A World in the Unmaking
An Aesthetics for Fukushima

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Two concepts that unfold the imagination of catastrophe in general, and the triple disaster of Fukushima Daiichi in particular, are the concepts of a "world" and a world coming undone, or an "un-world." In order to address the problem that the disaster poses for us human beings—and I would like to emphasize "for us"—and for us as forms of human life, I begin by proposing a definition of the concept of "world." We could say that the world can be expressed in many ways. The world can have different meanings. The world can be the thing in itself, independent of any state of consciousness and any possibility of knowledge. But to say that the world is the "thing-in-itself" seems unsatisfactory for a very simple reason: in our linguistic acts we constantly refer to something as the world, and we seem quite sure of what we are referring to. It could then be said that we are "speculating" about the existence of the world, that when we try to refer to the world we are actually making a hypothesis in the form of "Although I know nothing about this world, I hypothesize that there is something, some phenomenon, that exists independently of my consciousness, autonomously." And yet, I believe that there is something more in our everyday relation to the world, a "certainty of knowing." What do we know? Or rather, what do we think we know about the world?

I would like to propose, via Jean-Luc Nancy (1997; 2007), that on an everyday level we believe that we know, feel, and see the "meaning" of the world. The world for us is nothing more than this framework of meaning in which we find ourselves. In a sense, the world is a kind of performance through which we encounter beings and events. The world is like a fixed imaginary, and this fixed imaginary is like a series of paths that have been carved out in the tunnel of our mind to guide our

imagination. Our ontologies, or perhaps our taxonomies of beings and events, always include in the world what we have already known and seen of the world, thus anticipating it. From this point of view, the world is also a kind of affectivity: in the face of the world, our senses, and with them our intellect, are at rest. To imagine inhabiting the world, then, is to imagine a sedentary form of life in which we assume that the world is available to us. To borrow from DIDI-HUBERMAN (2021, 23), we could say that "we are always imagining images of the world that was" because under normal conditions we see nothing while it is happening.

A second proposal I would like to develop in addressing the question of imagination in relation to catastrophe also comes from Jean-Luc Nancy, the term "un-world" (*immonde*):

> The world has lost its capacity to "form a world" [*faire monde*]: it seems only to have gained that capacity of proliferating, to the extent of its means, the "un-world" [*immonde*], which, until now, and whatever one may think of retrospective illusions, has never in history impacted the totality of the orb to such an extent. In the end, everything takes place as if the world affected and permeated itself with a death drive that soon would have nothing else to destroy than the world itself.… It is as if being itself—in whatever sense one understands it, as existence or as substance—surprised us from an unnamable beyond. It is, in fact, the ambivalence of the unnamable that makes us anxious: a beyond for which no alterity can give us the slightest analogy.… It is a question of owning up to the present, including its very withholding of the event, including its strange absence of presence: we must ask anew what the world wants of us, and what we want of it. (NANCY 2007, 34–35)

For Nancy, "forming a world" is first and foremost a capacity and secondly a capacity that we have lost. Why? Because it is precisely our tendency to form a world, to multiply the meaning of the world for ourselves, for everyone and everywhere, that produces its double: the un-world (*immonde*). A double exposure, as Nishitani would say,[1] that comes at us from an unnameable beyond and troubles us precisely because we cannot say of that particular experience that is the un-world (*immonde*): "Here is the world I knew!" Is this not a daily experience that we live, especially in these years when it seems that something—we

1. "One can see the Ginza, for instance, just as it is, in all its magnificence, as a field of pampas grass. One can look at it as if it were a double exposure—which is, after all, its real portrait. For in truth, reality itself is two-layered. A hundred years hence, not one of the people now walking the Ginza will be alive, neither the young nor the old, the men nor the women.… We can look at the living as they walk full of health down the Ginza and see, in double exposure, a picture of the dead" (NISHITANI 1982, 51).

don't know exactly what—has escaped our control? I mean on a daily basis, from the most well-known problems of the geological era we now call the Anthropocene, to the disruption of everyday life experienced in the last three years due to SARS-COV-2 (CIMATTI 2022). This is what Nancy warns us about: we must rise to the level of the present, we should think about an "ontology of actuality"—to use FOUCAULT's words (1994, 577)—which means investigating what is "an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is both a historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and a test of their possible overcoming."

