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Balloon Explorers, the Panorama, and the Making of an Arctic *Nomos* in Contemporary Fiction

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In this chapter, I explore the trope of the balloon explorer and the panoramic view in contemporary fiction, with a specific reference to Carl Schmitt’s idea of *nomos* as proposed in *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950/2003), and drawing on the idea of visual agency. How does the balloon panorama over the Arctic expanse tie in with the process of appropriation, distribution, and production to construct a *nomos* of the Arctic? What kinds of control and epistemological order does the balloon panorama attempt? I will focus on Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017), with reference also to Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (1995; 1997; 2000) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* (2006), literary texts that utilize complex strategies of imaginative worldmaking that involve Arctic balloon exploration as a way of assessing new kinds of knowledge about humans’ relationships to their environment, but also as means of territorial and epistemological control. An examination of the panoramic view of the Arctic has important repercussions for an understanding of the visualization of the most important space in *New York 2140*: future New York City. In the Arctic as well as above New York, the aestheticizing panorama becomes aligned with endeavours to understand, control, and direct what is seen from above. One of the aims of this chapter is to reconsider panoramas as ways of framing knowledge and power over the landscape that is seen, and to reconsider alternative means of narrative framing that go beyond the aestheticizing, distancing and controlling perspective of the panorama.

At the background of this chapter is the increasing importance of the Arctic as a contested area in global relations, energy policies, resource governance, and future logistic chains. The renewed strategic interest in the Arctic is spurred on by global warming, a continuing scramble for fossil resources even in the context of projected disastrous consequences of continued greenhouse gas emissions, and the relative instability of geopolitics, with uncertainties about Russia’s (and the US) role within Arctic international relations. Such developments have made it necessary to

reconsider also earlier “scrambles for the Arctic” and the imaginaries they have spawned (see Steinberg et al. 2015; Keil and Knecht 2017, 5–10).

Arctic Balloon Explorers in Future Narratives

In a range of speculative novels that have appeared in the past few decades, Arctic balloon explorers feature as important secondary characters, providing occasional help to the protagonists in their quest, or adding secondary storylines to the broader narrative plot. They tend to be adventurous outsiders who, with the help of their ballooning skills and unique equipment, can give assistance in terms of transportation and exploration, but also, and crucially, in terms of providing a bird’s-eye overview of a territory that is otherwise designated as uncharted.¹

In Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, the figure of Lee Scoresby functions as a mediator who, with the help of his balloon and his intimate knowledge of the vast expanses below, guides the child protagonist Lyra on her quest in the North. His skill is navigating the empty expanses; his craft offers speed unavailable for travellers journeying overland. But he is also an important go-between between men and witches, between humans and the formidable, armoured bears. As a journeyman between the earthy realm and the heavens, he intimates the possibility of ontological crossings and mediation between the human and the godly realms. In Pullman’s trilogy, the Arctic is of first importance as the realm for such mediation, since it is the site of a weakening of ontological boundaries, with the Northern Lights the symptom and proof of such weakening (see Ihonen 2006). The Arctic region holds the secrets of humankind’s future relationship to the divine in the form of dust, the mysterious material the protagonist sets out to explore in *Northern Lights*, the first book of the trilogy.

In Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*, the “Chums of Chance”, a collective of balloon adventurers, provides a somewhat similar role of mediators. The route of the Chums of Chance takes them around the globe and in and out of space continuum (see St. Clair 2006; Mogultay 2018). The Arctic appears in their journeys as the arena for a new kind of race for knowledge, in an eerie foreshadowing of the current discourse on the Arctic as the setting for a twenty-first century scramble for resources and strategic bases:

Here, north of the Arctic Circle ... Daily skirmishes were now being fought, no longer for territory or commodities but for electro-magnetic information, in an international race to measure and map most accurately the field-coefficients at each point of that mysterious mathematical lattice-work which was by then known to surround the Earth. As the Era of Sail had depended upon the mapping of seas and seacoasts of the globe and winds of the wind-rose, so upon the

measurements of newer variables would depend the history that was to pass up here, among reefs of magnetic anomaly, channels of least impedance, storms of rays yet unnamed lashing out of the sun. . . . Here at the high edge of the atmosphere was the next untamed frontier, pioneers arriving in airships instead of wagons, setting in motion property disputes destined to last generations. (Pynchon 2006, 121)

