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# Earth networks: 'The Human Surge' and cognitive mapping

## Tiago de Luca

In this article[1] I want to explore the way in which the global can be imagined in the cinema by taking up the concept of cognitive mapping as proposed by Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson. I argue that the totalising remit of the concept offers an especially productive avenue through which to assess how the world has been mapped out in contemporary genres as disparate as the global network film and the world symphony. Above all, my hope is to broaden the intellectual horizons around which we can evaluate questions of world and earth in the cinema, and to that end I propose that the film *The Human Surge* (2016), by the Argentinean Eduardo Williams, updates an aesthetics of cognitive mapping in revealing ways – one that is as attuned to the phenomenology of lived experience and the topology of an elusive world system, as it is to the earth as both the ground and planet we share with other human and nonhuman beings.

Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping is perhaps mostly associated with his canonical 1991 essay 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', which ends by defining an 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping' as

> a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system... The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale.[2]

While Jameson does not provide examples of such an aesthetic in the essay, his subsequent book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World*

*System* (1992) leaves no doubt that he considers cinema to be a privileged vehicle for it. In particular, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* posits what Jameson terms 'the conspiracy film' as an allegorical attempt 'to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves'.[3] Insofar as the social totality is invisible and unrepresentable, it must appear in allegorical form, which 'allows the most random, minute, isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall'.[4]

That said, as Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle note, '[b]eyond the call for the emergence of the aesthetic and a few mentions sprinkled throughout his books, [cognitive mapping] is never presented as such as a coherent aesthetic, technique or theory.'[5] This lack of coherence has secured the longevity and flexibility of the concept in film studies, appropriated as it has been for diverse purposes and ends.[6] In this essay I want to simply propose a return to Jameson's foundational reflections on the concept, which I believe offers important insights into how we may conceptualise the way in which local perspectives and global realities are currently co-constituted in contemporary cinema.

Cognitive mapping first appears as the title of a 1988 lecture-turned-essay in which Jameson begins by acknowledging that he is not even sure 'how to imagine the kind of art I want to propose here, let alone affirm its possibility'.[7] He then proceeds by periodising capitalism's three stages and their corresponding spatial organisations: whereas 'the first kind of space of classical or market capitalism' should be understood 'in terms of a logic of the grid' and does not 'involve problems of figuration so acute', the second stage, 'the passage from market to monopoly capital' at the end of the nineteenth century is marked by 'a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience'.[8] Significantly, Jameson makes recourse to a cinematic metaphor to illustrate this contradiction in the age of empire:

> [a]t this point the phenomenological experience of the individual subject – traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art – becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, *a fixed-camera view* of a certain section of London or the countryside... But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited experience of London lies, rather, in

India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life.[9]

It is in this context, Jameson argues that the 'monadic relativism' of Fernando Pessoa, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf, with its emphasis on the 'coexistence of... sealed subject worlds and their peculiar interaction' must be understood, for they evidence 'the penetration even of middle-class lived experience by this strange new global relativity of the colonial network' – a global relativity that is then exacerbated in the age of multinational capital, which involves 'our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities'.[10]

This dimensional problem, then, requires a cognitive mapping, a concept that Jameson appropriates from Kevin Lynch's account of city experience espoused in his 1960 book *The Image of the City*, according to which there is a dialectical relationship between the phenomenological act of apprehending a city and its corresponding mental map formed through time and experience in the head of the observer. It follows for Lynch that clear and legible cities are those whose 'parts can be recognized ... and organized into a coherent pattern', thus engendering a process of integration whereby spatial alienation is averted and the day-to-day experience of the city reconciled with its abstract map as an ensemble totality.[11] Jameson's take on cognitive mapping involves, in his own words, 'an extrapolation of Lynch's spatial analysis to the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale'.[12] And for him the imagination of a social totality is best realised in the realm of aesthetics, even though – necessary as it is for questions of global orientation – this imagining act is always already doomed to failure given the impossible task it presents in representational terms.

