The Planetary Turn

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Published by Northwestern University Press

Moraru, Christian and Amy J. Elias. 
The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/38757.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/38757
Comparing Contemporary Arts; or, Figuring Planetarity

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The nature of our present contemporaneity and how the various arts practiced today manifest it have become hot topics in many spheres, from the arcane to the popular. In the *New York Times Book Review* of March 11, 2012, writer and visual artist Douglas Coupland opened his review of Hari Kunzru’s book *Gods without Men* (2011) by reflecting that one marker of how rapidly, and recently, times have changed is that, on 9/11/2001, people did not have smartphones to record the events of the day. From this observation Coupland leapt to a generalization: “It has been only in the past decade that we appear to have entered an aura-free universe in which all eras coexist at once—a state of possibly permanent atemporality given to us courtesy of the Internet. No particular era now dominates. We live in a post-era era without forms of its own powerful enough to brand the times. The zeitgeist of 2012 is that we have a lot of zeit but not much geist.”

Coupland is a writer and visual artist, a Canadian (and, unsurprisingly, an expert on McLuhan) best known as the coiner—in the title of his 1991 novel—of the term “Generation X.” To his credit, he followed the above by declaring: “I can’t believe I just wrote that last sentence, but it’s true; there is something psychically sparse about the present era, and artists of all stripes are responding with fresh strategies.” Then he goes on to identify “a new literary genre” that, he believes, responds in a fresh way to the current situation: “Translit novels cross history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader’s mind. It inserts the contemporary reader in other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present . . . Translit’s precursors are, say, ‘Winesburg, Ohio’ and ‘Orlando,’ and the genre’s twenty-first century tent poles are Michael Cunningham’s novel ‘The Hours’ and David Mitchell’s ‘Cloud Atlas.’”

As it happens, each of these texts has led to a film, and in the instances of *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992) and *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), very good ones. *Cloud Atlas*, directed by the Wachowski brothers, was released in October 2012. Is this an example of one of the arts—or, more accurately,
one tendency within one of the arts—developing in a way that happens to influence another, or are certain artists in both forms responding, in parallel ways, to the same set of changing cultural, social, and political conditions? If it is the latter, what are these conditions, on what scale (or scales) do they operate, and how do they shape such responses?

Despite his flip style, I believe that Coupland was on to something. I want to suggest that what amounts to an epochal change—or, more accurately, a change from historical development understood as a sequence of periods to conditions in which not atemporality but multiple, antinomial cotemporalities prevail—is playing itself out across the arts, in forms particular to each but also somewhat shared. To put it in terms that read as if they are naming successive versions of the same kind of thing but, in fact, are signs of splitting, we are living through a movement from modernity through postmodernity to contemporaneity and planetarity. These developments occur unevenly, at different times and at different rates, and do so distinctly in each place. Some are already historical; others are in their early stages. Overall, as Coupland’s remarks attest, this situation is experienced as an all-at-once coincidence of different temporalities and spatialities. In its immediacy, multiplicity, and dispersive spread, it feels as if all structures have evaporated, as if historical continuity has disappeared from human affairs and the ongoingness of natural phenomena has melted away. The paradox of contemporaneity, however, is not that human and natural continuity has suddenly expired and that incipience prevails in everything, everywhere, and everywhen. It is, rather, as climate change among other indicators tells us, that these two continuities—which separated during modernity—are not only reintegrating but also changing places as drivers of planetary destiny. In these circumstances, works of art are diminished if they are treated primarily as evolutionary additions to their own art form, as testimony to the expressive needs of their creators, as instances of the aspirations of the artists’ society or nation, or as embodiments of the creativity inherent in the human spirit. They will of course be one or more of these, but in contemporary circumstances, they are much else besides. In their specificity—by virtue of their actual location in a set of interlocked worlds-within-the-world—and in their potential universality—by virtue of the (in principle) unlimited imaginative scope that inspires them—works of art are integral to both localized and wide-scale change in the workings of this world.

