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Univ. of Amsterdam, May 14, 2014

The Planetary Remaking of Cultural Studies: Steps toward a Geomethodology

Hi, everybody. It is such a pleasure to be here. First, let me thank the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, the United States Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Department of State, and the U. S. Council for International Exchange of Scholars for this opportunity to visit your University and Institute. I am also grateful to Professor Besser for his kind invitation to present to you my recent research, in particular the book I have just completed.

Before doing so, let me repeat what I said three years ago, during another lecture delivered before a Dutch audience: Amsterdam and The Netherlands in general are ideal venues for the project I am about to outline, among other things because, to my mind, they are *places in the world* in a profound sense, historically at ease with the planet and thus “worldly,” cosmopolitan in ways others can only hope to emulate.

I would like to think of *Reading for the Planet* as an essay-manifesto of sorts, to be more precise, as a theoretical and critical manifesto pertaining chiefly to literary and cultural theory and criticism, calling first and foremost on fellow theorists and critics, but taking up issues broader than literature and addressing audiences by no means limited to the literati. Otherwise, whoever my readers are, I hope they will find the *platform* laid out here also historicized, theorized, *and* implemented in a book both patiently demonstrative and tactically impatient, one that takes its time with the discussion proper but only to submit that we are running out of time: on the one hand, the prevalent, nationalist-territorialist (nation-state-bounded) methodologies seem to be out of time, out of sync with the times throughout the humanities; on the other hand,

retooling or, as I put it, “planetarizing” this methodology—planetarizing the cultural studies paradigm—so as to bring it in line with our times, i.e., with the post-Cold War era’s radical changes, cannot wait.

The readers familiar with my work will discover that this book comes on the heels of my recent research. The idea of a planetary epistemology necessarily underwritten by an apposite ethics—the question of how to read with and for the planet whatever we happen to be reading (viewing, listening to, etc.), of how to look at or turn to the planet and “face it,” in every sense of the word, as the planet itself is turning to us—is a major thread running through my latest books. This is what the planet does, after all: it turns (*planā*, in Ancient Greek), gyrates, turns around, but also turns to *us*, faces us so as to force us, critics, to face it as well.

Centered on post-September 11, 2001 American and world literature, philosophy, and cultural theory, my new monograph extends particularly the line of inquiry of my 2011 *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. The book draws out some methodological implications of *Cosmodernism*’s core concept for the planetary paradigm with an eye to theorizing a geocultural model of interpretation—a geomethodology, as I call it—in a way that, to reemphasize, both elaborates a full-dress argument and issues a manifesto-like call to critical action.

Neither the sole “new thing” to supersede postmodernism nor a distinct movement or school so far, cosmodernism is, as I have described it, (a) a more and more recognizable imaginary pattern, that is, a modality of mapping out today’s world as a cultural geography of relationality; (b) by the same token, an also better and better-marked scenario of discourse and subjectivity formation; (c) an ethical imperative pointing to the present as much as to the future;

and (d) a critical algorithm for interpreting and assembling a range of post-1989 narrative and theoretical U. S. imaginings into a coherent and ahead-looking model.

Building on these meanings, *Reading for the Planet* adds a fifth: as an *inchóá[ei]te*, still “soft” trend, cosmopolitanism is for the American and other Euroatlantic cultures a transition to, harbinger of, and sometimes a blueprint for that which planetarism is becoming for the entire world on the threshold of the 21st century. That is to say, the North-American “cosmodernization” (cosmodern-becoming) of the postmodern—a subject tackled more insistently in *Cosmodernism*’s epilogue and in a couple of other places after that—is a world-fractal phenomenon, [a cultural *holomere* or] an isomorphic subset of a highly complex, fairly discontinuous, at and times contradictory shift of larger proportions and longer-lasting consequences; cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitanization are to the U. S. and the West generally what planetarism and planetarization are becoming to the world, its present, and foreseeable future.

