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Orientation in a Big World: On the Necessity of Horizonless Perspectives

One of the most overplayed songs of all time was penned by Disney "Imagineers" just as increased communicative connectivity, commercial global travel, and transnational economic dependencies were (or were on the verge of) becoming commonplace. "It's a Small World" debuted in 1964 at the New York World's Fair. While it's easy to cynically shrug off the lyrical simplifications of this earworm, it's worth closer inspection: the lyrics capture some of the more insidious and inhibiting idealisms that persist in the present. The banal expression of the same name, recited nowadays as an automatism, typically describes a serendipitous moment of mutual reference in conditions otherwise uncertain or unknown; rarely is this expression uttered in a lamenting tone. There is nothing wrong with the pleasant quality of this "small world" encounter, per se, but it does raise more general questions as to why the sentiments captured by this expression seem desirable, and why they are understood as comforting. What does this expression divulge about an approach to navigating the world today?

There are two interwoven problems captured within those four, mundane words. First, the expression marks the enjoyment in confirming familiar frames of reference in order to tame an otherwise unknown or alien encounter – be it with a stranger, a perception, an idea, or a situation. As the driving fable of early domestic internet uptake, the framing of a "small world" amounts to the sales pitch of a simplified world readily amenable to human sensibility as it currently is, "promising" a minimization of the unwieldly global, into the cozy, intimate scale of a village. Second, the seemingly harmless expression obfuscates the ill-reasoned assumption that heightened interconnectivity yields proximity and closeness. While today there are more logistic, ecologic, economic, and communicative vectors that connect humans and nonhumans in deep chains of relation than ever existed before, structurally speaking, this condition points to something quite the opposite of a small world. It points, rather, to the increased *dimensionality* of coexistence produced by exponentially multiplied vectors of relation. More critically, the idealized myth of containable smallness constrains cognitive, ethical, and technological capacities to more adequately and justly navigate the world in its current *nth* dimensionality. The proliferation of interrelations and interdependencies has, for better or for worse, ushered in a very big world. This is a world that demands more adequate frames of reference (spatial, perceptual, and linguistic) to construct orientation within and for its extensive dimensionality.

The "planetary scale" serves as an initial, terminological index for this big-world condition of coexistential *nth* dimensionality. Particularly deployed in discourses on climate change and ubiquitous computation throughout the last decade, the planetary scale, in general, describes the consequential magnitude of (some) human techno-economic activity (such as fossil-fuel reliance and its derivative products/externalities) and the amalgamation of their interacting effects that supersede the boundaries of earth (like mounting carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere). Beyond its diagnostic significance, can the application of this term denoting "the scale of how things currently are" be put to use as a new frame of reference for social transformation? Could it serve as a pivotal concept through which the making of otherworlds can be practiced – a "making" that is always a remaking of the world already at hand?[1] Can this concept of "planetary scale" function as a basis for political invention and solidarity to lead us beyond the simplified comforts of a small-world framework? Today, those comforts and that framework combine to operate more as a threat than a promise as "global villages" mutate into fractured social bubbles steadfastly enclosed by confirmation-bias. If the planetary scale came into being as an aggregate result of nineteenth-century liberal incentives of private wealth accumulation, can the existing hyper-relationality and path dependence endemic to planetary coexistence be otherwise mobilized away from the ideals that underwrote the very materialization of this condition? Obviously, a linguistic marker on its own is not enough to answer such loaded questions. That said, such an utterance is not a trivial exercise either, provided that terms become consequential and not mere tokens of disciplinary jargon. When language is figured as a human-world interface for picturing and correlating with reality, it is useful to tease out how the term could transform given frames of reference – and in turn how these renewed frames could serve as a starting point for hypothesizing navigational ramifications both *at* and *for* this planetary scale.

