

LITERATURE: ON DAVID BRAZIL'S "ECONOMY"

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THE PRODUCTION OF DISPOSABILITY

Sifting through the stomachs of cow carcasses in the early 1950's, Vermont dairy farmers were surprised to find broken pieces of glass. It didn't take long for farmers to identify the source of this indigestible detritus, and they soon organized and took the matter to state legislature, calling for a ban on the recently-introduced "disposable" glass bottle.¹ Farmers claimed that glass shards mixed with roadside hay-piles when consumers "disposed" of these bottles by tossing them from car windows. Subsequently, in 1953, the state legislature officially banned the sale of "non-reusable," supposedly "disposable," glass bottles, leaving consumers to purchase beverages packaged in traditional, refillable bottles for which stores held a deposit for redemption and reuse.

Although the Vermont legislature faced no immediate opposition to banning "disposable" bottles, the law became a costly threat to the packaging corporations' methods of expanding production and increasing profits. In response, just months after the ban took effect, Keep America Beautiful (KAB) filed for non-profit status under the leadership of leading beverage and packaging corporations, including Owens-Illinois Glass (who first invented the disposable glass bottle), the American Can Company (who first invented the disposable can), Coca-Cola (the largest distributor of products packaged in disposable glass bottles) and Dixie Cup (the largest manufacturer of one-time-use cups). KAB posited itself as a patriotic and environmentally-conscious organization with the mission of informing society about the dangers of the "litter bug." They defined the "litter bug" as a person who selfishly and irresponsibly leaves undesirable property in public spaces, disposable or not. While promoting citizen accountability might appear a helpful

public service, KAB underhandedly defined the contours of a criminal while simultaneously inventing the crime. In other words, corporations produced the problem by manufacturing “non-reusable,” “disposable” bottles and then created KAB to successfully divert this fact from public attention.

It suffices to say that corporations have successfully shifted public opinion on litter (as well as “waste,” in general), creating within popular judgment the association between litter and moral poverty. In reference to his poem “Economy,” David Brazil says, in a recent interview with Thom Donovan, “the waste that structures “Economy” comes from the space of civic abandonment.”² Litter now signifies not only materials abandoned by consumers, but also spaces abandoned by civic-municipalities, like low-income neighborhoods and homeless encampments. Rather than accept what’s been left behind as common property, inherited and stewarded by all, we’re dumped into the argument that public spaces are polluted by specific, disingenuous individuals. However, like other repressive social stunts driven by corporate power, somewhere deep within the figure of the “litter bug” rests a radical possibility.

In a passage from Karl Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, in which he proclaims the hidden potential of the proletariat, we can identify a correlating, positive potentiality also contained within the “litter bug.” Like litterers, whose actions seem to say that their possessions are not their possessions, Marx identifies the proletariat as a class with “radical chains,”

a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*.³

Because the only liberation of the proletariat comes from a negative, emancipatory turn, its very power is the complete transformation of the society of which it is a part by removing itself from its structure, therefore transforming the shape of society as a whole. Litterers wield a strikingly similar potentiality: acknowledged as placing their property in a zone of impropriety, they’re liberated to place any and all property into this zone. Simply put, like Marx’s “class of civil society which is not a class of civil society,” litterers potentiate their property by dis-owning it, and therefore their actions threaten commodity-production as a whole by calling

into question the concept of disposability. If disposability depends on litterability, then what's disposable is what, from the beginning, could never be totally owned in the first place.

In the wake of their defensive tactics, KAB overlooked the litterer's ability to emancipate commodities from their current form. Like the proletariat's ability to emancipate society, the litterer is imbued with the potential to emancipate the commodity's exchange-value while preserving its use-value, by making common what was privately owned—by making irredeemable what was once exchangeable. An unfamiliar, undecodable form of the commodity is then able to rampantly redefine many different forms of value in a capitalist economy. As I overheard a woman say the other day, “people litter on our street because they don't want the neighborhood to look nice and have people moving here, raising our rent.”

The condemnation of litter as “improper property” imbues it with the potential to combat the very structure that has attempted to cast it out. We've witnessed, first hand, how litter is used to fight police: from collecting large, durable objects for barricades to gathering heaps of flammable materials to produce smokescreens, the applicability of litter is unlimited during moments of protest and crisis. In fact, the near past of the Occupy movement is a pristine example of how litter can be used to build solidarity among those attempting to overthrow the current economic system. While city officials demanded that Occupy camps be demolished due to health-concerns, unlawful use of public space and littering, occupiers undermined such charges by proactively examining their own use of “waste.”

