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Primo Levi and the Terrestrial Condition

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**Abstract** – In his stories, Primo Levi presents contrasting planetary visions of Earth: one depicting it as an expanding technosphere made of entangled beings, and the other as a world of disparities impacted by the agency of a mutated humanity. But Levi's ideas of planet do not solely advocate for a utopian cosmopolitanism of all living beings; he critically probes the tension between technology's promises in industrialized societies and the worldview that sees Earth merely as an exploitable resource. Moreover, his stories emphasize the divisions and the contradictions created by the planetarization of the logic of industrial modernity. This essay analyzes selected short stories from *Vizio di forma*, seeking to unpack Levi's intricate engagements with planetary concepts and the emergent idea of a terrestrial condition. Central to this exploration is how Levi's planetary vision reflects the inherent tensions between the individual and the collective, and between different scales and ways of existing.

**Keywords** – Planetarity; Primo Levi's Science Fiction; Planetary turn; Anthropocene; Gaia.

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# Primo Levi and the Terrestrial Condition

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## 1. Primo Levi's Science Fiction

In a letter to his publisher regarding the 1987 reprint of *Vizjo di forma*, Primo Levi reflects on his short stories fifteen years after their first publication offering valuable insight into his perception of his own works. The reprint, according to Levi, was a source of both sadness and delight, as the stories composing *Vizjo di forma* were<sup>1</sup> «linked to a time sadder than the present, for Italy, for the world, and even for me: tied to an apocalyptic, resigned, defeatist vision, the same one that inspired *Il Medioevo prossimo venturo* by Roberto Vacca» (157).<sup>2</sup> These short stories were all written between 1968 and 1970, with the book originally published in 1971, years marked by heightened fears of nuclear war, regional conflicts, civil unrest, economic instability, and emerging environmental concerns around the world. As Italy's post-war economic boom began to slow down, intellectuals and the general populace became increasingly aware about the darker side of industrial modernity and consumerist culture. Labor disputes, inflation, and socio-economic disparities, as well as rising problems of air and water pollution, soil degradation, and deforestation, contributed to a pervasive sense of living in pre-apocalyptic times.<sup>3</sup> The existential risk of human extinction, combined with new scientific knowledge about the Earth's ecosystems and the impact of industrial activity on their well-being, inspired the first forms of environmental discourse on a global level.<sup>4</sup> These early forms of ecological discussion encompassed topics such as resource and population projections (which would inform the concept of planetary carrying capacity),<sup>5</sup> atmospheric transformations, the effects of toxic contaminants on bodies, water, and land, concerns about energy production, and new cultural

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Levi's stories are the author's own.

<sup>2</sup> In *Il Medioevo prossimo venturo* (1971, like *Vizjo di forma*), Roberto Vacca (who is also directly referenced in the story "Trattamento di quiescenza" from *Storie naturali*) argued that a new, shorter dark age would imminently arise due to generalized problems of unmanageable systemic complexity and global resource scarcity.

<sup>3</sup> Francesco Cassata reminds us of Levi's concern towards planetary ecology citing the book back cover of the first edition of *Vizjo di forma*: «In just a few years, almost from one day to the next, we realized that something definitive had happened, or was about to happen: like people navigating on a tranquil river who, all of a sudden, notice that the banks are racing backward, the water has become full of eddies, and the thunder of the waterfall can be heard close by. Not one single index has failed to soar: the world population, the DDT in the fat of penguins, the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the lead in our veins. While one half of the world is still awaiting the benefits of technology, the other half has touched the surface of the moon and is being poisoned by the garbage that has accumulated in a few lustrums» (Ch. 4).

<sup>4</sup> «In the United States during the 1960s environmental issues forced their way into public consciousness. [...] articles about the environment in the New York Times went from about 150 in 1960 to about 1700 in 1970» (Sachs 57).

<sup>5</sup> The notion of planetary carrying capacity derives from neo-malthusian theories developed in conjunction with the publication of the influential book by ecologist and ornithologist William Vogt, *Road to Survival* (1948). See Robertson; Sayre. For contemporary critiques of neo-malthusian population discourses, see Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum; Schlosser; and Schultz.

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paradigms to describe the web of relations enabling and sustaining life on the planet (as in Lovelock's *Gaia, a New Look at Life on Earth* and Buckminster Fuller's *Operating Manual For Spaceship Earth*).<sup>6</sup> «Now, the Middle Ages did not come: nothing has collapsed, and instead, there are timid signs of a global order based, if not on mutual respect, at least on mutual fear» (157), continues Levi from the vantage point of the late 1980s.

*Vizjo di forma* was the second collection of science fiction stories by Primo Levi. As Francesco Cassata notes, the differences between the earlier *Storie naturali* (1966)<sup>7</sup> and *Vizjo di forma* are multiple, but not limited to matters of style and writing. If the 1966 book indeed reflects, at least in part, the «Promethean» euphoria of Italy during the economic boom, the 1971 work is instead permeated by the anxieties that accompany the end of such «golden age» (Cassata Ch. 4).<sup>8</sup> Beyond the broader cultural climate of pessimism that influenced this second collection of science fiction stories,<sup>9</sup> Levi seems to take pride in the lucid foresight displayed by it:

If I reread it today, alongside several naïvetés and errors in perspective, I find something good in it. Synthetic children are a reality, even though they do have a navel. We have been to the moon, and the Earth seen from up there must really resemble the one I described; it is a shame that the Selenites don't exist, nor have they ever existed. Aid to third world countries often encounters the fate I outlined in the Recuenco doublet. (Levi 157)

Levi's brief reflection seems to indicate that he considered his stories to be more successful when they not only foresaw the consequences of scientific and technological advancements (as in the examples of the «synthetic children» and space travel) but also when the adoption of science fiction as a way of thinking about planetary futures helped him expose the inherent contradictions and paradoxes within the economic and political systems that govern the world in the present time (as in the case of the Recuenco stories). Beyond direct references to specific scientific advancements or paradoxes deriving from the new technological possibilities made

<sup>6</sup> See Höhler; Anker; Clarke.

