



In the World
Interior of
Capital

PETER SLOTERDIJK

Translated by Wieland Hoban

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For a Philosophical
Theory of Globalization

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polity

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In memoriam
Siegfried Unseld

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First Part

On the Emergence of the World System

. . . and the pirate globe drifts
in the stormy ether.

Henri Michaux, *Inexpressible Places*

1

Of Grand Narratives

The present essay is devoted to an undertaking of which it is unclear whether one should call it untimely or impossible. In recapitulating the history of terrestrial globalization, it seeks to provide outlines for a theory of the present using the means of a philosophically inspired grand narrative. Whoever finds this ambition outlandish should consider that while it is certainly provocative to assert it, it would be an act of intellectual defeatism to abandon it. Philosophical thought has always tried to tell us who we are and what we should do; for over two hundred years, this has also included information about how to date ourselves in 'history'. The penetration of the philosophical thought of Old Europe by time, however, has so far caused only a partial revision of the body of tradition. Now that the era of one-sided time-idolization seems to have ended, however, the lived space is also demanding its due. Kant, at least, already knew that reason itself had its model in spatial orientation.¹ Whoever follows this clue far enough should logically arrive at a changed view of the task of philosophical activity: philosophy is its place comprehended in thoughts. In the moments when it knows what it does, it shows the characteristics of a conference in which many disciplines all have their own bit to say. To elucidate the situation, grand narratives are necessary.

Such an attempt appears untimely in the light of the consensus that has been predominant among intellectuals for a generation, namely that precisely such narratives, the 'grand' ones, have had their day once and for all. This opinion certainly does not come from nowhere. It is supported by the plausible conviction that the known narratives

of this type, despite seeking to construct the course of 'history' on a large and general scale, had irredeemably provincial aspects; that, controlled by deterministic prejudices, they smuggled projected goals of shameless linearity into the course of events; that, because of their incorrigible Eurocentrism, they were in conspiracy with the colonialist looting of the world; that they, because they taught salvation history openly or covertly, helped bring down profane disaster on a grand scale; and that now, a very different form of thought would have to emerge – a way of speaking about historical matters that would be discreet, polyvalent, non-totalizing, and, above all, aware of its own perspectival conditionality.

Everything about this view is correct – except for the conclusion, which is almost always pulled in the wrong direction, that of resignation. It is true that the historian of ideas, looking back on the master texts of philosophical narration and the classical exegeses of the historically animated world with the sensibility of today, must have the impression of dealing with a bundle of rhapsodic exaggerations. What was previously called philosophy of history amounted without exception to delusional systems of prematurity. They always led to hasty montages of their material onto violently drawn straight lines, as if the thinkers had been seized by an overactivity syndrome that chased them towards the wrong goals. Fortunately, the times have passed in which doctrines could appear attractive while promising their adepts access to the engine room of world history – or even the administrative floor of the Tower of Babel – with the help of a handful of simplifying concepts. Today, the vanitas of all past historico-philosophical constructs is obvious even to the layperson; every first-year student or gallery owner meanwhile understands enough about these fabrications to show a faint smile at such terms as 'world spirit', 'historical goal' or 'general progress'.

Satisfaction over these clarifications does not last long, for the customary talk of the end of the grand narratives overshoots the mark as soon as it is no longer content to reject their intolerable simplifications. Has it not already hardened into a comfortable meta-grand narrative itself? Is this new intellectual myth not allied unmistakably with an acerbic sluggishness that sees in the extensive only the burdensome, and in the great only the suggestion of mania? Were the post-dialectical and post-structuralist scepticisms not followed, in fact, by a partial paralysis in thought of which the idea-hostile focus on detailed histories from obscure archives that is currently making the rounds in the humanities constitutes the mildest form?

