In 1935 the Soviet artist Solomon Nikritin finished a painting entitled *The Old and the New*, depicting a bare geographical globe amid figures symbolizing tradition and progress in a nebulous wilderness. This article reads the picture as a reflection on how global cartography shapes modern modes of conceiving and inhabiting space. Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk’s argument that terrestrial globes manifest a post-theological spatiality and arch symbol of modernity, my exploration of *The Old and the New* stresses the conflicted implications of global mapping for modern culture. In Nikritin’s picture, globalism is seen to estrange people from place, supplant traditional worldviews, and challenge modern subjects to consciously originate new spatial orders. The article closes by establishing the painting’s resonances with global discourses in Soviet and contemporary visual cultures, arguing that Nikritin’s picture focuses a continuing modern impulse to map meaning and order onto a disenchanted earth in which neither inhere.

Key Words: globalism, mapping, modernity, Nikritin, Sloterdijk.

A painting made in the Soviet Union between the world wars offers an intriguing vision of global cartography at work in the social world (Figure 1). Four figures people a wilderness enshrouded by roving mists, which obscure and diffuse the sunlight behind. Two characters at the little group’s flanks personify social ills like allegorical figures in a medieval morality play: idolatry, an impassive statue of Venus, and poverty, a maimed and emaciated beggar, who tips an empty tin toward the viewer’s charity. By contrast with this outer pair, the central figures embody health and modernity. Unmistakably they belong to the iconography of twentieth-century Communism: Each a model for their gender type, the two strike purposive gestures with muscled bodies clad in clean, practical overalls. Her feet stood wide, the female worker’s pointing posture recalls similarly posed statues of Vladimir Lenin, or even Christopher Columbus, but here aiming to collectivize the East, not colonize the West. She towers above her comrade, whom for sake of ease I call “the Bolshevik.” He is absorbed in contemplating a pale globe, which he holds, conspicuously, immediately before the female worker’s groin. The rock-blue sphere seems undifferentiated at this distance from the picture plane; unmarked by landmass, it could be construed as a blank world to be reimagined, or as exemplifying the obscurity of geographical science in these seemingly primordial surroundings.

The picture has the title *The Old and the New. A Group Portrait*, and was finished early in 1935 by a Ukrainian artist working in Moscow named Solomon Borisovich Nikritin (1898–1965). At six by seven feet, *The Old and the New* is Nikritin’s largest composition, in which he combines and sums up his three long-standing themes of landscape, social contradiction, and global geography. Given the backdrop of Soviet modernization against which Nikritin undertook the work, which was completed in year two of the second Five-Year Plan, its title might be taken to imply a progressive
transition from tradition to modernity, with the beggar and Venus belonging to a declining past, and
the two communists to a coming condition of classless plenty. Any apparent progressivism is
immediately dispelled, though, by the shroud of ominous fog and claustrophobic proximity of such
uncommunicative figures. It is unsurprising, then, that the picture, which Nikritin presented mere
months after the strictures of Socialist realism were promulgated in August 1934, proved too
politically enigmatic for exhibition in the Soviet Union. In April 1935 a committee of artists and
critics barred The Old and the New from public display. A transcript of their deliberation survives:
"After looking at such a work," critic Osip Beskin concluded, "one finds it dreadful to be alive for a
month, in spite of all the gaiety of our life" (transcribed in London [1937] 2004, 382). This animus
was provoked by the supposed eroticism conjured by the globe’s intimate position and curvaceous
worker, as well as the picture’s more general idiosyncrasy and ambiguity of intent. These issues
were debated in political terms, with the committee linking the artwork’s “individualist” and
“erotic” tendencies to work by “Italian Fascists” (382). Gloomy, eclectic and laden with enigmatic
symbolism, the painting stood at odds with the emerging political culture defined by uplifting,
wholesome, and ideologically transparent Socialist realism, its censorship indicating Nikritin’s

FIGURE 1 Solomon Nikritin, The Old and the New: A Group Portrait,
1935, oil on canvas, 178.5 × 216 cm. Courtesy of Nukus Museum,
Uzbekistan. (Color figure available online.)
growing marginalization as a “formalist” artist through the 1930s (Smirnov 2013, 127). The Old and the New remained in the Nikritins’ possession until 1976, when it was acquired by the independent Nukus Museum of Art, Uzbekistan, where it hangs today (Bowlt 2013, 157).

Having gone largely unmentioned in histories of Soviet art, the picture came to my attention thanks to an essay by Bowlt (2013), which provides an illuminating account of Nikritin’s painting in the context of Soviet aesthetic and political culture in the 1930s. Although my discussion of The Old and the New will return to the shifting politics of Soviet space during that period, this article largely draws back from the historical contexts in which Nikritin worked to explore the picture as an artistic meditation, manifested in painting, on what I term phenomenologies of global mapping. By this, I mean to grasp the ways that global mapping shapes modern conceptions of space and modes of inhabiting it. What follows is therefore an analysis of the different spatialities produced by global cartography in Nikritin’s painting, which I argue provides a concentrated image of the mutually constitutive connections among maps, modernity, and globalism. Now, it might be cautioned that this construal invests too much in the painted globe, which is so reduced and schematic that were it not for the stand on which the sphere is mounted it might scarcely register as a globe at all. It is precisely because the globe is depicted modestly, though, that The Old and the New sheds light on the phenomenological dimensions of global maps. As a scenic painting depicting a globe as one element embedded and experienced among others within an encompassing context, the picture places global mapping, foregrounding the relational work performed by globes on surrounding subjects and their intuitions of space.

