



Planet Zoom. *Image by Jamie Allen*

“The globe is on our computers. No one lives there.”

— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,

“Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet” ¹

“The world is turning, I hope it don’t turn away.”

— Neil Young, “On The Beach” ²

There are people in the world who are acutely, and almost continuously, aware of the planet on which we all live. Various lifeways, vocations, situations, or surroundings compel such people to use or choose “planetary magnitudes” as their main frame of reference: the ground from which they think and act; the object of their attention. In the geosciences and natural sciences, there are those who sample and interpolate data from all over the globe and those who derive large-scale models of planet-wide systems. In macroeconomics and geopolitics, there are those who monitor, template, and influence things like currencies and markets, trade and shipping, international conflict and policies. In the humanities and social sciences, studies of transnational cultures, globalization, translation, transport, and migration may hold a perspective that includes the entirety of planet Earth as a research subject or context. “The Anthropocene,” “the technosphere,” and “planetary” are extradisciplinary characterizations attempting to name such global knowledge practices

and orientations.

The tendencies and capacities of the human animal toward description, thought, and action at planetary scales can provoke relativization and conservatism, confidence and fear, hubris and humility. In Judith Butler's 2022 book, *What World is This?: A Pandemic Phenomenology*, she writes of a planet-wide "we," forged in part in the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the understanding of which "implicates us and everyone else existentially", necessitating "a shift in our very understanding of the world."³ Asking which "field of study takes 'the world' as its object," she suggests a kind of phenomenology of planetary experience: "I suppose we could make a case for geography, astronomy, world literature, systems theory, environmental science. As someone trained in philosophy, I am drawn back to phenomenology, or perhaps compelled to draw it forward in order to understand the phenomenon of the pandemic as exhibiting a sense of world, or a world that is given to us in part through the senses."⁴

As material, cognitive, and physical work that takes place—i.e. that is situated in real and mediated spaces—the continuous recreation of the "planetary" as an abstraction has the potential to be generative of both alienation and solidarity, of further splintered, self-serving objectifications of human and natural systems, or of consolidated and cooperative actions that resist the anti-ecologies of industrial exploitation. One of the most remarkable explorations of the latter, least promising of these potentials is the dystopian early science fiction story by E.M. Forster, "The Machine Stops."⁵ Written in 1929, the story recounts a world in which humanity is no longer able to live on the surface of the Earth. Individual people now live in isolation in little standardized rooms below ground. The "Machine," a globalized technological infrastructure that connects everyone and purports to fulfill all bodily and spiritual needs, has all but eliminated the desire for physical movement, travel, and intercourse (sexual or otherwise) between human beings. People spend their time sharing the only currency that matters in this world—ideas—which are delivered via a cacophony of available speeches, lectures, and presentations given to and from little

isolated rooms.

Prior to 2020, the existing cultural and literary commentary on “The Machine Stops” focused on its prescience and vision—i.e. the ways in which Forster presages behaviors of abstracted connection and ambient and omnipresent communication technologies, like streaming video conferencing (for example, Zoom) and instant messaging. Post-2020, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new slew of commentaries and repostings of the (now out of copyright) story appeared, highlighting the uncanny resemblances between the future lifeworlds depicted by Forster and the modern lives and livelihoods of most non-physical laborers. The self and workforce imposition of indentured screen and keyboard servitude that information workers, content creators, cultural workers, and knowledge practitioners experienced through the pandemic lockdown conditions was conspicuously similar to the ways in which Forster’s characters navigated work, relations, and the world: via abstracting screen and data surfaces that permit the transmission of ideas but not of intuition, sensation, or physical touch. Critical elaborations of the story understand that what is at stake is a near-complete alienation from nature, the planet, and physical systems, wrought through technological mediation. This mediation enables the exchange of “ideas” about and from other parts of the globe, a fetishized currency of content afforded by and through The Machine.

In some senses, of course, we all understand ourselves to be on a planet, here on Earth. There are a number of modes of thought, experience, and media that provide registers of access to the material fact of planetarity. Prime examples include those much-discussed photographs of the “whole Earth”—the 1968 “Earthrise” image and 1972’s “Blue Marble” snapshot—that were thought to have the potential to precipitate worldwide planetary consciousness, a recognition of our “membership in a single family sharing a common home,”⁶ or of being “riders on the earth together.”⁷ A hundred years prior, cosmic devices for navigation and gravity measurement—like Léon Foucault’s pendulum (the “Foucault Pendulum”)

—devised direct, if instrumented, experiences of planet-scale phenomena. Projection spaces, expanded forms of cinema, and planetariums have all been put in service of on-planet awareness. In fact, anyone with access to geo-located social media feeds can rapidly become more aware of their relative position on the globe. Some seek out or are more and more regularly thrust into geopolitical and geoscientific awareness and responsibility. It is through the crises of global “weird weather” patterns, mass climate migrations, or bottle-necked logistical flows (for example, the 2021 Suez Canal obstruction), that direct experiences or mediated streams of planetary ebbs, flows, and stoppages are provided. Here, awarenesses that go way beyond local human-scale contexts and perception or sensation abilities are thrust into our psyches in ways that leave many feeling disempowered and overwhelmed. The ambiguous apotheosis of this apathy is perhaps best reflected in the aphorism, “we live on a floating rock in the middle of the universe”, now a hashtag (#floatingrock) and social media meme.⁸ #floatingrock thinking serves as a reminder that one understanding of planetarity results in a sense of cosmic insignificance that works to shrink human-scale or personal problems relative to the unfathomable scales of the universe.

