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WORLD PICTURES: GLOBALIZATION AND VISUAL CULTURE

Although “globalization” is one of the dominant issues of our time, relatively little attention has been paid to the metaphors and images that constitute the very idea of the “global” and the whole genealogy of “world pictures” that accompany it. This essay attempts to sketch out the figures of the global, terrestrial, planetary, cosmic, and worldly models of the universe that underwrite this discourse. The aim is to question the facile “smoothness” and transparency that sometimes accompanies globalization talk, and to heighten our sense of its discontinuities and paradoxes. The evolution of the global or planetary model, from the invention of the modern globe to the Blakean “infinite plane” and vortex, to the Heideggerean critique of the “world picture,” is traced here, along with the emergence of an intermediate notion of the “region” and “regionalism” in the construction of large scale social spaces.

Fellow Labourers! The Great Vintage & Harvest is now upon Earth
The whole extent of the Globe is explored: Every scattered Atom
Of Human Intellect is now flocking to the sound of the Trumpet.
William Blake, Milton: *A Poem* (1803)

I have to confess that I find the very idea of “globalization” somewhat intimidating. There is something overwhelming about the concept itself, as if it had become synonymous with totality and universality. And then there is the scope and variety of the numerous disciplines and bottomless archives that are mustered to describe it, as well as the objective reality it claims to describe. There is no doubt that, in our time, an intensified, accelerated process of “worlding” and what Derrida called “mondialization” has taken place. The forces of media, capital, and culture swirl about us like massive storms of images. We know more about the world now than ever before, just as it seems to be more than ever escaping our comprehension, much less control. Edward Said could call for a worldly – that is, a secular and cosmopolitan criticism – at the same time that he recognized the undeniable fact that the 21st century world is descending into religious wars motivated largely by perceived violations of sacred

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spaces and places. Globalism and localism seem, in this light, not really alternatives but contradictions that grow out of one another – as if the very idea of the local had been generated by the global. It is this paradox in the concept of the global that I would like to ponder – the emergence of a “world picture” that has become incredibly clear, realistic, and information-saturated (every inch of the world has now been scanned, and is searchable), at the same time that it seems to be facing a growing crisis that can only be described as apocalyptic. Projections of a catastrophic future are no longer the province of Hollywood; now it is the domain of realistic documentary, based in empirical research, archival work, and punctuated by the mass media spectacles of disaster – Tsunami, hurricane, plague, and (last but not least) war.

There is temptation to indulge in presentist thinking at a time when apocalyptic predictions are made on every side. That is why I began by quoting the words of William Blake, who expressed very similar sentiments more than 200 years ago, in a time of war, revolution, and counter-revolution. Of all the English poets and painters, Blake probably had the most vivid sense of what was entailed in the image of the globe and globalization, which plays a major role in both his words and images. Blake’s work was situated in the transition period from the first, mercantilist phase of the British empire to its second phase of colonization and conquest. We occupy a similar transitional moment, from the breakup of the European empires commonly known as the “postcolonial” period, to a new historical formation after the fall of the Soviet Union that is called globalization, or (in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri) simply “Empire.”

So Blake, the prophet against empire, seems especially apt at this time. I invoke his work, not to deny the novelty of globalization in our time, but to place that novelty in a larger framework, one that attends to the long *durée* of globalizing processes, and to the history of the central image of “the global” as such. So much has been written about globalization that the term has become over-familiar, an unexamined cliché. When this topic has been scrutinized from the standpoint of visual culture, media, and image-theory, the general tendency has been to talk about the global *distribution* of images, their circulation in forms of mass media such as cinema, television, advertising, and the internet. My approach will be somewhat different, emphasizing not the “world circulation” of images, but images of the world and the global as such. I want to pay special attention to what Heidegger called “world pictures,” the metaphors, figures, and pictures that constitute discourses of globalization, ancient, modern, and postmodern. We need to begin, then, by asking ourselves: How do we imagine, depict, or know the global?