If the grand narratives known so far – the Christian, the liberal-progressive, the Hegelian, the Marxist, the fascist – have been seen

through as unsuitable attempts to seize power over the world's complexity, this critical realization neither delegitimizes the narration of things past nor exempts thought from striving to cast an intense light on the comprehensible details of the elusive whole. Has thinking not always meant taking on the challenge that the excessive would appear concretely before us? And is this excessiveness that challenges us to act conceptually not inherently irreconcilable with the tranquilizing nature of the mediocre? The wretchedness of the conventional forms of grand narrative by no means lies in the fact that they were too great, but that they were not great enough. The meaning of 'great', of course, remains arguable. For us, 'great enough' means 'closer to the pole of excess'. '[A]nd what would *thinking* be if it did not constantly confront chaos?'²

The sketches presented here form a side wing of the *Sphären* project, which constitutes a more extensive attempt to configure the narrative and the philosophical with each other in a partly neo-sceptical, partly neo-morphological fashion.³ In the process of carrying out my intentions – the final volume was published in 2004 – I discussed the development of the orb motif in the philosophical cosmology and theology of Old Europe, examining its psychodynamic implications in some detail and testing its powers of anthropological shaping. This brought to light, among other things, the high psycho-semantic or religious utility value of the classical orb speculations. In the encompassing orbs, the ancients discovered a geometry of security; in this geometry there developed, as was to be shown, the strong motive of metaphysically or totalistically producing worldviews. The narrative of divine spheres and universe orbs laid out in *Sphären II, Globen* revealed why these sublime imaginary constructs of wholeness were doomed to vanish with the beginning of the Modern Age,⁴ while the human location, the planet Terra, took on increasingly explicit contours. In a dawn that took centuries, the earth rose as the only and true orb, the basis of all contexts of life, while almost everything that had previously been considered the partnered, meaning-filled sky was emptied. This fatalization of the earth, brought about by human practices and taking place at the same time as the loss of reality among the once-vital numinous spheres, does not merely provide the background to these events; it is itself the drama of globalization. Its core lies in the observation that the conditions of human immunity fundamentally change on the discovered, interconnected and singularized earth.

If the present characterization, unlike many other attempts to address the matter, emphasizes its philosophical aspect, this is based on the frequently overlooked fact that the historical object, the

terrestrial globe, is a thing full of metaphysical quirks that like to hide beneath the veneer of the ordinary. It constitutes a geographical-philosophical bastard whose logical and physical peculiarities are not so simple to comprehend. On the one hand, the printed blue orb with the savannah-coloured patches initially seems no more than one thing among many things, a small body among many bodies, that statesmen and schoolchildren set in rotation with a single hand movement; at the same time, it is supposed to represent the singular totality or the geological monad that serves as the foundation for all life, thought and invention. It is this terrestrial question of location that becomes ever more binding in the course of modernization: while the ancient conception of the cosmos paradoxically made the earth the marginal centre of a universe that humans could only observe from within, the moderns perceived it as an eccentric orb whose roundness we could verify ourselves through external viewing. This would have unforeseeable consequences for the generations after Mercator. For us, monogoeism – the conviction that this planet is unique – transpires as a fact that is rejuvenated daily, while monotheism can never again be more than an age-worn religious thesis that cannot really be brought up to date, not even with the aid of pious bombs from the Near East. The proofs of God's existence must bear the blemish of their failure, while those of the globe's existence have an unstoppable influx of evidence on their side. In the following, we shall concern ourselves with the circumstances under which such extensive proof of the unity of the equally massive and sublime object we inhabit was able to accumulate.

These intimations have taken us into the heartland of philosophy – assuming we accept the supposition that the pursuit of philosophy is not, as one has often heard in recent times, merely an activity with no object, a *modus vivendi*, but also possesses an objectivity in its own right, not to mention a focus of its own. Philosophy can and should be conducted artfully as a quasi-science of totalizations and their metaphors, as a narrative theory of the genesis of the general, and finally as a meditation on being-in-situations – also known as being-in-the-world; I call this the 'theory of immersion' or general theory of being together, and use it to explain the kinship between recent philosophy and the art of the installation.⁵

One of the main characteristics of conventional views about globalization is, to be frank, a discreet comic element. It manifests itself in a wild philosophical activity that clearly feels most at ease as long as members of the profession do not interfere in the discussion. As a result, the most philosophical of all the contemporary *topoi* of politics and cultural theory travels the world with virtually no perceptible

involvement of the philosophical field. The most effective totalization, the unification of the world through money in all its transformations – as commodity, text, number, image and celebrity – took place through its own momentum, without the members of the faculty for world wisdom having, initially, more to say than any newspaper reader in a country with a vaguely free press. Where contemporary philosophers commented on the subject with the skills of their profession, this usually occurred in marginal publications, without any notable effects on the larger flow of words – with the possible exception of Negri and Hardt's *Empire*, which received worldwide attention.