To grasp the spatialities unfolded through the globe in the picture, the article begins by invoking Peter Sloterdijk’s conception of terrestrial globes, which he interpreted from a Nietzschean perspective as manifesting a posttheological spatiality and arch symbol of modernity. Being bound up so closely with the modern condition, terrestrial globalism for Sloterdijk renders humanity insignificant, relative but also self-sufficient, even empowered; articulating a space without divine plan or natural essence, the modern globe compels people and polities to recognize themselves as the only source of meaning, order, and value. Following a prolegomenon elucidating this account of the modernity of global mapping, the central discussion establishes a close reading of the picture in conjunction with Sloterdijk’s theory. Circling the depicted figures to unpack their existential attitudes toward the central globe, my argument demonstrates how the global spatialities depicted in the picture are riven by two countervailing yet indissociable tendencies—one estranging modern subjects from place and meaning, the other empowering them to establish new spatial orders. Regarding the first, I stress global cartography’s role in the disenchantment of the world, arguing that Nikritin’s globe inculcates a distanced stance toward locality, replacing the closed meaningful worlds of traditional cultures with the meaningless facticity of the modern earth. As I move into the second half of the article, however, focus turns on how these estrangements precondition more creative and affirmative possibilities. The pair stood centrally in the painting are read as modernists who, recognizing themselves as occupants of an earth lacking inner essence or metaphysical plan, stand poised to project their own social visions onto the otherwise formless globe.

Viewed in the round, neither nostalgic estrangement nor modernist empowerment emerge as dominant in the picture. Enlightenment and disenchantment are held tensely in balance. This does not imply that The Old and the New is contrary or undecidable as a painting; the dialectic it stages between estrangement and affirmation is rather inherent in modern globality itself. The article’s final section takes up this dialectic in a historical register. Posing the picture alongside revolutionary global images representing socialist internationalism, as well as the planetary icons
through which globalization is articulated today, I show how Nikritin’s vision of modern subjects inscribing meaning into a fortuitous globe has played out concretely in two historical contexts. My closing suggestion, however, is that the picture’s blank painted globe returns us to the meaningless facticity of a disenchanted earth, onto which (and in reaction to which) these global rhetorics are projected.

Before commencing, let me clarify the procedures through which I engage Nikritin’s picture and establish the reading just prefaced. This article employs a geographically informed method of cultural analysis—an “interdisciplinary research practice” associated with literary theorist and art writer Mieke Bal (Aydemir 2008, 38). Cultural analysis attends to the dynamic relations between cultural objects and conceptual theories in close empirical encounters, guided by “a keen awareness of the critic’s situatedness in . . . the social and cultural present” (Bal 1999, 1). As an approach to artworks, cultural analysis differs from protocols received from art history in that it does not subordinate specific engagements with art to questions of “influence, context, iconography, and historical lineage” (Bal 2001, xi). Although it might draw selectively from these areas, as in my following discussion of socialist globalism, for cultural analysis the meaning of artworks is neither fixed at the moment of their creation (as in much social history of art) nor encoded within them as an essential content awaiting proper identification (as iconography proposes). Significance emerges instead from the play of relations that surround and include art objects as they pass through various different geographical and conceptual conjunctures. On this view, persistently referring artworks back to cultural contexts or authorial intentions in their originary milieu effects a form of reverse anachronism, precluding new readings arising from the fact that artworks are reiterated whenever they are confronted anew. Undertaken in this light, cultural analysis turns on the encounter between artwork and researcher, who attends to what art “is, means, and does in the present time of viewing” while feeding in other, often theoretical resources (Bal 2001, xii). My juxtaposition of Nikritin’s painting alongside Sloterdijk’s writing, therefore, stages a cultural analytic encounter between art object and philosophical theory to explore how they mutually illuminate one another. Its aim is not to ascertain what The Old and the New means or meant in an iconographic or historical register, but to engage the painting from a present, geographically oriented perspective, opening it up to themes surrounding the spatiality of global mapping.

Two consequences of this method for my discussion warrant special emphasis from the outset. First, the relations between painting and theory are conceived on the model of neither artistic illustration nor theoretical explanation, but rather constitute a reciprocal, mutually transforming dialogue, with the artwork “participating in the construction of theoretical views” (Bal 1999, 12). Hence, I both read Nikritin’s picture through the lens of Sloterdijk’s theory, concretizing its central globe as a disenchanted earth, and consider how this theory comes to be articulated and critically reflected on in the painting, where it accumulates new social, political, and sexual resonances. But artworks cannot exercise these capacities for theoretical dialogue autonomously of critical practice; this leads, second, to how cultural analysis affirms the agency of the researcher in cocreating cultural meanings. This does not suggest that critics can write whatsoever they please, but that in bringing theoretical insights to bear on artworks and responding to art through creative forms of writing, researchers might wilfully activate and enrich the “event of poesis” through which artistic meaning arises (Hawkins 2013, 13). The following analysis should therefore be seen as creating and enacting an encounter between Nikritin and Sloterdijk, which unfolds in and through my writing practice.
To build this encounter, I begin by unpacking Sloterdijk’s key statement on the modernity of terrestrial globalism, through which I approach the global fulcrum of Nikritin’s painting as a disenchanted earth, held up before unsettled but newly affirmed modern subjects.

