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Odyssey without Nostos, or, From Globe to Planet

Hans-Christian von Herrmann

STANLEY KUBRICK'S MOVIE *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* came out in 1968. At first sight, the epic film takes up the well-known narrative structure of a life-threatening journey that concludes with the protagonist returning home. *Nostos* is the expression for this final homecoming in ancient Greek. While the return of Homer's Ulysses to Ithaca may already have been an ambivalent one, in Kubrick's film there is certainly no longer such a return. It is admittedly an arrival at planet earth, the starting point of the journey, but the protagonist and his former home have been deeply transformed. Although screenwriter Arthur C. Clarke mixes some esoteric undertones into the script, Kubrick's endeavor is obviously to make a statement about his own time as the age of space travel, then in its early stages. At its outset, the film makes a musical reference to Friedrich Nietzsche via the tone poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss. »Man is a rope«, Nietzsche says in his *Book for Everyone and Nobody*, »tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*.«¹ This tightrope walking, as Kubrick clearly shows in the first part of his movie (»Dawn of Man«), is initiated by the advent of technology. Thus in the famous match cut, which juxtaposes an animal bone handled as a cudgel and an armed satellite, the history of mankind spans from the first use of tools to aerospace engineering. The famous enigmatic monolith—which could well be a piece of minimalist art designed by Donald Judd—seems to confront mankind with its extra-terrestrial origin. It is also a transmitter of an electromagnetic signal directed towards Jupiter, the gas giant. In allusion to a phrase by William Burroughs, one could say: Kubrick's monolith appears not as a virus but as the occurrence of formal abstraction from outer space. The odyssey eventually leads to the insight that this stimulus from a nameless exterior can never be comprehended by man. So the final image of the film—the so-called starchild hovering above planet earth in his amniotic sac and looking into the camera—should be understood as an allegory.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, in: *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, New York 1982, pp. 103-439; 126f.

The embryo is the pictorial expression for a new kind of technology which has cocooned mankind, enabling human life to acquire a completely new shape. In this reading, Kubrick's movie marks the beginning of a new era which one could call the planetary age. While the globe and the global are bound to the idea of an open space and undefined territory that has to be conquered and colonized, the planetary refers to planet earth as an encompassing life support system discovered and enhanced by science and technology. One could also call this the *Mediocene*. This shall be further explained in the following.

The 1960s were also the decade when media studies was born. Media studies arose in the realm of the humanities as an earth-shattering research program highlighting the primacy of technological structures for cultural semantics. Media history, media aesthetics, and media theory attacked the basic ideas of historiography and interpretation setting exuberant wit, ironic lightness and elegant style against meaning, gravity and causation. Nevertheless, this program of media studies proved itself to be highly ambivalent, because it obviously addressed humanist culture and the field of the humanities at the same time that it pointed to the new continent of technical artifacts emerging from the ocean of history. From the beginning it was very clear that this rapidly growing intermediate realm could very well be observed by media studies but would always remain a forbidden ground that could never be really entered. So to a large extent, media studies was closely bound to the narrative of the decline of the humanist culture and the humanities.

The appearance of media studies during the 1960s was preceded by Marshall McLuhan's conversion from literary studies to the exploration of American post-war culture which was undergoing a dramatic change to a technological environment different from any previous form of human existence. McLuhan understood intuitively what was happening then and developed a new kind of historiography that could translate cultural forms into technical terms. In 1972 McLuhan gave an outline of this approach in an interview conducted by the French Magazine *L'Express*:

»*McLuhan*: What I am interested in are innovations as such, and especially their effect. I study what would happen if we did this or that. Most people wonder what happens to our children when they see violence on television. I am really no longer concerned about this. What I study is why individuals have the need for violence, and this has nothing to do with TV shows. I analyze phenomena starting from effects and moving toward the cause, not starting from the cause to arrive at the effects, as is a more common practice. [...]

L'Express: This is the opposite of what we normally do. Why do you act like that?

