

**The Pain and Exultation of
Representing Place:
Google Earth, Environmental Rhetoric,
and the Postmodern Sublime**

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ABSTRACT

Google Earth is an increasingly popular medium for educators, technicians and the general lay person flying over virtual geographic landscapes. Moreover, environmental activists have found the medium to be particularly beneficial to the dynamic challenges of contemporary advocacy. As such, environmental rhetoric is beginning to proliferate on the medium. Despite the cultural penetration of Google Earth amongst various groups, very little scholarly research has been completed regarding its communicative potential. In the following essay, I outline the nature of both the medium and the content of Google Earth. Working from notions of the classical and postmodern sublime, I explain the nature of experiencing Google Earth as a medium, tying the experience of viewing place representations to notions of the *differend*, the *survivor ethos*, and Lyotard's (1994) conception of the postmodern sublime as *representation*. Furthermore, I explain the nature of specific rhetorical content on the medium in accordance with these same concepts. The result, I argue, is a medium/content fit that, through the postmodern sublime, positions the user in light of ethical obligations that may be beneficial for the environmental activist, in part explaining its utility for social change.

“One could hardly find a better contemporary occasion for the sublime than the excessive production of technology itself. Its crisscrossing networks of computers, transportation systems, and communications media, successors to the omnipotent ‘nature’ of the nineteenth-century romanticism, have come to represent a magnitude that at once attracts and repels the imagination...nineteenth century engagements with nature can be seen in our own imaginative engagements with technology”

–Joseph Tabbi (1995, 16)

“For who amongst us has not flown on the magic carpet of Google Earth and gotten a kick out of and also felt a certain sadness while flying over many places of forever former lives, and those of our family, friends, and lovers?”

–Kingsbury and Jones (2009, 510)

INTRODUCTION

OF THE FEW CRITIQUES REGARDING THE ESSENCE of Google Earth it can be claimed that the medium is laden with inherent contradictions. Certainly, it has both Apollonian and Dionysian elements, alternating between a medium of control and of pleasure (Kingsbury and Jones 2009). Some use it to view nude sunbathers while others for the dissemination of social movement rhetoric. Similarly, the medium represents a duality of surveillance. Some find the surveillance problematic (Kingsbury and Jones 2009), which is illustrated by a recent attack on a “Google Street Car” by Massachusetts villagers (Gang 2009). To the contrary, many find the medium to represent populist surveillance, placing the means of watching in the hands of the public. This is evidenced by Dick Cheney’s and various national governments’ presumed or explicit fear of the medium (Google Earth 2006; Silva 2009). Thus, as characterized by a number of embedded contradictions, the medium can be read on multiple dimensions.

Certainly, however, despite these complications, numerous examples attend to the utility of the medium for promoting geographical-based social change. Dicum (2007) clearly illustrates Google Earth’s value to grassroots environmental communication:

Late in 2005, Rebecca Moore was giving a presentation to a community group concerned about the proposed logging in the Santa Cruz Mountains, south of San Francisco. In the darkened room, a large screen displayed an image of the Earth floating serenely in space. Moore touched a key on her computer and the planet expanded to fill the screen and as the view zoomed closer still, more than 300 audience members were able to make out the California coastline, then their own region. The landscape tilted, and the flat imagery leaped up to form mountains and valleys. Finally, they could see detailed three-dimensional satellite images of the redwood-covered ridges above their homes. Moore touched another key and added an overlay of the proposed logging plan. The audience gasped... (58).

This example is a fine anecdote detailing Google Earth’s populist potential. The medium is being used in similar situations across many different environmental contexts. This activity is further made possible by the inclusion of the *Global Awareness* tool on the

medium's database. Given its presumed value to social change institutions, questions naturally arise regarding the beneficial aspects of both the medium and its specific rhetorical content.

In attempting to understand Google Earth as a communications medium and the nature of the environmental rhetoric utilizing its geographic/surveillance resources, I feel it is vital to choose a perspective suitable for addressing its inherent contradictions while paying due attention to the implications of utilizing Google Earth for social change. In the passage recited at the beginning of this analysis, Kingsbury and Jones (2009) appropriately reflect on the complicated feelings associated with experiencing Google Earth. However, I feel it is necessary to extend their work by critiquing Google Earth according to what I feel is the conceptual nature of that feeling: the postmodern sublime. The essence of this analysis is situated to make the claim that Google Earth, when viewed from the standpoint of the postmodern sublime, is understood as a medium with a great deal of populist potential that provokes ethical responsibility by situating environmental rhetoric at the intersection of place and placelessness (Relph 1976), and by provoking a survivor ethos in a user (Slade 2007). Both the inherent characteristics of and rhetorical content on Google Earth represent the postmodern sublime and, thus, it can be argued the rhetoric on Google Earth "fits" the essence of the medium. Furthermore, as the postmodern sublime "leaves us with only imagination," and answers questions such as "What is my place?" and "What is my belief system?" (Lutzker 1997, 1), an experience on Google Earth promotes ethical obligation. The ethical obligation, representations of place, and medium/content fit, I argue help explain the medium's value to the dissemination of environmental rhetoric.