Therefore—and most notably—while the cosmopolitan can be described as a planetary synecdoche, cosmopolitanism is not the Ur-paradigm the rest of the world replicates. Let me make this clear: planetarism is scarcely cultural imperialism *redivivus* even though writers’ intimations of planetarism are not immune to imperial lapses and neoimperialist, totalist-globalist temptations. It is the other way around, rather: socioaesthetic mutations in the North America, Europe, and elsewhere cannot circumvent the broader *écu[iu]ménical* transformations affecting how artists, thinkers, and laypeople worldwide view themselves, their places, and the world. Thus, *Reading for the Planet* restages the cosmopolitan “algorithm” of interpretation discriminately, rehearses some of its tenets (e. g., the role of relationality), and revamps, repurposes, or casts aside others to work out a mechanism for reading planetarism—for teasing

out the inscriptions of planetarity, the world's reemergence qua planet, in early 21st-century literary, cultural, and theoretical practices.

The structure of this presence rests, I argue, on a characteristic geocultural logic: the heterotopic co-presence deployed by the greater elsewhere's ever more aggressive bid for redefining the "here"—nearness, locality, the "regionally specific," and the putative but usually problematic autochthonous—topologically as well as typologically (anthropologically). "We" are and are defined in relation to others and the elsewhere: it is a basic as that. This logic has been behind one of the most salient world developments since the collapse of the Berlin Wall: the overhaul of the traditional dynamic of place and culture.

Some critics have indeed underscored the weakening of the "umbilical cord" between determinate locations, on one side, and, on the other, cultural formations such as discourse, identity, and community, which have been customarily deemed as "stemming" or "coming from" a particular, well-contoured, and largely stable territory whose political and epistemological sovereignty has been enforced by the nation-state and its administrative-educational institutions. Others have hypothesized that this link has been severed altogether. Still others have maintained that it has been supplanted by a *less bounded* model of cultural origination, in which indigenous roots become rerouted—first cross-regionally, trans- and inter-continentially, and then globally—and where inherited filiation yields to voluntary affiliation and "vertical" derivation to horizontal *dérive* ("drift") and its sometimes cosmopolitan fantasies of playful self-fashioning.

In any case, there is little doubt that the path, makeup, functioning, and understanding of the locus-culture nexus have been shifting, faster and faster, across countries, cultures, as well as disciplines, where, consequently, we are running into problems testing the effectiveness of our approaches, the boundaries of our discourses and of the "scholarly" more generally, the

limitations of our epistemologies, and the germane limits of our academic units (departments, programs, curricula, degrees we are getting, etc.)

Bearing witness to the upswing in mobility and interconnectedness around the planet, these problems include the risks taken by the reader of Yoko Tawada's "Metamorphosen des Heidenrösleins," whose "language games," as Marjorie Perloff has shown with great display of erudition, put one on a "cultural collision" course with Goethe as much as with Japan's history, literature, and national idiom; the revelation of the Faulknerian scholar forced to travel these days, methodologically if not physically also, to Haiti and even farther away, to Western Africa, to uncover the sources of the Southern anxieties buried deep in *Absalom, Absalom!*; the bemusement of the critic who, alongside the characters of *White Noise* and other, later Don DeLillo novels, might wonder if the American heartland's glorious sunsets are no more than "fallout from a war in China"; or the conundrum one faces in Joseph O'Neill's masterpiece *Netherland*, where the bigger world becomes legible in the unlikely yet refreshing "civility" spectacle put up for our benefit on a Long Island cricket field.

Neither such intellectual provocations nor the world realities mounting them are entirely new. Their European origins, for instance, can be traced to the voyages of the great 14th-century Venetian and Portuguese explorers if not farther back. However, as I stress across this book, both the defining omnipresence of these realities and the intensity with which they level such challenges day in and day out at the dawn of the third millennium are historically unmatched and demand solutions without delay. In that, they tell or highlight one way of telling both the world's time and our cultural-intellectual time in the world. They speak to the world's overall "condition" or modality of being: planetarity.

Reflecting this ontology is the planet, understood here as the geocultural matrix fashioning human expressivity and understanding worldwide; the planet as emerging “single unit” of cultural discourse as well as of cultural analysis, of world-writing and world-reading. This is as much as saying that *Reading for the Planet* is not an ecocritical inquiry; here, the planet is not an environmental concept even though it would be possible neither without the concept nor without the recent work done around it by critics such as Lawrence Buell and Ursula K. Heise. What concerns me, as does critics such as Henry Sussman, Hubert Zapf, Michael Wutz, and Joseph Tabbi, is cultural or, better yet, geocultural ecology: culture defined as a world ecosystem to whose welfare the socio-discursive, ethno-racial, and gender-, class-, and faith-inflected here-there and self-other relations and relationality more broadly are crucial.

