

# Oozethetics

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X Much love to Sanger Clark, Brenden Lovejoy, Britt Gudas, and Sam Panter for their unwavering support.

1 Hill, Geoffrey. "Geoffrey Hill, The Art of Poetry No. 80." Interview by Carl Phillips. *The Paris Review*, 2000. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/730/geoffrey-hill-the-art-of-poetry-no-80-geoffrey-hill>. □

**We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we're difficult to each other. And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most "intellectual" piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are? Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when if such simplification were applied to a description of our own inner selves we would find it demeaning? I think art has a right—not an obligation—to be difficult if it wishes. And, since people generally go on from this to talk about elitism versus democracy, I would add that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that tyranny requires simplification. This thought does not originate with me, it's been far better expressed by others.<sup>1</sup>**

—Geoffrey Hill

## *Stuck In the Middle of Nowhere Again*

Most design is an attempt at speaking to masses of people, but rarely is it about creating masses. Contemporary design's simplified, scattershot grammar is foundational for generalist and populist means for alienation. Blindly following an archaic design ideology that attempts to be unfailingly comprehensive, we have lost our many stylized vocabularies and vernacular to enrich each others' lives: we've become bored by the homogeneity we create, observe, consume, and use and thus feel hopeless and afraid in finding others who may understand our idiosyncrasies.

Presently, most of society lives at the bottom of an abyss. At the top of this abyss is a brilliantly lit environment where few live and every attempt is made to burn away shadows that may reveal even the slightest deformities in its surfaces. This is further prescribed by the staid world of graphic design which is built upon modernist dogma: the pursuit of clarity, certainty, and purity—pursuits that light offers. These are principles to maintain the status quo and the belief in hierarchical systems. Modernism's constant blinding light, which is

decidedly white, focuses our attention on expectations and ethos we presume to be true, creating spaces and mentalities of never-ending sameness and thus dreadfulness. Oligarchies want to portray the abyss we've collectively been digging as something that needs to be combated so that we may turn toward and step into their white lights in order to be blinded and separated from each other.

A designer's first step to any new design brief should be rewriting it to fit the desires of its audience, not its client. Therefore, if we take a step back and reevaluate the darkness of this abyss, we can consider its blurry boundary as a gentle entry point—allowing one to ease themselves through its gradient threshold—as well as the lack of light as an opportunity for partaking in non-hierarchical structures. With this in mind, darkness can be understood as a space without the anxiety of absolute limits: one has the opportunity to style themselves without mockery, fail without the implications of disability, and have a discourse without the burning pressure of a spotlight, all while giving one the confidence to be uncertain. Not only that, but the digging and scraping that increases the abyss's depth needs to be recognized as a collective action to help prevent the lights of our ever-advancing surveillance-driven world from burning away our mysteries. The reverberating din a signal to each other that we are somewhere nearby in the darkness.

What I'm proposing is that darkness's disorientation and flattening of hierarchies does not correlate exclusively to oppression. Stuck within capitalism, design will never be ethical or save the world, and there are more important societal factors to be aware of and advocate for.<sup>2</sup> Yet while all seems hopeless with the state of current affairs, it's important that we continue to examine the ways in which designers can help push and pull ideas and bodies into a swaying of cognitive expression, giving form to the ethereal winds and volatile tides of cultural discourse. By inciting moods—instead of beliefs or goals towards “solutions”—through the use of the esoteric, we can stimulate the tenacity to coalesce masses and bring people beyond the limits of their self and self-preservationist impulses.

## *Fiction Friction*

Like many people, music is a vital source of inspiration in my life. For me, extreme aesthetics within music have been a profound influence, particularly aspects of black/death/doom metal, hardcore punk, drum and bass, and even ambient drone (“extreme” for those listeners that don't have the patience). I've had discussions with people who don't understand how I can listen to or stomach such noise, yet all I can

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2 Erik Carter's essay, *Do You Want Typography or Do You Want The Truth?*, smartly summarizes the ways in which the graphic design profession can better itself: <https://walkerart.org/magazine/erik-carter-op-ed-do-you-want-typography-or-do-you-want-the-truth>

3 Thacker, Eugene Thacker. "Sound of the Abyss." *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*. Zero Books, 2014.