I begin by reviewing Google Earth as a medium. This involves explaining the history and cultural particularities of the medium situated in a brief discussion of space and place-based media theory. Following this, I outline the tenants of the classical and postmodern sublime. While explaining these elements, I simultaneously evaluate their relationship to Google Earth as a medium. This is followed by an explanation of specific rhetorical content on Google Earth, explaining that, in terms of the postmodern sublime, Google Earth represents a medium/content fit. In conclusion, I explain how the analysis illustrates Google Earth's utility in disseminating environmental rhetoric and provides avenues for research into a geography-based medium with vast potential.

GOOGLE EARTH, GLOBAL AWARENESS, AND PLACE

Google Earth and Environmental Advocacy

Keyhole originally released a downloadable database entitled "Earth Viewer" in 2004 as a way to view the Earth from one's desktop. Not soon after its release, the rights to the program were purchased by Google, creating what we now know as Google Earth (Dicum 2007). The essence of the program involves superimposing satellite images on a three dimensional image of the Earth in order to imitate the experience of "flying" (Dicum

2007). By utilizing keys and the touchpad on one's desktop, the earth can be viewed from distances ranging from the view of the Earth from space down to the hills surrounding one's backyard. Considering the program is free, as mentioned earlier, part of the appeal of the program is that it places the power of geographical surveillance in the hands of ordinary citizens, a populist version of similar GIS or other mapping systems.¹

For this reason, many educational and social advocacy groups find Google Earth's software very useful for disseminating place-based information so as to allow distant groups surveillance over the cultural, social, and educational implications of space (Butler 2008; D'agnese 2007; Lund and Macklin 2007; Stahley 2006; Whitmeyer, DePaor, and Sharma 2007). In general, GIS software has helped individual and organizational rhetors illustrate spatial oppression (Kingsbury and Jones 2009). Environmental protection groups seeking change in a culture where access to information and data collection has predominately been the rights of the privileged scientific community find Google Earth to be a particularly useful device. They use the medium variously for "displaying near-real-time Arctic and Antarctic ice flow information, cataloging threatened habitat around the planet... scrutinizing proposed land-use plans" (Dicum 2007, 60), among many other applications. This interest generated from environmental groups has resulted in the development of the Google Earth *global awareness* tool, which, by turning it on with a simple click, relays information on nearly a dozen environmental and human rights campaigns, placing the information in the local geography experiencing the problem. Certainly, the medium seems to have an inherent relationship to the work on place, space, and media theory.

Google Earth and Space and Place-based² Media Theory

Delivering information in a local, place-based context has been the, often challenging, goal of Google Earth. Jones, chief technologist for Google Maps, believes the overwhelming response from social activist groups and educators is a result of their reassertion of *a sense of place* into the process of information gathering (Jones 2007). Assessing the importance of spatial placement, the developers of Google Earth positioned information in the place-knowledge needed to understand the "where" dimension of any event. As Jones (2007) writes, explaining the "where" of any event "requires providing an interactive, exploration-oriented user modality; presenting information visually in its natural spatial context..." (9). This placement offers a reward for seeing information presented in a user's locality. These rewards are affiliated with the affective dimensions associated with place identity (Proshansky, Fabian and Kamanoff 1983), place attachment (Smith 2002; Vaske and Korbin 2001), and a sense of place (Tuan 1976; Tuan 1990). As Jones (2007) states, "we trust the sense of place to entice romance, facilitate precision, and encourage generalization as users search and explore our maps and globes" (12).³ Certainly, this view on the medium as a reassertion of place into information searches is an optimistic perspective on Google Earth.

The optimistic view on the relationship between Google Earth and place and spaces can be thought of alternately as positive due to its deconstruction of traditional place boundaries. Adams (1992) provides an overview of the interaction between electronic media and place in which McLuhan (1967) is utilized heavily. McLuhan viewed the effects of electronic media on space and place optimistically as evidenced by his conception of the global village (Adams, 1992). McLuhan states “electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of ‘time’ and ‘space’ and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. It has reconstituted dialogue on a global scale” (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, 16, cf. Adams, 1992, 120). Even the notion of community has become disassociated from a sense of place, and conceived of more globally, through the means of electronic media (Adams 1992).

