1.

A View From Nowhere
(Death and the Astronaut)

I'm a researcher and lecturer in Illustration, here at Falmouth. For a long time (and often without realising it in these terms) I've been thinking critically and philosophically about the rhetoric of scale in images and visual narrative.

2.

Today I want to talk specifically about depictions of the earth, represented as a whole from a perspective positioned outside the earth.

The history of the production and persuasive use of whole earth images is closely entangled with the history of the "discovery of the idea of human extinction" that Tom outlined.

And many depictions or visualisations of human extinction themselves, such as the examples shown by Tom, fall within this category of views which attempt to represent a 'whole'. They are views of total destruction - representations of the loss of humanity at scale.

(I should be clear at this point I'm talking about a limited Western history of image-making, and even with this vaguely defined caveat I'll still be making some gross generalisations)

3.

The image of the world considered from above, has often been used rhetorically and in an ethically motivated way, to put humanity "in its place"

In other words, many Whole Earth images carry the same message as this bestselling children's book by Oliver Jeffers from 2017. "Here we are".

But the question remains for each 'whole earth' image: Who are 'we'? And what do we mean by 'here'?

Where - or what - humanity's "place" is; and - what that singular noun 'humanity' is supposed to signify has shifted, and continues to shift, with time and context

Taken in the context of our broader panel theme on human extinction - I want to ask where are human beings in my various examples of the whole earth image?

Are we gods, with a cosmic responsibility for the earth? or is the individual human subject and the agency we have, an anthropocentric illusion that vanishes with scale - are we bacteria by another name, hitching a ride on the back of a rock?

Representations of the earth from above have been used to support variations on both claims, sometimes, in a shimmering, paradoxical kind of way, at the same time…

4.

In this way whole earth images, much like the famous image of the rabbit and the duck, can be thought of as dual aspect, or "multistable", as the curator Anselm Franke puts it - they can be ideologically anchored in completely opposing ways.

This is partly due to the self-referentiality, the indexicality - the here-we-are-ness of these images. (Back to 3)

We are both signified by the image and positioned outside it at the same time - we adopt the all-seeing perspective facilitated by the image - even as we contemplate our own insignificance as represented *in* the image

The theorist Josh DiCaglio argues that this double perspective is a built-in feature of scale itself - where scale in his definition is “a systematic accounting for significant shifts in a measured range of observation” - the crucial point here is that scale, as a function of *observation* and not of objects (i.e. Things do not ‘have’ scale - they only become scalar in relation), “ties two perspectives together by putting them in relation to each other.”

It’s this *dual* nature of the whole earth image that I want to bring to the table today - that, and the suggestion that that the whole earth image is always a rhetorical image - *how* it used and framed, and the values it is used to represent can, like the depictions of extinction, tell us a lot about how we see ourselves.

PART ONE inside/outside

5

“To observe human affairs from above means, at the same time, to see them from the point of view of death…” This quote by historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot identifies a particular rhetorical move which can be traced back to the Ancient Greek Cynic and Stoic philosophers.

6

Take the dialogue ‘Charon, or the Inspectors’, by the satirist Lucian, writing in Greek in the second century AD. Lucian imagines Charon, the ferryman of the dead, on a mission to understand human life, and why we’re so reluctant to leave it

With the help of Hermes, messenger of the gods, he adopts a view from above by piling lots of mountains on top of each other, from where he remarks on the transience of it all, “How absurd it all is!”, he cries- all lives are bubbles, he concludes, which must inevitably burst.

The subtitle to this dialogue, 'Inspectors', sometimes translated as 'observers or overseers', was a nickname given to the cynics, whose philosophy emphasised the meaninglessness of most human concerns

For the cynics - the view from above and the view from death are the same thing. "It is no accident," Hadot explains, that Lucian chose Charon, inhabitant of the underworld, as his observer of 'human affairs'.

The overview represents and contemplatively facilitates an untethering from earthly desires and striving - in particular those attached to material luxury and power - which, from the bird's eye perspective of death, are rendered meaningless.

7.

Jump forward 1000 years or so and you can see an interesting visual continuation of this rhetoric brought into the service of christian theology in the whole earth image of the Hereford mappamundi.

The map shows the world as a geographical but also a temporal whole. Both places and events are depicted. Mortal time and space are conflated and contained within this circular boundary.

8.

Outside and above the frame is God, and a depiction of the second coming.

And spelt out around the frame are the letters MORS - spelling 'death'.

Historian Jerry Britton writes how this annotation confirms "the mappamundis prefiguration, for those pilgrims who gazed on it, of death and the end of the world, of the 'new heaven' and 'new earth' to come."

The pilgrim perceives the earth and its history as a finite, bounded whole. And in this way, the mappamundi facilitates a view from infinity, a god's eye view.

