Research Article

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“A Wide-Angle View of Fragile Earth”: Capitalist Aesthetics in The Work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand

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Abstract: Taking the widely viewed media work of French filmmaker and environmentalist Yann Arthus-Bertrand's as its subject, this essay posits that despite the filmmaker's stated ecological and humanist position, the formalist strategies he employs—particularly the fly-over and the database—bring with them a set of historical conventions that paradoxically import capitalist and imperialist ideologies and phenomenologies. In particular, the article considers the films *Home* (2009) and *Human* (2015) and the database project *7 Billion Others* (2003-ongoing) as documentaries that deploy techniques of technologically-virtuosic seeing that end up obscuring the very possibility of cognitive mapping that would allow viewers to situate their contents in legible political economic frameworks. Closely related to the concept of the Anthropocene, which holds all people equally accountable for the current environmental crisis, Arthus-Bertrand's work tends to obscure the causes and therefore meaningful solutions for the current situation. The article concludes by postulating that the model of cognitive mapping itself requires more attention to the ways in which particular aesthetic forms mobilize affective dimensions of viewer experience.

Keywords: fly-over, database aesthetics, digital documentary, anti-cognitive mapping

French photographer and filmmaker Yann Arthus-Bertrand is on a mission. Since the late 1990s, he has been translating a lifetime of work as an aerial nature photographer into a humanist documentary project to reform the excesses of capitalism. Not that he addresses political economy directly. Instead, he has developed a rhetoric of innocence by means of which he contrasts the wonder of the natural world, including wildlife, pristine landscapes and Indigenous lifeways, with the horror of urban living, factory farming and extractive industries, such as mining and petroleum. Through powerful visuals of the globe's most spectacular sites, combined with a humanist message of hope for change, his work has inarguably struck a chord. From the 1998 bestseller *Earth from Above* that spawned a follow-up TV series in 2003, to his stand-alone films, *Home* (2009) and *Human* (2015), among others, and his database project *7 Billion Others* (2003-ongoing), Arthus-Bertrand uses high-definition, slow-motion aerial cinematography in intense colour accompanied by soulful world music to provide strong visual and affective support for his global love letters.

At heart, Arthus-Bertrand is a pedagogue. According to Leon Sachs, Arthus-Bertrand inherits the 19th-century republican pedagogical tradition that attempts to attach civic values to object lessons. His work has been adapted for children, and his production company provides free distribution of a “pedagogical dossier” available online in six languages to help teachers use *Home* in their classes.¹ His 2009 TED talk,

1 <http://www.homethemovie.org/en/education/home-education>.

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aply titled “A Wide-Angle View of Fragile Earth,” displays his trademark combination of stunning aerial photography with heartfelt pleas to help save the world. He associates his GoodPlanet Foundation (to which French bank BNP Paribas is a major donor) with the humanitarian aims of the United Nations and other NGOs. A cult of personality has grown up around Arthus-Bertrand who seems to endow the aerial view with a “rhetoric of elevation in the moral sense of the term,” presenting himself as a “spiritual aviator” (Lugon 148; 150).

In what follows, I explore the way in which Arthus-Bertrand's drive to show the global big picture in order to bring about change, paradoxically relies on two dominant forms of capitalist aesthetics, the fly-over and the database. Considering Arthus-Bertrand's documentaries *Home*, *Human* and *7 Billion Others*, I argue that, despite his stated humanist intentions, his work nevertheless plays to capitalist subjectivity. That subjectivity is one that has become accustomed to mediated experiences of omniscience, and the accompanying feelings of superior knowledge and mastery that this triggers. His work is thus a compelling illustration of the contradictions at play when we are taught to look at the negative effects of capitalism through a liberal humanist lens: one risks telling a story about global responsibility that is incapable of mapping global power relations. Using Arthus-Bertrand's work as exemplary of a kind of recuperative critique of capitalism as both flawed and capable of reform, I explore the limits of the discourse of the Anthropocene and liberal humanism more generally for a cognitive mapping of capitalism, perhaps especially when these particular aesthetic strategies are adopted.

