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Salvage

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This essay develops a history of salvage both as particular activity and as concept, arguing that it has quietly become one of the fundamental structures of thought that shape how we envision future possibility. However, the contemporary sense of the word, which designates the recuperation or search for value in what has already been destroyed, is a recent one and represents a significant transformation from the notion of salvage in early modern European maritime and insurance law. In that earlier iteration, salvage denoted payment received for helping to avert a disaster, such as keeping the ship and its goods from sinking in the first place. Passing through the dislocation of this concept into private salvage firms, firefighting companies, military usage, avant-garde art, and onto the human body itself in the guise of "personal risk," the essay argues that the twentieth century becomes indelibly marked by a sense of the disaster that has already occurred. The second half of the essay passes into speculative culture, including fiction, video games, and film, to suggest that the most critical approaches to salvage have often come under the sign of science fiction but that the last decade in particular has shown how recent quotidian patterns of gentrification and defused antagonism have articulated stranger shifts in the figure of salvage than any speculative imaginary can currently manage.

A definition of salvage, as this will be, is necessarily also a history of it. This goes beyond the usual work of etymology, because that history details not just salvage's dislocation from a particular zone and sphere of commerce – the sea, its trade – but also the transformations of our lived world that come to make salvage such a key concept within it. By now, the meaning of salvage has stabilized to the point where it can be paraphrased: the discovery of hidden value or use in what appears beyond repair or sale – or, at the least, a wager that the already ruined might still have some element worth saving, provided one knows where and how to look. In this form, it designates a fundamental mechanism within the circulation of capital. It is a relentless search for every last scrap of value, forming a counterbalance to capitalism's general social and ecological indifference to just how high the slag and rot of its wastescapes pile. In our work, however, salvage also – and perhaps more importantly – names a heuristic, one that inflects how we might read these paths and circuits. It insists, for instance, that we follow supply chains not just from source to processing to market to consumption, but also far

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beyond that into the long material, conceptual, and imagistic afterlives of the busted, dumped, scrapped, and abandoned.

To think of the category of salvage as de facto "radical" would therefore make as little sense as labeling it "conservative," given that it is both a principle of accumulation and a critical operation with which to read historically through the accumulated. All the same, that historical reading opens up a specific split in timescale, because as naturalized as the notion of salvage has become, its contemporary sense only began to take visible shape a century ago. Its accompanying aesthetics of junky bricolage – evident in forms as varied as *Fallout: New Vegas*, Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*, and cafés built with "reclaimed" wood – are younger still. That is, it seems specific to the framing of twentieth-century modernism, including the shock of mechanized war, and is especially emblematic of tendencies that get subsequently deigned *postmodern*. And yet salvage is hardly particular even to capitalism or its toxic twins, run-off and asset. A form of salvage long pre-dates abstract labor and other hallmarks of capital, belonging equally to different regimes of wealth accumulation, especially when given its widest meaning (i.e. finding worth in a lost cause, a principle of selection and scavenging). Nevertheless, we can locate where the arc toward its more precise meaning and intimate entanglement with imperial and economic history actually begins. It starts with a particular development of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the rise of complex financial instruments that constructed blurry bonds between debt and doom, in addition to helping to lay a juridical, subjective, and logistical framework needed for capitalism to go global.

The shift is described, in a local form, by Fernand Braudel in his famous study of the Mediterranean in the age of Phillip. In that study, he outlines how the "Mediterranean victory over bad weather" – i.e. the advent of year-round shipping – consisted less of new naval technologies than of the substantiation and spread of insurance law.[1] This both backed riskier ventures (and therefore meant more and grander wrecks) and gave underwriters the rights to that wreckage, to lay "claim to any salvage."[2] Braudel's use of the term here to mean "gathering what was still sellable from a disaster" is almost anachronistic, though, as "salvage" at that time predominantly designated not those sellable remnants but a payment or appropriate portion of goods given to those who stopped the ship from sinking in the first place.

In English common law, this "appropriate portion" was often weighed heavily against the sailors who might come to the rescue, covering only their labor and time – hence giving little incentive beyond vague appeal to human

[1] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 263.