While many agree with this deconstruction of place boundaries, not everyone views it so optimistically. Relph’s (1976) *Place and Placelessness* takes a less optimistic view of global media, detailing the means by which electronic media dictate our experience with the natural world. Sounding similar to Baudrillard (1985), Relph (1976) states:

Mass media conveniently provide simplified and selective identities for places beyond the realm of immediate experience of the audience, and hence tend to fabricate a pseudo-world of pseudo-places. And someone exposed to these synthetic identities and stereotypes will almost inevitably be inclined to experience actual places in terms of them – a fact not missed by the developers of such real-life pseudo places as Waikiki or Disneyland (58 cf. Adams, 1992, 121).

The electronic media, according to Relph, conventionalizes places and spaces so that our interpretation of reality is altered accordingly. This is comparable to Adorno’s (1989) assertion that “no homeland can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and thereby which turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness” (132, cf. Kingsbury and Jones 2009, 503). The electronic media takes places, processes them, transforming them into a simulacrum, conventionalizes their uniqueness, and reissues the altered version to the public.

While the idea can be conceived of alternately as positive and negative, the work of the previously mentioned authors seems to suggest that Google Earth is in need of assessment regarding its relation to place and space-based medium theory. These competing visions beg a researcher to comprehend the specific nature of Google Earth as a medium possessing various defining characteristics, which in part deal with the experience of place. As (essentially) an interactive map of the Earth, Google Earth does lend itself neatly to an application of place-based media research. Does Google Earth, by providing information in a localized context, reassert place into the digital sphere, suffer from intense placelessness, or represent a complicated interaction between the two? What is the precise emotional experience of viewing places on Google Earth? These are worthy questions.

Furthermore, I would be remiss to consider Google Earth without considering its specific rhetorical content. That is, while the medium should be analyzed in light of its specific characteristics (McLuhan and Fiore 1967; Postman 1985), one must also assess the nature of the means by which it is used for specific rhetorical messages (Leverette 2003). Questions naturally arise such as what effect does Google Earth's representation of place have on the environmental rhetoric disseminated on the medium? Do the specific messages on the medium contain similar characteristics as the nature of experiencing the medium itself? That is, is there is a medium/content fit? Again, the questions are not without their opposing complications and beg for a suitable perspective – in this case, the postmodern sublime.

THE CLASSICAL SUBLIME

Before understanding the tenants of the postmodern sublime, I first must trace the meaning of the sublime throughout rhetorical history. The notion of the sublime can be traced back as far as Longinus. For Longinus (1966), the sublime is “a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse” with a “combination of wonder and astonishment [that] always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant” (1-2). For Longinus, the sublime existed in grand, but not over-elaborate, discourse. In the modernist version of the sublime, the effect of an object on human emotion is of the utmost importance. For instance, figures of speech make “style more emotionally excited, and emotion is an essential part of sublimity...” (Longinus 1966, 35). The classical sublime feeling is the dialectical product of anxiety, depression, and exultation as a human experiencing the sublime is likely to experience both elation and distress (Oravec 1996). The sublime was often thought of as a transcendental feeling that could only, in many cases, be provoked by nature or wilderness or *mediated representations of these places*. This is evident in transcendentalist and early nature writing (Oravec 1981; 1996).

This use of the classical sublime to elucidate rhetorical and cognitive processes in nature writing and art represents what some find to be the beginning of the environmental communication discipline, tracing the emergence of environmental communication back to Oravec's (1981) discussion of the sublime convention in the work of John Muir (Cox 2007; Depoe 2006). This essay promoted new thinking regarding the ability of rhetorical and communicative processes to constitute and filter behavior towards the environment around the human being. Oravec (1981) states that “Muir provided the first service – a vicarious experience of mountain grandeur – in his series of articles, primarily for *Century* magazine from 1875 to 1882, and in the edited collection of essays, *Picturesque California* (1889)” and that he “evoked a popular aesthetic and rhetorical effect, the ‘sublime response,’ to recreate in his audience the sensation of mountain grandeur” (247-248). That is, through Muir's writings, by provoking the classical sublime in his readers, the preservationist allowed people throughout the nation to experience places distant to their home with the same affectionate appeal often reserved for experiencing

a place firsthand. In short, mediated communication was capable of relaying the classical sublime to distant audience members far removed from the places in need of preservation, promoting pure exultation, liveliness, and appreciation for the landscapes. The success of Muir's writings, for instance, is evident in his incalculable impact on the creation of the national park system (Oravec 1981).