First, we might enumerate some of the ways that we name the global, starting with the figure of the “globe” or “sphere” as such, and going on to terms like the planet and the planetary, the cosmos and the cosmopolitan, the world and worldliness, and finally, the earth, which doubles as the name of the planet, the global, and as the concrete ground on which we stand, or into which we burrow.

SCHOLIUM

1. The OED tells us that the Latin word *globus* designates “a round body or mass;” a ball, sphere, etc. The Middle English *glob*(*be*, *glub*(*be*, GLUB, is used by Wyclif (in the first English Bible) to render the Latin word *globus* in the sense “body of men.” So the name condenses the singular and multiple object in the same way that a “body” can denote an individual or collective. The contemporary idea of globalization is probably traceable to Marshall McLuhan’s image of the global village produced by instantaneous electronic communication. McLuhan’s catachresis of the large and small captures the fundamental point of the global as a figure of the concrete universal, the miniature and the gigantic. The globe is both the model or map, and the thing which is mapped and circumnavigated. It is both the object that holds us in its gravitational field, while appearing as a handheld object, as in the images of Christ (or the Christian emperor) as *salvator mundi*, cradling the Christianized world as crystalline sphere in his hand. When the weight of the world grows (as it does for us today) the world may seem to crush the body that supports it, as in the famous emblems of Atlas holding up the globe. Spherical models of the universe pre-date the early modern navigation of the globe, as the ancient doctrine of the music of the spheres attests. If “the earth was without form and void” in the Biblical account of creation, it was easy to predict that the first created form would be the simplest, a Platonic object like a sphere or globe. Hence the rendering of creation as the inscription of a sphere in space, as in William Blake’s depiction of Jehovah-Urizen with his compasses, a Vulcan-figure contemplating his fiery work, or (in a more radically original image) as a demiurge giving birth to a gigantic womb or “globe of blood.”

These three images capture three major ways of thinking the global, three “aspects,” as Wittgenstein would have put it, or ways of “seeing as”:

A. As a geometrical, measurable construction, whether in terms of physical space, or mappable, calculable quantities, from geographical regions, topographies, and routes, to “flows” of capital, populations, and transitory cultural and atmospheric conditions – the passing weather of the mediasphere or the meteorological sphere. In the terms of Henri Lefebvre’s classic discussion, *The Production of Space*, this is the designed, administered, “represented” space of the architect, urban planner, and landscapist.

B. As a produced, made object, an artifice involving materials and technology, the “man-made” worlds of physical models, the virtual worlds of digital technology, or the shaped, physical features of cultivation, urbanization, and planetary deformation, from Chinese Walls to dikes and dams to global climactic effects (global warming, most notably). This corresponds to Lefebvre’s notion of “practiced” space, the built environment of the engineer, the ploughman, or the worker.

C. As a *reproduced* organic form, seen simultaneously as an organism and as the environment inhabited by that organism. Thus, this final image can be read as a kind of embryonic form nourished by a placental network of veins and fibres descending from the body of its progenitor. The globe is thus, as environment, a kind of womb in which life-forms are gestat-

ing on their way toward birth, or a biomedical¹ “culture” like a petri dish; as a singular *body*, on the other hand, it is the *globus* or “collective body,” as in the “body politic” of a nation, only in this case the political unity is that of species being, the “body of humanity” as such. This organic image of the global is surely the most fantastic and far-reaching in its implications. Globalization, in this view, becomes a totalizing biopicture of a “life-world” rendered in the most literal, corporeal terms, as if we were observing a spectacle of a birth-trauma, a multi-stable image of wounding and bleeding, reproduction, nourishing, and parturition. This corresponds to Lefebvre’s perceived or “secreted” space, the world as an embryonic and evolutionary eco-system.

