

Time with No Horizon

The View from Above as an illustration of Eternity

Phyllida Bluemel

Slide notes

1.

- This paper is haunted by one ghost in particular. Her name is Yente. She haunts the 900 or so pages of Olga Tokarczuk's century-spanning epic *The Books of Jacob*, a witness – suspended between life and death – to the many, *many*, events that unfold over the course of the story.
- I have become fascinated by Yente, and the narrative form she facilitates.

2.

- In particular, this paper will discuss Tokarczuk's use of Yente's unique visual perspective 'from above' – complemented by the inclusion of illustrative maps and panoramas within the novel.
- Crucially this perspective is both a *spatial* and a *temporal* narrative position
- I want to place Yente in relation to a long history of an identification (in Western European literature and theology) of the aerial or cosmic view with a particular 'outside' perspective on **time**.
- It's a perspective associated with the contemplative attempt to 'rise above' human, anthropic, finite temporalities – and to see time with the eyes of 'god'.
- It's a position associated with an attempt to 'see all, all at one.'

3.

- **What is it to see all?** There is an ecocritical context to this inquiry
- As Timothy Morton writes: 'in an age of ecological awareness there is no one scale to rule them all'. And that "thousands of equally legitimate spatiotemporal scales have suddenly become available and significant to humans."

- This is one of the narrative demands of the Anthropocene, to inhabit alternate temporal scales – the challenge is in considering how those scales meaningfully interact

4.

- No one could accuse Tokarczuk of being unambitious with respect to scale
- The full title is a case in point.
- First published in Polish in 2014 (and in English in 2021 with a translation by Jennifer Croft – which is what I’ll be using) the novel traces the history of the Frankist movement – an 18th Century Jewish sect centred around a charismatic ‘messiah’ character, Jacob Frank. Told from multiple third person perspectives, in fragments, it spans decades and continents in a richly woven history gravitating around the Jews in Poland from the 18th through to the 20th century.

5.

- Relatively close to the start of the novel Yente – an elderly relation – is brought to a huge family wedding, a gathering in Rohatyn (Now in Western Ukraine) of Kabbalist Jews. She arrives on the very brink of death – and in an act of magic gone awry, an amulet intended to briefly tether her to life until the wedding has passed, instead suspends her between life and death indefinitely.
- In the prologue to the novel, before we have met her in within the linear flow of the narrative - we meet Yente at her moment of ascent:
- *Then suddenly, as though from some unexpected impact, Yente sees everything from above: herself, the balding top of old Shorr’s head – in his struggle with her body, he has lost his cap.*
-
- *And this is how it is now, how it will be: Yente sees all.*
- Yente’s state is both spatial and temporal – in this moment she gains the ability to see events ‘from above’ both literally in space, from a distance – and in time. ‘How it is now’ and ‘how it will be’ become one and the same for Yente. “Yente sees all”, all at once.

6.

“In her scattered state, it seems to her she won’t be able to return to the hardwood floor of this world. So be it. It’s better here – times intermingle, overlap. How could she ever have believed in the flow of time? She had thought time flowed! Now she finds it funny.”

7.

- This spell, this magical working - which opens the whole book, provides us with a narrator able to occupy a complex temporality. Spatially she positioned almost alongside us – the reader, who is literally looking down on the events below, supported by maps and diagrams.
- Yente’s body remains earthbound, but her perspective on landscape, individuals and history is non-linear and panoptic, as her sight helps us to make connections between individuals and events.
- In an interview with the New Yorker, Tokarczuk is explicit about Yente’s role in the narrative, intriguingly describing her as a “fourth-person narrator” with a “new perspective, a kind of bird’s-eye view, independent of time and space... a point of view that can see beyond the text and can even see the author of the text herself.” (Tokarczuk, 2021) (wish I could go into this in more detail!)

8.

- Yente’s ascent from the ‘hardwood floor of the world’ and into the extra-diegetic temporality of this ‘fourth person’ draws parallels with the contemplative-literary tradition of *‘katascopos’*.
- *Katascopos* (kata – downward; skopos – view, or target) names the philosophical exercise – particularly associated with the ancient Cynic philosophers – of adopting a ‘view from above’ in the visual imagination (Hadot) in an attempt to transcend earthly concerns.
- This metaphor was taken up with relish by the early medieval Christian fathers in the service of their theology. (Burton, Kupfer)
- In this time ‘katascopos’ becomes synonymous with perspective of god.
- Boethius, who wrote ‘The Consolation of Philosophy’ – a major influence on medieval Christian thought – uses the word ‘specula’, meaning watchtower, to explain the idea of ‘divine providence’, linked closely to the idea of fate. Divine providence is the height from which God “in the simplicity of a continual present sees at once all things that were and are and are to come.”