Brotton goes on to characterise this image then as as a map 'unique in the history of cartography that eagerly anticipates and welcomes its own annihilation...."

The desired "affective and cognitive reponse" is, as art historian Marcia Kupfer puts it, "the flash recognition of man's true place in a divinely ordained scheme'" and therefore the "comprehension of the insignificance of his works"

It is, in this way, an image that illustrates and anticipates apocalypse, as the end of earthly time and space. But it is not, of course, an illustration of human extinction. The whole earth is en-framed and contained within a larger system of value and meaning, and while the 'earthly' is left on the one side of death, the righteous human soul passes through, shedding the earth like a skin, when judgement day comes.

Granted a glimpse of this 'divinely ordained scheme' - the pilgrim is both humbled, in the style of the cynics, *and* granted - if briefly - an all-seeing, divine, perspective from eternity.

PART TWO resolution and scale

9.

For the cynic philosophers and the medieval theologians, the image of the earth as a whole was an imaginative exercise - but in the second half of the 20th century, this perspective became *accessible* in a more literal sense - to a few humans - astronauts - first hand, and to the rest of the world via photography and mass media.

Here is one of the most famous images of our Earth, the Blue Marble - taken from space in 1972. It is significant in being the first - and currently the last - photo of an

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entirely illuminated globe as seen and captured by a human photographer.

10.

This photograph of the whole earth galvanised a growing environmental movement in the US in the 1970s, centering on California - and encapsulated in Stewart Brand's Whole Earth catalogue – on the basis that this image represented the fragility, unity and interdependence of all life on earth.

But many others have since critiqued the adoption of the whole earth image as an environmental icon – arguing that the perspective it adopts represents a separation or alienation from the non-human world on which we depend.

In astronaut testimonies and responses from the time, the earth is irresistibly analogised as various objects that fit neatly and vulnerably into a human hand - a marble, a pea, a blue and white Christmas ornament.

The earth becomes conceivable as an object. Seen and truly understood as 'globe', the implication is that it is a form to be surrounded, rather than something which surrounds *us* (Ingold),

Part of the critique here is that the image creates the illusion of the god's eye view, what Donna Haraway terms 'the god trick', the illusion of seeing 'everything from nowhere' - carried over from the ancient uses of the overview - a mastering, all-encompassing gaze, which claims objectivity despite the conditions of its production.

And in 1985, social theorist Yakov Jerome Garb cautions the readers of the Whole Earth Review that the image can be read as a "rearward view of a distant and abandoned earth", arguing it "fosters false illusions of detachment and independence from an earth on which we are still inextricably and crucially dependent. It lessens anxiety about our destruction of *this* earth"

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If this is the case, then the effect is not so different from that of the mappamundi - the astronaut stands on the other side of the death line, out in infinity, looking back on a doomed and finite earth.

11.

(As an aside I find it very interesting that the The New York Times commissioned *this* as the cover for the landmark, and controversial, 2017 essay by David Wallace-Wells - outlining worst case scenarios for climate change and possible routes to human extinction)

11.

Exacerbating this sense of a rearward view of a doomed earth, contained in the whole earth image, these illustrations by American space Artist Jon Lomberg, commissioned by science writer and communicator Carl Sagan, in 1983, adopt the Blue Marble perspective – but, published in the midst of the Cold War, they depict the imagined aftermath of a nuclear conflict and the onset of a nuclear winter

The illustrations were commissioned for the popular press magazine 'Parade', and explicitly designed to persuade the public of what Sagan saw as the real and imminent risk of nuclear holocaust, and influence the nuclear policies of the Reagan administration – Sagan's accompanying article concludes

"Fortunately, it is not yet too late. We can safeguard the planetary civilization and the human family if we so choose. There is no more important or more urgent issue."

Reference to the likes of the 'human family' often accompany and anchor the reading of images like this, in which humanity is conceptualised as a single, undifferentiated, agent.

Critic Anselm Franke notes how at an "an abstract, formalistic level … the circle, like

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the zero in mathematics, is a pure function and thus corresponds to the smallest unit in the relation: the site that since the 1970s has equated the “self”, as a relational function, with the planetary relationship.”

13.

In Sagan’s famous pale blue dot speech - illustrated by the 1990 image of the earth taken by the voyager space probe - he describes the earth as “a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam”

14.

He uses this to move to the same observation as the ancient philosophers, that “there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world,” but concludes, “To me, it underscores our **responsibility** to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

Here - the smallness of the earth signifies *fragility* which, to make the Sagan move, demands and carries the **responsibility** of care.

Without a larger framework, or a ‘divinely ordained scheme’, the smaller the dot becomes and the emptier the space around it - the greater the onus is on *us* to keep it habitable.

But, operating at this scale, Sagan’s use of ‘we’ and attributions of *our* ‘responsibility’ are levelled at ‘humanity’ as a single unit.

