

# Combined and Uneven Apocalypse

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## Salvagepunk

*SHADES: No one's gonna repopulate the Big Apple now, not with the rat population what it is. Ya know, stuff's just going begging! It's salvage city, Max. You'd love it ...*

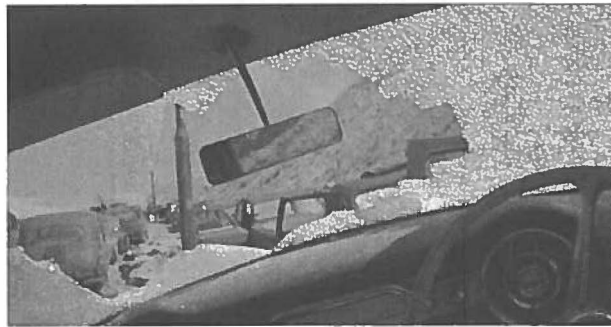
*MOSES: Don't call me Max.*

*– from Richard Stanley's Hardware*

*They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it - as Hegel noticed - by cunning.*

*– Walter Benjamin, "Exposé of 1935," Das Passagen-Werk*

### THREE MOMENTS



#### One

World War I lays out a scattered corpse-scape, a shattered night of the world and its waste. Europe freezes, looking at its own death mask, cast from scrap wool and oil, black mud and dropped casings, all beneath the weight of a rotting international

order and surging industry. Further east, the Bolsheviks say *No* and carve a trench into the plane of history. And in Berlin, Kurt Schwitters draws forth *Merz* from *Commerz*, pulling the innate venom of fragmented things from the bad sheen of commercial life.

#### Two

The '60s go *kaputt*. Then the long '70s roar into view, in all their gritty urgency and Satanic deformations of hippie non-thought, with real militancy losing a pitched battle to the triumphs of counter-revolution. In Italy, the Red Brigades shoot Moro and leave him in the trunk of a Renault. In New Hampshire, the end of the Bretton Woods system undoes the filaments of currency as certainty and shape. In England, 1969, *The Bed Sitting Room* and Monty Python think the end of it all as little more than the relentless repurposing of the same old shit. Ten years later, Mad Max heads toward the Outback.

#### Three

Neoliberalism's febrile tremors, and finance overcompensates, hysterically. There are small cracks and shimmers in this surface, like an old reptilian brain catching the whiff of older possibilities, false starts never quite taken. Cyberpunk already came and went: how could it not, given that it coldly sang along with what it felt like on the ground? Steampunk, the wet dream of Obama-time, acts twee and old fashioned while it sails smugly over the oceans of dead labor that got us here and sweeps the messy reality of progress out of sight. Salvagepunk isn't here yet, except as the unsteady movement of hands and brains trying to learn new tricks that have been there all along. Of the trash heap, only its romance of frozen decay should be discarded. There is no new construction, just the occupation of other architectures.

## DREAM IMAGES

To return to and clarify the epigraph from Walter Benjamin: we are not talking about dream residues of a world, the nostalgic fantasies and fashionings of what once was. Rather, these are residues of a *dream world* that form a historical border to the next era, not as blueprints or utopian plans, but as leftovers. Rather, they are the unwelcome remainder of what won't go away. For what matters is neither manifest nor latent dream content. It's always the *dream work*, the underground currents that actually expose the loops of repression and the labor of making something out of these remnants.

The cunning of an era – the way it works against itself towards its own demise – is the dreaming of its grave. Not of its murderers or gravediggers, of who's to blame or who tried to put it to rest, but of the after-effect. The dream image, then, is the quiet cemetery.<sup>3</sup> For in rejecting the immediate past and the hard work of the living to bring around a new world order, one is left instead with the long dead and a pale writing of the *now* in their language. The ambiguous image, in contrast, (the un-worked-through dream image, not settled or stuck) is the rustling skeletons. It's the vision of a necromancer's toolbox, with which we can refashion the dead into what we insist they could have been, and in doing so, clear a place for ourselves amongst the salvageable dead and the never quite gone.



In short ...

Steampunk. Well, something kind of like that, indeed, but ultimately not at all. Steampunk – an aesthetic that rewrites the outcome of late capitalism according to a different, kinder industrial trajectory – is the false dream image of these years. That falseness, however, doesn't lie in its being anterior (as the

vision of a resolutely past era) or too dreamy, too fantastic. Its falseness lies in it being the wrong dream image, even while it's the proper dream image of the liberal escape plan for the global crisis and its envisioned fall-out.