***Home's* Anthropocene Narrative**

Home, which was released simultaneously in theatres, on DVD and YouTube, has reportedly been viewed by over 600 million people, making it one of the most watched non-fiction films of all time (Crespo & Pereira). It is the global culmination of Arthus-Bertrand's previously nationally bounded works of locations seen from above (e.g. Greece, Paris, Morocco) and takes as its subject the planetary scale of the Earth's environmental crisis. As with his earlier *Earth from Above* project, *Home* alternates between the sublime beauty of nature and the equally breath-taking scale of its destruction at the hands of development. (Often, as with his images of the tar sands of Alberta, this destruction, when seen from above, is perversely beautiful.) However, as with his earlier work, Arthus-Bertrand avoids any discussion of politics, sticking instead to the refrain heard both here and in his TED talk: “we must believe what we know.” For Arthus-Bertrand, environmental destruction comes as the result of denial rather than the concerted effort to silence and marginalise critique. People (always presented as individuals or small communities outside of any large-scale forms of political organisation) presumably simply need to fight back against humanity's evil tendencies (e.g. greed) in order to restore equanimity and justice. This work will be initiated by those who can see what is put before them since, as Arthus-Bertrand conceives it, our relationship to nature is potentially unifying: “There is a universal quality about beauty; in front of a vast landscape, we all share the same feeling of wonder. When nature is beautiful, we are all moved by it” (qtd. in Mun-Delsalle). For Arthus-Bertrand, then, photographs and films that present a sublime and vulnerable nature to the eyes of the public are capable of producing the promise of future ecological responsibility.

Yet, shot in 120 locations in 54 countries, with every shot taken from the air, *Home* itself expresses techno-imperialist logistics. It is a perfect emblem of the elite European male traveller's frictionless mobility, the filmic equivalent of the environmental epics and “global travel narratives” that Ursula Heise (2012) identifies as increasingly common. Such stories often feature a moral “journalist, scientist or activist who travels around the world to heroically report on crisis hotspots” in an attempt to portray the “world in its entirety” (Heise 63). And just as these stories invariably demand a “globalized and cosmopolitan self” as constituent part of an “environmentalist ethic,” their visual equivalent is the Apollonian view of Earth from outer space, uncoincidentally the very image that appears at the outset of *Home*, serving as “a universalizing mask for a particular vision of global connectedness” (62; see also Cosgrove).

Unlike many aerial views, which are depersonalised, Arthus-Bertrand's perspectives continuously link the viewer back to him (and his stand-in narrators) as a moral teacher and concerned humanist. Perhaps part of

the popularity of his work can be explained by the almost Biblical rhetorical strategy Arthus-Bertrand uses in telling the story of environmental disaster: “Man” has fallen from grace and lost his “harmonious relationship to his environment” in his quest for oil. It is an epic story in which all humans—and none in particular—are to blame for the environmental collapse. Yet the fact that he is mobilising his privileged point of view for the common good rhetorically draws others from the Global North into a story of possible redemption.

A study of audience responses to *Home* undertaken in Italy with viewers of different nationalities emphasised that people appreciated the positivity of the film because they already felt like they were part of the environmental problem and wanted to be part of the solution as well. This confirms a reading of the subject in capitalism as divided and conflicted. By seeing the Earth from space, the audience reported both feeling like astronauts and having a new sense of needing to care for the planet as “small fragile thing” (Crespo & Pereira 177). This response evokes the relationship between a position of privilege and knowledge; feelings of empowerment can be produced by the shift in scale that aerial imagery enables, raising the viewer to the position of a benevolent deity who should be able to take care of things that are, in reality, well beyond their individual control. At the least, these responses highlight the way in which the aerial viewpoint seductively includes the viewer in a technologized, ordered and powerful, if not omniscient, perspective.

