# Conclusion: So, the Earth is flat…?

## Assembled Perspective

Our ideas about the Earth, and about both our space and place in relation to the world, changed with the innovation and introduction of each new imaging technology, from the map and landscape, to various globes, to today’s post-digital photography. Starting with the balloon-mounted photographic apparatus in the 19th century, and continuing with air, drone, and satellite imaging in the 20th and 21st centuries, post-digital photographs of our home planet, like those which constitute Google Earth or virtual globes, are not captured but rather assembled. By the time they reach our eyes, these images have been adjusted, with the density, opacity, saturation, and transparency of the output images much transformed from the input images or original real-world source images. These images have also been layered with other images, as well as information such as maps and tags, with all of these many layers have been flattened together. And, perhaps most significantly, these images have been corrected, frequently in terms of their perspective, using a polyperspectival system which affords multiple, simultaneous points and angles of view, in order to make a more total image of the Earth by combining human and machine vision.

The view which is constructed through these post-digital photographs of the Earth is total, at least in so far as that it extends the function of human vision, such that we can explore the whole of our world by the use of this technology, and from a perspective or view that the constraints of our bodies and eyes could not achieve. Yet, while this space may at first sight appear to be systematic, and to represent space with the linear perspective found in the architectural plans, drawings, or paintings of the early Renaissance, it is aggregated out of countless perspectives. This totality is, thus, not homogeneous. It is assembled. The total image is composed out of many different parts, which are automatically or algorithmically combined into a whole, across various angles, distances, and perspectives, each with their own respective interpretations and subjectivities. It is not the world unique, total sphere, but as a fragmentary experience, rather cartographically and with different borders which are not existing on the planet, as viewed from above. And it is changing with each new use.

The quantity and kind of information which is contained in any post-digital photograph of the Earth makes it impossible to see this total image all at once. As James Bridle rightly notes, ‘The aggregation of complex systems in contemporary networked applications means that no single person ever sees the whole picture’.[[1]](#footnote-1)Thus, despite the sheer volume of total images which exist in the post-digital age, when compared and contrasted to the pictures of the planet in Antiquity and the Medieval Period, we are actually losing any totalizing view or perspective. In the total images of today, there is in fact no totality. Instead, space and place as they are represented are more fragmented than ever before. Through such technology, the audience, interactor, or viewer can only experience and come to know the world as if it is a broken vase, that has pieces lost or missing, and having no idea of what the object actually looks like, also no possibility for piecing it together. As Fredric Jameson argues, this almost schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of the subjective view also brings alienation.[[2]](#footnote-2) And such a growing inability and incapacity to locate for ourselves a place in the world plays an important part in the burgeoning systematic failure of a globalized society to preserve culture, heritage, and personhood between all its differences and diversity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Assembled World

A major problem for post-digital contemporary perception is that the world appears sequenced, as it is visually indeed assembled, more over it appears overly close, so no distance needed in order to construct a perception is possible. This fractioned appearance reintroduced along with the total image is a concept of absolute space and New Medievalism, elaborated in the Introduction and Chapter 8.[[4]](#footnote-4) The theory of assemblage is often used to analyze perspective and space in the various forms of images from the Medieval Period, Modernity, and their combination in the post-digital age. Yet, in addition to being applied by philosophers in their analysis of more general, cultural. patterns, assemblage logic has many variants when applied to media: from bricolage to collage and from photomontage to filmic montage. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, followed by Manuel deLanda and Saskia Sassen, have theorized on assemblage in a wider context.[[5]](#footnote-5) Following Deleuze and Guattari’s famous theorizing on assemblage, deLanda introduced the model of an ‘abstract machine’, which he applied in his theory of society and which, in turn, Sassen applied to practical concepts.[[6]](#footnote-6) With these analyses, the focus of contemporary theories of assemblage have shifted from material and medial processes in visual culture to a political and social perspectives. These social theories of assemblage are now being practically applied in the analysis of the hybrid geographies which combine maps with photographs. Here, concepts such as ‘territorialization’ and ‘deterritorialization’ refer to the degree of indexicality between the total image and the reality which is being represented.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## The Loss of the Common World

Figure 27: We have never been to Moon, street poster (Internet meme)