<sup>7</sup> Silvia Zangrandi tells us of how Primo Levi described his own stories on the back cover of the first edition of *Storie naturali*: «Fifteen 'amusements' that [...] invite us to move into a future increasingly driven by the frantic spring of technological progress, and therefore the setting for disturbing or utopian experiments, in which extraordinary and unpredictable machines operate. However, it is not enough to classify these pages under the label of science fiction. One can find satire and poetry, nostalgia for the past and anticipation of the future, epic and everyday reality, scientific approach and attraction to the absurd, love for the natural order and a taste for subverting it with combinatorial games, humanism, and polite wickedness» (154).

<sup>8</sup> In 1979 Levi reflects: «Ten years ago, the scenario changed. Various voices, both timid and authoritative, were raised in warning that it would be difficult to continue to carry on indefinitely like this: ever upward, yes, but on all fronts? and how far? Hadn't the time come for *worldwide stock-taking*, and for curbing, if not consumption, at least waste, artificially induced needs, and air, water, and soil pollution?» (quoted in Cassata Ch. 4). Levi uses the expression «fare i conti planetari», which can also be translated as making planetary calculations or facing planetary consequences.

<sup>9</sup> Notably, the definition of science fiction in the context of Primo Levi's stories is not straightforward. Levi's relationship with the term and with the genre as a whole is, at least in its early stage, ambiguous; in the 1960s, he still preferred to categorize his own stories as «fables», «divertissements», «oddities», and «stories of tapeworms and centaurs» (quoted in Cassata Ch. 2). As Ross reminds us: «Any consideration of Levi's stories requires first an exploration of his particular brand of "science-fiction". Italo Calvino – Levi's contemporary and a writer with an abiding interest in science and its potential within literature – called Levi's stories "fantabiological", commending the way in which he cajoled fantasy, poetry and intellectual suggestion from a 'scientific' starting point. [...] Levi himself disputed the label of science-fiction, responding to an interviewer's questions thus: "No, these aren't science fiction, if by that you mean fiction about the world to come, cheap, futuristic fantasy. These stories are more possible than many others. Indeed, they are so possible that parts of them have already come true"» (108).

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available by industrial modernity, Levi appears to perceive a broader, epochal change of perspectives occurring during the years he wrote these stories: a transition in the way humanity understands its relationship with the Earth and the realization of the world-changing potential of technological development. This shift of perspective, echoing a planetary turn in the public sphere in the 1960s, involves a growing awareness of the interdependence and complexity of ecological, political, social, technological and economic systems on a global scale.

In this context, Levi's portrayal of planet Earth in his stories presents a conflict between two contrasting – yet aligning – planetary visions. The first envisions Earth as a one-of-its-kind habitat made of interconnected lifeforms, characterized by a terrestrial, relational ontology and, since the industrial revolution, an increasingly complex technosphere. The second represents an eco-political perspective of a humanity undergoing a momentous and uneven mutation, and inhabiting a world marked by fissures, gaps, and disparities. Levi's perception of the planet as the new arena for human history acknowledges the increasing interconnectivity between human activities and the Earth's geophysical dimension. Yet, his notion of planetarity does not represent exclusively a utopian cosmopolitanism that encompasses all human and non-human subjects equally. Instead, it identifies a critical juncture where technology's emancipatory potential in advanced industrial societies is coming to terms with the ideology that regards the planet as merely a stock-reserve, and with the fact that humans are increasingly divided by the rapid advancing of modernity's front, rather than united. Intertwined with this is the epistemic violence that emerges from the pervasive influence of Western technological supremacy across the globe.<sup>10</sup> While Primo Levi is acutely aware of the inconsistencies in how modern technology and science are applied across different regions—and is vocal about their being swayed by the interests of corporate and state powers—he nevertheless retains a sense of optimism. In his writings, he often conveys the belief that, despite its flaws, «progress» remains a vital instrument for creating a just and equitable human civilization.<sup>11</sup> Levi's perspective seems to resonate in Mark Bould's recent interpretation of William Gibson's famous quotation: «The future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed». For Bould, such assertion «seems to reiterate the myth of progress by aligning the future with technologies and thus commodities. But Gibson's words also imply that, on a finite planet, futurity is scarce. That under the regime of actually existing futurity, the future will be – already is – accumulated, concentrated and offshored by the few, denied to the many» (59).

In this essay, I will devote my attention to a selection of short stories primarily found in *Vizjo di forma*, with the aim of examining how Primo Levi engages with the notion of planetarity and its connection to the subjects inhabiting his narratives. Being Levi «a writer living under the figure of oxymoron» (Baldini 73), I contend that planet and planetarity, concepts widely discussed within critical theory and environmental humanities,<sup>12</sup> are not unambiguous concepts in his work, mirroring the contradictions between the individual and the species, and between the local and the global embedded within the planetary perspective. I specifically focus on *Vizjo di forma* due to the historical context in which these stories were composed, and because of Levi's declared engagement with planetary ecologies.

<sup>10</sup> For a non-Western theorization and history of the concepts of technology and technique see Hui.

<sup>11</sup> The conclusion of the story “Gli stregoni” from the collection *Llizi* is exemplary in these regards. After explaining the technological ‘backwardness’ of the Siriono indigenous people, Levi comments, in what sounds like an almost defeated tone: «I repeat, these are not made-up news. They were reported by the *Scientific American* in October 1969, and they have a sinister sound: they teach us that humanity is not destined to progress everywhere and at all times» (618).

<sup>12</sup> For some recent explorations of these concepts in critical theory and in the environmental humanities see Agathangelou and Killian; Clark and Szerszynski; Chakrabarty; Elias and Moraru; Moraru; Munster and Sylvest; Taylor.

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Early scientific knowledge on the Earth system, emerging partly as a consequence of the Cold War optic and satellite infrastructure,<sup>13</sup> directly influenced Levi, who was a scientist himself and a consummate reader of scientific literature. During the period in which *Vizio di forma* was conceived, the understanding of Earth as a cohesive entity made its way into the public sphere. Earth, as a life-sustaining celestial body among billions of non-living planets, was now viewed as a container of complex geo-physical processes that could be studied individually, yet were part of vast loops and operations on a massive scale. This change of perspective set the foundation for subsequent scientific and discursive paradigms, such as NASA's integrative Earth System Sciences<sup>14</sup> and, more recently, the Anthropocene thesis.<sup>15</sup> In analyzing his narratives, I aim to elucidate how Primo Levi grapples with the expansion of the technosphere and humanity's dual world-making and world-destroying capacities. Furthermore, I will delve into the broader ramifications of these tales, considering their implications for our contemporary critical discourse on the intricate interplay between the individual, the species, and the Earth.