The Images of Catastrophe

Let's formulate another hypothesis: today it is impossible to approach the subject of an ontology of the present, which is entangled in the problem of the world and the un-world, without asking ourselves what role the imagination, and in particular images, play in this matter. The scopic regimes of the imagination at our disposal help us to feel what we see (METZ 1986), but also, and above all, what we do not see.[2] This "invisible", although it is not visible—i.e., it belongs to the sense of sight—does not mean that it reduces a general "touch" of the senses. Rather than seeing the invisible, the challenge of an ontology of actuality that poses the problem of imagining the un-world will be to experiment in the visible with a form of hapticity, of tactile affection.

In the spirit of Nancy, I am aware that what can be offered here is certainly not a solution to the problem posed by the loss of the "sense of the world." At most, I can clarify the anguished affection generated by the un-world, the monstrous and unnameable double of the world. Precisely because it is unnameable, it must be touched by the imagination.

The images in FIGURES 1–3, which I call "world images," are not all images of the Fukushima disaster. However, they could be. One image is from another disaster site, the Maldives tsunami in 2004. Yet such images are analogous to those of Fukushima. It is as if, faced with such images, our imagination is blocked and recognizes the disaster only by using an already available sense capable of organizing by analogy. In this sense, all disasters are analogous—NANCY (2015) states they are equivalent, like a currency—and the sense of these disasters is given to us precisely through such analogy. However, the catastrophes to which these images purport

2. Properly speaking, a "scopic regime" is a shared way of seeing. A classic example is the Albertian window through which Leon Battista Alberti codified the idea of three-dimensionality in Renaissance painting. It seems that codifying a way of seeing—whether programmatically, as in Alberti's case, or tacitly, as in contemporary art or advertising—means allowing the gaze to see a certain kind of entity while excluding others. A field of the invisible is thus established at the same time as a field of the visible. The decision about such a field of vision is where the political game within aesthetics is played.

FIGURE 1: CC BY 4.0 U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Philip A. McDaniel. Released by the US Navy ID 050102-N-9593M-040.

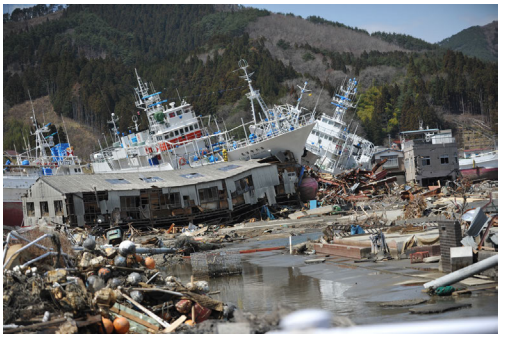

FIGURE 2: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 photo by whsaito. https://flic.kr/p/9y4Mxh

FIGURE 3: CC BY 2.0 photo by CECAR. https://flic.kr/p/bgGjaV

to refer are by no means similar or equivalent. To pose such an equivalence, so that similar disasters can be evaluated by analogy, is a para-economic desire. This is why I have defined this type of image as a "world image," that is, an image that provides "a composed and complete order (form) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation" of meaning (NANCY 1997, 4). What happens in the face of disaster, then, is always a "meaningful" use of images that are already endowed with meaning for us.

But what do we grasp about the catastrophe through a meaningful use of such images of the world? We comprehend what we have always understood about catastrophe. It is as if, in the face of catastrophe, we retreat into an established form that can provide us with an already given meaning. If this form is that of equivalence, then the meaning given to the disaster can only be para-economic. It is all about damage assessment and quantification, forgetting the point at which a quantitative difference becomes a qualitative one.

There are other ways in which the disaster is affecting us as well. These "other ways" are what I call, borrowing from Nancy, the "un-world." The un-world is that which the sense of the world generally excludes from its horizon. It is what I call

the "invisible" in reference to Metz's scopic regimes. It is only possible to speak of the un-world, because there is simultaneously the sense of the world. It is only because there is a scopic regime, a common way of seeing, that there can be something that is withdrawn from it.

