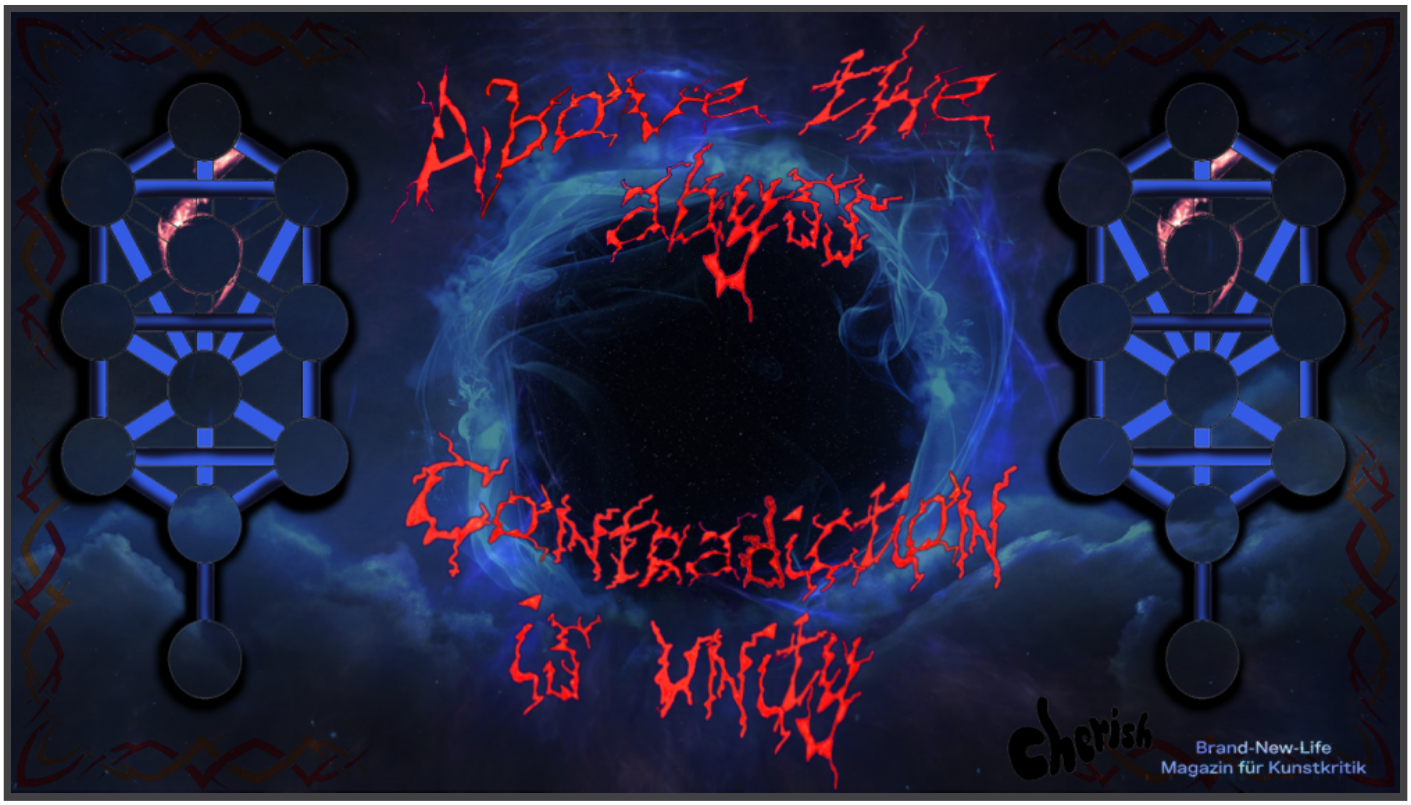
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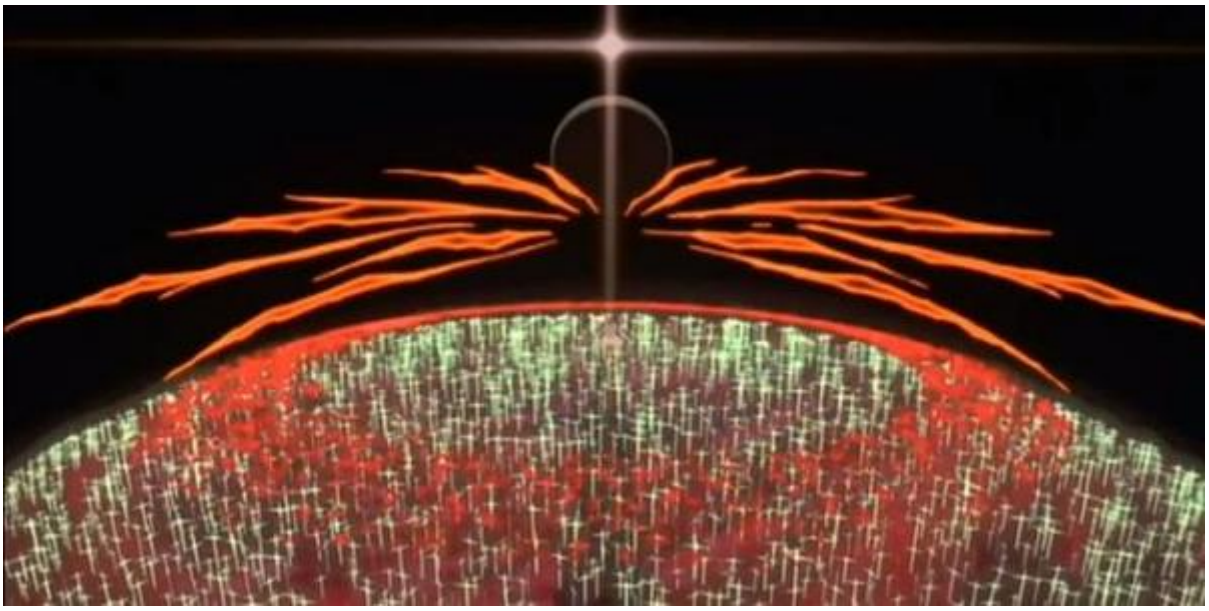
Contradiction is Unity