To track out this lineage of the present, we need to start with cyberpunk. If we are witnessing the slow self-dismantling of what can broadly be called a neoliberal order (the twin forces of financial deregulation and imperialism under the guise of "globalization"), we are also witnessing the eclipse of cyberpunk, at least as we've recognized it so far. Cyberpunk, that self-declared bastard child of science fiction, swapped out the cosmos and alternate worlds for a cooler, nastier version of this one: famous examples range from Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) to the total massification of cyberpunkish appearance in *The Matrix* trilogy. (Not to mention *Cyberpunk*, the 1993 Billy Idol album that nearly destroyed whatever remained of his career.) As a whole, it was a supposed "non-movement," imitated all the same, full of artificial intelligence and information technologies run amok, neo-mercenaries and the revenge of the nerds (getting to wear virtual reality goggles and tight-fitting body suits, hackers playing postmodern day samurai), and glimpses of instantaneous data transmission stitched through the run-down corridors of the material city. Cyberpunk was the dream image of the neoliberal world par excellence, albeit one that encoded within it enough short-circuits to wake itself again and again. In particular, it wrote the fantasies of a post-state corporate global order. However, it did so with a canny awareness of the gap between the illusions of free-market ideology and the real need for states to act as support systems for corporate extension into recolonized spaces, material or virtual. Hovering over all this, in a froth alternately gray or giddy, were the visions of deindustrialization, of immaterial labor, of new hybrid multitudes, of nomadic subjects. And above all, of deregulation: credit, unchained and without

master, races faster toward its own bartered-away abyss.

Cyberpunk was both creation and consequence of a gap between the paranoia of the technological sublime and a creeping realization that perhaps this is no brave new world. Just a nanotechnology dressing up of the way things already were going, and for that reason, it stands among the sharpest of critical realisms.

And then the fall ... In cyberpunk, neoliberalism did not see its inheritor, the dream of another world to come. It saw a distorted mirror image of itself and what the "neoliberal" was supposed to mean, a super-ego in all its taunting, sadistic glory. In hastening to meet that image, it forgot the cunning of its unfolding and collapse. (For at the "end of history" in which we supposedly live, the old tricks of history are dead and gone, right?) The deepening signs of the drawn-out end of neoliberalism happening as I write are properly cyberpunk: not brought about by anyone in particular, there are no heroes or victors, no actors with discernible will or capacity for willful action. Just the system let loose upon itself, speculative bubbles hiding all those toiling bodies and unused factories. An endless set of rational actors making rational profit decisions irrationally hollow out the core of profit itself.

Now, the reigning and scrambling order promises new direction, though a direction which digs into its bag of scraps to join together, in one touted version, new green Keynesianism with a "weaning off" foreign oil. Throwback economics, getting back to basics, investing in material things but in a way that reverses the trajectory toward the gasoline-soaked Armageddon.

Hence steampunk, the non-dystopian dressing-up of cyberpunk concerns with the trappings of steam power. In the novels, films, and comics that give shape to this tendency/genre, a world is envisioned in which the affective and social structures of the cyberpunk world – albeit largely stripped of their dystopian coldness – are preserved, cast back into an alternate

history, without the material configurations of economic/technological development that produced those structures. As such, steampunk is a romanticized do-over, a setting of the clock back to a time of craftsmanship and real (fetishized) objects, remaking the world, not in the mode of the ceaseless slow sprawl of cheap oil but in the Victorian self-aware world-making spirit. And this is what underlies the fantasy of overcoming our moment, seeing a crisis to be managed instead of a catastrophe already present.

The promise beneath this? Keep the technology, keep consumption, but make it "thoughtful," make it responsible, make it "sustainable."<sup>4</sup> Gild your laptop, hammer some bronze, and muse over the slow dance of the new wind-turbines on the horizon. All in all, a participation in that great pastime of the pseudo-Left, remembering the era that never was, back when life was simpler and labor was meaningful. Steampunk has this cake and eats it, too: the difference engine clacks and hammers out a dirigible and gear vision of intricacy without ease, of lightly soot-stained sky never truly polluted, of machines that never get out of hand, of taking the auto-pilot back into our own hands.



This is not the dream image of our times. Why not? Quite simply, because it is just the *manifest* content of our dreams. It lacks the ambiguity that really halts and concretizes history, freezing to show the impossible past and the non-future locked together. It just shows the present's wishes bared. It has all the dialectical ambiguity of a Hummel figurine in a Robby the Robot outfit.

In the place of steampunk, that weak handmaiden of Obama-era capitalism, is what will be called *salvagepunk*: the post-apocalyptic vision of a broken and dead world, strewn with both the dream residues and real junk of the world that was, and shot

through with the hard work of salvaging, repurposing, détourning, and scrapping. Acts of salvagepunk strive against and away from the ruins on which they cannot help but be built and through which they rummage.<sup>5</sup> The definitive examples I have here, if not necessarily the critical thought of it than at least the nascent "look": the *Mad Max* trilogy, Marker's *La Jetée* (and Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* as well), the New Crobuzon novels of China Miéville, Richard Lester's *The Bed Sitting Room*, the Strugatskij's *Roadside Picnic*, Dada and Surrealist collage and photomontage, Neil Marshall's *Doomsday*, *Waterworld* (as utterly terrible as it is), *Godspeed You Black Emperor!* and other derivations of anarcho-punk music, Richard Stanley's *Hardware*, barricades constructed in the service of insurrection and the accounts written of them, Yamaguchi Hiroki's *Hellvator: The Bottled Fools (Gusher No Binds Me)*, hip-hop sampling and early DJ culture, Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*, *Steptoe and Son Ride Again*, much of Monty Python, Jeunet's *City of Lost Children* and *Delicatessen*, certain portions of *Wall-E*. An incomplete and scattered history of cultural visions of a scattered world after the fact. These are all antecedent versions of this, for salvagepunk is a tendency still in the making. It is particular to this historical moment, and our work, in this chapter and beyond, is to elaborate something that has yet to fully exist. Our point is that shifts in the political, economic, and cultural landscape have resulted in a situation to which salvagepunk is a necessary response, both as a cultural form and a material practice. Most importantly, it is a certain turn of thought to cut against current trendlines of nostalgia, the melancholia of buried history, and static mourning for radical antagonistic pasts seemingly absent from contemporary resistance to capitalism.