Again, there is conflict tied to possible incursions from different ontological realms. The Chums, it transpires, are on a government mission to interfere with enigmatic Trespassers from another dimension. And, as in *His Dark Materials*, this is an area that promises the possibility of ontological shifts when disturbed. The Arctic in *Against the Day* hides dangerous secrets, as becomes evident when the Chums of Chance engage with the Vormance expedition, which is out on a suspect mission of Arctic exploration. The expedition finds a strange, “Ozymandias-like” figure (McClintock 2015, 145) that they bring back to New York, unleashing supernatural destructive powers upon the city (Pynchon 2006, 153–4; see also Staes 2010, 541). Like so many supernatural forces wreaking havoc in city literature of the first decades of the twenty-first century, this figure from the Arctic can easily be seen as an allegory for 9/11 (see e.g. McClintock 2015), but it can equally be read as a foreshadowing of later ecocritical concerns, an insinuation of what can go wrong when the ice in the Arctic is disturbed by the forces of progress.

Utku Mogultay has argued that the perspectives of the Vormance expedition and that of the Chums of Chance are structured around two distinct ways of seeing, with the Arctic expeditions producing an “artful textual play with the incongruity between two contrasting ways of imagining this landscape”; the Arctic “figures here as a dead, shallow, and empty space par excellence. But it also represents a deeply mythical landscape that is animated and primordial, often hallucinatory and at times extraordinarily hazardous” (Mogultay 2018, 30).² These two ways of imagining the Arctic landscape are also two ways of seeing and producing a panorama: “The gaze through which the explorers first construct the scenery serves as a means of objectification. This gaze projects and classifies objects onto the canvas of ‘the Arctic emptiness’” (38).

In Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *New York 2140* (2017), the Arctic region functions as an important secondary backdrop for the action, which is otherwise mostly set in and around a future New York City (see Ameel 2019a). The relation between New York and the Arctic is implicit in the importance of the rising waters of the Arctic and Antarctica that have submerged global coasts in successive “pulses”, and that have left New York City partly under water, a future “super-Venice” (Robinson 2017, 6) on the Hudson. More explicitly, a relation with the Arctic is constructed through the figure of the balloon explorer Amelia Black, a

reality TV host who, on board her balloon ship *The Assisted Migration*, travels across the globe on a mission to entertain but also to save endangered species through “assisted migration”. She adds new inflections to the trope of the balloon adventurer in terms of the mediation of natural environments, the production of different regimes of seeing and transmitting different geographical and visual scales for educative purposes with political undercurrents.

While I will focus on the panoramic gaze and its consequences for relationships to space, other elements too come into play when unpacking the meanings attached to the figures of balloon adventurers in contemporary fiction. One important frame of reference is that of the nineteenth-century tale of adventure, from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall” (1835) to Jules Verne’s *Cinq semaines en ballon* (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*; 1863).³ The Arctic expeditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, often involving balloon travel, are a particularly poignant point of reference (see e.g. Capelotti 1999). One expedition that has continued to attract interest is the ill-fated Arctic balloon flight by Salomon August Andrée in 1897, which set out with the express purpose to bring back aerial views of the area. Andrée’s balloon *Örnen* was equipped with “two specially designed cameras” to “provide the first aerial remote sensing of the Arctic environment”. The expedition ended in disaster, but undeveloped films were eventually found decades later and developed, providing “some of the most eerily fascinating [images] in all of the history of exploration” (Capelotti 2005, 90). In *Imagining the Arctic* (2017), Huw Lewis-Jones outlines in detail how the “balloonacy” in Arctic exploration of the nineteenth century developed in close dialogue with military objectives as well as with developments in public marketing and shifting thematic interests in popular adventure novels.