2. The *planetary* is from the ancient Greek for “wanderer,” applied to wandering stars, planets (cf. classical Latin *stellae errant* – to lead astray, (in passive) to wander, of uncertain origin), as opposed to the “fixed stars” which guarantee a sense of cosmic order, harmony in the spherical structure of the cosmos. When the globe is seen within a larger framework, the wider perspective of astronomy, from the standpoint of the sun or Uranus, it becomes the wanderer through space, a “globe rolling through voidness,” as Blake describes it. From this standpoint, the world becomes “a grain of sand” or a fragile island in the Sea of Time and Space, and the nomadism and fluid errancy sometimes attributed to globalization is applied to the globe itself. All three of Blake’s images of the globe render it as a planet that is still tethered to its creator: tethered by surveillance, mapping, and modelling; by productive activity and artifice; or by bodily, biological dependence. But all these images suggest as well a moment of distancing, detachment, and parturition, as if at some point the globe, the totality of the human life-world, comes to recognize its autonomous “island” status, its unique, rare identity in a mainly lifeless universe. The moment of the first astronauts’ perception of the world from outer space is certainly a key moment in the planetary re-framing of the global.

3. The “*Cosmos*”. “The greater World is called Cosmos from the beauty thereof,” according to *Humboldt’s Cosmos* (1848) I. 53. It is “the assemblage of all things in heaven and earth, the universality of created things, constituting the perceptible world.” “The Pythagoreans conceived the Kosmos, or the universe, as one single system, generated out of numbers.” (A view which undermines Heidegger’s notion that the Greeks had no world picture.) Perhaps this explains why the “cosmopolitan” figure often stands outside or above the “global,” holding the globe in his hand, framing it in a larger Olympian perspective – the very perspective that informs an international conference on globalization, where cosmopolitan men and women of the world gather to ponder the “global,” as if they held “the whole world in their hands,” as the African American hymn expresses it. The cosmos is depicted, generally, in highly abstract, schematic, even diagrammatic figures that leave all particularity to the sublunary realm of earth-bound creatures. The world becomes an abstract form held in the mind,

¹ On the concept of “biomedia,” see Eugene Thacker, in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (Chicago, forthcoming).

hand, or eye of a sovereign, imperial intelligence. Its contradictions are reduced to a figure of “harmony in opposition” or dialectics, and its complexity is rendered as a labyrinth seen from above. The cosmos is, as Alexander Pope imagines it, “a mighty maze, but not without a plan,” and the creation of actual mazes and landscape gardens is an attempt to depict, in the human scale of terrestrial spaces, the structure of the imperial, global totality. Thus Pope’s description of Windsor Forest treats it as a miniature emblem of the British empire (as well as of the original divine landscape (the “Groves of Eden”) and as a dialectical landscape that both embodies and resolves contradiction: “Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain/Here earth and water seem to strive again/Not chaos-like, together crushed and bruised/But as the world, harmoniously confused.”

It is striking, in this regard, to note that the very first sentence of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* is a similar declaration: “The problematic of Empire is determined in the first place by one simple fact: that there is world order.” Hardt and Negri seem almost conscious of the neoclassical resonance of their claim, and quickly set out to correct it by insisting that this order is neither natural nor divine, but “juridical,” neither a “spontaneous” result “of the interactions of radically heterogeneous world forces,” nor “dictated by a single power.” This third notion of world order as juridical, as a product of human consciousness and agency, is one thing that links their thought to the precedent of Blake, who shares their conviction that globalization and the world order are historical products of the human imagination, if not their “juridical” notion of it as governed by one law.