- praevidentia - foresight (seeing ahead in time)
- providentia - oversight (seeing all time at once)

10.

- Within this tradition, medieval european *illustrations* of the world – mappa mundis – served to represent more than a global environment – the whole of earthly ‘space’ – they also served to represent the whole of earthly ‘time’ – as perceived from the perspective of god.
- mappamundis were not – first and foremost – cartographic projects, but rhetorical or contemplative ones – designed to provoke awe, command attention and provide spiritual instruction
- In this example, a mappamundi from around AD 765. The space being represented is narrative as well as geographic – beginning with Eden on the left hand side, the places depicted show the westward progress of the church.
- Surrounded by celestial references which circle the globe, Art historian Marcia Kupfer writes of this as is an illustration of “the arena of humanity’s unfolding providential course. The image identifies *mundus*, a spatial concept, with *saeculum* a temporal one”
- Like those in the Books of Jacob, this map is found between many pages of text. Its contextual position within the codex and the readers’ physical distance from the page, all work to realise the ‘view from above’

11.

- Kupfer puts it well - “the map works visually to pull the reader’s attention upward from the specifics on which the text instructed, to the holistic totality that made knowledge of the manuscript’s contents meaningful. The image effects the cognitive shift of the ‘overview’, our own metaphor on which generalization depends.”
- This is also an interesting cognitive shift to consider at work in the Books of Jacob

12.

- This mappamundi, the Hereford mappamundi, did not have effect this cognitive shift through the mechanism of the book

13.

- rather it would have been revealed by the opening of doors. A reconstruction shows how the map once formed part of a triptych, in which it was flanked by the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin – whose comparative scale served to enhance this effect of viewing the world from a distance.

14.

Here is a nice summary of the desired effect:

- “The stupendous epiphany of the world’s entire compass; the sudden apprehension of all things in a single synoptic gaze; the flash recognition of man’s true place in a divinely ordained scheme and, a fortiori, comprehension of the insignificance of his works – these are the affective and cognitive responses that the Map’s revelation from behind closed doors was meant to induce. They are also topoi that belong to the cosmic vision or the celestial prospect, and its rhetorical equivalent, the aerial view from an elevated observatory or specula.”

15.

- In this depiction – earthly affairs, earthly time, which falls under the gaze of ‘divine providence’ is finite and enclosed. God’s ‘continual present’, on the other hand, which falls *outside* the circular frame, is infinite.

16.

- Here’s one of my favourite examples of how time and space are conflated in the map – this section tells the history (in location) of the Jews flight from Egypt and the parting of the red sea.

17.

- Central, then, to the intended ‘epiphany’ induced by the map is this idea of temporal finitude of earth.
- At the top of the map, outside of human time, the saved are depicted rising from their coffins and passing through the gates of heaven, into God’s continual present.

- circling the map's borders are the letters M-O-R-S – spelling out 'death'.
- History Jerry Brotton describes the Hereford mappa mundi as a map 'unique in the history of cartography that eagerly anticipates and welcomes its own annihilation...."
- In keeping with the salvation orientated theology of medieval theology Brotton writes that "The Hereford *mappamundi* hopes and prays for the end of space and time – an eternal present in which there will be no need for geographers or maps."

18.

- The medieval Christian ideology informing this map tells us there *is* one temporal scale to rule them all, and naturally – that ruling scale is god's. Embedded in its visual rhetoric is a subjection to a higher power, a hunger for the apocalypse and a rejection of the earthly, a wilful disembodiment, and detachment from the material earth.
- When we acknowledge this spatiotemporal element of a katascopic view of the global environment - it casts an interesting light on comparatively more recent representations of the earth as a bounded 'whole'.
- Earthrise, 'our planet's most famous photo' (The Guardian) was taken in 1968 from the Apollo mission. Along with its almost-as-famous sibling...

19.

- , 'The Blue Marble' in 1972

20.

- it quickly became an icon of the 1970s environmental movement, embodied in the Whole Earth Catalogue.
- as a symbol it was – and is - employed to many of the same visual rhetorical ends as the medieval mappa mundi – in particular an emphasis on the insignificance of human means and ends in service of a better understanding of the Earth as a 'whole' and interconnected ecosystem.

21.