PART THREE fractal

What can the individual, do with Sagan’s notion of ‘responsibility’ as attributed to ‘the human family’?

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Philosopher Lydia Baan Hofman summed up the problem nicely, in a paper from this year (2025), by describing this interaction with a group of pre-teen school children:

15.

"Some children shared their worries of an imminent apocalypse. Others dreamed of moving to Mars. But neither this problematic hope in 'humanity's' technological proficiencies – to go to Mars! – nor the despair of collective guilt and inaptitude to 'solve what *we* have done' allows my pupils a sense of agency to constructively respond in times of crisis. To what extent are my pupils 'humanity' and able to act as such? Should they try to become 'humanity'? Or are there other ways to respond to, or better, *within* ecological urgencies?"

17.

While both the blue marble and pale blue dot are used by Sagan to promote humanist ideals, there are - of course - no humans observable in these images at all. We are at the wrong resolution. How are we to connect these images to our subjective experience and agency - if they are to make a difference.

Ultimately *this* is the challenge of **scale.** The challenge of trying to work meaningfully with ideas of cause and effect, response and responsibility against the backdrop of very real X-risks – in a post-earthrise, technologically mediated world where multiple competing scales are accessible and thinkable at once. A world which, to quote Josh DiCaglio again, "insistently and persistently reveals ourselves beyond ourselves and demands that we comprehend this dissolution.

These are two pages from influential children's book 'Cosmic View: The Earth in 40 Jumps" by the Dutch educational reformist Kees Boeke. The image on the left shows the earth as dot, the image on the right, the nucleus of the sodium atom.

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The 40 pictures which systematically jump 'out' (scaling x 10 each page) from a human scale to an intergalactic scale, then back 'in', arriving at the nucleus of an atom. Boeke writes that "in only 10 of them, is life known to exist" Any object we might describe as recognisably 'human' is only visible 4 of the images, or - if we are to use Boeke's interesting choice of word - only *exists* in four of the images.

We don't actually have to depict human extinction to depict a world without human subjectivity - we just have to zoom out from where we are right now. (Or, indeed, zoom in.)

19.

In an often-cited essay, published in 2017, the writer Daisy Hildyard describes every individual as having two bodies. The first is "the place you live in, made out of your own personal skin", and the second is "your own literal and physical existence". This second body is the body as it exists at different scales, with collapsing borders and boundaries, our physical impact and our biological presence.

"The threat posed to the human by the second body," she writes, "is not the end of the world, but the loss of individuality… "if your second body is determined by its consumption and emissions and its individual difference is not perceptible from a great height, then there is no meaningful difference between your body and a cow and even a car."

Ecological and environmental crises make us increasingly aware of the existence of our second body, even as it becomes hard to understand where and how the second body meets the first - in other words, how objects across different scalar domains meaningfully interact.

20.

"In order to see two bodies then the single worldwide perspective won't do. The view

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is homogenous when you look down from the outside - the Earthrise is no good, if you are trying to see your two bodies at the same time. If you look out the window you will not fit the whole world in your eyeline. To see a body on a global scale, reaching from Germany to Syria, or from France to Bangladesh, means that you lose sight of the individual flirting, arguing, or eating his gnocchi."

Hildyard's 'Second Body' essay presents a new kind of whole earth narrative, which adopts what the environmental historian Thomas Lekan has described as a 'fractal poetics'. The fractal whole earth narrative, I offer - is one I have seen more and more of in recent years, and cannot be captured in a single frame - it depicts multiple scales simultaneously, in interconnected, multi-resolution, multiscalar narratives.

21.

The final Whole Earth depiction that I want to reference, very quickly, with this in mind, is 2023's Orbital, a fictional novella by Samantha Harvey.

Orbital narrates a day in the life of six astronauts aboard the space station and the narrative oscillates between the very individual hopes, fears, memories and appetites of the subjects aboard the station and descriptions of the planet from above. Scalar interactions between the individual and the whole are gestured towards in both literal and metaphorical ways.

Over the course of this day, one of the astronauts, Chie, receives news of the death of her mother.

Her mother is described as a survivor of Hiroshima; that epoch-defining event which brought the possibility of self-created human extinction into sharp relief.

Chie, writes Harvey, "suffers the shock of bereavement while in orbit". And from her position outside the earth, where her mothers body remains, and in the imaginative space evoked by mention of Hiroshima - another form of grief is shadowed.

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Harvey spells out the connection, writing “Since that news, they find themselves looking down at earth as they circle around it … and there’s that word: mother mother mother mother. Chie’s only mother now is that rolling, glowing ball…”.

In reference to the string of unlikely events which led to Chie’s existence, her mother’s near escape from the devastation of Hiroshima, Harvey writes a line that resonates on a number of scalar levels.

“She comes from a line that slipped through the crack, the fissure of history, found a way out while the whole thing came down.”

The end

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