M. McLuhan: Because it is when we invert the order of a process that we find its structure, its scheme. Meanwhile, neither the study of an emission nor that of its reception will give

you the scheme of a message or of an action. I learned that with advertisement. In the world of advertisement, you do not start by the creation of an ad, but by studying the effect you wish to elicit. You create the cause after the effect has been defined. Likewise, when you have to solve a management problem, you start by the aspects you ignore, not by what you know. The ignorance zone is the environment, the zone in which you get immersed in the environment, like in the case of a fish in the water: water is what it is completely ignorant about. [...] What I want to say is simply that I do not study what the fish does, but its environment.«²

What can be recognized in this passage is a naturalization of technological »environment« in McLuhan's thought, even though the term »media« was coined by him in a thoroughly cultural sense. So, although McLuhan looked upon technology as an artificial living environment, he completely excluded the realm of nature from his media research. For him, technology had built an artificial world which had to be analyzed with reference to its transformation of everyday life and to its shaping of cultural forms and social behavior. As McLuhan himself declared, he learned this kind of environmental research from modern literature and the advertising industry. One should also mention the historical context of cybernetics and its concept of feedback control systems. In his 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan says that Martin Heidegger »surf-boards along on the electronic wave as triumphantly as Descartes rode the mechanical wave«.³ Be this as it may, the phrase certainly holds true if we replace Heidegger here with McLuhan himself.

At this point it can be instructive to examine Bruno Latour's concept of the quasi-object.⁴ Extending a debate that originates in science studies in the 1990s, Latour emphasizes that technology should be treated in the context of a new cosmology. He introduces his Actor-Network Theory as a dismantling project that removes the remnants of European metaphysics from the historical scene. By doing so, he seeks to open the way for a non-modern perspective within which man could no longer claim the central epistemological position, because he would see himself again in close community with animals and inanimate things. Latour's writings can also be described as a theoretical disarming that seeks to overcome the great cultural divide between the humanities and the social sciences on the one hand and the hard sciences on the other. So the Actor-Network Theory is also

² Interview with Marshall McLuhan, 14 February 1972, in: *L'Express va plus loin avec ...*, Paris 1973, pp. 425-443: 425-426. English translation here: http://docshare.tips/marshall-mcluhan39s-interview_58287087b6d87f73678b4b43.html (8 October 2017).

³ Marshall McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, London 1967, p. 248.

⁴ Bruno Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA 1993.

a clear answer to Charles Percy Snow's famous lecture *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, given at Cambridge University in 1959.⁵

Snow's lecture may not have been very inventive but it became epoch-making by describing an urgent issue very clearly, namely the breakdown of the traditional order of knowledge and its institutional forms. What Snow tried to take account of in his lecture was the scientific revolution which had emerged during the 1920s and had come to a first climax during the era of cybernetics. Snow's main subject was the totally new status and impact of science and technology in his own time, much like for Latour and his Actor-Network Theory. »Technoscience« is the keyword in Latour's writings and it is used as an epoch-making term similar to Snow's »scientific revolution«. But at the same time, Latour cautiously tries to exorcise any hint of the avant-garde from his argumentation. In marked contrast to the decisive description of our situation as being determined by a techno-scientific complex, there stands an ethnological approach that aims to redescribe European modernity as a short and disastrous episode, a kind of sickness which has become global and has to be cured by acknowledging our irreducible involvement with the world of things. Thus we are not only forced by Latour to face our unprecedented and monstrous present populated by quasi-objects but at the same time we are compelled to reassemble the social in a new non-anthropocentric structure. The current situation, however, is characterized by dissolution, driven as it is by a frantic capitalist culture and its incessant production of artifacts that populate our lifeworld.

For Latour, the main goal of his writings is to overcome the modern dichotomy between nature and culture by denying the exceptional position of man on earth and in the cosmos. In his 1873 essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* Nietzsche had already made a similar move. He wrote:

»In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge [das Erkennen]. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of ›world history‹—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.«⁶

What Nietzsche does here narratively is to invert the telescopic survey of the universe done by modern astrophysics. What he brings about with this fictitious

⁵ Charles Percy Snow: *The Two Cultures*, Cambridge 1998.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche: *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, in: *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, New York 1982, pp. 42-47: 42.

turn is an explicitly nonhuman position that adopts the point of view of nature. And Nietzsche continues:

»One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.«⁷

By radicalizing Kant's transcendentalism, Nietzsche's narrative confronts the subjective or humane perspective with a nature that is introduced and mediated by technoscience. We can also call this perspective geological. It is obvious that Nietzsche's exchange of positions can likewise be applied to the current Anthropocene debate. Do we find ourselves today under the severe gaze of the universe assigning us the role of a cosmic villain? Or is nature just taking a few breaths after which mankind and cultural history will vanish from the scene?