Oravec (1996) expanded on this analysis in her later work when discussing the conception of sublimity in transcendentalist writings and nature photography. She argues the sublime became a cognitive filter resulting in behavior that led to disappointment with the natural world (Oravec, 1996). More recently, the sublime has been argued to exist in texts such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (Rosteck and Frenztz 2009), particularly as associated with the famous view of space from the Apollo 14 photographs discussed at length by Cosgrove (1994). In their association of the classical sublime to Gore's perpetuation of the hero myth, Rosteck and Frenztz (2009) argue that there is a direct association between "sublime" imagery and feelings of awe and inspiration related to the natural world. Again, the mediated representation of the natural world relays feelings of the classical sublime to its viewers, associating distant people with the preservation of distant places.

Upon initial interpretation it seems that Google Earth represents an extension of this perspective, relaying images of endangered environments to people far away from those places. It seems to be a completely modernist medium, representing reality perfectly through apolitical satellite imagery, promoting a one-way, direct association with human beings and the livelihood of the planet on which we exist.⁴ Indeed, the opening shot of Google Earth is the Apollo 14 photo—the view of Earth from space—which has been considered a classically sublime image (Rosteck and Frenztz 2009). This interpretation is complicated, however, by the various uses and intricacies of the medium. Google Earth is an interface decidedly more complicated than the medium of print utilized by Muir and even that of film used by Al Gore. The place imagery of Google Earth is filtered through the feelings associated with human beings' relationship to technologies that have outlived the general comprehension of the public, and provokes feelings of a decidedly postmodern nature. Thus, between the communication of the sublime and the intersection of material places and their symbolic representations is a postmodern relationship to technology and the contemporary world. To properly assess the nature of environmental rhetoric on Google Earth, then, one must turn to postmodern extensions of the sublime concept.

THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME AND GOOGLE EARTH

In the postmodern age, many thinkers feel that the rarity of the sublime only felt in nature has been transformed into a more common feeling of a postmodern world (Lutzker 1997). For Jameson (1991), that nature as an object of inspiration, provoking the series of elation and distress associated with the sublime, is now within the realm

of technological production. As critical advertising theorists note, the modes of production are no longer represented in the product itself (Ewen 2001), and this lack of representation is precisely the standpoint of the postmodern sublime. The inability to conceive of the modes of production, and the technology involved in such, evokes the sublime within the human being. As Tabbi (1995) says, “nineteenth century engagements with nature can be seen in our own imaginative engagements with technology” (16). The feelings encountered when dealing with hyper-technological production are further compounded by three more elements of the postmodern sublime: representation, the survivor ethos, and the differend.

Representation

Lyotard’s (1994) conception of the postmodern sublime is fundamentally comprised of the idea of representation. Lyotard’s point is that representation is a fundamental exposition of theatre that has permeated our everyday existence. Bennington (1988) uses the example of a painting: when one views a painting, he or she is in a theatrical setting. The theatre walls are represented by the museum, and the backstage is composed of the painter’s tools and the genius by which the product was created. The viewer is the audience. It is this detachment of the tools of production—the paint brushes or the author’s creativity—that are the causes of the postmodern sublime. While the painting may be beautiful, awe-inspiring, playing off our inability to fathom the means of production, it also evokes an uneasiness, fear, and depression as we recognize the composition of our own limits. Understanding our own limits helps us to understand our ethical position in the world, and the extent to which we fully live our lives from that place.

As indicated above, the postmodern sublime is a question of ethics. Lyotard (2006) writes that the postmodern sublime “passes through the moral law” (255). While certainly, these feelings associated with the loss of production may create in us feelings normally associated with aesthetics (pain and pleasure, awe and inspiration, and so forth), the elucidation of our position as viewer (to use Bennington’s example) against an artifact with no representation challenges our ethics. Thus, the way in which a certain feeling is presented by means of the sublime, may be more or less effective in asserting a clear understanding of the viewers’ position, or *place*, in the world. Once again, one is drawn to questions of place, placelessness, and the virtual media.

