

Up/Down



Two Perspectives

Steven Gartside
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City Reading

Steven Gartside

The first aerial photograph – taken from a balloon – no longer exists. An image designed to illuminate and clarify has become obscured, almost erased from history. What remains is only the discussion around the photograph, the traces of its existence, rather than the thing itself. The photograph was taken by Nadar in 1858, its disappearance was perhaps allowed to happen because its importance has only been retrospectively applied. The first aerial photograph to survive both time and decay, is by James Wallace Black from October 1860 and goes under the descriptive title of 'Boston as the Eagle and Wild Goose see it.' The interest is as much a testament to a moment in time, rather than the content of the image. It is also about marking a desire to see what we cannot normally see and to experience that which is not normally within our power. The aerial photograph is now commonplace of course, we can view roads, buildings, squares and parks in the smallest digital detail. But, the

image is not the experience and that's what drives the desire to see.

In Black's photograph the suggestion of seeing things through the eyes of the eagle and the wild goose offers a more romantic vision, they also indicate a further separation from the city below. Some years earlier, in 1831 Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* was published (the English translation was to change the title to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in order to add some gothic colour). The book has a chapter 'A Birds-Eye View of Paris' devoted to a detailed description of what could be seen from the lofty platform that is the top of Notre Dame. The narrative moves through different periods and perspectives, but some elements remain the same regardless of the chronology. The experiential element of being up high is about the effects of seeing, it makes it extraordinary. Hugo notes how everything 'strikes the eye' at the same time, the language stays in the physical. It documents a process which begins with the eye being 'wholly lost in this labyrinth' before an acclimatisation takes place, until

finally the eye begins to 'accustom itself to this tumult of edifices.' For Hugo the narrator, the importance of Paris exists beyond the narrative of the story, he was deeply concerned with the fabric of what surrounded him and the context of a whole series of architectural histories and the need for their conservation. The way to get this across was to insert this directly with a break in the narrative to get the reader to pause and look.

Hugo appears as a brief footnote in the essay 'The Eiffel Tower' where Roland Barthes draws connections through writers and altitude. In short, height gives the writer (and the viewer) the power to *read*. It is the distinction of reading that is important. The perspective the Eiffel Tower is able to bring - and this is something which should not be underestimated - is uselessness. The tower has no function, or at least all of the functions are by-products to support (or exploit) the task of climbing the tower. It is not even the tallest structure in Paris (the fellow tourist sites of the Invalides, the Pantheon and Sacre-Couer all stretch

further). The Eiffel Tower does feel taller though, its open structure surrounded by low level things makes all the difference. The reading of the city is more pronounced, because that is the purpose. It makes the viewer potentially literate on a number of different levels, from the modest through to the profound. For Barthes, the purpose of the visit is in order to 'perceive, comprehend, and savour a certain essence of Paris.' The effect of this position is that we start to read-in, gaps are filled and the imagination is able to take hold. There is an inevitable romanticising of place, a buying into the myth of location. This cannot happen anywhere though, there has to be something to work with – symbolic sites, notable features – from those elements the imagination grows.

There are other perspectives with the Eiffel Tower, as with any viewing platform or observation deck. Feelings of euphoria or fear are common, it is part of the experience. This is particularly the case when we are also exposed to the elements, it makes us feel as though falling is an option. When we are

contained inside a building there is more of a sense of control. Numerous towers have incorporated revolving restaurants, in this case the act of consumption is extended, it becomes more elaborate. In many ways the view from up to down does need time, it is only with a prolonged stay that we start to notice things differently. The theatricality of eating whilst revolving exemplifies the rhetorical excess of certain buildings. The desire to build high also reflects the power of the city (either actual or aspirational). Even Frank Lloyd Wright – an architect never wholly comfortable with the city – designed a mile high skyscraper, the Illinois, in 1956. Although it was never built, it did provide influence (not least for the Burj Khalifa, the current tallest building). For Wright the design may have been a form of escape, he had previously described looking at city plans as being akin to studying the 'cross section of a fibrous tumour'.