[2] Ibid., 792.

decency. However, the situation Braudel describes, especially the role of insurance underwriters in impelling and profiting from increased chance of calamity and waste, remained salient in the centuries to come, long after state and municipal services became more common. It remains so today, in the era of revived private military contractors like Blackwater/Academi: as these words are written, the wreck of the *Costa Concordia* has just been passed off to a Florida-based salvage company, TITAN, a subsidiary of Crowley Maritime, who will drag the eyesore to Genoa, to be scrapped and melted down to make forks or struts that will pointedly *not* bear the name of their source.[3]

Much as the related history of sabotage is bound to the explosive concentration of power in trains and a new capacity to distribute failure across an infrastructural network, salvage's first steps toward becoming a more general principle of how we conceive a world of permanent crisis were driven by changes in motive force. More specifically, this conception of salvage emerged with the steamship, which made it newly possible to rescue "distressed" vessels and to haul the well and truly scuttled up from the deep. In short, both the scope and the temporal range of salvage expanded tremendously, revealing that this labor of letting nothing remain dead to the world was both compatible with surging industrial capital and wholly dependent upon it. In those same years, the Romantics would try to lay claim to nature as a source of sublimity. But in terms of the resurrection and consequent sale of what has been seemingly reclaimed *by* nature, reduced to landscape, and ejected from the circuit of value, industry's technique was to be the ultimate arbiter. So begin two subsequent centuries of squabble over the meaning of the wasted.

Such dominance of machinic force and capital-intensive coordination did not come quickly. For an oceanic imagination not eager to relinquish the image of rapacious pirates (after the decline of real existing piracy in the late eighteenth century), maritime salvage fit the bill, especially when centered on the figure of the "wrecker." While the majority of a wrecker's real work oscillated between the two operative meanings of salvage (saving sinking ships from going all the way down or recovering the waterlogged and putatively lost), the idea that stalked nineteenth-century newspapers, plays, and novels concerned a more cunning and vicious labor: using guide lights to intentionally coax ships not to safety but to shoal and reef.[4] Once stuck or wrecked, plunder became an act of easy scavenging. Just sit back and let the tide roll in the loot.

[3] Macabre as it would be, it is hard not to think that the profits made on selling the scrap *as* scrap of the *Costa Concordia*, rather than as anonymous materials hiding its tracks, would be far greater, especially in a span of years so obsessed with "reclaimed" materials that can name their provenance.

[4] It's this meaning that underwrites Guy Debord's line in his final film: "Wreckers write their names only in water," meaning, in short, propaganda by the self-negating deed.

It finds a later echo in one of the less-celebrated of salvage films, Peter Weir's debut *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), featuring a town that runs off the wreckage of motoring tourists they can impel into crashing.[5] Much like Weir's wreckers–salvagers, the imagined wreckers of the nineteenth century were seen, to all intents and purposes, as pirates, "more voracious than the elements," who "appeared to delight in the ruin" of those who trusted their signals.[6] As Jamin Wells points out, however, even as this largely incorrect image of wreckers continued to fuel lurid tales, like Charles E. Averill's 1848 novel *The Wreckers: Or, The Ship Plunderers of Barnegat*, it was slowly supplanted over the course of the nineteenth century. First, it was overtaken by the figure of the brave, trustworthy, innovative, and pointedly white male individual wreckers, such as Captain Thomas Albertson Scott, who were not scourges of the high seas but tamers of the waves.[7] Second, this image of the respectable individual battling the elements in the name of property and of what Wells calls a "subdued, 'understood' ocean" – an aqueous propriety, a territory identical to its map – was itself subsequently outpaced by the economic reality of what such rescues required.[8] As the ships to be saved got bigger, so too did the technology of salvage itself, demanding not just the steamship but tremendous outlays of capital and resources that only corporations could handle.

The *spectacle* of salvage adjusted accordingly, drifting from the amoral scavenger to, first, the righteous engineer and, second, the sheer force of machinic technique itself. Fittingly, this encouraged a transformation of spectatorial behavior, as well of expectations of what could be altered by non-"experts," anticipating equivalent forms of twenty-first-century dismissal (i.e. high finance as supposedly both too big to fail and too complicated to allow intervention). For example, when the ocean liner *St. Paul* wrecked in 1896 on eastern Long

[5] Much of the town does so for reasons that anticipate George Miller's *Mad Max* five years later, although without the veil of post-fallout "necessity": because they want to act out cargo cult fantasies and, above all, to modify their cars into death-mobiles ready for all occasions.