Arthus-Bertrand’s environmentally concerned but apolitical views about the health of the planet are typical of the discourse of the Anthropocene, which tends to collectivise human responsibility for planetary change rather than point the finger at the particularly rapacious logic of capitalism and those who benefit from it. Suggesting that we live in an era where humans, rather than planetary forces, have become the definitive geological actors, the idea of the Anthropocene has been roundly rejected by critical geographers, cultural theorists, historians and ecologists for the dullness of its analytic blade (Davis & Turpin; Heise; Malm & Hornborg; Mirzoeff; Todd). James Moore proposes to replace the concept with the even more ungainly term “capitalocene” in order to address the fact that in the Anthropocene’s implication of all humans in “overwhelming the great forces of nature” important distinctions are lost. The Anthropocene, in his words, “reduces . . . human activity in the web of life to an abstract, homogeneous humanity. It removes inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, and much more from the problem of humanity-in-nature” (Moore 81; 82).

Moore is not alone in pointing out that capitalism has been built on a practice of degrading the environment and on excluding the majority of humans and all animals from the category of “humanity.” These categorical strategies have underpinned an imperialist system of exploitation that pays lip service to Nature and maintains a nostalgic fascination with authentic Natural others, at the same time that primitive accumulation, commodification and the expansion of markets are deployed as on-going tactics of dispossession. According to this analysis, global capitalism has consistently expressed a fascination with Nature in the aesthetic realm, even as it works to bring about environmental degradation and conditions anathema to human life on the social and economic level. This contradiction is experienced as an intoxicating cocktail of guilt, exhilaration and nostalgia by the subject of capitalism. And, indeed, all stories of the Anthropocene combine melancholy and hope in equal measure as humans are temporarily granted the vantage point of a wrathful god who, having brought destruction upon the Earth, may now reconsider his actions and restore equilibrium (Heise 70).

Taking the divine view, *Home* begins with nothing less than the emergence of life on Earth 400 million years ago. With the arrival of homo sapiens in *Home*’s story of evolution—exceptionally early given the geological scope of time being invoked—Arthus-Bertrand turns to the film’s central drama: namely, the human use of energy. After showing people who still live in traditional ways, with naturally available energy, including muscle power, drums are heard on the soundtrack as fires shoot up behind darkened trees to introduce the theme of industrialisation. To the accompaniment of insistent music, the narrator Glenn Close says “Humankind found a way to tap into the energy buried deep in the earth ... With oil began the era of humans who break free of the shackles of time. With oil, some of us acquired unprecedented comforts. And in 50 years the world has been more radically changed than by all previous generations of humanity.” A few minutes later the narrator speaks of development’s “thirst for energy” and accompanied by footage of a fly-over of a container port on the image track; she mentions that the shipping industry “caters to the

demands of globalized industrial production.” Here is the crux of Arthus-Bertrand’s contradictory message. The driver of the devastation of the earth wrought by the Anthropocene in his telling is development itself abstracted from any economic system. A repeatedly invoked collective subject has putatively “forgotten” its ties to the earth’s cycles and the value of limited resources, such as clean water. “Without realizing it ... we have upset the earth’s climatic balance” (*italics added*). Yet, given the preponderance of shots of people living according to traditional lifeways, the film betrays precisely who constitutes the “we” of the narration’s interpellation.

With uncanny precision, Arthus-Bertrand recounts a story which has been identified by Malm and Hornborg (2014) as the “Anthropocene narrative.” In this story, the Enlightenment distinction between Nature and Society has become obsolete as humans take on a role as the most important force in the biosphere. However, despite the involvement of humans, the narrative comes to be dominated by natural rather than social science. Thus, as we can see in the sequence from *Home* described above, the story of the manipulation of fire takes dominance rather than highlighting the 19th century British origins of the transition to fossil fuel which might take into account the inequitable global processes which underpinned this development in the first place, such as the exploitation of labour by the market, including, prominently, slavery, and the widespread genocide of Indigenous peoples (Robinson). As Malm and Hornborg clarify:

Capitalists in a small corner of the Western world invested in steam, laying the foundation stone for the fossil economy: at no moment did the species vote for it either with feet or ballots, or march in mechanical unison, or exercise any sort of shared authority over its own destiny and that of the Earth System ... Uneven distribution is a condition for the very existence of modern, fossil-fuel technology. The affluence of high-tech modernity cannot possibly be universalized—become an asset of the species—because it is predicated on a global division of labour that is geared precisely to abysmal price and wage differences between populations (64).

