

Theme issue proposal for *Geoforum*

## **The view from nowhere? Spatial politics and cultural meanings of satellite imagery**

*Guest editors:*

Chris Perkins and Martin Dodge

Geography, School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester

### **1. Rationale**

Following a highly successful session at the recent AAG meeting in San Francisco, where eight papers were presented to a packed audience, we wish to develop a focused special issue in *Geoforum* on the cultural meanings and spatial politics of high-resolution satellite imagery, critically examining how the burgeoning use of these data is radically reshaping the ways different groups comprehend space and place.

High-resolution satellite image data are becoming increasingly available to a wide audience. Data that were formerly in the military domain, under the control of elite groups and with uses carefully restricted on grounds of security, are being rapidly commercialised. Meanwhile technological change is revolutionizing the ways in which civil society are able to deploy these rich and apparently mirror-like images. Google Earth, and other internet portals offer ubiquitous high-resolution satellite imagery at unprecedented detail to a global audience through simple interfaces. The capabilities and technical beauty of Google Earth, in particular, has garnered widespread praise and a rapidly growing fan-base. Given this impact, and the diverse ways in which formerly elite image data are being deployed, now is an apposite time for a considered reflection of the culture and politics of this process. These themes speak to recent academic and social concerns over changing constructions and perceptions of scientific knowledge; tensions between confidentiality and freedom of information; the changing status of visual technologies; the relations between power, space and representation; everyday and elite practice; and forms of resistance. Different theoretical approaches may be deployed to interrogate the significance of

these powerfully affective visual technologies, and indeed it can be argued that the democratisation of satellite image accessibility is itself part of a significant epistemological shift.

The papers and artistic commentaries in this collection address exactly what can be seen in high-resolution satellite imagery, by considering how the seductively objective view of the world that they represent, termed by Thomas Nagel the ‘view from nowhere’, is constructed and deployed. This mirror-like viewpoint over territory is in fact spatially and temporally discontinuous: resolution and specifications vary, and despite apparent democratisation, remain in the control of powerful social groups. Image currency and resolution reflect Microsoft and Google perceptions of market potential and an ongoing tension between commercial and strategic interests. Interfaces encourage a belief in the veracity and accuracy of the data, and tend to facilitate site specific searching, but also make customized comparative overview quite difficult. A keyhole view of the world predominates. At the same time the widespread availability of satellite image data, the release of API scripts, and interactive capabilities of the new interfaces offer unprecedented populist access.

In the past imagery was mainly deployed as part of rational scientific discourse, to manage environments, plan for disasters, monitor land-use change, or as evidential support for planning enforcement. Increasingly, however, different social groups are deploying high-resolution satellite imagery in new ways. Actors in the process now range from mass media, to artistic practitioners, policy makers, educators, and everyday leisure users. New spatial practices are emerging from this nexus of technologies, social actors and institutions. For some groups imagery represents an opportunity to challenge power, by drawing attention to formerly secret sites and the previously hidden apparatus of state and military control. For others imagery is about play: deriving pleasure from searching for black helicopters; engaging in virtual tourism; creatively making their own subversive mash-ups; or part of a wider aesthetic performance.

This collection draws together practice and theory, juxtaposing different ways of understanding social and technological changes. It strongly challenges the notion that high-resolution satellite imagery offers ‘a view from nowhere’, demonstrating instead

the many complex ways in which the image operates and the many different meanings and practices that emerge from this process.

## **2. Timescale**

1<sup>st</sup> September 2007: Draft papers submitted to guest editors for evaluation.

1<sup>st</sup> October 2007: Final papers submitted to *Geoforum*.

Mid January 2008: Reviewing completed and initial decisions made.

May 2008: Submission of revised papers.

## **3. Contact details**

*Martin Dodge*

m.dodge@manchester.ac.uk

Geography, School of Environment and Development,  
University of Manchester,  
Oxford Road,  
Manchester, M13 9PL,  
United Kingdom.

Tel: +44(0)161-275-3622.

Fax: +44(0)161-275-7878.

## 4. Papers

The following people have indicated their willingness to contribute full papers to a special issue of *Geoforum*.