[6] Jamin Wells, "Professionalization and Cultural Perceptions of Marine Salvage, 1850–1950," *Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord*, 17, 2 (2007), 1–22, 2.

[7] A compelling effort to complicate the earlier racial history of this image – that of the Protestant white man as comber of the deep – can be found in Gustav Ungerer, "Recovering a Black African's Voice in an English Lawsuit: Jacques Francis and the Salvage Operations of the *Mary Rose* and the *Sancta Maria* and *Sanctus Edwardus*, 1545–c.1500" *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 17 (2005), 255–71.

[8] Wells, 15. There are potentially interesting echoes here of what John Eperjesi, *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2005), 55, sees as the tension between visions of the smooth and the striated in mid-nineteenth-century American literature's oceanic-imperialist imaginary.

Island, tens of thousands swarmed to the site, including 20,000 from Philadelphia alone. Yet if reports can be believed, nothing was plundered by the crowds. They came not to partake in salvage themselves but just to witness the feat of salvaging, to watch industrial capital strain under the pressure of dragging itself back to the surface.[9]

On drier land in the same years, increased urban concentration made fire an almost unprecedented threat to life and property. As with marine salvage, insurance companies took up the slack, at least in the name of the specific properties they backed. A number of "salvage corps" were formed, first in New York in 1839 (the New York Fire Patrol) and first in name as the Liverpool Salvage Corps in 1842. These private fire companies carried out three lines of duty: diminishing risk prior to a blaze, lessening risk during one (laying sheets of wet canvas over things deemed of value), and sifting through the ashes to assess the loss. Regarding the last, we find a story of the London Salvage Corps picking though the aftermath of a fire in a piano warehouse, counting charred keys to try and determine how many pianos there had been, an atrocious precursive echo of the battlefield forensics and recuperation that salvage will come to name only a couple of decades later.

This language of *risk* is not incidental, as it names another crucial moment in the financial and subjective infrastructure from which salvage will come to be inextricable. In *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America*, Jonathan Levy zeroes in on a crucial Massachusetts Supreme Court decision in 1842. The case concerned the claim of Nicholas Farwell, a railroad engine-man whose right hand was ruined beyond repair in a crash caused by another employee. Farwell sought damages from the company, which refused, and so brought it to the Supreme Court, which ruled against him in turn. According to them, "Farwell himself was responsible for the 'peril' that had destroyed his right hand. Farwell therefore also personally assumed a 'risk.'"[10] As Levy explores, this did more than bring the precedent of marine insurance law off the seas and into grounded industry. It also transferred risk to "the very meaning and substance of Farwell's personal freedom," creating a formal equivalence between danger to property and danger to life which still undergirds a properly capitalist subjectivity.[11] And when salvage shifts its meaning toward what is *beyond* saving in the twentieth century, the subjective implications for a vision of a world beyond repair or future deviation become both sinister and omnipresent. They are expressed

[9] Ibid., 16. See also Jamin Wells, "The Lure of the Shore: Authenticity, Spectacle, and the Wreck of the *St. Paul*," *New Jersey History*, 126, 2 (2011), 58–83.

[10] Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012),7.

[11] Ibid. 8.

simultaneously in the crushing fact of debt – a past risk taken on by an individual that cannot be undone – and in the liberal acceptance of the social and biological death of whole populations in whom capital is unwilling to risk investment.

By the start of the twentieth century, the trends of salvage long at work began to take more concrete and rationally mercenary forms. Refluxes of heroic salvage would appear on occasion. One of the most celebrated instances of early cinema, Edwin S. Porter's 1902 *Life of an American Fireman*, offers a variation on that kind of good clean heroism celebrated as the sturdy entrepreneurship and bravery of second-wave wreckers. However, the form of calculation at work behind the salvage corps stood at manifest cross-purposes to these archetypes of selfless saviors. And this was the case far beyond flammable cities. By the start of the twentieth century, marine salvage had enshrined in Lloyd's Form of Salvage Agreement its dictum of "No cure – no pay": salvage crews were only rewarded *if* they stopped the ship from going down, providing both urgency and occasion for what might resemble altruistic heroism, at least until the time came to demand fair remuneration. With the fire salvage corps, though, such grand gestures were reserved exclusively for those who had paid in advance. The rest could, and did, burn. In so doing, the principle of managed risk assessment – and the discrimination of what and *who* is worth saving – did not just become a key part of twentieth-century subjectivity, as Levy suggests. It also wrote itself irrevocably into the territorial patchwork and class stratification of cities.

