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Dislocation in Space and In the Imaginary World

Alberto Boatto

I would like to begin by sketching the paths, the approaches that will take us into the present, the After-Modern, the epoch which, despite ingenious map-makers and busy explorers, remains a continent yet to be circumscribed and charted and therefore one largely unknown.

The first route is the one traced by the object and its estrangement: it concerns, therefore, the status of the object as dislocated, removed from its ordinary context, just as a particular number is extracted from its series or a soldier ordered out of the ranks by a simple command. I shall emphasize a two-fold shift: in quantitative scale and, simultaneously, in category. Starting from a localized and fragmentary estrangement, the kind common in the Modern (De Chirico, Duchamp, and Magritte offer the most authoritative examples) we arrive at a global estrangement, planetary in scale. This latter estrangement, which I shall call "ecumenical

estrangement," while begun in the experimental laboratory of art, has finally matured in that hybrid, equivocal dimension that lies beyond both the imaginary and the real. This is precisely because it was born of the successful leveling of these latter two orders of being, which no longer reveal themselves as distinct. This first approach can be conveniently summarized in a simple formula: The shift from the individual ready-made of the Modern to the mega ready-made, that super object-trouvé proper to the After-Modern—the Earth itself.

Alongside this first path we shall follow a second one which clearly intersects it. We can call it the mirroring or duplication route, where the model sets itself at the origin of its own double, as a man sets himself in front of the mirror or in front of those mechanical extensions of the mirror, the photo, movie, and television cameras. Again I shall emphasize a shift: from that typically Modern fragmentary mirroring or duplication, which proceeded by accumulation and the addition of parts, to that global mirroring or duplication characteristic of the After-Modern. Here the gigantism of the mass media has played a leading role. Freely adapting a term of Lacan's, I shall call this the Earth's "mirror stage." For the first time the Earth is seen in its totality, in its global entirety. The Earth *looks* at the Earth with all the active and transitive tension of this verb. The Earth mirrors itself to itself twenty-four hours a day. This second approach can be summarized in a new formula: The shift from the typically Modern image or double of the particular thing to the synthesizing double that sums up the whole: the photogram, the planetary Double of the Earth.

When we have traced these two approaches, the estranged object and mirroring, the continent we have reached cannot help but appear to us in space. This continent, on which we dwell, displays strongly-marked features: it stands out as a continent dislocated, off-balance, projected outwards. Indeed it defines the space outside. From the information complex to the military, all those large, influential conglomerates that so transparently wield power have overflowed into that outer dimension where they now drag all beings, animate and inanimate, after them in their upward, gravity-denying thrust. Consequently a viewpoint has developed, an external gaze that provides us today with the single valid external viewpoint from which to focus our Earth, which, meanwhile, has assumed the appearance of a gigantic found-object. This is my framework; I must now fill in the concrete details.

The strong watershed image of our times is the one already time-worn, commonplace and disquieting that spreads itself

across the television screen: the terrestrial globe, or as it might be, one of its spinning hemispheres. For our culture, for the subtlety and power of penetration demanded of it, this photogram plays the part of the "purloined letter" in the sense of that phrase in Poe's tale. Invisible as is everything seen too close up, invisible precisely like the letter tucked into the letter-rack in the story—but for that no less fateful for all of us—there it is for the first time ever before our gaze, the total image of the Earth, its photogram, its more than hyper-realist identikit. As usual, it was a voyage that established the perimeters of this map. But the cosmonauts' inaugural flight required the communications media's gigantism to establish it and situate it in the planetary circuit.

As in every voyage of discovery, the farthest point reached in the course of the voyage established the new point of observation. In the past, at the beginning of the Modern, after Christopher Columbus' ocean-crossing, the fresh point of view which measured Europe against the ancient continents was provided by the continent just then discovered, by the New World. "L'autre" in relation to "le même"—meaning what is different, compared to the familiar and the known—presented itself, five centuries ago, under the confused aspect of the exotic and the faraway, as that "part of the world newly discovered." So we read on one of the earliest globes ever made, the one created by the cartographer Giuseppe Castaldi in the mid-sixteenth century. Today, after the interplanetary expeditions, the new point of view, which frames the entire globe, not merely a portion of it, is provided by the conquered shore of the outside. L'autre, which was far away but still within the confines of the Earth, has pushed outwards, five hundred years later, taking up station outside the planet. But what comes toward us now from the outside, the extra-terrestrial, is in no way the strange, the absolutely different, but instead a very realistic projection of the terrestrial, of us or more precisely of a separated piece of us: an extension of the scientifico-technico-military complex. Stanley Kubrick was right in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, labored as it was: the space rocket is only the latest extension of the club that an anthropoid of genius, in the exuberance of invention, tosses into the air in the solitude of the Mesozoic. With the extra-terrestrial so closely skirting the terrestrial, science fiction has caught up with science itself, stamping it with its own banal phantasmagorical features. For the very reason of its becoming true even science fiction, along with so many other things, has "already happened."