San Diego-based artists Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison exemplify this complex positioning. With roots in conceptual, performance, and land art, they have been pioneers since 1969 in seeking direct and usable solutions to actual problems in particular settings. They continue to pursue the goal of “ecosystemic well-being.” Each of their projects is conceived from its beginnings as a trigger to the imagination of the residents of a particular place, who are the only people actually able to bring projects to realization. The projects are, therefore, developed in a totally cooperative manner.
the artists are invited to an area by an arts or activist organization, work with it to identify an environmental problem, consult with local experts, and then present a display in a public venue that visualizes the circumstances that led to the problem; propose what the artists call a visual “metaphor” that suggests a viable solution; and provoke discussion of how that solution might be brought about in actuality. Projects have ranged from sewage filtration ponds in parks in rust belt cities in the United States (for example, Braddock, Pennsylvania) through lagoon reclamation in Thailand, to some that are national and even continental in scale.

Presented at various venues in Europe between 2000 and 2003, the Harrisons’ Peninsula Europe I: Bringing Forth a New State of Mind envisaged the European landmass as a single, coherent environmental whole, oblivious of national borders, and organized according to the best use of its waterways, mountains, and other natural resources. Through reconfigurations of maps, and displays of information about water flows, land use, and nonpolluting industries such as green farming, the artists showed that the ideal of Europe so contested by national political rivalries could be envisaged—indeed, that the region was once, and could be again, integrated by “biodiversity ribbons.” To the authors, these metaphorical ribbons become icons: lynxlike configurations, as if the land were a living creature, like one of the ancient animals it used to support. While their grand vision for Europe as a whole remains an ideal, various smaller-scale projects based on the same values have been pursued, notably in Holland, where their Green Heart concept—which proposes the removal of housing from central Holland and its concentration in the areas close to the nation’s borders—has influenced national planning since 1994.3

If the work of the Harrisons is a particularly striking instance of a successful practice in contemporary circumstances, it is not alone in the specifics of its response, nor is it by any means the only kind of visual art that matches the complexity of the current situation. There are many others, and others within the other arts. My aim in this two-part chapter is to sketch a framework for understanding how artists working in a variety of mediums are tackling these challenges. I will explore first the question of how the various arts have undergone the shift from modern to contemporary worlds. Working primarily from a cinematic example—Terrence Malick’s 2011 film, The Tree of Life—the second half of my intervention will take up the larger issues of the nature of our present contemporaneity and the consequent need to figure planetarity.

The Contemporary Arts Compared

Comparing the arts is absolutely no longer (if it ever was) a matter of identifying the main thrust, the driving direction, and the distinctive achievements
of one art form and then measuring it against those of another that is contemporaneous with it. If, for most of the modern era, commentators could point to a body of mainstream work that moved steadily forward by distinguishing itself from its accumulating traditions, rendering them past, while at the same time being frequently disrupted by avant-garde experimentation on its other flank, in contemporary circumstances the situation for each of the arts has become rather more like that described by John Cage in 1992: “We live in a time I think, not of mainstream, but of many streams or even, if you insist upon a river of time, that we have come to [a] delta, maybe even beyond [the] delta to an ocean which is going back to the skies.” This is a striking metaphor for the diversity experienced at every level, in every aspect, of the contemporary arts. How did this come about? Exactly what is happening at present? Where might it be going? To answer, let me set the scene for how we might see structure within this flowing diversity by offering a summary of three key ideas underlying my work, since around 2000, on late modern and contemporary visual art.

From Modern to Contemporary

The core art-historical idea is the claim that a worldwide shift from modern to contemporary art was prefigured in the major movements in late modern art of the 1950s and 1960s in Euro-America and became explicit in art world discourse by the 1980s. Postmodern aesthetic practice was an important signal of this change; postmodern theory, its first analysis. A market phenomenon in the major centers during the 1990s, contemporary art was at the same time divided, and expanded, by art emergent from the rest of the world. Since then, contemporary art everywhere has engaged more and more with spectacle culture—with image-saturated commerce, globalized lifestyle, and social media—and with anxieties caused by political volatility and climate change. These developments flow through the present, thus shaping art’s imaginable futures—at least in the short term.

