



On Fluid Grounds: Monica Ursina Jaeger's "Liquid Time - An Earthly Archive of Weathering Thoughts"

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!
O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is *all* that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

Edgar Allan Poe «A Dream Within a Dream», 1849

Voshchev, the dreamer, asks: "Don't people decrease in their sense of life when buildings increase? Man will make a building and unmake himself. Who will live in it then?"

The Foundation Pit from which Voshchev speaks is a cautionary tale and a philosophic inquiry by Andrey Platonov. He, like the other personnel in the posthumously published novel, are waifs, lost, lonely, displaced in geography and society and time.

The Foundation Pit is beyond irony, beyond satire, a tragic epos of hubris, the toils of humans and the passing of Chronos. In it we encounter Voshchev, who cannot rest until he finds the "truth of life"; the engineer Prushevsky, a man who knows only "parts of dead things," who feels lost and, like Voshchev, suffers from the need to understand "meaning" in the midst of chaos;

we meet Chiklin, whose body needs to work, who breaks the ground “abolishing the ancient natural order without ability to understand it,” a cypher for humanity itself.

In Monica Ursina Jaeger’s *Liquid Time: An Earthly Archive of Weathering Thoughts*, the humans are absent, monuments and cities are speaking instead, we see construction machinery but no trace of Chiklin, Voshchev and Prushevsky. Where Platanov zeroed in, Jaeger zooms out, the personnel of her narrative are the grains of sand, constituting our inhabited and built world. The hubris facing the shifting tectonics of time stays the same.

From snow-capped mountain tops the viewer descends like Virgil in Dante’s *Inferno* along falling water and pebbles and sand into a beautiful abyss. The underworld in Jaeger’s epos is not populated by human paragons but animated by layers upon layers of geological movement, time here is not historic but deep, different, out-of-scale. The artist deliberately and exquisitely remixed the archaic codes of lyricism and verse like Platanov into a visual idiom that works like its topic in strata and shifts. Everything around us erodes, tumbles, urges downwards. The descending rivers acting like arteries of giant bodies, its fine lines following the voice of the narrator, raying out in different directions, infinite subdivisions, and innumerable potentialities.

The work juxtaposes cultural monuments like cities with mountains and stones, traces sand as the grain that built it all and examines erosion from different perspectives. Natural phenomena as well as industrial processes, old and new, construction sites and transport routes, river beds and body scans intertwine in a poetological meditation on the nature of time itself. The immersive 5-channel video installation leads deep into the Earth’s interior, through cave systems and underwater worlds to the human innermost landscape. Overlaying documentary and fictional spaces, flowing natural materials and human-made transformations form a transtemporal and multi-layered narrative. Does time expand in geological depths? How does it differ from the one we humans experience?

In *The Order of Time* Carlo Rovelli argues as theoretical physicist: “Let’s begin with a simple fact: time passes faster in the mountains than it does at sea level.” To put in another way: time is – of course – relative. But relative to what? Rovelli then quotes Anaximander, who lived twenty-six centuries ago: “Things are transformed one into another according to necessity and render justice to one another according to the order of time”. This could also be taken as the starting point for Jaeger’s poetic approach towards geological thinking in the Anthropocene. Virginia Woolf observes in *Orlando*: ““But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second.”

Are we aware of the order of time confronted with the magnitude of manmade geological changes to the fabric of the planet? In the flows of material on five screens, we find acceleration and slow-motion, pre- and post- natural states of matter and mind. Conceived as a multimedia collage *Liquid Time* is an exploration of the worlds we inhabit and invent, strange in the magnitudes we encounter. We might have built empires and cities, flown to the moon and move about in cars and planes, but the shifting tectonics of time, the fluidity of the grounds we build our societies upon should remind us of a poetic truth encapsulated in the poem by Poe, the hubris in Platanov’s work, and the beauty amid weathering thoughts.

Damian Christinger, 2022