Peering out of this external laboratory, we perceive what I call "ecumenical estrangement." The Earth which is "here," beneath our feet, has now shifted, moved; it has become a "there." For the very first time it surprises us by coming from outside: we cross its path in the worn-out spectacle of a television screen. In this way we have succeeded in the acrobatic feat of having pass before our eyes the very solid totality we actually trample with our feet. With analytic precision, while "here" remains a material and fragmentary space, a very limited slice of the terrestrial, "there" displays quite opposite features: it is potentially an exhaustive, unitary, and, at the same time, symbolic space. Like "there," "here" is also restored to us transformed into an image, a sign, linked always to the totality. Nevertheless, if the "elsewhere" comes to us as an image, let us keep in mind that at its origin lies a clear and living gaze: the gaze that in a moment of homesickness or absentmindedness a cosmonaut casts back at the far-off Earth.

Two divergent structures have helped cause this "ecumenical estrangement." The first, chronologically, is the sphere of the imaginary, followed by the scientifico-technico-military complex.

In the laboratory of the modern imagination, in those spearhead operations which had Giorgio De Chirico and Marcel Duchamp as protagonists, we encounter the estrangement of an object or mass-produced icon. There are two salient phases in the process of estrangement: 1) the extracting of the object or the icon from its ordinary context which anchored it to the crude certainty of a practical, disguising function; 2) the introduction of the object or icon into a new generic rather than specific, spatial context, highly characterized, thus capable of surprising and disconcerting the observer's eye.

This route to estrangement, more over, once available, revealed itself as voracious; in a centrifugal flight, the scope of which was to achieve totality, it seems to have had the vocation to estrange itself, taking everything out of its proper context. In a quantitative progression, where what counts is addition, the plus sign, we have gone from the one-off to the multiple and from the multiple finally to the total. We set about from the single ready-made—the "Bicycle-wheel," the "Bottle-rack," the "Coat-stand"—or even from the biscuit, the rubber glove, the framed landscapes of De Chirico and we arrived at the addition of numerous—forks and iron files, for example—inventoried, crammed into Arman's "Accumulations," as we arrived at homogeneous sets of utensils—the tableware from an eaten lunch—frozen and suspended, mummified [*museificato*] in the works of Sperri.

Even more symptomatic than this numerical progression has been the other parallel extension of range, a progressive enlargement of vision in a change of scale which in this case has gone from the smallest to the largest: we have moved from the single object to the architectonic set until we have adopted the planetary scale. If up until then Duchamp had limited himself to estranging the single object, even before working on the scandalous "pissoir" re-baptized "Fountain" and duly countersigned with a pseudonym, the Dada master had already tried to transfer his work to an architectonic level. In 1916 he had worked on the theme of a New York skyscraper, the Woolworth Building, trying, by estranging it, to draw it out from the urban context of the American metropolis. His failure to find a satisfactory title prevented Duchamp from completing the undertaking. In the subsequent decade it was Magritte who, certainly aided by the greater flexibility of paint, offered us the record of a glacial work of estrangement conducted on a global and cosmic scale. In his painting, not only rocks in relation to the sky, but even one planet in relation to another, play away from home, act out of character. But it was Pietro Manzoni who touched one of the extreme points of estrangement: when he set his "Socle du monde" upside down on the ground so that the world might metaphorically stand on it, as an equestrian statue stands on its pedestal, what was the Italian artist proposing if not deliberately to extract, to exhibit, to estrange the world? Significantly, that was in 1961, seven years before the first landing on our satellite Moon.