Now, if I have dwelled at some length on these propositions, this is because I believe they resonate with two contemporary genres in world cinema in which the contradiction between the fixed-view of a lived experience and a relativised global structure that exceeds one's cognitive grasp acquire distinctly vivid contours. The first is what David Bordwell has famously theorised as a 'network narrative', that is to say, a mode of storytelling structured around the trajectory of multiple characters existing in vaguely related or autonomous narrative strands, and which has, particularly in the last decade, demonstrated a penchant for narrativising such networks across the globe. Examples, to cite a few, include *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), *The Edge of Heaven* (Faith Akin, 2007), *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006), *360*

(Fernando Meirelles, 2011) and *Mammoth* (Lukas Moodysson, 2009). The other genre, operating within the documentary mode, has been referred to as the 'atlas symphony' film, and it is identified with *Baraka* (Ron Fricke, 1992), *Samsara* (Ron Fricke, 2011), *Life in a Day* (Kevin Macdonald, 2011) and *One Day on Earth* (Kyle Ruddick, 2011).[13]

To be sure, attempts at figuring a world totality are not restricted to our contemporary moment. While this would be the topic of another essay, suffice it to note the way early film programmes capitalised on the category of the global as a structuring principle;[14] the 'atlas impulse' informing a multimedia project like Albert Kahn's *Archives de la planète* (1912-1931);[15] or what has been recently termed the 'world essay film'.[16] The current prevalence of world-encompassing films, however, is undeniable, and one that I believe can be understood as symptoms of a political unconscious, in a Jamesonian sense, of a desire to come to terms with a global reality in which the rift 'between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience' has reached unthinkable heights.[17]

To what extent the films mentioned above attempt to imagine a social rather than a purely spatial and/or geographical totality, and whether such films believe such a task to be completely achievable, is something to bear in mind if we are to examine their compliance or otherwise with a Jamesonian cognitive map. A network film like *Syriana*, for example, effectively a global conspiracy thriller about the oil industry, easily fits the bill. Likewise, in *Babel*, the misuse of a rifle by Moroccan kids results in the shooting of an American tourist. This is quickly interpreted as a terrorist act by the American authorities and produces ripples in many parts of the world, thus revealing the complex imbrication of the global and the local. Of course, not all network films are necessarily interested in the invisibility of social forces, and it can be said that many are even too certain of their own ability to depict a world totality, an aspect that for reasons of space falls outside the scope of this article.[18] But it is undeniable that the genre testifies to a desire to reflect on the disparity between local life on the one hand and a global structure on the other, thereby arguably constituting the cinematic equivalent of a 'monadic relativism' in our time.

The world symphony film for its part organises its conception of the world through a juxtapositional montage that produces visual and graphic equivalences between peoples and settings across the globe, often to surging 'world music' soundtracks. Its more recent incarnations *Life in a Day* and *One*

*Day on Earth* follow the chronological organisation spelled out in such titles while updating the genre in the era of online interconnectivity. Thus, designed as a uniquely participatory experiment of the digital age, *Life in a Day* (like *One Day on Earth*) compiles nonprofessional videos shot on the date of 24 July 2010. The film was sponsored by YouTube and then directed by Kevin Macdonald, who selected and organised the copious amount of amateur footage – allegedly 4,500 hours – around universally-human themes and activities such as getting up, cooking, eating, sleeping, and playing. [19]

Yet it is here that the world symphony film may also be seen as departing from a cognitive map in the sense proposed by Jameson, for whom such a map is necessary not so much as a geographical joining of parts of the world but indeed as a tool that may help us navigate an ungraspable world system. Seen in this light, the amassing of amateur footage into a unified global reality performed by a film like *Life in a Day* may be taken as an effort to close the dialectical gap between the local and the global, but one that arguably does so through abstraction and thus at the expense of the phenomenological. That is to say, by adopting a collage-like style that temporally subtracts the audiovisual content of shots and accordingly privileges predetermined thematic schema that semiotically circumscribe such content in advance, the world symphony can be accused of a homogenising visual rhetoric that glosses over the world's complexities in the name of a facile 'coffee-table globalism' that precludes rather than fosters political consciousness.[20] In this, such an aesthetic would seem to resonate with what Denis Cosgrove terms a 'one-world' discourse that 'concentrates on the global surface, on circulation, connectivity, and communication', one that is 'inescapably ethnocentric and imperial, able to admit "other" voices only if they speak and are spoken by the language of the (self-denying) center'.[21]