In light of current socio-environmental crises, Levi's works provide invaluable insights. His works prompt us to reflect on the foundational categories that have traditionally shaped our understanding of human agency. These very categories are now being unsettled and reimagined in the face of interactions with other-than-human existents with whom we share a common condition: the «terrestrial condition».<sup>16</sup>

### 2. Levi and the terrestrial condition

Levi's science fiction stories have been read as complementary rather than a departure from his testimonial work on the concentration camp experience. As Serenella Iovino has suggested, in the aftermath of Auschwitz, Primo Levi embarked on crafting narratives that would serve as acts of resistance against the forces of «dehumanization and oblivion that had conspired to bury the memories, visibility, and humanity of those who had suffered within its walls» (Iovino, «Primo Levi's Chewing Gum» 32). Through his writing, Levi aimed to unearth these buried truths and reclaim them from the wreckage of history, bearing witness to the atrocities that took place and presenting them as ethical responses to the dark trajectory of human history (32).<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Ross reminds us that Levi himself made a considerable effort to highlight the less obvious connection between his science fiction writing and his testimonial work, asserting that there was a link between his accounts of the lager and his stories, justified by the desire to uncover the *vizio di forma* of civilizational myths, a shortcoming that is most horrifically

<sup>13</sup> See DeLoughrey; Edwards; Guaraldo; Höhler.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the genesis and history of Earth System Sciences, see Steffen et al.

<sup>15</sup> «Earth System Science, facilitated by its various tools and approaches, has introduced new concepts and theories that have altered our understanding of the Earth System, particularly the disproportionate role of humanity as a driver of change. The most influential concept is that of the Anthropocene, introduced by P. J. Crutzen to describe the new geological epoch in which humans are the primary determinants of biospheric and climatic change. The Anthropocene has become an exceptionally powerful unifying concept that places climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and other environmental issues, as well as social issues such as high consumption, growing inequalities and urbanization, within the same framework» (Steffen et al. 59).

<sup>16</sup> I draw the term «terrestrial condition» as used by Gosselin and gé Bartoli in *La condition terrestre* and by Luisetti in *Non-human Subjects*.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview in 1971, Levi confirms this continuity also in the «inhumanity» of the language: «But it seemed to me that I still had some things to say, and that I could only say them in another language: a language that I feel is defined as ironic, and which I perceive as shrill, oblique, spiteful, deliberately anti-poetic, inhuman in short, just as my previous language had been inhuman» (Benvegnù 7).

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exemplified in the Lager (90). In a similar vein, for Paul Gilroy – as read by Bryan Cheyette – Levi's «concentration camp mentality» can be mobilized into a form of «planetary humanism», which entails a collective responsibility to remain vigilant about existing camps, potential future camps, and preparations for such camps (Cheyette 81).

As a scientist, Levi seems to employ science fiction imaginaries as a laboratory to examine, investigate, expand and question his own viewpoints and ethical coordinates, enabling him to manipulate the timescales, geographies, and ontological subjects within his cosmology. Drawing on his scientific expertise and his harrowing experience in the concentration camp, Levi emphasizes the importance of ethics in science in several of his stories, cautioning scientists not to prioritize experimentation over moral considerations. Consistent with his ethical mission, Levi's concern for the natural world and humanity positions him as an advocate for a more harmonious relationship with the environment and with the non-human subjects with whom humans share the planet (Zangrandi 151). Ross points out that while, at times, Levi praises human beings for their exceptional capabilities, there also exists an acknowledgment of the crucial links between humans and nature. This includes attributing human characteristics to animals and inanimate objects, and the presence of human-animal hybrids in his stories, which collectively question the idea of humanity as strictly superior to other life forms (Ross 8). For Damiano Benvegnù, Levi's cosmology is founded on an «element of reflection upon human technological hubris» and a «sense of common creature-ness» (Benvegnù, *Animals and Animality* 264). This perspective contributes to a larger cosmological project that seeks to counteract the destruction wrought by Auschwitz and the type of humanity culpable for such horror. Levi's cosmology, described by Benvegnù as an «original aesthetic and ethic chaosmos», is inhabited by both human and non-human animals as well as hybrid entities. It reconsiders human existence and relevance on planet Earth in the context of «unheimlich wonders and asymmetrical relationships». As a result, Levi's literary cosmology challenges the anthropocentric tradition embodied by Descartes and his disciples, instead proposing a more «relational universe» closer to the philosophies of «more-than-human-humanistic» authors, such as Montaigne, Bruno, or Vico, who have also questioned or expanded humanistic ideas (Benvegnù 264).<sup>18</sup>

According to Roberto Farneti, in the short stories of *Storie naturali*, Levi provides a «significant set of clues» for examining the matter of human life's susceptibility to various interventions and treatments intended to enhance its biological potential (725). The world portrayed by Levi is characterized by «a set of experiments aimed at transforming humans into portentous beings» who are more adaptive within certain environments. Farneti's perspective emphasizes the fact that Levi aims to preserve a foundation of essential beliefs about the normative nature of humans, while inviting us to «think the unthinkable» and envision a world where humans, animals, and «portentous beings», once distinct ontological entities, blend into an ambiguous, non-normative backdrop. In this world, traditional distinctions such as «freedom and authority, innocence and culpability, victims and perpetrators» no longer hold significance (740).

In Levi's stories, several non-human forms of life are portrayed as companion species to humans, often exhibiting a sense of kinship with them, in the sense that they share the planet as a habitat and that, along with humans, are mutating and hybridizing (often forced to do so by human interest) within a sprawling technosphere. This is the case, for instance, of the car-

<sup>18</sup> See also Benvegnù, «Witnessing Animal Suffering?».