The nominal and already ragged heroism of the salvager took a final blow with World War I, when the term became inextricably linked to the meaning most common today, the salvage of the *already* devastated. During that war, "salvage units" were employed on both sides, and their work ranged from German repurposing of British tanks to the bleaker work of combing the fields of the dead to literally take the shirts off their backs. Reporters spoke of a sudden dawning horror that their gas masks, necessary thanks to the nascent technology of chlorine gas deployed at Bolimov and Ypres, were made of fabric cut from the uniforms of the dead.[12] In photos, recovered rifles are stacked like cordwood and arranged like pyres.

It is this situation that led Walter Owen to write arguably the first and last salvage–splatterpunk hybrid, *The Cross of Carl* (1931). A novella whose censorship in Britain should have surprised no one, it tells the tale of Carl, an infantryman shot (seemingly) dead in the trenches. He awakes in a giant corpse

[12] See Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 35.

salvage factory where he and the other fallen have been baled together with wire to be rendered into soap. Speculative, yes, but this use of fat presages not only the nightmare image of the Nazis making soap from the corpses of concentration camps but also the American Fat Salvage Committee of World War II, who urged the gathering of domestic fats for use in explosives. As an accompanying Disney propaganda cartoon trumpets, "A skillet of bacon grease is a little munitions factory." From the re-weaponization of corpses to the weaponization of the national home in the name of producing further corpses, it's a salvage principle in a delirious closed loop, letting nothing combustible go to waste.

It is also this situation of World War I, taken broadly, that generates the crux of all salvage thinking to follow, especially the kind that became unmistakably visible since the year 2000. Salvage no longer names a crisis averted, as though snatching profit from the maw of emergency. It becomes instead a basic operation of an irrecuperable world order entirely beyond reform, a form of management within a catastrophe. Salvage's first version, from the seventeenth century to World War I, focussed on saving the unbroken and emerged from the ugly juncture of managed risk and mechanized death. Its second version, which stretches from the interwar years to the present day and focusses on breaking up what is beyond saving to find something of worth, features its own bleak juncture. It combines that sense of the already devastated with the contemporary awareness of a genuinely unprecedented, and permanent, coming wave of climate and social turbulence.

It is also in this second transition, starting in the 1920s, that salvage gets suffused with the very idea of *joining*, of assembling differently from what has already exited the commodity circuit, whether because ruined or simply outmoded. It comes to stand for montage in the wake of destruction and bricolage in an age of planned obsolescence. This takes especially clear shape in the cultural production of World War I's immediate aftermath, most explicitly posed through Kurt Schwitters's concept of Merz: "Everything had broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments; and this is Merz. It was like a revolution within me, not as it was, but as it should have been."[13] It then becomes both a cross-medium practice, whether in Bruce Conner's recycled cinema of "poverty" or, later, in contemporary digital glitch-hunting, and a discrete content, one that finds its rangy home in speculative fiction and culture, especially once the post-apocalyptic becomes a consistently blockbusting genre in accordance with a general

[13] Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6–7.

worldview.[14] Salvage, in short, comes to be a crucial shape of thought that underwrites our imagination of crisis, especially in recent years of more visible downturn. It becomes especially apposite insofar it comes to us already well adapted to a gnawing suspicion: that as specific as the coordinates of any disaster or crisis may be, they belong to a wider field of collapse that hardly can be exited, redeemed, or borrowed out of.

