

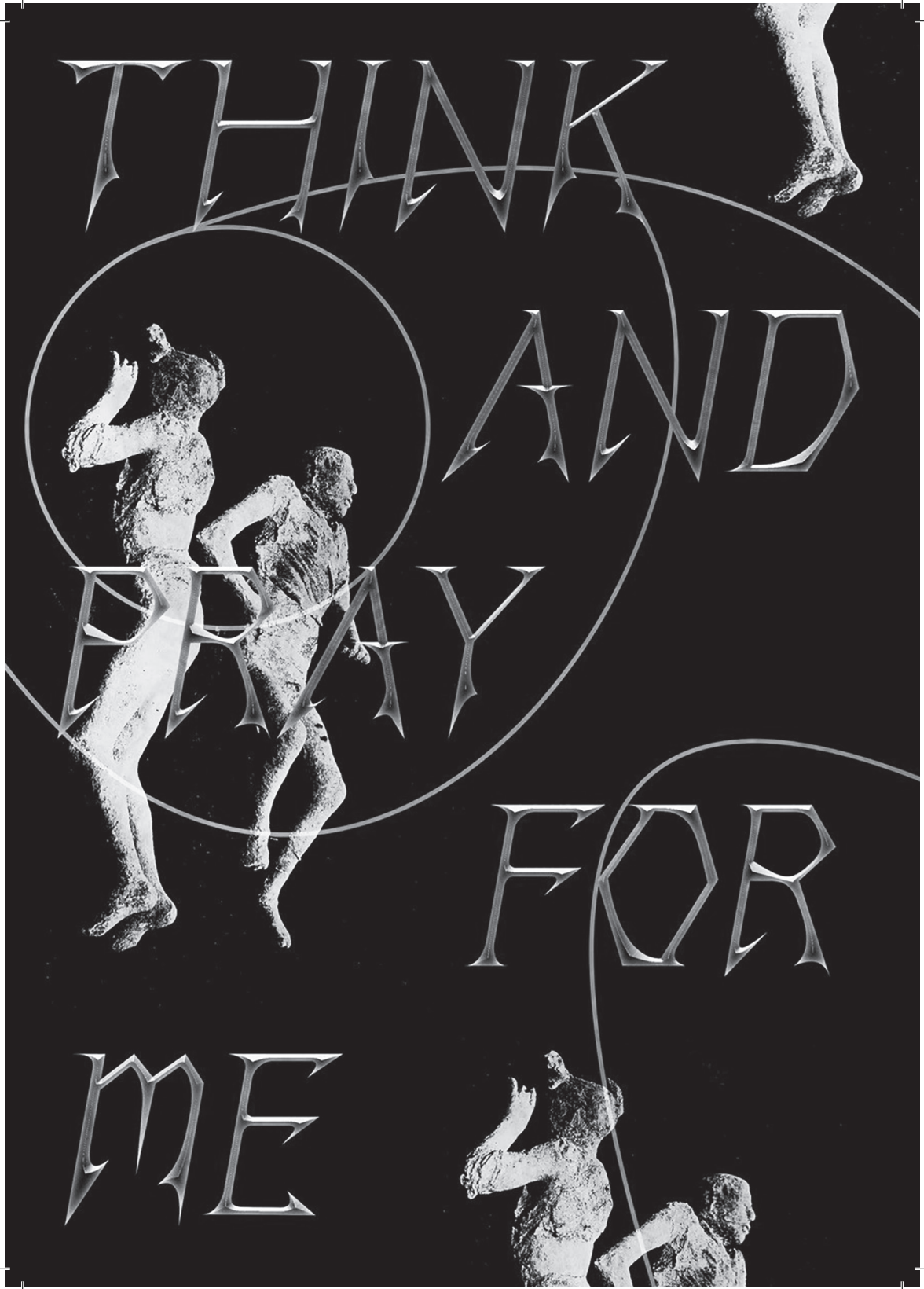
THINK

AND

PRAY

FOR

ME



## Planned Obsolescence by Jack Clarke



1

*“I love how millennials are associated with avocado toast and selfies instead of the fact that we all constantly joke about wanting to die.”<sup>2</sup>*

It has been clear to archaeologists, ever since unearthing the Necropolis late into the 16th Century, that those who did not flee the city of Pompeii in 79AD perished in an event of seismic proportions. However, as excavators worked over the centuries to uncover human remains, they noticed that the skeletons were surrounded by voids in the compacted ash – in the mid 1800’s this realisation lead excavators to discover that by carefully pouring plaster into these spaces, the final poses, clothing, and faces of the last residents of Pompeii can ‘come to life.’