The irony of the situation is increased by the fact that one could believe this levelling-out of the philosophical vote into the general muddle of opinions to indicate a desirable state. One could convincingly argue that integration into non-hierarchical everyday communications was the best thing that could have happened to philosophy, which claimed until recently to dream of becoming practical. It could even be claimed that an explicit sentiment in philosophical utterances of not wanting to be anything special proved one was dealing with a form of thought that was at the necessary level for our times – and the levels of today have renounced the bad habit of standing too high. Consequently, the spokespersonship of non-philosophers in the matter of globalization could be taken as an indication that 'society' – or whatever else one wishes to call the coexisting and politicized multiplicities – has become immune to dangerous philosophically induced enthusiasms and imperiously generalized mottos about the state of the world. So why lament the marginalization of philosophy?

Far be it from me to deny the productive aspects of such a view. The monopolization of the discourse on globalization by political scientists and sociologists, to whom we owe the continuation of journalism by morose means, would be quite bearable on the whole – were it not for the fact that the basic concepts of these debates are almost all unrecognized philosophical terms whose amateurish use leads to insinuations and distortions of meaning. Ultimately, anyone who conducts philosophy without regard for the state of the art is always propagating a myth, openly or covertly, and not infrequently with dangerous consequences. One of the most notable side effects of the current para-philosophical wave is the proliferation of unverified statements that no longer stop at the borders of nation-states. Pirated copies of cluelessness circulate freely in the whole world. They provide a powerful demonstration of the thesis that today, anything seeking customers will sell on all markets or none. Curiously enough, it is often liberal minds, those declared enemies of the grand

theological and philosophical narratives, that plunge into politically virulent hypotheses with underived concepts of globality and totality, of space, time and situation, of unity, multiplicity, interaction, inclusion and exclusion, along with other words that add up to an editorial when strung together.

For the time being, the only way to combat the undesired side effects of such precipitations is to recall the philosophical origin of the globe motif. This could begin with the frugal note that 'globe' is a noun representing a simple idea, the cosmos thesis, and a twofold cartographical object, the sky of the ancients and the earth of the moderns; it is on this noun that the usual adjectival derivations about 'global' facts depend, which were only recently re-elevated to nominal status via the English verb 'to globalize' – which resulted in the hybrid figure of 'globalization'. This term does, at least, have the virtue of emphasizing the active quality of the current world event: when globalization occurs, it is always through operations with long-distance effects.

The next step would be to show that the notion of an orb which serves as a vessel or carrier for biological and reflexive life was constitutive for the philosophical interpretation of the universe among the Greeks. The cosmology of Western antiquity, that of Plato and the later Hellenistic scholars, had devoted itself to the idea of representing the totality of what exists in the stimulating image of an all-encompassing sphere. The name of this construct is still present in the European memory, whatever nostalgic taints it may have accrued, for since ancient academic times, the great round body of the existent world has been known as the *cosmos* – a name that calls to mind the ornamental and beautiful character of the universe. The same object was simultaneously addressed as *uranos*, the sky. The titanic name expressed the notion that the world reached its limits in a final ethereal vault – a view one could equally have called a hope. The ancients wanted to conceive of the sky as a wide vase that held the fixed stars and calmed the human fear of falling. To Aristotle, the sky was the outermost shell of the orb that contains everything, but is contained by nothing.⁶ Measuring this sky in thought meant carrying out the first globalization. In the process, the good news of philosophy emerged: that humans, as much as the disorder they experience might depress them, cannot fall out of space.

The true beginnings of globalization, therefore, lie in the rationalization of the world's structure by the ancient cosmologists, who were the first to construct with conceptual, or rather morphological seriousness the totality of the existent in a spherical form, and presented this edifying construct of order to the intellect for viewing. Classical

ontology was a spherology, as a doctrine both of the world and of God – it offered a theory of the absolute globe in both forms.⁷ It gained a reputation for itself as a sublime geometry that placed the well-formed, the circular, that which runs back into itself, at the centre: it acquired sympathies as the logic, ethics and aesthetics of round things. Among the thinkers of the European tradition, it was an established fact that the good and the round amount to the same thing; that is why the spherical form could become effective as a cosmic immune system. Theories of the unround came into play as a far later achievement – they heralded the victorious experiential sciences, the death of God, chaos calculations and the end of the Old Europe.