To what extent an imagination of the global may conform to a one-world discourse that renders the totality of the world too easily visible or the pedagogical aesthetics of a cognitive mapping that may help us understand the world in its invisible complexity will therefore depend on how a film may deploy specific aesthetic devices. That we need aesthetic attempts to come to terms with a world totality is nonetheless undeniable and all the more pressing now, when the current global environmental crisis leaves us with no other choice but to think the planet in holistic terms. Indeed, I would argue that an aesthetics of global cognitive mapping must now also contend with the earth as the physical planet we inhabit and whose alarming signs of disturbance

urgently ask us to rethink our relationship with the world as a whole. Let us now turn to a film that negotiates these issues in original and revelatory ways.

## Earth as network

*The Human Surge*, the 2016 feature-length debut by the Argentinean Eduardo Williams, is at least in principle situated within the cinematic landscape outlined above. Winner of the main prize in Locarno's Filmmakers of the Present competition in 2016, and a co-production between Argentina, Brazil, and Portugal, *The Human Surge* can be seen as a global network narrative of sorts. Episodically divided into three parts, the film starts with the young Exe (Sergio Morosini) in Buenos Aires in Argentina, switches to Mozambique to follow Alf (Shine Marx), and ends in the Philippines in the company of a few unnamed young characters. As in other multiplot films, these strands are formally differentiated: [22] the first was filmed on 16mm, the second on a pocket camera whose images were then recorded from a monitor by a 16mm camera, and the third shot on a digital RED camera.[23]

As far as its network narrative goes, however, one of the film's original ideas resides in how it shows these characters' lives to be interrelated, for the connections that bring them together, as we will see, are not causal in the sense of a 'butterfly effect'. That said, the three strands resonate with each other thematically, with personal technologies at the centre of the film, and smartphones and wireless connection recurrent visual tropes and motifs. In this, *The Human Surge* may also be defined as a 'globe-trotting documentary about millenials and technology', as one reviewer puts it.[24] Featuring non-professionals in all roles, the film averts depth of characterisation and story development, and as such invites a reading in terms of its observational aesthetic carapace.

If the film endeavours to encompass an abstract totality through an episodic narrative and a thematic focus on social communication, then, it equally grounds its universe in the here and now of phenomenal reality. Comprising long tracking shots trailing characters from behind, *The Human Surge* continually suspends narrative drive through a durational emphasis on everyday life, often in natural settings such as jungles, mountains, open fields, and lagoons. As I hope to show below, it is this divided attention between life as it is lived and the imagining of a global structure within which such lives are inserted that allows *The Human Surge* to manufacture a telling cognitive

mapping of our time, one that is equally sensitive to the earth as a network of unseen relations and connections between humans and nonhuman entities.

As Jameson prophesised in 1992, '[s]ince the world system of late capitalism [is] … inconceivable without the computerized media technology which eclipses its former spaces…, information technology will become virtually the representational solution as well as the representational problem of this world system's cognitive mapping'.[25] This is certainly true of *The Human Surge*, which updates this representational problematic by transposing it to our present-day obsession with personal technologies. Connecting all young men and women in the film, in the three different locations in which the film is set, is a perceived dependence on gadgets like smartphones, mobile phones, and personal laptops, as well as a certain inability to cope with the presentness of phenomenal reality by frequently attempting to escape to the virtual world of text messages and online videos. A vast amount of scenes thus show characters often holding their devices, engaging in conversations about their phones, wondering out loud where to obtain wireless connection, walking and texting simultaneously, or simply lying around and typing in content that we as viewers never get to see (Figures 1 and 2). Thus, at one point in the Mozambican strand, while walking down a hill, Alf tells his friend Archie that 'it's the second time my telephone has been stolen', to latter add that he 'can't be without my phone'. Similarly, phrases such as 'I've just checked on the Internet' and 'I've seen it somewhere on the Internet' are often heard in busy group conversations that contribute to an aurally chaotic mise-en-scène not dissimilar to that seen in the films of William's countrywoman Lucrecia Martel.