To speak of salvagepunk is necessarily to deal with the *Mad Max* trilogy. I prefer to think of these films as a subgenre, perhaps "gasolinepunk" (or the post-apocalyptic strain of dieselpunk, but I prefer "gasolinepunk" as way of differentiating it from the *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* sort of dieselpunk, with its

WWI aesthetic). More broadly, it is the reactionary wing of salvagepunk. However, the *Mad Max* films are also the most recognizable example of the "look" of a mass cultural approximation of salvagepunk.

What is this look that, for better or often worse, has been picked up and replicated, parodied and unintentionally adopted far and wide? Things are very grubby. (And probably smell awful, albeit rather rugged and masculine, or so goes the fantasy structure of Max's cut-rate outback version of the Man With No Name.) If one is in a city/encampment/settlement, that grubbiness involves wetness: mud, dirty water, siphoned gas, pig shit, or, as a signal of supposed hope, clear splashing streams. Everywhere else? Blowing sand and empty highways, harsh sun, and fine coating of dust that settles on everyone and everything.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, the main type of clothing capable of surviving the collapse of civilization is leather bondage wear, followed in a close second by breezy linen, animal pelts, and awkward configurations of armor and long underwear.<sup>7</sup> The various combination of these and your commitment to dressing properly like a fetishist allow you to be mapped on a moral scale. White linen and headband, innocent if ineffectual; dyed hair and leather pants, perverted scourge of the desert; metal-spiked studded codpiece, completely evil. There are plenty of dreadlocks and Mohawks, along with flawlessly desert wind-swept and feathered hair. In general, there is a broad punkness to dressing and appearance, something that will wind through not just the salvagepunk apocalyptic impulse but other apocalyptic figures considered later, such as the zombie horde and the lumpen street gang. Yet as with those cases, the question remains: to what extent does that superficial codification of a recognizably punk aesthetic merely act as a buffer for the broader conservative condemnation of what the films convincingly show to be a lot of posturing and petty nihilism?

The crux of the *Mad Max* appearance and trope is the

landscape itself, littered with debris, gutted cars, abandoned cities, pavement marked with burnt rubber and blood, of shantytowns cobbled together from scrapped materials, the whole thing marked with smoke, grease, and fire. For all the deep goofiness of the films, their world remains one of the striking configurations of our time: detached from its politics, it is the look of an era on the literal skids, with all the attendant savagery, hustling, backstabbing, and implausible moments of shared hope. Forget the liberal cry of “NO BLOOD FOR OIL.” The *Mad Max* world posits a starker, meaner, truly realist inversion of this, written into its sun-baked – and often half-baked – vision: “NO OIL WITHOUT A WHOLE LOT OF BLOOD SPILLED.”

Beyond the genre-shaping landscape and populace, the films, as the most widely disseminated example of this genre, also give shape to its dominant political tendency. That tendency begins in the sense of what went wrong, a rather amorphous tale of peak oil and scrambling misrule. The narrator’s opening-voice over in *Mad Max 2/The Road Warrior* (1981) should be included at length:

To understand who he was, you have to go back to another time. When the world was powered by the black fuel. And the desert sprouted great cities of pipe and steel. Gone now, swept away. For reasons long forgotten, two mighty warrior tribes went to war and touched off a blaze which engulfed them all. Without fuel, they were nothing. They built a house of straw. The thundering machines sputtered and stopped. Their leaders talked and talked and talked. But nothing could stem the avalanche. Their world crumbled. The cities exploded. A whirlwind of looting, a firestorm of fear. Men began to feed on men. On the roads it was a white line nightmare. Only those mobile enough to scavenge, brutal enough to pillage would survive. The gangs took over the highways, ready to wage war for a tank of juice. And in this maelstrom of decay, ordinary men were battered and smashed.

The narrator goes on, in the tradition of so many post-apocalyptic narratives, to focus back on the personal and singular: the evolution of Max from ordinary man to Road Warrior, forged in this maelstrom. But beyond this fable, beyond its doom-and-gloom lyricism and persistent assumption that it takes only 20 years or so to abandon geopolitical analysis in favor of tribal fetishization, what of the images that accompany it? We begin in a swirling “fog of memory,” a pastel-hued zoom in on relatively fresh faced Max at the conclusion of the first film. Yet from there on, we revert to black and white stock footage: a montage of pumping oil derricks, refineries in the desert, and, as things get worse, WWII soldiers storming the beach, UN assemblies, politicians pushing and shoving, and late ‘60s riots and student protest (at the moment of “men began to feed on men”).