Recalling these circumstances means exposing why ‘globalization’ as a whole is a far more logically and historically powerful process than what it is taken to mean in current journalism and among its economic, sociological and police informants. The relevant political speeches, whether given during the week or on Sundays, deal exclusively with the most recent episode, which is marked by a greatly accelerated exchange of commodities, signs and microbes – to say nothing, for now, of the financial markets and their phantoms. Whoever wishes to envision the ontological gravity of the events we discuss as globalization – the encounter between being and form in a sovereign body – must highlight widely overlooked differences between periods in the notion itself. For this reason, the term ‘globalization’ is augmented here by the adjective ‘terrestrial’. It is intended to show that we are dealing with a chapter in a longer story whose intellectually arousing dimensions the contributors to the current debate, in most cases, do not adequately comprehend.

Terrestrial globalization (realized practically through Christian-capitalist seafaring and politically implanted through the colonialism of the Old European nation-states) constitutes, as we will show, the fully comprehensible middle part of a three-phase process whose beginnings I have discussed at greater length elsewhere.⁸ This five-hundred-year middle section of the sequence went down in history as the ‘age of European expansion’. Most historians find it easy to view the time between 1492 and 1945 as a completed complex of events: it is the period in which the current world system took form. It is preceded, as noted above, by cosmic-uranian globalization, that powerful first stage of spheric thought that – acknowledging the preference for spherical figures in classical ontology – one could call morphological (or rather onto-morphological) globalization. It is followed by electronic globalization, which will be dealt with by those alive today and their descendants. What distinguishes the three great

stages of globalization, then, are primarily their symbolic and technical media: it makes an epochal difference whether one measures an idealized orb with lines and cuts, sails around a real orb with ships, or lets aeroplanes and radio signals circulate around the atmospheric casing of a planet. It makes an ontological difference whether one envisages the one cosmos, which fully encloses the world of essences, or the one earth, which serves as the bearer of various world-formations.

The climax of spheric metaphysics – Dante and Nicholas of Cusa are its eminent witnesses – is at once the turning point towards its dissolution. The decline phase of the sphere-cosmological interpretation of the existent set in with the cultural caesura that we, following the trail of Jacob Burckhardt, call the Renaissance. The great historian and morphologist had suggested the formula of the ‘discovery of the world and man’ for this departure to the Modern Age – which, as we shall see, is identical to terrestrial realism’s phase of ascent. If we look at the oceans, it begins with the great voyages of the Portuguese; if we look up to the sky, it begins with the ‘revolutions’ of Copernicus and with Kepler’s abandonment of the dogma of ideal circular motion in planetary orbits. By removing the foundation of the idealism of the round, this renunciation had to bring about the collapse of the consoling ethereal firmament. From those days on, a very new turn towards the planet earth took place in an inexorable sequence of logical and empirical chapters – perhaps it will one day be grasped that the discovery and mapping of the neurological moons, human brains, are still part of that same turn. It is through this that the monogeistic faith of the Modern Age is empirically underpinned; the turn initiates the age of earth acquisition whose saturation phase we entered barely half a century ago.

In the present context, the term ‘saturation’ has an action-theoretical meaning: after the satisfaction of the aggressive hunger for the world that manifested itself in the excursions and occupations of European agents, an era began in 1945 – at the latest – whose mode of world-making differs clearly from that of the preceding time. Its hallmark is the increasing priority of inhibitions over initiatives. After terrestrial globalization had taken place over centuries as one-sidedness in action, people have now been looking back on the deeds and mentalities of that era with an obligatory contrition for the last few decades – they bear the cautionary label ‘Eurocentrism’, as if to convey that one has renounced the works of this formerly so arrogant centre. We will characterize this epoch as the time of the crime of unilateralism – the asymmetrical taking of the world whose points of departure lay in the ports, royal courts and ambitions of Europe. It

will be shown how and why the complex of these rash, heroic and pitiful deeds had to go down in history under the name of 'world history' – and why world history in this sense of the term is definitely over. If history means the successful phase of unilateralism – and we will defend this definition further below – then the earth's inhabitants are unmistakably living in a post-historical regime. How far this can be reconciled with the claim of the USA, as the 'indispensable nation', to be the heir of the unilateral conception of the world will be examined later in a section of its own.