Figs. 1, 2: Youngsters walking and texting in *The Human Surge*.

But if millennials and technology constitute the film's focus, *The Human Surge* critically engages with this phenomenon by situating it in relation to class. Indeed, it is hard not to notice that all characters in the film are uniformly disenfranchised and from less than wealthy countries, often living in modest if not shabby houses, and mostly unhappy in second-class jobs, when not jobless. While at the film's start we see the Argentinean Exe working in a warehouse supermarket, a few scenes later the viewer learns that he has been fired 'yet again' for reasons unknown (even though he will reappear as a cashier in a small shop later on). In another scene in the Mozambican story, Alf confides, to their friends' amusement, that he is thinking of leaving his job. Cryptic, disconnected phrases like 'They need us to be in debt, really' and 'What are the millionaires going to do? We have to wake up early. I hope their fortunes never decline!', often uttered unexplainably and presumably ironically, further underscore the particular social class to which these youngsters belong.

That the film chooses to focus on the poor may in principle appear to diverge from a cognitive map, given that in Jameson's foundational definition, as we have seen, its navigational tools are meant to address the dialectics between local experience and global structure that arises with the colonial network in Western centres of power, as in London during the British Empire. As Toscano and Kinkle note (via Brazilian cultural theorist Roberto Schwartz), however, the assumption that this rift between perception and abstraction is non-existent for the colonised or marginalised countries risks oversimplification.[26] And indeed, I would argue that *The Human Surge*

demonstrates that a binarism between the West and the rest in relation to this rift is hardly tenable in the age of global interconnectivity, even though the film is very clear that the latter is unevenly distributed and geographically differentiated.

This precarity when it comes to jobs and life is encapsulated in the very technology that these characters so adamantly cling to, with their cheap, often broken devices miles apart from the sleek gadgets whose release now form long overnight queues in our metropolitan urban centres. In fact, a recurrent episode in the film is that of characters asking to borrow someone else's phone owing to theirs being malfunctioning, with crumbling laptops and personal computers refusing to work as well. Similarly, internet connectivity is never a given for these young people, who are constantly in search of free Wi-Fi or, as in the case of the young Filipino woman in the last narrative strand, in urgent need of an internet café for reasons that remain undisclosed. These and other occurrences in the film thus reiterate that wireless connection and online connectivity may not be so free and easy after all, thereby throwing into question the myth of an all-encompassing, democratising and inclusive internet propagated by one-world technological discourses.

If anything, *The Human Surge* can be seen as showing the underbelly of the internet by alluding to online pornography as an easy means of making some cash for the destitute youth. This is shown in the first episode, when Exe and a group of friends, some of them half-naked, are seen performing live for a webcam. They strip their clothes, fiddle with their genitalia, and follow the number of 'spectators' paying for their private display across the world, a number that rockets when one of them starts performing fellatio on another, not without some hesitation and giggles. While this scene invariably contains homoerotic undertones, it also puts forward the idea that part of what propels these young men to perform these acts in front of an online global audience is a certain sense of boredom that comes with being jobless and disenfranchised. This is reiterated in the film's first transition, which shows the listless Exe in front of a computer monitor with numerous tabs open, one of which shows a video of young black boys playing with a banana as a substitute for a penis in the staging of anal and oral sex. The camera closes in on the video, which freezes for a few seconds due to poor connection as indicated by a spinning wheel at the centre of the image. When the image comes back to life, the viewer then realises that its source no longer refers to the computer monitor on which Exe watched the boys but instead stands in