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eating lichens in “*Cladonia rapida*”,<sup>19</sup> the axolotls and the hybrids of “*Angelica farfalla*”,<sup>20</sup> the tapeworms in “*L'amico dell'uomo*”,<sup>21</sup> and the interspecies bonds of “*Vilmy*”,<sup>22</sup> among others. Moreover, like many humans on Earth, non-human life-forms are also victims of a growing, increasingly bureaucratic, technological, and totalizing system of oppression and homogenizing regimentation, and are often captured and exploited by such systems. This is the case, more notably, of “*Censura in Bitinia*”, where chickens are conditioned and trained as censorship agents in an authoritarian regime; and “*Pieno impiego*”, where the discovery of interspecies communication is immediately used to coerce animals into more specialized (even illegal) labor, demonstrating how science and technology can accelerate the process of subsumption of nature into the productive logic of industrial modernity. The story “*A fin di bene*”, instead, plays with the idea of a self-aware, self-reproducing intelligence, emerging from the fusion of the communication networks of Europe and demonstrating the possibility for inorganic sentience and a planetary consciousness that may one day be non-human and non-biological.

Ross observes that Levi's stories dramatize the complex relationship between humans and technology, often illustrating instances of alienation in industrialized environments. In these settings, technology adopts a disciplinary role, giving rise to «docile bodies» that obediently conform to normalized orders as time progresses (15). Ross' analysis highlights Levi's keen interest for the interaction between humans and technologies specifically engineered to enhance physical capabilities or modify essential biological processes, such as birth, reproduction, and death. However, these technological advancements frequently function as oppressive devices rather than beneficial innovations, effectively undermining the emancipatory and foundational tale of the epoch of Western industrial modernity (15). This oppressive process implicates both humans and non-human animals, living and non-living beings, indicating the overwhelming transformative force that technology can have upon the planet.

This relational worldview transpires in Levi's engagement with the environment throughout his works, and, for Zangrandi, it follows mainly three forms: the exploration of conflict arising from the loss of an innate connection with nature and the subsequent desire to reestablish harmony with the environment; the connection between environmental hazards and ethical-social deterioration, highlighting their interdependence; and finally, stories of optimism in

<sup>19</sup> The lichens are a direct byproduct of the automotive industry: «Its discovery, or rather its appearance (since it is not conceivable that the lichen went unnoticed), can be located with considerable precision in the years 1947-48. This is probably related to the advent of glycerophthalic enamels replacing nitrocellulose enamels in the finishing of car bodies; in these enamels, improperly called 'synthetic', fatty radicals and the residue of glycerol are not coincidentally present» (Levi 52).

<sup>20</sup> A nazi scientist experiments with the forced mutation of humans toying with the concept of neoteny, the phenomenon where adult organisms continue to exhibit juvenile features or traits, leading to an extended developmental period or a slower rate of maturation and opening to the possibility of further metamorphosis and changes: «[...] this condition is not as exceptional as it seems: that other animals, perhaps many, perhaps all, perhaps even humans, have something in store, a potential, a further capacity for development. That beyond any suspicion, they are in a state of sketches, of rough drafts, and can become 'others', and do not become so only because death intervenes first. In short, we too are neotenic» (Levi 47). See also Benvegnù, *Animals* 159–60; and Giansiracusa.

<sup>21</sup> A professor is able to decipher the poetic lamentations of tapeworms, revealing a complex language of symbiosis: «Be benign, oh powerful, and remember me in your sleep. Your food is my food, your hunger is my hunger: please refuse the bitter garlic and the detestable <cinnamon?> Everything comes from you: the sweet humors that give me life, and the warmth in which I lie and praise the world. May I never lose you, oh my generous host, oh my universe. Just as the air you draw and the light you enjoy are for you, so are you for me. May you live a long and healthy life» (Levi 64).

<sup>22</sup> Vilmys are imaginary feline-looking domesticated creatures whose milk creates bonds of compulsive dependence in humans: «Drink once, and you become chained: you become tense, restless, feverish, and you know that you will find peace only with the presence of... the animal, the source» (Levi 212).

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which a renewed ecological awareness can lead to a commendable coexistence between humans and the natural world (Zangrandi 162). The anthropology of interdependence arising from Levi's stories is one characterized by «marks and crossings» (Iovino, "Primo Levi's Chewing Gum" 27), as seen in the story "Carbon", where the journey of a carbon atom is narrated through its transformation into numerous forms and its intra-action<sup>23</sup> – to use Barad's notion (Barad 141) – with several living and non-living terrestrial existents. "Carbon", a story written in 1970 but included in *Il sistema periodico*, is crucial because it explicitly refers to humanity's self-centered arrogance, while offering a 'geometrical' visualization of humans' 'volume' as a stratum on the planet's crust, a visualization that resonates deeply with the Anthropocene thesis:

Our very presence on the planet becomes laughable in geometric terms: if the entire humanity, about 250 million tons, were to be distributed as a homogeneous coating on all emerged lands, the 'stature of man' would not be visible to the naked eye; the thickness obtained would be about sixteen thousandths of a millimeter. (Levi 479)

The concept of a human stratum is then further explored as a geological metaphor in the essay "Segni nella pietra" from the collection *L'altrui mestiere*. In this piece, Levi examines the traces left by humans, in the form of discarded chewing gum on asphalt sidewalks, and envisions them as the fossils of a deep future setting, forming elements of «an archaeology in the making» already visible in the present (Iovino, "Il chewing gum di Primo Levi" 241). Through his narratives of interdependence, intra-action, symbiosis, cohabitation and kinship, Levi «gave us a lesson on how to read the planet» (Iovino, "Primo Levi's Chewing Gum" 32).

The contradictory terrestrial condition is well encapsulated by the story "Procacciatori d'affari", where two individuals approach a soul, and attempt to persuade it to be born on planet Earth. The sellers introduce themselves as Earth specialists: «"The Earth," replied the young man, winking amiably, "We are Earth specialists, as you know, the third planet in the Solar System"» (Levi 193). They present all the benefits of being alive on such a planet, especially the ones linked to the unique habitability conditions of Earth.<sup>24</sup> But the soul remains skeptical, as among the many pictures painting the Earth as an ideal place to be born, there are others depicting famine, racist violence, inequalities, war. Reacting to the soul's perplexity, one of the sellers finally reveals:

It seems to me that you have guessed it: someone, somewhere, has made a mistake, and the Earth's plans have a flaw, a defect in form [un vizio di forma]. For about forty years, they pretended not to notice, but now too many issues are coming to light, and we can't wait any longer: we need to take action, and we need people like you. (Levi 206)

<sup>23</sup> Karen Barad's intra-action rethinks the traditional idea of interaction. Instead of pre-existing entities interacting with one another, in intra-action entities emerge through their mutual relations. This concept challenges the individualistic metaphysics of classical science, suggesting that entities do not precede their interaction but rather materialize through these relations. For Barad, agency is not something possessed by humans or non-humans but is a dynamism integral to the ongoing reconfiguring of the world.