“THE ORB IS DEAD”: THE MODERNITY OF TERRESTRIAL GLOBALISM

Halfway through *Globes* (Sloterdijk 2014), the second book in *Spheres*, Sloterdijk’s three-volume exploration of “manifold universes of existential spatiality” (Sloterdijk 2012, 40), there is an excursus treating the meaning of modern terrestrial globes. Here Sloterdijk restaged the famous parable of the madman in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* in an altered form (see Nietzsche [1882] 2001, 119–20). Again the lunatic charges into the marketplace, again he delivers a fraught obituary for divinity, and again the consequences fall on deaf ears. Sloterdijk’s retelling differs from Nietzsche’s original where the passed godhead is referred to, strangely, as a kind of space. In place of the famous pronouncement on God’s death, the madman proclaims, “The Orb is Dead.” By “the Orb,” Sloterdijk referred specifically to Christian-Aristotelian cosmography, which conceived earth at the center of a firmament of interlocking crystalline spheres. Although a culmination of Christian and Hellenistic thought, this Orb has a larger resonance for Sloterdijk as a synecdoche for religious and metaphysical conceptions of space generally.

In speaking this “unspoken statement,” which reimagines the madman’s “God” as the “Orb,” Sloterdijk invited readers to consider probably the best known statement on the character and consequences of modernity in spatial terms. For Nietzsche, modernity was the condition that followed the dissolution of social values thought to derive from a transcendent, that is, superhuman and supersensible, rationality. Transcendent imperatives having waned, modernity involves peoples and polities coming to recognize themselves as the origin of the values they esteem. Modern subjects must consciously formulate the ideals and ends that guide their practice without recourse to metaphysical legislation. Redirecting this basic Nietzschean narrative toward questions of spatiality, Sloterdijk insisted that the modern crisis of theological and metaphysical regimes implicates received modes of inhabiting space. “God is dead,” he wrote: “what this actually means is that the Orb is dead, the containing circle has burst, the immune magic of classical ontotheology has lost effect, and our faith in God on high . . . has become powerless, groundless and hopeless” (Sloterdijk 2014, 559). The quotation indicates that for Sloterdijk, premodern societies conceived of space ontotheologically (manifesting a theological design or order). For a vivid example, see the thirteenth-century Ebstorf *mappamundi*, in which earth is subtended by the body of Christ, whose head, hands, and feet protrude from the world’s extremes. Ontotheological apprehensions of space such as these were imbued with meaning in that beings were conceived as arranged in a created order, in terms of which the world could be known and related to. Their inhabitants lived in what Glacken (1976, 176) called “the earth as a planned abode for man [sic].”

By contrast with the meaning and closure of premodern spatialities, modern subjects undergo the world as an “indifferent machine of becoming that, inaccessible to allocations of meaning, continuously turns within itself” (Sloterdijk 2014, 630). To focus on the existential security lost with ontotheological spatialities, however, is to repeat Nietzsche’s madman’s fixation with the negative dimensions of modernity, which can be countered by asking instead what emerges from
the waning of premodern space. In the loss of ontotheological Orbs, Sloterdijk’s madman experiences the “birth trauma of the exposed planet” (558), an uneven spheroid moving within a boundless, planless, and indifferent cosmic extension:

[A]fter the destruction of heaven, it was the earth itself that had to take over its function as the last large-scale curvature. This physically real earth, as an irregularly vaulted, unpredictably uneven and grooved body, now had to be circumnavigated and recorded as a whole. Thus the new image of the earth, the terrestrial globe, rose to become the central icon of the modern worldview. Beginning with the Behaim Globe of Nuremberg, made in 1492—the oldest surviving specimen of its kind—and continuing up until NASA’s photograms of the earth, the cosmological process of modernity is characterized by the changes of shape and refinements in the earth’s image in its diverse technical media. (773–74)

Hence, the death of holy Orbs is also simultaneously the birth of the terrestrial globe, which can be considered modern, first, in the historical sense that global maps, although constructed on the basis of ancient precedence, were developed in the early modern period and have prevailed since. Beyond chronological correlation, the global earth has intrinsic connections with modernity: Having been established by cartographic projection and survey, not religious transmission, terrestrial globes for Sloterdijk figure forth postontotheological space. They manifest an enlightened and disenchanted apprehension of the earth, with a twofold significance. On one level globes amount, in Nietzsche’s (2014) words, to a “self-belittlement of humankind,” which becomes “arbitrary, loitering and dispensable” when conceived in their finitude as the transient occupants of an insignificant cosmic body (342). On another, they affirm modern subjects, for in a world without transcendent order, humans must become their own source of meaning.

