on Praça Mauá said #CIDADEOLIMPICA—a perfect visual for selfie-takers, with the recently-opened Museum of Tomorrow in the background (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Ready for selfie? The #cidadeolimpica sign, in front of Museum of Tomorrow during the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Image source: <https://letsflyaway.com.br/presente-e-futuro-no-museu-do-amanha/museu-doamanha-cidade-olimpica/>.

Here again, Marshall McLuhan's most famous quote holds true: "The medium is the message." And with the selfie, "The message goes viral," for it is about how *some selfies only* will go viral when being shared on the social networks. As suggested earlier, digital technology is separating the citizens into two groups—the watchers and the watched. In surveillance capitalism, the majority is certainly being watched as it gently surfs on "feeds," "buzz," or "memes." Yet, only a minority will get to actually be seen, "liked" and followed, in the highly-competitive, VIP world of online self-representation. The Kardashian family has built an entire career on the powers of selfie virality. In 2015 the e-socialite Kim Kardashian published a photobook: *Selfish*—a printed reproduction of her most famous selfies—quickly followed by the sequel *More Me! With New Selfies 2015-2016*). Stuck between the mirror and the cellphone, solipsistic, Kardashian stares at the cellphone camera, in a pose that has come to epitomize the... selfie pose along with the typical kissing mouth. Seconds after she has shot it, the photo will probably spread on the social networks, maybe go viral. No wonder *Selfish* the book did not sell well... (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Kim Kardashian taking a selfie for her 2015 book, *Selfish*. Image source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/celebrity/story/kim-kardashian-selfie-bookselfish-sold-only-32000-copies-nielsen-bookscan-pam-sommers-coffee-table-adult-art-book286832-2015-08-06>.

Selfie-taking can sometimes be a dangerous, even fatal activity, when selfie-takers expose themselves to the perilous elements of nature. The Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskills has recently become ingloriously famous; it is now “the deadly waterfall in the Instagram age” (Shannon), “the New York waterfall where people are losing their lives for the *perfect selfie*” (Inside Edition Staff—my emphasis).

If selfies often get a bad reputation as a classic symbol of millennial narcissism, they have also been used as a fun tool of empowerment and self-expression, as well as activism.

Zakia Belkhir, a young Muslim woman, decided to take some cheerfully defiant selfies in front of protesters and was captured doing so by photographer Jurgen Augusteyns. His photos of Belkhir's selfies went viral after being published by Vice. (...). Selfies often get a bad rap as a classic symbol of millennial narcissism. But feminists, for one, have challenged that notion and championed the selfie as a fun tool of empowerment and self-expression, as well as activism. (Crockett—see Figure 4).



Fig. 4. A young Muslim woman countered an anti-Muslim protest with selfies in Antwerp, Belgium, 2016. Image source: <https://www.vox.com/2016/5/17/11692306/muslim-selfies-islamophobiaprotest-antwerp-belgium>.

When the selfie is used as a form of protest, it is then a “self-actualizing digitally-mediated DIY politics,” as Bennett has suggested (see also Sheehan). When the selfie shows someone holding up a sign, it is meant to circulate and spread the cause it is defending. The #nomartyr campaign is a good example.

It took the death of a young Lebanese teenager to rally the #notamartyr selfie protest in Lebanon. Killed by a car bomb attack in Beirut -- planned for an opposition politician -- Mohammad Chaar was sadly killed by the blast only minutes after taking a smiling selfie with his friends on the street where the bomb went off. To support his cause and put an end to senseless violence as byproduct of politics, the #notamartyr campaign has been set up by fed-up youth using the popular 'selfie' as their driving mechanism. "We are devastated by the senseless violence and wish to voice these feelings and ideas," says twenty-five years old blogger Dyala Badran. Selfies might just be the next big thing in social media when it comes to politics. (Helmy—see Figure 5).



Fig. 5. Selfie from the #notamartyr campaign, 2014. Image source: <https://www.trendhunter.com/trends/notamartyr-selfie-protest>.

Beyond the selfie, protests and demonstrations have recently become the arena for a rich experience in contemporary visualities. The Occupy Wall Street movement has proved an intense sign creativity; in some cases, the signs have staged their self-referentiality and awareness explicitly: “*Stop taking pictures, pick a sign!*,” “*Stop taking pictures and join us!*,” or simply declaring: “*The whole world is watching*” (see Figure 6).



Fig. 6. "The whole world is watching:" during the Occupy Wall Street movement on October 13, 2011, rather self-conscious signs remind us about the powers of visibility (and censorship). Image source: <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/watch/occupy-wallstreet-facing-showdown-44144707731>.

In January 2015 after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, the self-referential "*Je suis Charlie*" ("*I am Charlie*") has quickly spread, both in the streets and the social networks (see Figure 7); while the collective "*Nous sommes tous Charlie*" ("*We're all Charlie*") was also present (Figure 8).