What’s striking here neither the severity of the envisioned apocalypse nor its ideological inconsistencies, but the way that it *salvages* established narratives of the war against fascism and social progress and uses them otherwise. In this case, to inscribe an anti-modernization polemic in which all roads end in gasoline-obsessed hoodlums prowling the post-oil desert. So, in turns out, the slaughter on the Normandy beaches and the Maginot Line were about the panic of disappearing “black fuel.” The barricades of May 68: what are they if not a “firestorm of fear,” the frantic clawing of the masses in the “nothing” that follows the end of affordable oil? Furthermore, the films are not set in the future: the historical images are drawn from and lead up to the time in which the film was made. As such, they aren’t a projection of the far future, but a reinscription of previous events so as to make the “real world” present genuinely apocalyptic and to enable a flight into another type of fantasy. For the montage approaches the moment of the film’s coming-to-be, the end of the 70s, and indeed switches “back” to color, but it does so by tying off this narrative in the roar of the “white line nightmare.” Thus, the decline of the West becomes the occasion

for sanctioned adrenaline and the closure of thinking otherwise. Creatures of habit become creatures of salvage, but only insofar as that preserves a distorted parody of the status quo. And more than this, not just the obscene shell of a past normalcy but, across the arc of the films, a "rebuilding" that is nothing but the slow and inevitable march toward a recreation of contemporary capitalism.

In *Mad Max* (1979), we see, on the outskirts of the collapsing cities, anarchic dissolution into the Hobbesian state of nature. It's *homo homini lupus* – man is a wolf to man – if wolves were interested in revenge plots and supercharged cars. But in the wreckage of the city, life still continues somewhat normally, centered around Max's nuclear family. Police and legal systems exist. The collapse is not immediate, but rather feels of attrition, the slow grinding down of resources coupled with the sudden emergence of men who are good at violence finally getting to show just how good. If there is an "eventual rupture," it is not on a mass scale, or at least not visible in the film. The localizable point of no return is the murder of Max's wife and son, a metonymic stand-in for, and conceivable trauma of, the "unthinkable," for what remains genuinely beyond the reach of our intellect. Namely, apocalypse that has not *happened* but has been *happening*.

A train wreck in slow motion, a secret narrative: it has been about oil from the start. That uncomfortable intersection of montage and narration which begins *Mad Max 2* is one of the great truly apocalyptic instances of late capitalist cinema. It is a revelation not of hidden events (a prophecy of foreseen actions coming to be) but of hidden sense (a retroactive prophecy stitching together the scattered remains into a trendline). A mode of analysis that has eluded us becomes uncannily clear. And unpleasantly so, in that the moment of revelation is a revelation of complicity, in "not knowing" what had been known all along.

*Mad Max 2* nails this issue of the choice that underpins the

illusion of necessity. It is patently false that only "those mobile enough to scavenge, brutal enough to pillage would survive." Out there on the road, racing around, perhaps. But a possibility remains which is only approached at the very end of the third film: if they weren't so busy searching for, hoarding, or defending gasoline, one could easily "start anew," particularly in the ghost town ruins of the city. It isn't that they "have" to live this way, but rather that they quite enjoy it, the same over-the-top joy we approximate when watching a film about the end of the world devote the majority of its energy to large explosions and well-choreographed chase scenes.

Of course, we do get initial attempts to "start anew," and the second film is primarily structured around this collision between two orders: the "settlers" who attempt to form permanent communities versus the nomadic hordes who stick to the previous mode. (A previous mode that *did not exist previously*: what is the historical memory of the gas-scavenging swarms other than a misconstrued memory of the far past, here not mobilized to imagine a utopian way of being but as part of an attempt to be properly barbarian . . . To be the baddest of the bad, it becomes necessary to don the mantle of savagery from long ago and far away.)



*Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) continues this trajectory of retracing the steps toward emergent capitalism. We move from the battle between nomad and settler to the creation of a market, new "city" formation, non-warlord legal code managed life



(bolstered by the autocratic force of Tina Turner). All this still stands as an outpost amongst the "wild," in which the willfully primitive tribes are those who remain committed to the visions of the past: that is, to the advanced state of late capitalism. The standstill of post-history crudely draws on cave walls the prehistoric vision of the glories of the global economy.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the film and the end of the cycle as a whole, Max and his band of primitivist Lost Boys and Girls go back to Sydney, the "Tomorrow-Morrow Land" of legend, its empty skyscrapers now lit by scattered fires and inane storytelling that folds Max and the reverse exodus into the tribalist narrative of starting over. And while the reclamation of dead spaces for other uses is a genuine articulation of what salvagepunk can be, we can't help but feel that something misfires here. As if going *beyond* is just going *back*: the new settlement that sees itself as a restoration. What we end with is just a grimier, leather-and-feathers, post-history equivalent of steampunk's anti-materialism. Here, the "fundamentals" may be different, but the illusion is still one of getting back to basics, basics that were never possible in the first place.