Now, Sloterdijk’s Globes represents but one work in an extensive body of scholarship concerned with the cultural import of global imaginations, from Cosgrove’s (2001) compendious genealogy of terrestrial imagery to Heise’s (2008) critical elaboration of globality to counter the received localism of much environmental discourse. Although I invoke various insights from this literature, this article foregrounds Sloterdijk’s excursus because his Nietzschean insistence on an interplay between nostalgic estrangement and modernist empowerment in global spatiality grasps what I see as the core of Nikritin’s vision. Before exploring The Old and the New in light of Sloterdijk’s account, however, I want to qualify my summary of the latter in view of an important counterclaim. Global maps, as Sloterdijk’s “macrospherology” amply attests, have long served religious institutions and purposes: clear historical grounds on which to refute terrestrial globalism’s connection with disenchantment. Notice, though, that for Sloterdijk, modern globalism’s emergence was (and is) a fraught historical process, drawn out over centuries and continually provoking countervailing movements of reenchantment as it unfolded. Faced with the shocking fortuity of the emergent spatial paradigm, there arose retrogressive and reparative reactions against modern spatiality: attempts to deny it (Cesare Cremonini refusing to look through Galileo’s telescope); to make poetic and intellectual accommodations with it (the lingering conceit of a “music of the spheres”); or to reenchant the desacralized world (the world map sometimes used by Daesh [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] in their media imagery). Pointing to instances of religious globality ultimately makes little argument with Sloterdijk’s understanding of terrestrial globalism as postontotheological, then, for he would understand them as attempts to delay or embellish the facticity of modern space—an impulse to exorcise or “garnish the immeasurable with a colorful array of worlds” (Sloterdijk 2014, 558).
If Sloterdijk’s excursus establishes the far-reaching existential consequences of global mapping, which replaced closed worlds of meaning with a disenchanted earth, *The Old and the New* depicts how this spatiality plays out in a specific social scene. My reading of the picture examines the figures’ existential attitudes toward the central globe, which, following Sloterdijk, I take as an articulation of modernity. At once revered and denied, the globe emerges as simultaneously unsettling and affirming: a frightening meaning-deficient earth, mapped as a grasping globe over which modern subjects might exert agency.

**PHENOMENOLOGIES OF GLOBAL MAPPING**

I begin with the only figure in the picture to examine the globe: the Bolshevik, whose absorption in the viewing is complete. Spherical cartographies are especially elusive and enticing, as much of their surface extends over the invisible far side of their curvature. The Bolshevik submits to this visual appeal. Gripping the stand with his right hand and revolving the sphere with his left, his gaze falls along its turning equator. Viewed through the negative moment in Sloterdijk’s theory, which holds global maps to have dissipated the secure existential horizons of traditional societies, the Bolshevik exemplifies the estrangements attendant on modern globalism. In a much-cited essay probing how global figurations frame human relationships with the environment, Ingold (2008), argued that “the world imagined as a globe, far from coming into being in and through a life process . . . figures as an entity that is, as it were, presented to or confronted by life. The global environment is not a lifeworld, it is a world apart from life” (463). The global image appears only from afar as “an object of contemplation” (462), not through lived entanglements with the earth. This “global ontology of detachment” is for Ingold connected with modern technology, which requires that the world be “presented as a spectacle” to be ordered from a disengaged managerial perspective (468). Thus globes reinforce a correspondingly distanced form of practice, in which people and places are engaged with in cartographic terms as homogenized and manipulable points set out in a mapped array.

The figure of the Bolshevik personifies on two levels the distanced attitude toward lived space inculcated by global maps. First, he is ulterior to the representation, which he can survey and even reimagine, but not enter and immerse himself in as a part of its whole. Second, he appears uninterested in, even unaware of his immediate environment. No longer an inhabitant bound into an encompassing world, the Bolshevik has internalized the global view, and relates to his surroundings as they appear through global mapping: insignificant, relative, and distant. He has become what Ingold (2011, 112) called an “exhabitant” of the earth, for whom the world is not a surrounding context in which to dwell but a surface to survey.

The obverse of the Bolshevik’s fixation with the spherical cartography before him, then, is his phenomenological and ethical disengagement from the surrounding scene. This lack of social commitment is all the more striking given that Nikritin modeled the figure on a *komsomolets*—a member of the Communist Party’s youth wing, the *Komsomol*, in whose program youth is hailed as “the vanguard of the proletarian revolution,” and “gives thousands of brave warriors for a better future” (quoted in Tirado 1994, 236). As one such warrior, it seems strange that the Bolshevik should allow starvation and tradition to persist around him while attending instead to the globe. Perhaps his preoccupation with geography is only momentary, after which time he will fulfill his vanguardist commitments by filling the beggar’s bowl, following his comrade’s
gesturing hand, or toppling the idolatrous statue back into the swamp. Ultimately, though, the globe is more than a passing curiosity for its enrapt beholder, who chooses not to pursue these outstanding commitments: It alone commands his attention and informs his behavior. The Bolshevik’s strangely weightless lean compounds the idea that global mappings divorce viewers from their social and spatial context. It makes his alienation literal, as if the globe has induced the Bolshevik to escape the existential scene altogether—a Soviet Apollo transcending gravitation and locality, globe in hand. This motif is developed more baldly in a watercolor Nikritin made eleven years earlier, with an ironic title, The Resurrection of the Registration Clerk 2, suggesting a caricature of Soviet bureaucracy. The picture enrolls a simultaneously Christian and Apollonian imagery of transcendence and light (see Cosgrove 2001, 1, 57) to depict the eponymous functionary as an androgynous nude equipped with globe and abacus, levitating cross-legged in a sunlit sky (Figure 2). This image recalls a broader cast of flying figures in Soviet modernism, from Over the Town (1918), Marc Chagall’s self-portrait airborne over Vitebsk, to Vasily Kamensky’s poetic biography of his spiritual alter-ego, whose “searching Spirit missed . . . the flight of the body under the clouds, the swift discharge into the skies” (1918, 109; quoted and translated in Vujosevic 2015, 85). These fliers cut a sharp contrast with the Bolshevik, who neither enjoys Chagall’s expansive aerial views, shines like Nikritin’s bureaucrat, nor pursues Kamensky’s dream of futurist free flight. Shadowy, unbalanced, and withdrawn into his globe, the Bolshevik’s floating precariousness registers less as Apollonian transcendence than mere alienation—detachment from place.