These changes from modern to contemporary art do not, however, constitute a monopolizing phenomenon that spread from a predominant center, as did the great art styles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather, the changes occurred at different times and in distinctive ways in each cultural region and in each art-producing locality. I believe that the histories specific to each place should be acknowledged, valued, and carefully tracked alongside recognition of their interaction with other local and regional tendencies, and with the waxing and waning of more powerful regional and international art-producing centers. Applied retrospectively, under the banner of “alternative modernities,” this approach has led to enriched histories of art throughout the world during the modern period. They are the grounds of the diversity that we now see flowing through the present. Yet this diversity is not, as some claim, best understood as a “global art,” a “world art,” or a
“geoaesthetics.” Each of these terms certainly highlights a key aspect of contemporary art. Nevertheless, however loosely defined or critically intended, each of them echoes the metropolitan-provincial models that obtained during the age of empires and thus is dating fast. Worse, they falsely suggest an overarching coherence, an inclination toward hegemony that, while present within parts of them, is, I argue, residual within the whole ensemble. Rather, we note now the contemporaneousness of distinct kinds of contemporary art, each of which, if it has an “aesthetic,” has its own, internally diversified one. From the perspective of worlds-within-the-world, we can see that each is, at once and in distinctive ways, local, regional, and international—that is to say, worldly—in character.

**Contemporaneous Currents**

Antinomial difference is the most striking feature of relationships within this multiplicitous, scaled, and intensely interactive flow. What are these distinct kinds of contemporary art? As another major art critical idea, I argue that three strong currents may be discerned in art made since around 1989. Remodernist, retro-sensationalist, and spectacularist tendencies fuse into one current, which continues to predominate in Euro-American and other modernizing art worlds and markets, with widespread effect both inside and outside those constituencies. Against these, and giving rise to a second current, is art created according to nationalist, identarian, and critical priorities. This art has emerged especially from previously colonized cultures. It came into prominence on international circuits such as biennials and traveling temporary exhibitions: this is the art of transnational transitionality. For many of the artists, curators, and commentators involved, it has evolved through at least three discernable phases: a reactive, anti-imperialist search for national and localist imagery followed by a rejection of simplistic identarianism and corrupted nationalism in favor of a naive internationalism and then by a broader search for an integrated cosmopolitanism, or worldliness, in the context of the permanent transition of all things and relations. The third current cannot be identified as a style, a period, or a tendency. It proliferates below the radar of generalization. It results from the great increase in the number of artists worldwide and the opportunities offered by new informational and communicative technologies to millions of users. These changes have led to the viral spread of small-scale, interactive, DIY (Do It Yourself) art (and art-like output) that is concerned less with high art style or confrontational politics and more with tentative explorations of temporality, place, affiliation, and affect—the ever-more-uncertain conditions of living within contemporaneity on a fragile planet.

In view of these considerations, the comparative questions become: Can arts other than visual be understood in terms of two, three, or more contemporaneous currents? Did modern architecture, cinema, literature, and music,
say, become contemporary in similar kinds of ways? Can contemporaneous currents be discerned in their present disposition?

*Retromania: Currents across the Arts*

Toward the end of their thoughtful review of *What Is Contemporary Art?* (2009), Anthony Gardner and Huw Hallam make the following observations:

> It seems likely that his triumvirate of spectacularism, postcolonialism and practices engaging in the critical interrogation of contemporaneity itself will be observable in other areas of cultural production and [therefore be] of great interdisciplinary value. These categories may even prove to harbour their greatest analytic power when faced with phenomena posing as exceptions. If used to examine the situation of contemporary music, for instance, Smith’s categories are quickly recognizable in several fairly stereotypical forms of production. “Spectacularism” is again split: into “remodernism,” easy enough to spot in most of the world’s leading publicly sponsored concert halls, where it can often be caught straining to hold onto cultural formats inherited from the nineteenth century; and into the pop industry’s “retro-sensationalism,” working, as the labels that dominate the sector do, to ensure that “of the people” means ever increasing corporate profit according to an all too familiar geographic patterning. Jazz, Tropicalism, or the myriad redressings of hip-hop across the globe can all lay claim to having shaped postcolonial struggle, and this is not unconnected to strong traditions of the kinds of “do-it-yourself-with-friends” engagements with music (from politically motivated improvisation collectives, to garage band jamming, to LGBT community orchestras) that Smith argued characterized his third stream of contemporary art practice.

These are fertile suggestions for further inquiry. Taking up just one of them, we might note that the account offered by Simon Reynolds in *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (2011) parallels my read of retro-sensationalism in the art of Damien Hirst, the Young British Artists, Takashi Murakami, and many, many others. To Reynolds, the essence of popular music, pop culture, and “pop” itself as a quality of experience is that it is a pure event, utter eventuality, which he calls “future-rush.” Is this the quintessential modernist value: the shock of the new? Or is he evoking contemporaneity as it is experienced in every first, or immediate, encounter with newness in any and all of the arts, whatever other distinctions might apply? In any event, it is no surprise that he despairs of the all-pervasive retro character of popular music: “In the 2000s the pop present became even more crowded out by the past, whether in the form of archived memories of yesteryear or
retro-rock leeching off ancient styles. Instead of being about itself, the 2000s have been—so far—about every other previous decade happening at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel.”

