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The Alien Comes Home: Getting Past the Twin Planets of Possession and Austerity in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

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INTRODUCTION

The Dispossessed is an “ambiguous Utopia” with an ambiguous title.¹ Its ambiguity hinges around *possession* as ownership and *dispossession* as deprivation, on the one hand, and *possession* as bewitchment and *dispossession* as liberation on the other. In terms of political philosophy, the novel’s title suggests an engagement with the Marxian themes and theories of commodity fetishism and alienation. In more contemporary terms it suggests a kinship with critical accounts of consumerism from Lefebvre² and Debord³ in the 1960s to Klein’s *No Logo*⁴ and the anticonsumerist movement of today; a critique whose essence is captured in aphoristic form by *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden: “The things you own, end up owning you.”

Le Guin’s novel articulates these themes by shuttling back and forth between the novel’s two worlds—the “possessed” Urras and the “dispossessed” Anarres—and weaving a network that both articulates and calls into question the apparent dualisms of possession and dispossession. From Urras the Anarresti appear as impoverished Utopians self-exiled on a barren world, while from the anarchist planet its nonidentical twin appears rich in material resources inequitably distributed and squandered on frivolous display. Critically, the novel’s protagonist, Shevek, experiences these ambivalences and oppositions not so much through “raw” political philosophy or ideological discourse, but in his material and experiential encounters with objects, architectures, design, and aesthetics—the “glass and steel” buildings of Urras, the “erotic” furniture of the spaceship, the shop windows on the “street of nightmares,” Vea’s clothing, and Takver’s mobiles. This is more than a tangent to the novel’s politics, though; the concern with how objects and architectures are designed, manufactured, distributed, and experienced is a recurrent feature of radical and Utopian thought and social practice.

96 *Douglas Spencer*

The English socialist and pioneer of “design reform,” William Morris, drew upon a romanticized interpretation of the medieval period, and the writings of Marx, to develop a critique of nineteenth-century industrialization and the design standards of its products. In response Morris not only produced his own work of Utopian fiction—*News from Nowhere*⁵—but his own designs for furniture, buildings, wallpaper, and typography as a largely rhetorical counter-discourse to the practice of the division of labor and the aesthetic aberrations of the Victorian era.

The conditions in the newly formed USSR generated a similar confluence of Utopian thought and radical design practice. In the midst of the political and economic crises of the 1920s, the Bolshevik leadership actively supported the establishment of new design schools operating along avant-garde lines, and within this fertile environment figures such as Moisei Ginzburg and Alexander Rodchenko produced architectures and objects intended not merely to represent the values of a communist Utopia, but to generate the conditions in which it could be actively realized.

Contemporary to the publication of *The Dispossessed* was the work of 1960s and 1970s radical design groups such as Utopie in France and Superstudio in Italy. These groups were politically informed by a revived reading of the early Marx and the theories of alienation and commodity-fetishism, ideas which had assumed increasing relevance in postwar “consumer society.” Seeking a historical path from this “consumer society,” and acknowledging the culpability of their own profession in its creation, these groups developed Utopian architectural and design projects in which alienation could be transcended through a reshaping of the material world.

This nexus of Utopian thought and critical design practice also encompasses another feature of Le Guin’s novel: the mobilization of science-fiction discourse as radical imagining of future possibility. In Soviet Constructivism, for example, rhetorically “modern” materials—steel, concrete, and plate glass—were employed to suggest transport to the new socialist Utopia of the future and departure from the old feudal and preindustrial world of Tsarist Russia. The geometries of circles, squares, triangles, and helixes into which these materials were formed also suggested a futuristic and cosmic dimension: in *Of Two Squares* the Constructivist El Lissitzky used prototypically modernist graphic design to narrate the arrival of the “pure” geometry of the square to earth from space and its transformation of the terrestrial world.