Notably enough, these tellings, narrations, representations, measurements, and the struggles to make sense of them—in short, planetarism or the cultural imaginary of planetarity—constitute both a reality and a metareality, a historical phenomenon and an aesthetic-conceptual construal thereof. Further, as constructions, they are simultaneously descriptive and normative, contemporary and future, a reality, “under construction” as it may be, and a *reality to be* or set of directives for the present reality’s change. As cultural form, imaginary configuration, and Weltanschauung, planetarism is then both aligned and at odds with the material-historical circumstances of its birth. To be sure, the post-1990s, ever-accelerating de-linking and unorthodox recoupling of locale and material-discursive production in trade, finance, communications, sciences, and the arts are the backdrop against which new, planetary ways of experiencing and viewing the world rose and with them the possibility of a new cultural paradigm inside and outside the U. S. Thus, at the core of what may well amount to a sea change “out there,” in the “real world,” planetarism is, more and more markedly every day, *the 21st*-

century imaginary's "Prevailing Operating System," to borrow Sussman's term. Neither entirely unprecedented nor everywhere the same nor subtending the entire earth, the planetary is the pivotal dimension in which the world's cultures are fostered. In this sense, rather than in the more holistic-integrative one, of which critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remain understandably leery, this "dimension" is unique in terms of the force with which it leaves its imprint on how people picture themselves and their environments in the 21st century. A highly complex, material-aesthetic operator, the planet is becoming a dominant, shaping as well as illuminating context, an arena, a modulating drive, and a mode of cultural production. No question about it.

The question is how to handle this output. More to the point, the question is—aesthetically, ethically, and politically—how to handle the imagination system so as to enlist its own episteme in a "reimagination" of the world's "prevailing systems of actuality."

One might ask, therefore, how are we to respond to planetarism critically? How are we to sort out a planetary cultural symptomatology ranging *from* free-floating, disembodied fantasies of fluidity, hyperconnectivity, and "contamination" *to* the nitty-gritty of migrant lives and quasi-generalized diaspora of a world that seems to be in search of the postcolonial's "beyond"; *from* extreme forms of "time-space compression" (David Harvey) *to* the global "spectacle society" and the world panopticon of touristic voyeurism, military surveillance, and aggressive data gathering by government agencies; *from* the shrinking-cum-dilation and the conflict-ridden intermingling of private and public spheres *to* the ebb and flow of identities—*from* the deterritorialization of subjectivities *to* the reterritorialization of allegiances as supra-national consumer options, fashion statements, and professional memberships? How are we to make sense of cultures' pathos of being in the bigger world—how do we understand them in their

patent or disguised worldliness—while distinguishing between this legitimate aspiration and the homogenization and “banalization of the world” Baudrillardian “telemorphosis” and other categories of overmediatization threaten as with? How do we interpret novel X from culture Y geoculturally? Once again, how do we read “with” the planet, and what would be the intellectual mechanics as well as the ethical ramifications of such a planetary form of interpretation?

A pressing challenge of today’s critics, answering these questions is also my brief here. My manifesto picks up the gauntlet and advances a reading model for the planetary projections encrypted in cultural practices or artifacts. Putting together this model involves a two-step process.

The first step lays the groundwork for the geomethodology developed in the book’s second half. Specifically, this introductory segment consists of a series of historical and conceptual dissociations helping contextualize the rise of planetarism and its core critical lexicon over and against post-Cold War globalization, global studies, and the “global” family vocabulary as set up by the latter. By no means synonymous although routinely conflated, world (the broadest term), globe, and planet make up this part’s fundamental notional triad, with the last two understood as interconnecting processings (“worldings”) of the first: the world has to undergo a process in order to become globe, planet, or something in between. While, similarly to “planetarism,” “planet,” and the like, “globalism,” “global,” and their brethren do correspond to either fully shaped or emerging empirical realities, to how things are or are about to be in the world, *Reading for the Planet* remains keen on such worldly signifiers as discourse formations, ways of talking about what is happening to the world. For it is on this terrain, where the contemporary world is construed, discursively formed, and, in an important yet often neglected sense, also produced, that alternate formations and reformations are first envisioned.

