9. Panoramas: A Crow's Nest Over London; Walking Through Gettysburg

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, hundreds, if not thousands of panoramas were put on exhibit in Europe and the United States. Many were smaller than a school blackboard, or could be scrolled on an easel. But the most famous were leviathans, large enough to fill a hippodrome—and they were wraparounds, often 360 degrees, with up to an acre of painted canvas, even sound effects. As mass entertainment for only a shilling, panoramas most resembled wood engravings in travel literature, of the kind found in *L'Illustration*, *Puck*, or the *Illustrated London News*.

Like the illustrated press, they presented—or staged—the horror at Gettysburg, the path down the bazaars of Jerusalem; or along the entire Mississippi. Even the giant panoramas rarely lasted more than two hours, the length of a long play, or a vaudeville bill. But that can be misleading. Most of all, more than theater, panoramas were armchair tourism. They were cinerama for Victorians interested in imperialist adventures, but not in sweating to get there. There was no risk of malaria inside a panorama, even if it went to India or Africa. And no chance of missing an early dinner.

During the early stages of my research, I assumed that these great immersive whales were movies before the fact—the birth of cinema and photography. And clearly, dozens of panoramas were indeed cinematic, particularly moving (scrolling) panoramas, and the Kaiser (peep show) panoramas in Germany; and of course, the day-for-night dioramas of Daguerre himself.[1] But I have since changed my mind on what the evidence tells me. For this project at least, panoramas point toward another phenomenon altogether, not really cinema at all. They suggest modernist architectural space, a kind of ornamented modern architecture. They were not simply movies, but scripted, phantasmatic skyscrapers, Eiffel Towers and Ferris wheels before the fact. They mark a crucial transition in special effects from 1820 to 1900. They help me understand

why in 1995, at the height of modernist design, both Disneyland and Las Vegas take off.

To enter this modernist world of special effects, let us begin in 1829, as we did with Goldsworthy Gurney, and his quixotic "boiler" automobiles. We go to Regents Park in London, a center for panoramas. There we enter a very trendy panorama (over half a million visitors that year alone). It is called the Colosseum—as in colossus—though it was actually modeled on the Pantheon in Rome.[2] It stretches more than 130 feet in diameter,[3] rises more than seven stories. It dominates the street as a strange polygon, like a Hadrian's Tomb for special effects.

Inside, at its center, a spiral staircase winds up a gigantic column that eventually fans out into very large galleries at the top. From the highest point—known as the 'ball'"—visitors see all of London overhead, twenty-two miles long, as if they were on the ball of St. Paul's Cathedral. But in the Colosseum, there is always perfect morning light. It is always clear for miles, even though London was already smogged in by "groves of chimneys."[4] The Colosseum had done nature one better. It was literally more than the eye could see. No matter how far away, the buildings never blurred. What's more, St. Paul's was closed for repairs anyway.[5]

An eccentric surveyor, Thomas Hornor had drawn all the cartographic detail (originally for a colossal map), then thought twice, found a backer (Roland Stephenson), and an architect (Decimus Burton). Nevertheless, it was essentially Hornor's brainchild, though of course not the form: Panoramas had been popular for over forty years, led by the Scotsman Henry Aston Barker (after 1783), and two decades later, his son.

Estimates on the size of the Colosseum make it the largest of its day, from 24,000 to 44,000 square feet.[6] Flyers sum up the sheer yardage with a phrase that repeats often in panoramas afterward: *nearly an acre of canvas*. The Colosseum opened in 1826, immediately infuriated Wordsworth, as I will show later on; but was a vast success. Unfortunately, Hornor's backer felt otherwise, wandered off to Paris, they say, and left Hornor broke in 1828. So, by the afternoon that we arrive, Hornor's colossus is already in the hands of a "Committee of Management."[7] 'In the next decade, new owners would rebuild and presumably refurbish it, reopening by 1845.

This "improved" Colosseum, with added Moorish and medieval touches,[8] stood as a fixture in London entertainment until 1875, let us say, just in time for the Gothic Revival, by way of the picturesque. Guests were led to "even higher elevation, until the scene of wonderment ends with a small subterraneous lake,

deep, dear, cold and dead still." Not a sound is heard except the "occasional splashing of the dew drop."[9] Then, even further below, was the Colosseum's famous Swiss Cottage, also improved—for the sweaty Alpine hike that you never take, along "rock scenery ornamented with waterwalls,"[10] the Swiss sublime so often mentioned by Romantics, now plopped in the midst of Regents Park.

