Above – Degrees of Elevation

Special Issue for “Space and Culture”

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Guest editors’ introduction

Degrees of Elevation – Modes of Reflection

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In *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*), Italian author Italo Calvino narrates the story of a young boy who, after refusing to finish a meal of snails, climbs the trees in his parents’ park, never to return to tread the ground (Calvino, 1959). Even after his initial rebellion cools down young Baron Cosimo stays in the trees and begins discovering his surroundings from the above. Roaming through the treetops of Ombrosa allows him to meet people he would have never encountered if he had stayed on the ground, such as farmers and thieves, and to make experiences that do not just speak of independence and autonomy, but more generally indicate changed perspectives and new engagements due to his elevated position. In this sense, the narration of a tiny yet insurmountable distance (Schulz-Buschhaus, 1978, p. 19) enables the main protagonist to recognize what happens below him and gives room for new perceptions, reflections and engagements with the everyday, society and the environment.

Such reflections along the distinctions of above/below, up/down, high/low pervade literature and film. Comparable spatial aspects play an important role in fields such as religion, myth and philosophy, history and art, as well as geography, architecture and planning. Given the ubiquity of narratives of ascent and height, flight and fall, levity and gravity, and the various degrees of elevation taking form through them, it is no coincidence that our understanding of thinking and imagining itself has been shaped by notions of verticality: intense reflection bears promises of catapulting us to ‘heights of thought’, and imaginative ‘writers’ wings’ carry us on ‘flights of fancy’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, our thinking and imagination condenses in architectures of knowledge high up when we build ‘castles in the air’ or erect intellectual ‘ivory towers’. All these various fields pertain to the theme at the core of this special issue: the relevance of elevated places and spaces and geographies ‘above’ for thinking and imagining the world, and ourselves in it.

The distinctive role of the above shows both in imaginative modes of reflection as well as in scientific thought and abstraction. Not least due to its limited accessibility, the above inspires creative and imaginative modes of reflection. While adventurers and imperial explorers from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries set out to map territories formerly unknown in the West, and the ‘modern world came to be pictured in globe, atlas or map form as the familiar series of curved surfaces or coloured flat surfaces’ (Graham, 2016, p. 3), the above could and cannot easily be reached by human beings. Despite technological advances in travel and transport, and despite the development of optical instruments such as the telescope, places and spaces above often are barred from physical journeys and have to be discovered and constituted through imaginative exploration and reflection: pondering the skies or embarking on mind-travels to the above gives rise to imagination and phantasy, and poetic creativity emerges when soaring above the ordinary or just hovering slightly above the everyday as Baron Cosimo in his life in the tree. Stories of flying elevate minds and hearts to greater heights, and narrations of space travels and voyages to the moon transport them yet further above.

Likewise, modern scientific thinking and cognition took form by reflecting about vertical aspects. As Nina Engelhardt shows in her paper, one of the founders of modern science, Francis Bacon, employs the image of ‘gradual […] ascent’ in *Novum Organum* (1620) to describe how the empirical method moves towards generalisation (Bacon, 2000, p. 36; see also Engelhardt in this issue). Bacon’s empirical method envisions elevating by degrees towards abstract, general knowledge. He participates in a more common association of the above with the abstract – that which is elevated from the particular instances we live through and achieves greater generality and explanatory power. Even the notion of the human as a thinking and self-knowing entity is connected to looking up, into the sky. In *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Practical Reason,* 1788), another work that is central for the development of modern critical thought, Immanuel Kant famously connects the above and the sense of the self:

‘Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.’ (Kant, 2015, p. 129; 5: 162)

Verticality thus provides us with modes of reflection – it is a spatial relation that enables specific modes of thinking and imagining, and that is imagined and constituted through them. Accordingly, referring to the above allows simultaneously holding diverse connotations through which concrete places and spatial aesthetics gain meaning and develop practical and material, as well as transcendent, implications. It is in this sense that we propose to understand the above as a ‘thinking space’.

The immense productivity and richness of the above as a thinking space manifests in several concrete fields and topics. Spatial connections and disconnections along a vertical axis enable reflections about morality and religion. For Kant, the gaze into the sky directs the view to the self, and for him, bringing together the physical outer space of the ‘starry heavens above me’ and the abstract internal space as a seat of moral law connects with a moral dimension. Such connections between morality, ethics and the above are manifold. Routinely, places above are full of inspiration and hope and bring promises of grace and wisdom. In traditional Christian thinking, a person living up to ‘high ideals’ might find a place in a paradise located above the clouds, and God or gods, the givers of moral law, are often envisioned as dwelling in the sky (see, for instance, Meier, Hauser, Robinson et al., 2007, p. 699; Homberg, 2012, p. 301).