One of the best places to see this is through the appearance of salvage within what we might generally call speculative culture, that ambit of novels, films, comics, games, and television that center on sci-fi. In that loose tradition, salvage appears both as a content – a thing done, with a kind of people who do it with piratical flair – and an economic mood, not least of all visible outside and between the books and films, with the ceaseless rehashing of pulp-genre inheritances for a last whiff of profit.[15] Indeed, we can find it in the history of speculative fiction production itself: in the 1950s, sci-fi magazines like *Fantastic Universe*, which primarily published stories rejected elsewhere, were known as "salvage magazines," finding nuggets of worth in – or just grabbing up for cheap – what the majors had passed on.[16]

By that time, though, salvage was already present as activity and trope in the narratives of the stories making those rounds. Jack Williamson's "Salvage in Space" (1933) features an asteroid miner who steers around the voids of space on a vessel of cobbled-together asteroid chunks. It's a raft of past mineralogical catastrophe, fitting for the cosmic Crusoe tendency that runs through many of these works. In the John Grimes stories of A. Bertram Chandler (who, not coincidentally, was a master of an aircraft carrier and, by law, had to remain on the empty hull before it was hauled to southeast Asia to be broken for scrap), maritime salvage history goes cosmic with a "Gaussjammer" yet remains otherwise intact for various off-world naval adventures: "'So if it's a ship, it's probably a derelict,' murmured Grimes.

[14] Salvage is best conceived as an operation *within* these drifts of meaning, rather than a driving force itself or a proposed solution. As mentioned, even if conceived as a solution or tactic, it has no inherent "politics" and cannot be chalked up as either cogently radical or reactionary. Simultaneously, it is a small image of how to function against the policed reproduction of capital, gender, and empire, and it is the form of thinking that undergirds and naturalizes paths of capital that end in the brutally toxic work of e-waste salvage yards of Agbogbloshie, Ghana.

[15] Enough so that I identified this in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, under the term *salvagepunk*, as an ongoing tendency whose instances had become more and more frequent in recent decades. There I argue it further as a possible framework through which to approach a relation between speculative culture and social history more broadly.

[16] Mark Rich, *C. M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010), 291.

'Salvage …' muttered Beadle, looking almost happy. 'You've a low, commercial mind, Number One,' Grimes told him."[17]

The space opera inclination spans from mid-century on, from Robert Wells's *The Spacejacks* (1955), and its "Ryder's Recovery Systems United," to Paul J. McAuley's "The Passenger" (2002): "All of them hulks. Combat wreckage. Spoils of war waiting to be rendered into useful components, rare metals, and scrap."[18] In Melissa Scott's *Mighty Good Road* (1990), extensive descriptions of how cosmic salvage contract work interfaces with large-scale financial interests produce an echo of the actual history of maritime salvage, even if its dangers tend toward the fantastic. The trope even found its way into American living rooms briefly in *Salvage 1*, the 1979 TV show scientifically advised by Asimov and starring both an all-salvaged spaceship named *Vulture* and a protagonist who dreams of salvaging the junk that litters the Moon.

Elsewhere, salvage presents itself more as a needling concern, an anxiety about what the continued accumulation of waste could do to us, especially when it exits socially designated zones of exclusion. (The half-step toward the actually existing treatment of living humans as such waste seethes just under all of this.) In James White's *Deadly Litter* (1964) – a proto-*Gravity* with a breathtakingly literal title – space litter does as promised, hurtling off the Sun's orbit to become lethal payload. Charles Platt's 1968 *Garbage World* provides as good a precursive image of financial turbulence and revenge of accumulated waste as any. It takes place on an asteroid, a fitting locale given that salvage and asteroids are inextricably linked in the history of speculative fiction. Through that history, asteroids are imagined as subplanets without tight orbital coherence, just drifting around while they wait to shatter (the ubiquitous asteroid field in which to lose pursuing ships) or to ruin things for those with the decency to obey a tighter cyclical path (like family structure in Michael Bay's 1998 film *Armageddon*). In Platt's novel, the asteroid, named Kopra with scatological tongue firmly in cheek, is a dumping site for the wealthier lumps of inhabited rock in the galactic area. Now covered with ten vertical miles of trash, its residents eke out a scavenger life ("the drinking, the dirt, the dancing and the debauchery") on its surface.[19] However, the waste has accumulated to such a height that it has become a threat: not, of course, to the life of the Koprans but to the surrounding "pleasure planets," which are in danger of getting pelted with their own