Fatima Wegmann

On November 27, 2019 Geneva-based Off Space Cherish and Brand-New-Life organized a reading with Fatima Wegmann. The two contributions, titled *Above the Abyss* [b-n-l/above-the-abyss/]and *Contradiction is Unity* published here originated from this reading and are published on B-N-L as video- and text-based documentation and an accompanying essay. In her essay Fatima Wegmann is discussing the collectivizing potential of Ursula K. Le Guin's fictional utopian horizons, intertwining performance with an interest in collaborative and healing practices. As part of an expansion of the discussion towards French-speaking Switzerland, B-N-L offers a platform to text-based artistic practice. Writing is an artistic practice that is still not comprehensively remunerated and recognized and, in the art context, is too rarely a subject of funding programmes. B-N-L therefore gives artists a framework to develop a new text.



This summer, after finishing my master studies in Geneva, I was feeling happy but already nostalgic about not having another Theory Fictions' class. The aim of the seminar was to show how science fiction can be an act of speculation as rigorous as any philosophical hypothesis and as experimental as any scientific inquiry. When I saw that one of my all-time favorite anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995, directed by Hideaki Anno and produced by Gainax) was streaming on Netflix I became even more frustrated for not being able to discuss it in class. Because this dystopian animeis now available on one of the biggest streaming platforms, thousands of people are able to watch it and it could become a more influential and «mainstream» reference. In an attempt to turn my frustration around, I will discuss two science fiction works in this essay: the anime tv series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and above all the novel *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin.