And all this bound to the absurd self-consumptive core: one needs gasoline in order to drive around and kill others to steal their gasoline, but in doing so, one consumes the gasoline that one had, and so one needs gasoline in order to ...

## CONSTRUCTION IN THE AGE OF WRECKAGE

Whatever calls itself a break in the trendline necessarily calls out for a ground clearing. It demands that the piles of accreted junk be shoved into the gutter so as to gain visibility out of the clutter and to clear a space from which to move otherwise.

Or this is how it supposedly goes. And this has been the rallying and outpacing cry of prescriptive communist and radical cultural movements, from the manifestos of Dada and the Situationist International, Constructivist design and Brutalist slabs, dialectical film and anarcho-punk.

This mode of emptying the graveyard to make room for new dead is nothing new. It is the dominant minor logic of the 20th century, a blood-and-noise conviction running alongside its modern twin and enemy: the promise of global liberal democracy making capitalism itself a "basic human right." And there is little worth in our mourning and periodizing as lost: we just end up dwelling in the basement of the museum of avant-gardes, canonizing those things aimed to destroy all canons, fingering our collectible remnants of when times were different and when people believed in farther horizons.

So, like the very movements in question, we wind up backs to the wall of that non-choice: either we mark and mock, tell ourselves that it was always just aesthetic play from the start, postmodern equivalences from the get-go, and that real politics always lay elsewhere; or else we maintain a conviction in the thought of the avant-garde and unmoor even from our radical past in order to break the baleful spell of melancholic inaction, thereby discounting both the struggle that is our very history and the historical forces at work.

There are distinct corollaries here with the kind of schematic Alain Badiou (and others, albeit with different terminologies) have been proposing in recent years, that of the different inflections of a "passion for the Real." ("Real" here doesn't carry a

strictly Lacanian meaning, as that which exceeds/escapes the symbolic. Rather, it is an insistence on a practice formed on the ground of what the world could be. This is neither utopian nor hemmed in by the reigning symbolic order. It is based on a sense of what lies below, of the bedrock of potential social relations and thought-forms to be rediscovered by revolutionary theory and action.) Without delving into the specificity of that project, we can still draw out two things: 1) its direct relation to political-aesthetic projects and 2) the symptomatic blindspot of the model, what it remains structurally incapable of perceiving.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it tracks the supposed heroic arc of avant-garde art and vanguard political thought, is indeed marked by the relation between the ghosts and goals of unity and division, synthesis and contradiction, coalition and antagonism. And as such, the basic question is needed: are we to locate our way out of this mess via the unification of the opposed Two – bourgeois vs. proletariat, capitalism vs. communism, democracy vs. “totalitarianism,” religion vs. secular thought – into a new One, or do we need to keep ceaselessly negating, dividing, resplitting, to shove a wedge into the false unity of the globe and show who’s on what side, plainly, harshly? The reformist and/or apologist overtones of the “unifier” position are unmistakable, and I find force and hope, with Badiou, in the latter, in the bringing-to-crisis of the Two. Yet with this position, he recognizes the possibility that was in fact the manifested historical tendency: our well-known annihilative, purgative, and partisan conviction that just might destroy the world – or at least the possibility of having a coherent position in relation to it – in trying to burn it clean. Yet the work of revolutionary consciousness, political or cultural, cannot be the antithesis to the world that annihilative passion poses itself as (the destructive embodiment of the antagonism itself), but something else. It needs to be a horizon toward a third way that escapes either the unary phantasm of the One or the terroristic deadlock of the Two.

Against this, as a third of sorts, Badiou offers

the subtractive path: to exhibit as a real point, not the destruction of reality, but minimal difference. To purify reality, not in order to annihilate it in its surface, but to subtract it from its apparent unity so as to detect within it the minuscule difference, the vanishing term which constitutes it. What barely takes place differs from the place wherein it takes place. It is in the ‘barely’ that all the affect rests, in this immanent exception.<sup>9</sup>

Concretized as cultural strategy, what does this look like?

Essentially, it is minimalism, that particular (historical) form of abstraction drawing forth the most “barely” of minor difference. Robert Ryman, Carl Andre, Agnes Martin. Morton Feldman, Mies, Mondrian, Malevich at his starkest best. Late Beckett, minus the scatological humor. (Which is to say, minus a lot.) Warhol’s films, but not his paintings. Late conceptual names and their antecedents, all.<sup>10</sup>

To return to the schematic Badiou offers, 3 modes:

1. Annihilative passion for the Real: burn it all down, very militant, very destructive.
2. Subtractive passion for the Real: minimal difference revealing the vanishing term around which the order is supports it, very subtle, very formal.
3. Two unite into One: coalition building, synthesis and papering over difference, very liberal.

But there is a blindspot in all this, and not the productive blindspot of anamorphic vision, where you shift position and get what you’ve been missing. This approach to thinking radical

political culture/culturally radical politics is accurate, particularly for a certain predominant moment in capitalist aesthetics. Yet something is left behind, a lack unacceptable for our conjuncture. We know a lingering dissatisfaction that there need be something else, and a sense that these modes – petty nihilism, self-subtracting unwillingness to play the game, and compromised unity – are modes of apologetic participation. More simply, we might say that each of these have historically been more potent than that. But they are no longer.