Navigation as Synthesis
Before diving into navigation at a planetary scale specifically, it is worthwhile to lay out a brief outline of what navigation is. Navigation is, above all, a synthetic operation. First, it's the ongoing mediation of intentionality with the contingency of unknown or accidental events. Navigation is not destination, but it is not entirely divorced from destination either. It's a movement of inclination requiring markers of orientation. If navigation requires inclination to lend a

functional or affective valence of direction to mobility, the politics of navigation are bound to claims on constructing these points of referential orientation, as well as making them sensible, intelligible, and shareable.

Second, navigation is reliant on extra-local, mental diagrams of space and time that are continually cross-referenced with situated localization. In this way navigation embodies the continuum between the conceptual and the material; and it is due to this weaving that navigators can continually revise and adapt their choreography and markers of orientation over time. As the saying goes, "the map is not the territory." However, arresting this thought in its purely oppositional state undermines the crucial, synthetic dynamic wherein the map (understood as a conceptual artifact) partially shapes:

a) the perception and perceptibility of the territory or system,
b) how that territory or system is thought to exist beyond immediate sensory feedback (if it is sensible at all),
c) the possibility space of its imagined tractability, and
d) the understanding of causal interrelations, which contribute to pictures of agency.

The map, be it a story, a drawing, a diagram, a model, or a mathematical projection, may be distinct from the territory or system to which it refers, but it informs the way it is conceived, rendered accessible, and imagined as a navigable entity. Abuses of cartography occur when the abstraction of the map or mental schematics remain fixed and unresponsive to situational localization. The transplantation of European names to existing, inhabited, and locally named sites as a way to leverage cartographic projection for extraterritorial claims is just one such example where abuses of abstractions have been historically instrumentalized to abolish or disregard situational reality.[2]

Last, the activity of navigation presupposes the existence of a navigable thing. When it comes to the present, how navigable is the world today in its complex, *nth* dimensionality? In thinking through the politics of navigation, it's crucial to consider several related questions: For whom or what is navigability optimized? For whom or what is the very possibility of navigation foreclosed, and through what power dynamics are those affordances determined? Ready-at-hand navigability cannot be assumed as a given; the activity of navigation is inseparable from resetting and/or questioning frames of reference for rendering conditions navigable in the first instance. Since the planetary scale denotes an "object" so complex it surpasses the capacity for individual, heroic, human intellection, it can only

be partially accessible at a collective or distributed level. In other words, planetary navigability can only be figured as an equally intricate, collective project. The necessary geometries, narrations, epistemologies, images, and interfaces (in both operational and linguistic form) to make this planetary scale tractable to navigation seem to be in a nascent state, if existing at all. This is not a dissuasion from the proportion of labor ahead, but a note of optimism infused with a realist bent.

Planetary Considerations

Several factors arise when speculating on transforming the "planetary scale" from its existing diagnostic state to one that may offer a valence for political orientation. The first and most obvious factor is the critical question of how to contend with scale as such. Historically, scalar ambitions have been equated with forms of domination, conformance, and homogenization. This correlation is evidenced by the current (yet dwindling) version of so-called globalization – a "unilateral globalization" built of, in the words of Yuk Hui, the "particular epistemologies [from a] regional worldview to a putatively global metaphysics"[3] – as well as the ongoing oppressions of colonial subjection, including its managerial derivatives. One of many examples of such managerial derivatives is the disputed and ongoing French treasury guarantorship of the Central and West African franc currency.