Recall that for Sloterdijk this unsettled mode of habitation results from a far-reaching historical transition, in which the terrestrial globe displaced closed premodern spatialities. The globe’s historical significance is brought into relief by the statue of Venus, which derives from Hellenistic cultures that attributed spherical form to the cosmos and experienced the globe from within. Indeed, Sloterdijk (2005) contrasted the reified spatiality of modern globalization with that of the ancient Greeks, who had “the privilege of inhabiting a real cosmos . . . a closed and comforting world” (223). The Venus originated from existential spaces oriented toward cosmic order: According to Aristotle (2005, 5), the pre-Socratic thinker Anaxagoras even claimed that life was worth living if only to “apprehend the heavens and the whole order of the universe.” Belonging to this older worldview, which conceived of the inhabited world as embedded within a sublime and meaningful universe, the Venus most approximates Sloterdijk’s Christian madman. Unlike the madman, though, who panics at the withdrawal of metaphysical space, the statue seems undaunted by the modern globe. Possessed of a calm solidity, it looks disdainfully past the mapped earth, as if recalling the better (enclosed and meaningful) cosmographies to which she is anachronistically hidebound. If statues could think, she would scorn moderns who manage space cartographically from without; if they could experience, she would have undergone the loss of existentially secure worldviews in what Weber, following Schiller, called the “disenchantment of the world.” For Weber (1963, 270), premodern societies experienced space as “a great enchanted garden,” infused with received stories and figures. In the scene of modernization suggested by The Old and the New, such gardens have been overtaken by dense fog, which obscures the meanings once immanent to the Hellenistic and Christian worlds through which the Venus has passed. A lost garden is hinted at pithily by a single yellowed leaf lying dead in the foreground.

Dismayed by cartographically induced distance and disenchantment, one might search out locality in the picture to counteract the adverse effects of global mapping. Place-based existence
continued amid globalism is represented here by the beggar at the composition’s right flank. Of the four figures it is he—who neither examines the globe nor laments lost Orbs—who dwells in place most completely. One might try to construe this occupation romantically as establishing a refuge of authenticity, but there is little in *The Old and the New* to affirm locality. Having lost his lower legs, perhaps in war (see Bowlt 2013, 160), the beggar covers his remaining thighs with a board: Far from celebrating place, he is condemned to it. This becomes clearer if we compare the figure with a painting Nikritin made in the mid-1920s named *Journey Around the World* (reproduced in Bowlt 2013, 156, and Adaskina et al. 2004, 270). In it, two travelers use a globe as a tool with which to navigate a desert, disregarding centuries in which globes were essentially symbolic objects. Unlike the Bolshevik, who is absorbed in his globe, these figures

FIGURE 2. Solomon Nikritin, *The Resurrection of the Registration Clerk* 2, 1924, pastel on paper, 9.5 × 13.4 cm. State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece. Courtesy of the Costakis Collection. (Color figure available online.)
view theirs in interaction with the landscape. Holding the globe to the sun while riding a miniature automobile, the pair journey around a borderless postrevolutionary world, symbolized by a little red flag flying from the globe. By contrast with the emancipated global movement of these travelers, the beggar’s place-based world has little to recommend it. Emaciated and yellow with malnutrition, he is unsheltered and grimly immobile. Even if the beggar dwelt in place willfully, his surroundings are poor compensation for the experiential immediacy foregone by the Bolshevik and metaphysical meanings mourned by the Venus. He might concur with Sloterdijk’s madman’s nostalgia for the Christian Orb, for its inhabitants upheld the principle of charity.

The picture does not affirm place against globality, then, despite recognizing distance and disenchantment in global mapping. None of the figures truly inhabits their place: Clad for urban labor, the worker and Bolshevik seem misplaced in the wilderness, the beggar’s naked torso is unprepared for exposure, and the statue, normally guarded in curated interiors, has been abandoned to the elements. Nor are they responsive to one other; no two gazes meet, not even those of the young communists. In fact, it can be argued that the depicted locality, far from countering globality, actually embodies the estrangement and disenchantment produced by globes. This is suggested by one of the many preparatory drawings for *The Old and the New*, which shows the scene boxed into a frame crossed by intersecting ellipsoids and circles (Figure 3). Although this might have been used as a compositional schema through which Nikritin organized the painting, the unnecessarily repetitive global lines, some of which do not even enter the frame, indicate a further significance, especially given the importance accorded globes and discs in Nikritin’s theories (see Bowlt 2013, 166). The drawing shows existential space not simply containing a globe, but itself caught within the graticular constructions of which globes are made. Place, here, has been circumscribed and

FIGURE 3 Solomon Nikritin, *Preparatory Study for The Old and the New*, early 1930s, pencil and ink on paper, 20 × 15 cm. State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece. Courtesy of the Costakis Collection. (Color figure available online.)
pervaded by globality in advance. Following this sketch, it becomes possible to see the locality depicted in The Old and the New as but another expression of the modern (global) spatiality mapped at its center: The watery fog obscures the meanings once immanent to premodern Orbs, the discordant congregation enacts the estranged sociality induced by the global perspective, and the individual figures take their place within a rigidly rationalized graticular space.