In 1979, the Swiss writer Max Frisch published his novella *Man in the Holocene* (*Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*). In retrospect, this short text appears as a striking attempt to confront the art of storytelling with the onset of a geological scale that makes cultural history shrink to the size of an ant, a point condensed in the short phrase which also serves as the novella's title: »— man emerged in the Holocene«⁸. That is to say: The existence of man may be the outcome of an evolutionary process. As a living being defined by cultural history, man was born in the neolithic age, the period when sedentism, agriculture, and stock farming arose. Geiser, the protagonist of Frisch's novella, is an elderly man who has retired to the solitude of a Tessin valley where he faces a heavy landslide. Without being in acute danger he begins imagining a future catastrophe in which mankind will meet the fate of the dinosaurs. At the same time, Geiser's life turns into a steady fight against memory

⁷ Ibid., pp. 42–43.

⁸ Max Frisch: *Man in the Holocene*, Champaign/London 2007, p. 79. A similar reading of Frisch's novella can be found in Bernhard Malkmus: *Man in the Anthropocene*. Max Frisch's Environmental History, in: *PMLA* 132/1 (2017), pp. 71–85.

loss. This threat of amnesia is to some degree caused by an apoplectic condition but it also indicates the approaching erasure of cultural memory as a whole. For this reason, Geiser starts his own memory project by excerpting passages and paragraphs from the Bible, a Brockhaus encyclopedia in twelve volumes, and a travel guide, all of which Frisch's text includes as clippings and handwritten notes. Gradually the walls of Geiser's hut are covered with notes about the great deluge, the history of the Tessin, the geometry of the golden ratio, natural disasters, amnesia, erosion, the geologic eras, dinosaurs, and so on. »It is no longer a living room«,⁹ says the text when all the walls are totally blanketed by slips of scribbled paper. At the end, Geiser explains the fundamental distinction between nature and culture by referring to the word »natural catastrophe« as a contradiction in terms:

»What is there to think about?

- $EB : AE = AE : AB$
- the Bible and the fresco of the Virgin Mary do not prove that God will continue to exist once human beings, who cannot accept the idea of a creation without a creator, have ceased to exist; the Bible was written by human beings.
- the Alps are the result of folding.
- ants live in colonies.
- the arch was invented by the Romans.
- if the Arctic ice were to melt, New York would be under water, as would Europe, except for the Alps.
- many chestnut trees are cankered.
- only human beings can recognize catastrophes, provided they survive them; Nature recognizes no catastrophes.
- man emerged in the Holocene.«¹⁰

Catastrophes for Frisch thus mark the border between culture and nature in a very specific way. Nature penetrates into the realm of culture in the form of catastrophe. Nature without culture, however, is nothing but an endless and nameless becoming:

»The ants Geiser recently observed under a dripping fire tree are not concerned with what anyone might know about them; nor were the dinosaurs, which died out before a human being set eyes on them. All the papers, whether on the wall or on the carpet, can

⁹ Frisch: *Man in the Holocene* (as note 8), p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

go. Who cares about the Holocene? Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory.«¹¹

By underlining the nature–culture divide Frisch seems to uphold the modern narrative we find in Kant’s critical writings: the loneliness of man set in contrast to the infinity of an indifferent universe. But at the same time, Frisch develops a form of catastrophic narrative. His novella creates an archive of planetary disasters and imagines a world of unmanageable contingency in which the nature–culture divide has been swept away.

Walter Benjamin was one of the first cultural theorists who, against the backdrop of the scientific revolution of the 1920s, recognized the transformative effects of technology. The term Benjamin used in this context was the »planetary«. The last paragraph of Benjamin’s 1928 book *One-way Street*, an aphoristic and highly artistic snapshot of a groundbreaking reconfiguration, reads as follows:

»To the Planetarium

If one had to expound the teachings of antiquity with utmost brevity while standing on one leg, as did Hillel that of the Jews, it could only be in this sentence: ›They alone shall possess the earth who live from the powers of the cosmos.‹ Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former’s absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods. Its waning is marked by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age. Kepler, Copernicus, and Tycho Brahe were certainly not driven by scientific impulses alone. All the same, the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led, contained a portent of what was to come. The ancients’ intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance [*Rausch*]. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights. It is not; its hour strikes again and again, and then neither nations nor generations can escape it, as was made terribly clear by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers. Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high–frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary

¹¹ Ibid., p. 107.

scale—that is, in the spirit of technology. But because lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? And likewise technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man. Men as a species completed their development thousands of years ago; but mankind as a species is just beginning his. In technology, a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families. One need recall only the experience of velocities by virtue of which mankind is now preparing to embark on incalculable journeys into the interior of time, to encounter there rhythms from which they shall draw strength as they did earlier on high mountains or on the shores of southern seas. The ›Lunaparks‹ are a prefiguration of sanatoria. The paroxysm of genuine cosmic experience is not tied to that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call ›Nature.‹ In the nights of annihilation of the last war, the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic. And the revolts that followed it were the first attempt of mankind to bring the new body under its control. The power of the proletariat is the measure of its convalescence. If it is not gripped to the very marrow by the discipline of this power, no pacifist polemics will save it. Living substance conquers the frenzy of destruction only in the ecstasy of procreation.«¹²