4. The *world*: according to the OED, “a formation peculiar to Germanic, f. *wer-* man, *WERE* *n.*¹ + *al-* age (cf. *OLD a.*, *ELD* *n.*²), the etymological meaning being, therefore, ‘age’ or ‘life of man.’” “World” expands to the universal and contracts to the particular – “this world” as opposed to the next; the lower, secular, earthly, and worldly, as opposed to the heavens. It is also a temporal state, not just spatial, a condition, not just a location. The world is another catachresis of part and whole, specific singularity and general totality. “The world is all that is the case,” says Wittgenstein, but it is also a small subset of what is the case. “The world, the flesh, and the devil” are situated in a middle region, below heaven, but above the underworld of Hell or Hades, the subterranean realm where a universe of fire, torment, and destruction is to be found. A world can also denote a social or ethnographic region, as in “The Arab World,” or even the domain of a species, as in the concept of a “life-world.” Worlds, unlike the Kosmos, easily take the plural: there are many worlds, wars of the worlds, and different ways of world-making, as Nelson Goodman teaches us. There is one cosmic order, one juridical law, that governs the numerous worlds. One suspects that Derrida’s sensitivity to language made him prefer the term *mondialization* to globalization. Mondialization does not translate very well, however, as “worlding” – perhaps we need a new term like “mundanization” or “mundanity” (though that would come perilously close to equating globalization with an epidemic of boredom and inanity).

The world as a planet is also “whirled,” if you will permit a Joycean pun, through space, rotating through the seasons and lives of its denizens. The spherical overtones of the global and the errant wandering of the planetary converge in the figure of the vortex or helix, the spiral trace left by any point on a globe as it wanders through space, or the track of the artist-creator’s inscribing hand as he draws a New World into existence. Saul Steinberg’s *New World* illustrates this scenario perfectly, as well as Heidegger’s notion of a “world picture” that is not a depiction of the world, but the world itself constituted as a picture.

5. *Earth*, or *terra*: again, the OED: “on the ground; no other non-Teutonic cognates are known to exist, the plausible connexion with the Aryan root **ar*, to plough, being open to serious objection.” The ground, nevertheless, the place of burial and digging. But also the “whole earth” (as catalogued) and “middle earth” (as imagined), or the place where “earthlings” live (in science fiction). Earth’s version of the global dialectic is to vacillate between the proper and the common noun, the name of the planet and the name of that which covers its surface with a nourishing, fertile and fecund substance.

Since I have been invoking the cosmology of William Blake as a framework for the poetics and iconology of globalization, perhaps it would be helpful to put his most comprehensive statement on the structure of the universe into the record. His fundamental principle is, as I hope is evident at this point, to bring out the dialectical character of the whole concept of the world, the global, and the cosmic, to insist on the catachresis of part/whole, particular/general, the small “Minute Particular” and the “Infinite.” – “To see a world in a grain of sand.” But here is his statement on the matter of the infinite:

The nature of infinity is this: That every thing has its
Own Vortex; and when once a traveler thro’ Eternity
Has passd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind
His path, into a globe itself infolding; like a sun:
Or like a moon, or like a universe of starry majesty,
While he keeps onwards in his wondrous journey on the earth
Or like a human form, a friend with whom he livd benevolent,
As the eye of man views both the east & west encompassing
Its vortex; and the north & south, with all their starry host;
Also the rising sun & setting moon he views surrounding
His corn-fields and his valleys of five hundred acres square.
Thus is the earth one infinite plane, and not as apparent
To the weak traveler confin’d beneath the moony shade.
Thus is the heaven a vortex passd already, and the earth
A vortex not yet pass’d by the traveler tho’ Eternity.

– Blake, Milton: *A Poem* (1804)

This passage has sustained a large amount of commentary, but I only want to emphasize a couple of major points in this context. As an account of globalization, it suggests that the figure of totality as a globe is itself a transitional phase, not an endpoint.

The globe is merely another “thing” that human consciousness encounters, and like all things, it “has its/own Vortex,” which is to say, its own spiraling, doubled, dialectical identity which alternates between opposite perceptions – singular objects such as “a globe itself infolding” OR an outward directing radiance like “a sun,” OR “a moon” reflecting light; OR an array of collective objects, a mass gathering, “a universe of starry majesty.” Or (and this is the final visionary version of the nature of infinity) a “human form,” the Other, who contains, as a sovereign subject, all these worlds, these infinities, within himself. If there is a lesson in this passage for students of globalization, it is not to be fixated on the figure of the global as the privileged icon of the world, the earth, or the cosmos. As Blake puts it, “As to that false appearance which appears to the reasoner,/ As of a Globe rolling thro voidness, it is a delusion.” The earth is rather to be seen as “one infinite plane” in which every particular object, and every living thing contains a vortex that opens into yet another infinity.

