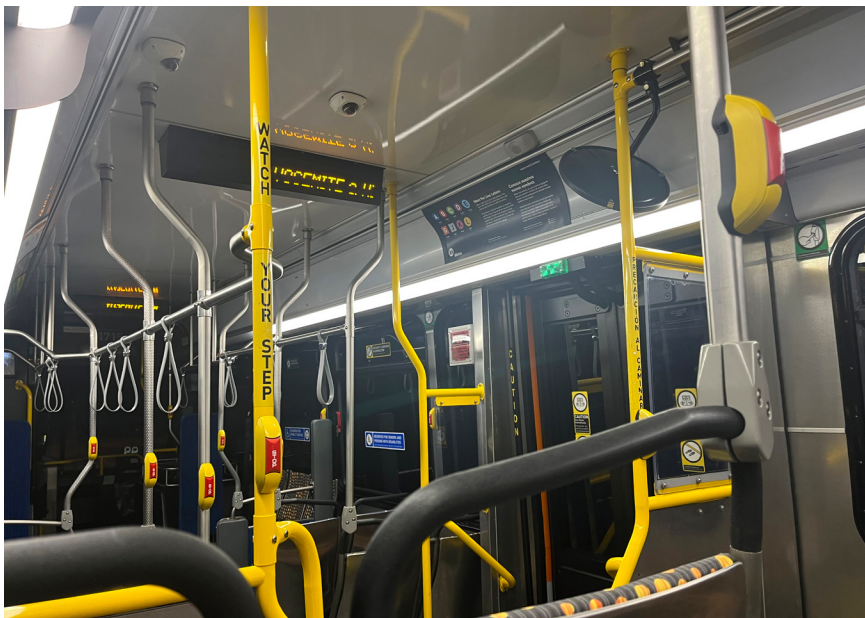


space time DIASPORA

Originally delivered as a talk in a sci-fi film set on May 22, 2023,
as part of the “place settings” lecture series hosted by Anya Ventura
and Laura Nelson in Los Angeles.

“The future is cancelled”, says Mark Fisher, yet its tireless illusion remains inescapable. How do we inhabit the world? A familiar question in the coordinates of space, it has become urgent under the Capitalocene to ask: **how do we inhabit time**?

After a car accident in March, I have been doing a lot more walking. Initially I welcomed this as a forced relief. I was starting to practice public transportation anyway and felt ready to embrace the challenge. But over the months, a sense of solitude settled in. With car-owners making up 88% of households in LA, I find myself effectively inhabiting a distinct tempo of reality. It takes me 17 to 22 minutes to walk from my door to a bus stop,



Night ride on the 81 bus, photo by author.

1 hour to get most anywhere outside of my immediate neighborhood, and more than 2 hours to visit my mother in the suburbs. My footsteps feel small against the eternal pavement. I begin to envy the ants I pass by, for the company they share in their small world, and the trees in their collectively slow world.

In truth, the world is becoming too big and fast for us all. The ants are developing higher metabolism and shorter lifespans under rising heat. The trees are migrating north in a multi-generational attempt at climate

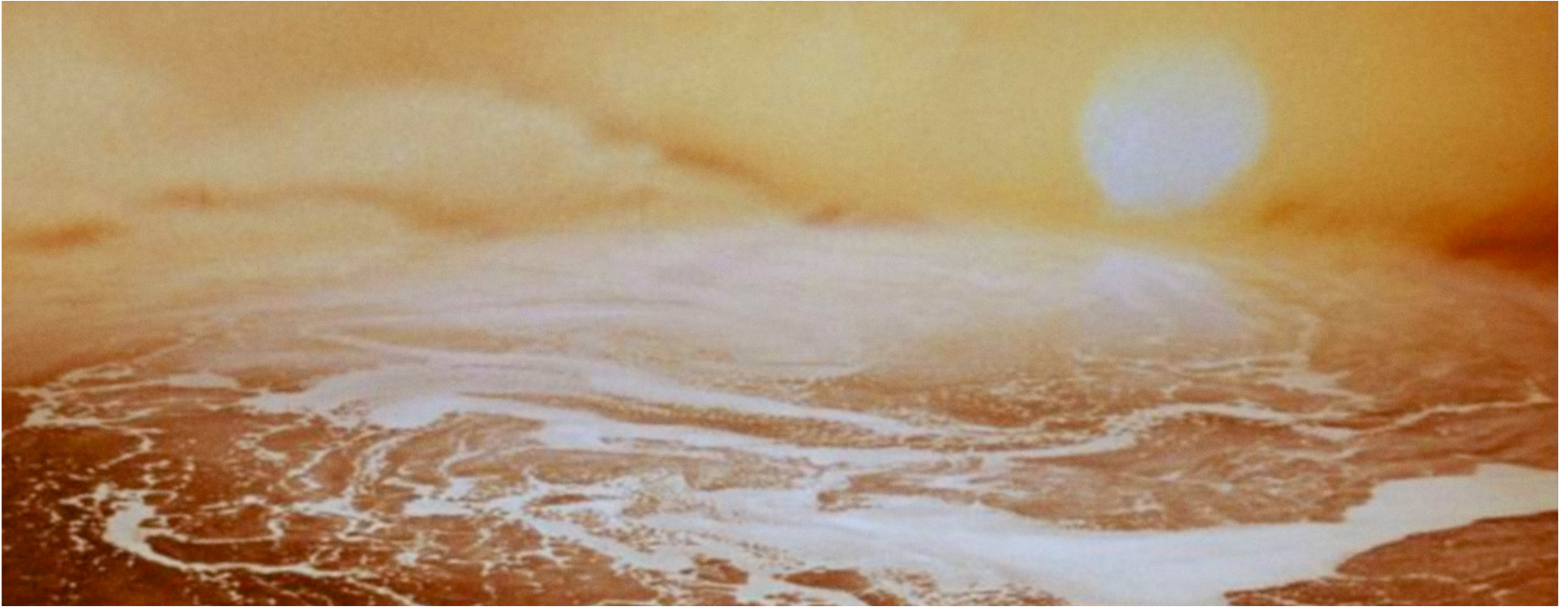
adaptation. Many of us struggle to afford gas or ride shares to get from place to non-place, while scavenging for some temporary sanctuary amidst a sea of digital noise.