Being up keeps us away from such thoughts. Michel de Certeau described the experience as if being 'lifted out of the city's grasp' and that

to return was to fall back into the 'dark space' of the crowded streets. The experience of up perhaps only provides a temporary respite from being in the midst of things, as that is perhaps where we inevitably remain. This breathing space allows us to consider our own position, a chance to read the city at our leisure and in whichever way we so choose.

References

Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979

Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City', from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984,

Victor Hugo (1831) *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978

Looking Up & Looking Down **Sam Gathercole**

Looking *up* to something and looking *down* on something both tend to imply a difference between the status of the viewer and that of the viewed. To look up to implies a sense of admiration, as well as a sense of inferiority on the part of the viewer. To look down on implies a detrimental judgement, as well as a sense of superiority on the part of the viewer. Thus, power is distributed in the visual field.

To counter the hierarchies suggested by looking up and down, it is tempting to seek a *neutral* viewpoint that sees things on a level. In photographing structures in the industrial landscape, for instance, Bernd & Hilla Becher worked to eliminate any perspectival distortion that might carry the sense of a particular point of view being taken. The subject is centred horizontally and vertically; a mid-point was found from which to take the photograph. If such a vantage point was not available, 'corrections' were made in the printing of

the image. The Bechers worked to simply *show* the structures they recorded, classified and documented.

The ethics of such an outlook might be challenged though, particularly on the level of any claim to neutrality of representation. For the Russian photographer Alexander Rodchenko, visual culture was one that repeatedly privileged and prioritised 'belly-button height' or 'eye-level' viewpoints. Such viewpoints had, according to Rodchenko, been promoted and widely accepted as being the most 'appropriate.' In an article, 'On Contemporary Photography' written in 1928, Rodchenko posits the hypothetical example of a photographer in the United States climbing to the 34th storey of a building from which to photograph a neighbouring 68-storey building. Rodchenko also invites his readers to think more expansively of theatre-goers, who might be watching a play from high in the gallery, but who would 'transform what they see' so that Uncle Vanya would be standing immediately before them. Rodchenko argues that visual culture idealises the level view, and

when this perspective is not actually available to us we actively work to convert what we see so that it conforms to the ideal. According to Rodchenko, the consequences are 'oppressive' and a 'one-sided distortion of visual thought':

*We don't see what we're looking at.
We don't see the remarkable foreshortened
perspectives and positions of objects.
We who have been taught to see only
what we know well and what has been
inculcated in us must discover the world
of the seeable. We must revolutionise our
visual thinking.*

Towards seeing afresh and consequently materialising our relationship with things, Rodchenko photographed downwards and upwards. He set himself the task of photographing 'ordinary, extremely familiar objects from completely unusual viewpoints and in unusual positions.' The images he produced – particularly his 'snapshots' of the mid- and late-1920s – present an explicit and specific point of view.

Rodchenko's words and images can be thought of in relation to Viktor Shklovsky's theory of 'defamiliarisation' or 'estrangement'. In 1917, Shklovsky had published a celebrated essay, 'Art as Technique' (or 'Art as Device'), in which he rails against art (specifically poetry) that permits an 'economy' of effort on the part of the audience (the reader); art that fully mediates its subjects 'on behalf of' its audience. Such economy relieves the audience of having to make sense of the representation, and thus encourages an 'algebraic method of thought' and a too-easy and too-general process of recognition of the already known. For Shklovsky, 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.' Such a purpose demands of art a difficulty so that recognition is delayed. Shklovsky insists that the language of poetry be 'difficult, roughened, impeded.' Rodchenko explored the implications of this in

a visual context. For all the challenges that such art presents, the rewards — it was argued — are richer.

To defamiliarise has the potential to reveal new perspectives, both literally and figuratively. Looking up and/or looking down can dynamically destabilise the conventional relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Thus, power might be redistributed in the visual field.

References

Alexander Rodchenko (1928), 'On *Contemporary Photography*' (translated by Stephen Lowell), in Catriona Kelly, ed. *Utopias: Russian Modernist Texts 1905-1940*. London: Penguin, 1999

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