for the actual webcam filming in situ (as one of the characters eventually adjusts the camera), which sets in motion the film's second strand in Mozambique (Figures 3 and 4).
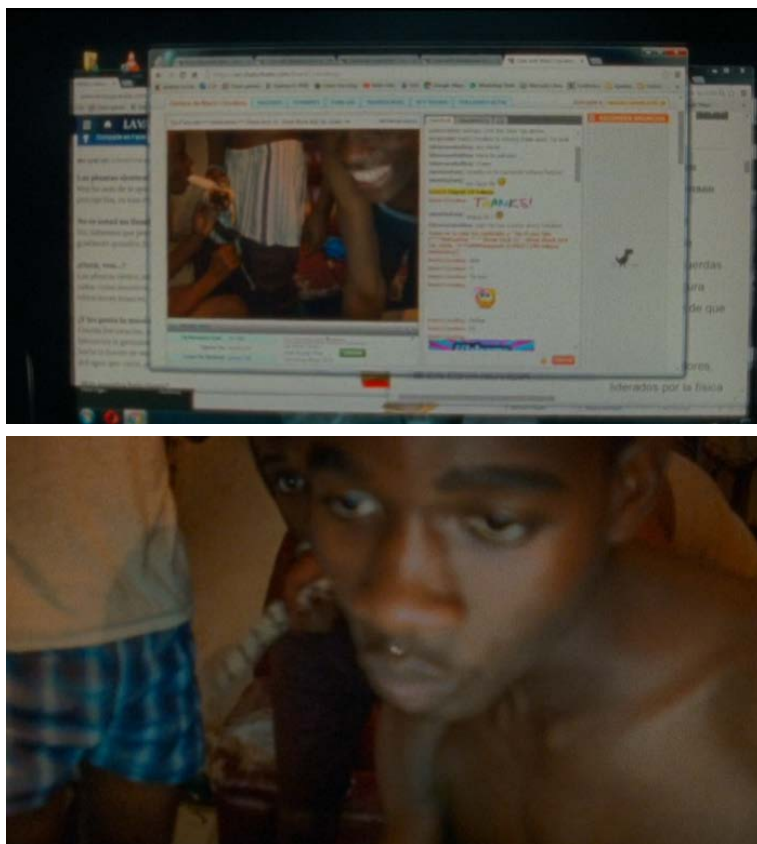




Figs. 3, 4: The staging of sexual acts for a webcam acts as an interface for the first transition in *The Human Surge*.

This transitional sequence in the film thus functions as an interface that literally merges the digital and the real world into an image whose ontological status becomes, at least for a few seconds, indiscernible. This uncertainty is further underlined a few scenes later, when we follow Alf as he walks about town, with the image curiously displaying a 'play' arrow symbol at the top right of the frame (Figure 5). Whether this sign was intentionally inscribed in the image or else the result of a glitch while the film's second strand was recaptured from a computer monitor, as mentioned earlier, remains open for speculation. But what is undeniable is that this image resonates with the first

transition precisely as its status as standing for the diegetic reality is thrown into disarray by the play symbol, which suggests it to be a reproduction of such a reality instead.



Fig. 5: A play symbol on the top-right edge throws the ontological status of the image into question.

Above all, the characters' incessant need to be online would seem to picture a world in which the virtual world of interconnectivity, while not replacing lived experience and concrete reality, is certainly competing with it. In this, these young people are emblems of the prevailing modes of subjectivity operating in what Jonathan Crary, building on Jameson's periodisation, calls '24/7 capitalism', which 'esteem[s] the individual who is constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding, or processing within some telematics milieu'.[27] As a result, 'distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, and between action and repose' are undermined,[28] with the consequence, for Crary, that sleep, in its refusal to be subsumed into the systemic logic of finance capital, emerges and subsists as 'one of the great affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism'.[29] Interestingly, in *The Human Surge* even sleep seems jeopardised by capitalism in the form of dreams, with Alf telling his friend that he dreamt that 'the sky was covered in advertisements', and the woman in the Filipino episode recounting a dream to a friend she had about 'numbers'. The film's last sequence, which does not seem to belong to any of the individual narrative strands and shows the assembly line of a tablet in the making with close-up shots of an intricate technological circuit, further underlines a world system ferociously colonised by media technologies.