In the real world, such processes of fragmentation also are progressing. For example, more and more countries are withdrawing from international organizations, such as with the USA and Israel leaving the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in December 2018, and the UK leaving the EU in January 2020. Yet, at the same time we have never lived in time having more total consequences. While the whole Earth and people all over the world are impacted by climate change and the climate crisis, not everyone shares the total view of the planet. As Timothy Clark writes, ‘No-one sees the Earth globally and no-one sees an ecological system from nowhere’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, even the governments and corporations in both larger or smaller nations which occupy a particular territory behave as if they are isolated rather than connected to the whole. But whatever fate is made by the human species will be the grand master narrative produced, claims Clive Hamilton.[[9]](#footnote-9) None will be spared. At least regarding global warming, as Hamilton writes, ‘there are no more enclaves’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Enclaves, uncontaminated by the virus that is the confidence of one group in their own dominion over another group, will vanish. And if the difference and diversity in humanity is further dispersed and distributed, then this will be at least in part due to the seduction of a total image of the world, an image which does not provide a real picture of how things are, but an image which we construct according to our own attitudes, beliefs, and desires.[[11]](#footnote-11)

## Loss of Place

In addition to a loss of totality in the total view in the total images of the post-digital age, the idea of place is being lost; that is, place is being overproduced, becoming redundant. With the datafication of geography and programmability of images in terms of integrating a realistic effect, the impetus for us to use technology in order to achieve better and better estimation and identification of the real-world geographic locations for objects has led to another function in the combination of map and landscape: the need to capture places.

But does the precision of this location in turn lead to a loss in our sense of place? There are several recent changes of human conditions which today shape our belief of reality, framing it down to a small scale. Overall, humanity is losing its physical contact with the surrounding world. We have lost our joy, which is characteristic of children and scientists alike, in simply observing nature, the way Aristotle did in what I described as his ‘argument from experience’, which is characterized by naïve realism and interpreted in the framework of limited knowledge. In previous eras, this curiosity has led each of us to learn, sometimes completely on our own and independent of any given education, about phenomena such as the horizon of the Earth, the movement of the Earth around the sun which is made visible in changes to the shadows of objects, the turning of the seasons which can be seen in movements of the constellations in the night sky, and solar as well as lunar eclipse and their various shadows. In addition, there are agricultural and urbanization factors which limit our access to nature and influence this detachment. The human race has cultivated more than half of the planet, in many places making views of the horizon literally inaccessible. Today, in or near cities, there is also light pollution, and the sky is obfuscated with smog, to such an extent that the stars may not be visible at all. Because of the speed of transport and communication technologies, even the very idea of the space as existing from a departure to an arrival point has all but disappeared. Paul Virilio thus observed that here ‘depth no longer includes the visual horizon, nor the vanishing point of perspective’, but rather speed becomes the most essential and important dimension.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Time is essential element in our perception of the world which is in front of us. Our eyes move to analyze the space, not only in terms orthogonals but also depth, by focusing on various distances. The interface, as a temporary form-image, is also connected to our understanding of time as well as of space. The speed of the signal through the Internet or from a television network, as well as the speed with which this signal is carried through the device itself, has a temporal quality. This, leads to progressive disappearance of space-time, providing no illusion that the Earth is a sphere and that, hypothetically, one could travel around it endlessly, thereby introducing not only the idea of the finiteness of the planet but also the finiteness of the view. And again, according to Virilio, the speed and acceleration towards instantness have destroyed fixity of both the space and its visualizations.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition they have set the place in motion, so it is impossible to capture it. It is not that our four-dimensional world, with its three dimensions of space (height, width, depth), as well as the temporal dimension, is thereby fixed or flattened, but it has sliced into layers in which it has been decoded, and such layers do not describe general categories.

## Reality Effect

The subjective view angle of humans, and thus the human condition as well, is radically dismissed in total images also because the trustworthiness and truthfulness of these images cannot be verified. Consequently, the very concept of the view angle, as it has been understood in Western culture and thought for the past five hundred years, is disappearing right before our very eyes.

As such, the total image is at once convincing and dangerous. Jean Baudrillard was right: with the image, reality disappears.[[14]](#footnote-14) Instead, indexicality in the total image is merely a realistic effect or style which is applied to the image by the layering of photographs. Through the computational processes of artificial intelligence which combine multiple photographs together, as well as many other kinds of information, the photograph loses its original indexicality, or at least the indexicality takes on more of a symbolic quality, as the indexical realism of photography is being merged with the data systems of mapping. In post-digital photography, the connection between the image and its reference, such as between Google Earth and the Earth itself, is based more on indirect resemblance than direct relation, as has already been suggested by Baudrillard.[[15]](#footnote-15) By confusing the chain of custody for photographic evidence from firsthand witnesses, human or machine, its credibility in relation to space becomes lost. Thus, indexicality in the total image no longer serves as proof to the viewer that the something being represented actually exists in reality, as has long been the role of indexicality in photography.