Though such a planetarity has become normalized (as an assumption of cosmopolitanism, liberalism, and internationalism in our times) it fails to recognize that our composed and mediated globalism is a particular kind of planetary experience—and one that is imagined, abstracted, illusory, and in many instances in tension with grounded realities and situated contexts. The unfortunate right-wing instrumentalizations of localism notwithstanding, there do exist tensions between those who think they are from somewhere and those who perceive themselves to be from “everywhere,” and so “nowhere.”⁹ And just as we are forced to do whenever we attempt to piece together a global event or media blitz, those who are tasked with deriving, modeling, interpolating, and projecting the condition of planet Earth as a whole or as a scientific object do so through partial, sampled, local, and perspectival information.

“The Impossibility of a Planet” intertwines discussions with people who have taken active roles in researching, critiquing, or creating “planetary” knowledge, abstractions, or practices with textual elements paraphrased from E.M. Forster’s science fiction tale. It is an attempt to socialize the active processes that are now helping to reform the images, imaginations, and actions derived from planetary concepts. It aims at reducing estrangement and increasing understanding or affected communities—of which all earthlings are a part. The project visits, records, and chronicles sites of planetary production—reflecting and revealing the diverse localities, architectures, varied lives, and livelihoods that scaffold and support planetary as a set of ideas and framings. Many of the interviews and footage featured in the edits included here were recorded during coronavirus lockdowns, during which a sense of planetary experience seemed both imperative and impossible.

“The Impossibility of a Planet” documents encounters that mostly took place online but that were nonetheless encounters with places and people, environments and domestic scenographies—reminding us that global-scale and earth-magnitude presuppositions and work take place, more often than not, by a cozy kitchen table beneath the flyzone of UK’s Luton airport or in a disused child’s bedroom converted into a lockdown office. Echoing Gayatri Spivak’s epigraph at the start of this essay, globes are on people’s computers and planetary is in people’s heads.

In interspersing these disparate yet uncannily related stories—a science fiction from the past and a science fact in the present—the ambiguous yet promising “impossibility” of “planetary experience” shows its utopian and dystopian shades. The continuous, laborious efforts made to compose and transfer ideas, documents, media, and concepts in the service of creating planetary perspectives, images, subjectivities, and objectivities become apparent. The potential for a planetary picture to create a map that cleaves itself from the territory is ever present; that, in creating worlds, we might forget the Earth is a valid and recurrent modernist anxiety. How does planetary as a practice and category become

worthwhile and fundamental to resolving the ways that our relationships to the Earth change, while respecting its alterity and the recurrent, illusory dangers of scientific totalization?

“Being planetary as praxis and the becoming planetary of media thus asks how the planetary might provoke other ways of figuring planetary inhabitations.”

— Jennifer Gabrys, “Becoming Planetary”¹⁰

“I guess when your stars align,
You do like the solar system and planet out”

— Big Sean, “Blessings”¹¹

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Susanne M. Winterling, “The imperative to make the imagination flexible,” *Planetary Sensing*: <https://planetarysensing.com/the-imperative-to-make-the-imagination-flexible/> ↗

Neil Young, “On the Beach,” *On the Beach*, Warner Records Inc., 1974: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBVde75e4sU> ↗

Judith Butler, *What World is This?: A Pandemic Phenomenology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022, p. 17. ↗

Judith Butler, *What World is This?*, p. 17. ↗

E.M. Forster, “The Machine Stops.” S. H. Burton ed., *Modern Short Stories*. Longman Group Ltd, 1965. ↗

Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment: How the United Nations Built Spaceship Earth*. New York: Columbia, 2018. ↗

Archibald MacLeish, “Riders on Earth Together, Brothers in Eternal Cold”. Quoted in Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment*. ↗

For example, see: <https://www.tiktok.com/@thedailyvictorian/video/7125490819691253034> ↗

Many thanks to both Louise Emily Carver and Paolo Patelli for reference to controversial political commentator David Goodhart's coinage of the terms "Somewheres" and "Anywheres." [↑](#)

Jennifer Gabrys, "Becoming Planetary". *Accumulation*, October, 2018: <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/accumulation/217051/becoming-planetary/> [↑](#)

Big Sean, "Blessings", *Dark Sky Paradise*. GOOD Def Jam, 2015. [↑](#)

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