Globalization has been saturated in the moral sense since the victims began reporting the consequences of the perpetrators' deeds back to them from all over the world – this is the essence of the post-unilateral, post-imperial, post-colonial situation. It has been saturated in the technological sense too since fast goods vehicles and over-fast media outdid the sluggish world traffic of the seafaring age (which does not, incidentally, change the fact that there is more disenchanted drifting on the sea today than at any earlier time: 95 per cent of material world trade currently takes place by sea). One can now return from an aerial tour around the globe virtually the same day one leaves, and one usually learns of great political events, serious crimes and tidal waves on the other side of the world a few minutes or hours later. It has been saturated in the systemic sense since the carriers of this reaching out into open space were forced to acknowledge that all initiatives are subject to the principle of reciprocity, and most offensives are connected back to the source after a certain processing time. These repercussions now take place within intervals scarcely longer than a human life, and often even shorter than their actors' terms of office, such that the perpetrators themselves are increasingly confronted with the consequences of their actions – one must therefore acknowledge the trials of criminal heads of state such as Pinochet, Milošević, Saddam Hussein and other unfortunate unilateralists as moral world firsts. As immanent justice gains ground, the forced ideas of retribution in the hereafter – once an indispensable ingredient in advanced-civilized morality – can lose significance for us. The law of increasing density gives the idealistic thesis that world history includes the Last Judgement new meaning: in the compacted world, all actors who have ventured far out are indeed subject to uninterrupted assessment by their supervisors and opponents; the expectability of resistances and countermeasures gives the concept of reality its current hue. When there is dense event traffic, the individual initiatives follow the law of increasingly reciprocal obstruction – until the sum of all simultaneous undertakings stabilizes in a hyperactive, vibrating jelly: that is what the phrase 'post-historical civilization',

correctly understood, means. Word is getting around that the terms 'co-operation' and 'mutual obstruction' mean the same thing.

The process of terrestrial globalization can be considered to have reached its completion with the establishment of the gold-based world monetary system by Bretton Woods in 1944;⁹ at the latest, however, it ended with the installation of an electronic atmosphere and a satellite environment in the earth's orbit in the 1960s and 1970s. The same movement encompasses the founding, however hesitant, of the international courts of law, those havens of justice in which atrocities that have travelled around the world are brought back to their perpetrators.

It is at this level that the manifestations of the current *third* globalization come into view. These will primarily be discussed in the second part of this attempt, which deals with the establishment and arrangement of the capitalist 'world interior'. To describe the globalized world, which could equally be termed a 'synchronous world', we shall invoke the image of the Crystal Palace from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* (1864) – a metaphor that refers to the famous large-scale enclosure for the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The Russian writer believed that it held the essence of Western civilization, as if in a final concentrate. He recognized the monstrous edifice as a man-eating structure, in fact a modern Baal – a cult container in which humans pay homage to the demons of the West: the power of money and pure movement, along with voluptuous and intoxicating pleasures. The hallmarks of the Baal cult, for which modern economists offer the world 'consumer society', are still encapsulated most convincingly in Dostoyevsky's palace metaphor, even if we prefer to keep our distance from the author's religious suggestions – as well as Walter Benjamin's brilliant and obscure intimations about 'capitalism as religion'. The 'Crystal Palace' houses the world interior of capital, the site of the virtual encounter between Rainer Maria Rilke and Adam Smith; we will hand over to these authors at the appropriate time. We have taken up the term 'crystal palace' once more in order, first and foremost, to express the sentiment that the current talk of the 'global market' is ill-suited to describing the constitution of life under the spell of obtrusive monetary circumstances. The world interior of capital is not an agora or a trade fair beneath the open sky, but rather a hothouse that has drawn inwards everything that was once on the outside. The bracing climate of an integral inner world of commodity can be formulated in the notion of a planetary palace of consumption. In this horizontal Babylon, being human becomes a question of spending power, and

the meaning of freedom is exposed in the ability to choose between products for the market – or to create such products oneself.