[17] A. Bertram Chandler, "The Wandering Buoy," in Chandler, *The Hard Way Up* (New York: Ace Books, 1972), 54–68, 55.
[18] Paul J. McAuley, "The Passenger," in Gardner R. Dozois, ed., *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twentieth Annual Collection* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 71–94, 73.
[19] Charles Platt, *Garbage World* (New York: Berkley, 1967), 33.

refuse now that the natural gravitational balance of Kopra has been disturbed. To solve this, they must displace the Koprans and destroy the ground on which they walk. In other words, out of concern for the better-off on other planets, they evict the poor from the one where they live. All because, it suggests in a fierce satire of the colonial force that backs liberal logic, the excess of a system can only be displaced and tolerated for so long before it must be simply destroyed.

If one strand of salvage was space opera, the more common one, especially in the last three decades, is a variant of the earthly post-apocalyptic. In some of these texts, like the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* (1971), salvage becomes a basic human operation for processing the trash left behind here – Earth as cosmic rest stop – by far more advanced beings, turning subsequent human evolution itself into just one long labor of retrofitting. Other works remain more strictly terrestrial, situating salvage – both the collection and the montage of ruined materials – as the key procedure of survival in a hell we ourselves wrought. Examples abound, from Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) to Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010) to less unabashedly doomsday fare, like Cory Doctorow's *Makers* (2009) or Slick Henry in William Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988), modeled after Mark Pauline of Survival Research Labs.

Arguably the most popular diffusion of this has been cinematic, etched into permanent pop-cultural memory by the *Mad Max* films, which served primarily to do three major things. First, they bind the idea of salvage to a specific vision of how use-value (and libidinal value, with the post-apocalyptic warriors in their requisite BDSM-esque outfits) can outstrip exchange-value, furthered by the films' emphasis on bartering and the preciousness of scarce resources. Second, they take that vision and use it to create a total image of resurgent neo-primitivism in the wake of market and carbon-energy collapse. Third, and most consequentially for the following decades, they helped make that image available as an *aesthetic* ready to be transposed, just one more *-punk* to enter the cultural gristmill. A film like Richard Stanley's *Hardware* (1990) makes this entirely clear, as the compelling inhuman work of a machine (a military robot) that scavenges anything to keep itself running, human bodies included, is posed against those (the people who find it and hang a piece of it on the wall as a sculpture) for whom salvage is *just* anart practice. More recent crisis-era films like *Wall-E* (2008) and *Doomsday* (2008) extend this even further. In the former, a landscape of the unsalvageable – the earth unrecognizable beneath mountains and skyscrapers of trash – becomes the site for whimsical assemblage, more-human-than-human robot love, and, finally, redemptive farming, as the humans return from space to find themselves through precapitalist agricultural forms. In the latter, acts of salvage are just one amongst a whole array of stylistic options for post-plague barbarians, neither more nor less political than putting neon paint

on your machete. Again, it reduces down to something that is just a look, and a look that is, to all intents and purposes, that of a *slightly* punkish music video from the mid-1990s, one indication among many of just how slow the uptake has been on any new aesthetic maneuvers surrounding salvage.

Outside speculative fiction, recent years have seen the idea of salvage proliferate through social worlds and the attempts to fully marketize them. This has two major tonalities. One is especially grim, becoming apparent wherever attempts at sustainable life and community run most brutally into predatory financial operations, resulting in a lived world marked with "fire sales," new landscapes of foreclosure, junk bonds, sub-primes, and the looming prospect of mass default. The other major tonality apparent in the last decade is the wide diffusion of a toned-down and entirely precious salvage aesthetic, visible both in speculative culture and, with far more force, in one of the primary obsessions of a new generation of yuppie culture: "architectural salvage." This thirst for the reclaimed, which works to disavow actual historical particularity by fetishizing any minor grit belying an origin – as in, *you can still see where they bolted the train rails to this reclaimed British depot wood that now forms the frame for our bed!* – also expresses a new horror of space that has been taking shape of late. Amply aware ofthe real social contradictions and cruelty on which the passage of any commodity depends, the last ten or so years have responded with increasing fixation on whatever can be pinned down to *a* site. As though worried about the spread of asteroid trash from one planet to another, real processes of urban gentrification and eviction get bolstered by a vague sheen of salvage aesthetics. The operations of those aesthetics become amply clear upon walking into a certain type of business, of which coffee shops are the most widespread. A vague antimodernism and a look of the hand-tooled join with a tremendous overvaluation of what is worth very little (reclaimed wood), a vague ethics of localist reuse, and the baleful idea that knowing *where* something comes from compensates in any way for what goes missing: any practical critique of the actual movement of goods, bodies, and cash. Coffee might be single-origin, but capital never is.