What we find here could be called a technophilosophical gnosis. ›To the Planetarium‹ means to look upon the shattering of the oppressive forms of modern existence. For Benjamin, science and technology are the revolution and the reorganization of mankind as a planetary collective. The artificial living environment anticipated by Benjamin replaces the capitalist nation state and the family as fundamental symbolic structures of modern culture. Nature is no longer objectified and mastered by human knowledge. It emerges rather from latency in a non-subjective form of resonance. This is the reason why Benjamin uses the premodern term *physis* here. It is the altered or displaced return of an ancient question: In what way are we involved in the becoming of the cosmos as the entirety of what surrounds us and carries us along?

¹² Walter Benjamin: *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, MA 2008, p. 58f.

Forty years later, Buckminster Fuller in his book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, developed his concept of world planning and design thinking which points in the same direction:

»My own picture of humanity today finds us just about to step out from amongst the pieces of our just one-second-ago broken eggshell. Our innocent, trial-and-error-sustaining nutriment is exhausted. We are faced with an entirely new relationship to the universe. We are going to have to spread our wings of intellect and fly, or perish; that is, we must dare immediately to fly by the generalized principles governing universe and not by the ground rules of yesterday's superstitious and erroneously conditioned reflexes. [...] The architects and planners, particularly the planners, [...] have a little wider focus than do the other professions. [...] At least the planners are allowed to look at *all* of Philadelphia, and not just to peek through a hole at one house or through one door at one room in that house. So I think it's appropriate that we assume the role of planners and begin to do the largest scale comprehensive thinking of which we are capable.«¹³

Fuller's enthusiastic concept of world planning was historically accompanied by a series of photographs taken by cameras on satellites and by astronauts of the Apollo program. The first issue of Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue* came out in Fall 1968 and showed planet earth in color against a dark background on its front page. A similar picture appeared on the cover of *Life Magazine* in January 1969. These images materialized a view which had been repeatedly imagined during the previous years and decades, but they were also totally unexpected because they showed the globe for the first time without any political and cultural borders and as a dynamic system of oceanic and aerial currents. It thus appeared totally abandoned and solitary, lost in space. One should also mention the International Geophysical Year 1957/58 here, which marked the beginning of the satellite age and had the planet emerge in the form of an interdisciplinary research program.

It was then the dawning of the »planetary age«¹⁴ as Greek-French philosopher Kostas Axelos calls it in allusion to Hölderlin and Heidegger. »According to the Greeks«, Axelos explains by referring to etymology, »the essence of the »planetary« lies in an errant wandering [...]. The full meaning of the Odyssean adventure, and not only of this adventure, is alluded to in the opening verses of that epic quest: ›O Muse, tell me of the deeds of that many-sided man, / who journeyed off so far after the destruction of sacred Troy, / who saw and learned the cities and ways of

¹³ R. Buckminster Fuller: *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, Zurich 2017, pp. 66-67.

¹⁴ Kostas Axelos: *Introduction to a Future Way of Thought: On Marx and Heidegger*, Lüneburg 2015, p. 122, under: http://meson.press/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/9783957960061-Axelos-Future_Thought.pdf (8 October 2017).

many peoples, / and on the seas suffered such pain in the depths of his heart / to save his soul and the return of his companions.« Human beings are struck and driven on by the being of a *physis*, by destiny, by the lightning bolts of Zeus, *plazómenoí*, and they are continually living in wandering errancy, in an odyssey. They are *plánetes*: they are the errant ones.«¹⁵

In the planetary age, grand narratives of knowledge and progress have been replaced by the control loops of cybernetic systems. Their »wandering errancy« marks a transition (or a return) from transcendental philosophy to cosmology (in a Heraclitean sense). Similarly, the mediocene marks a transition in the field of media studies from deconstruction to epistemic realism. Today, the concept of »media« refers to the scientific and technological practices covering the entire domain of human existence, not only on a semiotic but also on a physical and microphysical level. So instead of marking a new turn or paradigm, the mediocene is first and foremost a statement of affairs. It proclaims that science and technology have reframed human life on earth as a whole and have replaced the culture-historical scale with a cosmic one.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 124-125 (translation slightly modified by Hans-Christian von Herrmann).