A blank globe stranded in a wasteland among starving beggars, forgotten statues, and estranged moderns: It is little wonder that Bowlt (2013, 168) described the scene as an “apocalyptic limbo.” Reactions to the disenchanted earth need not be despairing or nostalgic, however. Approaching The Old and the New through Sloterdijk’s Nietzschean moment, we see how the terrestrial globe, although profoundly daunting, might ultimately empower the surrounding subjects, challenging them with the need to assert themselves against the blankness of modern space. This entails taking a self-affirmed attitude to the disenchanted earth, originating modes of inhabiting a desacralized planet that neither bemoan alienation nor long for past cosmic orders, but pursue instead the creative possibilities open to modern subjects.

I begin my discussion of empowered modern meaning-making in Nikritin’s painting with Berman’s (1982) definition of modernism: the “attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” (5). Only one such attempt is discernible, immediately, in The Old and the New. Whereas the globe still overawes the Bolshevik, his worker comrade seems to have accepted its disenchanted spatiality and risen to engage her surroundings anew. She rests her right hand assuredly on her hip and extends her left arm outward in a purposive gesture that seems determined to influence the space in which she stands. In confronting the globe’s implications and facing her environment thus, the worker meets the challenge, forfeited to her willful design by the passing of metaphysical spatialities, of consciously forging a habitation on a disenchanted earth, presenting a newly factual and malleable earth as it appears to empowered moderns, ready to revalue and remake the desolate landscape. Unencumbered by metaphysical constructs, such partisans of modernity recognize themselves as givers of meaning to earthly space, asserting their will over imagined deities or essentialized natures as the origin of existential order hereafter.

The pointing worker can thus be read as embodying the modernist self-assertion resulting from the disintegration of premodern Orbs. In having the globe coincide with her lower abdomen, however, Nikritin’s picture indicates a sexual dimension to globalism that went unremarked on in Sloterdijk’s excursus. The coincidence equates globality with gestation and female sexuality, and global viewing with masculine wants. Garb (1990, 269) has written about earth imagery from an ecofeminist perspective, which similarly proposes “structural resonances between men’s violence toward nature and toward women,” emphasizing how the earth’s experiential realities have been fixed by an objectifying visual apparatus and its resources bared before human (male) demands (but see Nash 1996 and Rose 1995, which uncover complexities and alternative tendencies in the patriarchal cartographic gaze). Nikritin’s crossing of globe and groin confirms the impulse to sexual dominance behind the Bolshevik’s will to power over the earth. He also considered reversing this gendering: One preparatory sketch has a languid Bolshevik rest the stand on his groin—the earth as a phallic projection. Although Nikritin decided against this alternative, the final equation of globe with female abdomen can
also be construed positively. Blumenberg (1987) argued that distanced global imaginations, although disquieting, ultimately heighten humanity’s attachment to the earth, which seems precious against the aridity of space—a “cosmic oasis … this miracle of an exception, our own blue planet in the midst of the disappointing celestial desert” (685; following Lazier 2011, 619). Through this lens, Nikritin’s feminized globe becomes an invaluable womb, and the female worker’s expansive gesture seems to acknowledge an earth for which humans are impossibly fortunate. If the Bolshevik seems fated to exemplify a spatial variant of modern alienation through his absorption in the global view, reading the globe through the worker counteracts this “Copernican trauma” by substituting the estranged globe with an earth conceived as humanity’s womb and only viable environment (Blumenberg 1987, 678).

Thus the worker enacts a spatiality apparently purged of not only the ontotheological imaginings declared dead by Sloterdijk, but also the “Copernican” disquiet that followed their withdrawal. Even as the worker gestures resolutely over a pliant mapped earth, however, this equivocal painting casts doubt on her modernist attitude. Might she consolidate the Bolshevik’s distanced perspective by acting it out in social practice? Might her commanding point figure an insignificant, even hubristic gesture, destined to disappear into the swirling mists behind? The worker’s very modernity seems dubious: Her features and complexion resemble those of the Venus personifying tradition to her right, suggesting that “the new” is merely “the old” in modern overalls. If the worker is distinguished only superficially from tradition, then the globe too might be little different from the premodern cosmographies it superseded, and might share their pathologies and fate.

**MAPPING MEANING ONTO THE GLOBE**

Notwithstanding these intimations of hubris, for me the worker figure embodies the idea that the unsettling blankness or facticity of global spatiality is, in fact, a precondition of modernist self-assertion. The point is reinforced if we return to the painting’s central vignette, depicting the Bolshevik’s steely confrontation with the globe. His purposive gaze falls across a nebulous global surface almost inviting the imposition of form. Indeed, it requires no leap of imagination to envisage a pencil in the Bolshevik’s left hand, with which he bestows significance on a meaning-deficient world. Building on these moments of empowered, modernist meaning-making in the painting, this final section poses different global imaginations that have prevailed historically alongside *The Old and the New*. First global images belonging to the contemporary iconography of globalization, then the imagery of socialist internationalism is discussed. Exploring the picture’s resonances with these very different globalisms, I argue that Nikritin’s work focuses a perpetual, constitutively modern impulse to map meaning and order onto a fortuitous world. I take the blank central globe as my point of departure: an empty space and signifier through which I now engage some of the mappings that have enwrapped the disenchanted globe in constructed significance.