Here we have to track out the other possibility not elaborated: the passion for the Real should not be allowed to count only when the dialectical model is that of One divides into Two. For simply making as Two is not dialectics, at least not the dialectics of our project, from the rust knowledge of salvagepunk to the uncanny existence of our world with its co-present apocalyptic collapse. Capitalism is the bringing into existence of a world of the non-dialectical Two (there is only that which is capital and that which might become capital, and this itself rests on the irresolvable antagonism of workers and capitalists). All this under the shifting veil that insists that the world is global now, that it's a tremendous heterogeneous One. Our thought must be dialectical exactly because capitalism itself is not.

And as such, we need not just the division that creates the Two. We need also the insistence to not rest in this division, either as annihilation or subtraction. Specifically, we need a model of *construction*, that other possibility anathema to contemporary dialectical thought so resolute in following the vitally important line of “negative dialectics” that it considers anything other than annihilation or subtraction to be the silly promise of unification, compromise, synthesis, and near-magical joining together.

What it can't think is the work of salvage and montage, of the work of construction in the age of wreckage.

In other words, to divide up the One neither for the sake of purgative annihilation nor for the subtractive insertion of a void.

Rather, to see what's worth saving in the One that was never visible. We begin indeed with the ratcheting up and cracking apart of the pseudo-totally of late capitalism. And then starts the harder task of knowing when to call it a wreck and to start to dig through that wreckage.

This is the inheritance of that avant-garde move which we can't afford to leave behind. But here, it is doubled. To clear away the waste - the wreckage at once *material* (the produced crap and scraps of our production processes) and *theoretical* (past gestures, manifesto fragments and strategies for repurposing) - to make a space for what can be made from it. Then the making and the remaking, not the smoothing of compromised synthesis, but welding, stitching, rewiring. All with the chances that were there from the start, too polished to see, too immense to grasp, too broken to have ever been whole.

### PUTTING THE PUNK BACK INTO SALVAGE (WHERE IT WASN'T TO BEGIN WITH)



If salvagepunk is a genre to come, a radical principle of recuperation and construction, a certain relation to how we think those dregs of history we inherit against our will, a return of the repressed idiosyncrasy of outmoded things - if it is all this, it is also, rather obviously, defined against the longer lineage of salvage to which it is bound. Taking the initial linguistic form of *word + punk suffix* (cyberpunk, steampunk, etc) that started this

investigation, salvagepunk is not – or should not be – salvage plus a rakish air, a self-declared *fuck the world* perspective, and a carefully located sexy grease smudge on the cheek. That aesthetic needs no work to be brought forth. It already exists, woven into in the machine-frayed hem of every fake vintage shirt sold at the mall.

Rather, to put the punk into salvage is *to occupy it too well*, not to stand outside the logic of the game, but to track it to its far horizons. There we see the frayed hems of a mode of thought. For example, and to reiterate the central point of our earlier discussion, the *punk* specificity of cyberpunk had nothing to do with noirish spike-haired heroes and digital samurai, not drugs or dub. (Of course, the massification of it, from *Hackers* to *The Matrix*, had very much to do with that.) It had to do with the intersection of a close attachment to its historical present with the fact that it no longer believed in a future – the present is already the hollowed-out promise of that future. In other words, it is not speculative fiction: it is just a dead stare portrait of what the neoliberal order wanted itself to be if it had the total hegemony to do it. Not neoliberals themselves, who always cared too much about shoring up nations and “wars of civilization.” No, it was the asubjective shape of the thought, the toneless growl of capital turning back against on the remaining petrified forms of its makers’ world. The dystopia of cyberpunk was this thought’s acid bath, stripping down to the bones. No fussing around with supposed humanitarian concerns and spreading democracy, just financialization, total penetration of markets, and the frenzy of the invisible, as circulation zipped through shady back alley deals and the high architecture of finance with equal greased ease.

Cyberpunk hence was not the sneer at a barren speculative future. It was the hidden sneer of that present itself.

The end of that present – the end of speculation – is the site on which salvagepunk - not salvage - is emerging. Like all things

apocalyptic, it reveals itself as that which was hidden, in the wrecked afterlife of the world dreamed by cyberpunk and lived, unevenly, by all of us for the last 20 years. It paces in the fallout and debris, the burst bubbles and factories that won't de-rust and start humming again.

And yet, salvage itself is a mechanism, both in practice and in thought, procedure and ideology, deeply ingrained in the circuits of late capitalism. And much further back than that.



From the total inanity of green “upcycled” goods (to borrow the term from the website of one company that makes bags out of truck tires, “i.e. recycled/reclaimed into something special,” because “Ethical is Beautiful” and they insist on “only using laptops”) to the recession horror of wrenching fillings from your teeth to sell to “Cash For Gold U.S.A.” (no oral hoarding in these lean times!). From the total staggering obscenity of price mark-ups at trendy vintage clothing shops to children rummaging through the stinking mountains of trash. These are apocalyptic times generally, but in economic and material terms, the figure and action of salvage looms perhaps largest.