However, if *The Human Surge* is peopled by youngsters whose desire to be transported to virtual realities is unrelenting and palpable, the film's mise-en-scène and style act as an interesting material counterpoint through its pointed emphasis on embodied existence and the pulsing rhythms of the quotidian and the concrete. This is achieved via two interrelated formal strategies. The first is the durational quality of shots allied with a focus on mundane events, with characters lying around, chatting away, and, most notably, wandering about. This emphasis on activities normally coded within the category of the everyday, in shots whose length exceeds the temporal metrics of mainstream narrative cinema, imbues the film with an acute sense of the materiality of lived life.

Whether we are following characters walking into a jungle, pottering about in a lagoon in the Philippines, wandering down the sinuous pathways of a hillside in Mozambique, or even plodding through a flooded urban area with water hitting peoples' knees in Argentina, *The Human Surge* foregrounds not just the instantaneous gratification of the connected world, but indeed the physical mundanity of acts such as walking and the material elements with which human beings must interact in the process of walking in the real world, be it the dense vegetation of a jungle or the flooded waters of a rainfall. In such cases, it is the experiential, here-and-now aspect of life that is emphasised, one that gains in significance when we consider, to cite Crary again, that as a 'foundation of social existence', everyday life has been hijacked with 'a new ferocity' since the early 1990s, when '[t]ime itself became monetized, and the individual redefined as a full-time economic agent'.[30] A brief comparison with *Life in a Day* is helpful, since whereas in that film the durational phenomenology of the everyday is dissipated into an abstract world system, in *The Human Surge* it is preserved thanks to the time the films devotes to activities that do not advance story or character information.

The second formal element that deserves mentioning is the ambulatory camerawork, with the film tracking characters from behind while they variously walk, wander, and stride (Figures 6 and 7) – and in this the film might well be seen as pertaining to the contemporary 'slow cinema' trend, with its marked reliance on the trope of the wanderer.[31] However, it must be noted that while the walking youngsters in *The Human Surge* may recall the aimless students of a Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2004) or the wandering vagrants of a Béla Tarr film, there is none of the smooth, gliding, even preternatural camera movement of these last films, achieved, among other things, through the

use of a Steadicam. On the contrary, the camera in *The Human Surge* is positively handheld and shaky, thus reflecting in the very constitution of the image the embodied exertion and contortions of the camera operator. This is especially the case when we consider the hilly, jagged, and sinuous paths and alleys through which the camera often traverses, which makes it difficult if not impossible to stabilise the recording equipment whose erratic movement becomes itself an index of the corporeal experience of traversing those settings.



Figs 6, 7: Camera tracking characters in *The Human Surge*.

Such a corporeal I behind the camera's eye is further underlined in the repeated glances into the camera by passers-by and onlookers, which puncture the already flimsy fictional tapestry interwoven by the film and simultaneously raise questions as to whether this stalking camera indeed stands by a corporeal presence within the diegetic universe. Corroborating this reading

is a certain autonomy on the part of the camera, which seems to decelerate, pause, and even change its mind and choose other characters to follow on its own volition, as when, in the first episode, the camera tracks Exe from behind until he arrives at the shop counter, to then start following the customer he was serving in one unbroken shot.

But if this point-of-view on the world would thus appear to be marked as fundamentally human, in the film's most remarkable sequence this assumption proves misguided. This shows Archie getting up at daybreak in an open field and urinating into an anthill, at which point the camera closes in on a hole on the top of the nest to then plunge into it with the help of a dissolve. This is followed by a wondrous and entirely unexpected sequence inside the nest populated by ants whose size is magnified through microcinematography. The sequence ends, again through a barely perceptible dissolve, with the camera emerging from the nest, but now in a different location with the ants crawling over a human hand holding a smartphone, and the hand subsequently brushing them off and typing in a message (Figures 8-10).

Figs 8-10: An ant nest provides a subterranean passageway underneath the earth from Mozambique into the Philippines.