<sup>24</sup> «The young man rummaged through his suitcase and took out several images of Earth, some of educational type, others taken from great heights or cosmic distances. [...] "Here it is. As I mentioned, we deal with Earth, and specifically with the Human Race. The hard times have long passed: now it's a well-equipped, even comfortable planet, with temperature differences that do not exceed 120°C between the absolute maximum and minimum, and an atmospheric pressure that is practically constant in time and space. The day is 24 hours, the year is about 365 days, and there is a charming satellite that causes moderate tides and gently illuminates the nights. It is much smaller than the Sun, but it has been intelligently positioned so as to have the same apparent diameter as this: this results in solar eclipses that are highly appreciated by connoisseurs, look, here's one, with a complete view of the Corona. There's also a saltwater ocean designed without sparing resources, here it is, can you see?"» (Levi 194).

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The unique habitability and life-sustaining properties of planet Earth are leading inexplicably – at least for these metaphysical beings – to the emergence of a humanity that is aggressively divided and on the brink of self-destruction. The pictures from space cannot explain why the only known biochemical ecosystem of the Universe capable of hosting life is also the only one hosting war and racism. The terrestrial condition is the product of this contradiction, one that is not resolved by the rapid modernization of the world and by scientific advancements, and neither by the realization of the interconnected relations that tie humans to each other, to other-than-humans, and to the planetary environment, but instead industrial modernity has unlocked more efficient, more pervasive forms of violence and oppression.

### 3. Out of (planetary) body experience

The launch of the first satellite into Earth's orbit marked a fundamental moment for modernity, and changed forever the collective consciousness of the modern world. Both Peter Sloterdijk and Hannah Arendt, at different times, reflected on the consequences of the launch of the first man-made object into space. For Hannah Arendt, the first man-made satellite represents the most important event in human history, but it is also a carrier of contradictory and unsettling meanings.<sup>25</sup> For Arendt, planet Earth represents the «quintessence of the human condition», as it could be the only place in the cosmos where humans can «move and breathe without effort and without artifice» (2). Although the human-created world distinguishes our existence from mere animal surroundings, life itself exists outside this constructed domain, maintaining a connection between humans and all other «living organisms» (2). Sloterdijk instead notes that «since October 1957, something has been underway which has led to reversal of the oldest kind of human gaze: the first satellite was put in orbit above the Earth» (57). This event initiated a new era in which human gaze could be redirected away from the sky and could instead be focused on humanity's home planet as a discrete object of observation. The development of satellite technology enabled humans to observe Earth from an entirely new vantage point. As satellite technology advanced, Earth's near space became populated with numerous satellite *eyes*. Sloterdijk observes that satellites «provide technical implementation of the ancient phantasm of God looking down from high in the heavens» (57) realizing an age-old human fantasy of a divine entity observing our world from above, affording humanity a divine perspective on Earth. Sloterdijk describes this phenomenon as an «inverted astronomy» that «looks down from space onto the earth rather than from the ground up into the skies» (57). In a similar vein, for Wolfgang Sachs, the journey of Apollo 11 to the moon brought us under the spell of a new epoch-defining image – not of the moon but of the Earth (Sachs 56). This inverted approach to observing the cosmos has significantly impacted our understanding of the planet and our place within it, and it is not a coincidence that in 1999, in a foundational moment for the formulation of the Anthropocene thesis, climatologist Hans Joachim Schellnhuber envisioned a second «Copernican revolution». Five hundred years after the scientific revolution enabled by the optical amplification techniques of the telescope and

<sup>25</sup> «This event, second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom, would have been greeted with unmitigated joy if it had not been for the uncomfortable military and political circumstances attending it. But, curiously enough, this joy was not triumphal; it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men, who now, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first “step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth”. And this strange statement [...] unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia's great scientists: “Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever”» (Arendt 1).

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microscope, satellite images and computer-generated simulations of the Earth system were finally capable of producing inventories of planetary images and that «this new revolution will be in a way a reversal of the first: it will enable us to look back on our planet to perceive one single, complex, dissipative, dynamic entity, far from thermodynamic equilibrium — the “Earth system”». He continues, «it may well be nature’s sole successful attempt at building a robust geosphere-biosphere complex (the ecosphere) in our Galaxy, topped by a *life-form that is appropriately tailored for explaining the existence of that complex, and of itself*» (Schellnhuber 1999).<sup>26</sup> This new Copernican revolution echoes the shift between two perspectives of the world: the modern Earth of Galilean science, which is one celestial body among others, and Lovelock’s Gaia, an exceptional local region within the universe, a cosmic anomaly brought about by life’s geomorphic agency (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 179). With the possibility to be contemplated and studied from afar, the Earth entered the domain of perceivable objects. In the past, the Earth’s existence was an «empirical certainty, but not an empirical magnitude» (Sachs 111), as its immense mass was beyond the scope of a single view. Satellite vision has made the Earth intuitively, superficially comprehensible, establishing it as an object through images taken from space. This vision bestows the Earth with a tangible quality, giving birth to an entirely new reality (111).<sup>27</sup>

However, planetarity is not a merely astronomical or geo-scientific notion, but rather it signals the alignment of both the scientific infrastructure that made the discovery of *planet* possible, and the political and ideological consequences of such discovery. Observing Earth from a distant and disconnected standpoint creates the illusion of a cosmopolitanism made of all living forms seen as the residents of the only known living ecosystem of the Universe, but also that the planet «could be managed or programmed» (Gabrys n.p.). This holistic perception of Earth signifies a vast interconnectedness while concurrently suggesting the possibility of «imperial control». Such a viewpoint is the product of both «globality as well as universal science» (Gabrys n.p.). Stacy Alaimo notes that this