A strange consequence of this is that the true weirdness and scope of salvage, as imagined in the distant planets and robot wars of speculative culture, has been outpaced by the quite real transformations of urban space and consumer cartography which engage salvage as a mere *look*. A minor crisis follows for speculative culture interested in such things. Unable to clearly distinguish itself from pastiche yet unwilling to commit to the rigor of genealogy, torn between being a mere subset of the post-apocalyptic and a defense of "upcycling" and DIY in a prelapsarian world, that culture ends by folding in on itself and simply repeating. It draws portraits of recuperated waste and supposedly singular assemblages that only and ever look like more of the same, no matter the elements combined.

Ultimately, it is perhaps this very limit that makes salvage a category worth tracing into present years, in order to gain a clearer sense not of what could be "mobilized" but of the limits long at work behind too much of our speculative thinking. In that regard, two elements of salvage's cultural figurations have become of special relevance, precisely insofar as they have remained absent and barred from appearing whatsoever.

The first is most visibly lacking in video games, the medium where salvage as both mechanism and aesthetic has spread the widest. That spread is due in part to the kind of meandering, snooping time games can encourage and in part because of item gathering and "crafting" systems – as in RuneScape, the Far Cry series, and Star Wars Galaxies, for instance – that have become common, rewarding players for scavenging, wreck-diving, and peering under rocks. At the heart of a wider swath of games, however, is an even more basic principle of salvage: that there may be value in the neutral, broken, dead, or passed-over. For instance, in the Borderlands games, as in Diablo and most other grinding and leveling-oriented RPGs, one is expected to spend an inordinate amount of time performing the game's unofficial tagline and injunction: "Shoot. Loot. Repeat." Its basic principle is that any and all volumes – a body, a barrel, a chunk of rock, a giant tentacle, a pile of cyborg innards – can be opened, whether with a key or with a bullet, and all potentially contain items other than themselves. Given their much-touted randomized drop rates, there is always the impelling chance that it might reveal the rarest of the rare. A bazooka pops free from an unmarked grave. Corpses gush forth piles of bullets, shields, injections, and recorders, and reams of cash. All the world's a Kinder Surprise, provided enough rendering power and the limit that some things must be declared empty, full only of themselves, and therefore unsalvageable.[20] Although leaps and bounds in computing power have given recent sandbox games a scope that rewards this form of poking around landscapes of waste (most literally in Fallout), this is a generic principle of games in the last three decades, a minor reward for those low on ammo but high on time. The first Super Mario Bros. (1985) got gamers used to bashing their heads on boxes full of stars and psilocybin. Sega's Gigas (1986) added power-ups to Breakout's bricks, so that a game entirely structured on busting masonry with a bouncing ball ends by asserting that not all bricks are created equal. And the true, unabashed weirdness of the conceit found its best groove early in Castlevania (1986), where whipping

[20] Otherwise a player would not advance. She would just spend dusk to dawn hitting the walls and burrowing the ground, at which point she would simply be playing Minecraft, a game structured by the same principle on an even more granular level: smack a swath of pixels like it is a depth, and it will yield chunks that can be used to make masses, heights, fortresses, and other things that can themselves be smashed and left to gape.

candles causes hearts to drift free of them, where walls may or may not contain hunks of life-giving mutton.

The implication is that one should try to scour – that is, destroy – everything that appears neutral, valueless, and indifferent on the off-chance that it *might* bring to light a secret store of worth. One should be a wrecker, through and through. However, what never happens in any of these games is that volumes or cavities break open to reveal objects that are non-identical to the material but of no utility to the player. Indeed, the suspiciously dry ammo that spurts out from a zombie's skull may not be the specific caliber you need, but it is still adequate to the game's definition of utility: able to open more holes in more skulls. Inside a robot's hull there are no feathers, unless the feather can function as currency. So despite the conceit of salvage at work in these games, they can only imagine up to the point of what is essentially insurance company salvage. The broken reveals what can be used to build anew – and therefore to create more corpses. Nothing more and nothing less.