Fig. 7. Demonstrators make their ways along Place de la République during a mass unity rally following the terrorist attacks on January 11, 2015 in Paris. Image source: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/college/2015/01/11/campus-beat-studentjournalists-respond-to-charlie-hebdo-attack/37399697/>.



Fig. 8. Republican march on January 11, 2015, in Strasbourg, France. Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Strasbourg_manifestation_Charlie_Hebdo_11_janvier_2015-2.jpg.

Last October 14th 2018 in Rio de Janeiro, people held street signs honoring slain councilwoman Marielle Franco, on the seventh month since she was murdered (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. People hold street signs honoring slain councilwoman Marielle Franco as they mark the 7th month since her murder in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Sunday, October 14th, 2018. Franco supporters distributed a thousand street signs after a video on social media showed one being destroyed by two politicians with the right wing Social Liberal Party. Image source: <https://www.apnews.com/913f7d21786841c982c0dc42ac959bfa>.

An aerial view of Cinelândia Plaza where the demonstration took place shows her name—“Marielle”—made of dozens of protestors holding a sign (Figure 10).



Fig. 10. Aerial view of Cinelândia Plaza, in Rio de Janeiro, October 14th, 2018, in memory of slain councilwoman Marielle Franco honored on the 7th month since her murder. Image source:

<https://www.facebook.com/ForaBolsonaroBR/photos/a.721676054640193/1351783194962806/?type=1&theater>

These examples suggest that the production of visibility has expanded significantly, both online and in the streets. In fact, they both feed into each other; they are becoming almost inseparable.

Here I was in Bangalore – more than five hundred years after Columbus sailed over the horizon, using the rudimentary navigational technologies of his day, and returned safely to prove definitively that the world was round – and one of India’s smartest engineers, trained at his country’s top technical institute and backed by the most modern technologies of his day, was essentially telling me that the world was flat – as flat as that screen on which he can host a meeting of his whole global supply chain. Even more interesting, he was citing this development as a good thing, as a new milestone in human progress and a great opportunity for India and the world – the fact that we had made our world flat!

—Thomas L. Friedman

The World According to Google

So much for horizontality: there is indeed a good metaphor for our global, connected times, informed by pundit Thomas L. Friedman’s 2005 book title: “The world is flat.” Paris may well have been the (horizontal!) “Capital of the ninetieth century;” New York was certainly the (vertical!) capital of the twentieth century. Will Google be the virtual, e-capital of the twenty-first century?

Since British sociologist John Urry wrote his seminal book almost thirty years ago (Urry 1990; 2002 for the 2nd edition), the “tourist gaze” has now expanded *virtually*: that is, beyond both horizontality and verticality. In 2011, John Urry and Jonas Larsen published also *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (see also Larsen 2014). Urry’s “original” tourist gaze did imply going and enjoying remote places, moving horizontally across the globe, consuming sites, sightseeing, taking pictures... and going back home. To a certain extent, it certainly implied also a *vertical gaze*. Now in the online world, in the age of Google Earth and VR (virtual reality), the tremendous attractiveness of the vertical viewpoint (from above or below) has become available at all times, and in real time—(literally) all made in Google: Google Maps, Google Earth, Google Cultural Institute’s World Wonders Project, or the (commercially failed) Google Glass.

A great and most recent example of “dead media” (Sterling) if there is, Google Glass was introduced on April 4, 2012 during a Google I/O Congress with an extraordinary live skydiving demo; it was named by *Time Magazine* one of the “Best Inventions of the Year 2013,” and ceased to be produced in January 2015. Augmented reality was perhaps too overwhelming for the regular user. How could it feel to walk down the streets while being bombarded with pop-up info about virtually anything?

The Google Glass project was an effort from Google to develop augmented reality glasses through an optical display designed in the shape of a pair of eyeglasses. Google Glass is essentially the internet in your eyes. Sort of like your smartphone as a pair of glasses. Using voice commands, you can dictate what the glass does and how it acts. For example, a hands-free camera means that you can take photos and videos through voice commands. (Nieto-Rodriguez).

There were just two problems with Glass. The first is that it made you look like a dork. Although Google teamed up with the company that made Ray-Bans, among other things, if you were wearing Glass then you became the contemporary version of those 1950s engineers who always had several pens and a propelling pencil in their top jacket pockets. The second problem was the killer one: Glass made everyone around you feel uneasy. They thought the technology was creepy, intrusive and privacy-destroying. Bouncers wouldn't let wearers—whom they called “Glassholes”—into clubs. The maître d' would discover that the table you thought you had booked was suddenly unavailable. And so on. [...]. Clearly Glass was not going to work as a consumer product. But it still could be a powerful aid to human effort in some areas. (Naughton).