All of the novels by Pynchon, Pullman, and Robinson draw on real and imaginary Arctic balloon explorations, as well as on the genre of the adventure novel and its later offshoots, such as the tales by H.P. Lovecraft and more recent steampunk aesthetics (see e.g. Miller 2013 for balloon explorers and steampunk). In drawing on these genres, they revisit narratives of progress and of belief in technological innovation and technocratic solutions, all the while questioning and perpetuating the figure of the amateurish and boyish adventurer who posits himself against the overwhelming elements in a quest to explore and conquer, to educate and to amuse. There is always an engagement with an imagined frontier, or (in one of the famous reworkings of the adventure novel, *Heart of Darkness* [1899/1995]) with the allure of the “blank spaces on the earth” that invite the onlooker of maps to think “When I grow up I will go there” (Conrad, 1899/1995, 21–2). The narrator of *Heart of Darkness* tells his listeners that “The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven’t been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour’s off” (22). But as the continuing use of the trope of the Arctic balloon

explorer shows, for many the glamour of the Arctic remains, well into the twenty-first century. And for narrative framings, it continues to provide an imagined “blank space” on which to project hopes and fears for the future, an imagined uncontained *terra nullius*, where individual prowess and cunning can be matched by meaningful acts of exploration that are intended for the better of future humankind. This is especially so in light of the spectre of radical climate change and ecological collapse, as in the case of Robinson’s *New York 2140*.

The Arctic as Subject to *Nomos*

The “Arctic emptiness” in *Against the Day* (Pynchon 2006, 143); the “blank space” of the North Pole in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; and the “frozen landscape ... a black whiteness to every horizon” in *New York 2140* (Robinson 2017, 99), all appear as imagined *terra nullius*, land that, in the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “is legally unoccupied or uninhabited”.⁴ The first step to begin to chart and occupy this conceptually empty land is set by the distant gaze of the onlooker who, by way of the panoramic view, sets in motion an aestheticizing process that confirms the possibility of control. The dialectic between an imagined empty land and the processes of order and control have been described in detail in Carl Schmitt’s *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950/2003). While *nomos* is traditionally translated as “law”, Carl Schmitt uses the term to denote the pattern of operations that bring order and orientation to the world: *nomos*, in the words of Schmitt, is “the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes spatially visible”, and made possible by three operations: appropriation, distribution, and production (Schmitt 1950/2003, 70). I have elsewhere drawn on Schmitt’s concept of *nomos* to examine the New York waterfront in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*, concluding that processes of appropriation, distribution, and production, even if questioned in the novel, eventually prevail in the novelistic denouement that privatizes and monetizes the communal water (Ameel 2019a). I will here expand the examination of *nomos* to include the way in which the Arctic is visualised in the novel, in particular through the panoramic gaze and how such a gaze is projected onward onto the future city. Such a focus on the panoramic gaze also has importance for how we understand other media that aim to aestheticize, explain, and control an imagined *terra nullius* of the Arctic and the urban waterfront – images such as newspaper pictures of a warming North Pole; or FEMA flood maps of the American coast; or the bird’s-eye-view image of future New York on the cover of *New York 2140*.

The concept of *nomos* as the legal order that stratifies an imagined empty space is particularly relevant for future narratives because it enables to critique a view of the future, too, as imagined *terra nullius* – the future as empty land dissociated from embodied and embedded lives.

What does it mean for our perspective of future presents (see Adam and Groves 2007, 29) when the future appears in fiction, media narratives, or policy texts as aestheticized, seen from a distanced vantage point, and emptied of beings possessing agency? Such a perspective has arguably been complicit in producing the current commodification of future disaster, which is why unpacking such mechanisms has particular urgency (cf. Adam and Groves 2007).

Panorama as Literary Strategy: A Way of Structuring Knowledge and Control

The panorama is not approached here in its original meaning, that of the 360-degree presentation of a “picture of a landscape or other scene, either arranged on the inside of a cylindrical surface, to be viewed from a central position” (*OED* 1). Rather, I am interested in the panorama as “[a]n unbroken view of the whole region surrounding an observer” (*OED* 3). The panoramic view examined in this chapter, then, entails primarily a high vantage point from which the lower-lying landscape is presented in an accessible, comprehensive, and aestheticizing manner. In Arctic exploration, the importance of the panorama has particular resonance, with the near-mystic promise of an aerial view of the North exerting a continuing enchantment from Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1799) to Soviet inter-war Arctic explorers and beyond (Cosgrove 2001, 218–19; see also Potter 2007). While the panorama as a 360-degree image has its roots in early nineteenth-century innovations in new media, such as the panorama and diorama (see Comment 1999; Huhtamo 2013), the panoramic view from a high vantage point in literary and cultural representations has a longer history, with roots in classic epic as well as in early modern military usage. A first point of reference is that of the *teichoscopy*, the “viewing from the walls” in classic epic. The *teichoscopy* is an important dramaturgic strategy, since it describes through an intermediary what the reader/viewer cannot see for themselves (Pavis 1998, 381). For our understanding of the panoramic views in *New York 2140*, it is important that the *teichoscopy* was associated with a female focaliser and narrator: the starting point in epic is Helen on the walls of Troy in the *Iliad* 3, who, in this “original moment of epic *teichoscopy*” takes up the “position of knowledge (and power?)” (Lovatt 2013, 220). Later examples with woman focalisers can be found (in Classical examples) in Statius, Vergil and Ovid, among others (217 ff.).