This double vision of an all-salvage world with no variability or surprise – where everything is lost, yet the lost contains only the exact things needed to keep going in that terrain – is echoed and reinforced by a second recent tendency: a vision of extreme immaterial flexibility but total material fixity. It is a tendency visible in games but even more so in big-budget speculative film, of which Neill Bloomkamp's 2013 *Elysium* is an especially telling version. However, it lies not in the film's explicit images of salvage, which the film has amply in both *Mad Max* and biopunk flavor. It resides instead in how it simply cannot grasp technological objects as composed of various parts, belonging to various histories, potentially not identical to their tasks, and therefore open to sabotage.

To be clear, this is a film that features hackers able to both bring down class structure itself (by uploading a new program) *and* bolt a salvaged robotic exoskeleton to the bones of a dying man. Yet it still establishes an unbridgeable gulf between the production process of those machines and their near-magical functions once built. It goes to great lengths to show how the advanced technology of its future is still built on Earth, by hand, and in factories. The cops patrolling these territories may be expensive, automated, irradiated, and Ferrari-red drones, but the workers who make them remain wholly human, poorly waged, highly replaceable, and still physically making it all.

Yet what the film never displays is any sense that those same workers who assemble the drone cops or those "healing beds" have any knowledge whatsoever of how they function.[21] They reproduce a system that they are not allowed

[21] In recent cinema of this ilk, that is a capacity literally limited to mutants, such as Magneto rewiring the Sentinels to do his bidding in *X-Men: Days of Future Past.*

to fathom, not even on the micro level. We know this because, quite simply, they never sabotage their productions, whether to turn the drones to their side, to put the muzzle to their absent lips, or to at least make them run with a limp. They never tune the healing beds to *give* the ruling-class Elysians syphilis.

Above all, they never make their own. The film literalizes its absurd treatment of technology as the pinnacle of inhuman mystique by showing "migrants" from Earth trying to make it through the defenses of Elysium, all in order to sprint over groomed lawns, into a mansion, and onto one of the beds for a short minute before the robocops arrive. Wouldn't it be far easier, we can't help but ask, to just make a version of the beds for use on Earth? After all, the film implies, the earthbound are the ones who make such things. Why wouldn't they copy the design? Build from scrap and rip parts from the ample waste sites that accompany their production? Steal them from the factory, as the song goes, piece by piece? Or, at the bare minimum, hot-wire them to blow up in the faces of those who condemn the earthbound to live?

The premise that therefore goes entirely missing in this landscape dominated by the aesthetics of salvage is of any possible sabotage, any possible intimacy with the mechanisms and materials that perpetuate an order stacked against you. Yes, it can be "rebooted" with different social content, regardless of the ends for which its means were designed. But it cannot actually be known, let alone altered. Its inhabitants confront a world of integral objects and closed processes built in accordance with a plan that cannot be grasped even by those who execute it daily. Salvage remains only a style, available for those who fancy it, and an embedded property of the already cast out and junked, left behind on the wasted Earth and reconfirming the strictures of its imagination from a century's worth of speculative thought. Beyond the realm of managed expertise, the prospect of a passage and interaction between what works and what no longer does remains even more closed than the film's cosmic border walls.

In this situation, the film, and the last years of salvage culture more broadly, entirely confirm the very split it depicts and moralizes against. It insists upon, on one side, a lower world where salvage rules, because that world in full has already been decisively cast out of any sphere of influence. And on the other? A glittering upper realm produced by the time, death, debt, and desperation of the lower, a space of sheen where any type of scavenging or montage is strictly impossible. In trying to reach between the two, we can only stub our fingers against the aluminosilicate of a touch screen, unable to get any closer to the wreckage it depicts in such crystalline resolution.[22]

[22] Fitting that at this very moment, there is a game in development called Salvaged, in which you act as the commander of a deep-space salvage crew, directing their action not just from a computer but from a computer with a tablet for dual-hand puttering.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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