Radical design groups of the 1960s and 1970s also recruited the imagery and language of science fiction to their projects. The inflatable structures of the Utopie group suggested some escape from the pull of the Earth’s gravity and the weight of its “materialism,” while the English Archigram and Italian Superstudio groups appropriated science fiction comic imagery and photos of manned space flight in their graphics and manifesto-like publications to promote their futuristic and Utopian connotations. Meanwhile, in France, the Situationists “de-

toured” Barbarella-like comic strips so that its heroes and villains spouted revolutionary critique from their speech bubbles.

So *The Dispossessed* can be situated in the context of a social, political, and cultural “moment” in which the themes and concerns of alienation, consumerism, and science fiction converged in a critical fashion. In particular, Le Guin’s exploration of the role and place of aesthetics in Utopian discourse, and the possibilities this suggests for transcending the often ascetic and austere positions of these alternatives to consumerism, are worth considering.

ALIEN(ATED) ENCOUNTERS

Shevek first experiences Urrasti civilization on the spaceship that carries him from his home world, Anarres, to theirs. On the journey he is struck by the “strange” objects of the Urrasti—the “caressing suppleness” of the mattress, the “decidedly erotic” “hot-air-nozzle-towel”—and speculates on the sublimation that might drive their design:

the smooth plastic curves into which stubborn wood and steel had been forced, the smoothness and delicacy of surfaces and textures: were these not also faintly, pervasively erotic. . . . Were Urrasti cabinetmakers all celibate? (1: 18–19)

A similarly alienating encounter with a new material world also happens on Earth beginning sometime around the 1950s. Consumer goods, TVs, hi-fis, cars, and fridges begin to occupy a central role in everyday life in Northern America and Western Europe. This terrestrial encounter with a new material world, and the estrangement it implied, was met by a critique that took on the new conditions of consumerism and its implications for everyday life. Central to this critique and its origins was the work of the French philosopher, urbanist, and theorist of the quotidian, Henri Lefebvre.

Lefebvre had argued against the orthodoxy of the French Communist Party (PCF)—from which he was expelled in the mid 1950s—that the key to understanding the most urgent needs of contemporary humanity was Marx’s account of alienation. This account, rediscovered and reevaluated by Lefebvre in Marx’s 1844 *Philosophical Manuscripts*, emphasized the necessity of the “total man” as the goal and expression of human liberation. Whereas in capitalism all human relations were mediated by the mercantile economy, its social hierarchies, and the commodities it produced as its material expression, Marx’s “humanist” socialism sought to establish a realm in which the “total man” could express himself and fulfill his essential “nature” in a direct and nonalienated fashion. This position was in sharp contrast to the orthodox Marxism of the PCF, which concerned itself with overcoming “exploitation” in its narrow and purely economic definition.

98 *Douglas Spencer*

Already there are resonances here with the politics of Le Guin's novel. In common with the various expressions of nonauthoritarian, far-left communism and libertarian socialism, of which Lefebvre along with the Hungarian Georg Lukács was a vital influence, *The Dispossessed* suggests that even the *de facto* beneficiaries of an exploitative society are enslaved to its narrowly economic dimensions; even the socially privileged Urrasti with whom Shevek spends most of his time on Urras are alienated by the logic of "possession":

you the possessors are the possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes—the wall, the wall! (7: 229)

The spatial terms in which the condition of "possession" is put by Le Guin also parallels Lefebvre's thinking. As Rob Shields has noted: "Lefebvre's 'alienation' is a spatial concept referring to displacement and distance" and "Alienation is defined by Lefebvre as the 'single yet dual movement of objectification and externalization—or realization and de-realization.'"⁶ The inner life and passion of the Urrasti has likewise become externalized and alienated into the material of their objects and their design:

Everyone was very polite and talked a great deal, but not about anything interesting; and they smiled so much they looked anxious. But their clothes were gorgeous, indeed they seemed to put all their light-heartedness into their clothes, and their food, and all the different things they drank, and the lavish furnishings and ornaments of the rooms in the palaces where the receptions were held. (3: 83)

The motifs of walls, containment, and packaging that run throughout *The Dispossessed*, contrasted with those of mobility and communication as freedom, suggest a spatialization of politics that is part of a larger "spatial turn" in critical theory, a movement for which Lefebvre, particularly in his *The Production of Space*,⁷ was chiefly responsible.