But no matter how Romantic the descent or ascent, a chief selling point of the Colosseum was its "unobstructed view:"[11] "It was an improvement on the sublime. That became a primary clue for me, why I am convinced that the Colosseum is a futurist imaginary of the skyscraper. It is a scripted fantasy space suggesting the promise of a city in the air, also called the all-embracing view (the warmth of being embraced by power itself). Thus, it reminds me more of skyline cities about to be built than the early movies of 1900, the pale flickers; however grand their promise.

Put another way: the Colosseum was the city of circulation as an immersive fiction; but so early, over fifty years before the Chicago skyscrapers. As a reviewer for The Scotsman wrote (1829), once you climb higher inside the Colosseum, "the pure breezes of the fields" replace the smoking atmosphere of the street."[12] Suddenly nature unhinges from the land, and enters the sky. And hovering beside these streets in the sky are the new machines operating the Colosseum. They suggest the industrial mechanism that will turn boulevards into panoramic scripts decades later, in hundreds of photos and paintings.

London as colossus has been perfected indoors: "Room succeeds room, and avenue leads to avenue."[13] It is suddenly very simple to master London visually. And yet, it remains a labyrinth, but a labyrinth that sighs. It sighs because it waits for you to tame it: "The Tower of Babel was nothing to this."

> Only think of the effect of a thousand pshaws, as many zounds, some few cackles of anger, vows of love … some petulant whinings, and the thousand silly compliments, popping like pistol balls in every direction around your astonished ears … The unfreezing of (the arctic) Novya Zembla was not to be compared to this audio expression of … astonishment.

We see the romance of the noisy congested city emerging in comments like these. The roar of the street turns into "the drama of the scientific artificial contrivance." This drama—the machines that operate the Colosseum—produces a string "of magnificent illusions and scenes surpassing what imagination has painted in Caliph Vathek,[14] or in the most gorgeous scenery of any Oriental fiction." Inside this London made easier by machine, you are invited to dream

on your feet. That is the sales pitch in the guide book for the Colosseum. It resembles what Baudelaire would call "the opium of the mind," "the Orient in Europe."

Panoramic London rivals travel fictions, but now scripted theatrically inside a massive, proto-modernist space. Think of large panoramas as close relatives of the Crystal Palace (1851), and world's fairs afterward. Or think of them as dense warehouses scripted to give the illusion of open space. Or as urban density exoticized in vast entryways in front of dime museums. Or the orientalist, machinic sprawl at Dreamland and Luna Park in Coney Island. Better still, consider the noise itself; The sound effects at the Colosseum compare to the buzz along Haussmann's upgraded Parisian boulevards by 1870; or along the Ramblas in Barcelona (circa 1900); or in the impacted madhouse of crowds that Gustave Doré records in his classic illustrations of London (1871).

The paradox of the modern city (1850–1950) was already being imagined as early as 1829, through the Colosseums, and critics who de-scribed it. This paradox operates as follows: London may be smoky and suffocating on the street, but from the Colosseum above it, its possibilities become endless. It turns into a promise of endless opportunity, in the midst of endless intrusion. It may take 534 steps to climb the Colosseum, and 52 more to achieve "the bail."[15] And yet, as an allegory of striving and overcoming, once we acquire the top, "the ascent is easy, the sky is fine and bright, the atmosphere is clear …. We can command constant sunshine."[16]

It is an overcoming, as entertainment more than in a Nietzschean sense. But an overcoming nonetheless, a conquest of the ruthless scale of this new economy at least, of nature as brutal and overwhelming. It is a harmonizing script of nature. In Leon Pomerade's *Panorama of the Mississippi River* (1844), a two-hour conquest of over two thousand miles "diminishes" the beautifully majestic Hudson" as it meanders, and finally is "reduced in appearance to gardens of flowerbeds."[17]

This overcoming of scale, of Baroque labyrinth and of time, is noted often in panoramas. It is a reversal, in its way, of the Baroque special effect. To explain, let me return briefly to the Baroque technique: Through perspective awry (ceilings, sculpture, etc.), the Baroque illusion starts off by looking hyperreal, as real as nature could hope to look. Then the Artifice takes over; that takeover becomes the charm and message of the Baroque scripted space.

By contrast, in giant panoramas, the machinery can be heard humming right away. The trompe l'oeil devices also look obvious at first. That is part of how the wonder is set up. The viewer walks and waits, getting ready for entry:

Then the all-embracing view dissolves the trickery: the Artifice immediately gives way to nature. The machines conquer nature. This is no longer a Neo-platonic argument about the immaterial or occult science. The machine and the natural become indistinguishable all at once. The Artifice dissolves that second. Then this machinic nature embraces even further: it even improves on the natural. It makes landscape and cities very legible, like a garden as machine.