<sup>1</sup> Dyer, *Pompeii. Its History, Buildings and Antiquities* (Bell, 1887), 476

<sup>2</sup> Leah Williams, <https://twitter.com/mymonsterischic/>

<sup>3</sup> Schuppli, *Material Witness*, <http://susanschuppli.com/research/materialwitness/>

<sup>4</sup> Le Guin, *The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of Therolinguistics (in Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*, Plume, 1974), 167

<sup>5</sup> Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia (re.press, 2008)*, 53

Dr. Pliny, an Italian psychogeologist specialising in poromechanics, has been working with these material witnesses<sup>3</sup> since excavations resumed in early 2018. Following new funding from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Dr. Pliny and a small team of researchers at the International Therolinguistics Association<sup>4</sup> have begun to execute a new, experimental procedure of psychographic material analysis. Their work on site begins from the basic premise that:

*“For every inconsistency on the surface, there is a subterranean consistency.”<sup>5</sup>*

In their new method of analysis, the plot of land (or plaster) that Dr. Pliny and his team have been given to work on and the plot of Pompeii as a narrativised

psychosocial event cannot be separated – in both domains they are simply looking for inconsistencies, or plot holes:

*“...the main plot is the map or the concentration blueprint of plot holes (the other plots). Every hole is a footprint left by at least one more plot, prowling underneath.”*<sup>6</sup>

Since beginning this process of excavation, Dr. Pliny and his colleagues have realised that their previous issues were simply deficiencies in resolution. When excavation commenced in 1748, the resolution of the blueprint that Carlo di Borbone had operated within lay at around 1km<sup>2</sup> – at this resolution, plot features such as the town structure were not even yet visible. However, over the last 200 years, the available resolution has steadily increased with the help of improved technology and, most recently, cybergothic methods of excavation and analysis. Now, Dr. Pliny is able to worm his way into the pores and secretory cavities of victims buried millennia ago, making observations of the cast reliefs directly at a fidelity of as little as 17µm<sup>2</sup>.

This increased resolution is invaluable in Pliny’s work, as he is psychoanalysing the inorganic matter of the unconscious itself. In recent interviews he has attributed the inspiration for this ground-breaking psychoarchaeological approach to the late Mark Fisher:

*“There is a death drive, which in its most radical formulation is not a drive towards death, but a drive of death. The inorganic is the impersonal pilot of everything, including that which seems to be personal and organic. Seen from the perspective of Thanatos, we ourselves become an exemplary case of the eerie: there is an agency at work in us (the unconscious, the death drive), but it is not where or what we expected it to be.”*<sup>7</sup>

By exploring this understanding of Thanatos and elaborating an approach with the assistance of the geolinguists at the International Therolinguistics Association, Pliny has been able to divine and translate fragments of unconscious material from the plaster casts. The fragmented audible results are shocking, somewhere between unspeakable groans and inhuman chattering, the team managed to map together a few unconjugated

scraps and even a whole sentence: “*Qui me calcas, calcaberis, et tu, id cogita et ora pro me.*”<sup>8</sup>

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*“Now and then, as in the case of the helicopter, with its unstable, insect-like obsessiveness, we can see clearly the deep hostility of the mineral world. We are lucky that the organic realm reached the foot of the evolutionary ladder before the inorganic.”*<sup>9</sup>

When a market becomes more competitive, product life-spans tend to increase. When Japanese vehicles with longer lifespans entered the American market in the 1960s and 1970s, American carmakers were forced to respond by building more durable products.<sup>10</sup> Coincidentally – or perhaps accordingly – the British author J.G. Ballard was also investigating such a symphorophilic† relationship between automobiles and life-spans during the 1970’s; a research project culminating in the publication of his now infamous experimental fiction *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and the equally controversial *Crash* (1973).

In a brief introduction to *The Atrocity Exhibition*, William Burroughs observes:

<sup>8</sup> Roughly translated: He who treads on me, will be trodden. You, think and pray for me.

<sup>9</sup> Ballard, *Atrocity Exhibition* (Fourth Estate, 2014), 38

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planned\\_obsolescence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planned_obsolescence)

†Symphorophilia is a paraphilia in which sexual arousal involves staging and watching a tragedy, such as a fire or a traffic accident.