Arthus-Bertrand gestures at these differences when he flies over Nigerians living alongside polluted tributaries in a shanty town outside the fences of smoke-belching oil refineries. “The wealth is there but the country’s inhabitants don’t have access to it,” says Close. “The same is true all over the globe. Half the world’s poor live in resource-rich countries. Our mode of development has not fulfilled its promises ... Half of the world’s wealth is in the hands of the richest 2% of the population.” Yet, rather than acknowledge that industrialisation relies on precisely such an “asymmetric exchange of biophysical resources” (Malm & Hornborg 64), Arthus-Bertrand keeps his analysis at the level of what “we” have forgotten about living in balance with nature. His conclusion in the film is consistent with the emphasis on human nature rather than capitalism: “we all have the power to change, so what are we waiting for?”

The Anthropocene framework that we see at work in *Home* is one that is “analytically defective” and “inimical to action” (Malm & Hornborg 67). As Zoe Todd puts it in her work on Indigenizing the Anthropocene, “not all humans are equally invited into the conceptual spaces where these disasters are theorised or responses to disaster formulated” (Todd 244). Here is where Arthus-Bertrand’s fly-overs of peasants in Africa, Asia and Latin America become most problematic as they seem to reinforce the objectification of humans and lands that have contributed to the imperial act of de-humanisation that lay the groundwork for global development in the first place. In the next two sections, I consider the historical precedents for his particular aesthetic approaches: the expedition film, aerial photography, and database aesthetics.

“To Travel Is to Possess the World”

Arthus-Bertrand’s work emerges as part of a more than century-long genealogy that links technology to forms of mobility. From the first years of cinema, travelogues and expedition films helped to create a spectator who was trained not only to see photographic representation as a form of travel but also to expect privileged, omniscient, and even divine vantages. Burton Holmes, a famous early expedition filmmaker, put it axiomatically: “to travel is to possess the world” (qtd. in Ruoff 7). Arguably, the global vision of the late colonial period was actually a very particular “European planetary consciousness,” one complicit with “war, colonial expansion and exploitation” (Pratt qtd. in Roberts 65; Gunning 38).

The expedition film of the colonial period gave way to the travel lecture film in the 1930s and 40s and the eco-tourist gaze of the safari in the postwar world. Expedition cinema of this kind relies on a European (typically) male explorer bringing back audio-visual souvenirs of his adventures and presenting them in an exciting yet safe way to viewers at home. As with Arthus-Bertrand's work, the safari travelogue focuses on the point of view of the Western traveller and demonstrates a "preoccupation with panoramic vistas and frequent panning of animals and indigenous peoples as if revealed for the first time." Both the expedition and the safari film are concerned with the "capture and collection of exotic sequences" (Staples 394). Key to the safari chronotope is the idea of travelling vast distances to go back in time in order to encounter "genuine exotic difference" (Staples 407). Such films are a good example of what Renato Rosaldo calls imperialist nostalgia "where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (108).

In their classic study *Reading National Geographic*, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins demonstrate that for a century before the Internet, National Geographic operated as one of the most important conduits for information about the world beyond the borders of the United States. Avoiding politics, "upbeat... magnanimous" and resolutely middle brow, the publication's main focus was to provide beautiful photographs of non-industrial people, exotic landscapes and animals in order to help define white American aspirational subjectivities. It was, they argue, a mass cultural form of natural history (22). The connection between novelty and exploration remains central to the brand today. Staples notes that while elements of the genre are alive and well on the screens of National Geographic and the Discovery channel, they require ever novel "techniques of visuality and virtuality" to maintain audience interest (Staples 407). Before he took up filmmaking, Arthus-Bertrand sold many of his photographs to *National Geographic*, and his work well exemplifies the brand's emphasis on striking yet apolitical imagery. Arguably, his emphasis on ecology provides the novelty that today's travel and safari media require to engage concerned audiences while still providing exotic views and imperialist nostalgia.