ever tell them is that the screaming, sloppy craftsmanship, toilet bowl production, and chaotic (or lack of) rhythm are all somehow calming. Thematically or lyrically, a majority of this music revolves around the debilitating feelings that stem from the nothingness or uncertainty of our lives—feelings that the abyss we live in can incite. But extreme auditory aesthetics create something with the nothingness of uncertainty, constantly pursuing the capture of uncertainty's form, weight, and sound while still letting it continue to be nothingness. In other words, as theorist Eugene Thacker writes, "the sound of the abyss is not silence, or quiet, or noise, but unsound. That which is unsound—like a building, or a mind—is always unstable, continually about to collapse. ... An unsound is akin, perhaps, to the term 'unknowing' ... an undoing or unraveling, denoting both the negation of the ground of knowledge, as well as the paradoxical apprehension of an absolute limit."<sup>3</sup>

Extreme aesthetics within music are an entanglement of that which is distressed, complicated, unstable and unknown. Any attempt to "unravel" this knot will be met with friction and even more uncertainty. But this friction slows one's thoughts, forcing one to notice something or someone, and thus reveal expressions of style. It also acts like a form of meditation. The aesthetic complexity of such work forces one to linger in its presence, and as we wallow in the pinnacle of its extreme din we are able to reframe the darkness we live in and the nothingness we feel as spaces in which pain can be acknowledged and pacified. For example, the minimal beat and synths in Cardi B's *Bodak Yellow* carve out a void so dark that its eeriness allows Cardi B to confidently rap about her foothold on this chaotic world, letting those words be the infectious element for listeners to use as they navigate the auditory void. In a visual sense, while driving at night, voids of light between street lamps on city freeways and rural backroads transform our routine (sunlit) routes into a strobe-light-like jigsaw puzzle. Similar to sensory deprivation, such voids are a place or moment to reshape feelings of uselessness as motivation and disorientation as possibility. Voids don't impose themselves on one's space. They are climates outside the conventional framing of a work that instill aimless direction beyond the limits of stationary contemplation and guide us toward definitive feelings about the spaces we stand upon and occupy. Voids allow a landscape of commonality to populate.

If design is a tool or a vessel for inquiry, then it must utilize the friction and spatiality of entanglements. If anything, it's undemocratic to design things that are meant to be a passive presence (i.e., "invisible design"). Easily digestible work is mind-numbing for designers to make and for audiences to consider. Friction and its inherent difficulty

help to arouse consciousness. In my own practice, I've used a methodology for many years that overwhelmingly decays images into high-contrast visual entanglements. Some of the original sources' forms are still recognizable and therefore allow moments to reassess spaces within the new disfigurement that hopefully evoke a desire to renew endeavors that once seemed lost for both myself and, more importantly, my audience.

Uncertainty doesn't need to be solved by design, rather design needs to give it form so that its presence can be embraced. Through the use of disorientation and disfigurement, the creation of uncertain landscapes and voids allows an audience to compare and relate their views of the world with how an artist or designer sees. Taking this a step further, understanding others' ways of looking is what creates friendship. Abandoning an oligarchy's pursuit of certainty, clarity, and purity for messiness and inexperience would be seen, in the words of curator Eloise Sweetman, as an appeal for intimacy. And this appeal would finally dissolve the preconceived notion that intimacy is a private affair and instead establish intimacy as the actuality that it is: a public affair that welcomes all encounters and teachings.<sup>4</sup> By subduing the pressures of perfection and cleanliness, and allowing the weirdness of normalcy to be reassuring—just like the extreme aesthetics of music—we can engender solidarity within the abyss's darkness. Knowing that you belong to something, that you connect with something, is the essence of authenticity and an aspect that builds the confidence to investigate.

### *The Light at the End of the Tunnel Is...*

Inherent within darkness is an inclusive behavior based around the human right to experiment: to find and understand who you are as a human being. Making darkness's traits ubiquitous means constructs currently considered "alternative" in our capitalist and sedated world would be able to slowly devour staid language and behavior and replace them with their ("alternative") vernacular.

Night, for example, is one ubiquitous form of darkness. However, it isn't a reoccurring moment meant for hiding or masking. Instead it encircles, for it must be understood that light and its negative effects are a necessary component of night's mystique. To completely extinguish light is to do the same to cognitive expression. We need the ember of a once raging flame, pale blue moonlight, and red blinking aircraft warning lights on the horizon to arouse our consciousness in darkness. The pulsing gradient boundary where darkness and light clash is an interzone of oscillating sincerity, and its fragility

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<sup>4</sup> Sweetman, Eloise. "Roll On, Roll On, Phenomena (Until You Are No More)." *School of Missing Studies*. Sternberg Press, 2017.