But there is another element that comes into play and that can already be viewed in the scene from the Trojan walls: the military context of the panoramic view, with its concomitant focus on visual power and on struggles for dominance. In early modern city views, the predominant bird’s-eye-view panorama was not the view from the walls but the view *of* the walls, the panoramic siege view of a fortified city from an imagined

higher vantage point. The stylized and distanced views of besieged cities that appeared in the early modern period had strong rhetorical purposes, and “campaign[ed] for the hearts and minds for the public through their eyes” (Pollak 2010, 111). They were also influential as ways to introduce a public to new sights: displaying knowledge of the pictured environment with a view to commodify the views (books with city panoramas rapidly became popular in the early modern period) but also with a view to enable control over the depicted cities.⁵

The panoramic view, then, presents ways to *know* and *control* the pictured environment as much as a way to *see* it. Narrations of the panoramic view would seem to be geared towards metaphorizations of what is seen, and one of the consequences of the distancing and aestheticizing strategies of the panorama is to literally diminish any physical elements or actors seen within the landscape so that buildings or landmarks may appear as toys, or humans and animals may appear dwarfed (see Ameel 2017). The effect is not only that of providing a measure of understanding, but also that of insinuating the possibility (indeed, the need) to intervene from a position of power. Within the panoramic view, there are distinct gradations in distancing and objectifying the envisioned landscape, but also in how the focaliser is made visible. The *teichoscopy* retains a grounded perspective, a personified point of view that may in fact be a marginalized one within the broader frame of meaning (such as that of Helen on the wall). The impersonal vantage point (as in the siege panoramas) suggests a further distancing and objectifying. In the cartographic map, we find the completion of panoramic processes of distancing, selection and ordering, concomitant with the insinuation of an objective truth detached from any particular human perspective.

Viewing the Arctic from Above

In *New York 2140*, the reader is introduced to the post-deluvian natural world in 2140 – including the Arctic expanses – by way of a *teichoscopy* and the figure of Amelia Black, one of a range of characters populating the novel. Throughout most of the novel, Amelia is travelling alone in her balloon, and while up in the air, her activities revolve around looking and transmitting what she sees: she is gazing at the skies (where she notices floating skyvillages and air freight carries), at the horizon and at the land and sea below. Her particular vantage point allows for a reversal of established knowledge, as when Canada below her appears “more like an archipelago than a continent” (Robinson 2017, 99). In that sense, her distanced perspective is akin to that of the author of the novel, who, by way of an imagined future vantage point, becomes able to put up a distant mirror to contemporary readers, allowing a reversal of perceived truths.

Amelia’s perspective, however, is far from authoritative. She does not come across as the most likable or most intelligent among the large cast

of characters in *New York 2140*, in part because of her profession as a reality star who caters to the whims of global audiences. And it takes not that long for the reader to realize that she inhabits a scripted universe of her own, in which some (or all) of her adventures are manipulated for the pleasure, interest, and titillation of her onlookers; there is a strong suggestion, for example, that some of the events happening to her are simply cheap ways to have her undress in front of the cameras. Teichoscopy – the view from the walls – tended to include a subtle restructuring of gender roles and power over knowledge. While Amelia’s name and profession designate her as heir to one of the female heroes of aviation, the way her adventures are presented foregrounds cheap commodification of the aestheticized landscape below and of the sexualized body of the adventuress. What is shown through Amelia’s cameras is predicated on its commodity price on a global entertainment market, and the reader is allowed a measure of doubt with regards to how Amelia selects the sights she transmits to her audiences, and the way in which she represents these.

The environments introduced by Amelia are mostly described as conspicuously empty (although she acknowledges this is often not more than a perception). The North American continent, which she crosses in the chapter that introduces her to the reader, is described as being “stretched out looking as empty of people as it had been fifty thousand years ago ... the continent looked like wilderness” (Robinson 2017, 39). Similar views of underneath environments as empty appear when she gazes at the ocean, and the Arctic, which appears as a “frozen landscape ... a black whiteness to every horizon” (99).