To begin, consider the global rhetorics pervading current visual culture. Unlike Nikritin’s three-dimensional globe, today global maps are largely experienced as digital composites that can be instanced and interacted with on screens in countless quotidian settings, or as logos discarding all but the symbolic dimensions of global geography to create instantly consumable icons of corporate identity. Whether branding nongovernmental organization and transnational
corporations’ claims to transnational reach, focusing ecological anxieties, or finding a figure for the Internet, global icons tend to elicit cosmopolitan identifications and concerns. Although Nikritin’s characters would scarcely recognize these concerns, still less identify with them, *The Old and the New* reflects the mode of reception in which current global maps and imagery are consumed. My impression is that they are experienced in the backgrounds of lived practice (e.g., a browser tab icon, or clip introducing a newsroom broadcast), and that their efficacy derives from their being both pervasive and inconspicuous. This is confirmed by sociologists Szerszynski and Urry (2002, 466–68), who, updating Billig’s (1995) notion of “banal nationalism,” referred to an emergent condition of “banal globalism,” in which cosmopolitan consumer-citizens are constructed through daily exposure to media motifs of global belonging. Although such global motifs are rarely submitted to the kind of cerebral scrutiny applied by the Bolshevik, the state of distraction in which contemporary subjects experience them is exemplified by the beggar’s spare stare, the Venus’s turning away, and the metro worker’s attention elsewhere. These figures ignore the central globe, but it stands centrally among them, shaping how they conceive and inhabit space all the more effectively for going unnoticed and unremarked. Thus the picture envisions a cultural situation subtly mediated by global mappings, prefiguring the phenomenological conditions through which globalism is constructed today.

Engaging banal globalism through *The Old and the New* also uncovers disquieting aspects of contemporary globality of which prevailing maps and media motifs give little suggestion. Di Palma (2009, 264) argued that the mapping application Google Earth “creates the fantasy of an intimate globe,” overcoming physical geography to condition an unprecedented accessibility of views and mutual looking across the planet. Posing contemporary global maps and images alongside Nikritin’s existentially laden group portrait deflates these fantasies of intimacy. The Bolshevik’s intimacy with the globe has its corollary in local distance and disengagement, whereas mapped visions of world closeness, mutuality, and holism, when set against Nikritin’s wilderness, become blindly optimistic rhetorics forcing significance onto a shifting blankness.

It is striking that an interwar Soviet painting should reflect current globalism, as much social theory has presented contemporary globalization as a negation of Eastern Bloc communism, implicitly positioning the latter outside of globalist discourse. Nevertheless, the globe was one of the most prominent motifs in socialist visual culture. Figured in banners and prints, carried in parades as three-dimensional properties, or reworked by artists as different as the English romantic Walter Crane and Latvian constructivist Gustav Klutsis, socialist globe imagery provided a concise visual symbol of global solidarity among workers. It emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the larger discourse of socialist internationalism, which sought, in the words of Trotsky (1918), “to put forward and defend the overall interests of the whole proletariat in its totality independent of nationality.” These associations are clear in a political poster designed in 1919 by Alexandr Petrovich Apsit entitled *First of May: The Workers of the World Have Nothing to Lose but their Chains, but they Have the Whole World to Gain* (Figure 4). A crowd depicted as representing all world cultures and every trade, although made up exclusively of men, holds a nighttime revolutionary assembly. The political vision espoused by the central, smock-clad speaker is conjured in the sky: a stark white earth whose nations are steadily merging into the global red of socialism. A scarlet banner declaring “Workers of the World, Unite!” billows around the vision, having been planted, significantly, in Moscow. Imagining Apsit’s globe in the blank space of Nikritin’s mandates specific
interpretations of *The Old and the New* as a whole. The two youths become advocates of globalizing revolutionary gains in a border-crossing project indicated by the worker’s expansionist gesture, and the Venus and beggar figure symptoms of residual tradition and morbidity, soon to disappear together with the boundaries that once divided the now united globe. Before long, though, it becomes apparent that *The Old and the New* undermines the positivity of socialist globalism. In the Apsit, the congregation is a community; although we might query the emergent hierarchy between the speaking individual and listening crowd, this is a dialogic situation from which a common, indeed universal, project will emerge. The globe reveals a captivating social ideal, towering over a nocturnal scene in which darkness implies not danger, but impending daybreak—the coming of a new society. In Nikritin’s painting, by contrast, the proximity of the mute figures enacts a claustrophobic isolation, and the globe, far from unfolding a visionary future, belongs to the fallen present fully as much as the dead leaf, dirt ground, or beggar’s bowl. Gloom swallows the distinction between night and day.