But this turn to alienation and a spatialized understanding of the social itself needs to be understood in historical and social terms. Lefebvre's thinking was largely a response to the rapid changes in French culture that occurred after World War II. The flooding of a new and relatively affluent market with consumer goods, alongside the growth in mass tourism, organized sport, and the spread of advertising, marked a full-scale change in the experience and nature of everyday life. Not only were people economically exploited at work, but their "free time" and space had been colonized by the new consumer culture too. As the wholesale commodification of lived material culture took place, the entrenched subjects of this critique had to fight against their total "possession" by things. As one example of May 1968 graffiti in Paris declared, "cache-toi, objet!" (hide yourself, object!).

In his own account of the object, *The System of Objects*, Lefebvre's student and assistant, Jean Baudrillard, tried to show how the object had escaped its utilitarian servitude and now occupied an autonomous position in the center of the new consumerist world. Here we find Baudrillard not only following Lefebvre's lead, arguing against a world in which human nature has been externalized and alienated into the sphere of objects, but also chiming with the presence of these themes in *The Dispossessed*:

Indeed, a genuine revolution has taken place on the everyday plane: *objects have now become more complex than human behaviour relative to them*. Objects are more and more highly differentiated—our gestures less and less so. To put it another way: objects are no longer surrounded by the theatre of gesture in which they used to be simply the various roles; instead their emphatic goal-directedness has very nearly turned them into the actors in a global process in which *man* is merely the role, or the spectator.⁸

In this early work Baudrillard produced a perceptive account of the material experience of everyday life and its symbolic dimensions. In the consumer society the object had moved beyond its utensile servitude, its status as “tool,” into an autonomous zone where it stood alone and apart as a fetish of consumption itself: an image of the reified system of advanced capitalism where all human relations and communications were relayed through commodities and their possession. Baudrillard's approach here is resonant with Le Guin's recurrent themes of containment and packaging. On Urras Shevek observes how objects are held apart from one another, and from people; isolated and self-contained: “Even packets of paper,” he notes, “were wrapped in several layers of papers. Nothing was to touch anything else” (7: 199).

These practices of packaging and isolation also extend to the urban and architectural scale where they evoke the experience of the tangible emptiness of everyday life at the heart of this “consumer society”:

He came to Saemtenevia Street and crossed it hurriedly, not wanting a repetition of the daylight nightmare. Now he was in the commercial district. Banks, office building, government buildings. Was all Nio Esseia this? Huge shining boxes of stone and glass, immense, ornate, enormous packages, empty, empty. (7: 209)

In the France of the 1960s Baudrillard observed the same operative motivation in the use of glass as the default material of consumer society:

A shop window is at once magical and frustrating—the strategy of advertising in epitome. The transparency of jars containing food products implies a formal satisfaction, a kind of visual collusion, yet basically the relationship is one of exclusion. Glass works exactly like atmosphere in that it allows nothing but the *sign* of its content to emerge.⁹

100 *Douglas Spencer*

Like Le Guin's protagonist Shevek, Baudrillard is alert to the perversion at work in this "system of objects," where beings are dispossessed of their sexuality and objects themselves assume an erotic character. Where Shevek becomes aware of the eroticism of the furnishings on the spaceship, and speculates on the celibacy of the Urrasti cabinetmakers, Baudrillard observes how design shapes the object world into eroticized forms advertised and consumed as fetishized "woman-objects." Both are also alert to the gender politics of this sublimation. In a perhaps direct reference to the sculpture of British Pop artist Allen Jones, Le Guin makes several mentions of "the woman in the table" as an image of the Urrasti's displaced and objectified sexuality, an operation where objects not only take on the functions of the erotic, but beings, particularly female ones, have to objectify themselves in order to express sexuality.