And it only because of this effect, as Allen Carlson notes, that we are ‘picturing and perceiving nature as if it were a landscape painting, as a grandiose project seen from a specific standpoint and distance’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Photographic realism is just one element in the total image. As I have described across the proceeding chapters, in many if not most instances, photographs become just one layer of material out of many within a complex system. In fact, in many cases the outcome of this process does not make visible any photograph at all. In photomaps, for example, photographs are first added and later discarded. In photomontage, they are stretched or merged. And in orthophotography, they are corrected so that their scale is uniform. Indeed, more often than not, photographs camouflage more complex data. When integrated into maps, however, and both corrected and layered, the photograph becomes less of a medium and more of a style for providing a realistic effect. The photograph is appropriated for the total image because of its visual qualities which carry or convey the natural world to the eye in a way which we recognize as being like our own human way of seeing. Consequently, as an epistemic genre, photography today has acquired a secondary value beyond the indexical. Indeed, the medium has become a ‘slave’ to our culture of hyper-visualization as it is used less for itself and more in more for complex interpretations of reality. Indeed, it is as if the photographic medium has been ‘hacked’ and opened up to intrusion from a ‘virus’ of substantially different media types, whether map, landscape, globe, or just raw data.

The consequences of utilizing photography for its realistic effect in our representations of the world may be far reaching. By introducing complex, non-mimetic models of reality, we distance ourselves from reality even further. The post-digital photographic reality has by now become completely un-checkable, leading even to the production of landscapes which have no relation to reality at all. As Trevor Paglen addresses the issue, ‘As “landscape” in art has moved far outside the frames of painting and photography, a lot of artists are turning towards geography for methodological and analytic inspiration’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Today the landscape exists no longer as an object but as something abject. Rather, our relationship to these new datascapes, at least in terms of cognition, is projective. That is, this landscape itself is a projection of our selves. And each of these projections is individual. Today, total images of the Earth no longer help us to learn about the world. Rather, they function as a barrier between us and the planet, an illusion, which breaks us away from our own human processes of discovery, exploration, and navigation. As with other images of the Earth taken from the air and from space, which some people believe are proof that the surface of the planet is flat, in the post-digital age the total image serves not only to explain our habitat, but to falsely stabilize its ever dynamic and shifting qualities.

1. Bridle, *New Dark Age*, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991*,* 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Many places on the Earth are being erased from maps. According the artwork of Columbian-born American filmmaker Maurizio Arango, being part of the project *Victims Symptom* I have curated which only used few concepts of victimology to show how the number of victims is being reported in media, there are many places of the planet which are erased from media maps. They are not being reported thoroughly even in cases of events with large fatalities. See: Ana Peraica, *Victims Symptom: PTSD and Culture*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Grau, *Virtual Art*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Deleuze and Guattari analyze assemblage in territorial, statist, capitalist and nomadic layer, as well as their amalgams, in a constant change of predicate logic functions. deLanda furthermore is defining parts of the assemblage as coded, arbitrary and variable, contrary to stratum. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*;Saskia Sassen, *Territory Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblage*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008;deLanda, *Assemblage Theory.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. deLanda, *Assemblage Theory*; Sassen, *Territory Authority, Rights.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Throughout *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari analyze various types of deteritorialization, from relative to absolute. See: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 130-149 and 192-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene,* New Zealand and Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2017, Chapter 3, unpaginated. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hamilton, *Defiant Earth,* Chapter 2, unpaginated. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Virilio, *Lost Dimension,* 66*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Virilio, *Lost Dimension*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. He writes: ‘This is also true of geographic and spatial exploration: when there is no longer any virgin territory, and thus one available to the imaginary, *when the map covers the whole territory, something like the principle of reality disappears*.’ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser (trans.), Ann Arbor, Minnesota: University of Michigan Press, 1994, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, Sydney: The Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Allen Carlson, ‘Appropriation of the Nature Environment’, in Alex Neil and Aaron Ridley (eds), *Arguing about Art, Contemporary Philosophical debates*, London: Routledge, 155-166. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. # Michael Dear, ‘An Interview with Trevor Paglen’, in *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria, Doug Richardson. Routledge, 2011, 24.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-17)