The presentation of the Arctic landscape as empty can be seen as a first step to intervene in these environments, a necessary requirement before creating a new order of meaning, or, in Schmitt’s words, a new *nomos*, an order made spatially visible through the operations of appropriation, distribution, and production (Schmitt 1950/2003, 70). In Amelia’s view of the Arctic, exploration, entertainment, and ecological action move seamlessly into monetization, commodification, and preparation for armed violence of the perceived environments. Similar to nineteenth-century Victorian adventurers who move into purportedly uncharted territory, Amelia’s travels are part adventure and part exploration for the benefit of her listeners, who do not have the means to see these places with their own eyes, and who may have a range of interests of their own that go beyond mere curiosity, as is the case for the trader Franklin, who uses knowledge of Arctic regions to perfect his “Intertidal Property Pricing Index” (Robinson 2017, 20). The landscape presented by Amelia is thus indirectly linked to processes of production and monetization. What is more, it is also instantly commodified in the moment of broadcast – after all, the incentives for her explorations are (also) commercial, carried out in order to produce reality TV as a form of entertainment that is carefully scripted, catered to her audiences, and complete with commercial jingle:

“And make a garden wilder than the wild ... the last line of the show’s theme song, from the great poem by Frederick Turner” (365; reference is to Turner’s apocalyptic epic “Apocalypse: An Epic Poem from 2016”).

Amelia’s adventures shows a strong sense of entitlement with regards to the environments she passes over. This entitlement is evident in the name of her craft, the *Assisted Migration*, which asserts the right to intervene in complex ecological and natural processes on behalf of endangered species. A key episode is the transfer of a group of polar bears from the Arctic to Antarctica (98–104, 166–71, 251–60). It remains unclear whether this radical interference with the ecosystems on the ground is made for the benefit of these non-human species, or rather for the benefit of yet another commercial adventure of Amelia Black, yet another possibility to showcase her cunning and the technological prowess of her craft. Certainly, within the storyworld of *New York 2140*, there are dissenters: an ecological terrorist group, the “Defenders of the Earth” (45), objects to such human intervention in ecological systems and takes radical action: they detonate an atomic device on Antarctica, killing the polar bears (258–60). The incident shows how polar exploration and intervention in what is presented as an “empty” space, a *terra nullius* malleable to human interference, can quickly escalate into armed, even nuclear, conflict. The seemingly light-hearted view from above, directed by a cheerful balloon adventurer to global audiences, is also as part of a chain of operations that is aimed at bringing the environment under control – a new *nomos* taking shape, initiated by the panoramic view.

An Ethics of the Land

Is there an alternative way to envision the relation to the land, running counter to such processes? And how could it inform the panoramic gaze? At a crucial moment, when flying above Kamchatka, Amelia points her listeners into the direction of one possibility. Again, the land is defined by “emptiness” – “[e]ven though the Russians had built some massive cities along their Arctic coastline, most of the tundra she floated above remained empty” (Robinson 2017, 359). The distanced perspective invites an aestheticization of what is seen with the help of striking metaphorizations: “she was looking down at Kamchatka. ... Bizarre to see the land so hot that snow melted on it. ... There were a few towns, scattered like giant navigational beacons” (361); “the skyvillages she saw below her looked like flower arrangements, or cloisonné jewelry” (363).

The towns appear as beacons to help her navigate; the skyvillages (not on the land, of course, but below Amelia nevertheless) as flower arrangement or as jewellery (for her embellishment?). Gazing at the expanse underneath her, and pondering the complex interactions involved in ecology, she tunes in to a podcast of “her undergraduate supervisor at the University of Wisconsin, an evolution and ecology theorist” (359). He

talks of a new master rule to replace the dominant rule based on profit through the thinking of Aldo Leopold:

what's a better master rule, if we have to have one? ... One I like ... comes from right here in Wisconsin. It's one of the sayings of Aldo Leopold, so it's sometimes called the Leopoldian land ethic. "What's good is what's good for the land." (360)

As Amelia sees the "empty" lands of Kamchatka pass beneath her, she listens to the consequences of such a land ethic:

This one takes some pondering. You have to derive the consequences that would follow from it, but that's true of any master rule. What would it mean to take good care of the land? It would encompass agriculture, and animal husbandry, and urban design. Really, all our land use practices. So it would be a way of organizing our efforts all around. Instead of working for profit, we do whatever is good for the land. That way we could hope to pass along a good place to the generations after us. (360–1)

This specific passage, and the way it is embedded within the novel, goes some way in showing how *New York 2140* is structured around didactic purposes, popularized scientific perspectives, and fictional narratives, in order to test and showcase to the reader what may happen when such tenets are put to the test. In a sense, it is similar to the occasional use of fictional excerpts in policy scenarios (although the focus and text ratio are inversed here), through which qualitative data and theoretical perspectives are presented in an accessible format that is allowed to speak directly to a character and thus to a reader. Amelia, in the passage, is not reading ecological theory, but listening to a voice speaking to her, and pondering its meaning. The space Amelia sees at the very same moment is a reminder (if that is necessary) that these lofty theoretical perspectives have a direct relevance for the relationship with the environment. And it invites the reader to consider how well the "Leopoldian rule" has been applied in the storyworld leading up to the year 2140, and whether the protagonists in the novel will be able to adhere more closely to this rule.

This is not the place to revisit Aldo Leopold's thinking on the land ethic, or its implications for the environmental movement in the United States, or the many more recent reappraisals of his thinking. But a few important points about how the land ethic is presented in unison with a view from above may be highlighted. The first point is that the Leopoldian land ethic remains firmly anthropocentric. What is most important for the ecology theorist is not exactly "What is good for the

land”, but rather “What is good for the land in terms of management for future generations” – as he points out, a way to preserve our planet as “a good place to the generations after us”. This brings the land ethic close to the idea of “stewardship”, with roots in Judeo-Christian thinking of human relationships to the environment (see Palmer 1992). The last lines of Amelia Black’s reality show’s theme song, “make a garden wilder than the wild” further emphasize this idea of a nature perfected for the benefit of humans, echoing Judeo-Christian thoughts on stewardship of nature. A second important point centres on the Americentrism perspective that is evident in this passage. Amelia Black is literally inspired by a perspective that “comes from right here”, in the United States. But she does not perceive the geographical dissonance – the fact that this “right here” she hears and experiences is not the same “right here” of Kamchatka. Information technology allows Amelia to listen wirelessly to a broadcast from Wisconsin while flying above the Russian Arctic, further enhancing the assumption that bird’s-eye-view perspectives of the land unveil the same basic dynamics everywhere. But in the context of planetary upheavals, the importance of locally grounded perspectives has only grown (cf. Heise 2008, 50 ff.).

Viewing New York City from Above

A crucial change in Amelia’s role as transmitter and producer of the panoramic view comes when she returns to New York City after the devastating storm and water surge toward the end of the novel. She transmits and translates the devastation to her global audiences, and she eventually becomes instrumental in advocating for radical societal change, together with several of the other protagonists, all of whom are located in the same building – the Met Life. Here, we see *teichoscopy* at work in its full dramaturgical potential in terms of providing an audience who has no direct access to the events with gruesome details on a wide canvas, as well as giving an explanation of what happens and translating that knowledge into meaningful action. The distanced, aestheticizing panoramic view over the Arctic, with its focus on amenable emptiness, is attached here to a New York City that has become again open to radical change after the disruption by the storm. As is typical of the distanced, panoramic perspective, Amelia’s view of the city entails a focus on people as dwarfed, bereft of their agency:

Finally she veered in toward the city to have a look down into Central Park. She was shocked like everyone else by the devastation. It was a tent city now ... People like ants everywhere, the lost ones of the city huddling there, mostly out of an instinct to huddle, it seemed to Amelia. (Robinson 2017, 524)

To Amelia, the people she sees below seem “like ants”, and their actions, seen from her perspective, do not seem rational but carried out “mostly out of an instinct”. The city, too, asserts itself in the form of a metaphorized slain, inactive animal, with the altercations of light as seen from the balloon making “the long spine of Manhattan look like a piebald dragon, slain and laying dead in the bay” (524). Once the effect of the devastation is established and transmitted, the panoramic view of a stricken city and of the helpless people sets the stage for the next step: that of providing an explanation, and a solution, to the devastation witnessed. On the spur of the moment (if we disregard the possibility that Amelia’s actions are scripted), Amelia calls for revolution, directly addressing the camera: “She looked into the bridge camera. ‘So you know what? I’m sick of the rich. I just am. I’m sick of them running this whole planet for themselves. They’re wrecking it! So I think we should take it back, and take care of it’” (526).