The invisibility of representation becomes the initial point at which Google Earth extends beyond the mode of the classical sublime and exemplifies characteristics of a postmodern medium. Each image of a particular place on the medium is nearly inconceivable in terms of the modes of production. While a reader of Muir may not possess the same abilities as the author to, say, write about the beauty of a mountain or the violent gush of a large waterfall, the reader likely could understand the mode of production: Muir went to the place, the mountain or waterfall, was inspired, and the

inspiration was transposed into an elegant verbal representation, which was printed in a text. With Google Earth, however, the modes of production are more complicated. A plethora of satellites take photographs of incomprehensible amounts of images and sends those images through their “crisscrossing networks” (Tabbi 1995, 16) of trans-spatial information processing. These images must be stored in a database of sorts, which is used to superimpose images of the Earth upon 3-D topographical maps downloaded upon your computer screen. In this very vague (mis)representation of the functioning of Google Earth, certain questions inevitably arise: Who is the author? Who is the John Muir in this situation? Does Google own the satellites? *The production of the representation is missing. It is unimportant. What matters is the representation as it exists on your computer screen and the further use of that image for various Apollonian and Dionysian, technical and populist purposes.* With Muir, we understood the production. With Google Earth, we only understand the auditor usage.

This ability to disregard the modes of production, to fail to understand fully the representation of place, positions the Google Earth user in light of a complicated realization of her or his position in the world. The user understands the limits of the human imagination and finds the self as an inferior counterpart to the vast intersections of technology that trace the far ends of the universe. This realization of inferiority is related to classical conceptions of the human/nature relationship, but as opposed to rising to the level of the mountain, creating a true sublime feeling, the self is confined to a local position. This locality of the self, however (and this may be good news for the environmental activist), has expanded. Whereas the inferiority experienced positioned against the grandeur of the mountain creates locality within the inner smallness of self, the inferiority in regard to a universe of technological networks positions the self in relation to other objects inferior to this network. This includes places on the Earth that are otherwise distant and extreme as well as, perhaps, the Earth itself. The famous Apollo image of the Earth from space, for instance, in this conceptualization, is inferior to the vast trans-spatial technological network of satellite imagery. In this sense, it becomes smaller and more accessible to the human being. Whereas in the original photograph, the mode of production is relatively comprehensible with somewhat of a distinct author, Google Earth represents that image as connected to an overwhelmingly postmodern, vast information network. In being *positioned* in regard to the ambiguous production of place images, the user may feel an ethical responsibility for that place of “locality,” a place that may include the entirety of the Earth.

The Survivor Ethos

Part of the ethical dimension of the postmodern sublime is its relationship to the survivor ethos. Slade (2007) provides an absolutely phenomenal overview of the relationship between the postmodern sublime and the survivor ethos, utilizing and exemplifying this in the works of Lyotard, Beckett, and Duras. For Slade (2007), the survivor ethos

is “one who is living who should be dead and hence given testimony, however partial it may be, to the events of death that passed them by” (86). Slade works a great deal from the writings of Lifton (1979) and his work with the same concept. For Lifton and Slade, the survivor ethos is the fundamental feeling of our postmodern world. We are exposed to an abundance of death-related messages in the mass and electronic media. By living in a world of inevitable destruction, those who have not perished feel as if they have witnessed the events that have transpired around them. Part of the effects of mass media on public culture has been a feeling that given the extent to which death and destruction occurs one should have perished by now, and as such is a survivor capable of providing intimate testimony of those events. Any given person exposed to certain messages is placed or positioned to the ethics of survivor.

In terms of the sublime, the association with survival evokes the traditional responses of pain and pleasure, exultation and anxiety. That is, the survivor sublime is a feeling at once pleasurable given the association with life and survival—the realization that one has not perished—and painful given the realization that mass death is an inherent component of everyday life. This is a pain derived from the sadness of witnessing this death and the guilt associated with surviving it. Relating the work specifically to Lyotard, Slade (2007) writes:

In the works of Jean Francois Lyotard, we can see the reason for the currency of the sublime as a mode of bearing witness to historical violence. Not the mutation of violence into pleasure, nor an adulation of the experience of terror, but an inscription of the event into history and memory as event. The sublime bears witness to terror as terror that we have survived (1).

The sublime becomes, evoking the discussion of representation earlier, the means by which we represent our survivor ethos (Slade 2007).