In effect, as special effect, the longer you stay, the more natural it becomes, like a botanical garden, or Central Park, or a penthouse view on a clear day. Your individual ego commands the horizon (or pretends it does). This is quite different from Baroque special-effects revelation—to be startled into knowing your place. Inside the panorama, you exceed your place; you exceed boundaries. You feel for a moment the success of overcoming. The story of panorama suggests that an economy of scale will not crush your ego. Instead, it will give you the means of full expression.

In much the same way, armchair tourism from the Crimean War forward shrank the world to the scale of double-page wood engraving in the *Illustrated London News*, or *Harper's Magazine*. That epic condensation converted easily, like a sponge in water, into the scale of a building where you could take an exotic trip. Walk down the narrow bazaars of Jerusalem. Or feel the acrid smell of artillery fire during the Battle of Gettysburg. Or cross the trackless wilderness along the entire Canadian border. Or better still (this was a charmed experience, I suspect); go 3,500 miles by rail, from New York to San Francisco in only two hours, along a 40-by-8-foot painting "stretched on a wire" (Hardy Gillard's Great American Panorama, 1873).[18]

There is no doubt that giant panoramas glorified imperialism, often reenacted great moments of colonization. But they also made a point of showing the parallels between imperialism and the new imperial metropolis. From cities like London or New York, the new machine world looked on from a commanding height. Like the famous Philadelphia Exposition of 1876, featuring the early electric turbine, these wonders could be presented indoors. And with machine wonders came veracity eloquence, and clarity; like toy soldiers come to life on the floor. After all, one of the original models for panorama was the military view of the general watching the battle from overhead. He mentally guides its fortunes from a hill, or if he is in a panorama, from the sky itself. He is safe from harm, but in the fray.

Flanerie About the All-Embracing View

How might Walter Benjamin have completed this chapter, since he certainly was aware of the panoramic impulse, in popular illustrated books of the 1840s in Paris, in the illustrations of Grandville? Oddly enough, he devotes infinitely more time to the arcades, these neighborhood shopping streets covered in glass and steel, what others in 1829 called the "Arabian Nights Effect," what I call bottled light.

The arcades, weaving out mostly from the Palais Royale on the Right Bank, were practically in ruins by the 1920s, as in Aragon's novel *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), Benjamin's inspiration for the Arcades Project. And the panoramas were all but gone, even the acres of canvas missing, for the most part. They were symptoms of the death of nineteenth-century entertainment culture.

Benjamin collected traces of its erased moments through quo-tations, like a moment from a longer conversation, now lost. I will try that for the panoramas, to let their vision give us a clue. Clearly, the unobstructed view was somehow linked to Romanticism and to the Enlightenment, to the exotic and to the encyclopedic, much as cinema was. Inside the panorama, both machine and nature blend as one—the all-embracing view—a dream of technoid utopia that haunts science fiction, like driving with the top down on an open road.

Panoramic Visions

Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, chapter seven (1850, poetic reminiscences): As one might expect, the old curmudgeon Wordsworth is deeply troubled by a changed London in 1827, and by the dense sham on its streets. Finally he visits "the [panoramic] spectacles within doors, where birds and beasts" by sea and land are "express[ed] as in a mirror." But they are expressed horribly in these panoramas, so like the entertainments of this degraded city, clearly "imitations fondly made [but] in plain confession of man's weakness … with a world of life and life-like mockery…with blended colours." They are an aesthetics of "rabblement."

Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveler,* chapter thirty-four (1861):

Mr. Barlow has "Invested largely in the moving panorama trade," as a lecturer with "a long wand in his hand." Dickens clearly sees the Pickwickian silliness of travel by lecture.

In *Pictures from Italy*, chapter eleven, called a "rapid diorama," where "the blue and bright sea" rolls below the window of an inn famous in robber stories. The crags are picturesque, overhanging "tomorrow's narrow road." In the morning, the clouds reveal a miracle at daybreak: Vesuvius across the sea "spouting fire."

Gerard de Nerval (1805–1855). The great French poet, novelist, and *feuilletoniste* journalist/critic was obsessed by foreign, exotic travel, like his friend Théophile Gautier. He reluctantly visits the Diorama of the Flood in Paris, in 1844. Daguerre had once owned the Diorama, then went broke. Later, the Diorama burned down. Nerval writes a feuilleton (a column) about its reopening. Of all the biblical touches, he is struck most by the city of Enoch, an "antidiluvian Paris," of "archaic and Cyclopean splendour … across a huge valley as far as the horizon."[19] Its walls, battlements, palaces, skyline, its bridge in ruins encircle a "rough sketch of a Tower of Babel whose upward spiral menaces the heavens."