The end result of these deconstructive/reconstructive procedures can be described as a critical equivalent to linguistic backformation. Needless to say, “globe” and “planet” did not come into being, nor were they defined ontologically, in what they are and do, as globalism and planetarism had their multiple suffixes clipped (by whom?); it was the other way around, actually. But, if globalism, globalization, and globality, on one side, and planetarism, planetarization, and planetarity, on the other side, entail worldly maneuverings, certain ways of fashioning the world, then planetarism may be well poised to refashion, reimagine, or re-world the world into a shape, structure, or meaning distinct from, if not outright critical of, the shape, structure, or meaning “world” acquired (or lost) as it “worlded” as “globe” (as it “globalized”), and as it was “worded” as such by global studies.

This is why “globe” and “planet” are so insistently treated here as *competing constructions of the worlding world*, of the world that is coming together, or, in brief, the world-as-world. They are alike insofar they share the relational modus operandi, and they diverge in their different management of relationality. The book both queries and dwells on this contrast to take a stand by producing its own, planetary alternative. This makes *Reading for the Planet* a critical-theoretical counteroffer twice: while not restricted to issues of textuality and literary perusal, the greater objective of its preliminary rereading of the scholarship on globalization is another—planetary—reading.

Beside the planetary nomenclature, which naturally seeps into the entire discussion, a more established, already ossified dictionary also comes into play. “Culture,” “cultural practice,” “originality,” “tradition,” “sovereignty,” “community,” “identity,” subjectivity, “contemporary”/“present,” and “space”/“territory” are some some of its main entries. As with “globe” and “globalization,” the overabundance of scare quotes signals an awareness of the

conventions—assumptions, expectations, and agendas, in sum, rhetoricity—these words body forth. “Idiosyncratic” on occasion, and so not unlike all new (or “newish”) terminology, the planetarity repertoire is here nonetheless defined methodically and rigorously and then put to work accordingly in the book’s second part.

In concert with the historical-terminological revisionism of the book’s opening segment, this next step taken by *Reading for the Planet* follows from the conviction that a planetarily minded reading should work out a flexibly comparatist interpretive modality able to approach ethically, with an epistemologically auspicious humility, a culture’s planetary “fine print” and thus unscramble or decompress the encodings of planetarity—turn to the planet’s face, distinguish and make it visible for others also—in the putatively or “genuinely” local, regional, cloistered, and culturally-anthropologically peerless. In the book’s second half, I articulate this interpretive apparatus or geomethodology and I also apply it to 21st-century fictional works. These are my case studies. They tend to be North American more than anything else; I am an Americanist first and a comparatist after that (and *because* I am an Americanist).

Let me take quickly two such cases to give you a sense of what I mean by turning to the planet’s face as a critic—by reading that face and thus reading for the planet.

Both cases—both novels—are . . . Well, I am not really sure what they are any more. That is, I do not know how to *identify* them. What I mean is I do not know whether our customary, national identifications, the invisible labels the nation-state has been stamping on our foreheads throughout modernity, are helpful any more. At any rate, these works are not only American or East European (Romanian, more exactly), but also Dutch, or perhaps primarily Dutch to you, but also to me, and to the American public as well, for reasons that have to do with translation but also with the books’ content itself.

One is Mircea Cărtărescu's 1400-page *Blinding* ("Orbitor" in Romanian), written between 1996 and 2007 and translated into the Dutch as *De Wetenden* [(The Knowing/Those Who Know/The Wise Ones)], with the third volume still to come out. The other is Joseph O'Neill's 2008 *Netherland*, translated *not* as *Nederland* but as *Laagland* [(Lowland)] in 2009. I might call *Blinding* a Romanian book, but I suspect—and the author does too—that it is more appreciated outside Romania, definitely in countries like The Netherlands, for the episodes set in Amsterdam, as well as for its intertextual dialogue with, among others, Kafka, Borges, and Pynchon. Likewise, I might call *Netherland* an American book, but O'Neill's background is Irish and Turkish. He lives in New York City, and his novel is, thematically, about America's Dutch past and about America at its lowest (not to say "laagste") in the 9/11 aftermath.