The whole totality is shot through with that scrap and hustle, whittle and swindle instinct. Hip hop’s “made something from nothing” ethos. Pepsi bottles “purified” municipal tap water and labels it *Bottled at the source*. Advertising trawls the shitpool of consumer anxieties and petty fears, hauling up and polishing out new needs and ownership dreams.

More than all this is the fact that capitalism’s great work of salvage is the salvage of *time*: making something out of every last bit. In earlier formations, the worker kept time to inhuman rhythms of the integrated factory, and Fordism streamlined movements to the single repetitive task. On from there: the colonization of our free time, never being able to punch out, free time only a self-subtracting countdown back to the time of value.

"Grayback," was the laconic reply. "I should hate to say anything to spoil your appetite, but if you must know, the flap of that mask you just had on was made from the tail of a Tommy's shirt picked up on the battlefield. Possibly he thought he could chase Boches faster if he threw it away; possibly it was cut off him when a comrade applied first aid; possibly — — —"

"That will do," I cut in, hastily rolling up the mask and returning it to its case. "Here's hoping no asphyxiating shells sail over to-day to force us to the dread alternative!"

It is here, in both the unfathomable brute fact of the slaughter fields of WWI themselves and in the mordant and furious culture that emerged out of it, that our lineage of salvagepunk starts, although just barely. (With the possible earlier antecedent of revolutionary barricades in all their body-stacking, city-remapping montage.) That is to say, where the *punk* in salvagepunk begins. Not accidentally, in a European-wide catastrophic moment, when the savagery directed outwards by the Continent turned back on itself. The World War as the severed inheritance of the previous world.

Salvagepunk is the drawing out of the logic of salvage itself (in its WWI sense), past the point of its own consistency. It takes the basic ground of salvage (there is value here somewhere, if we sift through the ashes, or keep the ship from going under, or strip these bodies) on its own terms, and, in doing so, wrecks it. Salvagepunk wrecks salvage with the simple recognition that the world is now irrevocably structured as apocalyptic wasteland. The very notion of recuperation means that the former world is no more, but that we are left with its persistent remainders and after-effects.

Hence salvagepunk says: *it's already been burnt, already lost at sea. We came to the rescue too late. There is no reward, and definitely no one there to pay it. And we can only begin again*

from here if we finish wrecking - in thought - what we know to be wreckage yet which refuses to call itself such.

Yet this alone would not constitute salvagepunk, at least insofar as it can escape simply meaning an aesthetic of rusty hulls and bleached bones. The key turn, the raising of salvagepunk to a capture of this historical conjuncture (the drawn-out catastrophe of late capitalism) and a rejection of where that will go, if untrammelled, is the work of construction of and from wreckage.

In this way, the "look" of salvagepunk should be less about how it appears, from cobbled together caravans to junk-world robots, and more about a kind of look onto that world. The look is two-fold, and German artist Kurt Schwitters, working in the aftermath of the first World War, gives the way in.

Schwitters is a pivotal figure in this history for several reasons: his association with Dada and Surrealism, his collages of selected refuse and trash, and his naming of his art practice as *Merz* by decoupling it from *Commerz*. In English, think stealing "merce" away from "commerce" to cut away the "with" ["com"] that describes the social relations of economic life so as to leave behind the isolated objects themselves, in an inversion of how reification happens.

"Merz," Schwitters wrote, "is the graveside smile and the solemn gaze at comic events." In a broken world of broken things, this graveside smile is a necessary response and one-half of the look of salvagepunk, how it looks out and what we would see on its face. Not the sneer of cyberpunk - that of the wanna-be automated world itself - but the expression of those born into this world, who refuse to either look away or submit to the hypnosis of cynical resentment. The work of construction only starts with breaking the baleful spell of decay and mourning, and nothing can do this without the obscene laughter at what we are supposed to be very serious and dour about. (And in reverse, Schwitters' other directive, that solemn gaze at what we are told

is frivolous and light and gentle, tearing that open to find the utter nastiness of expected laughter.)

The look, then, is a dual mode: both the graveside smile and the perspective of looking for what can be reassembled "wrongly" and how. It is for this reason that the traditions of montage (Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker) and collage (Hannah Höch, Schwitters, John Heartfield, Terry Gilliam), détournement (Duchamp, Debord and the Situationist International, hip-hop, some of Italian *arte povera*) and farce (Monty Python, Richard Lester, Marco Ferreri) are so crucial here: all are forms of idiosyncratic uses of "given" materials.

It is worth staying with Schwitters' particular thoughts about construction and objects for a moment because, to reiterate, salvagepunk – not in its Mad Max appearance but in what it *could be* – is fundamentally about such questions, of how we relate construction to the inherited remains of historical encounters. Reading him on this requires a fair amount of unpacking. After all, he is the man who wanted both to use "household refuse to scream with" and to "remove the innate venom of things."