This estrangement produced in the laboratory of the imagination was overtaken and duplicated, fifty-six years after Duchamp's invention of the ready-made, by the triumphant scientifico-technico-military trinity. Having abandoned the small hermetic laboratory of the language of the avant-garde, we moved onto the dilated scene of the universe where the combination of liquid-fuel rockets and the swollen state of the instruments of communication made possible the total displacement of the Planet Earth. In the course of this endeavor, the Archimedes of the After-Modern let himself be guided by a daring hypothesis: that of being able to move the world without the need of a point of leverage. Thus he passed over working on the mega-object Earth—as the Dada master had done on the object in an experimental way—to work instead on the observer, changing his optico-spatial location in relation to the same mega-object, the Earth. His ruse consisted in transporting and setting up the observer's eye in the exterior realm. First on the Moon, where it lay at an average distance of

384 thousand kilometres from the Earth and subsequently on the numerous artificial moons which, like so many rings of Saturn, scrutinize in close-up all the manifestations of the terraqueous globe. In this way the eye is permanently stationed outside the Earth; every gaze we receive comes from the outlying territories; the gaze of the After-Modern is precisely this outsider's view which possesses the power to make of the Earth a super objet-trouvé of an imperfectly spherical kind which rolls before our eyes in the void of the starry spaces.

We have not yet finished our reading of this uncertain planetary map revolving on the television screen. It marks in fact a further concomitant happening: the unanimous entry of the Earth into the "mirror stage." Metaphorically the Earth has come to the point of mirroring itself, of seeing itself through the collaboration of our eyes or, better, through the intervention of that all-seeing mechanical lens which the surgery of technology has managed to graft onto the human eye.

Throughout the modern age, first the photo, then the cinema, and lastly television, all of which are extensions of the mirror, or better, mirrors "endowed with memory," have done nothing but duplicate and double reality: every living being and every object comes accompanied by its own sharp image, with its luminous shadow, its double, trailing hard on its heels. Even the first nineteenth-century photographic plate showed itself capable, in its twilight game of light and shade, of imprinting an unstoppable acceleration. From the start, the individual portrait in the daguerrotype first doubled into the portrait of the couple and then multiplied into the portrait of the circle of friends or of an entire class, religious, professional, or military, to the point where the individual portrait disappears into the portrait-apotheosis of a group: an entire battalion, or the mustered crew of a flagship all together in pose. The photo seems intent on squeezing the vital statistics of humanity into an image the size of a membership card.

As with estrangement, so too along the path of duplication, what has a decisive effect in the photographic conquest of the world is the widening of the field, the enlarging of the scale of vision. In a singular way Niépce's first plate—which bears the date 1826—already indicates the line of future development: presenting us with a glimpse of a road with serried roofs, framed by a window, it witnesses to the desire for a gaze which, coming upon the outside, the exterior, intends to absorb, the whole world avidly and obstinately by duplicating it. From the start, the photo-

graphic eye tends to lift, to frame before it as much space as possible. There is significance, therefore, in the competition among the most enterprising professional photographers of Europe to reach the most elevated heights of the major capitals in order to take panoramic views. That authentic "enfant du siècle," Paul Nadar, by daring to go up in the balloon "Le Geant" in 1856 to take shots of Paris from above, celebrated from the beginning that marriage, proof against all betrayal, which was forever to unite the photographic lens to ascending flight: balloons, airships, biplanes, aeroplanes, finally satellites and interplanetary rockets.

In this way, the circle is in the end welded to its beginning: from mirror fragment to mirror fragment, from double to double, suddenly and all at once, we have entered into possession of reflection, of the total and synchronous image of Planet Earth. There it is: we can point to it. Like any other object, the Earth itself has come to fashion its own double, or, like Narcissus, it reflects its own effigy on the stream of electromagnetic waves. If the gaze, then, of the After-Modern is the detached gaze from outside, the situation in which the Earth finds itself, is one of global identity between the plane of reality and the plane of vision.

Up to this point we have been taking hold of an image, the Earth framed by the screen, which hides like Poe's "purloined letter," behind its too commonplace presence, behind its ostentatious self-display. But beyond the fact of appropriation, what really interests us is to penetrate its meaning. The question then is: What does this duplicated and estranged Earth mean? Let me again make clear that to ask ourselves for the hidden meaning of this image is in effect to ask ourselves about the meaning of the estranged object, given that the Earth has changed into a huge ready-made.