And yet there is hope: for Cărtărescu's homeland, for yours, for O'Neill's Dutch America, and for the world. Why? Because no matter where the writers' characters are, and no matter how tiny, destitute, and threatened their little places are—in Bucharest, Amsterdam's Red Light District, or New York City's Lower East Side, *others* are there to reaffirm the world as world, the relation, that me-you ethical nexus on which being is premised. The planetary critic should resonate, for example, to the deeply constitutive, fundamentally worldly appetite of *Blinding*. For one is undoubtedly struck by the book's intrinsic and insatiable yearning for the greater world, by its insistently affirmed desire to take this world's measure *no matter what* and bear witness to it, painful as it may be, from a place half a century of brutally isolationist politics purported to cut off from other geographies and their vaster repertoire of topography, affect, and material culture. Designated as "(the) *All*," this larger, geopolitical and cosmic-metaphysical world is the novel's ontological provocation, challenging *Blinding* into existence by simultaneously fueling and frustrating its writing. While the Cold War allows Mircea, the

protagonist, to experience empirically speaking, *in situ*, the *All* only “in part” (hence the Saint Paul epigraph to one of the volumes of *Blinding*), this non-totalist totality becomes accessible through the imagination, more precisely, through a feverish, hyperconnective, planetarily (w)holistic imaginary that, over and over again, plugs the forlorn, the isolated, the ostracized, the incarcerated, and the trivial into the ecumenical and the cosmic, and, vice versa, telescopes the last two into the rest, over and over again. This is how these pages come into being and tell their story, which turns out to be the story of the world’s literal inscription into the crumbling stucco of Bucharest’s buildings and into the sinewy sheets of Mircea’s manuscript alike.

Toward the novel’s end, however, the eventful late December 1989 is the euphoric-liberatory, post-authoritarian and planetary *kairós*—“right time” but also “right place” in Ancient Greek—when the macro and the micro worlds finally fasten onto one another as if “you have pierced” the planet’s “folded map with a needle, uniting incompatible and disparate places in an incomprehensible trajectory, perpendicular to the paper.” Now, the planet’s face and the city’s face gaze into each other because the kairotic time, dislodged from its totalist-totalitarian chronology of repetitiveness, is one of suddenly accelerated, world-making worlding. At this point and *in* this point of the new world, Cărtărescu’s fictional *teléscopy* reaches its apex, for, in fact, *kairós* is best understood as a paroxysm of planetarization, radical reorientation in and toward the world. At this climactic moment, the planetary maze and Mircea’s whereabouts in a “revolutionary” Bucharest (his “cobweb map of [his] place in the world”), the world’s macro cartography and that worldly portrait’s scaled-down versions in “the filigree design of coffee cups” and snowflakes, the cosmic butterfly and the one resting in your palm, the world’s geopolitical intrigues and the patterns of Maria’s handmade rug in, alongside all the other, countless instantiations of the internal-external, small-large, inward/inworld-outward/outer-world

planetary dynamic “snap” into place, into the same co-incident, synergetic spot of co-presence to *witness*—be with and bear witness to—each other.

Witnessing is paramount in O’Neill as well. Self and other, place (location, *Ort* in German) and planet, Dutch and American, America and the world are with and bear witness to one another in the . . . game of cricket. But as, the Turkish-Irish-American author teaches us through his Dutch protagonist Hans van der Broeck and especially Hans’s West Indian friend, Chuck Ramkissoon, cricket is more than a pastime. It is not in the past either. Its time has not passed. Or, if it has, so has the exceptionalist-autonomist temporality in which American communality has traditionally pictured itself. As a community, Chuck believes, the U. S. still has to pass the geopolitical and cultural-demographic test of the planetary present. Popular with Americans since the early 18th century but gradually elbowed aside by baseball’s modern “hegemony,” the game more than a trope or fictional ploy. It is a concrete, athletically embodied modality of presentifying or updating an America that, after September 11, 2001, must reconstellate itself *qua* community so as to work through the meanings of not only the World Trade Center tragedy but also of the planetarization without which the traumatic event would remain meaningless. A community driven to the limit by the violently worlding world, the U. S. cannot afford *not* to use its new, liminal position to think through its communal cultural-ethical limits and spatio-political limitations. As Faruk Patel, one of the rumored financial backers of Chuck’s New York Cricket Club project and proponenet of a “one with the cosmos” life philosophy, implies, cricket uniquely brings together liminality, Americanness, and understanding, or, less redundantly, simply *brings together*. Chuck’s club purports to be not only a platform for global business, Internet broadcast rights, and so forth, but also for a planetary community project. He wanted to build a team, a field and its facilities, and socialize with

teammates, opponents, fans, and the cricketers' families, in a nutshell, to deploy cricket as a 21st-century ritual of American togetherness.