In some sense, the occupy camps acted as zones of “illegibility” that the state simply couldn't read without forcibly overwriting them through brute force. The secret power of litter is that—when it's made “legible” by those who stand in opposition to state and corporate control—it both opens opportunities for new forms of domesticity and exposes the state's inability to maintain juridical and economic power. A new type of economy, then, a new form of domestic governance, is secretly embedded within our relationship to litter, just waiting to legislate. Litter's “legibility,” developed by litterers and those associated with new forms of “disposability,” plays an important role in Brazil's “Economy.”

“THE LOST HALO” AND THE TRANSMISSIBLE

“What do I see, my dear fellow? You—here? I find you in a place of ill repute—a man who sips quintessences, who consumes ambrosias? Really! I couldn’t be more surprised.”

“You know, my dear fellow, how afraid I am of horses and carriages. A short while ago I was hurrying across the boulevard, and amidst this moving chaos in which death comes galloping at you from all sides at once I must have made an awkward movement, for the halo slipped off my head and fell onto the muddy asphalt pavement. I didn’t have the courage to pick it up, and decided that it hurts less to lose one’s insignia than to have one’s bones broken. And furthermore, I said to myself, every cloud has a silver lining. Now I can go about incognito, do bad things, and indulge in vulgar behavior like ordinary mortals. So here I am, just like you!”

“But you ought to report the loss of your halo or inquire at the lost-and-found office.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I like it here. You are the only person who has recognized me. Besides, dignity bores me. And I enjoy the thought that some bad poet will pick up the halo and won’t think twice about adorning himself with it. There is nothing I like better than to make someone happy—especially if the happy man is one I can laugh at. Just picture X. wearing it, or Y.! Won’t that be funny?”

—Baudelaire, “The Lost Halo”⁴

A litterer is a person who makes, what David Brazil calls, “an attempt to discover the contingent prosody inside of the intersection of objects, days, a space...”⁵ Legal definition aside, litterers cannot not negate their property. For the litterer, this contradiction acts as a zone of indiscernability where an object’s prosodic capability is made accessible. In fact, the litterer highlights the destructive hold of commodity-production in which the authoritative grip of price strangles an object’s prosody. Because of this, the litterer and poet share a deep interest in reading and activating objects in the world.

Why litter is imbued with such potentiality can be anecdotally explained by analyzing Baudelaire’s “The Lost Halo,” if we follow Giorgio Agamben’s statement that “the greatness of Baudelaire with respect to the invasion of the commodity was that he responded to this invasion by transforming the work of art into a commodity and a fetish.”⁶ Agamben’s analysis contributes towards the elucidation of litter’s transformation from a commodity into a work of art, emancipating its own exchange-value while making possible a complete change of the value-form within a capitalist economy.

Baudelaire's acute sense of the commodity's powerful hold over the work of art is what grants the speaker of "The Lost Halo" the power to indict the "bad" poet as the retriever of the littered halo, an assumption which presupposes that the "good" poet is the litterer. This odd accusation comes from Baudelaire's sensitivity to the thin line between the artist as creator and artist as producer, wherein a moral system shifts toward favoring "perfectly delightful" production practices. "That is," says Agamben of Baudelaire, "he divided, within the work of art itself, use-value from exchange-value, the work's traditional authority from its authenticity."⁷ When Baudelaire remarks that "every cloud has its silver lining," it's clear that a poem can be inspired by both a prostitute and a drug-induced experience so long as the poem resists divine authority. As Agamben says, with a frighteningly related image, "the aura of frozen intangibility that from this moment began to surround the work of art is the equivalent of the fetishistic character that the exchange value impresses on the commodity."⁸

Now that the poem and the commodity are each surrounded with the same silver lining of "frozen intangibility," the poet can "produce" poems rather than "create" them. The fetishization of the poem, like that of the commodity, devalues the importance of Baudelaire's halo: when every commodity has its own silver lining, the poet would be better off suspending the old moral inclination of singing what's divinated for the amusement of carrying on carelessly, like one lost within the music of the crowd (or the movement of the market, where things are purchased according to the speed at which they exchange hands). The fetishization of the poem results in an indifference to its source, its transmission, in favor of receiving the poem for what it, and only it, can transmit: the very negation of its "use."