As *Guardian* journalist John Naughton describes, the much-mocked wearable computer was refashioned for industrial applications, and has been used in industrial applications since the launching of Glass 2.0 EE (Enterprise Edition) in 2017 as an aid for factory workers. Which suggests that AR (augmented reality) works better when it is oriented and task-specific, rather than when it distracts the view (now augmented, but for what?) of the average urban *flaneur*, putting a computer in front of his eye as he walks down the streets. While augmentation is about *continuity*, *flow*, and *indistinction* between reality and “augmented reality,” VR is about *separation* between reality and “virtual reality.” In other words, the VR player knows that he is playing. In our early 21st century, such clear boundary is still comforting.

That there is, above all, anything new in the little black box remains to be seen... Indeed, VR is 360-degree virtual reality—horizontal, vertical, virtual—, and all of the above. If there is such thing as a case for *VR vs. Google Glass*, it really comes down to the opposition *VR vs. AR* (augmented reality). VR is

an interactive computer-generated experience taking place within a simulated environment. It incorporates mainly auditory and visual feedback, but may also allow other types of sensory feedback like haptic. This immersive environment can be similar to the real world or it can be fantastical. (“Virtual Reality”).

Whereas VR completely replaces the user's real-world environment with a simulated one, AR alters one's ongoing perception of a real-world environment.

AR is

an interactive experience of a real-world environment where the objects that reside in the real-world are “augmented” by computer-generated perceptual information, sometimes across multiple sensory modalities, including visual, auditory, haptic, somatosensory, and olfactory. (“Augmented Reality”).

As much as VR is easily *accessible* (virtual reality remains a spectacle, a phantasmagoria), Google Glass may have been *confusing*. In VR, one may be gazing at aerial views, drone photos, Google Earth, or Google Map—or some other feature that will be mixing all of the above. Yet, the point is that, as a visual apparatus, it is about *separation* from, say, our natural phenomenological viewpoint, and *replacement* with another, virtual, reality. In other words, the boundaries are clear. On the contrary, AR is about *continuity* and *coexistence* between reality and its “augmentation”—which might indeed be confusing. As to why it failed commercially, Google Glass may have been too offensive to our anthropological perception of the “real world.” While technological devices attempt to visually *invade real-life settings*, the actual blurring of boundaries between the real and the virtual becomes threatening. As it seems, immersive environments still need to be experienced *separated* from real life, that is, always “on demand:” attending an immersive museum exhibition, or diving into a smartphone VR app, for example. AR, Google Glass are mixing it all up. While the “NYT VR” app encourages to “Immerse yourself, your way” (“The New York Times: VR”—“Put yourself at the center of our stories in an immersive virtual reality experience,” says the app), Google Glass seemed to imply that one should “Immerse, Google way”—yet in real time, and real life. A weird experience indeed, for what could it feel like, walking down the streets enhanced by Google, or being in the world while “googling” (at) it at the same time? And, most basically: who *needed* that? As a matter of fact, Google Glass failed for not having a clear *function*: no one seemed to be ready to go for it, nor pay the price for such uncertain adventure in the—yet—real world.

The failure of Google Glass is due to the lack of clarity on why this product exists. The designers did not clearly define or validate: the users’ problems, what solutions Google Glass would provide for its users, or how customers

would use the glasses. This revolutionary product never succeeded because users could not figure out why they needed it in their lives. (Yoon—for Google Glass, and AR and VR respectively, see Figures 11 and 12).



Fig. 11. Google Glass. Image source:
<https://www.cio.com/article/3201886/itstrategy/notorious-project-failures-google-glass.html>.



Fig. 12. Virtual reality headset. Image source:
<https://gadgetsreviews.com/review/132-virtual-reality-helmets-which-is-to-win-oculusrift.html>.

Physiologically, vision implied that the subject be at the center of the/his world. As a social construct, visuality had been signified according to a specific location, precisely *between* the subject and the world. It had allowed for selling

destinations to tourists around the globe. The social construction of gaze had worked as a marketed decentering of the subject—a strong argument for going places indeed, and a powerful invitation to consuming places, objects, views, and the dreams and visions of *grandeur* attached.

Permanently mediated by images, the decentering of both object and subject gives way to a condition of radical immersion, where the re-centering of the subject is virtually impossible, or rather, where the re-centering of the subject only occurs virtually. The viewpoint becomes a vanishing point, although the observer is observed permanently, under digital surveillance. As a social activity, mediated visuality had occupied the space of a merely physiological, unmediated vision.

Now that (thanks to Google!) the (virtual) world is available a mouse-click away for everyone to see in real-time, the virtual gaze has flattened everything onto the same pixels and digital screens. The emotional charge of visuality has now returned home—a home that is now connected with wi-fi. What is then left, when the visual loses its emotional impact? A mere vision, banally aestheticized.

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