As height involves aspects of detachment, reflections on the above inspire deliberations about relevance to reality and ethics of connection and disconnection. Bacon, when associating thinking and gradual ascent, is careful to distinguish it from unbound soaring or flights of fancy. He stresses the necessary connection to ‘sense and particulars’ from which the ascent sets off and emphasises the necessity of controlled elevation by degrees: ‘we do not need to give men’s understanding wings, but rather lead and weights, to check every leap and flight’ (Bacon, 2000, p. 83). Similarly, negative connotations of the above reverberate in the metaphoric language of places such as ‘castles in the air’, ‘cloud-cuckoo-land’ and ‘ivory tower’ which signal undesirable disconnection and detachment from earthly reality (Shapin, 2012; compare Haacke, 2011, p. 1–2, on the ‘leaning tower’).

Relevance to reality is also an ethical issue, and ascent into the above can be seen not to ameliorate but to merely escape the problems below. Across periods, literary writers emphasise that literature ought not to be a flight from reality but that it is to propose new perspectives on it. At the same time as Victorian author Anthony Trollope sets out that writers of poetry, which ‘takes the highest place in literature’, elevate themselves from mundane reality, he stresses their responsibility towards ameliorating it: ‘the writer has soared above the earth, and can teach his lessons somewhat as a god might teach’ (Trollope, 2009, p. 291). For Trollope and other writers, poetical flight is not to lead to escape but is ultimately bound to improving reality.

Finally, vertical spatial positionings, such as being up or being down, serve to deliberate and constitute aspects of power and domination. The view from above is easily associated with warfare and threat (Adey, Whitehead, & Williams, 2011) and, more generally, the striving for territorial domination (see the paper by Aishwarya Subramanian in this issue). These political implications of the vertical seem to be intensifying in present-day societies, as Stephen Graham observes: ‘As the world’s surface becomes more and more congested and contested and urbanisation girds more of our planet, so political and social struggle takes on an increasingly three-dimensional character, reaching both up from and down below ground level’ (Graham, 2016, p. 4; see also Graham and Hewitt, 2013, p. 79–80).

Considering this significance of non-horizontal spatial dimensions, it is surprising that elevation and verticality have not been a major focus of analysis for scholars working on the construction of space. Despite a generally increased interest in aspects of space, place and scale over the last decades, scholars hesitate to include the ‘above’ as an explicit reference point for their analyses. While aspects of the above are not completely absent from literary studies and historiography, urbanists and geographers have only recently begun to break with the dominance of the horizontal and turn to the third dimension of space.

In a wide-reaching article in the journal *Progress in Human Geography*, Stephen Graham and Lucy Hewitt criticize the ‘flattening of discourses and imaginaries’ that ‘tends still to dominate critical urban research in the Anglophone world’. They claim ‘that the majority of critical urban writing emerging over recent decades has neglected the vertical qualities of contemporary processes of urbanization,’ and criticize ‘a notable *horizontalism*’ in ‘analyses of contemporary urban space’ (Graham & Hewitt, 2012, p. 72–73). As an antidote, Graham and Hewitt recommend ‘a fully *volumetric* urbanism […] which addresses the ways in which horizontal and vertical extensions, imaginaries, materialities and lived practices intersect and mutually construct each other within and between subterranean, surficial and suprasurface domains’ (Graham & Hewitt, 2013, p. 74–75; for the debate on territory and volume, see also Elden, 2013).

Recent research in line with these suggestions include studies on general aspects of verticality and urbanism (Graham, 2016), ‘high-rise urbanism in contemporary Europe’ (Drodz, Appert, & Harris, 2018), and ‘aversion to high places in the modern city’ (Deriu & Kane, 2018). Yet, given the interactions between fictional and non-fictional aspects of elevation, and the complexity of the above as a thinking space, we suggest enriching these topics in geography and urban studies from the perspective of literary studies, religious studies, and history. How, for example, do imaginative texts and practices envision elevation, height and verticality, and how do they reflect geographies and the material presuppositions of reaching the above? What can studying narratives about landscapes, architectures and the built environment contribute to our understanding of verticality? What roles do materiality in general and the body in particular play in reflections of the above, and in how far are these subject to historical change? How can we conceptualize notions of bodily ascension and ideas of mystical ascent? Finally, what roles does the vertical assume in our reflections and modes of thinking? How do we use notions of height, elevation and verticality to understand our modes of thought and imagination, in our flights of fancy and reflections about spirituality, social relations and power? How do we use notions of the vertical to imagine the structural preconditions of our modes of knowledge production?