Refusal is not so simple to call upon. Vehicles are sentimental for they gesture toward possibility yet. The car was my father's, who migrated to Los Angeles in the nineties, leaving everything behind for a mere horizon. Years after he passed, its mechanical body had stayed behind to carry mine as I stitched together a future of my own. Likewise, a spaceship turns our societal gaze toward the cosmos, stretching the domains of what is knowable or potentially even inhabitable. What lies just beyond our reach, after the human? After the collapse of society as is? After Earth? The future has always been a curious veil, but under crisis, it hovers as an ever more pressing canvas of optimism.

In Stanislaw Lem's science-fiction novel "Solaris", later adapted into film by Andrei Tarkovsky, a crew of scientists are situated in orbit of their subject of study, an oceanic planet. The mission had stalled for decades, and a psychologist joins to evaluate why. Aboard the ship, he begins to encounter the same effects that have driven the crew into disarray. The psychologist's deceased wife appears, more simulation than hallucination. He becomes increasingly occupied by this haunting until the scientists find remedy by broadcasting Kelvin's brainwaves into the planet itself, effectively rejoining man and cosmos with no wiser winner. The tale was written in the height of the space age, and it serves as a sobering reflection on limitations of rationality by turning the lens inward to our mortal lives.

More recently bridging fiction and reality, in 2021 the "Star Trek" actor William Shatner had the 11-minute opportunity to voyage into outer space on Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin space shuttle. Reaching weightlessness amidst a dark expanse, he remarked, "I had thought that going into space would be the ultimate catharsis of that connection I had been looking for between all living things, but it was among the strongest feelings of grief I have ever encountered. All I saw was death."

As French theorist Paul Virilio stated, "the invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck". I have been investigating the material weight of technological infrastructure — of what it takes to know everything. Namely, the Internet, mostly powered by corporate data centers, has



Still from *Solaris* (1972), directed by Andrei Tarkovsky

contributed to 3.7% of global emissions in pre-pandemic numbers and is projected to use up one-fifth of the world's electricity in another two years. Training a single AI model emits as much carbon as the lifetime usage of five cars. E-waste has become the fastest growing waste stream.

It appears we are hurtling all-that-exists faster and faster into the future's insatiable void. The ouroboros is devouring its own tail faster than it can metabolize another body. Are these simply the inevitable externalities of progress? What do we call a progress championed by some, yet endured by all?

When I visited my hometown in China a few years ago, I barely recognized it. My cousins offered to take me to the new Haagen Dazs cafe. Along the way, we passed by countless malls, high rises, and office buildings erected atop recently-forgotten street names and corner stores. They lamented

about how difficult it is to find a job. Stagnancy loomed so incongruently in their voices against the shiny landscape that flew by us. As the current of progress tides them over, my cousins felt even more transient in our hometown than I did abroad.

The future is an illusion of course, warped in relativity to space, time, and our criteria of success. None are more aware of this than perhaps us migrant kids who bear the disillusionment of their parents' dreams. Defiantly we poke at the shadows of progress to find some truer livability. Some of us get tattoos, some become artists, others move even farther away or back again. *The seeds that don't take.*

Under all of society's well-meaning attempts at rationalism, I'd like to believe that Shatner's instinct of life lies deep within the body. Beyond the punch cards, bills, deadlines and taxes, another rhythm beats. This

register of time is latent—hidden like a memory, buried like a secret, until it's forced into protest like a fever pitch.