“My motto is, Think fantastic,” he lets Hans know. Chuck’s plan is not to import, from the outside, worldly “bigness” into cricket-reconstellated American smallness. He just does not envision worldliness as an outside; no optional, flavor-enhancing additive to the American melting pot, the world is neither external nor supplemental to the U. S. His goals are, first, to flesh out the big tightly already packed within the small, the history burrowed inside our seemingly ahistorical contemporaneity, the potential future with which the flat present is thus interleaved, the macro within the micro; and second, to help Americans *visualize* this multilayered structure, picture their home as, with, and of the world and the world as and deep inside it, in brief, to turn to the planet by turning meaningfully, self-analytically and ethically, to each other, their country, and its renewed hospitality. As he tells Hans, if “[y]ou ask people to agree to complicated rules and regulations,” the sport might just be the answer because, in spite of its colonial dissemination, it has served and can serve again as a “crash course in democracy. Plus—and this is key—the game forced [players from the warring tribes of Papua New Guinea] to share a field for days with their enemies, forced them to provide hospitality and places to sleep.” “Hans,” he carries on, “that kind of closeness changes the way you think about somebody. No other sport makes this happen.” When Hans wonders if his friend thinks of Americans as “savages,” Chuck rejects the implication by bolstering not only his “fantastic” vision’s import as a world-communal picture but also the planetary relationality over whose filigree, specifically and deliberately, the world picture is laid palimpsest-like. “I’m saying,” he elaborates, “that people, all people, Americans, whoever, are at their most civilized when they’re playing cricket. What’s the first thing that happens when Pakistan and India make peace? They

play a cricket match. Cricket is instructive, Hans. It has a moral angle. I really believe this. Everybody who plays the game benefits from it. So I say, why not Americans?" The question is timely because the 9/11 attacks triggered a major crisis, a crisis of "planetary optics." Says Chuck: "Americans cannot really see the world. They think they can, but they can't. I don't need to tell you that. Look at the problems we're having. It's a mess, and it's going to get worse. I say, we want to have something in common with Hindus and Muslims? Chuck Ramkissoon is going to make it happen. With the New York Cricket Club, we could start a whole new chapter in U. S. history. Why not? Why not say so if it's true? Why hold back? I'm going to open our eyes."

To open our American eyes in order to see and "get" the world picture is thus to "fulfill [our] destiny," in other words, to re-become the hospitable community for which cricket can provide a model morally urgent, plausible, and practical. The only "white man [he] saw on the cricket fields of New York," Hans is surrounded by "teammates" who "variously originated from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka," with "Hindus, Christians, a Sikh, and four Muslims" drawing together "into a circle for prayer" before the match. In the finite circle of "we," a new communality becomes readable at long last. "I've heard," Hans confesses,

that social scientists like to explain such a scene—a patch of America sprinkled with the foreign-born strangely in play—in terms of the immigrant quest for subcommunities.

How true this is: we're all far away from Tipperary, and clubbing together mitigates this unfair fact. But surely everyone can also testify to another, less reckonable kind of homesickness, one having to do with unsettlements that cannot be located in spaces of geography or history, and accordingly it's my belief that the communal, contractual phenomenon of New York cricket is underwritten, there *where the print is finest*, by the same agglomeration of unspeakable individual longings that underwrites cricket played

anywhere—longings concerned with horizons and potentials sighted or hallucinated and in any event lost long ago, tantalisms that touch on the undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others. I cannot be the first to wonder if what we see, when we see men in white take to a cricket field, is men imagining *an environment of justice*.

Indeed, “where the print is finest”: this is where you look for the large print of the world.

At any rate, this is my project. Thank you.