*FIGURE 4* Alexandr Apsit, *First of May. The Workers of the World Have Nothing to Lose but their Chains, but they Have the Whole World to Gain,* 1919, printed poster, 95 × 71 cm. Courtesy of Eric Reznikov. (Color figure available online.)
This mood of doubt and defeat befits the fortunes of socialist globalism in the Soviet Union. Whereas Apsit’s poster helped revive revolutionary internationalism after the Great War, by the time Nikritin painted *The Old and the New* the expansionist program of the revolutionary organization known as the Third International or “Comintern” (1919–1943) had begun to wane. Carr (1982) wrote that in this period the notion of global revolution “no longer occupied a central place in [the Comintern’s] agenda. World revolution continued to figure in the perorations of Comintern pronouncements on every solemn occasion; it was no longer thought of as the primary condition of the survival of the Soviet regime” (9). In the 1930s, then, revolutionary internationalism was being gradually hollowed out by a Stalinist drive toward state formation and accompanying rhetoric of “socialism in one country.” This had ramifications for geographical practice: The geodetical geometry in which global cartography is grounded came under criticism for its supposed formalism, and the energies of Soviet cartographers were redirected toward topographical mappings of the Union as a closed territory (see Baron 2013). Viewed against the backdrop of this ossification of socialist globalism in the USSR, Nikritin’s picture takes on the appearance of a pained retrospective restaging of how aspirations toward a globe united under Communism played out and come to grief in revolutionary practice. The Bolshevik looks, the worker points; both are in thrall to the global vision, and yet poverty and tradition persist. If Nikritin’s is a socialist globe, it was held back from fulfilling its ambitions by the Stalinist assertion of statism, remaining stranded in a landscape it failed to transform and society it failed to unite.

Taking the central sphere in this way as an empty placeholder onto which I have projected different globalisms downplays the fact that, unlike the meaning-saturated global images invoked earlier, Nikritin’s globe offers nothing by way of geographical vision (Figure 5). Resolutely nondiscursive, it presents a nebulous blank, no less vaporous and uncertain than the mists churning on its peripheries. Remember the extraordinary size of the canvas,

FIGURE 5 Detail of *The Old and the New*. (Color figure available online.)
confronting spectators with this starkly blank painted globe, which is larger than many cartographic equivalents, at just eye level. Although it should also be said that, viewed up close, the globe does display slight suggestions of form, this only incites viewers to will the existence of a more developed geographical vision that the picture ultimately withholds.

Beyond offering a mute space through which to explore ulterior global discourses, then, Nikritin’s globe has its own, specific import. To close, I want to suggest that this bare, rock-blue sphere embodies the meaningless facticity onto which (and in reaction to which) modern discourses of meaning are projected. Its formal blankness denotes existential blankness, encapsulating the postontotheological spatiality of Sloterdijk’s excursus in that it offers neither transcendent meanings nor inherent orders, and certainly no spaces predesignated for human habitation. My reading of The Old and the New has also encountered modernist figures who affirm themselves against this blankness by actively originating their own social schemas. The worker stands ready to build on the tabula rasa of the wasteland; the Bolshevik is poised to inscribe self-made meanings into a meaningless world. The bare globe suspended between these two figures, however, subtly undermines their gestures of empowered creativity. Unsettlingly blank, Nikritin’s globe sets forth the frightening facticity of the disenchanted earth—a facticity that, although continually papered over with confected significance, haunts the maps made to keep it at bay.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored the spatialities produced through global mapping in Solomon Nikritin’s The Old and the New. Drawing on Sloterdijk’s Nietzschean excursus on terrestrial globes, I have shown how the picture presents globalism as a constitutively modern apprehension of space, riven by two contrary yet inextricable tendencies.

On one side, the mapped globe represents a culminating motif in the disenchantment of the world. Clustered around a bare sphere in a murky wasteland, the depicted figures enact an estranged, posttheological spatiality in which humans live on a globe, not immersively in a world, still less as part of a meaningfully constructed cosmos. On the other, the disenchanted earth preconditions empowered attitudes to terrestrial space, spurring its inhabitants to generate new spatial orders of their own, reflexive design. Engaging this theme, I have construed the central figures as modernists ready to inscribe new visions of society and space into a malleable globe, also connecting Nikritin’s picture to global imaginations circulating in Soviet and contemporary culture. In offering a poignant image of socialist internationalism thwarted and mirroring the phenomenological conditions of banal globalism, the painting brings into focus how modern cultures have enwrapped an unnervingly blank terrestrial globe in constructed significance.

It is eight decades since Nikritin painted The Old and the New. In that time the painting has been censored, stored away in the artist’s studio, rediscovered by a collector, and taken to Uzbekistan for eventual exhibition. Meanwhile global imageries and rhetorics have proliferated in cultural discourse, attaining such importance that today the term globalization represents perhaps the leading concept through which contemporary society understands itself. What Nikritin’s painting returns us to, I have argued, is the meaningless facticity across which these global rhetorics play out. From the Uzbek fringe of a vanished Soviet Union, The Old and the New depicts a modern condition in which people and polities consciously project their own meanings onto the fortuitous earth disclosed in their midst.
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NOTES

1. My colleague Irene Villaescusa pointed out the worker’s similarity to statues presenting Columbus pointing.
2. For further discussion of the picture’s censure, see Bowlt (2013, 160–65).
3. A distinction obtains between “pure” phenomenology, which studies how the world is apprehended by a transhistorical subject, undiluted by context, and a historicizing “existential” phenomenology, for which existence is disclosed to human consciousness in radically different ways in different cultures and moments of history.
4. Interestingly for the nascent field of geohumanities, these procedures might not be incidental to geography. Hawkins (2013) emphasized the notion of encounter as a specifically geographical mode of art analysis, drawing on Bal (among many others) in an explicitly spatial register to explore “productive relations between the artwork, world and the various audiences of the work” (15; see also Ferdinand 2014, 3–4).
5. The drawing can be viewed on the Costakis Collection Web site at http://goo.gl/A7nFte (see Costakis Collection 2007).
6. I chose this example following Baron (2013, 2).

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