God’s-eye perspective, this triumphant, purified neutrality, erases social and political contestations, economic disparities, and the material processes of the entangled, emergent world. It imagines that science floats above earthly processes as well as cultural, economic, and political systems. (102)

Furthermore, the shaping of planetary space is influenced by urbanization dynamics that operate within the borders of capitalist frameworks and are deeply intertwined with neoliberal governance. The descriptor *our planet*, frequently adopted by natural scientists and the general public, does not adequately encompass the magnitude of its metamorphosis. Indeed, the reach of planetary urbanization has profoundly transformed our world (Bendik-Keymer, n.p.).<sup>28</sup>

In the story “Visti di lontano”, Levi offers his own form of reversal of planetary perspective by imagining how Earth might appear if it were the object of astronomical research<sup>29</sup> by an

<sup>26</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>27</sup> It’s worth noting that Lynn Margulis, who collaborated closely with James Lovelock on the development of the Gaia hypothesis, offered a unique lens for interpreting this planetary-level framework of symbiosis. Margulis envisioned it as if observed from space: «Gaia is just symbiosis as seen from space», the depiction of «fellow symbionts» that «abide in the same place at the same time, literally touching each other or even inside each other» (Margulis 2, cited in Luisetti).

<sup>28</sup> Planetarity as a universalizing concept has been critically confronted notably by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in a series of essays. See for instance *An Aesthetic Education*; and “Planetarity”.

<sup>29</sup> In the story “Una stella tranquilla” from the collection *Lilit*, another form of human astronomy is described, one that wrongly postulates the immutability of the cosmos: «This restlessness had been

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imaginary alien civilization living on the moon. These lunar beings, the Selenites, are not passive inhabitants of the Earth's only non-artificial satellite; instead, they have been conducting optical surveys of planet Earth for centuries, searching for evidence of complex and intelligent life. The story is crafted and structured as an intelligence report written by the Selenites, presented as though decoded and enclosed in an FBI report:

The deciphering of the present Report, which reached us in Linear B Selenite script, posed serious technical difficulties for the FBI decoders entrusted with it; therefore, the reader is kindly asked to be indulgent about its inconsistencies and gaps. [...] it seemed appropriate in the transcription to adopt [...] equivalent or corresponding terrestrial units of measurement, dating, and geographical terms to the expressions contained in the original. (Levi 184)

The FBI, used here by Levi as a symbol of American governance and often associated with shadow political manoeuvres including extraterrestrial conspiracies,<sup>30</sup> serves as a reminder for the state of advancement of the American world-view as planetary view, deemed capable even to intercept and translate an alien intelligence report. In this scenario, the perspective of the Selenites is translated for a terrestrial audience, allowing for a moment to challenge and de-center earthly preconceptions. By presenting the Selenites as narrators, albeit filtered through the US intelligence apparatus, Levi encourages readers to question the inherent biases and assumptions that accompany human-centric perspectives about the Earth—a narrative device that can be found in other Levi's stories.<sup>31</sup> What may seem obvious to terrestrial beings, such as their own existence or the significance of geopolitical divisions and cultural differences, is not a given for the Selenites. Instead, the lunar beings interpret images captured by their optical instruments, speculating about the existence of complex life on Earth. The Selenite document discusses changes observed on the surface of the planet that their science or their situated experience as moon dwellers cannot explain, naturally attributing many of Earth's processes (such as the cycles of polar ice caps, color variations of plains and mountains, ocean tides, and changes in atmospheric transparency) to mere «astronomical cycles». Consequently, these processes are deemed «irrelevant for the purpose of any discussion about the presence of life on Earth» (Levi 184). While in reality these phenomena alone might suggest a dynamic environment, climate patterns, and geological processes capable of supporting life, the Selenites, counter-intuitively, perceive possible hints of life on Earth in the sprawling urban infrastructures and atmospheric biochemical phenomena, both consequences of industrial development.

Thanks to the recent improvement in the resolving power of our optical instruments, it has been observed that most of the Cities are in a phase of rapid growth, and that the atmosphere above them tends to become increasingly opaque, filled with dust, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide and sulfuric anhydride. (185)

The findings of the Selenite report seem to imply two main hypotheses regarding the possibility of life on Earth. The first hypothesis suggests that if life exists on Earth, it is a form of life

noticed by Arab and Chinese astronomers. The Europeans didn't: the Europeans of that time, which was a harsh time, were so convinced that the starry sky was unchangeable, indeed the paradigm and kingdom of immutability, that they considered it pointless and blasphemous to spy on its changes: they couldn't be there, they weren't there by definition» (Levi 546).

<sup>30</sup> Some obvious examples of this trope can be traced in popular media, such as Steven Spielberg's classic film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and the television shows *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-2018). A more recent instance of the US government attempting to decipher alien communication is depicted in Denis Villeneuve's film *Arrival* (2016).

<sup>31</sup> For instance, in the aforementioned "L'amico dell'uomo" and in "Le fans di spot di Delta Cep." from *L'ultimo Natale di guerra*, among others.

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(vegetal or animal) that organizes itself in ever-expanding, geometric cities and ports (note that the original terms used by the Selenites are unknown, as these words were chosen by the FBI translators). This life form would be capable of impacting the planet's atmosphere and creating structures large enough to be visible from the moon.<sup>32</sup> The second hypothesis posits that if there is no animal or plant life on Earth, the phenomena observed from the moon could be explained as manifestations of a planet expressing its vitality as a singular living entity, characterized by pulsations and growths.<sup>33</sup>

The Selenites seem to be particularly interested in deciphering the mysterious nature of the ships they observe in the oceans of the Earth, and advance the hypothesis that these could actually be forms of aquatic life, with their own reproduction and feeding cycles:

It is now excluded that they are floating blocks of pumice or ice. A recent bold theory deserves attention, according to which they would be nothing but aquatic animals, more intelligent the periodic ones, less intelligent (or less endowed with spatial instincts) the others. The former would feed at the expense of some material or living species found in Ports, the others, perhaps, at the expense of smaller ships (invisible to us) in the open sea: however, according to some observations, they show a tropism for hydrocarbons. Many aperiodic ships, in fact, frequent Ports located in areas where the atmosphere reveals traces of methane and ethane. In the Ports, the reproductive cycle of both varieties would take place, which is still unknown to us. (Levi 190)

