

EARTH OBSERVATION: THE GEOGRAPHY OF REALIZATION

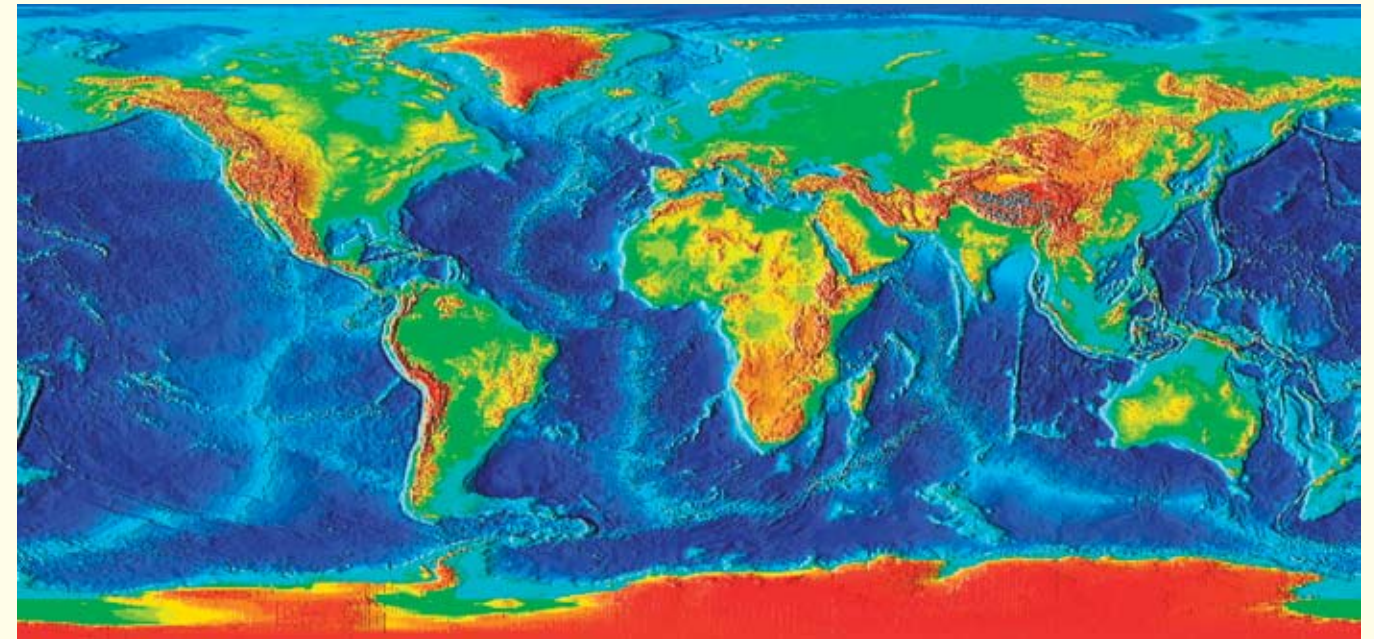
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*Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence.
And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world. We have not
even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us.*

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*



A vast alluvial fan blossoms across the desolate landscape between the Kunlun and Altun mountain ranges that form the southern border of the Talimakan Desert in China's Xin Jiang Province.



The early pictures of Earth from space were more than just strikingly beautiful; for the first time we saw our planet sparkling, alive, and swathed in clouds—a precious jewel floating in the blackness of space. Joseph Campbell called it “the most powerful image in the mythological imagination—the first time the Earth was able to look back on itself through the eyes it had grown in human beings.”¹ While the photographic images are powerful, those who have been blessed with the opportunity to actually look back on the Earth with their own eyes describe an experience that goes beyond symbolism; they testify of an encounter with the living being itself, emanating as impulse of the divine to exist in material form. Whether accessed through digital imagery or through the human eye, the common realization is that all the inhabitants of this planet—animal, vegetable, and mineral—are inextricable from the whole. All that is contained in it is us just as what is contained in us is it.

While our forbearers used maps, drawings, and their capacity for imagination to visualize features of the globe, technology gives us the ability to collect massive amounts of digital data uninhibited by the dark of night and the cloak of mist and cloud, extending far beyond the narrow band of light energy detectable with human vision. These data are referred to by some as the “the God’s eye view” of Earth; a phrase that implies complete objectivity, omniscience, and a lack of “personality” in the observing mechanism. Implicit in this phrase is the absence of any interference by the observer on the observed that might affect the outcome and validity of scientific study. This quality of detachment is also captured by the scientific term commonly used to describe digital sensor technolo-

gies and the information industry they have spawned: “remote sensing.” According to Dr. Nicholas Short of NASA, remote sensing is a collection of instrument-based techniques used to capture electromagnetic radiation and process it into knowledge about the objects or features in the sensors’ field of view.² Some would say that the images used to illustrate this text exist only because of their value for scientific analysis and interpretation. In contrast, evolutionary theologian Michael Dowd offers a living, breathing perspective in his definition of a God’s eye view of the world:

A God’s eye view of the world is not merely the objective, transcendent perspective—the view from above or outside nature. A God’s eye view of the world also includes the subjective experience of every creature—the view looking through every set of eyes, human and non-human. What dolphins and whales see, what bats and fish see, what dragonflies and hawks see, and even what chameleons with their independently moving eyes see: all must be included in an evolutionary understanding of a God’s eye view of the world.³

As a mapping scientist and remote sensing professional who applies technology to support engineering, planning, and resource management decisions on a daily basis, I often work in the former perspective; but as a *Salika* and student of the esoteric teachings of Sufism, I am drawn to the latter. What I offer here is a discussion of the meeting place of these seemingly incompatible perspectives.

Remote sensing instruments sample the breadth of the electromagnetic spectrum and see far more than any