Slowly, this horizon grows overcast. Clouds darken, turn red. The sea glows while the sun drops. Then "Water starts washing down the walls and … into the squares and streets." The winds spread the flood as if from an overfilled vase. It overwhelms the walls of the city. The population "scrambles for safety on roofs." And finally, like intimations of TS. Eliot sixty years later, the world ends in a "dense drizzle." Though the people are painted clumsily, the radiant skies and the play of brightness and darkness "all serve to make a true theatrical spectacle, filled with, its own surprises, emotions and dramatic twists."

Xue Fucheng, Chinese diplomat, at a Parisian military panorama (memoir circa 1890) site, vividly commemorates the Crimean War, (or an imperialist adventure):

> A big round chamber is lined with huge paintings along its wall, and … lit … from the roof. Standing in the middle of the room, looking to all sides, one sees fortresses, mountain ranges, rivers and forests all positioned in massive array. Soldiers and horses from the two armies dash in confusion: some soldiers are on horseback, some lying on the ground, some running away, some pursuing, some shooting, some manning cannons, some holding up banners, some pushing gun carriages, and together they form a continuous stream. Where a shell lands, fiery blasts break forth and smoke envelops everything. Whatever is lit turns instantly into ruins: houses are drained and walls are burnt. As for the soldiers, their arms and legs are broken, their blood soaks the ground, and they lie there, either resting or stone

> dead; it is an unbearable sight. One looks up and sees the bright room hanging in the sky, covered partly by passing clouds; one looks down and sees a velvet-like grass and the vast expanse of river basin. One almost forgets that one is in a room and wonders whether this is not the battlefield. Only when one reaches out to touch it does one realize that it is just a wall, just a painting, just an illusion.

New York Herald, on *Pomerade's Panorama of the Mississippi River*, September 7, 1850:[20]

"Mimic steamboats" are "blowing of steam in real high-pressure style." Two hundred and sixty-four mechanical figures are animated by a heated furnace. A prairie fire is a "devouring monster" approaching "at the rate of a racehorse." Then "a snail steady light" appears, "as night sets in."

In 1849, fifty thousand people, three quarters of the population of Saint Louis, see the *Dissolving Views* panorama of the burning of St. Louis.[21] One night, the paintings themselves go on fire, and are lost. That would indeed make a curious scene in a feature film. The fictional possibilities are difficult to resist.

Similarly, Banvard's *Seven Mile Panorama* burns down in 1850, in Newark, New Jersey. Its small cotton fibers caught a spark; and the building also went down.[22]

From the play, *Diorama*, or *Moving Scenery* (circa 1850):

A steamboat passes upriver toward the Catskills. "See how beautiful the majestic Hudson, diminished by distance to the size of a rivulet." A Leatherstocking hero offers to guide a couple through the wilderness. Recently, he shot an artist who forced himself on a woman. Let that be a warning, he says, "for fools who travel to see wonders." Like America itself, he has been "raised to the clouds and descending on the mountain top."

By 1850, panoramas add steam power and even steamships. But most of all, even into the late nineteenth century the term panorama meant a tourist's-eye view of the hubbub of the city or a picturesque travelorama of exotic locales. Both the rustic fantasies about escape from the city, and the urban myths of the crowd, were contained inside the culture linked to the panorama. The term became almost synonymous with armchair tourism (tens of thousands of travel wood engravings, mostly after 1855).

Walking Through Gettysburg

Battles were the most immersively cinematic of the panoramas, particularly the Battle of Gettysburg by the indefatigable Paul Philippoteaux, 50 feet high and 4,000 feet long, a tabernacle for northern citizens who gloried in, and mourned, their victory in the Civil War. Similarly, the Battle of Sedan was memorialized in Berlin (in 1883, to honor the pivotal victory against the French in 1870): 7,000 square feet of canvas; real weapons; cardboard soldiers in action. Visitors at first are afraid to collide with the horses. "The air seems to be filled with swirled-up dust and mist." John Ford meets Kurosawa seventy years earlier.

The Ur-Shape

Dozens of imaginary and real special effects repeat the parachute shape of the Colosseum in London—particularly covers of science fiction magazines from the twenties and thirties. This is indeed the ur-shape of the skyscraper, even for the Sony Pavilion at the Potsdammer Platz in the new Berlin.

It is also part of the encyclopedic impulse of the nineteenth century –the shapes and the sense of "the all-embracing view," in scrolling or moving *feuttil-letoniste* panoramas, and in the shilling guidebooks to panoramas. Even more important, newsreel shorts from the first decade of the twentieth century were scrambled panoramic encyclopedias—the so-called "actualities" and "nouveautés" that played in a stream. And the wide-angle look of the great prairie in the United States, as the trains colonized the western frontier. Finally, panorama is indeed both egalitarian and imperialist, the spirit of industrial utopia.