To look at her, Vea was the body profiteer to end them all. Shoes, clothes, cosmetics, jewels, gestures, everything about her asserted provocation. She was so elaborately and ostentatiously a female body that she seemed scarcely to be a human being. She incarnated all the sexuality the Ioti repressed into their dreams, their novels and poetry, their endless paintings of female nudes, their music, their architecture with its curves and domes, their candies, their baths, their mattresses. She was the woman in the table. (7: 213)

In strikingly similar terms, Baudrillard notes the perversion of this objectified sexuality and its fracturing of the "total person" as an expression of the alienation produced in the "system of objects":

If perversion as it concerns objects is most clearly discernable in the crystallized form of fetishism, we are precisely justified in noting how throughout the system . . . the possession of objects and the passion for them is, shall we say, a tempered mode of sexual perversion. Indeed, just as possession depends on the discontinuity of the series . . . sexual perversion is founded on the inability to apprehend the other qua object of desire in his or her unique totality as a person, to grasp the other in any but a discontinuous way.¹⁰

In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes used a similar semiotic methodology to Baudrillard's to account for the profuse invasion of consumer objects, advertising, and the leisure industry into French everyday life in the postwar period. Dealing with topics as diverse as detergents, film stars, Michelin guides, and cars, Barthes sought to reveal the bewitching power of these cultural manifestations by reference to their mythmaking, and the role of these myths within a larger ideological system. A vital source of these objects' mythological power was their tendency to appear as what Barthes termed "pure signs," autonomous images severed from any connection to their original production and construction, and hence free to float as signs that could refer to more abstract myths—the "good life," purity, nationalism, and so forth. Writing about the Citroën DS in "The New Citroën" Barthes commented:

It is obvious that the new Citroën has fallen from the sky inasmuch as it appears at first sight as a superlative object. We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales.¹¹

This abstraction of the object from its conditions of production and its miraculous capacity to appear “as if from nowhere” also occupies Shevek during his visit to the shops of Nio Esseia’s *Saemtenevia Street*, the “street of nightmares”:

And the strangest thing about the street was that none of the millions of things for sale was made there. Where were the workshops, the factories . . . ? Out of sight, somewhere else. Behind walls. All the people in all the shops were either buyers or sellers. They had no relation to the things but that of possession. (5: 132)

So Le Guin’s novel strikes a significant chord with near contemporaneous accounts of consumerism and the centrality of a system of fetishized and mythified objects at a critical moment in advanced capitalism. Much as Shevek encounters the world of Urras as both alien and alienating, philosophers, theorists, and others experienced the rapid transformation of the West into a “consumer society” as an ominous herald of a new world governed by a generalized alienation.

While these critiques focused their attention on the object, the possibility of some escape from alienation was also explored through a dialectical reversal in which objects, differently designed, strategically “hidden,” and alternatively deployed might play a significant part. And again these developments find their parallel in Le Guin’s fictive exploration of design and aesthetics.

THE RHETORIC OF THE OBJECT

There are critical moments when the invention of Utopias appears either as urgent necessity—Morris’s industrial England or the consumer society of postwar Europe—or an immanent possibility—as in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. At these points the arguments for radical social transformation frequently assume material form in the shape of new aesthetic paradigms and rhetorical objects; a coalescence of technologies, material formations, and avant-garde designs mobilized in a Utopian discourse that announces the possibility and necessity of transcending existing social conditions and experience.

A prime and prototypical example is, of course, the Arts and Crafts movement’s employment of vernacular materials, ornament, and production methods

102 *Douglas Spencer*

as an argument against the industrial division of labor in an increasingly urbanized modernity. But closer to the futurism of much 1960s design, and of a more direct lineage, would be the work of the Russian Constructivists of the 1920s. Due to the material and economic conditions of the new Soviet society, the grander designs of this avant-garde were typically unrealizable in all but model form. Vladimir Tatlin's towering *Monument to the Third International*, conceived as a rival to the skyscrapers of the capitalist world, remained unrealized at its intended scale. Rhetorically, though, its formal and technological qualities signaled the ambitions of the USSR. Its rotating inner volumes and helical outer structure signified revolutionary mobility and dynamism, while the technology and engineering, which was supposed to drive its mechanisms and project Soviet slogans into the skies, suggested a promethean transcendence of nature and the conquest of space. Circles, spirals, and helixes became favored geometrical tropes at this time, figures whose inherent mobility and self-transformation stood analogically for the goals and direction of the new society. Alexander Rodchenko's mobiles often employed these geometries in structural and tectonic experiments in materials, form and movement, and there is a suggestive parallel here with Takver's mobiles in *The Dispossessed*:

she went to her old dormitory, once for her clothes and papers, and again, with Shevek, to bring a number of curious objects: complex concentric shapes made of wire, which moved and changed slowly and inwardly when suspended from the ceiling. She had made these with scrap wire and tools from the craft supply-depot, and called them Occupations in Uninhabited Space. (6: 182–83)

In the fictive worlds of *The Dispossessed* kinesis is discursively privileged over immobility much as it was Soviet Russia in the 1920s. And there are further parallels. The briefly fertile moment of the avant-garde in which experiments such as Rodchenko's could receive official state approval and sponsorship had ended by 1930 with the ascendancy of Stalinism, and its intolerant and utilitarian orthodoxy. Similarly the character Bedap complains that the initial revolutionary ferment of life on Anarres has congealed into a sterile and intolerant utilitarianism:

Bedap spoke more gravely: "They can justify it because music isn't useful. Canal digging is important, you know; music's mere decoration. The circle has come right back around to the most vile kind of profiteering utilitarianism. The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention and initiative that was the center of the Odonian ideal, we've thrown it all away. We've gone right back to barbarism. If it's new, run away from it; if you can't eat it, throw it away!" (6: 175–76)

Here Le Guin points to the ambiguities of life on Anarres and the tendency of Utopian thought to ossify into a rigid dogmatism. On Anarres, as in Soviet Russia, ideas had become abstracted into an autonomous ideology unresponsive to the lived, spontaneous nature of everyday life.

The avant-garde groups of the 1960s were inspired by their predecessors of the early twentieth century but typically addressed a new set of conditions and possibilities. For Utopie in France and Superstudio in Italy, the degrading of everyday life through a generalized consumerism and its attendant alienating consequences were the most pressing concerns for design. Through new materials, buildings, and landscapes they sought to transform human relations with objects and spaces into nonalienated and enabling scenarios.

Inspired by the thought of Lefebvre, Utopie was formed in 1967 as a grouping of the architects Jean Aubert, Jean-Paul Jungmann, and Antoine Stinco and a more theoretical arm including Jean Baudrillard, Hubert Tonka, and Isabelle Auricoste. In their collaborative constitution this group attempted to give radical critique an expression in material form and an operative dimension in everyday life. In the work of its designers Utopia took the shape of various *structures gonflables* (inflatable structures). Further radicalized by the events of May 1968, Utopie saw in the inflatable structure a pure and transcendent space for a post-consumerist existence. As Marc Dessauce comments:

In any case, if the word “alienation” had become the chief cant phrase of our time, and the struggle against it a central mot d’ordre of the student protest, a representation of the corresponding remedy—the asylum—would assume equal popularity. Operating a synthesis between the grotto and the airship, pneumatic structures seem designed to epitomize this type of asylum, with its dialectic of confinement and cure, of fusion and evasion—thus, the alternative use of inflatable domes for group experience and meditative isolation.¹²

The inflatable structures of the group promised insulation from the environmental bombardment of objects and advertising. The taut skins of the structures offered protection from the hostile atmosphere of consumerism and the provision of an object-free interior world where alternative social relations might emerge. The composition of these structures also suggested ethereal qualities opposed to the materialism of the times: their thin transparent membranes, given volume only by air itself, produced a near immaterial essence, and the ephemerality and disposability of these designs mitigated against their fetishization as “consumer goods” and against the possession of the subject by the object.

Similar ends were pursued by Superstudio in Italy at this time. The major part of their work was given over to the search for a “degree zero” in design, architecture, and aesthetics, and their resultant *Continuous Monument* project proposed a stripped down, homogenous tectonic grid as the “once and for all” solution to the architecture of the human environment. The barest and most semiotically neutral aesthetic would suffice to generate the minimal surfaces for human inhabitation. In a series of collages and staged scenarios Superstudio envisioned a future in which the neutral monochrome grid of the *Continuous Monument* formed a mute support for a nomadic Utopia. In this liberated environment human figures wandered, played, dined, and slept in direct unmediated relationship to one another.