In stark contrast to Coupland’s awed acceptance of atemporality as an opportunity for new kinds of artistic response, Reynolds sees the “pulse of the NOW” weakening in pop music, not only in its ordinary forms (band reformations and reunion tours, reissues, remakes, and mash-ups), but also, most egregiously, among its outstanding practitioners. Lady Gaga’s performances and videos are stunning, but sonically not a lot is happening. To Reynolds, still the modernist, this is an abuse of “the artistic imperative to be original,” leading him to despair that “there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its own immediate past.”

“What happens,” he asks in a related interview, “when we run out of past[s]?” In this sense, today’s popular music is not contemporary in any interesting sense: it is a noisy fading away from the heights of the 1960s and 1970s, when this form of music, like the economic system that provoked it and sustained it, reached its peak. It bears noting that Reynolds is also alert to the fact that the greatest change in all forms of music in the past ten years has not occurred in the writing or performance of music itself but in the technical means of its production and distribution. Napster and the iPod are the change agents in what he calls “the macro-structure of how music is made,” not any one musician, or ensemble, or band, or scene, nor any aggregation of them, however “good” they may be to listen to on a one-to-one basis. Reynolds cites remix band Gonjasufi: “I talk about Gonjasufi in the book—there’s lots of interesting things there, in that the mix is drawn from the past as well as from contemporary things. They’ve listened to grime and dubstep but they’ve also listened to a huge array of music from history and from across the globe, but you don’t get that pure, hard hit of futurism, hardly ever.”

This observation applies even to outstanding musicians among those with world-picturing ambitions, such as DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid (my example, not his) in, for example, his Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antartica, 2009. In an article written to accompany the launch of Retromania, Reynolds was more precise about the experience of time during the analogue era, as being structured around “delay, anticipation[,] and the Event,” whereas within what he calls digiculture, “time is lateral, recursive, spongiform, riddled with wormholes,” and is marked by “a paradoxical combination of instantaneity and permanence, speed and stasis.” These analyses resonate with those I will discuss in the second part of this chapter.

Retromania is sourced to the negative narrowness of monopolizing distributive companies: it is they who are the powerhouses of contemporary cultural consumption; it is they who treat music from elsewhere as “xenomania.” Like all other forms of postmodernism, he suggests, retromania is symptomatic of the creative vacuity at the heart of late capitalism, a mode that remains
inventive at the level of building desire for commodities, reproducing them in viable numbers, and distributing them everywhere. Since the 1970s, music from outside Euro-America (and from the immigrant communities within it) has been cataloged as “world music.” On its own grounds, however, much of this music works powerfully, and resonates elsewhere throughout the world, enough for it to constitute a second current on my model. It, too, has been around long enough to have its version of recent past nostalgia. I leave it to those more knowledgeable to assess whether this taste for self-reference amounts to retromania and whether or not more subtle kinds of musical remembering are typically in play in classical music contexts, though I believe that they are, and that that is their main point, even in the small portion of attention that they devote to contemporary compositions.

To return now to my opening reference, Coupland locates his generalization about a present possibility for literature within a global optic, but his view, too, is primarily from the Euro-America centers outwards. This perspective has, in the recent past, given us comparative literature (the West vis-à-vis the Rest), Commonwealth literature (English literature vis-à-vis Anglophone writing from the former colonies), and French literature and writing in French (French versus Francophone writing), among many other similar Orientalisms. None of these were entirely a matter of one-way traffic dispensed from the metropolitan centers outwards and downwards. But it was clear until recently where most of the enabling power lay.

Arguably, “magical realism” in South American writing was, however, a construct of regional consciousness vis-à-vis West European and North American literatures. This signaled a shift. Perhaps the emergence of a second current in the world’s writing about itself? One that, after four decades of diversification that has blasted apart each of the disciplinary categories just listed, Coupland wishes to name “Translit”?