The poet's halo, traditionally thought of as the sign of divine transmission, is lost to the work of art itself. In order to complete the transformation of the poem into the transmissible object, Baudelaire had to throw the poem into, what Agamben calls, "an absolute commodity . . . in which the process of fetishization would be pushed to the point of annihilating the reality of the commodity itself."⁹ This push of the poem towards the furthest limit of the commodity-form finally associates it with litter. Like litter, the poem becomes "a commodity in which use-value and exchange value reciprocally cancel out each other, whose value therefore consists in its uselessness and whose use in its intangibility, [and so] is no longer a commodity: the absolute commodification of the work of art is also the most radical abolition of the commodity."¹⁰ What the work of art and litter finally come to share is the abolition of use-value and exchange-value within the commodity form. But such an abolition, or push "to the point of annihilating . . . reality," is not—cannot be—the final resting place. With the mark of a pen, what was once an abandoned commodity can emerge from its slumber, rid of its chains, in the form of an unaccounted for, absolutely redemptive potentiality.

LITTERATURE

The house is the form of its
transmission, but if the house
is broken, if in my dreams I
no longer know where I live,
how do we proceed, from what
do we gather the signs from . . .¹²

Early on in “Economy,” Brazil posits the house as “the form of [economy’s] / transmission.” But if the house is broken, how do we proceed? If the economy is non-transmissible, not because it cannot transmit, but because the form it takes is broken, then how do we know that we’re “doing the right things with [our] time?”¹³

The entirety of “Economy” pivots on this question and, of the many questions that could be posed, it escapes the current economy’s rationale: unable to directly answer back, capitalism, through the distraction of material appearances, attempts to prevent the search for an answer. For capitalism, we know too well, the question is not whether or not we’re doing the right things with our time, but whether we’re making the most profit (or progress) with our time. Brazil’s question, then, can be thought of as a dialectical reversal of the question asked by capitalism, because Brazil’s question of time is not meant to determine profitability, but to determine transmissibility: not “how can I get the most out of my time?” but “how can I let time pass through me absolutely?” Brazil doesn’t see economy itself as an intransmissible form; instead, he recognizes the form of capitalism as a broken house or a broken form of economy that transmits the signs we’ll need to proceed through life. But, because this form of the economy is broken, the transmissions are broken and so we must search for pieces that have been forgotten or left out and turn them into the house’s ability to transmit new and different laws once again.

From the very start, Brazil’s lyric takes on a philological tone and format, sifting through theological, poetic and political texts and comparing them next to the forms of the abandoned paper he finds during his walks down streets.

“this is fucking garbage,”
all dialectized with respect to the form,
continuing contribution towards an understanding of
what this is by form . . .¹⁴

As all good philologists do, Brazil seeks in abandoned material not only the determination of its meaning, but also, the authenticity and the form of its transmission. If the economy is to be the authentic and meaningful “law of the / house,” and if this house is broken, is the proper form of its transmission to be found in the abandoned materiality of what it once was? Of what it was as property? Is the form of its transmission found in what it is as broken, improper property?

I thought I could write ECONOMY by dwelling
on the human symbolic, constitution of the systems
of exchange & the subjects that such systems make,
but these systems depend on a substrate of stuff
that we do not make, that we are moreover given,
or whose appearance to us takes on the form or gives
the impression of given.¹⁵

If the economy is transmissible, it's not through the systems of symbols that humans have made because these systems are made of materials that are either given ready-made or given so as to appear ready-made. Because the materials of the economy are read through the logic of the economy's operation, it's difficult to discover the form of the economy's transmission if the operation of reading it is an operation of the form itself.

An economy or an episteme is a reading system,
which decides first that a thing is legible according
to its code before saying what it says/means.¹⁶

In the beginning of “Economy,” we're exposed to the lyrical contradiction that Brazil faces: if we're a result of the system that makes us up, how can we objectively study this system? If we're to read the economy as Brazil proposes then we have to overcome our reading by seeking out forms from different systems, forms that are not made by us, but that are given to us—forms that have been abandoned, looked-over or over-worked.

In the interview with Donovan, Brazil includes a passage from “Corinthians, 4:13: *ως περικαθαρματα του κοσμου εγενηθημεν, παντων περιψημα εως αρτι* (we have become as the refuse of the world [or the kosmos], the off-scouring of all things until now),” which he says, “is also reflected in our material reality, in our relation with the objects through which we think ourselves and in which we model all possible relations.”¹⁷ Much like litter, “we are cast out, cast off, traduced and abjected, left with no history.” Through the world we walk, and even in our dreams we no longer know where we live so that our propriety is absolutely improper. Like litter, we live in a state of impropriety in relation to the economy, which the

economy upholds as a vital function of its progress through time. So long as the unlimited use of earth's resources is justified in the name of progress, then litter must exist to mark the limit of this progress. By laying dormant and not quite out of reach, litter dissuades us from understanding progress as progressing towards the end of humanity. If we continue to look upon certain objects as forever useless to humans, then it's only logical to use the world as that which will be forever useful. But it's this very logic that alienates us from seeing what we are, from seeing the limits that define us as our time "here-now." As humans, we must stand properly-improper to time so that we can locate within time what is given to us, which is not a property of us or ours, but which brings us the forms through which we can transmit beyond ourselves. Precisely because we are properly-improper to our time, Brazil finds litter a useful material to work with:

... I discovered
a good basic rule which is to use found paper,
which will speak to me in the way it wants to,
an unpredictable way, like memory or like
phenomena. So we can examine the space that
prevails between subject and object . . .¹⁸

"The space that prevails between subject and object," for Brazil, might be understood as time, but an "unpredictable" time, "like memory" where time's malleability kisses the liminality of a space that doesn't yet exist.¹⁹ This memory would be that of what's abandoned, but as a projection of a future where what's abandoned is equal to what's forgotten (and so can be remembered into our present moment as an import to solutions for the future). Brazil's rule of using "found paper" then lends him the potential to access what's been forgotten in time through what's been abandoned in space.

In writing about Brazil's question ("am I doing the right things with my time?"), C.J. Martin says, "it's a question of DOING-WITH,"

It's precisely in poem-work, with all its thrown wrenches—where "art becomes this house of touch" NOT RHETORIC & NOT YET DIRECT ACTION—precisely here that the question of economy can be hazarded without recourse to consensus-toward-movement—& where the question of will it have mattered (or will we be strung up anyway) can nonetheless land with the force of an inexorable momentum (of fucking proceeding regardless).²⁰

Locating "poem-work" between rhetoric and action elucidates Brazil's question, which is less a question of poetic form and more a question of the intersection between political and poetic praxis. "Proceeding regardless" of the politico-poetic question as mere rhetoric, Brazil suggests "doing-with" litter what we, for instance,

could be “doing-with” money. As Brazil explains in his interview with Donovan, “Robert Kocik spoke to this concern [of creating a commons] when he said . . . we have to make a commons out of money . . . using money to destroy money.”²¹ Similarly, by using litter to “destroy” litter—by working poetry’s disposition through litter or by using poetry as a place to dispose of litter—Brazil, first, finds an “economy of / the legible here, in / local reading.”²² Secondly, by incorporating litter throughout “Economy,” he both reifies poetry and makes litter legible (and therefore disposable). And, finally, his ability to dispose of litter is measured by his “doing-with” litter the reification of poetry, which makes possible the dialectical reversal of litter. Such a “doing-with” is made possible because Brazil finds his vocation, as a poet, in the liminal space that’s “not rhetoric & not yet direct action,” a space “in which,” he says,

. . . whichever
orphaned scrap I
find can come to
speak to me, the
way that I can
come to hearing²³

Situating itself within the possibility of discovering previously disregarded answers to continually present and difficult questions, which often prevent political action from ever actually taking place, “economy” unearths a lost form of transmission between poet and world. We might call this forms of transmissibility and disposability “litterature.”

Notes

1. For further reading, see Heather Rogers, “The Conquest of Garbage,” *International Socialist Review*: <http://www.isreview.org/issues/53/garbage.shtml>.
2. Thom Donovan, “David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost, & Evan Kennedy,” *BOMB*, April 14, 2014: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000095/david-brazil-jacqueline-frost-evan-kennedy>.
3. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.
4. This translation of “The Lost Halo” is derived from *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 209.
5. Thom Donovan, “David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost, & Evan Kennedy,” *BOMB*, April 14, 2014: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000095/david-brazil-jacqueline-frost-evan-kennedy>.
6. Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 42.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. David Brazil, *The Ordinary* (Compline, 2013), CIII.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid, CXI.
15. Ibid, CXII.
16. Ibid, CXIV.
17. Thom Donovan, "David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost, & Evan Kennedy," *BOMB*, April 14, 2014: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000095/david-brazil-jacqueline-frost-evan-kennedy>.
18. David Brazil, *The Ordinary* (Oakland: Compline, 2013), CXVII.
19. Like Rob Halpern says of "non-sites [that] compose the strata of many forgotten events, and potentialize the transfigured memory of our future": <http://www.thetoleranceprojectarchive.org/halpernnonsite.html>.
20. C.J Martin, "The Ordinary Weather (Part IV)": <http://www.on-contemporarypractice.squarespace.com/>.
21. Thom Donovan, "David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost, & Evan Kennedy," *BOMB*, April 14, 2014: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000095/david-brazil-jacqueline-frost-evan-kennedy>.
22. David Brazil, *The Ordinary* (Oakland: Compline, 2013), CLIV.
23. Ibid, CLIX.

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