Another factor in figuring the possibility of an emancipatory planetary scale is to ask how this *nth* dimensional abstraction works back upon and transforms human self-understanding. The planetary scale isn't just an external condition, but also provides a conceptual opportunity to reframe where the human stands within this scale, a repositioning from which other pathways and logics for navigating the world cascade. What new perspectives are opened when human self-picturing is repositioned at and within this *nth* dimensionality? What other modes of relation unfold from the repositioning of self-picturing; and how can the consequences of this perspectival shift be narrated in both hypothetical and meaningful ways? If there is to be any just, political navigation *of* and *at* the planetary scale, these fundamental factors need to be accounted for both epistemologically and ethically. The aforementioned perspectives and modes can also be seen as interwoven precisely through the conceptual-material activity of navigating.
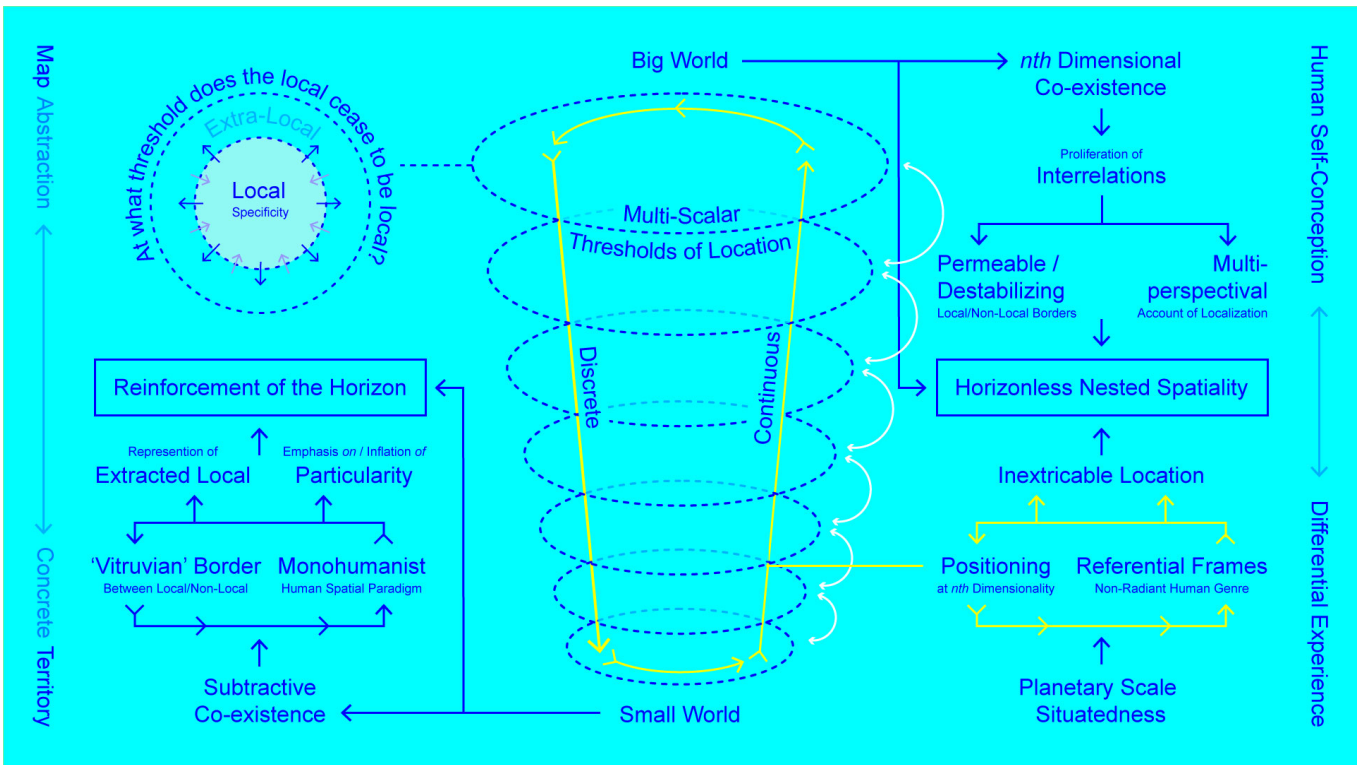
Preserving Specificity