National Geographic's brand of armchair travel often deploys the aerial view. Developed in colonialism, warfare and the nascent social sciences, aerial photography bears many links to capitalism. First used extensively in World War I, representing a key development in the "deadly harmony" Paul Virilio observes between eye and weapon, it was then borrowed from the military by human geographers in the inter-war period (69). In her study of Albert Kahn's utopian Archives of the Planet project in the 1920s, Paula Amad argues that aerial photography satisfied an archival "dream of a totalizing taxonomy of the world." This technique was utilised by the "survey-and-control" logic of colonialist expansion but was also deployed to humanist ends in the new discipline of human geography (262). The God's-eye perspective tends to reveal the pattern and focus on monumental features of the landscape against which humans themselves become ant-like and insignificant. Arthus-Bertrand's vision from above is similarly focussed on the pattern and the insignificance of individual humans, except as symbols of fragility and interdependence against an overwhelming landscape or in large numbers.

Urban geographer Jeanne Haffner notes that aerial photography was utilised for different purposes in Europe and its colonies. In the colonies, anthropologists used it to study the organic cultural formations of exotic others through the lens of colonial humanism. As Peter J. Bloom defines it, colonial humanism retroactively justifies economic exploitation by trying to cure "the effects of colonial intervention" (viii). In Europe, aerial photography and mapping were tied to both planning and the beginning of the quantification of space that would lead to comparisons of various cultures, as well as the universalising tendencies that became crystallised in the Family of Man discourse of the UN in the Cold War period (Haffner 93). "Aerial views placed all human activity within a common framework . . . [and] seemed to provide the basis for a twentieth-century Enlightenment project" (Haffner 74; 77).

The apex of aerial photography's promise of homogenising all human activity in a common framework is most certainly satellite photography, which became ubiquitous and mundane with the launch of Google Earth in 2001 (Dorrian 295). The sublime (literally *aloft*) satellite view of the planet in space that appears in the credit sequence of *Home*, for instance, is more than simply denotative. Although it certainly does signify geological time and global indivisibility beyond the arbitrary political divides we have created at the human scale, it arguably also celebrates itself as a sublime technological perspective on our terrestrial home. Despite its stated humanist intentions, then, Arthus-Bertrand's work nevertheless sustains the imperialist

precept that takes the aerial overview as a means to superior knowledge and mastery. In this regard, the aerial view does indeed function as an ideology (Duffy 41).

The Dream of Totalization: Fly-Overs and Database Aesthetics

Although the aerial view and the database are rarely linked, they are both visual strategies that are rooted in the 19th century “dream of totalization” that can productively be thought about together (McQuire qtd. in Pollen 29). The history of combining the database with the spatial documentary goes back to the 19th century. From national photography projects of the late Victorian era to the city symphonies and cross-section films of the 1920s, documentary projects have long been drawn to organizing principles which will unify fragments in time and space, whether projects that consider a day in the life, or those that figure life across one particular spatial parameter, such as a city or nation.

While spatial and encyclopaedic documentary photography projects such as Edward Curtis’ *The North American Indian* or August Sanders’ *People of the 20th Century* display a clear database aesthetic through their collection of visual data according to strict parameters of cultural, national or racial typologies, the cross-section film uses montage to create an even more immediate sense of shared time and space between disparate people and scenes. A product of the growth of the city symphony in the interwar period, the cross-section film combines establishing shots (aerial views when possible) with databases, municipal, national or global (Cowan 2014). Indeed, it is notable that Lev Manovich’s (2002) influential work on database aesthetics allocates pride of place to Dziga Vertov’s silent Soviet cross-section classic *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Michael Cowan argues that the database aesthetic in films such as Walther Ruttmann’s 1927 classic *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, “present[s] the world as an inventory of possible choices rather than a causal chain of narrative events” (60). And, as with all database aesthetics, in this work, the structure ultimately comes to take precedence over the content.