104 *Douglas Spencer*

As was the case for Utopie in France, and the lead they had taken from Lefebvre and Baudrillard, Superstudio saw the rise in consumerism as a new stage in capitalist development in which there was even more at stake than the economic exploitation of one class by another. Group member Adolfo Natalini observed in 1971:

if design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of the bourgeois models of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning is merely the formalization of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and cities . . . until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear. We can live without architecture.¹³

Superstudio also shared Utopie's broader strategic response to consumerism; a distinct asceticism in their treatment of objects, design, and aesthetics. Any aesthetic stimulus toward pleasure in objects themselves is eschewed as a refusal of patterns of consumption and possession. Objects and spaces are designed only to provide the minimal and pure conditions that would support direct and non-alienated social relations free of their mediation through the object.

This fear of ornament has a special significance in modernist and Utopian discourse and is also voiced in *The Dispossessed*. But here it is bracketed within the rhetoric of the Odonian orthodoxy that reigns on Anarres and subjected to a more demanding critique.

BEYOND EXCREMENT

For the Austrian architect and theorist, Adolf Loos, ornament was crime; on Le Guin's Anarres "Excess is excrement" (4: 98). Throughout the novel Shevek observes the "excremental" waste of the Urrasti, their excess of ornament and decoration, as symptomatic of their inner poverty. Like their fellow consumers on Earth they know "no relationship but possession." By contrast the citizens of Anarres are materially impoverished but rich in humanity. The austerity and asceticism of Anarres is a material necessity, but one given a virtuous moral gloss in this opposition. Again this echoes the austere and purifying practices of groups such as Utopie and Superstudio.

But Le Guin introduces a third position to upset this apparently reasonable equation:

People in the small towns wore a good deal of jewelry. In sophisticated Abbe-
nay there was more sense of the tension between the principle of nonowner-
ship and the impulse to self-adornment, and there a ring or pin was the limit

of good taste. But elsewhere the deep connection between the aesthetic and the acquisitive was simply not worried about; people bedecked themselves unabashedly. (10: 324)

Le Guin suggests that in the first instance it is only the conditions of material scarcity on Anarres that produce a corresponding ethical and aesthetic opposition to waste and excess. But there is nothing either “natural” or necessarily superior about these positions. On the contrary Shevek has to learn to curb the instinctive “propertarian” drives that come before he is taught Odonian communitarian ethics. In the quotation above, and elsewhere, the desire to possess appears to be a naturally consequence of aesthetic stimulation. At Oiie’s home we find Shevek approving of his host’s taste:

A relative absence of furniture pleased Shevek’s eye at once: the rooms looked austere, spacious, with their expanses of deeply polished floor. He had always felt uneasy amidst the extravagant decorations and conveniences of the public buildings in which the receptions, dedications, and so forth were held. The Urrasti had taste, but it seemed often to be in conflict with an impulse towards display—conspicuous expense. The natural, aesthetic origin of the desire to own things was concealed and perverted by economic and competitive compulsions, which in turn told on the quality of the things: all they achieved was a kind of mechanical lavishness. Here, instead, was grace, achieved through restraint. (5: 145–46)

Certainly Shevek enjoys the restraint of his host’s taste, but what is striking in this passage is the suggestion that the desire to own things might be “natural.” This statement is at odds with the equation of possession with alienation and a provocation that upsets the notion of renunciation as liberation; it is a seemingly audacious claim that could not have been reasonably made within the broadly Marxian framework of anticonsumerist discourse or radical design theory. Yet placed within the discourse of science-fiction on a distant planet it enables a reframing of Utopian approaches to objects and aesthetics.