To begin imagining navigation at the planetary

scale without it becoming a mode of enforced uniformity, this structural condition of *nth* dimensionality needs to be approached with a commitment to the preservation of localized distinctions. What are the politics of location at the planetary scale? "A politics of location" emphasizes an accounting of (and accountability to) specificity in order to avoid the tyranny of diminishing the differentiation of the world into a rigid and *reductive picture* of totality. The question instigates a situated accounting for the localized geo-historical-material contexts from which one speaks, thinks, relates, learns, and acts – in other words, a conscious activity of positioning knowledge-makers. As Donna Haraway wrote, an insistence on "positioning" is not simply about revealing bias and scientific misuse. It also elaborates on a mode of objectivity understood to be productively partial; and since knowing (in both propositional and material forms) comes from this partial objectivity, it is informed by the perspectival contingencies of a specified place. Importantly, these partial, locatable knowledges are not instances of an anything-goes relativism that serves only as the "mirror twin" for an a-positional mode of objectivity (the god-eye trick), but are rather to be understood as gateways for "webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology."[4] The value of this "situational insistence" is that it preserves contextual particularity, and sees in this framework ways to build better, more robust accounts of reality. Where this situational insistence offers less methodological guidance, however, is in approaching the coherence of a generalized, better account – that is, how all those "conversations" or relays between epistemological localizations *cohere* in mutually influential, co-constitutive ways. How can situatedness be formulated in consideration of *nth* dimensional relationality, by relations both near and distant, by those which are immediately perceivable and those which are not? One of the central problems posed by the proposition of political orientation at the planetary scale is how to simultaneously uphold multiple scales of relationality. It's a mereological, part-to-whole, one-to-many-and-many-to-one problem, which is as old a problem as one gets in philosophy. However, the stakes for finding ways to *coexist in* this concept today turn it into an urgent question of social pragmatics.

The Discrete and the Continuous

There is a shared inclination in this regard, already present in Édouard Glissant's writing towards the end of the twentieth century on a "one-world" (*tout monde*). Glissant's *tout monde* was one composed of vastly different worlds,

Map Abstraction

Concrete Territory

Human Self-Conception

Differential Experience

At what threshold does the local cease to be local?

Extra-Local

Local
Specificity

Big World

nth Dimensional
Co-existence

Proliferation of
Interrelations

Multi-Scalar
Thresholds of Location

Permeable /
Destabilizing
Local/Non-Local Borders

Multi-
perspectival
Account of Localization

Discrete

Continuous

Reinforcement of the Horizon

Horizonless Nested Spatiality

Representation of
Extracted Local

Emphasis *on* / Inflation *of*
Particularity

Inextricable Location

'Vitruvian' Border
Between Local/Non-Local

Monohumanist
Human Spatial Paradigm

Positioning
at *nth* Dimensionality

Referential Frames
Non-Radiant Human Genre

Subtractive
Co-existence

Small World

Planetary Scale
Situatedness

"Hypothesizing Planetary Scaled Situatedness," diagram courtesy of the author.

including representations of it, making it impossible to speak of the whole from a single position.[5] The negotiation of this multiplicity comes through the enactment of a what he proposed as a "world mentality" (a morphing of *mondialisation* to *mondialité*)[6] – a mentality in opposition the flattening forces of unilateral globalization (described by him as a driven by a non-site or non-positional mentality) – while simultaneously upholding a picture of a nonhomogeneous totality.[7] His focus on relationality qua specificity of location preserves particularity while also addressing the connected embeddedness of that site, insofar as any particular location is not extractable from the totality of its relations, despite its differential specificity. Glissant's is a multiplied and nested picture of specificity, not a subtractive one, constituting an important theoretical move that undercuts reductive claims linking specificity to atomized individualism.[8]