As the film's second transition into its third and final narrative strand, set in the Philippines, this sequence is remarkable on a number of accounts in terms of the film's global cognitive mapping. Most notably, it sits in stark contrast with the first transition, in which, as we have seen, the connection between young people in Argentina and Mozambique is forged through a digital interface that separates off the computer screen in the former country from the webcam in the latter. Here, conversely, the connection between Mozambique and the Philippines is effected not through the invisible signals of wireless communication but via the invisible connections that bind us all – including nonhuman animals – to the earth as the planet we inhabit. Symbolically, the sequence thus functions as an underground journey to the centre of the earth connecting two different continents, and in so doing it acts as a counterpoint to the idea of technology as the only connective tissue in the world. This is conveyed in particular through the scale interplay that the sequence throws into sharp relief.

In place of humans in full figure followed from behind – the film's main visual coda – the viewer is instead offered the image of magnified ants. Their enlarged size gains in significance at the end of the sequence, which enacts a reversal of scale yet again by reducing the ants back to their 'normal' size while simultaneously enlarging the human hand holding the smartphone, which occupies the screen in a close-up shot. Lasting over four minutes, the powerful effect of this sequence is one that reverberates until the film's end and retrospectively inflects the preceding content. By halting the film's human-centric narrative to show an ant colony in close detail, the sequence asks us to relativise the world of characters not merely in relation to each other

within the entire world – as is the norm in the global network narrative – but also in relation to the unseen world literally underneath our feet, and thus to a much wider, networked ecosystem that includes the natural environment and nonhuman animals. This leads us to take the film's title with a pinch of salt and to similarly take issue with its English translation, which does not fully grasp the arguably ironic nuances of the original. While the Spanish title reads *El auge del humano*, with *auge* literally meaning 'peak', a more faithful if nonetheless cumbersome translation would thus read as 'The Peak of Humanity', which conveys the culmination of an achievement or effort. But if humans would have achieved the height of their powers through the continued perfecting of communication technologies, the ant sequence diminishes humanity within a vaster ecology – not to mention the film's critical stance on globalisation. In its showing of earthly, subterranean connections beneath the technologised networks of the human, *The Human Surge* underlines that the instantaneous connections of technology are one among other networks of which we also, and perhaps more fundamentally, form a part.

It is worth noting, in this respect, that a number of scenes throughout the film make recourse to the visual trope of holes and subterranean passageways that imply the existence of mysterious links beyond the nets and webs of technology. At one point in the first strand, for example, Exe mysteriously walks into a cellar, only for the scene to be abruptly interrupted. Later on, he and a group of friends all enter into a dark hole inside a giant tree for reasons that remain undisclosed. In the Mozambican narrative, Alf unexplainably peeps into a cone-shaped object while at work, whereas, in a nonsensical conversation exchanged by the young man and woman in the last strand, the man suddenly mentions that he 'fell into a dark hole'. No doubt these visual and conversational allusions remain undeveloped in the film, but when examined in relation to the hole into which the camera plunges to reveal the inside of a nest that traverses the subterranean plane, they gain in significance in their intimation of worlds whose opening up into the 'real' world remain unseen but perhaps no less real.

That the film chooses to show a network underneath the earth as the ground on which we walk, wander, stride, and stroll is thus emblematic, for it is this choice that allows the film to reintroduce the earth back into the invisible world system of 24/7 capitalism. In so doing, *The Human Surge* asks us to reckon with the physical planet we live in in a manner not dissimilar to what philosopher Kelly Oliver conceptualises as 'earth ethics'. She writes:

> [i]f we conceive of the earth as a network of dynamic, living, relationships, then we also change the way we 'see' ourselves... This means that individuals, species, and nations are fundamentally interconnected. It means that relationality is primary rather than secondary to who we are and what we can do... In other words, it means that we must embrace the fact that we are limited creatures who are not just living on earth, but rather part of the biosphere that constitutes its very being.[32]

For Oliver, then, an earth ethics

> acts as a counterbalance to globalism insofar as it is grounded on the earth as a dynamic network of relationships through which each and all earthlings share the earth even if they do not share a world. At bottom, the earth is a limit against which totalizing tendencies of global technology abut.[33]

