

Jan Šerých: On Exactitude in Science

22. 2. – 6. 5. 2023

Fait Gallery MEM, Ve Vaňkovce 2, Brno, Czech Republic

curator: Tomáš Dvořák

Jan Šerých and I belong to the last generation that had a globe in their children's rooms. Children were usually given this decorative teaching aid when entering the primary school, as awareness of the whole world and the ability to read a map were, along with reading, writing, counting and telling time, among the basic skills that resonated with the modern ideal of literacy. The popularity of spherical, often rotating, relief, or even illuminated models of the Earth grew in the 1970s as a result of space exploration programmes on both sides of the Iron Curtain and the opportunity to view our planet from the outside, through images taken by astronauts. The globe thus no longer referred only to adventurous voyages and travels, when all places on its surface were described, but rather to the exploration of space: the Earth became a home port.

I didn't get my son a globe. The reason was not only the fact that we now carry the models of our planet in our pockets, but also the inappropriateness of such a gift, the guilt felt when "passing on" the planet to the next generation. On the globe today we can discover at the most diminishing glaciers, sinking tropical islands, or new ones made of garbage. The routes of overseas explorers have been taken over by cargo ships and refugee boats. Geography today is inherently geopolitical; maps show not only the unevenness of the globe's surface but also the inequalities among the planet's inhabitants. What I found most off-putting about the student globes, however, was their small and fixed scale, reducing them to mere decorative symbols, and the flatness of the image emphasized by its application onto a sphere. The three-dimensional globe lies more than the flat surface of a map: although they appear so at first glance, paper or plastic have no inside or depth.

I am not referring here to the inner spheres of the Earth which are as inaccessible to us as the outer space, but to the area only a few kilometres thick that us earthlings inhabit. Bruno Latour calls this relatively thin layer, a fragile biofilm surviving at the interface between land, water and air, the "critical zone" in his recent books and projects. Negligible as it may be in relation to the size of the planet and the universe, it has thickness and density of its own; it is not just a surface but a living and diverse layer, a skin, a coating. The film needs to be peeled off from the globe and properly examined as to what it is made of and how it is made.

The critical zone can only be seen from a distance: we have to climb a tree or a hill, take off in a balloon or a plane, and today we can use from the comfort of our homes virtual globes made up of a multitude of continuously updated satellite images. Among the most popular ones is Google Earth, which gives the impression of a continuous and homogeneous map on which we can zoom in on any place on Earth and view the stage of earthlings' existence. In reality, however, its software assembles images taken by different providers, with different spatial resolutions or levels of detail, with different colours and from different eras (Ukrainian Bachmut still exists on Google Earth). Especially in less-exposed places, its mosaic character and complexity (in the original sense of composition) can be revealed the closer

we get to the Earth. Zooming in and out and refocusing are among the most important media techniques today. It is no coincidence that the golden age of zooming in cinema goes back to the 1970s, a time of awakening planetary consciousness stimulated by spaceflights, when zooming still implied the possibility of a smooth transition between different dimensions, ultimately always related to humans. But zooming is not just an optical, aesthetic effect; it is at the same time and above all a technique of comparison. It is a special kind of moving image (no longer in the sense of the virtual motion of a film, not even the movement of a person navigating through a map); it changes the scale of things and thus of the observers. Rather than as a technique of overview and appropriation, zoom can be understood and used to encounter otherness and to learn to approach and move away, closeness and distance, in spatial, chronological, mental and cultural terms. Such an encounter is no longer a manipulation of a unified, neatly arranged model of the world, but a negotiation of particular people in particular situations in which we are always a detail and the whole at once.

Text: Tomáš Dvořák