- In recounting the moment of Earthrise's capture, commander Frank Borman describes a cognitive shift in perspective that's highly reminiscent of the katasopic descriptions of the ancient philosophers - "Raging nationalistic interests, famines, wars, pestilences don't show from that distance."
- the 'katasopic' perspective, and the ideas about wholeness and finitude it brings with it, is a complex inheritance, when it comes to representing 'earth' as we understand it in the Anthropocene.

22.

- In his paper on the subject historian Thomas Lekan cites Yaakov Jerome Garb writing in 1985 of "the general naivete [when it comes to the use of this image as an environmental symbol] regarding the power of imagery to define our relationship with the earth and nature", describing a displacement of the "pulsing, detailed vitality of terrestrial life" with "a rearward view of a distant and abandoned earth"
- In considering this view a 'rearward' one, Garb's interpretation of this image might just as equally be ringed with the word for death – the astronaut with a camera stands at the gates of heaven, looking down on a doomed and finite earth.
- Lekan writes how this anticipates Donna Haraway's critique of the 'god trick' invoked by the proliferation of technologically mediated ways of seeing in the 20th century.
- Haraway - "all seems not just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice."
- "that view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god trick... All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility."
- What Haraway asks in her defence of the 'privilege of partial perspective' – and continues to ask – right through to her tellingly titled 2016 book 'staying with the trouble' – isn't that we abandon the view from above – but consider a webbed multiplicity of perspectives in representing the earth.
- Rather than accept the binaries of relativism vs. totalisation, or the global vs. the local, Lekan makes the case instead for a 'fractal poetics' of the global environment

- Drawing on Benoit Mandelbrot's work in mathematics, and the features of 'fractal' geometry – properties of spiraling, recursion and self-similarity in complex systems –

23.

- Lekan proposes “– the fractal – whether in digital, analog, or ocular form – provides a more effective index of a post-Holocene critical practice, energizing an earth-wide network of connections of amidst a fragmented, unequal, and exuberant world of difference.”
- He offers Google Earth [while acknowledging the many critical complexities of *that* particular perspective] as a visual example of this fractal approach to the global environment (Heise) – “the zooming in and zooming out on Google Earth” he writes, “instantiates the fractal, as landscapes reveal uneven surfaces and complexity at every scale.”

24-30

- Google Earth demo

31

- Let us return to Yente – who's been patiently floating above us all this time
- While set mostly in the 18th century, *The Books of Jacob* is very much a book written now, in the age of a zoomable Google Earth. In the age of Information. In the Anthropocene.
- In her Nobel prize lecture Tokarczuk is explicit in her ambitions to strive towards a kind of totality, to create her own *mappa mundi*, but her motivations are a product of *these* times, they are grounded in an ecological awareness, and a fear for what the information age's 'polyphonic noise' (to use her phrase) is doing to our sense of interconnection.
- **We return to the question: What does it mean to 'see all'?**
- For Tokarczuk “Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture “here” is connected to a gesture “there,” that a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable.”

- This is an ‘everything’ that feels closer to Haraway’s ‘thick present’ (Staying with the trouble), , than Boethius’ divine providence.

31

- So bear with me as – without any time for proper justification – I propose we might describe the fragmented, interconnected, not-always-linear narrative of The Books of Jacob as adopting a fractal poetics. In which Yente’s katasopic perspective forms a vital part of a fractal complex system of interconnected perspectives.
- In an essay published last year, Tokarczuk coined a new term to accompany us into this attempt to represent the whole in a ‘fractal’ way, and to define her own process. I’m sharing this term with you now, not to neatly tie up this paper, but as something new to go forward with, I hope you’ll see its relevance to the whole.
- She illustrates the essay with this image – a reverse katasopos
- **Ognosia** (French *ognosie*, Polish *ognozja*)—a narratively oriented, ultrasynthetic process that, reflecting objects, situations, and phenomena, tries to organize them into a higher interdependent meaning; cf. → plenitude. Colloquially: the ability to approach problems synthetically by looking for order both in narratives themselves and in details, small parts of the whole.
- *“Ognosia focuses on extra-cause-and-effect and extralogical chains of events, preferring the so-called → welding, → bridges, → refrains, → synchronicities. A connection is often suggested between ognosia and → the Mandelbrot fractal set as well as → chaos theory. It is sometimes perceived as an alternative type of religious attitude, i.e. → altright, which seeks the so-called consolidating force not in some superbeing, but rather in inferior, “low” beings, the so-called → ontological odds and ends.”*
- And on that odd slash end, I’ll end.
- Thanks!