Neon Genesis Evangelion: End of Evangelion by Gainax and Tatsunoko Production

During the class we discussed some science fiction films, but not much in terms of Japanese anime. We were trying to study «non-conventional» science fiction mainly through the work of Octavia E. Butler, who is a black female science fiction writer (and much more), and so we didn't have much of a chance to discuss non-Western science fiction. Yet comparing Western science fiction to non-Western Science Fiction such as Japanese anime is an interesting undertaking, as it reveals a lot about (largely mediated) Western fears. While most Western dystopian science fiction is about the fear of humankind's enslavement as a result of the supremacy of technology, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is proposing a different scenario: it is humankind's fate to be dominated by some transcendent power. The series implies that the human (and non-human) body needs to be annihilated in order to evolve into a higher consciousness, while Western anxieties tend to focus on any form of mutation of the human body. In the Western vision, humanity is threatened by technological development; what was regarded as its singularity is now disrupted by the emergence of artificial intelligence. Central to *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, as suggested by is title, is a «mystical» discourse (the creation myth of humanity). At the end of the anime, the world's fate has been achieved through radical materialtransformation: the liberation of the soul from the body when all beings merge into a single shared consciousness. The world is restored to its original form: a cluster of energetic forces. This end means a new beginning; it is the *cycle* of life. Indeed, with this «death», humanity can finally undergo a new project, as the series implies that humankind in its present form is unfit for the future.

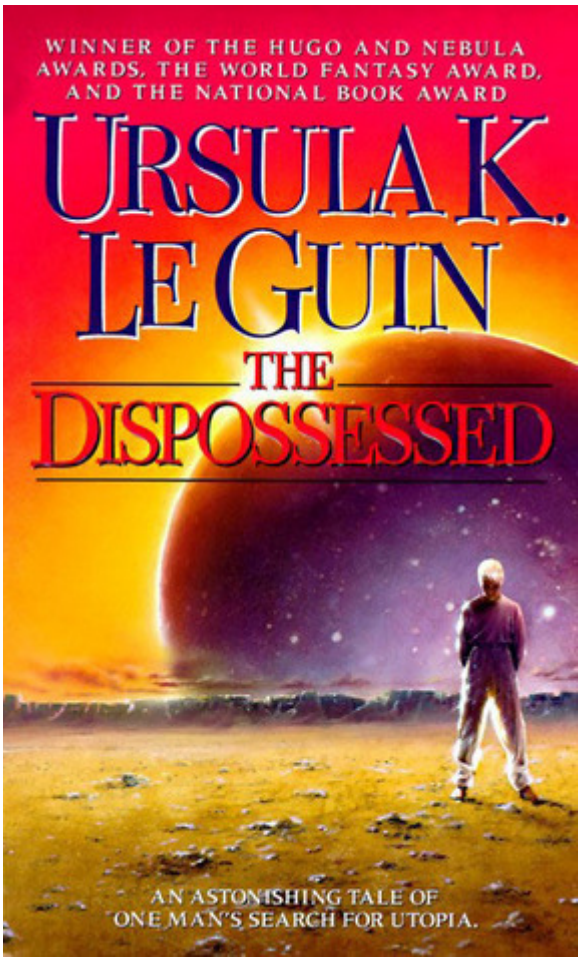


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Contrasting Western science fiction's vision of humanity's fate with that of Japanese anime in this way is, admittedly, a generalization that suggests that most ofWestern science fiction sees humankind end with it's becoming *other-than-human*. But not all Western science fiction falls into this category. There are always exceptions to the rule, as exemplified by the work of the aforementioned Octavia E. Butler who offers a different kind of analysis of humanity's fate. In her *Xenogenesis Trilogy* (1987–89), Butler states that in order for humanity to have a future it will have to accept its potential for change. Her work is significant for imagining new life forms. The concept of change is at the heart of her stories where the main protagonists enter in contact with the *outside*, with all-knowing alien beings.