Seen from afar, from the perspective of what terrestrials consider an inhabitable celestial body, planet Earth, already transformed and restructured by industrial modernity and planet-wide urbanism, appears to the lunar beings as an enigmatic ecosystem comprising urban centers, ports, hydrocarbon-powered megafauna, electric lighting, atmospheric anomalies, stadiums and skyscrapers (both hypothesized as puzzling geological formations), and so on. Levi employs the distance between the moon and the Earth as a device to blur the distinctions between human civilizations, nations, species, and cultures, much like NASA's *Blue Marble* photograph. This erasure, however, is merely a trick that can deceive only the distant Selenites, not the humans who must endure the situated conflicts and fractures of their own planet. Instead of offering a detached perspective, the Selenite report serves as a ploy to impose an extraterrestrial viewpoint from Earth's only non-artificial satellite, suggesting that humanity, when seen from afar, doesn't seem to truly exist or matter, but rather seems to belong to a series of terrestrial parameters, cycles, and processes. From the moon, what becomes visible are the lights of the technosphere and its ever-expanding connective tissue. To extend Ross' interpretation of the recurring figure of containment in Levi's oeuvre as it «pertains to questions of ontology and epistemology that animate Levi's work and thought» (3–4); the ultimate physical container of terrestrial beings, the planet itself, has been breached. The human eye has leaked

<sup>32</sup> The Selenites are puzzled by the presence of what they see as elliptical craters in many cities of Earth that animate once every seven days; they are, of course, talking about stadiums: «They formed slowly (over the course of five to fifteen years) in very ancient times near various cities in the Mediterranean region; but there is no evidence that they were observed before the 8th century BC. Most of these ancient craters have since been more or less completely obliterated, perhaps due to erosion or as a result of natural disasters. In the last sixty years, numerous other craters have formed with great regularity within or near all cities larger than 30-50 hectares: larger cities often possess two or more» (Levi 186).

<sup>33</sup> Consider for instance this passage: «As mentioned, many cities appear to be actively growing. Generally, this growth respects the structure of the pre-existing grid: radial cities grow along the rays, while reticular cities grow with new layers of orthogonal grid. The analogy with crystalline growth is evident, suggesting that cities are vast areas of the Earth's surface characterized by pronounced crystallinity. Moreover, we have an example of this on the Moon, in the impressive formations of well-crystallized orthoclase that cover several hectares of land within the Aristarchus crater» (Levi 185).

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out of it and is now a disembodied organ floating in space. In this out-of-body experience, humans now see their terrestrial body as if they were hovering from above, discovering their inseparability from the critical growths of a technologized planet. Through the perspective of the Selenites, impossible living beings on a non-living sub-planetary object, both humankind and non-human life forms, along with the atmosphere and the geological structures of the Earth, gain self-awareness as terrestrial beings. Thinking along with Viveiros de Castro and Danowski, «Gaia-Earth detaches itself from heavenly-body-Earth», and as the realm below the moon becomes distinct from the one above it, the world regains a deeply closed sense, characterized by its «terrestrial, local, proximate, secular, and non-unified nature» (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 179).

#### 4. Encounters in a fractured planet

*Visti di lontano* began with what Levi calls a «note in good faith» (184). Directly addressing the readers, he states: «We have been promised that within a very few years, perhaps even within the current year 1967, human beings will set foot on the moon, irreversibly bringing our cellular mechanisms, our infections, and our civilization there» (184). Levi's note in good faith (un)consciously establishes a parallel with another epochal moment in the history of the perception of the planet and the beginning of the modern world: the conquest of the New World, which unified the hemispheres transforming the physical space of humanity into a globe and which gave rise to the ideology of the «one world»: a «world that has granted itself the right to assimilate all other worlds» (Blaser and De la Cadena 3). The arrival of Europeans in the New World, which they considered a *terra nullius*, and the genocide and epistemicide of Amerindian civilizations symbolize the abject birth of the global as the defining figure of Western-led modernity and transatlantic capitalism. In this context, the imaginary future encounter between Terrestrials and Selenites mirrors an encounter that is not just speculated or the subject of science fiction extraterrestrial encounters, but one that already belongs to the history of both man and the planet.<sup>34</sup> 'Our' infections potentially exterminating 'them', 'our' civilization possibly supplanting 'theirs' are part of the current planetary history of Earth.

The encounter between distant worlds existing simultaneously on the same planet, is the theme of the Recuenco doublet,<sup>35</sup> the only example among Levi's works of a double story in which the second one serves to decipher the first one. The first part, "Recuenco: la nutrice", is narrated from the perspective of the population of a village, Recuenco, in an unspecified area of the 'developing' world. Recuenco's ecology is suffering: «In the village, within a two-hour walk radius, no grass had grown for many years: only brambles and cacti, so harsh that even the goats refused them» (Levi 262). On the horizon over the fish-less sea, a young goat herder observes a swiftly approaching object, «a small luminous hump, round and white» (263), and quickly realizes that the Nurturer is coming, a mythical mechanical creature that appears once every century and «brings satiety and carnage» (264). The villagers panic, as even their elder is unprepared to encounter the Nurturer: «But even Daiapi himself, who was the oldest in the village, was only fifty years old, and therefore could not know from his own experience what to do when the Nurturer comes» (264). The Nurturer brings food in the form of a milky substance to famished parts of the world: «It crosses mountains and seas like lightning, drawn to where there is hunger. That's why it never stops: because the world is boundless, and hunger

<sup>34</sup> Analysis of Antarctic ice cores provides evidence that the «Great Dying of the Indigenous People of the Americas», which is estimated to have caused 56 million deaths between 1492 and 1600, had a lasting impact on the planet's climate and geological record. See Koch et al.

<sup>35</sup> For an in-depth exploration of the connection between ecological and anthropological themes with special attention to these stories, see Maiolani.