From another, rather distant field, leaps of invention around similar part-to-whole problems can be traced in the domain of mathematics. More precisely, the second half of the twentieth century saw a working through of what mathematician René Thom called the "founding aporia of mathematics": namely, the dialectic between the discrete (or the particular) and the continuous (or the global).[9] Alexander Grothendieck, the mathematician, climate activist, and vehement critic of scientism who notably cofounded the group Survivre et Vivre (Survive and Live), worked through this problem geometrically. He arrived at what is known as "Arithmetic Geometry" – where "arithmetic" signifies the discrete, and "geometry" signifies the continuous. In his lengthy semi-autobiography *Récoltes et Semailles* (Harvest and Sowing: The Life of a Mathematician, Reflections and Bearing Witness), Grothendieck details, in (somewhat) layperson terms, the scope of his geometrical innovation, historically on par with the innovations of Euclidean geometry (in its time), as well as the transformation of the general conception of space-time from Einstein's theory of relativity:

> As for Geometry, one can say that in the two thousand years in which it has existed as a science in the modern sense of the word, it has "straddled" these two kinds of structure, "discrete" and "continuous." One can say that the new geometry is a synthesis between these two worlds, which, though next-door neighbors and in close solidarity, were deemed separate.[10]

The point of this comparative detour via Glissant and Grothendieck is to highlight that for both

thinkers, coming from disparate fields, there is no pitting of the discrete against the continuous. They each refuse this false choice, and put their efforts towards the articulation of a relational glue that upholds both discrete and continuous scales simultaneously.[11] Each approach delivers its own set of consequences and contexts of application to be sure, yet in thinking through both authors, we glean a mode of refiguring spatial relations, as well as relations *to* spatiality, that offer important insights for navigation at a planetary scale. Notably, this results in a picture of situatedness as discretely located, but also, crucially, as inextricable from the continuous or nonuniform totality.

Distributed Locatability

Through the synthetic lens of the discrete and the continuous, it can be said that locations or sites not only exist in and have relations to neighborhoods of broader contexts, but that this relationality feeds back into them. This means that sites or situations are co-constituted by extra-local relations. There exists an array of contextual conditions that co-produce any instance of localization. Today this isn't even a difficult idea; it's part of everyday life for those with internet connectivity, even if it doesn't lend itself to direct experience in many cases. Being online entails relations with both the locations that serve as sites of material extraction for our machines, and the specific laborers doing the work; additionally, the computational parsing of our requests instantiates chain reactions (columns) across variously geolocated jurisdictions and entities at once, regardless of the happenstance, physical location of the user. In operational terms, this contemporary condition means that humans are multiply located – a distributed form of situatedness. This in no way erases the concretely differential experience of locational embodiment, but offers a more extensive, local/extra-local picture of "being situated" in view of the path dependencies that constitute the planetary scale. Location is partially defined by a specificity of experience, but it is irreducible to that which can be directly experienced. Although this may appear to be a useless academic framing of location, when evoking a concept like "systemic oppression" there is already a gesturing to both scales of location: the causal forces of distributed localizations that co-produce a concretely localized (embodied, lived, and known) experience of oppression.

To define location – or to define something as "local" – requires the implicit articulation of a geometric threshold. The term is usually taken as self-evident, yet it is one that implies specific (and contingent) spatial norms, scales,

perspectives, and abstractions at work – ones that are rarely made explicit, drawing a border between a general terrain and a particular instance. Understanding the implied spatial abstractions in a term like "local" provokes a helpful moment to scrutinize certain assumptions. What is the border condition of location, and at what threshold does the local cease to be local? From which perspectival position are these thresholds drawn? The answers are many, since what these dilemmas of location signal is that location is, above all, a relative and not an absolute spatial concept.

How does this multi-scalar understanding of localization – as a continuum between the concrete and the abstract – affect the relative perspective from which situatedness is understood at a planetary scale? How are we to understand "positioning" within this framework, dependent as it is on consciously *locating* the knowledge-marker – a locatability now framed in a nested, non-extractable, and yet perspectivally differential dimensionality? There is a bidirectional answer: we can understand positioning from the location of *a* particular human self *in relation to* the general location of human, conceptual self-images. If the position of the human at the planetary scale is a decentered one, that is, one no longer conceivable as a heroic, monohumanist[12] human separate from and masterfully dominant *over* the world, how does this play into the navigational synthesis between the conceptual and the material, in the mutual influence between the abstract and the concrete? Put simply, how does the decentered human picture work back upon us as a form of diagrammatic agency, towards the way we come to account for situatedness in this *nth* dimensional frame of reference that is informed by, but irreducible to, the immediately concrete?