<sup>11</sup> Burroughs in Ballard, *Atrocity Exhibition*, ix

*“The line between inner and outer landscapes is breaking down. Earthquakes can result from seismic upheavals within the human mind. The whole random universe of the industrial age is breaking down into cryptic fragments: “In a waste lot of wrecked cars he found the burnt body of the white Pontiac, the nasal prepuce of LBJ, crashed helicopters, Eichmann in drag, a dead child . . .” The human body becomes landscape...”*<sup>11</sup>

In the demise of pre-modern Pompeii one can see a precursor to this conceptual image of ‘the body as landscape’ – the figures, faces, expressions and desires of a city compressed, decomposed and unwillingly etched into an impersonal terrain. Here, the barriers between inner and outer – organic and inorganic – become disinhibited, compounded and muddled. For Burroughs and Ballard in the ‘industrial age’ however, such apocalyptic imagery arrives instead through the lurid figures of hyper-capitalist sexualisation of political, economic and cultural

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 61

<sup>7</sup> Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 85 – in Greek mythology, Thanatos was the personification of death.

chieftains, the glut of trivialised images depicting murder and destruction.

In this prophetic reading, the waste-land of the Anthropocene is rendered visible at the sunbleached intersection between Thanatos, capital and the Earth. If the apocalyptic annihilation of Pompeii arrived from the inorganic ‘without’, the fate of our industrial-capitalist age is proactively produced from the inorganic drive ‘within’<sup>12</sup>:

*“[t]he death of capital is less a prophecy than a machine part.”*<sup>13</sup>

Here, the cybernetic features of an ostensibly free market come into play, as agencies of all kinds (human, inhuman, corporate, natural) descend on the asphalt plot;

*“...the hint of death is present in every biological circuit.”*<sup>14</sup>

Feedback loops, such as the supposed tendency for competitive markets to produce longer product life-spans, begin to proliferate without the need for human intervention, in fact they actively preclude it. Increasingly competitive labour markets result in shorter life-spans as workers are progressively locked out of the means of survival.

Moving away from the automobiles – into a distinctly post-Fordist era of production and precarity Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi observes:

*“When the production of goods is turned into information, and the network becomes the sphere of recombination of productive actions which take place in distant spaces and moments of time – the capitalist’s need to buy the whole of the worker’s lifetime ends – he just needs fragments of time. The networked machine ceaselessly picks up and recombines fragments of info-time from the ocean of social life and intelligence. Thus, precariousness invades every space of social life, and permeates the expectations and the emotions of individuals, whose time is fragmented, fractalized, cellularized.”*<sup>15</sup>

Problems of agency (economic, political, educational; human, nonhuman) become problems of time. Whether fascist: *Make America Great Again!* neoliberal: *Keep Calm and Carry On!* or anarchistic: *No Future!* these slogans all represent a time-crisis. A crisis, the symptom of which manifests itself in an abstract desire for time in a system under which a sense of futurity has collapsed. This is a direct result of the technological apparatus that Berardi describes as the ‘networked machine’: a time-machine built to facilitate and construct ‘productive’ compulsions in lieu of meaningful communications: the impersonal death drive, the ‘electro-libidinal parasite’<sup>16</sup>, the ‘eerie pilot of everything’ virtually renders itself in (cyber)space – in spite of Ballard’s prophetic warning – the inorganic leaps to the apex of the evolutionary ladder.

*“Everything is becoming science fiction. From the margins of an almost invisible literature has sprung the intact reality of the 20th century.”*<sup>17</sup>

Through this understanding it is clear that the human is complicit in, and a catalyst of, its own obsolescence. The spirit of entrepreneurialism, so revered in neoliberal discourse, serves to accelerate a process of anthropocentric discontinuation. If *“capital is a social suicide machine, it is because it is compelled to advantage its assassins”*<sup>18</sup>, then time is running amok, shorting, spiraling inward.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.virtualfutures.co.uk/discover/no-time/>

<sup>17</sup> Ballard, *Fictions of Every Kind* (Books and Bookmen 1971)

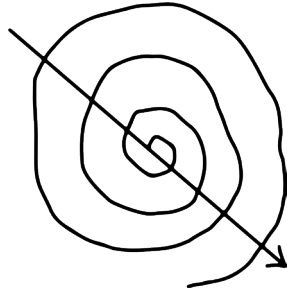
<sup>18</sup> B “Capital produces the first sociality in which the *pouvoir* (political power) of dominance is perpetually submitted to the hazard of experimental puissance (physical strength).” Land, *Making it with Death*, 265

<sup>12</sup> *And what is this death that always rises from within, but that must arrive from without – and that, in the case of capitalism, rises with all the more power as one still fails to see exactly what this outside is that will cause it to arrive?”* Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti Oedipus* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 301

<sup>13</sup> Land, *Making it with Death* (in *Fanged Noumena, Urbanomic*, 2012), 266 – for further reading on Land – and the problems with his more recent work – listen to Mark Fisher’s, *Anti-Vital*, <http://www.openschooleast.org/the-bad-vibes-club-presents-mark-fisher-anti-vital/>