Just as the fly-over has its roots in colonial expansion and social planning, the digital database—technologically intensive and highly capitalised—traces its history to computational schemes to document and manage large populations. Indeed, the database’s connection to administration and, at its extreme, genocidal state projects has rendered it a key object of critique in visual art (e.g. Christian Boltanski, Photo Archive Group, Harun Farocki). The development of financial and market capitalism has also been reliant on databases to a significant degree. Digital capitalism has implicated the form into our daily lives as the basis for both communication and surveillance (Andrejevic 2013, Isanovic 2017).

According to Manovich (2002), when the world is interpreted through “an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database” (219). In historicizing the form of the database, Manovich joins scholars such as Sven Spieker (2008) and Victoria Vesna (2009) who consider the ways that individual artworks interact with the larger form of the archive or database through which they are operationalised. By and large, archive/database aesthetics tend to privilege multiplicity over singularity, simultaneity over hierarchy, and collection over selection. Seriality and relationality take precedence, and the significance of any one object or image is downplayed in deference to the patterns visible in the whole. In current digital practice, idocs often signal their derivation from databases, sometimes by asking a viewer to make choices about the order of sequences from a larger set (Nash, Hight & Summerhayes).

Home was the culmination of decades of photo-taking from helicopters that utilised what could be read from the air to convey Arthus-Bertrand’s message about the Earth’s fragility. At the same time—and in direct response to the limits of the long shots he had always relied upon—he began working on the *6 Billion Others* (now *7 Billion Others*) database, a listening project that aims to hear what the world’s people have to say about their lives. No less ambitious than *Home* and the *Earth from Above* series, *7 Billion Others*, co-sponsored by UNRIC, is also no less imperial in its imaginative architecture. While *Home* utilised the sublime technology of the fly-over to grant ubiquitous access and the feeling of the world’s total visibility, *7 Billion Others*, made up of 6000 interviews filmed in 84 countries, promises to organise and present the thoughts of the world’s people through the transparent architecture of the database. Edited together into

dozens of short films on a variety of topics from climate change to love, happiness and women's rights, which have been broadcast on television, exhibited as immersive gallery installations and made available through a Vimeo channel,² the compilations nevertheless maintain a database aesthetic by utilizing the mosaic grid of faces behind any foregrounded content.³ The mosaic imagery is typical of a digital documentary, which tends to aestheticise the network itself, highlighting participation and collaboration, while downplaying the author's ultimate control over the interactive architecture (Guadenzi 2014). As Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose put it, the scale of the digital network itself seems to have reignited humanist ideas, bringing about a "revival of global humanism in the idea that somehow it is possible to represent everyone and everything through the infinite network architecture of the web" (374).⁴

The faces in the *7 Billion Others* project are uniformly lit and framed in close-up, against a dark background, in such a way as to fully obscure their context. On the screen, we see only faces while on the soundtrack we hear only voices. This masking of the names and contexts of participants is a deliberate attempt to humanise through anonymisation. By knowing nothing about each of the speakers except what we hear of their stories and can see on their faces, the viewer is meant to be able to see them as humans first and members of political communities and socio-economic classes second: this is a liberal humanist story about individuals on a global scale. However, like all humanist ideas, "common humanity . . . is a historical construct determined through discursive assemblages and, therefore, through power. In celebrating our connectedness, we should also remember the massive inequalities of wealth, gender and race that celebrations of 'one-world-ism' ignore," remind Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose, paraphrasing Roland Barthes (372). As with the patterns of the Earth revealed from above in *Home*, *7 Billion Others* reveals human patterns. Therefore, despite its reliance on the close-up, the ambitions of the *7 Billion Others* project are, as its title suggests, encyclopaedic and totalizing.