Struggle over the Human

There are those who champion, or who actively seek to amplify, the navigational turbulence produced by this decentered human position at the planetary scale, making for an urgent battle over claims on orientation. Such tendencies thrive among several techno-neoreactionaries, who, in denying absolutely any form of planetary navigability from a resituated human position, ultimately advocate for the stripping of humanity's cognitive-political agencies to transform given frames of reference. Paradoxically, what is often perceived as a form of techno-fetishist futurism is nothing but an unimaginative conservatism that celebrates the preservation of existing frames of reference. These existing frames are defended as if they are an immutable fact of nature, a world "naturally" oriented by nineteenth-century navigational

frameworks, now augmented by twenty-first-century AI, smart cities, and iPhones. Implicit endorsements for dehumanization can be found in this destructive negation of these capacities. This is so, not because this endorsement traffics in images of machinic supremacy on the surface, as is often the point of critique, but because it amounts to a renunciation of the capacity to make claims on the *artificial nature* of humanity itself, a coexistential fictitious necessity for constructing markers of collective orientation. In the end, revelling in the chaotic perpetuation of navigational turbulences at the planetary scale is nothing more than an uninventive fossilization of status-quo fictions as given and permanent facts. At this juncture, it becomes evident that the struggle for orientation at *nth*-dimensionality coexistence demands intervention on this artificial plane, in order to dislodge naturalized conservatisms that are often disguised as blinking futurity.

Sylvia Wynter crucially theorized that no historical paradigm exists without a corresponding concept of the human to buttress its logics, modes of justifying certain actions/decisions, and frames of reference for "making sense." As the hybrid, bio/mythos creatures she frames us as (not unlike Haraway's "natureculture"), none of our social reality would be possible without the conceptual engineering of a certain "genre of being human." This genre-concept operates both as a template for idealized human adaption (setting borders of inclusion/exclusion in the process), as well as a vehicle through which to legitimize certain ways of organizing social life.[13] Paradigmatic epistemic and political change is tethered to how genres of being human are conceived, meaning that placing emphasis on the human does not necessarily lead to more anthropocentric narcissism, since the ramifications of human self-image transformation concern not only the human itself, provided that this non-radiant situatedness serves as a pivotal abstract location from which conceptual reconstruction can begin. In response to the totalizing effects of unilateral globalization, ushered in through the logic of an ontologized, monohumanist human, and the *homo economicus* template that it imposed far beyond the scope of its regional invention, Wynter asserts the need to construct genres of being human "made to the measure of the planetary," as a way to justly contend with this now wholly inseparable, entangled totality.[14] How is this "measuring-up" of humanity to be imagined in a way that encompasses both an accounting for *nth*-dimensionality coexistence, and yet is also accountable to contingent, localized differentiation?

We can begin to answer this question in the

negative, since there is no aspiration to continue the violent precedent of creating planetary-scale conditions from the absolutizing of a particular, regional-human perspective. Such a precedent captures instances of domination stemming from discrete conditions that get magnified to a continuous scale, forcing the plurality of the world into a reductive template. Such reduction provides no schematic for orientation commensurate with the planetary. Answering to this measure necessitates *nth*-dimensional approaches that can account for, and be accountable to, differentiation, complexity, and systems of human and nonhuman interdependence, without the malicious comforts of simplification and confirmation of the familiar. There exists no nonhomogenizing way of approaching this *nth*-dimensional, planetary condition with frames of reference applicable only to small-world scales.