5 Berardi, Franco 'Bifo'. *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London: Verso, 2019.

from waxing and waning means it's mutable for anyone whether they have expertise with the subject or are naively interested in participating.

So how can individuals find their way into such interzones? Like the sensory deprivation sensations caused by extreme aesthetics in music, darkness evokes disorientation and puts one at risk of stumbling. When one stumbles, either physically or metaphorically, it is, in the simplest of terms, a form of grotesqueness but also vulnerability. This also means it is a moment of recognition or correction for one's behavior. In the same way that we would stumble and land somewhere we normally wouldn't have, the border of graphics and interfaces need to ooze, rather than frame, their content. When grotesque interests and the vulnerability in crafting and sharing those interests oozes, an imaginary mesh or constellation of esoteric spaces begins to germinate and self-preservationist trends erode. This constellation isn't to make everything neat and orderly, for those are not the conditions our society has ever been in nor should they be. The purity of light-driven design has built a staid environment that evokes a "paranoid obsession with order [that] tries to reduce the horizon to repetition, belonging and identity."<sup>5</sup> Quoting theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, "in this condition of panic, reason becomes unable to master the flow of events or to process... A schizophrenic mode spreads across the social mind ... as an over-inclusive mode of interpretation." In other words, this panic can be understood as the reason many people act, argue, or vote against the betterment of their own lives and the lives of those in similar situations: it's stirring confusion around class consciousness. The proposed oozing constellation is a means to encourage the acceptance of disorientation as a form of navigation through the panic of the information age. As we curiously stumble as a form of action from one node (i.e., one person or group's esotericism) of the constellation to another, we can begin to dismantle anxiety and promote listening in intimate public spaces.

This oozing is also something more than just a means to seep into works or structures that surround it. An image in flux is a fragile image, not built upon the ironclad gridded structures of modernism and therefore always at risk of decaying or shattering. And it's important to understand this ephemerality as something more than a disappearance or removal of something. Newer generations will no longer navigate or see the world as we do now, which is already prevalent in how present day youth navigate and repurpose social media platforms. Timelessness does not exist, and notions of permanence only cause us to compete against one another in superficial and binary ways. In terms of design, light-motivated work

has distorted authenticity's definition to be about individualism which tragically results in isolationism, convincing us that it is more important to be seen than to exist. Designers that strive to make "timeless" and "invisible" work, or are afraid to show their hand in their work, advocate for oppression upon their audiences and themselves. How are designers supposed to present our identities as not explicitly fixed by capital if the work they contribute punctuates and blends in with austere environments? What does it say of the profession that enables the elitist binary qualifications of likability and scalability that dismiss so many voices? Timeless measures only create a more brilliant light that burns away the shadows that reveal the cracks in the foundation of our physical, digital, and government infrastructure.

Consider artist Rammellzee's "gothic futurist" work. Made mostly from the trash of New York City, the eccentric, eclectic, and esoteric sensibilities of Rammellzee's work—from graffiti, to music, to costumes, to performance art—stem from his parasitic attempt to burrow into the decay that capitalism has caused and reassess how we can use it or build within it for civic means. In regard to this idea of "abandonment and reclamation" in Rammellzee's work, illustrator Zhu Bajiee inspiringly writes:

**To walk through the urban environment with the eye and mind of a graffiti writer is [to] dismantle the intended organisation of space, the town planners drawings are sliced up and reconfigured into an entirely new landscape. The ignored undersides of bridges become focal points, boundaries become access points, the landscape becomes a map of vantage-points where graffiti may be seen and concealments where a writer may be undisturbed. Opportunities for expression open up within ignored, abandoned and liminal spaces. The tags, throwups and pieces left behind by other writers become markers, not only a patina that indicates safe-spaces for illicit writing, but a dynamic system of rivalry and community that weaves its way through the otherwise static canyons of urban space that in the dominant culture exist only as dead-space between land-banks, glass and concrete investment portfolios, the wreckage of broken machines for living in and zones of social control. ... The substrate—the surface ... be it the A-train or a tenement block is an alien artefact, designed and created entirely outside the social sphere of those who inherit and occupy the space. Graffiti, and weaponised intergalactic graffiti at that, reclaims the impersonal, tyrannical object—the building—**

6 Bajiee, Zhu. "Gothic Futurism." *The Realm of Zhu*, November 6, 2017. <https://realmofzhu.blogspot.com/2017/11/gothic-futurism.html>.