How do we inhabit time? In Jazz, Carles and Comolli call for corporeal malfunction: “too hot, too cold, too near, too far, too fast, too slow.” In cybernetics, Tiqqun calls for a panic, large scale, like the force of a herd of animals in danger. In nomadic theory, Deleuze and Guattari call for the rhizomatic weed that grows pervasively in negative space with no beginning or end. In Taoism, Lao Tzu calls for “returning as the motion and yielding as the way”. In film, Trinh T. Minh-ha tells us, “A sunset is lived not necessarily and literally as the death of the sun, but as a rupture with and a continuation of the cycle of departing and returning. No real crisis.”

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I don't have words for this other way of inhabiting time, except that the feeling is familiar. It is diasporic, in that we have all become migrants along this uninhabitable trajectory, and we must learn to make refuge otherwise. Unlike space, time is a framework. Like any technology, we invent time and it invents us back. In space, you can theoretically move in any direction, but you must go forward in time. With a diasporic approach however, we hold the keys to many other timings even as we may be constrained in space.

After the accident, I gathered some friends around the car for a grief ritual. We spoke about other lost cars, broken dreams, and the ghosts of many futures past. We ate our fears and felt our hearts synchronize into a more collective choreography. We lived our sunsets into the future.

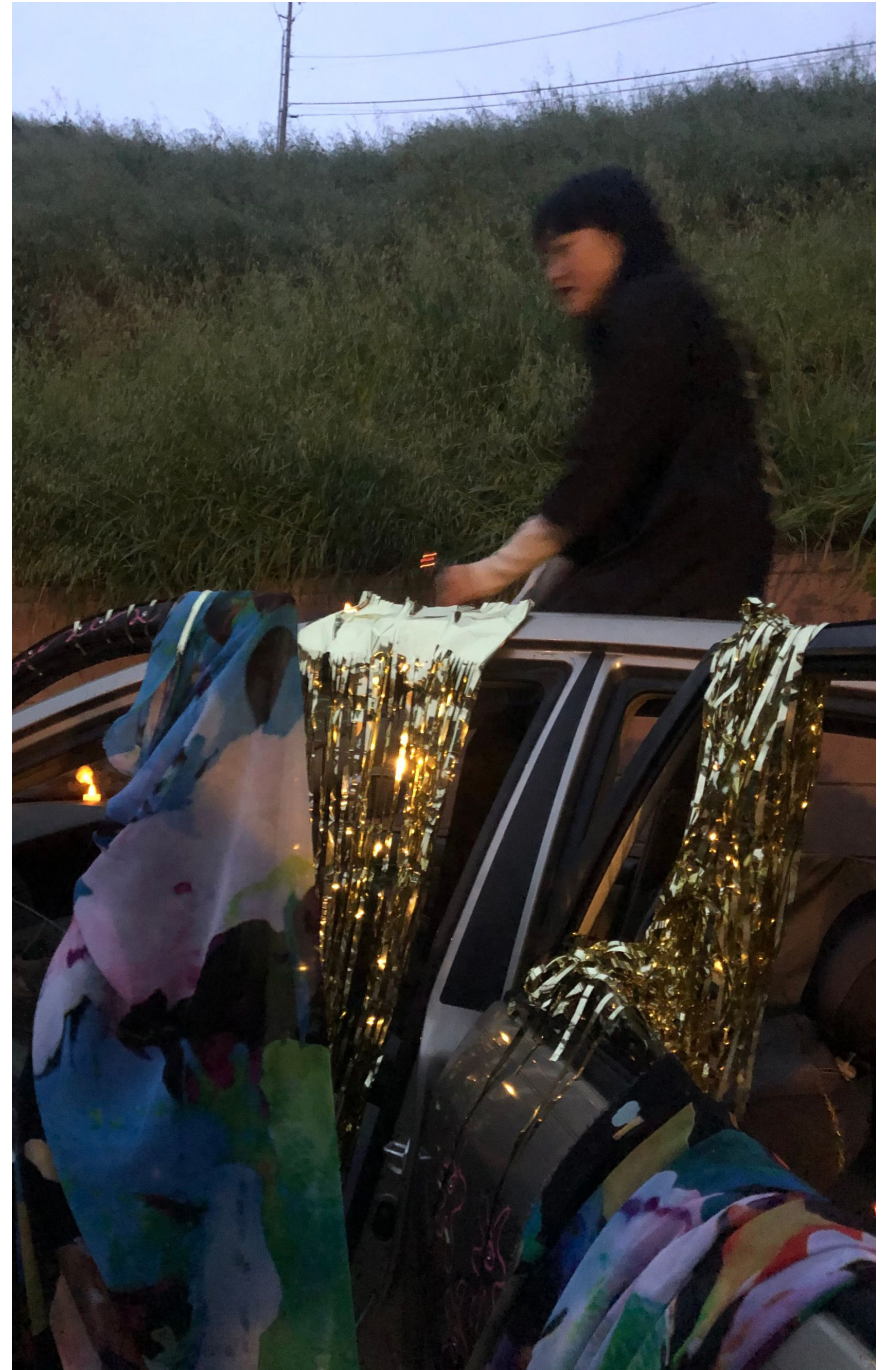


Photo of grief ritual by Adrian MM Abela; March 2023.



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