Such statements resonate with *The Human Surge* in a number of ways. For, if this is a film that, in line with other contemporary genres, depicts a networked global space and the relationality of human worlds in the world system, it simultaneously foregrounds that this relationality extends to other nonhuman beings and entities and to the very ground that holds us all together. At the same time *The Human Surge* underlines that, as humans, ours are always already 'partial and limited perspectives', as Oliver further notes, thereby reinforcing that a full and complete grasp of the social totality is ultimately impossible.[34] This is achieved, as we have seen, through its most notable and consistent formal device, namely a tracking camera whose unbroken takes summarily restrict our spatial and temporal point-of-view *on* the world and whose jerky movements similarly remind us of our phenomenological constraints as beings *in* the world. If on a macrostructural level the film is decidedly world-encompassing in its narrative aspirations, its insistence on the durational and material folds of the everyday makes us acutely aware of the phenomenological plenitude of lived life.

No doubt this plenitude has to contend with the film's equally insistent focus on technology as a lure promising to take us out of our world and into the online worlds of bottomless stimulation and instant gratification. But whereas *The Human Surge* never adopts a moralising or condemning tone, it nevertheless shows that 'the earth is a limit against which totalizing tendencies of global technology abut'.[35] Importantly, though, this is not the 'whole-earth' that Cosgrove deems the twin ecological discourse of a 'one-world' rhetoric, which often presupposes a detached and all-knowing gaze – a God's eye perspective or a view from nowhere – as encapsulated in the Apollo photographs of the earth from space.[36] In its picturing of the world

as a dynamic constellation of forces and networks that both underpins and escapes the human, this is a film whose global cognitive mapping, rather than premised on an all-encompassing view from above, is instead grounded on a bottom-up perspective of the earth as the Earth.

## Author

Dr Tiago de Luca is Associate Professor in Film Studies at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality* (2014) and the editor (with Nuno Barradas Jorge) of *Slow Cinema* (2016). He is currently writing his new monograph, titled *Envisioning the World: Film, Media, and the Earth*.

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# Notes

[1]    I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their enormously helpful suggestions.

[2]    Jameson 1991, p. 54.

[3]    Jameson 1995 (orig. in 1992), p. 2.

[4]    Ibid., p. 5.

[5]    Toscano &amp; Kinkle 2015, p. 22.

[6]    See for example Nilsson 2013 and Hageman 2016.

[7]    Jameson 1988, p. 347.

[8]    Ibid., p. 349.

[9]    Ibid., my emphasis.

[10]   Ibid., pp. 350; 351.

[11]   Lynch 1960, pp. 2-3.

[12]   Jameson 1988, p. 353.

[13]   Amad 2010, p. 89.

[14]   See Gunning 2008.

[15]   See Amad 2010; Castro 2011 (chapter 3 in particular).

[16]   See Avezzù &amp; Fidotta 2018.

[17]   Jameson 1988, p. 349.

[18]   See Shaw 2011 and Ciafone 2014 for a critique of Babel and the global network film along these
lines.

[19]   Jovanovic 2016, p. 37.

[20]   For a critique of the world symphony film along these lines, see Jovanovic 2016 and Roberts 1998.

[21]   Cosgrove 2001, pp. 263; 265-266.

[22]   The multinarrative films of Alejandro González Iñárritu, such as Amores Perros (1999) and Babel
(2004), adopt this strategy, as does Steven Soderbergh's Traffic (2000), to cite a few.

[23]   See interview with the director in Rizov 2017.

[24]   Ide 2017.

[25]   Jameson 1992, p. 10.

[26]   Toscano & Kinkle 2015, p. 20.

[27]   Crary 2014, p. 15.

[28]   Ibid., p. 17

[29]   Ibid., p. 10

[30]   Ibid., p. 71.

[31]   See de Luca & Barradas Jorge 2016.

[32]   Oliver 2015, p. 41.

[33]   Ibid., p. 40.

[34]   Ibid., p. 41

[35]   Ibid., p. 40

[36]    Cosgrove 2011, p. 263.