Let us also remember that the etymology of the word "object"—in Latin "objectum"—indicates that which is exposed, that which has, in other words, been set before our eyes. Through estrangement the object that has been deliberately placed before our gaze, whether a domestic appliance or the object Earth, seems to open out toward two possible meanings, orienting itself toward two opposing significations.

The first is the instrumental meaning. The object planted in front of us displays its function. We can appropriate it, use it, cause it wear, exhaust it, grasp it. The Earth itself, once estranged, reaches the point of displaying with great sharpness "the thing," the great utensil to which it has been reduced. At this point we

run across Heidegger's thought and his definitions: "the world as the set of the utilizable" and again, "the nullity of the world as the complex of utilizable things." This functional meaning of the object Earth, it should be emphasized, in no way waits to be constituted, but is precisely the meaning that, first the Modern, and now the After-Modern, have instituted and immediately translated into the behavior pattern triumphantly operating in the goings-on of every day. In that view the map of the world spread out before us represents nothing but

- a) a deed map embracing the total census of property;
- b) an economic map with raw materials and every other kind of resource marked upon it;
- c) a military map which shows, however, only one sector of the actual "theatre of operations" which has expanded out of the terrestrial to include and annex the extra-terrestrial, going beyond any conceivable enlargement of Clausewitz' theory of war.

Besides this instrumental sense, the estranged object is open to a second possible interpretation. In this latent sense it can happen that what stands before us unattached, separated from an intimacy that has been shorn away with violence, makes its return to us in the guise of a stranger, and re-emerges in the troubling greatness of the enigma, of the disquieting, of an unknown X enthralling and enthralled. The exit of the familiar in the direction of the extraneous and the unknown has the power to incite a question, to set us before a hieroglyph, an incognito which dwells within an equation whose every co-efficient is unknown to us since all have shifted. Furthermore, if the Earth has begun to look like an unhinged door or Duchamp's over-publicized "Pissior," its present state of disarray helps things return to their original guise of "prodigium," "portentum," "monstrum." At the farthest reach of the gaze cast from the outer shore upon the dislocated Earth, there is nothing but "monstra": animals, stones, grass, machines, men, horrors. "Propterea quod in Terra omnia monstra sunt." What comes to our help in the direction of the unknown X and the enigma, more even than Duchamp's ready-made, is De Chirico's estranged image, the biscuit, the vegetable, the set-square or the sphere expelled from the perspective grid, as they appear in an early work by the master of the Metaphysical school. What has changed since then to a dizzying extent is the scale and the level at which the operation is conducted: this unknown X has slipped out of the world of the image

and of language and installed itself instead in reality, taking on a planetary scale; by now it extends to the whole Earth.

It is extremely likely that this second meaning, which sees in the estranged and duplicated Earth an unknown X, an enigma, an immense Sphinx, has yet to be developed in depth and its corresponding behavior to be invented. The map which the mirror surface displays appears on this view as a map to be explored and deciphered, as a terrain to be traversed with the whole gamut of the senses as an invitation to adventure. What is now put in question is disinterested curiosity, participation, eros, the spirit of contemplation. Thus, in a universe like ours opened up by a voyage, if the cosmonaut is the figure put into orbit by the technological universe—and the figure who in fact inaugurated our period—the new aesthetic figure put into orbit by the imagination of the After-Modern will be the “psychonaut.” Again, if the “cosmonaut” is the figure that has definitively sanctioned the Earth as a “thing,” a tool that stands before us, docile at our disposal, it will be the “psychonaut” instead who institutes the Earth as an incognito, an enigma, a “monstrum.” Thus the “psychonaut” becomes a new voyager who endeavors to record the current phase of displacement and change involving the entire globe, to experience it using essentially his own psycho-nervous system, at once fragile and acute, fired by the imagination and “*les paradis artificiels*,” to cite Baudelaire’s biting metaphor. If, as Jean-François Lyotard claims, we have lost the great narratives, those closed, meaningful narratives which explicated the Modern, the psychonaut accepts the risk of attempting “micronarratives,” open and available to meaning, in which he leaves behind the traces, the account of his voyage of discovery and trial. Like all of us, the “psychonaut” too is a voyager who has lost the point of departure, his launch pad.

