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The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium by Stephan Oettermann

Review by: Oliver Grau

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BOOKS

THE PANORAMA: HISTORY OF A MASS MEDIUM

by Stephan Oettermann. Zone Books, New York, N.Y., U.S.A., 1998. 497 pp. \$37.50. ISBN: 0-942299-83-3.

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It is no accident that the current eruption of virtual reality and the dominance of visual media coincide with the discovery of the prehistory of these media. The panorama, that media dinosaur—the “tele-visual” device of the nineteenth century—provides the primary clues needed to uncover that prehistory. Installed in rotundas, panoramas, sometimes larger than 6,000 sq ft, were gigantic photorealistic paintings that hermetically surrounded the observer. From a darkened central platform, the observer found himself or herself completely enveloped in visual illusions illuminated by concealed lighting. Almost 100 million visitors may have flocked into these specially designed rotundas before the age of tourism. The visitors surrendered their eyes to simulations of distant lands, familiar cities and spectacular natural catastrophes produced by these “image machines.” Consequently, panoramas contributed considerably to public images of otherness and foreignness; the more exotic, distant and unreachable the projected landscape was, the greater the profit for the proprietors of the panoramas.

In *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, Stephan Oettermann introduces a detailed and entertaining history of the 300–400 oval images that were shown in Europe and North America in

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the nineteenth century. His presentation is enriched with many anecdotes.

The basic method of panoramic perspective presentation was patented by Robert Barker in 1787 and hastily marketed, producing a mass medium that oscillated among the intersections between art, entertainment and political propaganda. Initially created by individual artisans over years of painstaking work, the manufacture of panoramas was quickly rationalized according to strict economic principles. In the large cities of England and France, panoramas were produced in an assembly-line fashion, their production taking on an almost industrial quality. As early as 1800, an individual panorama could be produced in a matter of months. The companies producing panoramas financed their ventures with foreign capital and therefore operated on the principle of maximizing profits. In this sense, the panorama mirrors the age of burgeoning capitalism. As soon as the presentation was no longer viable at its place of origin, the canvasses were rolled up and sent out on far-reaching tours through regions with wealthy populations. The paintings were often transported over thousands of kilometers and shown at as many locations as possible until they were practically shredded from the wear.

This early modernization, which anticipated the devices of the film industry, really set in with the standardization of the rotundas around 1830. The subject matter presented in the panoramas primarily adhered to market demands and reflected the interests of the upper classes, initially the only ones who could afford the exorbitant entrance fees. However, alongside the current battle reports displayed in the panoramas, burgeoning imperialism also found its way into this new mass medium, whose potential for propaganda had already been recognized by the likes of Napoleon and Lord Nelson. The spectacular events, landscapes and battles provided by colonial conquests were presented to the subjects of the given hegemonic power depicted in the panoramas.

The opulent documentation of *The Panorama* provides the most eye-pleasing asset of the book. The vivid illustrations and well-researched and informative text offer a detailed and clear presentation of a century in the history

of this medium, which alone makes the book worth buying. If, however, one wants to understand the place that the panorama has in art history and to gain an insight into its specific effect on its contemporary observers—consequently treading the bridge of connections leading up to current developments—then the Germanist Oettermann’s analysis, which was first criticized upon its initial publication in 1980, is simply outdated. Oettermann, hardly reacting to earlier objections, has simply toned down his contentions in a few places. In this edition, he contends that “the precursors played no role in the panorama’s development (p. 5),” whereas in the first German edition this line reads: “Precursors and successors can be found almost anywhere; they are meaningless (p. 7).” This uncompromising position exhibits just plain ignorance. Oettermann’s main assertion cannot be maintained, not only when one looks forward to the immersion experiments of the twentieth century and the currently emerging computer-generated virtual spaces, but also when one looks back upon the steady, multi-faceted and complex prehistory of the panorama, which can be followed from the Renaissance (Baldassare Peruzzi’s Sala delle Prospettive, 1516, or the Sacri Monti movement, 1498–1600) through various eras all the way back to antiquity.

The panorama is rooted, moreover, in the history of the 360° sphere of illusion. The wall-paintings of such spaces hermetically encapsulated and transported the observer into an artificial world. Even though there were hundreds of such rooms in European palaces, villas and sacred places, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth cen-

Reviews Panel includes Rudolf Arnheim, Wilfred Arnold, Kasey Rios Asberry, Marc Battier, Robert Coburn, Mary Cure, Shawn Decker, Tim Druckrey, Jose Elguero, Michele Emmer, Josh Firebaugh, Eva Belik Firebaugh, Geoff Gaines, Bulat M. Galejev, George Gessert, Thom Gillespie, Francesco Giomi, Tony Green, István Hargittai, Gerald Hartnett, Paul Hertz, Curtis Karnou, P. Klutchevskaya, Patrick Lambelet, Richard Land, Barbara Lee, Roger Malina, Diana Meckley, Axel Mulder, Kevin Murray, Youri Nazarov, Simon Penny, Clifford Pickover, Sonya Rapoport, Henry See, Jason Vantomme, Misha Vaughn, Rainer Voltz, Christopher Willard, Stephen Wilson.

turies, Oettermann persistently ignores the comments of his predecessors on this point or dismisses them with an air of superiority. The panorama grows out of this tradition and is simultaneously her most elaborate representative. In order to support his contention of the singularity of the panorama, Oettermann especially argues the position that the panorama represents an aesthetic reaction to the supposed discovery of "horizon" in the eighteenth century (p. 13). This presumption is quite incomprehensible because city vedutas, coastal panoramas and bird's-eye view maps date all the way back to the fourteenth century—a time in which Francesco Petrarca ascended Mont Ventoux and "like one who is paralyzed" relished the Mediterranean panorama between the Alps, the Rhone and the Gulf of Marseilles.