The journalist Tom Friedman has notoriously concluded that “the earth is flat” in his recent book by this title, and that globalization means, paradoxically, that we have now moved beyond Columbus’s discovery that the world is round into a wired universe of instantaneous virtual community – a community, as Friedman neglects to mention, of increasingly drastic economic inequality. Blake draws exactly the opposite conclusion from Friedman’s blasé neoliberal confidence in the homogeneous flatness of a world of high-flying cosmopolitan entrepreneurs flying business class from one world city to another, along with the images, information, and commodities that circulate along with them. For Blake, it is the Minute Particular that is infinite, individual, and singular. The infinity of globalization is not to be found in the homogeneous air-conditioned world of neoliberalism, but in the sweatshops and dirty wars it administers, and in the unique human forms that inhabit all its levels.

One of the favorite scapegoats for the abstract character of globalization is technology and science. This is Heidegger’s argument in his famous 1938 essay, “The Age of the World Picture,” which argues that the modern era has been a time in which the world itself has become a picture. It is not merely that modern cultures create pictures of the world, but that the world they present to themselves has been constituted as a picture, by which Heidegger means the measurable, calculable universe of mathematics and physics, of scientific research in its modern sense. For Heidegger, the ancient Greeks and medieval man did not have a world picture in this sense, one which splits Being into a totalizing object, on the one hand, and a totally perspicuous subject, on the other, who “gets the picture” as if all the world were depicted “before” it, and yet also finds itself “in the picture,” as its total situation. “As soon as the world becomes picture,” argues Heidegger, “the position of man is conceived as a world view” (133–134).

I’m going to leave aside the question of whether Heidegger is right that other ages had no world picture and therefore no world view. I’m more interested in whether he is correct about the modern, putatively scientific *Weltanschauung*. Interestingly, the exact opposite to Heidegger’s claim was argued just six years earlier by Freud, in one of his last essays, “The Question of a *Weltanschauung*.” Freud argued that scientific thought was inherently hostile to the notion of a comprehensive world-picture or

world-view: it cannot “even draw us a coherent picture of the universe. ... It gives us fragments of alleged discovery, which it cannot bring into harmony with one another. ... Everything it teaches is only provisionally true: what is praised today as the highest wisdom will be rejected to-morrow and replaced by something else, though once more only tentatively.” (Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader*, p. 790). And Freud did not, of course, exempt the mind of man itself from this conclusion, arguing that, as one of the sciences, psychoanalysis could not claim to have a *Weltanschauung*, and that it must renounce any claim to provide a world picture.

Which of these views is correct? My own sense is that they are both wrong, and need to be understood as expressions of deeply connected ideological fixations. Freud is attempting to overcome magical thinking and religion, which he understands to be the source of dogmatic world pictures and world views, an infantile stage in the evolution of human thought. Heidegger’s antagonist is precisely the opposite. He wants to blame technoscience and instrumental reason for the modern disenchantment of the world, and with it the construction of a comprehensive world picture. The one thing Heidegger and Freud agree on is that world pictures are bad things, though for completely opposite reasons.

