

## **Material globes on material worlds – Google Earth and social change**

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Most readers of this blog will have doubtless come across Google Earth (figure 1), the interactive three-dimensional simulated globe, published by Google. If not, it is almost inevitable that you soon will, as its increasing usage amongst academics for showing spatial locations of fieldsites, and concurrent application by news agencies such as CNN and advertising agencies such as for British Airways (see figure 4), means its visual style is in danger of becoming the ubiquitous global image. From the point of view of material culture studies, virtual globes such as Google Earth raises a range of important issues. This includes the significance of the interface's visual realism and simultaneous appeal to corporeal delight and entertainment; the dominant modality of space employed by users; common patterns of place-image 'consumption'; the social narratives and biographies constructed using the program; and ultimately the relationship between material culture and social change. Here, I will summarise a few aspects arising from an analysis of the visuality and historical precedents of the program and the small ethnographic study I undertook, to examine Google Earth in use amongst teachers and students at two schools in southern England.

## Material World

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A close analysis of the visual 'regime' of Google Earth reveals an interesting mix of 'perspectivalism and projectionism' (cf. Jay ; Pickles 2004), as the camera angle shifts from global to local (figure 2) and from vertical to oblique perspective (figure 3) The program is deeply indebted to these Renaissance and Enlightenment models of objective visuality. It represents space in the visually authoritative manner of a photograph and/or modern map. However the program also appeals to a humanised, subjective, or rather, enchanted space in several aspects. Visual referents recall familiar earlier cinematic forms, from the revolutionary visual effects of films such as Citizen Kane, to entertainment of the zooming camera which scales from atom to universe in Powers of 10. Virtual globe development, has been strongly driven by imagination of the future, for example, from Neil Stephenson's Snow Crash: a sci-fi thriller which features a live computer-generated model of world called simply 'Earth'. Indeed, many in the user group I studied were particularly concerned with the entertainment potential of the program (delighting in spinning the globe manically, or enjoying the visual effects of zooming or panning). All users preferred to search for discrete, familiar places, and avoided anonymous or abstract concepts of environment.

No doubt Foucault would have had a thing or two to say about Google Earth. But curiously, the potential fear of panoptic surveillance, of being watched from above, widely discussed amongst adult informants, was usually outweighed by excitement at being able to see one's own house in high-resolution. The stereotype, confirmed by the ethnography, of most users spending inordinate amount of time searching for places closely associated with the self, was confirmed repeatedly. This trope, a kind of 'egovisualism', I found intriguing and difficult to explain satisfactorily. Most informants from who I asked for speculative explanations, suggested simply that people are self-obsessed: 'like checking they look good in a photograph'. But if this is the case, the house has come to stand as icon for the self. I suspect that there is a cultural logic at work, in the context of screen and celebrity culture, which involves a desire to link the self into a wider public visibility. Is

this desire for visibility the positive form of panoptic fears? The effect of seeing a place one knows on television is not dissimilar: somehow through the depiction of a place, or person that one knows on a screen, the place gains a magical aspect and a taste of divinity, or 'celebrity'. What does this mean for the way people think about themselves and their identity?

Here the 'global' nature of Google Earth comes into play: both symbol and actuality. Of course, Geographic Information Systems with the ability to display global satellite imagery have been around for some time. What is significant about the current program and its contemporaries (such as WorldWind), is the scale of distribution due to its digital 'portability' (no doubt something that will increase as mobile phone versions are developed), and thus the huge potential for data integration with simultaneous centralisation and democratisation, as a few interfaces come to dominate an increasing number of spatial sources. This trend towards a 're-spatialisation' of the internet, a field which in general discourse is discussed as a territorial 'virtual' space, will no doubt have unforeseeable consequences. In the context of other media developments, such as e-mail, 24-hour news, mobile phones (cf. Eriksen 2001), in which an increasing importance is attached to instantaneous, continuous synchronicity, the lack of live images in Google Earth (once recognised) was unsurprisingly a cause for disappointment for my informants. If, as Benedict Anderson (1987) noted, the nation state only become a cultural and practical ideal in part through the temporal synchronicity resulting from the development of print capitalism, it is fascinating to speculate on the potential new 'imagined communities' and concomitant identities which may be enabled by the temporalities of these new technologies such as Google Earth.

Links

Google Earth - <http://earth.google.com>

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