

Andreas Gursky, Google Earth, and the Achievement of the World Picture

Until Andreas Gursky came along, photographs seemed destined to be good for one very important thing: putting the viewer into a relationship with one place at a time. Most who write about photography assume that this condition is built-in to the perspective-system machine – a controversial belief that artists and scholars have, accepted for centuries. Gursky's landscape photography represents a new possibility for the perspective system image, and for photography in general – a visually human relationship to space that is not a locality. This presentation will, in part, argue that Gursky's landscapes are, for the first time in the history of linear perspective, global.

The linear perspective system of depiction is, without a doubt, the most philosophically important advancement in visual art in the history of Western culture. Its invention in the early 15th century allowed for pictures that seemed laid the existential foundation for *Cogito ergo sum* to make philosophical sense to philosophers and scientists two centuries later. For it even though it was a coded system, it appeared to make transparent sense of the world, and as such its appeal was one of universality – a system of conjecture, of proposition, of representation, that seemed, if done right, ontologically *prior* to any of these things.

Perspective came with a price. Before depiction became the content of an instant of human vision, painting a picture of the world was optically possible, and even common. Following perspective, optics rendered such a picture conceptually lost to history. It is true that a picture of the world was still geometrically possible, but the fantasy that perspective permitted – the observation of visual experience itself – could not be sustained by accurately projecting of all the land and sea on earth. Maps were no longer pictures as such, because pictures, as such, at least of land, had become what memory and imagination deemed optically possible. No one had ever seen

a lot of the world at once, let alone all of it, and this fact, a wound incidental since the beginning of time, now emerged to separate the possible and the impossible in the art of every spatial depiction: a thin, horizontal scar running from edge to edge.

Making human vision the template for pictorial architecture means reckoning with the ontological limitations of our being with each act of depiction and viewing. But with landscape, there is the added burden of reckoning with the existence of ontological possibilities that are unavailable to humanity. A metaphor that runs throughout landscape painting's history should prove an example: water mocks our frontiers. We hold firm in the center of our visual field, and rivers and clouds simply pass through our pictures on their eternal supercilious cycle around the globe. Awareness of our ontological limits is a double-edged sword, and nowhere in depiction is this strife more exactly articulated than in landscapes. Gursky has, incredibly, figured out how to "tame" water within a perspective system depiction, such that its ontological potency – an admittedly difficult term my presentation will define in specific detail – now seems dependent upon human intentionality.

A projection of the earth with the horizon is hardly possible. But this might not be necessary if the artist came up with another way of restoring the ontological potency we lost when we were seduced by the *jouissance* of observing ourselves be in the world. Of course, after perspective became the new clearinghouse of existential truth – a wager photography later raised significantly – returning to a prior mode of depiction would have been futile. I should say that few landscape painters and very few photographers ever saw a need for the entire world to be depicted; the articulation of a sense of place was, and will perhaps be for quite some time, the quintessential purpose of the genre. But the whole world exists in some form in every viewer's imagination, and a picture that allowed the viewer to observe the experience of being everywhere inspired quite a few artists indeed, which this presentation will review on its way to Andreas Gursky.

This talk will argue Gursky's landmark achievement, but even more than that, it will argue that superceding the limitations the perspective system imposes on artistic depiction will in fact dispense with its artistic potential altogether. For demonstrative proof, this presentation will offer *Google Earth* – a technological wonder achieved by the “sewing together” of single photographic satellite images. *Google Earth*, I will show, achieves the unified picture of the world that the perspective system foreclosed centuries ago, but at its own price – the ontological status of an art object, and thus the very possibility of creativity in depiction.