In terms of general spatial feelings, it is characteristic of the third wave of globalization that it de-spatializes the real globe, replacing the curved earth with an almost extensionless point, or a network of intersection points and lines that amount to nothing other than connections between two computers any given distance apart. While the second wave, at low and medium speeds, had raised the immense extension of the planet to human observation, the third, at high speeds, made the Modern Age's sense of expansiveness disappear once more. The response to this today is a nebulous unease at the over-communicative constitution of the world system – a justified sentiment, we would argue, for what is celebrated today as the boon of telecommunications is experienced by countless people as a dubious achievement with whose aid we can now make one another as unhappy from afar as was once possible only among next-door neighbours. Where the dignity of distances is negated, the earth – along with its local ecstasies – shrinks to an almost-nothing, until nothing remains of its royal extension but a worn-out logo.

After these preliminary remarks concerning the title of the book, we must still answer the question of how seriously the heading of the final part of *Sphären II*,¹⁰ which has been incorporated into the present study in a modified form, was really meant. The author asks the reader to believe him that he finds the endism and ultimatism of the apocalyptic features pages no less ridiculous than do their weariest readers. A 'last orb' was not discussed out of any intention to perform a philosophically distorted western. The grand narrative of the encounter between being and the circle, however, was intended to provide the background for an elucidation of why terrestrial globalization does not merely constitute one story among many. It is, as I mean to show, the only period play in the life of reciprocally discovering peoples – also known as 'mankind' – that deserves to be called 'history' or 'world history' in a philosophically relevant sense.

World history was the working-out of the earth as a bearer of cultures and ecstasies; its political character was a triumphant one-sidedness of expansive European nations; its logical style is the indifferent view of all things in terms of homogeneous space, homogeneous time and homogeneous value; its operative mode is compaction; its economic result is the establishment of the world system; its energetic basis is the still copiously available fossil fuels; its primary aesthetic gestures are the hysterical expression of emotion and the cult of explosion; its psychosocial result is the coercion to become cognizant of distant misery; its vital chance is the possibility to compare the

sources of happiness and the strategies of risk management interculturally; its moral crux is the transition of the ethos of conquest to the ethos of letting oneself be tamed by the conquered; its civilizatory tendency expresses itself in a dense complex of reliefs, assurances and guarantees of comfort; its anthropological challenge is the mass production of 'last human beings'; its philosophical consequence is the opportunity to see the one world rise in countless brains.

It should not be difficult to admit that the compression of the many previously separate worlds into one global context is a subject in which the concerns of philosophy and historiography converge. Anyone who looks back through the logbook of the last half-millennium, which bore the widely aggravating, but materially correct title 'World History of Europe',¹¹ will understand in what sense the orb navigated by Magellan and his successors can be called the last, or even the only one.

2

The Wandering Star

When Greek philosophers and geometricians began to measure the universe mathematically two and a half thousand years ago, they were following a strong formal intuition: that all things ultimately moved in circles. Their interest in the totality of the world was kindled by the easy constructibility and symmetrical perfection of the spherical form. For them, the simplest form was at once the most integral, complete and beautiful. The cosmologists who gathered in the ancient Academy and other places of learned quarrelling were now considered not only the greatest rationalists, but also the most distinguished of aesthetes. Anyone who was not a geometrician or an ontologist was no longer of any use as a connoisseur of beautiful things. For what was the most beautiful thing – the sky – if not the material realization of the best, namely the whole? The Greek prejudice in favour of rounded totality would survive until the days of German Idealism: ‘Do you know its name? The name of that which is one and is all? Its name is Beauty’ (Hölderlin, *Hyperion*).¹

From that point on, then, the name for the perfectly beautiful – *sphaira* – was formulated geometrically. This rise of the world form over the world material was guided by an aesthetics of completion that remained in force until modern Europe implemented a different set of rules concerning the beautiful and the un-beautiful. If the subtle and the massive cosmos were ever to be integrated into a single conception, it had – as was thought at the time – to be in the notional shape of the orb. It was in the sublime nature of this super-object to remain unrecognizable to ordinary eyes: there is an orb that is too large for trivial perception and too sublime for sensory

comprehension. This is hardly surprising; since philosophy started its war against the sensuality of the people's opinion, invisibility has always been presented as the foremost hallmark of deeper realities.² What reveals itself to the senses is, according to the philosophers, mere illusion and example, while the enduringly essential appears only in conceptual thought. Regardless of whether it is an ideal construct or a manifest phenomenon, however, no object since has succeeded in satisfying and humbling its contemplators like the all-encompassing orb, which continues to shine from afar, bearing its dual name of *cosmos* and *uranos*, long after disappearing into the archive of disused ideas.