Dwelling on this shift in her *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urged students of writing to “cross borders under the auspices of a Comparative Literature supplemented by Area Studies” by imagining themselves as “planetary rather than continental, global, or worldly.” In words that appear more than once in the *Planetary Turn* collection, she announced:

I propose the planet to override the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered with latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems. To talk planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided “natural” space rather than a differentiated political space, can work in the interests of this globalization in the mode of the abstract as such. (I have been insisting that to transmute the literatures of the global South into an
undifferentiated space of English rather than a differentiated political space is a related move.) The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say “the planet, on the other hand.” When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition. I will return to the implications of her comments on this effort of imaginative figuring in the second part of this chapter, which examines this third major current in the arts today. In this section, I have proposed that macro-level changes in the arts in recent decades have constituted, and in some centers continue to constitute, a general movement from modern to contemporary forms. I have further maintained that these changes have occurred, and in some places are still occurring, differentially yet concomitantly, according to a structure that I dub the “three current model.” I hope that these suggestions are of some value to those wishing to track the flow of the arts of the present.

**Figuring Planetarity: The Problem of Visuality**

Let us now shift gears, as Spivak’s invocation requires us to do, up through the scales of the psychic, social, economic, and political worlds-within-the-world that, layered together, constitute our planetary sphere. The cross-artistic currents I have been exploring are, I submit, manifestations of the great changes that have occurred since the mid-twentieth century in the distribution of power within and between these scales. On the political and economic levels, it is now a commonplace to observe that, while the era of the European and North American colonizers seems to be in decline, their enormous influence persists and is taking new forms. Some, in the years after 1989, believed that the United States stood alone as the world’s “last remaining superpower,” as the only “hyperpower.” However, its failures in international policy and national governance since 2001 are clear evidence that no nation retains the kind or extent of geopolitical influence once wielded by the advanced countries of the modern period. The economic rise of China, India, Brazil, and others is everywhere acknowledged, but it remains to be seen whether their efforts at global and regional influence will be of the same kind.

Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, nation-states no longer align themselves according to the four-tier system of First, Second, Third, and Fourth Worlds. Multinational corporations based in the Euro-American centers control only a significant portion, instead of the entire, world economy, for new global corporations are located in South, East, and North Asia. Manufacturing, distribution, and services are themselves dispersed around the globe, and
linked to delivery points by new technologies and old-fashioned labor. Some would argue that, with globalization, capitalism has achieved its pure form. Certainly, the living standard of millions has been lifted, but only at enormous cost to social cohesion, peaceful cohabitation, and natural resources. Most national and local governments, as well as many international agencies, seek to regulate this flow and assuage its worst side effects—so far without conspicuous success. The institutions that drove modernity appear, to date, incapable of dealing with the most important unexpected outcome of their efforts: the massive disruptions to natural ecosystems that now seem to threaten the survival of the Earth itself. Awareness of this possibility has increased consciousness of our inescapably shared, mutually dependent existence on this fragile planet.

In such circumstances, how is planetarity being figured, in visual terms? I see planetary figuration occurring on a number of levels simultaneously, and, to clarify, I will choose examples from three: world-scale regimes of seeing, such as those made possible by new technologies of vision and visualization; the aesthetics of disappearance in contemporary visual art; and the configuration, in certain movies, of worlds within the World.

**Regimes of Vision**

“Visuality,” to begin with, was a term much in currency during the postmodern 1980s, where it was widely taken to mean the social circulation of images, including mental images and projections in the imagination of peoples as much as individuals. A distinction was drawn between it and “vision,” understood as the physical processes of seeing common to us all. Hal Foster’s collection *Vision and Visuality* (1988) built on this differentiation as a basis for exploring the connected character of all forms of visualization, high and low, within Western modernity, along with their history. Martin Jay, following Foucault, called them “scopic regimes.” But the usage was vague then, and has remained so since. A few attempts to historicize broad-scale changes in “ways of seeing” in Western societies have been made, but with little success. Exceptions include Régis Debray, whose theory of “mediology” features interesting schemas of visualization that are seen as components of significant political change.