The engagement with technology represented on Google Earth is in part a feeling of survival. The position of survivor is one that is both experienced in the encounters with specific Google Earth rhetoric, as indicated later, and also in encounters with sublime representations of material landscapes on the virtual medium. While working on planning a trip to the badlands of South Dakota, for instance, a given individual may decide to fly to the place virtually using Google Earth’s controls. Upon arrival, in a matter of seconds, one finds a three-dimensional, topographically enhanced, 360-degree, photograph of the landscape. The individual user can actually enter the photograph and travel the landscape virtually. This is beyond a vicarious experience; this is a postmodern conglomeration of representation. On the one hand it (as mentioned earlier) seems to be a completely modernist representation of the landscape, a sort of positivist perfection of representation. This, however, is countered by a multitude of mixed feelings regarding not only *our* submission to technology, but also that of the landscape. My point is that a realization comes upon the individual in which the material landscape is constituted as

victim to the oppressing hand of human technology. The ability to enter the badlands of South Dakota in a matter of seconds and gather an “authentic” experience with the landscape is a false promise. That is, as the classical sublime indicates, experiencing the landscape in its authenticity causes the landscape to be the dominant, oppressing character. The feelings are reversed on Google Earth as the “authentic” experience is only an experience with nature as victim to technology. Thus, the material reality of the Earth is constructed as a landscape of victimization, wherein the human who has the power to dominate the landscape is positioned as a survivor.

This promotes a necessary and perhaps beneficial ethics in the Google Earth user, in part suggesting the reason for the medium’s success as a tool for the environmental movement. On Google Earth, the authentic experience with nature is one in which the user is surviving the destruction of the earth. Thus, the feelings inherent in the medium are feelings that may further the cause of the environmental activist. The rhetoric on Google Earth, then, may be interpreted within a favorable media environment. The content and medium characteristics of Google Earth will work in concert to promote the ethical obligations associated with survival in a postmodern world. More will be said about the environmental rhetoric on Google Earth shortly.

The Postmodern Sublime and the Differend

Part of the relationship of the postmodern sublime to the survivor ethos is its association with an irreconcilable difference, or a *differend*. As Slade (2007) writes, “the sublime figuration and the sentiment it produces are not accomplished through a sublation of the conflicting moments into a unified moment...but through the differend occasioned by the irreducibility of the two moments” (87). The differend is fundamental to the goals of this analysis. It occurs at a point of intersection between two opposing positions. For Silverman (2002), the sublime and its nature as a differend can be read in the cultural reception of 9/11, as it was something that was both beautiful (a risky statement indeed, but Silverman is referring not to the beautiful destruction of the towers but the beauty of the towers themselves) and upsetting. The differend, in the case of the images of 9/11, by providing experiences with beauty on one hand and devastation on the other, directly at the point of the planes entering the building, becomes the fundamental basis of Lyotard’s conception of the postmodern sublime. The imagination is failing to understand fully the nature of the idea. This is the inability to make completely complimentary two opposing forces. As related to the survivor ethos, as well as both Slade’s and Silverman’s comments, the differend is often occasioned when terror or destruction is combined with the pleasure associated with survival.

Google Earth represents a differend of place and placelessness (Relph 1976). While Jones (2007) argues that Google Earth reasserts a sense of place into the electronic or digital media, many others might find its mere association with the media to extinguish this association. I find that neither interpretation is, in fact, incorrect.

Google Earth situates environmental rhetoric at the point of intersection regarding place and placelessness. On the one hand, Google Earth is the ultimate experience with placelessness. With a simple click of the mouse, the entire world becomes accessible in a matter of seconds. Local place is no longer important. At the same time, however, if one is to utilize the *global awareness* tool, the placelessness is countered by a distinct association with place. That is, a user is required to “stop” at certain points and reassert place into the experience of information gathering. This experience with place, however, is only comprehended in relation to the opposite side of the differend: the constant realization that placelessness is simply a click away. As such, we are motivated to feel both a sense of security (place) and vulnerability (placelessness)—an alteration of the sublime feeling—which makes us strive more for the security of place. This, again, is a suitable feeling for the environmentalist rhetor using this database.

THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME AND THE RHETORICAL CONTENT ON GOOGLE EARTH

If the medium environment on Google Earth is one of a marked postmodern sublimity, then what do we make of the specific environmental rhetoric as disseminated through the global awareness tool? Can I view the rhetoric in terms of the postmodern sublime as well? In what follows, I examine these questions with regard to the specific content on Google Earth. While I have already made my arguments for the nature of the medium itself, I will now explain the specific content located in various geographies on the database. I argue that, and this is part of the value to social movements, the nature of the environmental rhetoric on the medium is equal in relation to the postmodern sublime to the characteristics of the medium itself.