As soon as the concern was to formulate a concept – or rather an image – of the planet's globalization, however, it was the aesthetic of the ugly that had to assert its jurisdiction. The decisive aspect of this process was not that the spherical form of the earth had been ascertained, and that it was permissible – even before clerics – to speak of the earth's curves; it was the fact that the particularities of the earth's form, its edges and corners, were now in the foreground. These alone are informative for science, for only the non-perfect – which cannot be constructed geometrically – permits and requires empirical research. The beautiful in its pure form can safely be left to the idealists, while the half-beautiful and the ugly occupy empiricists. While perfection can be designed without recourse to experience, facts and imperfections cannot be deduced without it. That is why uranian-cosmic and morphological globalization had primarily been a matter for philosophers and geometricians; terrestrial globalization, by contrast, would become a problem for cartographers and a nautical adventure, and later also a matter for economic politicians, climatologists, ecologists, terror specialists and other experts in the uneven and entangled.

It is easy to explain why this could not be any other way: in the metaphysical age, it was impossible and impermissible for the planet to present itself in a more distinguished light than its position in the cosmos allowed. In the Aristotelian-Catholic plan of the spheres, the earth, being most distant from the encompassing firmament, had the humblest status. Its placement at the centre of the cosmos thus entailed, as paradoxical as it may sound, a relegation to the lower extreme of the cosmic hierarchy.³ Its encasement in a layered system of ethereal domes did provide security within a dense totality, but also shut it off from the upper regions where perfection resided. Hence the metaphysical references to the 'earthly' and its haughty condescension towards the non-perfect down here, on the dimly lit fringe of the heavens. One must concede that the metaphysicists knew

what they were talking about: what is one to think about a place where it is night half the time, and where death and decay await all that lives? The ancients were so impressed by the contrast between form and mortality that they had to separate off a deathless world on high from the death-affected depths. Thus they became increasingly infused with a dualistic nation of the cosmos: whatever happens beneath the moon will always remain marked by failure and dissolution, for this domain is ruled by the linear, finite and exhaustible movements that, in the view of antiquity, could never lead to any good. The indestructible forms and rotations of the eternal ether, on the other hand, are at home in the spaces above the moon. The strangeness of the human situation stems from the fact that mortals, despite their condemnation to heaviness, exist as denizens of both spaces. Each individual consciousness bears the faultlines of those old tremors of separation after which the intact supra-lunar spheres broke away from the corrupt zones beneath the moon. This banishment from perfection left every sub-lunar object with cracks, scars and irregularities. Humans feel the crack in their souls as a homesickness for the better state. It reminds them of brighter, rounder, ethereal days.

What contributed to the attractiveness of the metaphysical regime despite the cosmic demotion of the earth was the circumstance that above and below were clearly separated within it; it offered the inestimable advantage of a clarity that can only be provided by hierarchy. While the lower realm was naturally unable to move upwards under its own power, it remained the privilege of the upper to pervade the lower at will. That is why in ancient times, to think always meant to think from the position of the sky, as if one could get away from earth with the aid of logic. In the old days, a thinker was someone who transcended and looked down – as Dante illustrated on his ascent to paradise. Even Eichendorff's lines from the poem 'Mondnacht' – 'It seemed as if heaven / Had quietly kissed the earth' – still read like a swan song for a schema that had moulded the habitus of being-in-the-world among Europeans for an entire age, which included the confidence that unworldliness could be learned. The poet, admittedly, already lived in a time when heaven only had pretend kisses for the earth, and in which the soul flew through silent lands as if the vehicle of the metaphor could enable it to find the way home from a beautiful foreign place.

In reality, the weakened world of the living in Eichendorff's time had not exercised its *droit du seigneur* with the earth for a long time. Centuries had passed since modern physics discovered empty space and did away with the mythical enclosure of the firmament. Not

everyone found it so easy to renounce completion from above, however; one can sense the sorrow over a world without heaven until Heidegger – an earth that, it was said, was ‘being-historically the wandering star’. We recall that this phrase, which sounds rather distinctive and sombre today, refers not to any given planet, but rather to the one on which the question of truth and the meaning of being arose. The wandering state of Heidegger’s earth-dwellers and their star is the last trace of the lost chance to be encompassed by a heaven.