### 1. *Seeing nothing from nowhere – Google Earth and the illusion of information*

Robert Barr

Geography, School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester

Google Earth has transformed the lay person's view of geographic information by providing high-resolution (or, more accurately, variable resolution) imagery of the entire earth's surface. While it offers some overlays of street mapping, points of interest (often linked to Google advertising) and territorial boundaries, the image remains just that, an image. As such Google Earth threatens to undermine this more sophisticated view of what constitutes a geographic object. In Google Earth the 'objects' lie in the eye of the beholder, and each observer will interpret the image in different ways. This makes it difficult to attach attributes to the map in a meaningful way, without superimposing a whole new structured map on the image. There is no straightforward mechanism for handling the history of spatial objects – something that was becoming possible with the more sophisticated ways of structuring geographical space into collections of well defined spatial objects. There is a danger that by offering the veneer of sophistication, but an underlying naïve view of the world, Google Earth will stop the development of a more sophisticated, more mature and ultimately more valuable view, or set of views

### 2. *NGOs as intelligence agencies: The empowerment of civil society by commercial high-resolution satellite imagery*

Steven Livingston and Sean Aday

School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University

In 2002, as the Bush administration strained to draw world attention to Iraq's alleged WMD programs, the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in Washington announced that it had detected two nuclear processing facilities in Iran. They were located following the release of information in August 2002 by an Iranian opposition group called the National Council of Resistance of Iran. Relying on information provided by this group, ISIS purchased Digital Globe satellite images of the two sites. ISIS's disclosure forced the Bush administration to acknowledge the Iranian program, something it did not want to do while it focused attention on Iraq. This and other similar cases will be explored to illustrate the democratisation of epistemic power in international affairs. As intelligence agencies have faltered, commercial high-resolution satellite imagery has strengthened NGOs ability to offer countervailing technical analyses. Commercial remotely sensed imagery supplements the NGO's more common moralistic rhetoric of *ought* with a *technical* analyses of *is*. This constitutes a major shift in the epistemic balance of power between civil society and the state. This in turn affects the nature of democratic accountability in foreign policy. These considerations are explored in this paper.

### *3. Beyond Apollo and Adorno: Dionysus and Walter Benjamin on Google Earth*

Paul Kingsbury  
Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University

John Paul Jones  
Department of Geography and Regional Development, University of Arizona

This paper argues, following Friedrich Nietzsche, that recent evaluations of Google Earth uncritically privilege the product's Apollonian determinations at the expense of its Dionysian capacities. In other words, Google Earth is routinely understood as a virtual globe composed of surveyed panoramas, sober rationalization, dystopic control, and transparent order rather than an uncertain orb spangled with vertiginous paranoia, frenzied navigation, jubilatory dissolution, and intoxicating giddiness. We argue that these interpretations not only risk foreclosing our theorizations about how Google Earth is actually used in various ways and different contexts, they also reproduce a one-dimensional and conservative reading of technology that can be traced back (at least) to the writings of Theodor Adorno. By drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin (Adorno's critic and pen pal for more than a decade) we aim to 'go beyond Apollo and Adorno' by illustrating the extent to which Dionysian love makes Google Earth go round. To do this, we examine Google Earth's "Spot the Black Helicopter" competitions; the websites "Play Google Earth" and "Ogle Earth"; and the stories about how Google Earth revealed two topless sunbathers in the Dutch city of The Hague, as well as a parked stealth bomber in the deserts of California. We conclude the paper by asserting that the allure of Google Earth, much like Nietzsche's reading of Greek tragedy, involves a topological rather than oppositional enlacement of the God tricks that are Apollo and Dionysus.

### *4. Placemarks and waterlines: How is the racialized landscapes of post-Katrina New Orleans revealed in Google Earth*

Michael Crutcher and Matthew Zook  
Department of Geography, University of Kentucky

The hurricane Katrina in August 2005 coincided with the roll out of Google Earth and marks the first extensive use of satellite imagery by individuals to spatialize and share commentary about an ongoing current event. The use of placemarks drawn by users on the imagery to spatially annotate comments about New Orleans provides a good example of how online and offline experience are melded. Building upon theories of code, DigiPlace, critical urban geography and race, this paper explores who was/is represented in Google Earth's satellite representation of New Orleans. We will explore the placemark and associated bulletin board discourse that appear during the crisis, paying particular attention to representation of place, race and racialized landscape in satellite imagery. We will also compare the text within online placemarks to the conditions at the physical locations to which they are attached as well as eye witness accounts of what transpired there. Ultimately, our goal is to understand the ways in which this spatial annotation of satellite imagery replicates (or transcends) the divisions of race, place and class that are evident in the offline world.