In *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011), Nicholas Mirzoeff substantially advances our thinking about these issues. Struck by Thomas Carlyle’s use of the word “visuality” in 1840 to characterize the capacity of heroic individuals to take broad views of the sweep of history and to act within it, Mirzoeff looked for similar competencies on the part of other leaders. When battlefields became too large to be seen with the naked eye or the telescope from a single position, generals such as Napoleon and Wellington developed the ability to visualize dispersed but connected domains and to anticipate and initiate actions across them in a coordinated way toward the
overall end of victory. As European nations pursued their colonizing ambitions, they developed complex structures of visuality that ruled at home and abroad. Mirzoeff names this the “Imperial Complex” and dates its dominance to the years 1860–1945. He acknowledged that this ability was first developed in plantation economies throughout the world, where overseers controlled complex, sequential processes of production and large numbers of workers primarily by means of oversight—always, of course, backed up by the exercise of extreme violence. The “Plantation Complex” was dominant from around 1660 to 1860. Following President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his farewell address to the nation in 1954, Mirzoeff dubs the third phase the “Military-Industrial Complex.” If we add entertainment and information to military and industrial, we recognize it as having prevailed from 1945 through the present.

Against these regimes Mirzoeff posits a set of matching counter-visualities, that is, resistances to their dominance that also took strong but distinct visual forms. The oversight visuality that held sway during the plantation years was opposed by “revolutionary realism” in Europe, and, in Haiti especially, by what he calls “abolition realism.” Similarly, he suggests, various forms of indigenous counter-visuality were developed to evade imperial visuality, and, when imperialism took on fascist dimensions during much of the mid- and later twentieth century, by “antifascist neorealism,” a battle still being waged in parts of the world. If the military-industrial complex favored “aerial visualization” during its earlier phase, it was opposed by what Mirzoeff calls “decolonial neorealism.” Since 1989, this complex has entered a more intensive phase: “post-panoptic visuality.” Opposition to it, he believes, must take the form of an environmentally alert “planetary visualization,” which brings us to the current situation. At the time of writing (up to late 2010), Mirzoeff could at least allude on his final page to the significance of the Arab Spring as harbinger of a contemporary counter-visuality: “The everyday form created in Tahrir Square, Cairo, has been the best example to date of the possibilities of a praxis of the everyday that is not found but made.” Eruptions such as these ever since have thrown into confusion what he identifies in The Right to Look as the latest mechanism of military-industrial control: the deliberate creation and maintenance of conditions in which militarized counterinsurgency becomes the overriding task of government. While focused at present in Middle East hot war zones, this strategy has every potential to be used against the citizens of even overtly democratic states. Reviewing the world picture as of 2010, he concludes: “Several outcomes seem possible from this swirling crisis: a new authoritarianism, a perpetual crisis, or, just possibly, a time in which my claim to the right to look is met by your willingness to be seen.” Like almost everyone else, Mirzoeff failed to foresee the spread of Tahrir Squares throughout the Middle East, nor their appearance, in distinct forms, throughout the West—in the streets of Spain, Greece, and even Israel, and in...
the squares of cities throughout the United States. He has not hesitated to become deeply involved in this unanticipated movement. Indeed, he maintains a blog that is itself a kind of occupying: he devotes a given part of each day to “Occupy 2012: A Daily Observation on Occupy,” producing a short text that reflects on the potentials and possibilities of occupying as an absolutely contemporary kind of countervisuality.23

Contemporary Visual Art: The Aesthetics of Disappearance

In a recent single-screen, continuous loop video work, Shadow Sites II (2011), Iraqi artist Jananne Al-Ani takes viewers through a sequence of zooms from aerial distance in to framed landscapes that show residual traces of natural forms and man-made structures (ancient, modern, and contemporary). The video combines archaeological techniques of searching for sites through cast shadows with unusual regularities with digital and satellite mapping technologies used by the military. In this way, it alerts us to the operation of “aerial visuality” as defined by Mirzoeff. Yet, because we soon see that each formation was made using plaster, ambiguity and imprecision actually are shown to prevail at this level. The ideals of informational exactitude and precision targeting that military and governmental surveillance claim are shown to be false. The God’s-eye camera keeps zooming close to a ground zero that insists on fading to another place, closing in to a surface that it cannot penetrate. Al-Ani is responding to the prevalence of surveillance technologies in warfare and civil life as well as to the critiques of them offered by theorists such as Paul Virilio.24 At the same time, she works very much from her own perspective as an Iraqi artist, which position is made clear by one of her recent statements:

My early work focused on orientalist representations of the Middle East in western visual culture and particularly of enduring myths and fantasies surrounding the veil. Since 2007, I have been developing a new body of work, The Aesthetics of Disappearance: A Land Without People, which explores the disappearance of the body in the contested and highly charged landscapes of the Middle East. The project includes single screen films Shadow Sites I (2010) and Shadow Sites II (2011). Frequently depicted as a desert, an exotic place with no history and no population, the Middle Eastern landscape has become familiar to westerners as the blank backdrop to military action. In response to the use of aerial reconnaissance and satellite navigation devices in the 1991 Desert Storm campaign and the 2003 Gulf War, both films adopt the vantage point of such missions, while taking an altogether different viewpoint of the land surveyed. Scanning the surface or burrowing into the earth, the films excavate what cannot otherwise be seen on the ground. Landscapes disappear and reappear
as one image slowly dissolves into another, like a mineshaft tunneling deep into a substrate of memories preserved over time.\textsuperscript{25}

We see in her work the pursuit of a critical distance from dominant regimes of visuality, distance, or interval that is, on the one hand, a necessary but by no means sufficient component of what Mirzoeff calls “planetary visuality” and, on the other hand, an example of what Spivak identifies as the pressing need to “figure planetarity.”\textsuperscript{26} It is to this need that I turn in conclusion.

**Worlds-within-the-world and Filmic Visuality**

Many other artists working today imagine the physical conjunction of a number of different kinds of world: the intimate, personal sense of “my world”; the close neighborhood of the local; further worlds, increasingly distant beyonds, until a sense of the World in general is reached; then the transitory, “no-places” in between. Such a conception evokes the co-temporality of these worlds, their differential movement through time. As a contribution toward the task of imagining planetarity, let me take this spatial idea of simultaneous worlds and, in an effort to envisage the structure of the world as we experience it today, marry that idea to the notion that these worlds share temporal contemporaneousness.

Beginning spatially, we might imagine four planes, surfaces, fields, arenas, or domains that stand to each other as layers—“orders” in an older parlance, or “levels” in a more recent one. Let us call them “worlds” in the sense of worlds-within-the-World. They could be represented as follows:

**WORLD/WORLDS: PLANES, LAYERS**

- Earth, planet, natural histories, evolution, information
- Sentient interiority (human, animal, things? machinic?)
- Societies, social relations, cultures, local economies, nation-states
- Geopolitics and economics, international arrangements, NGOs, civilizations

I have been inspired to this (tentative) proposal partly in reaction against the somewhat simplistic modeling of worlds-within-the-World recently, and very influentially, advanced by theorists of globalization and government such as Samuel P. Huntington and Joseph Nye Jr.\textsuperscript{27} Nye suggests that we envisage the distribution and play of power throughout the world as a chess game played on multiple boards at once, in which actors moving pieces on one board (say, the geopolitical) impact on another (say, the cultural). He urges that, if the United States is to retain its preeminence, it must act in awareness of the effects of power across all relevant domains and do so in a planned way, within frameworks of conscious policy (hence his concept of “soft power,” avidly adopted as a tool of foreign policy by governments around the world today, not least the Chinese government). Being actually more concerned
with coercive power, having forgotten their Foucault, and being unconcerned about climate change, both Nye and Huntington pay little attention to interiority and the planetary. But their models do have the virtue of highlighting the fact that we form perspectives on the world at large according to the forces in play within the world, or worlds, in which we mostly act, or most immediately need to act, and that we are often unaware, or unable to envisage, the nature of the relationships that connect them.

With these cautions in mind, let me complicate the diagram with some suggestions as to the kinds of ties that are commonly held to link up these planes. I indicate only some of the most prominent forms that these relationships take, through the names that they have attracted:

WORLD/WORLDS/WORLDING: PLANES & RELATIONSHIPS

- Earth, planet, natural histories, evolution, information
  - <Indigeneity, ecology, virtuality>
- Sentient interiority (human, animal, machinic? things?)
  - <art, language, sexualities, belief, humanities, sciences, media>
- Societies, social relations, local economies, nation-states, cultures
  - <diplomacy, war, criminality, cooperation>
- Geopolitics and economics, international arrangements, NGOs, civilizations
  - <modernity, globalization, globality, planetarity>

To “complete”—to the degree that that is possible—this tentative sketch of the world picture, I would posit that a host of actions, difficult to diagram, actually weave the connections within this model, where they constitute the substance of relationships. I would call them “connectivities.” These include the imagination, feeling, projection, identification, communication; producing, consuming, prosuming; warring, surging, peace-making, reconciling, deterring, negotiating; searching, networking, flocking; and many others, both shared and specific to particular practices. Imagine them as threads weaving through these layers and forms of connection, thus giving us a three-dimensional matrix. This overall activity, this weaving of connectivities, is what I would term “world-making” or “worlding.” Please notice too what we might call the rounding of the model, its return to itself, such that our taking of the Earth itself as the grounding matches, at world-scale, a planetary consciousness rather than a globalizing thirst for dominance and hegemony. One ambition here is to enable a conception of the world that does not begin from the image of the globe, or that of a map of continents, but of course includes them within a broader pictorial imagining of worlds-within-the-World that now stretches through more space and more time and in more differentiated ways than hitherto imaginable.28