Even while the earth was still lying in the ethereal domes, however, long before its nautical circumnavigation and its cosmic dis-mantling, it presented itself in thanatological terms as the star on which people died scientifically. Its vague roundness was not an immune barrier that repelled death; it delineated the site on which the fall into time had taken place, that event after which everything that came into being owed its origins a death. That is why, on earth, everything that was made to exist must end – without exception; here clocks tick irreversibly, fuses burn towards ignition points (which is significant for the ‘historical consciousness’ as soon as one understands that the thought figure of the ‘bang’ is more suitable for endings than beginnings). Anyone on earth who understands their situation faces the fact that no one leaves this place alive. People on this gloomy orb must practise – which, in the jargon of later philosophy, meant running ahead into one’s death. That is why, since then, it has been better not to call humans mortals, as was customary among the ancients, but rather the provisional ones. If a historian were asked to say from the perspective of an imagined evolutionary end what human collectives, viewed as a whole, did with their respective times, they would have to respond that humans organized free-for-all runs to their death: as humble processions, Dionysian hunts, progress projects, cynical-naturalistic elimination battles, or ecological reconciliation exercises. The surface of a body in the cosmos on which humans spend their days with futile precautions against the inescapable, then, cannot be a regular one. Perfect smoothness is only possible in idealizations, while the rough and the real converge.

It is scarcely a coincidence that the first systematic utterance concerning an ‘aesthetics of ugliness’ – in the book of the same name by Hegel’s student Karl Rosenkranz, written in 1853 – addressed the real earth as an uneven surface at the very beginning of its argumentation. In this new, non-idealistic theory of perception, the home of humans was afforded the privilege of serving as an example leading towards a theory of natural ugliness.

Mere raw mass, in so far as it is dominated only by the law of gravity, presents us with what one could call a neutral state. It is not necessarily beautiful, but neither is it necessarily ugly; it is coincidental. If we take our earth, for example, it would have to be a perfect sphere in order to be beautiful as a mass; but it is not. It is flattened at the poles and swollen at the equator, and its surface is of the greatest irregularity in its elevation. A profile of the earth's crust, viewed purely stereometrically, shows the most coincidental muddle of elevations and depressions with the most unpredictable outlines.⁴

If one follows this thought to its conclusion, the central principle of a post-idealistic aesthetics of the earth can be formulated thus: as a real body, the geographically quantified globe is not beautiful, but rather interesting – and an interesting thing is halfway to ugliness. A momentary unease returns about the sub-lunar humiliation, known in our time by the watchword 'the human condition'. Then, however, the tide turns: the irregular becomes newly attractive for observation. The modern aesthetics of the interesting and the ugly not only ally themselves aggressively with empirical research, which is by nature concerned with things coincidentally grown together – literally the *concrete* – and with the asymmetrical; they also make disappointment palatable, thus releasing forces for the counterattack. In this way, they assist disinhibition, known in its heyday as 'praxis'. The concept of disinhibition, without which no convincing theory of modernity is possible, gathers together the motives that drive us to intervene in the imperfect and disagreeable.

If one grasps the local disadvantages of existence on the earth's surface soberly enough, one can shake off the restraints that had previously curbed the anger of mortals at the impositions of existence in the unpleasant. As a result, the advent of modernity saw outrage acquire its licence as a basic stance – *on a raison de se révolter* [it is right to rebel]; Prometheus now became the titan of the hour, and Philoctetes his secretary.⁵ Now that the avoidance of the coincidental, the thinking away of the burdensome and the mental adjustment of the disturbing – all advisable in the metaphysical regime – were rapidly losing their orientation by the orderly world above, it was necessary to remain in the unpleasant, to rest among the grotesque and amorphous, to hold out beside the base and adverse. Describing it turns the object of description against itself: the new aesthetics absorbs the cracks, turbulences, ruptures and irregularities into the picture – it even competes with the real for repulsive effects.

In aesthetic terms, terrestrial globalization brings the victory of the interesting over the ideal. Its result, the now-known earth, is the orb, which disappoints as a form but attracts attention as an interesting

body. To expect everything of it – and of the remaining bodies on this one – would constitute the wisdom of our age. As far as the history of aesthetics is concerned, the modern experience of art is tied to the attempt to open the eye, numbed for too long by geometrical simplifications, to the perceptual charms of the irregular.