During my studies, I realized that science fiction, rather than just being the locus of an imagined future inscribed in one way or another in our present, is really a distortion of the present. Science fiction (even in its worst form) offers a vision of a possible future nourished by the hopes and fears of current societies, and in doing so, science fiction reveals the contradictions at the heart of our «modern» times as a direct outcome of scientific «progress». A science fiction novel that is particularly compelling in its depiction of a social experiment is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974).

The main theme of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* is the role of science and the ethical and political implications of its association with technology. Thus, *The Dispossessed* deals with the contradictions at the heart of scientific progress, when the new comes into conflict with conventionally accepted norms of society.



Shevek, the main protagonist, is a brilliant physicist working on theories of time and looking for a way to build an interplanetary comradeship. The novel is set on Anarres and Urras, two planets that communicate via a highly advanced technological device called the ansible. In *The Dispossessed*, it is technologically possible to travel from one planet to another and it is commonly accepted that human life is not restricted to just a single planet. Technology is usually a key element in science fiction, yet it is interesting not so much for its unexpected future development as for the ways in which it can help break down the limits of our world (through space travel and communication, for instance) and for what it reveals about our present.

Following Shevek's journey, the chapters alternate between the two planets and between past and future. Urras is depicted as a capitalist and patriarchal system, while Anarres is an anarchist society formed around 200 years ago following a rebellion on Urras. The Urrasti states gave the revolutionaries the right to live independently on another planet: Anarres, an arid and inhospitable world. People in Anarres live within a system where there is no formal government, no property or ownership and only a few agencies such as the Division of Labor and the Production Distribution Committee. According to the ideology governing Anarres, everyone ought to be fully invested in the common good in order for society to keep functioning. Obviously, one could interpret Anarres as a *utopian* and Urras as a *dystopian* society, but Le Guin suggests we should be careful not to narrow down these societies to one or the other. Hers is precisely the kind of work that seeks to transcend this kind of «either-or» thinking. Hence, *The Dispossessed* cannot be described as either utopian or dystopian literature—the reality is quite more complex:

> In the sense that it offers a glimpse of some imagined alternative to «the way we live now,» much of my fiction can be called utopian, but I continue to resist the word. Many of my invented societies strike me as an improvement in one way or

> another on our own, but I find Utopia far too grand and too rigid a name for them. Utopia, and Dystopia, are intellectual places. I write from passion and playfulness. My stories are neither dire warnings nor blueprints for what we ought to do. Most of them, I think, are comedies of human manners, reminders of the infinite variety of ways in which we always come back to pretty much the same place, and celebrations of that infinite variety by the invention of still more alternatives and possibilities. Even the novels The Dispossessed and Always Coming Home, in which I worked out more methodically than usual certain variations on the uses of power, which I preferred to those that obtain in our world—even these are as much efforts to subvert as to display the ideal of an attainable social plan which would end injustice and inequality once and for all. [1]

In the course of the novel, the reader learns that Anarres, founded by followers of Odo, a radical Urrasti anarchist thinker, is becoming enclosed and dysfunctional. Despite having realized an anarcho-communist society and lacking any official government, the community paradoxically is sliding more and more into a «totalitarian» regime. Due to the planet's hostile environment, pragmatism and bureaucracy erode idealism and collective conscience. In order to understand Le Guin's reflection on society, we need a yin and yang approach where the duality of utopia/dystopia is seen as complementary rather than contradictory or paradoxical. The yin yang illustrates a dynamic «balance» between two opposites, with each containing part of the opposite. The duality of yin and yang creates an unattainable whole: they need one another, and so their relation is based on complementarity, interconnectivity and interdependence. Thus, Anarres and Urras are both utopian anddystopian. If we move away from binary thinking, a new perspective can emerge, one that takes into account the originally opposite terms without trying to resolve them, instead embracing them both. In addition to the utopia/dystopia dichotomy, the novel addresses several other antitheses. Here, we will focus in particular on that of the time-related concepts of *being* and *becoming*.