Furthermore, if something like this connective layering represents the structure of our intersecting worlds, how might we understand it to have changed throughout time?29 Debray, Mirzoeff, and others have proposed
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frameworks for following the movement of visual imagining across some centuries. Tracking the movement of the entire scalar structure is rather more daunting. Yet certain artists have let their imaginations enter this space.

We have seen in our cinemas recently one such example: Malick’s film, *The Tree of Life*. For all of its obvious flaws, New Age overreaching, and quasi-Creationist banalities, this is an extraordinary effort to imagine visually the world-historical dynamic of something like the structure I have just sketched. *New York Review of Books* writer Geoffrey O’Brien gives us a concise description of the movie and offers what is, in my view, an accurate judgment of it:

Malick has never shied from grandiosity, and in *The Tree of Life* more than ever before he risks the humorless and overblown. Into what might in other hands have been the small-scale, melancholy tale—too elliptical even to be called a tale—of the not unusually eventful childhood of a boy in Texas, his two brothers, and his father and mother, he has managed to incorporate the creation of the universe, the origins of life on earth, the age of dinosaurs, and the prospect of future dissolution, with musical accompaniment by the powerful tonalities of Berlioz’s *Requiem Mass*. But he has made an audacious and magnificent film.

O’Brien goes on to make many useful observations, to me the most pertinent of which narrate the film as an extended evocation of the adult architect’s memories of his childhood, a postmodern one in Houston, the third largest city in the United States. O’Brien’s glosses turn on the fact of the accidental death of a beloved younger brother at nineteen. “The whole film,” the critic points out, “might be a poem of deep grief diffused over a lifetime.”

No heroes here. In contrast to the “spooky fears” of teenage Goth movies, O’Brien notes, Malick “proposes the existential dread of cosmology. He can’t show the life of this boy unless he shows you his parents; and the time and place where the parents lived; and the planet on which that era unfolded; and the universe in which that planet came into existence, and within which it will meet its end.”

O’Brien makes this sound like a personal compulsion of the filmmaker and the film itself an elaborate act of representation, on a par, perhaps, with Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. However grand a comparison this is—and there is no greater, in literature—I believe that it limits understanding what has been put before us. For are we not moved to ask: Is not something like what is glimpsed in these flowing stagings that which the world—quite literally, the planet—is asking us to imagine more fully? Is the movie not asking us to see beyond the proximities within which we normally live, with so little regard for realities more distant in space and for those more powerfully pushing through from other times? If *The Tree of Life* is a representation, it is
one of the world remembering itself, the world unfolding from now to then, and then to now, a representation of The Tree of Life itself—that is, of the “way of nature” and the “way of grace” combined.

In view of the questions before us, we can conclude only by asking some more. Is Malick toying with the ambition—however flawed, partial, hubristic, and at times banal—to represent the world remembering itself or, more accurately, to show a set of world memories that run from those that are absolutely specific to one living being to those that are, absolutely, of the universe? Does not such a quest uncover to us the structure of worlds-within-the-World, its processes of layering and unraveling, its violent disjunctions and its affiliative connectivities? Is this not a picturing of a kind of planetary consciousness operating along, across, and between the scales of the world-picture? Is this not what we might hope art can do for us all?

Notes

1. Not to spoil a good story, but, in the interests of historical accuracy, it should also be recalled that the thousands of media workers living nearby—a concentration unequaled elsewhere on the planet—had many other modes of recording what was happening to them. Thus the plethora of images and sound records of the event, at least from the second strike forward, which generated a repertoire that fed its highly mediated resonance.


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11. Ibid., x–xi.

12. Ibid., 176, xiii (emphasis in original).


14. Quoted in McKeen, “Is Pop Culture Consuming Itself?”


21. Ibid., 309.

22. Ibid.


25. Quoted in Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, eds., *All Our Relations: 18th Biennale of Sydney* (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 2012), 258; see also www.janannealani.net.