My own sense of world pictures is that they are necessary, unavoidable, and always limited in one way or another. The question is, what are the limits? A good illustration might be provided by Google Earth’s marvelous satellite photographs, which produce a digital and virtualized answer to the traditional spherical representation of the world as globe. With a mouse click, I can zoom in from thousands of miles out in space to a spot a few hundred feet above the earth’s surface, watching in amazement as continents and regions come into focus, followed by distinctive geographical formations like coastlines, until we find ourselves coming to rest above recognizable city streets and buildings. Like the crystalline sphere of the *Salvator Mundi*, everything is clear, transparent, and highly defined – until, that is, we come close, and then the world picture dissolves into pixels. This is the moment of Blake’s *Minute Particular*, the moment when the global image dissolves into the local, the passage into the vortex of dissolution and re-framing of the image. This is also very like that moment when aerial surveillance convinces us of the certainty of a target, and we watch that target explode in the cross-hairs, a “surgical strike” that almost invariably turns out to be a mistake, a catastrophic incident of “collateral damage.”

There is no way to “zoom” smoothly and precisely from the global to the local, in other words, or from the heights of abstract infinity to the minute particular – the perspective must pass through a vortex which imposes a new regime of observation – up close and personal – on the spectator. The dangerous illusion of the contemporary world picture of neoliberal economics and militaristic adventurism is that technoscience has made this “smooth” zooming possible. That is the side on which Heidegger is correct. The fact that this *weltanschauung* is always provisional and fragmentary is the side on which Freud is correct.

But there are other kinds of parallax views or jumps in the global perspective that need to be recognized. It is not just a question of scale, of the gigantic and miniature, but also the fundamental coding of the world picture as such. A perfect illustration

may be found in the cover image of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. Why should a book that insists on a resolutely political, economic, and social construction of world order, the "juridical" formation of state, corporate, and NGO agents that constitute what they call "Empire" with a capital E, have a meteorological event like a hurricane as the totalizing emblem of its message? The image is radically inappropriate to the text it illustrates. It would make much more sense as the cover of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which treats globalization as an ecological and environmental process that (on its present course) is leading toward a global catastrophe. Global warming, as Gore argues (with the unanimous support of what can only be called the "world picture" of contemporary science) is threatening the entire life-world of the human species. It is as if Hardt and Negri were led, almost unconsciously to the limiting breakdown of their world-picture, a turbulent form of order *and* disorder, what Heidegger calls the "shadow" that haunts the world picture, in the form of that ancient figure of transformation, the vortex.

Rather than conclude, however, with the relatively abstract and cosmological image of the vortex as the turbulent passage between world pictures, I want to leave you with a few thoughts on the intermediate concept of the *region*, the "excluded middle" that tends to be left out in the polarizing concepts of the global and local. I think that it is no accident that Hardt and Negri discount the importance of "geographical regions" and Marx's figure of the "Old Mole" of proletarian revolution that burrows through the earth, in favor of a highly virtualized Empire whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere. For them, all the different struggles against Empire are "incommunicable" with one another. An abstract "multitude" resists an equally abstract "Empire" whose "virtual center ... can be attacked from any point." (59)

If we learn any lesson from contemporary politics (say, in the Middle East, but also in the Americas and in Africa and Asia, for instance) it is that the *region* is a more potent factor than ever before. The military nightmare of our moment turns out to be, not the ICBMs of the Cold War, which were genuinely global in their reach, but the short and intermediate range missile that can go 10 or 20 miles, and be launched from the back of a pickup truck, or the backyard of a cottage. All warfare now is regional warfare, by which I mean that it is almost never fought between nations with armies arrayed against one another, but is a complex war of position fought over uncertain and shifting borders, contested terrains, and demilitarized zones with smuggled or improvised weapons.

And this is entirely in keeping with the concept of the region. What is a region? The word comes from *regere*, "to rule," a sense that is echoed in related words such as "regime," "regency," and "reign" – something very like the "juridical" order postulated for Empire by Hardt and Negri. But the actual use of the term belies this image of a space ruled by law. The "regional imaginary" is likely to be constructed in terms of images of emancipation from political and governmental boundaries, and in general it denotes an area of relatively weak or divided jurisdiction. In American culture, regionalism is the name for forms of cultural resistance to what is seen as the oppressive dominance of the metropolitan regions. Thus, "southern" literature (and "western"

and “Midwestern”) provide alternatives to the cosmopolitan centers of New York and New England in American literary histories.