On Anarres, Shevek is feeling increasingly entrapped. The social system is supposed to grant its habitants radical freedom but his work as a physician is being looked down upon, as it doesn't contribute directly to Anarres' prosperity. Feeding the entire population has become a real challenge on the arid planet and, by necessity, a primary concern for all its residents. Hence Shevek's attempt to develop a theory that would unify two opposing concepts of time. Feeling betrayed by the restrictions on his freedom and abandoned in his research, Shevek accepts an invitation to go to Urras to complete his theory, hoping to get the support he needs on the other planet. Being confronted with this society antithetical to his own, Shevek will learn unprecedented things about both systems.

In oft-recurring maximin the novel is «true journey is return.» [2] In my understanding, this is not about going back to what was, but rather analogous to a feedback loop. This ought to be the nature of the relation between contradictions—constantly defining each other. Return is the principle of the entire novel: in the course of the novel we come to understand that the real purpose of Shevek's journey to Urras is to return to Anarres and complete his true mission: achieving change on Anarres. In fact, the Shevek's theories which deal with the nature of time serve to make us understand the true movement of change. The non-linear nature of the novel also reflects Shevek's theory. The «General Temporal Theory», the subject of Shevek's research, implies two opposing theories of time: sequency and simultaneity. In the novel he describes this as follows:

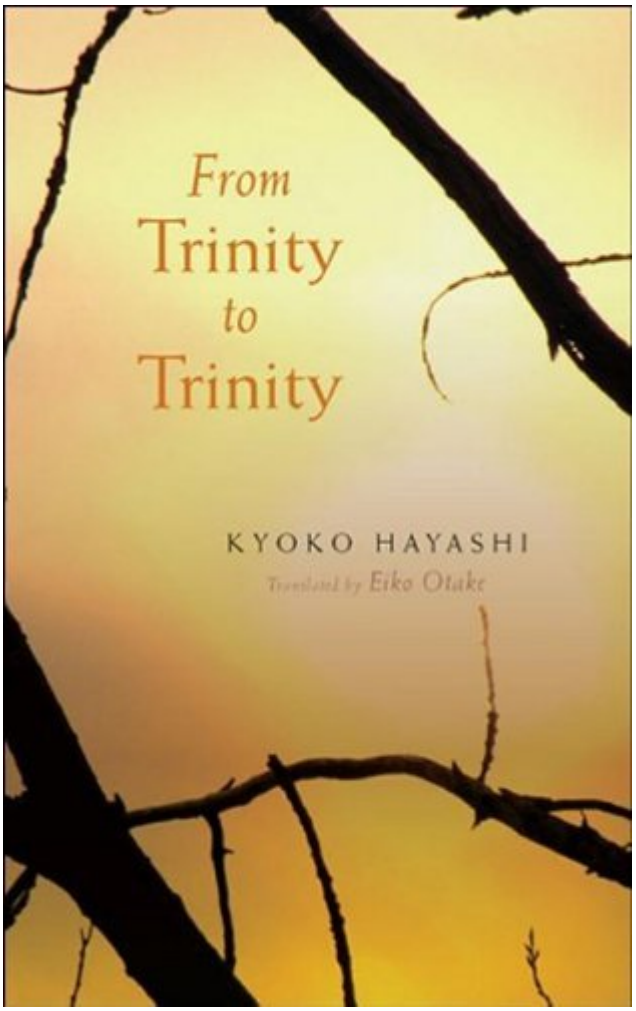
> Sequency explains beautifully our sense of linear time, and the evidence of evolution. It includes creation, and mortality. But there it stops. It deals with all that changes, but cannot explain why things also endure. It speaks only of the