First of all, there is the image of Earth from space. Some argue that this image is a peaceful representation of the classical sublime (Roskreck and Frenztz 2009). Cosgrove (1994) finds this image to be fundamental to the western imperial geographic imagination. Long associated with images of divinity, Christianity, and the perpetuation of the empire, Cosgrove (1994) argues that the photographs have been traditionally associated with modernity, assuming scientific objectivity is possible by the human hand and technology. The photograph taken from Apollo 14 is assumed to be completely objective, the apolitical state of the Earth from above (this, of course, ignores the aesthetic and political decisions of the person taking the photograph). Furthermore, the vision is seen as promoting the imperialist vision of one entire people together for the good of western imperialism (Cosgrove 1994). The classical sublime feeling, then, associated with this image is one that is inherently connected to classical assumptions of scientific objectivity from a western imperialist perspective.

Google Earth, however, creates alternative postmodern sublime feelings associated with this image. The image on Google Earth is not represented in a fundamentally stable state. The meaning of this image is always malleable. While the Apollo 14 photograph contains the continents of North America predominantly, a Google Earth user can move

and view the image of space from any angle or direction, including any given continent at the forefront. This aids in the deconstruction of the classicist, western imperialist assumption in the photograph. Furthermore, the user has the ability to alter the reality of this picture on a number of dimensions. The user can change the lighting and time of day, distance (the Earth can fill the whole screen or only half of the screen, etc.), and so forth. In this sense, the user becomes the photographer, paying due respect to the constructed nature of the image, working against the modernist, presumed objectivity of the image. If the classical photograph is argued to be used for the classical sublime (Rosteck and Frentz 2009), then a postmodern deconstruction of the presumed objectivity of this image should provoke a postmodern version of those feelings.

While altering a modernist image for postmodern purposes is certainly one step towards establishing the postmodern sublimity of the content on Google Earth, more specific instances occur in relation to specific *global awareness* social movement material. For instance, the environmental movements utilizing Google Earth are quite adept at promoting the survivor ethos. As I explained earlier, the interface of Google Earth promotes a connection to the events in the world around us. As Slade (2007) argues, this creates sublime feelings of survival. On the one hand, there is pleasure of surviving; On the other hand, there is the guilt of bearing witness to destruction. Greenpeace's use of Google Earth is a fundamental example of the medium's utility in positioning environmental rhetoric in light of the survivor ethos of contemporary culture. Let us attend to this now.

One particularly powerful use of Google Earth involves Greenpeace's discussion of climate change. The rhetoric is situated as one travels to the Alps in Switzerland. As one lands upon the virtual country, a Greenpeace symbol appears, enticing the user to click and receive environmental information. The title of the symbols reads "Humanity is Fragile in the Face of Nature." When clicking on the link, one is provided with a picture of a long line of nude men and women standing on a glacier in the Alps. Above the photograph, the text reads "Hundreds of people stripped naked working with renowned photographer and installation artist Spencer Tunick. The project highlighted the fragility of humanity, and the fragility of the glacier in the face of global warming" (Greenpeace 2008a). There is a survival irony here; a duality to the survivor ethos. On the one hand, the title of the information suggests that the Google Earth user is bearing witness to its own death in the face of nature. The nudity of the human beings in the photograph reinforces these feelings; the exposure of the naked human body to the vast and frigid glacier certainly could result in human death. The voyeuristic composition of this viewing positions the user in relation to death and, thus, promotes a survivor ethos of sublimity. Exuberance is felt upon the point of survival while apprehension is caused at the point of recognition that the user is a member of the human race that is exposed to death.

The user, however, encounters a second interpretation of survival. The second portion of the survivor ethos in the photograph involves bearing witness to the destruction of nature. The text above the photograph reads that the art project “highlights the fragility of nature in the face of global warming.” The photograph of the glacier, then, is framed as one of a glacier being destroyed by global warming. Combining the two sublimas and feelings of survival, the user encounters a complicated, sublime experience associated with dual feelings of survival and victimization. In both cases, the user may encounter exuberance at the point of survival with both nature and humanity, but depression at the point of accepting membership in humanity and that humanity’s reliance on nature.

Flying from Switzerland to the border of Turkey and Armenia, a user encounters another link for Greenpeace (2008b) generated information entitled “Replica of Noah’s Ark Built as Symbol of Hope.” Clicking the link brings up another page wherein there is information about Greenpeace activists building a replica of Noah’s Ark on the top of Mount Ararat. On this page is a video wherein the building of the ark is discussed. At the beginning of the video, Gerwald Herz, coordinator of the project, says “There is a connection between the floods which, uh, happened a long, long, long time ago and our climate change now. We are having floods all around the world more often than before. We thought we should go to the original place where the very first ark was landed and where Noah and, uh, his wife, and all the animals survived” (Greenpeace 2008b). Noah’s ark is the quintessential symbol of survival and the video is designed to provoke association with Noah and the ark. To view climate change from the *position* of Noah and Mount Ararat is to view global warming from the *position* of survivor, provoking the mixed feelings associated with such.

