Chapter 2

World Affairs—The Movie

Looking outside the modernist project is done here mostly in the modernist way. This means that “other” cultural and sacral traditions will be explored below in an abstract, Rationalist fashion, that is notably universalist. For example, “world heritage” and “world religions” are discussed later, but the discussions eschew all the lived experiences involved. This is to subject these discussions to the same limits and distortions that all modernist thinking entails.

It is arguably worth pausing, then, to consider how we might compensate for modernity’s shortcomings in this regard. How, for example, might we take the first step away from Rationalist orthodoxy, as described in the Introduction?

The first step would be one that stays within the modernist milieu, but deliberately subjectifies it. It is one that would involve deliberately standing close to listen to the practice of world affairs, and taking part, before standing back to look at the subject again in the orthodox Rationalist fashion. For though Rationalism is of demonstrable worth as a way to know, it is not the only way to know, or even necessarily the best way to know, particularly given what proximal research methods can do, that distal research methods cannot.

Proximal research methods foster not only participant observation but also participant understanding. They invite us to experience world affairs in a subjectifying fashion. They invite us to appreciate what objectifying is specifically designed to eschew, namely, how the facts we choose about world affairs feel.

As noted earlier, this book adopts the same objectifying mind-mode that modernists do. It does not, on the whole, attempt to step away from what is “seen” using the objectifying mind-gaze, to conduct research of a more experiential kind. Nor does it use logics less linear and less parsimonious—mosaic logics, for example, logics that proceed in parallel and in multiple streams, logics that converge from different points of awareness, or logics that spiral in toward their conclusions rather than proceed straight away toward them (Kaplan, 1966b, 10).

Except for what follows. Though the step toward experience is a contentious one (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997), the participant understanding it provides is as compelling as the knowledge that objectifying Rationalism provides. This can be readily demonstrated by considering, for example, what American state-makers might have learned about the durability of their Soviet adversary by sending drunk poets around the Soviet Union.
disguised as vodka sellers, to talk to ordinary citizens in their kitchens, rather than by relying on satellite measurements of the wheat crop in the Ukraine, and spy reports of elite Soviet conversations. In terms of a capacity to anticipate the communist regime’s collapse, the latter proved to be woefully inadequate. American epistemological preferences precluded any sustained attempt to get closer to listen to Soviet accounts of their own predicament, however, ultimately to the detriment of the political understanding of the American policy-makers concerned.

What follows is an attempt to provide the reader with a more proximal experience of how world affairs feel. In a book, this can only be done vicariously, but it can be done. To repeat: this does not mean shunning the Rationalist outlook. Rather, it means using this outlook to provide distal accounts of world affairs, then subjecting these accounts to the more proximal sorts of scrutiny, then reassessing the results. The reassessment part of this cycle of knowing is left here to the reader. Meanwhile, enter right . . .

... our Narrator:

I’m standing on the roof of a mid-city skyscraper. I’m holding a suitcase and it’s full of rocks so it’s pretty heavy. I’m just about to drop it over the edge here, onto the side-walk. It’s lunch-time and the pavement is pretty crowded, so I’m very likely to hit one of the pedestrians below.

Before I let go I want to ask you what chance you think I have of hitting a good person. 70%? 50% 30%?

[The narrator drops the suitcase. The camera tracks its descent but the frame freezes just over the heads of the people in the street. The image rotates through 360 degrees, as our attention is returned to the . . .]

Narrator (voice over):

If you think I’ve got 70% chance of hitting a good person, you’re probably optimistic about human nature. You probably think that we’re essentially good.

If you think I’ve got 30% chance of hitting a good person, you’re probably a pessimist. You probably think that we’re basically bad.

If you think I’ve got 50% chance, or you want to know more about what the pedestrians are like, then you probably see people as something else, probably something more like what you’re doing by asking this question. You probably think that we’re basically calculating.

[The suitcase completes its fall, narrowly missing two startled pedestrians, before smashing into the pavement.]

Narrator (standing by the suitcase, as pedestrians pass in profusion, sometimes bumping into one another in a rather aggressive way):

Feelings about how good or bad we happen to be, just like ideas about what it means to grow up in different places, or what it means to be a particular gender, are fundamental to all our ideas about international affairs.

Narrator (takes out of his coat pocket a folded map of the world and unfolds it, holding it toward the camera. He starts to walk forwards. The pedestrians walking by tend to collide with him as they pass . . .):

Take this map of the world. It’s the usual sort of map. It shows all the world’s countries, their territories, their borders, their capital cities, that