Oddly, though, Schwitters' art is never much of a screaming project, with far more of a mordant smirk than any sort of expressionistic yawp. His is a labor of devaluing and revaluing, of how to pull objects from their situated position within circuits of production, consumption, and discarding, and to locate them anew in the position of the artwork. Hence his statement that "the work of art is produced by the artistic devaluation of its elements." The problem that impels such devaluation is the "innate venom" of things, the eccentric, idiosyncratic aspect of objects which must be defanged in order to join the new combinatorial logic of the collage. It is here that salvagepunk is radically opposed to Schwitters' work, otherwise its sharpest ancestor. For it is precisely that "innate venom" with which salvage is concerned: our task is to remove the veil of abstraction – the

designation of an object in terms of its exchange value – in order to find that venom, the particularity of its use value which cannot be entirely subsumed.

So when Schwitters declares that "what is essential is the process of forming" when working with junk and trash, we can detect an early vision of salvagepunk's work of wreckage/montage. However, the gap widens on the question of where value comes from. He writes,

I set Merz against a refined form of Dada and arrived at the conclusion that while Dadaism only points to opposites, Merz resolves them by giving them values within a work of art. Pure Merz is art, pure Dada is non-art - each consciously so.<sup>12</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether or not Dada is truly "non-art," the central difference between salvagepunk and Merz is that the former, even as an "artistic practice," provides the occasion for the already-present singular values of things (now visible in the very moment of their ruin, of their monetary and often functional devaluation) to come to the fore. More precisely, perhaps salvagepunk can stand obstinately between these points: a production of "values" (the task of construction and assemblage as producing a second life to the already broken) which does not subtract that innate venom but mobilizes it.

It is this belief in "innate venom" or the "idiosyncrasy" of objects that gives salvagepunk a stranger, unsettled, and prescriptive relationship to its historical moment: it manifests a needed kickback against the still dominant logic of postmodernism. We might debate the degree to which the terms of postmodernism theorized by Fredric Jameson and others in the '80s still apply to our moment – they surely describe nothing "new" – when subsequent developments in media technologies and massive shifts in the global order produce a perhaps uncrossable rift between then and now. Regardless, we can say

that the notion of salvagepunk we construct, including both its existent cultural examples and the possible manifestations of its conceptual moves, indicates a lost promise of modernism swept under the rug.

For if one strand of modernism (including those practitioners of montage, collage, détournement, and farce) was born of a contentious tarrying with the orders of capitalist imperialism and its consequences, as well as an exploration of a wider set of possible relations between workers and the realm of mass-made things, it has always been about salvage, mapping another current alongside the work of capitalist salvage itself. This modernist tendency made its task to find value in the scrap heap, although it maintained a specific sense of a whole that must be cracked and made into said scrap heap before salvage-construction can start. But above all, there remains, against Schwitters' own words, a sense of both the eccentric value of things and that not all images are equivalent. In the work of junk-montage and the recreation/recombination of the most banal sub-regions of the cultural realm, we get glimpses of a different kind of sneer back towards us: the tough, unwanted, and venomous insistence of the objects of mechanical production, from plastics that will don't decay to unsettling singular properties of mass-produced things.

The "postmodern turn," despite its emphasis on pastiche, mash-up, and hybrid forms, closes off the punk aspect of what salvage could be, precisely because of that emphasis. At stake is the inherent flatness and equivalency of postmodern cultural production, in which the disappearing sense of a lived history of the world opens the cache of cultural options to endless reuses, all unmoored from the original situation of the images, sounds, genre conventions, and so on. To be sure, the number of exceptions to this trendline indicate that this may never have really been the case. However, like all real abstractions whose description of a situation feed back into and dictate the terms of

that situation, the postmodern turn has believed its own lines. Whether or not this has been the experience of living through the past couple decades, the cultural sphere has been necessarily marked by its degrees of deviation from, or adherence to, the hollow frisson of postmodern ahistorical sampling.

Most simply, salvagepunk is not postmodern. It is a modernist project never fully started. Fundamentally opposed to pastiche, salvagepunk realizes the eccentricity of discarded, outmoded, and forgotten things still marked by the peculiar imprint of their time of production and the store of labor and energy frozen in their form. A form from which all value has supposedly been lost. Above all, it is that work of construction, not simply gutting to see what can be sold back to the industrial suppliers, but a production of "valueless times" to see what values might emerge outside of the loops of circulation and accumulation.

Particularly when combined with other aspects of waste. We don't want to hold up single objects as treasures, like so many vintage lamps or kitschy artifacts of a political world gone by. Instead, starting with a world after the fact of its collapse, an endless series of world collapses. (The catastrophe across time, on which we have to work in order to reveal anything.) Constructing anew from leftovers of what was once very new. And then inhabiting the old worlds, pushing a moment to the point of its stress and crack, taking up those parts of it already belonging to another time, waste zones of history one and all.

### ANTI-CAPITALIST REIFICATION

To pull back for a moment, we should ask: but isn't this whole salvagepunk enterprise bound to mirror other forms of object worship, from crass consumerism to the financial crisis call to "get back to real things"? The primitivist urge to rediscover a natural life of pure use-values? The fantasy of the most radical