A crucial distinction needs to be made at this step, between the aggrandizement of a locally situated concept to the scale of a big world on the one hand, and on the other the situating of concept-creation within a big-world perspective. A small-world perspective can be understood as a subtractive correlation to reality where the borders of positional location are "self-evidently" drawn in conformance with the accustomed proportions of ready-at-hand, immediate human experience – not unlike the proportionate borders of the Vitruvian Human diagram. A big-world perspective does not in any way disavow small-world localization; it's a necessary position of departure, but it insists on the insufficiency of such positioning in isolation to address (and be accountable to) the planetary scaled. Big-world positioning demands a nested account of situatedness, where "location" is no longer figured as self-evidently enclosed, despite its differential status, but is rather imagined as a synthesis between immediate/concrete surroundings and the dimensional vectors of relation that co-constitute it. A big-world perspective is not driven by a hubristic ambition towards an illusory "perfect" vision of totality. These perspectives, like any other, are always partial. The ambition is, rather, to introduce a better accounting for the transformation of spacial conception and dimensionality at this scale, in order to avoid the scalar pitfalls of conflating the part with the whole, and deploying that misgiving as a definitive navigational marker.

Horizonless Spatiality
Spatially and geometrically speaking, it's worth highlighting that the classical perspective coincided with the concept of the monohumanist human – the genre of human centrality where

reality is conceived as optimizable in its own, familiar image, and "knowing" is often reduced to picturing the world as a resource for human projects.[15] Correspondingly, in this classical perspective, the re-enactment of human vision on a two-dimensional plane became mechanized, reproducing images wherein the extra-local vanishes at the threshold of a horizon, namely a subtractive mode of re-presentation. This works to reinforce a narrow depiction of what a location is, by extracting it from extra-local relations, and merely mimicking the limitations of human biosensory visual systems that have limited depths of vision and that tend to privilege proximate immediacy. Moreover, in both common and academic language, the "horizon" has (like the "small world" expression) become an automated term of choice, usually referring to a sense of expansiveness, or a way to loosely gesture to an unknown, becoming, futural phenomenon. At *nth*-dimensionality coexistence, the horizon is simply an inadequate correlation to reality; spatially, representationally, and linguistically, it has no existence in reality and can only reflect on small-world proportions. The horizon may be useful at the everyday, mechanical scale of the small world to be sure, but at the planetary scale, it stands in as a representational artefact for the monohumanist human world.

What is crucial, however, to glean from this historical example is the mutual influence between an emerging concept of a genre of being human (at the time) and a representational system for spatializing it, making this concept amenable to both sensation and thought. The planetary scale demands a similar picturing and spatializing approach for a new genre of being human commensurate with the planetary scale, in order to better account for this *nth* dimensionality. Without the comforts embodied by the relative nearness of the horizon of a discrete world remediated back to us in our own image, the big world demands perspectives from a position of distributed localization, composed of, but irreducible to, happenstance personal geophysical location. To hypothesize on seeing, hearing, moving, relating, and communicating from within this big world requires experimenting with techniques for accessing its unfamiliar, often opaque, and nested scales – for making its aggregate spatiality amenable to navigation at all. It is one thing to name the "decentred human" and its "planetary-scale" situatedness, but it is quite another to learn to *coexist* in the consequences of those concepts meaningfully, with material, epistemic, and social ramifications. Considered navigation at the planetary scale will be impossible with tools, language, concepts, and spatial figurations

belonging only to the small world of the familiar and the discrete. If there is navigational optimism for this condition, a *realist optimism*, it will be vital to mobilize existing vectors of *nth*-dimensional relationality otherwise in an effort to combat the exploitative incentives that instantiated their coming into being. That incentive is predicated on the most pernicious fiction of the monohumanist genre of being human, the myth of atomized personhood, whose idea of wealth belongs only to the smallest possible world. If existing relations are to be otherwise catalyzed against the inflation of small-world exploitation (the 1 percent meme captures this well), it's not just a world mentality that is required, but also big-world frames of reference, through which to hypothesize possibilities for non-radiant coexistence at this horizonless *nth* dimension.

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