However, if Nancy is right, it is no longer possible to separate the "visible" or the represented—what I have called "the world"—from its monstrous double, the invisible or the impure. This is similar to what Latour writes about the "modern":

> Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of "man" or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of – things, or objects, or beasts – and the equally strange beginning of a crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines. Modernity arises first from the conjoined creation of those three entities, and then from the masking of the conjoined birth and the separate treatment of the three communities while, underneath, hybrids continue to multiply as an effect of this separate treatment. The double separation is what we have to reconstruct: the separation between humans and nonhumans on the one hand, and between what happens "above" and what happens "below" on the other. (Latour 1993, 13)

In this sense, the simultaneous emergence of that hybrid which is the nexus of the world and the un-world is what we have to experience in the midst of our aesthetic experience. How does it happen? In a kind of dualism between culture and nature, we do not have a sense of the world on the one hand and an un-world that simply makes no sense on the other. On the contrary, we are always somehow entangled in this hybridization of meaning and agency, to which no meaning can be ascribed that belongs to us (human beings) alone. This is why Nancy writes, in a passage from *The Sense of the World*:

> Consequently, when I say that the end of the world is the end of the *mundus*, this cannot mean that we are confronted merely with the end of a certain "conception" of the world…. It means, rather, that there is no longer any assignable signification of "world", or that the "world" is subtracting itself, bit by bit, from the entire regime of signification available to us—except its "cosmic" signification as universe, a term that for us, precisely, no longer has (or does not yet have) any assured signification, save that of a pure infinite expansion. (Nancy 1997, 5)

FIGURE 4. Viking Eggeling, *Symphonye Diagonale*, video, 1924. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF9tHNzHVCo

Let me attempt to analyze other images, which are not simply images in their directly visible sense (form, composition, and so on), but which present us with the complexity of their sensuousness. I would like to make it clear, however, that by the "complexity of the sensuosness" I mean something similar to an activity of hybridization that is internal to the image itself or that is the image itself. It is a hybridization between those sensory aspects of the image that are usually considered separate, especially the tactile and the auditory.

Let's think of Viking Eggeling and his *Symphonie Diagonale* in which geometric forms dance and transform silently on the screen. Although we do not hear any sound coming from the images, when we observe this dance of abstract and metamorphic forms we still perceive a sound. This sound is presented to us as imprinted in the visible. What is the meaning of this? The best answer is that it means nothing. However, that would not be an honest answer. It means nothing, and yet it means something in the recognition of the rhythm underlying these transforming images. Only meaning, if there is any, does not come from an image established and imprinted in memory, from "world images." Meaning, if there is any, comes directly from the contingent encounter between the metamorphosis of the image and the singularity of the perceiving body, which is also in transformation. This body and image are different from any other body and any other image in their encounter in the cosmos in terms of their conformation, their capacity for movement, and their access to a plane of the sensible. In this

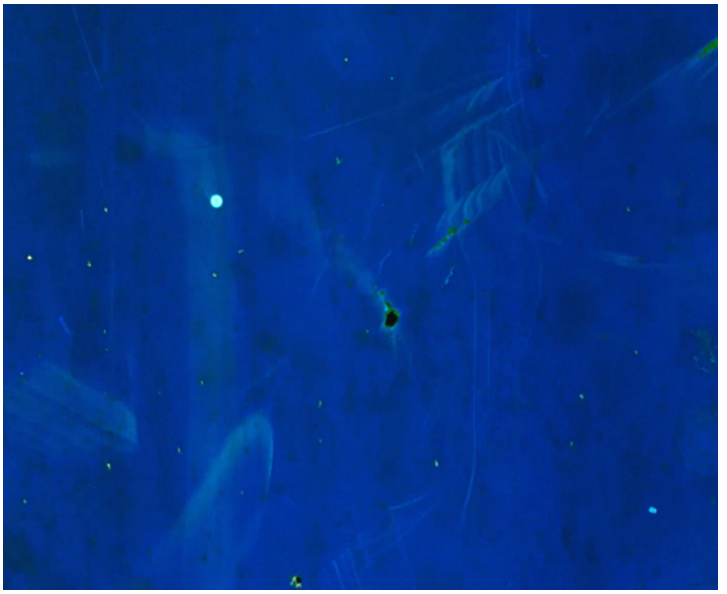

FIGURE 5. Nishikawa Tomonari, *Sound of a Million Insects, Light of a Thousand Stars*, video, 2014. https://vimeo.com/117525500

sense, an image does not only contain its visible appearance. There is something else, something that is invisible, but which is also not to be regarded as inaccessible to perception in any other way. One could say, perhaps provocatively, that there is an alternative to the world we know and remember, one that is already taking shape. It is an alternative that is not in sight, and perhaps is not in sight of us.