The reframing of Utopian discourse suggests that the Utopia of Anarres is not an unambiguous alternative to consumerism or a viable model for a future society in itself. Whereas Utopie or Superstudio could renounce the need for objects through choice and Lefebvre, like Morris before him, could look back nostalgically at apparently nonalienated historical moments, on Anarres scarcity is a precondition, and, moreover, a precondition that inhibits the ability of the Anarresti to achieve total self-realization. Instead, they are frequently reduced to the same narrowly economic dimensions of existence as the Urrasti: one is enslaved by scarcity, the other by luxury.

In this way Le Guin’s novel points to a critique of the strategies of the groups and individuals discussed here. Whereas the ascetic tenor and an anticonsumerist austerity of these equates renunciation with salvation and freedom,

106 *Douglas Spencer*

some of Le Guin's characters achieve real aesthetic pleasure, satisfaction, and self-realization through their relationship to objects, even their possession, and against the dogma that would label them "propertarian." Others, significantly, such as the composer Salas, have their aesthetic experiments thwarted in the name of functionalist orthodoxy.

Again the thematics of containment versus mobility come into play here, between utopian fiction and utopian design, because, while both Anarres and Urras are trapped in their circumstances and unwilling to change or develop, this same dynamic lack and the inability to account for kinesis mark the projects and thinking of radical design in the 1960s and 1970s. The new spaces they proposed for human inhabitation were as free of objects and as aesthetically muted as possible, as if this might provide a pristine environment in which subjects could realize their essentially nonalienated and unmediated individual and social being. But this was only a polarized reversal of the late capitalist condition in which people could only find their identities and relate to the social *through* objects. You are either alienated by objects or liberated by their absence. Both Urrasti capitalism, where objects are the source of human identity and sociability, and Anarresti anarchism, where objects alienate and their absence allows for identity and sociability, represent polar positions; Le Guin brings the two worlds, and by implication the two positions, into a proximity that starts to undermine the stability of both. The "propertarians" of Urras are capable of simple and refined aesthetic taste and the anarchists of Anarres are capable of turning ethical principles into a dogmatic and repressive orthodoxy. Their relationships to objects are not parceled neatly into the categories of "alienated by" or "liberated from." Challenging this binary logic some of the novel's characters relate intimately to objects without succumbing to their powers of alienation; on the contrary their subjectivity engages with the social through the world of objects as an extension of their individual agency. The mobiles that Takver constructs, for instance, suggest a tactile and haptic relation to the material world and its potential to be worked into meaningful and empathetic forms: their embodiment of kinesis in space makes concrete the abstract theorizing of Shevek for the novel's world. In contrast to the drift towards a purely semiotic epistemology, initiated by Baudrillard and Barthes, or the drive to eviscerate the object that takes place in *Utopie* or *Superstudio*, Le Guin's novel, anticipating much contemporary critical thought,¹⁴ suggests the mimetic potential of our relationship to the world of things and points toward the mutually enabling and transformative mediation between people, objects, technologies, and ideas. As such it remains a significant parable for our consumerist planet.

NOTES

The author would like to acknowledge the volume's editors, whose comments and criticisms played a significant role in developing this chapter from its initial draft to its present form.

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), cited in the text by chapter and page to the 387-page Eos HarperCollins edition of 2001.
2. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume One*, trans. J. Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 66.
3. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press/Dark Star, 1977).
4. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2001).
5. William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (London: Penguin, 1993).
6. Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 40–41.
7. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
8. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. J. Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 56.
9. Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 42.
10. Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 99.
11. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers (London: Paladin, 1985), 88.
12. Marc Dessauce, "On Pneumatic Apparitions," in *The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in May '68*, ed. Marc Dessauce (New York: The Architectural League of New York, 1999), 14–15.
13. Cited in Peter Lang and William Menking, "Only Architecture Will Be Our Lives," in *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, ed. Peter Lang and William Menking (Milan: Skira, 2003), 20–21.
14. On "mimesis" see Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), especially chapter 9; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); and Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular Study of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1992); on the critique of modernity's purifying operations see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and for his critical account of Latour see Scott Lash, *Another Modernity: A Different Rationality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

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108 *Douglas Spencer*

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