While the instances of Greenpeace rhetoric discussed here are brief, they do serve as suitable anecdotes to think about the nature of the medium/content fit. The Greenpeace rhetoric on the medium matches the postmodern sublime representations of the medium itself. Overall, through its use of postmodernist (postcolonialist) reinterpretations of modernist, colonialist imagery of the Earth as well as specific movement-based rhetoric (Greenpeace), Google Earth evidences a unified holism in its attempt to provide a medium format and rhetorical artifacts that evidence the complicated experience of pain and pleasure in the postmodern world.

CONCLUSION

In the previous analysis, I have attempted to discuss both the nature of Google Earth as a medium in general and the specific rhetorical content on the medium. Google Earth represents a postmodern representation of place wherein the author is invisible, creates feelings of survival and inferiority, and places environmental rhetoric at the intersection of place and placelessness. Furthermore, the specific rhetorical content on the medium matches these feelings of the postmodern sublime, creating a medium/content fit,

particularly when examined in light of the Apollo 14 view of the Earth and images provoking the survivor ethos. A result of the cultural experience with Google Earth, then, is a precise, and perhaps beneficial, ethical placement. While placing users in an environment of dual, sublime-like feelings, the medium offers a populist grasp of the world wherein these feelings, through the proper placement of environment rhetoric, may be motivated for environmental causes.

This analysis extends work on the sublime in environmental communication. While there has been a healthy amount of work on the sublime in environmental rhetoric (Oravec 1996; Rosteck and Frentz 2009), such has not been considered in light of postmodernity, nor has environmental rhetoric been analyzed on essentially complicated postmodern mediums such as Google Earth. By doing so, this analysis attempted to extend environmental rhetoric by understanding not only the nature of a new medium and its association with places, but also to understand a novel approach to disseminating environmental rhetoric in a postmodern world.

Furthermore, while the classical sublime could be experienced in regards to representations of places and nature, postmodern extensions of the sublime have focused on technological complexity. Google Earth, as a medium that complicates the relationship between the virtual world and experienced places, begs of the postmodern sublime consideration that takes the two conditions of existence in relation with each other. That is, Google Earth takes nature or place, processes it through postmodern technologies, and then represents it as nature experienced anew. Thus, one must seek to understand how Google Earth functions in terms of the postmodern sublime not simply as a representation of places or a representation of technology, but as a complicated intersection of the two. Indeed, there is still much to be talked about in terms of Google Earth as a communications medium. I hope that this essay has helped initiate that discussion.

ENDNOTES

¹ It should be clear at this point that anything that can be said about Google Earth also can be said in terms of its opposite. In other words, as stated in the introduction, it is full of complications. Thus, while the medium is used for popular purposes, it also represents an essential technical tool for researchers (i.e. Monkkonen 2008). In addition, while the medium may be financially free for downloading, it does carry with it a political price regarding the politics of viewing and its association with a militaristic history and image capitalism (Stahl 2010).

² The research on place, including a sense of place, place attachment, place identity, and others, is utterly vast. Some quality representative examples are: Tuan 1976; Tuan 1990; Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff 1983; Bird 2002. Most researchers interested in the interaction between human beings and “place” take it to be a fundamentally complete experience with space in all of its intellectual, emotional, historical, personal and cultural dimensions. Humans can turn space into place through various communicative elements such as naming it (Stewart and Dickinson, 2008) or personal and cultural narratives (Bird 2002; Tuan 1976). This is what Stewart and Dickinson (2008) call “place-making strategies” (283) and Gordon and Koo (2008) call the creation of “placeworlds” (1). Most importantly, is that place is distinguished from space particularly through human symbolic action.

³ This notion of an interactive interface where users “search and explore” is one element that seems to be of insurmountable importance to the relationship between space and virtual worlds represented by Gordon and Koo’s (2008) analysis of Second Life and Lammes’ (2008) overview of space in video games.

⁴ Again, this is complicated by more politicized (Stahl 2010) or Dionysian (Kingsbury and Jones 2009) interpretations of Google Earth’s satellite imagery. I do not intend to discount these interpretations. Rather, I simply intend to work at the medium from a different angle so as to advance the dialogue on the medium from the perspective of the postmodern sublime. This should open up new considerations about the usefulness of environmental rhetoric on the medium.

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