Amelia explicitly asserts that it is the elevated viewpoint which gives her the access to the necessary knowledge: “The *time is now* ... I’m up here looking down at it, and I’m telling you, the time is now” (526; original emphasis). She returns to her elevated perspective time and again later during her call for action: “Here I am! So yeah. Still Amelia Black. But I’ve seen the damage done. I look down on it all the time. ... And I’m looking down at it now” (528). Demanding some suspension of readerly disbelief, Amelia and her co-conspirators succeed; the world order is overturned, and a new *nomos* takes place, in part initiated from the panoramic perspectives as they are transmitted by Amelia. There is an almost inevitable metapoetic aspect in that Amelia’s key role, at the turning point of the novel’s plot, is in effect a miniature of the task Kim Stanley Robinson has set himself in transmitting the future using a broad canvas, explaining the meaning of what is seen, and suggesting possible actions.

Examining again the opening chapters of the book, and with the hindsight of what the panoramic perspective puts into motion above the Arctic and above storm-wrecked New York, it becomes clear that the panorama and the aestheticizing properties that support it as a vehicle for a call to action on behalf of figures below devoid of agency, are carefully introduced from the opening pages of the novel onward, where a view of New York City from above dominates. This is partly bound up with the organizing perspective within the novel: the Met Life Tower, where all the protagonists live and which is introduced in the opening of the novel as a place “from which vantage point lower Manhattan lies flooded below them like a super-Venice, majestic, watery, superb” (6). The panorama builds on aestheticizing imagery that accentuates the similarity between urban structure and children’s toys, waiting to be played with: “looking south, downtown looks like a kid’s train set left behind in a flooded basement” (35). It is a further illustration of the alignment, in city literature, of stories of end-time and of playtime (see Prendergast 1992, 207). In the

panorama, the image of the real city appears as a scale model of itself, an invitation for play: “From her vantage the great harbour looked like a model of itself, a riot of tiny buildings and bridges, an intricate assembly of gray forms” (Robinson 2017, 41). The distanced perspective is closely associated with that of the protagonists up in the Met Life Tower, but also with that of the narrator, who shares their point of view, describing it in self-consciously aestheticizing terms:

looking south over the drowned city, taking in the whitmanwonder of it. O
Mannahatta! Lights squiggle off the black water everywhere below them.
Downtown a few lit skyscrapers illuminate darker towers, giving them a geological
sheen. It’s weird, beautiful, spooky. (7)

The explicit reference to Whitman is representative of the descriptive strategies used more broadly in the novel, which draw extensively on models from New York literary classics (including also Jonathan Lethem, Herman Melville and Thomas Pynchon) to describing the city in distancing and aestheticizing fashion, foregrounding the city’s strangeness and beauty.

The implicit comparison, which also underlines the argument in this chapter, between New York and the Arctic as seen from above, is introduced halfway in the novel. The comparison is made by the trader Franklin, who describes the tilted buildings of partly submerged future New York in terms of an Arctic landscape seen from above when he passes them by on his boat:

I was reminded of those photos of drunken forests in the Arctic, where melting
permafrost had caused trees to tilt this way and that. Chelsea Houses, Penn South
Houses, London Terrace Houses, they all canted drunkenly. (280)

I mentioned earlier that the panorama is rooted in military modes of representation attuned to conflict over contested areas. In *New York 2140*, a military map of New York provides one of the keys to the revolutionary plot in Robinson’s novel. This map is the British Headquarters’ map of New York, used by the English army during the revolutionary war. In the novel, it provides a means to chart the underwater landscape of New York in order to harvest the resources embedded in the intertidal in the form of the legendary gold of the English war vessel *The Hussar* (see Ameel 2019a). It is notable that the very same map is also at the centre of one other contemporary book of future New York: Eric Sanderson’s *Mannahatta*, a non-fiction view of past, present, and future New York, and praised profusely by one literary character in *New York*

2140 (Sanderson 2009, 548). *Mannahatta* has been criticized for its reliance on a distancing, aestheticizing, and panoramic view (see Rose 2010; Ameal 2019b) – a dominant aestheticizing strategy that also appears on the cover of the book, which shows New York seen from an elevated position south of the tip of Manhattan – very similar, in other words, as the panoramic overview that is on the cover of *New York 2140*.