> arrow of time—never of the circle of time …. Time goes in cycles, as well as in a line. A planet revolving: you see? One cycle, one orbit around the sun, is a year, isn't it? And two orbits, two years, and so on. One can count the orbits endlessly—an observer can. Indeed, such a system is how we count time. It constitutes the timeteller, the clock. But within the system, the cycle, where is time? Where is beginning or end? Infinite repetition is an atemporal process. It must be compared, referred to some other cyclic or non-cyclic process, to be seen as temporal. [3]

In *The Dispossessed* Le Guin shows how two opposed ways of looking at things are necessary and how neither one on its own is sufficient. As pointed out by Shevek, time doesn't happen in either sequency or simultaneity—it happens in both ways. Otherwise, we cannot explain how things are in constant change (sequency of time) while they remain in existence as such (simultaneity of time). This may, in fact, happen in a variety of other ways we are still unaware of. Either way, time is not simply one clock running uniformly for the entire universe. Contrary to our usual way of thinking, we can actually make contradictory statements about one and the same thing. [4] For example, what we understand as «our present» is far more complex than generally accepted. In the Simultaneity system «there is no past and future, only a sort of eternal present.» [5] And in the Sequency system, the present is understood as the «here and now» and contrasted with notions of past and future. Seeing that those two theories are in total contradiction with each other, we can understand time only with both points of view in mind. As Shevek asserts:

> Becoming without being is meaningless. Being without becoming is a big bore …. We don't want purity, but complexity, the relationship of cause and effect, means and end. Our model of the cosmos must be as inexhaustible as the cosmos. A complexity that includes not only duration but creation, not only being but becoming, not only geometry but ethics. It is not the answer we are after, but only how to ask the question ….

In further examining the question of return, it is worth turning out attention to Karen Barad's article «Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing the Incalculable». Barad draws on a semi-autobiographical work by Kyoto Hayashi—a survivor of Nagasaki's atomic bombing—to introduce differentconceptions of time that are distinct from a universal conception. The novel, *From Trinity to Trinity*, cuts across time and space to follow the aftermath of the first detonation of nuclear device in New Mexico for the purpose of fully grasping the entanglements of colonialism, racism and militarism that connect the stories of the people of Nagasaki and those behind Trinity. If we change our perception of time, we can change our perception of the past. Thus, her work is an attempt at «ontologically reconfiguring a past that never was on behalf of possibilities for a better future.» [6] Reconfiguring time could produce new horizons allowing for possibilities of justice to come. [7]



How can we understand Le Guin's novel if we believe that the real journey in *The Dispossessed* is not from Anarres to Urras (or from Urras to Anarres), but rather from Urras to Urras? I ask this question primarily in order to remind myself that change doesn't happen by replacing the old, as that would mean succumbing to the logic of progress and modernity. Describing the journey as one «from Urras to Urras» in analogy to Hayashi's title enables us to reflect on the potential for change in a capitalist society and its relationship with an outside—a utopian horizon. Through contact with the *other-than* we can achieve a shift in perception and bring change.

Lastly, I would like to offer for further discussion the view that in a capitalist society the *other-than* includes the dead. The Russian cosmist Nikolai F. Fyodorov first asserted this in the late nineteenth century. In an article on the subject titled «Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time» Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl explain that «The dead are already unsafe because they don't have any rights in our society: they don't communicate, consume, or vote and so they are not political subjects …. Financial capitalism does not care about the dead because they do not produce or consume. Fascism only uses them as a mythical proof of sacrifice. Communism also is indifferent to the dead because only the generation that achieves communism will benefit from it; everyone who died on the way gets nothing. It seems that only indigenous cultures at this point keep some reverence for the dead. Fyodorov writes that a true religion is a cult of ancestors.» [8]

I feel that the contradiction between life and death must be *embraced* in order to allow for a justice to come. The line separating the two is but a modernist construction dismissing the dead as unworthy of interest, when we really ought to take care of those on the other side. We must demonstrate solidarity with those who lived before us. Only in this way can we have a future where we mourn those who came before us and finally make the pain that passes from

one generation to the next stop. There is no relief from pain without love, without solidarity. The dead are *simultaneous* to us and we need to accept this in order to change our perceptions. Otherwise, our journey of *return* may not be achieved. One of the central tenets of Fyodorov's Cosmism is that a «common task» should not be carried out selectively; we shouldn't have the right to determine which lives are worthy and which are not. «It's either everybody or nobody.» [9] For Fyodorov, this is the only rightful «either-or» decision.