Human's Technological Humanism

With a total running time of 262 minutes (extended version) Arthus-Bertrand's magnum opus *Human* attempts to do something like a documentary cross-section of the whole world by using an amalgam of his two approaches to showing the big picture. Fly-overs akin to those in *Home* are interspersed with his database of interviews from *7 Billion Others* to create a montage of decontextualised, yet viscerally powerful images and stories. In its quest for universalism, *Human* combines three elements: a database of close-ups of unnamed people sharing stories about their most profound experiences; stunning slow-motion aerial images of land and water; and aerial views of large-scale human events, such as crowds and rituals. However, there is no overarching narrative presented that would link these disparate fragments beyond the universal and transcendent perspective that both beauty and evil exist in the world and that we are, at heart, all the same. Instead, the narrative principle is the filming itself, the capacity of the camera to encompass everything in its view, to render up patterns both natural and human at a large scale.

In its utilization of humanism as an organizing principle (e.g. people are all capable of love and violence; humans struggle in conditions not of their own devising), *Human* bears resemblances to Edward Steichen's 1955 *The Family of Man* exhibit, in which hundreds of disparate photos taken for many purposes were rendered into a unified story of the seven stages of man (Pollen 2017). As with the *7 Billion Others* project, testimonies are edited into sequences of similar subject and intensity. For instance, one sequence concerns the challenges of people who have come out as gay, another the struggles of people to continue their traditional lifeways on the land. Although the film provides no information on the existence of LGBTQ political organisations or land-based struggle in any particular context, we are meant to see commonality

² vimeo.com/channels/7bo

³ The website (7billionothers.org) presents a browsable grid of testimonies and allows viewers to upload their own video responses to the filmmakers' questions. Films have been made to celebrate a range of UN events, such as World Food Day, International Day of Happiness, and World Day for Cultural Diversity.

⁴ Notwithstanding, Annabella Pollen (2016) has convincingly argued that there is a continuum of such projects that predates the digital.

between experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in a range of situations.

Human’s modality is highly affective. Moving personal stories of loss, suffering and love build on each other to form global cross-section montages. Often in *Human*, while one individual speaks, there are cutaways to other individuals, as though they too are listening. The technique ingeniously serves to cover for audio edits with the novelty of new faces in close-up. Close-ups make faces into landscapes and simulate an intimacy one usually experiences only with loved ones (Deleuze & Guattari 173). By presenting the viewer with so many intimate close-ups, we feel drawn into a range of encounters. Yet, while the film’s subjects vulnerably express their deepest emotions, viewers remain safely in galleries, auditoria or private viewing spaces, creating a fundamental imbalance. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has put it, looking into each other’s eyes “cannot be represented because it exists only in common as it passes between people” (228).

These sequences are intercut with spectacular aerial shots of stunning imagery chosen seemingly at random (the locations revealed only in video closed captioning) and over it all the mournful singing in a range of languages deployed in Armand Amar’s haunting soundtrack. In one sequence, the film edits together aerial shots of children leaving school in a refugee camp in Kenya; boys playing in the snow in Pakistan, and women laying out laundry on the sand in the Dominican Republic. Perhaps the theme that links these shots is “everyday life around the world,” but it is probably no coincidence that the three locations are also representatives of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The camera thus provides a European gaze encompassing everyone in its universalising frame but still retaining the privilege of compassionate invisibility for itself. The end result approaches the feeling of having flipped through a global family album or coffee table book. But how does *Human* and Arthus-Bertrand’s other work considered here contribute to understanding the world’s challenges, including climate change, human rights and genocide?

Anti-Cognitive Mapping

As forms that favour the big picture, both aerial views and databases may be considered in relation to cognitive mapping, which, on the surface, they may seem to facilitate. The influential aesthetico-political programme of cognitive mapping provided by Fredric Jameson in the late 1980s raised the following questions: how do we conceptualise the “world space of multinational capitalism?” and what is the “totality of class relations on a global . . . scale”? (54; 416). Although the ways in which power is distributed within the capitalist system is in some ways invisible—unlike for instance the symbols of monarchy—its effects on the world in the form of extraction, development, exploitation, war and destruction are experienced by all, though in differential ways. One of the most insidious framings of capitalism has been provided by the colonial discourse of humanism itself, which has long been mobilised to justify economically motivated violence in the name of “moral, political, intellectual, educational, and social values” (Bloom 128). This approach individualises and relativises the vastly discrepant situations of people around the world in relation to modernity but presents the struggle against inequality and injustice as one that necessitates the adoption of “universal” Western values. Insofar as this work obscures any understanding of the power relationships of global capital, it may be characterised as “anti-cognitive mapping” (Toscano and Kinkle 176).