“Ecumenical estrangement,” along with the “hall of mirrors” which covers the whole Earth, sets our horizon just as the Atlantic routes set it for Baroque Europe. And as these factors modify the world and Man, so also do they modify our imagination. The gap between the imaginary and the real which is to be hoped for, can without doubt be brought into being, provided however that all the fundamental shifts and changes that have already occurred are first acknowledged.

At this point an infinity of trails might be followed. All I want to do in conclusion is to concentrate on the difficulties confronting the imagination, required as it is to operate in a dimension where

reality, language, and vision have been leveled. At this point our choices and our behavior must either give confirmation to this leveling—by choosing the familiar utility—or we must try to break it apart, opening gaps and creating disparities within it—by choosing the unknown X, the enigma, the unfamiliar voyage.

I would like to offer two examples of this great difficulty. The first concerns the leveling taking place between the technological instrument and the magical object and which I offer as a guessing game, a simple enigma. I shall read a simple list, and the enigma I propose concerns not so much the name of its enormously celebrated author as the nature of the object that the words describe and, at the same time, the identity of the vision's recipient.

Here then is the famous list: "I saw the populous sea, I saw the dawn and the evening, I saw the multitudes of America, I saw a silvery spider's web at the centre of a black pyramid, I saw a shattered labyrinth (it was London), I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, veins of metal, water vapour, I saw convex equatorial deserts and each of their grains of sand, I saw in Inverness a woman I shall never forget, I saw her unruly locks, her haughty body, I saw a tumour in her breast. . . . I saw horses with their manes in the wind, on a beach of the Caspian Sea at dawn, I saw the delicate bone structure of a hand, I saw the survivors from a battle in the act of sending postcards, I saw in a shop window in Mizapur a pack of Spanish cards, I saw the oblique shadows of some ferns on the floor of a greenhouse, I saw tigers, pistons, bisons, sea-storms and armies."

Also worth pointing out from this passage which I am quoting incompletely is the position of the man enthralled by this vision. One reads: "The reclining position is indispensable. As also are darkness, immobility, and a certain adaptation of the eye."

One can hardly fail to recognize in the handling of this list the style of Luis Borges, and perhaps even the object described: the very mysterious Aleph, which is said to be "a formidable observatory," "a point in space which contains every point," "a place where are to be found, without their becoming confused, all the places of the Earth seen from every angle."

But one might also observe with what perfect ease this quotation adapts itself to the description of a banal television set, this "point in space which contains every point," and how the reclining position, the darkness, the immobility, the very addiction of the eye fit the description of the position of the everyday user, the idle tele-viewer.

As always, it requires a fantastical and metaphysical mind to register objectively that which our eyes fall on everyday and which we make use of with listless automatism. But if the quotation is valid for both objects, it means that the Aleph, the magical object, has been demoted to an overinflated technological object, and that this instrument has by now become a piece of our everyday furniture.

After the Aleph, that is, after the leveling between magic and technology, the second example concerns the leveling that has occurred between the old point of view of the world of imagination and the present point of view of Man.

It is not here a question of a descriptive list, but of a series of images representing birds, reptiles, mammals, fish—abstract friezes carved in the Peruvian pampas at Nazca during the pre-Columbian period. We are dealing with a grandiose and unique work that has provoked much discussion and speculation. The concrete fact is that the total perception of each of these images evades human perception by going beyond it. The images at Nazca are visible in their entirety only when viewed from above. It so happens that the ancient people who created these figures centered the total vision in a place X, where man cannot be found but where instead there is the other, the imaginary, the unknown, the as yet unthought. The eye for which this gigantic piece of land-art was created is not the human eye but the eye of the gods.

Well, today, in that point, in the place X, Man has insinuated himself with no difficulty, thanks to the most ordinary of airplanes in flight. The point of view of the gods, we may say in conclusion, has become the ordinary viewpoint of Man.

What has the Modern ever sought if not an estranged, dislocated, displaced vision? What runs through the Modern if not this tension, this extremely lucid obsession to catch sight of things from a new point of view, from a fresh angle, to surprise them in a state of indiscretion, ecstasy, childishness, obscenity, wonder?

Today this estrangement has changed from an imaginary, symbolic condition into a real situation, into a condition of fact. The estrangement thus brought about as a goal must now be taken as the starting point. Such is the possibility, the occasion, the chance, extremely arduous as it is, that we now have before us.

(Paris, June 1985)