7 Weinmayr, Eva. "One Publishes to Find Comrades." In *The Visual Event: An Education in Appearances*, by Oliver Klimpel and Britt Helbig. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2014.

**destroys its authoritarian purpose and transforms it into an entirely new narrative.<sup>6</sup>**

Or take the See Red Women's Workshop posters that some would consider low-vernacular and ephemeral. Yet these facets established their publishing practice as a co-operative designer/audience model, rather than an austere designer/client model. Publisher and educator Eva Weinmayr defines such a model as not "the end of a process during which consolidated thoughts and enquiries are put into a final brochure, book or leaflet." Instead, she proposes that we should

**look at publishing more as a way to initiate a social process, a social space, where meaning is collectively established in the collaborative creation of a publication. From this perspective, all of a sudden publishing is not a document of pre-defined cognitions. Publishing becomes a tool to make discoveries. ... I'd like to think of printed publications, posters or zines as not necessarily the end product trying to convince anyone of anything, but rather as "working towards establishing conditions for the co-production of meaning." ... where skills are exchanged and knowledge co-produced—in public.<sup>7</sup>**

In many ways the slight hint of naivety—and therefore sincerity—in the work of the See Red Women's Workshop was an invitation to "non-designers" to participate in the collective's poster making process but also in the more important women's rights discourse the collective was trying to influence. They presented woman's rights as a malleable opportunity for *anyone* to activate and transform.

But it should be noted that fragility and the flattening of hierarchies should not be confused with minimalism. Successful minimalism is the *result* of a design process, not something you aim to do from the outset. Furthermore, the default conditions that are usually prevalent within minimalist design are not low forms—they stem from luxury design's obsession with sleekness and that it is next to cleanliness and cleanliness is next to godliness. Not all instances of sleekness or minimalism are unethical, but when they manifest as luxury—lacking a need for cognition—they become inhuman and inhumane. Default sleekness makes both designers and their audience feel flawed for expressing or sharing their esoteric interests, and diminishes the motivating forces of craftsmanship. It is an austere attempt at homogenization, as musician Ian Svenonius argues:

**The hit A&E TV show *Hoarders* identifies people with things as socially malignant, grotesque, primitive, dirty, bizarre. In a word: poor. Apple has turned the world upside down in making possessions a symbol of poverty and having**

**nothing a signifier of wealth and power. ... The shaming of targeted “hoarders” is intended specifically to cajole, bully, and embarrass the population into giving up everything they have; not just possessions but ideas, ethics, rights to ownership (both intellectual and otherwise), privacy, decency, justice, fair treatment, and human rights. In the Apple-internet age we are expected to surrender absolutely everything; anything less is filthy and deranged “hoarding.”**<sup>8</sup>

As we dig the abyss deeper, we need to keep our imaginations and urgency to inquire alive and well, and a hoarder mentality would do just that. From the trivial to the monumental and the bizarre to the chic, we need *things* to create entanglements and noise and potential and authenticity and consciousness. Our connections to these myriad of things means we always have a source that can begin a conversation or a creation of some kind. And there is always the route of appropriation. Avoiding unethical cultural appropriation, the reworking/remixing definition of appropriation is about picking up the loose threads and cold trails of other artists’ and designers’ interests, research, and investigations and continuing that work in your own voice with your own intentions and opinions.<sup>9</sup> If one were to replace traditional hierarchical systems with hoarded graphic representations of personal memories and affections, then our habit to automatically accept the application of systematic typicality upon ourselves could be mutated into desires to uniquely affect and be affected.