Sanderson's vision of past and future New York, informed by a view from above, also has social and political implications. In her critique of Sanderson's book, Gillian Rose speaks of visual agency:

It is also a question of wanting to see for the sake of seeing: seeing not to see something but as a way of asserting an agency and a presence in the world, to visualize who and were we are, and to have others see that seeing so as to be able to say more fully that we are here at all. (Rose 2010, 258)

This visual agency feeds into other forms of agency. Drawing on our analysis of the panoramic view of post-storm New York in *New York 2140*, we can see how a narrator with access to an exclusive panoramic view becomes able to speak *in lieu of* what and who is seen, to explain what is seen, and to consequently make a call for action from an elevated position that weds implied agency, power and knowledge. Such implications are at work in other panoramas and maps that inform how to see our relationship with our environment, now and in the future. *New York 2140* hints at such real-world maps, such as the heat maps that have come to dominate media coverage of the future Arctic:

when you looked at average temperature maps of the Earth in those years, and even for decades before then, and the whole world was a bright angry red, you still saw one cool blue spot, southeast of Greenland. (143)

The quote is instructive for the way it speaks directly to and about the temporal frame of its contemporary readership, inviting readers in the late 2010s and early 2020s to look at their planet, and their own actions vis-à-vis planetary futures, through the lens of a heat map above the Arctic.

Conclusion

In their exploration of Arctic panoramas, Pullman and Pynchon question hierarchic modes of seeing and gaining knowledge, instead multiplying

possible perspectives (see St. Clair 2006; Mogultay 2018). The use of the panorama in Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* is arguably geared toward other purposes and sets up an aestheticizing, distancing view of the world that points to political and societal consequences, and enables a call for action. As such, it is largely aligned with the overall ethos of Robinson in this novel, which is strongly didactic and aimed at environmental action in the real world. In a double interview with Jeff Goodell (author of non-fictional *The Water Will Come*, 2017). Robinson did not dwell on questions of literary form or genre conventions, but spent most of the time discussing actual geo-engineering to be implemented in the near future (Kleffel 2017). In such instances, an imagined future appears as akin to the Arctic seen from above: an imagined empty land, a *terra nullius* observed from an aestheticizing distance, inviting intervention.

One of the greatest challenges for contemporary narrators (from literary authors to journalists and forecasters) who try to visualize and narrate the future, and the future of the Arctic in particular, is to provide a balance between, on the one hand, the objectifying, aestheticizing, and rhetorically so effective view from above, and on the other, the more difficult but ethically important task of providing also grounded, embedded, and embodied perspectives (see also Adam and Groves 2007). Drawing on the work of Scott Slovic (2018), what is needed, in addition to distancing perspectives, is a measure of poignancy and singularity, of a “more particularized understanding”. Speculative literary fiction provides perhaps unique possibilities for juxtaposing radically different visual perspectives, and for providing the human-scale *qualia* of a future present. But as the examination of *New York 2140* shows, even in a future novel peopled with a plethora of characters, a panoramic perspective can ultimately dominate.

Notes

¹ Other examples of the balloon adventurer in contemporary fiction can be found; one such example appears in Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black* (2018), in which the eponymous protagonist escapes Barbados on a hot-air balloon, his travels taking him as far as the Arctic.

² See also Justin St. Clair, who sees in *Against the Day* a logic of “double vision” and examines this “binocular disparity” and “panoramic paradigm” in a 2006 article (St. Clair 2006).

³ The balloon adventure tale also influenced early Chinese science fiction; see Isaacson (2017, 93 ff). For the genre continuation from nineteenth-century scientific romance to twentieth-century science fiction, see Underwood (2019, 60–4).

⁴ It should be noted that in legal terms, the real-world Arctic is anything but a *terra nullius*: “its territories are under national sovereignty with fixed national borders and most maritime boundaries were agreed upon by the relevant littoral states” (Heininen and Zebich-Knos 2011, 195).

⁵ The military possibilities for up-to-date panoramic representations of cities in this period are particularly evident in the commissioning by Louis XIV of highly detailed scale models of the border towns of France, with a total of 140 raised relief models.

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