In their book *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle observe that a comprehensive cognitive mapping of capitalism in cinema may be an impossible task. Nevertheless, because of their global scope and ambitions and even, as in the case of *Home*, their pointed criticisms of wealth inequality, violent dispossession and environmental catastrophe, I would suggest that Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s films seem to miss their mark more conspicuously than most. Moreover, because they purport to speak about the effects of global development, if not capitalism per se, they play a role in consolidating a problematic story of the Anthropocene.

Drawing on humanist tropes of *The Family of Man* and associative forms of editing that link humans in different parts of the world through commonalities (we all love, we all suffer, we all laugh), Arthus-Bertrand’s work has difficulty providing a cognitive map of the current capitalist system even as it more or less obliquely addresses issues of environmental degradation, pollution, violence and exploitation. In particular, let’s consider Arthus-Bertrand’s formalist commitment to the fly-over and the database forms

as the best means for presenting his audience with the “wide-angle view” of the global situation. Both are forms that put the maker (and by extension the viewer) in positions of sublime power and authority. The position is one of technological omniscience, surveying both the land on which humans dwell and the data through which they appear from a position of total mastery. The attempt to mitigate the extreme long shots with the voices of ordinary people in *Human* paradoxically ends up highlighting the sublime power of digital platforms. Arthus-Bertrand’s work, like many other global documentaries, is thus profoundly anti-cognitive mapping.⁵

Although cognitive mapping is an important task, I would argue that any analysis of how capitalism is *represented* in film and television risks leaving out consideration of the ways in which cinema is at its core an apparatus that helps to constitute capitalism’s spectator *as embodied*. Considering the ways Arthus-Bertrand’s documentaries mediate—at the level of affect—between our perception of our own bodies in time and space and the perception of the world in which we live may help to concretise an assessment of precisely where this work forecloses political consciousness; arguably at a level beyond the realm of representation. No matter how much the texts profess to bring the viewer closer to “nature” or to the Other, on a proprioceptive level, they arguably re-establish difference by articulating the viewer’s body to the speed of aerial propulsion and the enormous processing power of digital platforms (Richmond 117; Druick).

As I’ve argued, the contradictions between the stated humanitarian or ecological aims of Arthus-Bertrand’s productions and the spectacular aerial views and sublime database aesthetics they offer provide a useful site at which to consider the profoundly ideological phenomenology of technological power itself. In this way, these productions are the exact opposite of what Scott MacDonald has termed “ecocinema,” which he defines as the idea of using cinema to provide experiences that “demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset” (20). Far from unconventional, Arthus-Bertrand’s documentary work discussed here reinvigorates liberal humanist tropes and vernacular expressions of a technological sublime. It further sutures the viewer to a capitalist subjectivity that obscures the ramifications of technologized and asymmetrical ways of looking that ultimately counter our desires to help manifest change. In that way, his work is continuous with the manner in which colonial humanism and Western ideals of universalism have been utilised as ideologies and phenomenologies to justify exploitative capitalist relations. Absent a cognitive map of capitalism and global class relations, Arthus-Bertrand’s work, however powerful and ambitious, can point to only limited suggestions for reform of the capitalist world system. More revealing perhaps are the ways in which his work activates the deeply ensconced and uncomfortable contradictions of capitalist subjectivity, which are based not on ignorance, or failure to believe what we know, but rather structural inequalities that will take more than an individual agency to alter.

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⁵ For other examples of global documentaries see Zoë Druick, ‘On (Not) Falling from the Sky: Fly-Over Global Documentary as Capitalist Body Genre’, in Steve Anderson and Christie Milliken, eds. *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*. Indiana University Press (forthcoming).

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