The image in FIGURE 5, *Sound of a Million Insects, Light of a Thousand Stars,* has a lot in common with Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale*, although there are some important differences: In the summary to the video, the filmmaker Nishikawa Tomonari describes the creation of the image this way:

> I buried a 100-foot (about 30 meters) 35 mm negative film under fallen leaves alongside a country road, which was about 25 km away from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, for about 6 hours, from the sunset of June 24, 2014, to the sunrise of the following day. The night was beautiful with a starry sky, and numerous summer insects were singing loud. The area was once an evacuation zone, but now people live there after the removal of the contaminated soil. This film was exposed to the possible remaining of the radioactive materials.

What do we see in these moving pictures? You might say "nothing!" And yet we see something. What we see are speckles imprinted on the film, on a blue-green surface, and we "hear" the same speckles in the noise of the film reproduction. By analogy, we associate these speckles and noises with the title of the film: *The Sounds of Millions of Insects, the Light of Thousands of Stars in the Sky*. But this level of analysis, which dwells on the analogical and mimetic, is as if it makes us forget the possibility of analyzing the sensitive aspects of Nishikawa's operation. And what are these? Firstly, this film was buried 25 km from the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, in soil that, although declared decontaminated, retains, as Nishikawa states, the residue of its own radioactivity. It is as if the entire film had been "filmed" through these residues. It is as if, beyond the artist's gesture of placement, the creators of the film were the ground and the atmosphere. It is a "painting of the inorganic," similar to the "writing of light" that Anäis Tondeur achieved together with Michael Marder in their Chernobyl Herbarium (Marder and Tondeur 2016).

Perhaps the difference between the two operations lies in this act of burial in Nishikawa's work, where the invisible emerges in the darkest and most inaccessible place to the eye through direct contact with the ground and the air. Another difference lies in the possibility of perceiving the movement of the image in Nishikawa's audiovisual work, which is impossible in Tondeur's photography. In this sense, Nishikawa's footage seems to extend direct contact with the contaminated earth to our bodies, giving us access to a metamorphic plane excluded from Tondeur's mimesis. It is as if, through contact, it were demonstrating an uncontrollable metamorphosis into a form, into a sense of the world oriented towards us.

Nishikawa's work is indeed a "buried image." At the same time, it is—to use Didi-Huberman's (2002) term—an "unburied image": an image loaded with time, which allows us to imagine the anachronism of time because such an anachronism is directly imprinted on the body of the image. It is the earth, the ground—beyond any human subject—that charges the image with such anachronism, speckles the surface of the film, sensitizes aspects that were simply invisible until the world images of the Fukushima disaster were filmed: destroyed buildings, debris, waves. Nishikawa's work, by refusing to be reduced to a world image, is thus a sign of the alternative that is already taking shape under our gaze, but without looking at us as human beings, as human forms of life. It is an image of time that cannot be concentrated in one point, that cannot be stopped in the moment. It is as if, in front of Nishikawa's image, in contact with the concrete ground of Fukushima, all time is present at once, and the distinction between present, past, and future collapses. In this way, we are confronted not only with the invisible, but with the "un-world" itself: an invisible that is not only unseen, but also what we never wanted to see. Too big for us, it is not we who contemplate the unworldly, but it is it that involves us in its cosmic metamorphosis.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a small addendum, a question to which I have not yet found an answer and to which, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, there may be no answer at all. If the "world" is meaning, and if this meaning multiplies the "un-world"—that which deprives us of the possibility of this meaning causing embarrassment and generating anxiety—then images like those of Nishikawa help us to perform a fundamental imaginative operation in the face of catastrophe. Imagining catastrophes, which are not future because as Fukushima teaches us they are already happening before our eyes, is always an operation that, by destabilizing the sense of the world for us, leads us to question three central aspects of that "sense of the world" that is overturned along with the "world" itself: the measure of time, the availability of space, and the autonomy of the subject.

To imagine the Fukushima Daiichi disaster as a place where the unworldly is already happening is, in short, to radically reimagine a time, space, and subject that no longer have anything to do with a time, space, and subject for us alone. Time now operates on an inhuman scale. (Think of nuclear power and its effects, which last for radically inhuman times [Fongaro 2020]). Space is no longer habitable in its usual forms: it is becoming a "No Men's Zone." Subjectivity, far from being that of the autonomous modern subject, is now literally enmeshed in a sensitive cosmos, having to reckon with a non-human agency to which it literally cannot make sense.

In conclusion, living in contact with catastrophe, experiencing this contact as *con-tact* (a form of touch capable of making a common space tangible), can only force us to confront these three problems. It is urgent to try to deal with them, because it is about an aesthetics, an ontology, a politics, and even a religion, which today seems to have lost its traditional ability to interpret the meaning of human existence on earth.

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