Like world-pictures, regional imaginaries always display a double, dialectical face. The region is what is “ruled,” but it is also what is free of central rule, contesting the power centers, often in a struggle between the country and the city. Regions are ambiguous with respect to their status as *parts* or *wholes*, fragments or totalities: North America is a gigantic (almost) continental region that contains just two nations, the U.S. and Canada, and yet each of these countries also contains numerous regions within themselves. China is located in the region known as East Asia, but is itself composed of radically distinct geographical and cultural regions. I call these regional *imaginaries* in contrast to world *pictures* however, because the region is a much more tentative and provisional entity than a nation or country. No one has ever been called upon to die for his region, but dying for one’s country or nation is absolutely commonplace.

The regional imaginary does resolve into a picture, however, when it is exemplified in a specific site. The most vivid regional pictures are thus of zones of conflict and contestation, border areas, demilitarized zones, or set-aside spaces (what Foucault called “heterotopias”) that flaunt their double role as places or localities, on the one hand, and symbolic spaces that represent larger regional and even global meanings on the other. Pope’s Windsor Forest is just such a heterotopia, a region set aside from use to transform a specific place into an emblem of the world, simultaneously subject to imperial rule, and to a kind of public openness that is the predecessor of the modern institution of the public park.

From a global perspective, especially one driven by the rational calculation of cartography, the region emerges as the most stable, permanent feature of the earth, especially in the manifestation in the great regional land-masses known as continents. A vivid demonstration of this point is provided by Chinese artist Hung Hao in his fictional map entitled “New Political World.” This map shows us a world in which all the familiar continents and regions remain in the usual places, but all the names of political entities such as cities and nation-states have been *displaced*. Hung Hao’s map provides a useful way of thinking about the relations of spatial categories from the global to the regional to the local. At its most general level, it reminds us of the contingency and fragility of our national entities and their life-world (a point that could also be made by looking at a political map of the Balkans over the last century), while at the same time stressing the relative durability of continents and regions. “Continental drift” is one aspect of global reality that (unlike global warming) seems beyond human intervention. The volatility of the borders and national identities in Hung Hao’s map serves to remind us, at a moment when the U.S. is touted as “the lone superpower” and globalization is routinely equated with “Americanization,” that empires and superpowers may be even more ephemeral than tiny nation-states.

But the wit of Hung Hao’s “New Political World” lies in the details of displacement and dislocation as much as in its general point. You will note that the city of London has moved and expanded to become a region of the north coast of Australia, while Israel has been re-located to Canada, where presumably it will have plenty of

room to spread out. China, alas, has been split up into many parts, Australia taking over its eastern seaboard, and Beijing seems now to be located in Algeria, while Portugal has taken over the western reaches of the Gobi desert. Only India retains its “proper” location in the subcontinent, with Lithuania moving into Sri Lanka.

The most striking displacement is, of course, the People’s Republic of China, which finds itself in sole possession of the territorial United States (Alaska evidently has been added to Uganda). What does this mean? Is it a not so subtle prediction that China is now in a position to take over the position of the world’s largest economy, and become the dominant superpower of the 21st century? Or could it be a sly prediction that the U.S. will become *like* China in a political sense, a “one party democracy” in which the Republican party abolishes all opposition?² What does it mean that the United States seems to have been dispersed over what looks like the outlying islands of the Phillipines, an archipelago that housed its former colony? And what are we to make of a world where oceans are traversed by sailing ships, tanks, and jet fighters, while carefree divers launch themselves into the South Atlantic from the coast of what was once Brazil, but is now the Netherlands? Like all marvelous works of art, Hung Hao’s “New Political World” is capable of generating an infinity of propositions and questions. And like all provocative world pictures, it produces a vortex of displacements and re-orientations, drawing the beholder into a vertiginous re-assessment of just what this world is, or is becoming.

² This was written in August of 2006, just before the elections which drove the Republican Party from power.