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is in many distant places, and as soon as it is satiated, it re-emerges like the sprouts of bad plants» (Levi 264). The Nurturer's aliment is force fed to Recuenco's villagers from above, through pipes that bring destruction along with the 'gift' of food. But the consequences of the Nurturer's visit are devastating and perplexing for the Recuenco villagers:

Two women had drowned, and so had many rabbits and dogs, and all the chickens. Floating on the liquid, hundreds of printed sheets of paper were found, all identical: they had a round sign at the top left, which perhaps represented the world, and then there was a text divided into articles, repeated in different fonts and languages, but no one in the village could read. On the back of the sheet was a ridiculous series of drawings: a thin, naked man next to a glass, then the man drinking from the glass, and finally the same man, but no longer thin; below, another thin man, next to a bucket, then the man drinking from the bucket, and finally the same man lying on the ground, with wide-open eyes, wide-open mouth, and an exploded belly. (Levi 266)

The puzzle set in the first part of the doublet is explained through the second half, "Recuenco: il rafter", which narrates the event from the perspective of the Nurturer's insides.<sup>36</sup> Himamoto, Kropivà, Farnham, the three men who make up the cosmopolitan crew operating the rafter-Nurturer, come from a world vastly different from that of the villagers of Recuenco. Their world possesses the technological capabilities to reshape the planet according to their desires and to create structures and atmospheric phenomena that can be observed even by Selenite scientists. Anthropologically, they are distinct from the Recuenco villagers, with whom they cannot communicate, and their presence is enshrouded in mysticism. After tasting the milk, one of the crewmen comments:

Of course: it's not something for us. It's good for those who are hungry. They are pitiful, especially the children: you must have seen them too, in films, during the preparation course. But in the end, they are people who deserve nothing more, because they are lazy, short-sighted, and good-for-nothing. You wouldn't want us to bring them champagne. (270)

Farnham describes to the young Himamoto how the milk they are transporting is produced by an even larger rafter-ship that harvests trees from a Texas-sized forest not too far from Recuenco and converts them into food:

There is a vast forest, as large as the entire state of Texas, and a super-rafter that goes back and forth within it. As it moves forward, it cuts down all the plants in front of it, leaving behind a thirty-meter-wide empty trail. The plants end up in the hold, where they are chopped, cooked, and washed with acid to extract the proteins, which are essentially the milk; we call it that, but the official name is FOD. (271)

These men, stemming from the modern world, struggle to comprehend the connection between their world's existence and the precarious state of living in Recuenco's village. They believe they are improving the villagers' impoverished and underdeveloped conditions through superior technological means, yet they fail to recognize that such technology, and the worldview behind it, may be the root cause for the misery of countless Recuencos worldwide.<sup>37</sup> Just as the Selenites struggled to grasp the impact their celestial body exerted on Earth,

<sup>36</sup> The second part also reveals that the approximate geographical location of Recuenco should be somewhere in Latin America. As the crew receives a request from the Philippines, one of them comments: «Another urgent request: Shangechaydhang, Philippines: who knows how the hell it is pronounced. 12° 5' 43"North, 124° 48' 46" East. Brace yourself: no weekend in Rio. It's on the other side of the world» (Levi 270).

<sup>37</sup> On this aspect, see Maiolani 41.

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particularly evident in phenomena like sea tides, the rafter-men, with their elevated perspective from the flying craft, similarly fall short in understanding the intricate relationship between their world and Recuenco. The villagers, like humans for the Selenites, become invisible due to the distance between them and the men of the rafter. In this case, the distance is not cosmical, as it was in “Visti di lontano”, but is instead cosmological, and created by the anthropological mutation brought about by technology on the moderns. The men of the rafter utilize «detectors that sense acetone in the atmosphere, near centers where there are hungry people, and transmit the signals to the computers back at the base» (Levi 271). Much like non-terrestrial beings, they need to scan the atmosphere with sensors to understand what lies beneath them. Just as the Selenites’ distance from Earth made it impossible for them to fully understand human life, as they could only rely on astronomical observations and atmospheric analysis, so too can the inhabitants of modernity’s cosmopolis not decipher the other forms of life inhabiting their own planet.

In his review of the English translation of Levi’s stories, Pulitzer award winner Richard Eder seemed particularly impressed by Recuenco’s doublet:

There are no wars and the world’s powers collaborate to solve the big problems. But the collaborations are technology devoid of human involvement. Philanthropy is waged as war once was waged: from 30,000 feet, by pushing buttons, without knowing what happens to the people on the ground, without transforming those in the air. The food nozzles are as impersonal as the gas nozzles at Auschwitz, and as fitted for as many indifferent purposes. ( n.p.)

The encounter between the rafter and the villagers of Recuenco is indeed depicted as an act of war. But it is a war that is different from all the other wars constellating human history. This one is fought on modernity’s front and is a war between worlds sharing the same planet (see Latour, *War of the Worlds* and *Facing Gaia*). The people of Recuenco and the men of the rafter embody the division between humans and terrans as imagined by Bruno Latour. Humans view themselves as technologically immune to nature’s challenges and as the only civilization that has escaped the closed world of archaic animisms, embracing the infinite universe of inanimate matter (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 182). Meanwhile, Terrans are the people who inhabit Gaia, and as such, they rely on its well-being to sustain themselves and continue existing.

Primo Levi’s exploration of planetarity, as illustrated in *Visti di lontano*, sheds light on the sense of abstraction that arises from observing Earth from a distant, almost alien viewpoint. In his writings, Primo Levi probes the terrestrial condition, elucidating the complex repercussions of technological dominance on global dynamics and planetary well-being. The narrative contrasting Recuenco’s villagers and the rafter-men emphasizes the metabolic rift that results from such technological imperatives. Through Levi’s intuitions, this rift emerges not merely as a passive observation, but as an opportunity for a radical deschooling and a recentering of perspectives. His narratives challenge the readers to grasp the intricate balance disrupted by the planetarization of industrial modernity.

Reading Levi in a time where the present crises mirror the uncertainties of futures once only imagined, a present time characterized by environmental violence and existential precarity, his narratives draw attention not only to the profound interconnectedness that threads our cosmic fabric, but also to the cautionary tales they present, compelling us to gaze into the widening rift that separates the existents of this world—a rift that, in its unsettling expansiveness, is deepening into an abyss, raising questions about planetary futures and what worlds they may include.

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