‘Above. Degrees of Elevation’ brings together papers that explore these aspects of the third dimension and the space above, and in particular, examine how referring to these enables specific modes of reflection and figures of thought. The papers, studying the roles of the vertical and processes of elevation in locating ourselves, jointly discuss the above as a ‘thinking space’ and highlight the relevance of space and place for reflection, for thinking and imagining oneself and the world. This includes exploring travels and interactions between up and down (elevation, rise, fall), and the gaze from above and below, as well as the spatial positions that emerge through these movements (height) and the states that modulate such travels and positionings (such as levity and gravity). This allows us to account for the concretely spatial, the ethical-religious, and the imaginative dimensions that the above and processes of elevation encompass historically and today.

With the collection of papers, we suggest an approach that merges material aspects of cultural and political geography with imaginative aspects of constituting the ‘above’ and degrees of elevation, and thereby foster explorations into cultural geography in conjunction with the humanities. This resonates with reflections by Andrew Harris in his paper ‘Vertical Urbanisms’, where he argues that in ‘getting off the ground’, ‘further methodological, geographical and disciplinary experiments will be required that will enable research into the vertical qualities of cities and urban life to delve deeper and float free’ (Harris, 2015, p. 614). This contention holds true for the study of verticality in general. Indeed, while scholars from a wide range of fields are implicitly concerned with the vertical, we need more exchange to account for and connect the various aspects that the above and movements of elevation imply. This special issue aims to contribute to this endeavour.

The special issue is the result of a workshop ‘Above. Degrees of Elevation’ at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Edinburgh, in May 2016. Gathering a small group of people interested in different aspects of elevation, we were surprised to see how divergent meanings, levels and implications of the ‘above’ came together, were translated into each other and revealed connections. The papers bring together perspectives from different disciplines, spanning divinity, literary studies, urban studies, history and geography.

The first section, ‘Spiritual Elevation in Religion, Philosophy and Literature’, examines the above as a thinking space for religious, moral and humorous concerns. Andrew Hass and Doug Haynes start with investigating gravity, levity and height as key concepts in philosophy, literature and religious thinking. The second section looks at ‘Heights: Imaginary and Technological’. Focusing on views from above and narrations of imaginary elevation, Aishwarya Subramanian and Nina Engelhardt discuss aspects of power and knowledge in literary engagements with the above. With section three, ‘Elevated Spaces and Vertical Urbanisms’, our special issue turns towards concrete architectures and urban environments. Focusing on the *terrazza* and the skyscraper respectively, Nicoletta Asciuto and Sascha Klein draw on two distinct architectonic elements, which both gain their literary and cinematographic value from their vertical features and aspects of detachment along the vertical line. Lorenzo Tripodi extends this perspective to the discussion of contemporary urbanity more at large by considering ‘urbiquity’, an urban condition emerging as city dwellers increasingly become able to situate themselves on the planetary grid thanks to technological advances such as satellite technologies and mobile devices.

Overall, the papers portray the above as a sphere that enables distinct forms of reflection and imagination; it allows various traditions of thinking and imagination to meet and can thus affect our understanding of relations between them. Naturally, the range of texts and examples in the papers is limited; yet they are suggestive of the importance of an interdisciplinary understanding of the ‘above’ and illustrate how material, imaginative, literary and historical associations come together in explorations of ‘degrees of elevation’.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh, and the financial contribution of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Susan Manning Fund to the workshop ‘Above. Degrees of Elevation’ in May 2016.

Susanne Schregel would like to thank the European Institutes for Advanced Study (EURIAS) Fellowship Programme and the *European Commission Marie-Sklodowska-Curie Actions* – COFUND Programme – FP7 for funding her stay at the IASH Edinburgh with a Research Fellowship in 2015/16.

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1. Further examples of so-called ‘up-down spatialization metaphors’ are discussed in Lakoff & Johnson (2003), p. 14–19 (‘Orientational Metaphors’). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)