As theorist Mark Fisher asserts, “innovation in popular culture has overwhelmingly come from the working class.”<sup>10</sup> When the sterile sensibilities of light-driven design lock “popular culture into repetition,” it can be understood as a “systematic and sustained attack on working class life.”<sup>11</sup> The endeavor of remixing memories and affections—whether that be cartoons from your childhood, trips to the mall, being locked in your room listening to records, hiking in a forest, eating at a restaurant, running errands, or noticing cracks in the sidewalk—is an exercise in being mindful of the aesthetic and esoteric devices we are constantly ingesting and digesting. Integrating such devices in hegemonic works opens up the potential for audiences to discover portals to designers’ “digestive tracts” and establish personal and egalitarian connections through the acknowledgment of similar experiences or interests. This moment of connection is an interzone: our memories and affections the darkness that encircles the light-driven dogma that proclaims these things as worthless and unappealing. It’s a moment to decelerate one’s behavior to notice and consider the many routes that can be taken towards human connection

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8 Svenonius, Ian. “All Power to the Pack Rats.” *Jacobin*. July 25, 2014. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/07/all-power-to-the-pack-rats/>.

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9 I had this description of appropriation written down but lost the source. I think it was on Twitter? Would love to give credit where credit is due.

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10 Fisher, Mark. “Abandon Hope (Summer Is Coming).” *k-punk*, May 11, 2015. <http://k-punk.org/abandon-hope-summer-is-coming/>.

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11 Ibid.

12 As designer Ruben Pater stated on Twitter: "Putting words like 'feminism', 'labour', or 'decolonizing' on a design does not make it politically engaging. If we treat progressive politics as ornaments and forget to practice it, we defeat its potential." [https://twitter.com/unlisted\\_roots/status/1188030145774395392](https://twitter.com/unlisted_roots/status/1188030145774395392)

(the aforementioned “mesh”) rather than being pressured into hastily consuming “solutions” that perpetuate our systematically defined generality. It’s an attempt at including, rather than suppressing, a myriad of voices other than just those of designers—a reminder that society exists, and things that are considered alien, weird, or even banal can be foundational for engendering political and sociological discourse with people that need to be a part of such conversations. By entangling those visual remixes with the chaos that stems from politics, architecture, technology, and other constructs within our daily lives, designers and their invigorated audience can address these indisputable chaotic and negative facts and clumsily contort these truths not into hyperboles but into desires for the future, fighting for each other and against the systems that oppress us.

## *The Future of What*

It is vital to arouse consciousness around light-producing and capitalist constructs, and action through and within darkness engenders such possibilities. But the aforementioned dark traits and approaches must not be considered exclusively as an outsider endeavor. Being an outsider is passé because light-producing constructs can easily whitewash and isolate the message or entity of the outsider. We are stuck under capitalism, and designers are more often than not forced to work under problematic corporations for financial needs. Therefore, as capitalism forces designers to be insiders, such roles need to be embraced for their ability to confront hierarchy and power and destroy plans for marginalization. Embrace the fact that such roles, especially as a collective, are unavoidable to the end goals of capitalism. When it comes to molding the future, the question of “what if” is less powerful than the question of “what now.” We must not mistake our talk of alternative art spaces and thinking as our only means of political action. Such marginal spaces are safe harbors for us to collect ourselves in, but the cracks within capitalist decay are the autonomous zones for us to irrupt our oozing initiatives.

The work of designers should be a space that allows us to lose ourselves in each other, drifting from one convergence to another. And in the simplest of terms, esotericism is the driving force that leads us to those connections. Generality does not. I’m not proposing to use specific imagery or language, political or otherwise, to coalesce masses since actions will always speak louder than words.<sup>12</sup> We as people, as a society, are culture makers, and designers are simply people with the awareness to formulate that culture into something visually coherent. The design mentality of designing *for* someone

or something more often than not creates elitist, exclusive, and homogenized “solutions.” Only when we consider design as an “expression of ideas and as language”—capturing feelings of “pleasure, desire, [and] uselessness” as the encouragement to walk “through the world with your eyes open”—can we begin to engender possibilities of designing *with* others.<sup>13</sup> Rather than relying on light-producing empathy—whose passivity to simply recognize a situation or feeling may subconsciously absolve us of responsibility or urgency to take action—designing with others is how we access dark-centric *compassion* to give weight and value to personal or societal concerns. Combined with the pulsing interzones of various subcultures, our senses swell and lead us to ask questions, particularly about the present, in order to better address the future of spaces, objects, identities, semiotics, and semantics. With our everyday occurrences, activities, and affections configured as vulnerable graphic entanglements, solidarity will no longer equal conformity.

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13 Thomson, Mark. “Design Is Not a Solution.” *Eye Magazine*, 2006. <http://www.eyemagazine.com/opinion/article/design-is-not-a-solution>.