The panorama as medium unifies two diametrically opposed aesthetic experiences. Oettermann justifiably throws out the aesthetic-sublime effect of the horizontal perspective, which conjures up a feeling of an obscure power of the gaze. On the other hand, he fails to grasp the central function of immersion, which rises out of the suggestive power of the absolute image. This point is all the more pertinent when regarding spaces in which the illusion was expanded through the use of figures and natural accoutrements in the interior of the room leading directly up to the observation platform. This faux terrain functioned as a three-dimensional element in the illusion. Battle cries and other, predominantly orchestra-effected sounds increased the poly-sensual suggestion. In the Panorama of the German Colonies, opened in 1885, the proprietors intended to recreate the lighting, atmosphere and haziness of tropical regions with artificial fog and wind effects, thereby appealing to the skin and noses of the visitors. This kind of "transposing into the image," this immersion, encapsulates the incipient essence of the idea of the panorama. The panorama attempts to break the inner distance separating observer and image; it attempts to intensify the influence exerted by the image upon viewer reaction, thereby incapacitating the observer. Oettermann fails to reflect upon this strategy of immersion, especially as employed in the suggestive politics of the battle panoramas, which make up a third of all known panoramas.

In the 1880s, the "dark side" of the panorama had reached its peak. As in

the case of the Panorama of the Battle of Sedan, opened in the center of Berlin in 1883 by Moltke, Bismarck and the Kaiser himself, the suggestive potential of the panorama was exploited in order to purposefully manipulate the emotions of hundreds of thousands of people, making them more susceptible to state propaganda.

Today, our eyes are used to following a steady acceleration; thus, we can hardly appreciate the effect that a still panorama picture had on observers at this time. Many witnesses attested that for the first few moments the deception was so strong that the luminous scenery was experienced as a real battle. The *Berliner Tageblatt* reported, "It is as if one were standing amidst the awful battle." With the calculated precision of illusion, the picture and the three-dimensional interior concentrate and fix upon the onlooker, who is devoured by the image. The mechanism of shattering the inner distance of the image, which demanded emotional participation, always claimed the central role in the history of these image-machines. Oettermann interprets the panorama as a "pictorial expression or symbolic form of a specifically modern bourgeois view of nature and the world," of a society going through the process of democratization (p. 7). With the return of the panorama in the 1980s as a medium for the glorification of politically important battles and for the fostering of national unity in notoriously authoritarian societies—among them, North Korea, China and Iraq—one must recognize Oettermann's glorifying analysis of the panorama as untenable.

In the context of current developments in the fields of new media, the panorama becomes worthy of attention precisely because of its problematic aspects. On this point, one finds a decisive parallel with virtual reality: virtual reality employs currently available means and technologies but is, at its core, characterized by the search for interface. It is an attempt to affect directly and physically as many senses as possible. As the extent to which the virtual illusion can act upon the senses increases and as the potential for interaction of observer and image becomes more comprehensive, the suggestive power of the digital image in the process of immersion will increase drastically and create a sustained suspension of the distance between image and observer. As interfaces become less perceptible, more natural and physically

intimate, they will further expand the illusion of the unbound image; the power of distance that contributes to the construction of the subject will disintegrate. By creating an illusion and affecting all the senses of the human body, virtual reality reveals itself as the technically developed heir to illusion as it made itself felt in its paradigmatic predecessor, the panorama.

The publishers of *The Panorama* deserve recognition for interfacing the debate around new media by publishing works about its media-archaeological predecessors, in the form of this wonderfully formatted book.

PERCEPTION AND IMAGING

by Richard D. Zakia. Focal Press, Boston, MA, U.S.A., 1997. ISBN: 0-240-80201-2.

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Vision and art are inseparable, even more so if, as Paul Klee observed, "Art does not render the visible; rather, it makes visible." Written by a well-known photographic engineer and educator who taught for more than three decades at the Rochester Institute of Technology, *Perception and Imaging* is an encyclopedic handbook of concepts and experimental findings related to art and visual perception: attention, gestalt organizing principles, visual memory, color, ambiguity, contours, subliminal images and so on. While addressed mainly to photographers, it describes and amply illustrates a wide range of ideas about art, design, advertising, semiotics and visual communication.

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BODIES OF SUBVERSION: A SECRET HISTORY OF WOMEN AND TATTOO

by Margot Mifflin. Juno Books, New York, N.Y., U.S.A., 1997. \$23.95, paper. ISBN: 1-890451-00-2.

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Women as artists. Women as art galleries. Women as artworks. These are all topics covered in *Bodies of Subversion*, Margot Mifflin's richly illustrated book on women and tattoos, from the nine-