The «common task» of humanity Fyodorov refers to is to restore wholeness and integrity to the dead. It is a duty to re-gather all the things comprising the cosmos. He considered «progress» as a journey of *return*: to fully restore all the past lives back to the beginning of life. Only this common task, with the help of scientific technology, will bring humankind into transformation and therefore a better world. For him, the great goal of humanity is actually to attain total unity. This idea also underlies the Japanese anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* mentioned earlier in this essay. And by overcoming our universal conception of time we can restructure humankind. This is possible by realizing that past lives are *simultaneous* to our present lives because we live in an eternal cycle (past, present and future) rather than merely in sequency. Restructuring humanity is definitely, in the cosmist mind, a way to dismantle the dividing lines–between matter and energy, animate and inanimate, time and space, virtual and real, male and female, etc.–preventing us to attain a higher consciousness. Thus, the cosmist «common task» is about envisioning and creating the «world as it ought to be» out of the «world as it is.» [10]

[1] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] «‹You can't assert two contradictory statements about the same thing,› said Dearri, with the calmness of superior knowledge. ‹In other words, one of these ‹aspects› is real, the other's simply an illusion.›» Excerpt from Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) (London: Gollancz, 2002), 1074.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Barad raises questions that are rooted and invested in particular conceptions of time and being. Again, her work is not so much about finding answers about the true nature of time, but rather about how the conception of time can change our perception of the present and produce

new openings while breaking down the walls eroding our ways of thinking. The pilgrimage in *From Trinity to Trinity* is a true journey of *return*. A return necessary for Hayashiin order to mourn the victims of atomic bombings—«a concerted ongoing labor, never finished or complete.» Hayashi does the work of redefining her understanding of a single event–Nagasaki's nuclear bombings. An event is not a special moment in a linearity of moments, but a Barad raises questions, which are rooted in and invested in particular conceptions of time and being. Again, her work is not so much about finding answers about the real nature of time, but rather about how the conception of time can change our perception of the present and produce new openings while breaking the walls eroding our ways of thinking. The bombings in Trinity and Nagasaki may have taken place in different times and spaces but they are still *simultaneous* events. Just as Shevek, Hayashi needed to go back to the place where the « first » event took place to fully grasp the relationship between both places. Thus, the journey of return is not about going back to what was, but rather about returning with the missing pieces of the story and therefore to produce a change of perception. This is a movement of going beyond, to overcome the initial position–the way for radical change. Karen Barad, «Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing the Incalculable», *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* no. 92 (2017): 56–86.

[8] Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl, «Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time», in *e-flux Journal* 82 (May 2017), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/134989/cosmic-catwalk-and-the-production-of-time/ [http://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/134989/cosmic-catwalk-and-the-production-of-time/].

[9] Ibid.

[10] George M. Young, «Esoteric Elements in Russian Cosmism», in *The Rose+Croix Journal* 2011, volume 8. https://375b1364bab998f0d14f-9d7ce9244c1359862daf87d2617988df.ssl.cf5.rackcdn.com/vol8_124_139_young.pdf

FATIMA WEGMANN

Fatima Wegmann is a Geneva based artist, researcher and DJ. She explores science fiction and theory - which she sees as closely interrelated - through an audio-visual practice. This allows her to investigate a space of experimentation in search of emancipatory discourse - narratives off-center from patriarchal, imperialist thought. In 2019 she graduated from the MA Research Programme CCC (Critical, Curatorial, Cybernetic), at HEAD Geneva.

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930122