<sup>14</sup> Bateson in Plant, *Zeros + Ones* (Fourth Estate, 1998), 162

<sup>15</sup> Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (Verso, 2015), 203 – [emphasis my own]



19

*‘You can lean against us, we’re quite real’*<sup>19</sup>

Rosie Grace Ward’s work is, in a similar sense, a time-machine – not in the sense that one could jump in and ‘travel’ to Ancient Rome – but in the sense that it ‘machines’ time; the work works with time, enters into a machinic relationship with time itself, treating it as raw material. In short, it functions via an explicitly “cybergothic methodology – disinterring the present in the relics of the Deep Past...”<sup>20</sup>

Ward’s work manifests itself in a particular kind of ‘time-space’ and arrives there via this peculiar methodology, one in which time has been collapsed back in on itself – huddled in a corner muttering maddening incantations over and over. Spiralling, folding inward it has assumed a primeval, foetal posture (in death, in life and the madness in-between).

The figure of the voided corpse, crouched in a foetal pose and cast in plaster over 1000 years after its initial demise, becomes emblematic of Ward’s work: ancient, idyllic agricultural landscapes are cut with the blades of future warlords; clinically bureaucratic office-spaces become involuntarily spliced with a body of coagulated blood, spilt on an altar to some anonymous, violent logotype. This is an archaeology – an exhumation or conjuration – of every temporal axis, excavating artefacts that break down any notion of an internal/external division

The dreams, desires and nightmares of agents spread across millenia coalesce in the gallery space. Here again we encounter the haunting image of Ballard’s atrocious,

<sup>18</sup> Foetal: denoting a posture characteristic of a fetus, with the back curved forwards and the limbs folded in front of the body. Diagram by Jack Clarke

<sup>19</sup> Ballard, *Unlimited Dream Company* (1979)

<sup>20</sup> Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 89

unchaste capitalist landscapes. However, instead of the hyper-erotic images aroused from a recent sexual revolution, Ward’s time-space garners the brands of a decaying planet, stratifying them through the infrastructure of an impersonal, insane, neoliberal cityscape.

*“Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...”*<sup>21</sup>

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Berardi’s ‘networked (time-)machine’, at once an agent and a hallucination<sup>22</sup>, seeps out into the ‘real world’ – infecting the various plots (both earthly and narrative) entangled throughout space-time with its own logic of productivity and accumulation. Here, the woeful obsolescence, the foetal impotence of the human appears clearer than ever.

However, for such an inhuman, impersonal area of investigation Ward seems intent on staying with the human, for better or for worse, in life or in death, use or disuse – both as inorganic artefact and organic ally. A belief in the potential capacities of the human (and its kind) is evident in the excessively ritualistic artefacts and situations that Ward’s work seeks to map out: agricultural tools ornamented with sacrificial offerings of pearls and blood; massive, looming graveyards at once haunting in their morbidity and humane in their injunction to remembrance.

At once diagrammatic and pragmatic, Ward’s time-spaces seek not only to represent, reproduce or exhibit the plot-holes they uncover, but also dilate, distend and corrupt them – plot-holes which worm their way through the established narratives of neoliberalism, capitalism, cyberspace and civilisation more broadly. The paradoxical realisation that “the only future we have comes when we stop reproducing the conditions of the present”<sup>23</sup> is inescapably materialised in Ward’s work. However, it is materialised through the structures, images and figures of

<sup>21</sup> Gibson, *Neuromancer* (*Voyager*, 1995), 67

<sup>22</sup> Behavior-altering parasites are known for their infection of the hosts central nervous system.

<sup>23</sup> Edelman in Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (University of Minnesota, 2016), 13

the capitalist present – leveraging corporate-cultural branding, climate destruction and consumer culture against itself.

These spaces of a collapsed time compounded by a hallucinatory moment in which the affective background of ‘legislated nostalgia’<sup>24</sup> reigns supreme – making use of the cybergothic tendencies already present in contemporary culture. While Ward’s work often manifests itself in explicitly violent, negative figures, hers is in fact a project of empowerment and emancipation – a method of positive temporal infection and a recuperation of the death drive we began with. It is only through these encounters that we can stop romanticising life as it stubbornly exists (across all temporal modes) and instead ‘wish a happy death’ on the calcified political forms and no-good solutions of contemporary capital.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Definition: To force a body of people to have memories they do not actually possess.*  
Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991)

<sup>25</sup> *Culp, Dark Deleuze, 13*

**Think And Pray For Me  
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