*5. Nowhere is everywhere? Towards post-modernist ubiquitous computing-based geographic communication*

Francis Harvey,  
Department of Geography, Leicester University

“There's no there there” quipped Gertrude Stein when she was unable to find her childhood home in Oakland, CA while on lecture tour in the United States. This quote has since evolved to be understood as an indicator of the characterlessness of urban and suburban areas in United States--a vast nowhere resplendent in mediocrity, cheap food, and strip malls. Google Earth enters this scene and fulfils a deeply rooted desire to elevate any strip mall, any shopping centre, any 5000 place car park onto a ethereal plane of virtuality within the reach of all networked citizens--erasing geographical difference and turning experience into the process of scale, rotate, click, and zoom through. Google Earth entices localities that aim to be as virtual as any other image of geography on Google Earth and transcend their place-bound constraints. This paper suggests that the allure of Google Earth is significant in changing the political economy of local government self-presentation, but may turn out to have the same staying power of many past innovative technologies used to represent local government in the US, for example, electronic voting and interactive local government television, neighbourhood C-Span. However, the commercial orientation of Google Earth products suggests that it may achieve lasting staying power. By making the virtual world of online geographic visualization affordable and attractive, Google Earth affords nowheres everywhere a future place on the screen. Getting beyond the screen and becoming a 'place' remains the challenge for computationally based communication.

*6. Secret sites and satellite imagery: A possible reversal of the Panopticon?*

Martin Dodge and Chris Perkins,  
Geography, School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester

Governments and other powerful interests deploy technologies such as remote sensing to reveal other peoples secret knowledge and sites, but also strive to keep their own strategic interests hidden from the panoptic gaze of the eye in the sky. We will explore the tensions between the commercialisation of high-resolution imagery, the strategic desire to see everything and the need to maintain secrets. We invoke a neo-Foucauldian model of the panoptic gaze to understand the practices of military visibility and use this to assess newly emerging efforts to resist and subvert governmental secrecy over military activities and their sites of operation. Case studies will illustrate different ways in which military secrecy is being questioned, by a conscious re-purposing of mapping and satellite imagery as active sites of resistance. Public policy agendas contrast strongly with more radical critiques, and with site-specific cataloguing. These new kinds of counter-mapping reveal the importance of a contextual reading of panoptic visibility, in which the image and the gaze are situated and practiced. They show the extent to which a view through a more focused keyhole, highlighting particular sites, can emphasise targets likely to be lost in space in the wider, seamless, and apparently all-knowing world of portals such as Google Earth. They also show how panoptical power can be reclaimed by those formerly cast as subject to its gaze.

## *7. Digging into Google Earth: Interfacing history*

Lisa Parks,  
Department of Film and Media Studies, University of California-Santa Barbara.

The goal of this essay is to develop a series of critical questions for engaging with Google Earth interfaces. It moves from a discussion of the semiotics of the interface to analyses of specific uses of Google Earth for humanitarian purposes such as the intervention in Darfur, the evasion of sectarian violence in Iraq, and the search for lost persons (whether refugees or individuals such as Jim Gray). I explore how such uses of Google Earth build upon the practices of broadcast news agencies by appropriating satellite imagery to represent world historical events, while, at the same time, opening the field of representation in an unprecedented way to geographically dispersed users with various vantage points, social backgrounds and political interests. The essay closes with a discussion about the relationship between Google Earth interface and the writing of history, and explores whether this web application presents the possibility of a global historiography that represents and negotiates individual and collective agencies.

## **5. Artistic commentaries**

In addition to the conventional papers listed above, we would also like to include several shorter critical commentaries by artist-practitioners. These will provide a provocative visual exploration of the cultural meanings of satellite imagery. They will mix together visuals and text in a more creative fashion than conventional papers, each comprising around 6 pages and 2,000 words. Ideally these would have a 'lighter touch' reviewing that normal papers.

The following people have indicated their willingness to contribute commentaries to a special issue, drawing on their current artistic work.

- ◇ Kathryn Yusoff, researcher/artist, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, [www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/people-profile.php?staff\\_id=1778287](http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/staff/people-profile.php?staff_id=1778287)
- ◇ Nikolas R. Schiller, independent geospatial artist, Washington D.C., [www.nikolasschiller.com](http://www.nikolasschiller.com)
- ◇ Laura Kurgan, architect/design theorist, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University, [www.l00k.org](http://www.l00k.org)