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Luke Davies



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Rachele Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde*

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- 1 Rachele Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde*
- 2 London: Palgrave, 2016. Pp. 253. ISBN 978-1-137-59061-9.
- 3 Luke Davies
- 4 University of Tübingen
- 5 The backdrop to *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction* is provided by Surrealist and Dadaist artists like Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara and Hans Arp, who first introduced *objets trouvés* and the principle of *bricolage* to the world of visual art. Rachele Dini's study starts with a reflection on how their recuperation of waste products constituted a radical attempt to destabilize the traditional boundaries between art and the everyday, and more generally to oppose "the mechanisation of the world" by seeming to celebrate the previously neglected value inherent in discarded objects. These discoveries set the tone for Dini's study of later twentieth century fiction writers: comprising of an analysis of a long list of seminal authors, including André Breton, Samuel Beckett, Donald Barthelme, J.G. Ballard and Don DeLillo. In the course of her analysis, Dini uncovers an undeniably prevalent fixation uniting a group of authors with an otherwise disparate set of interests. She's bold enough to claim that waste is "if not the central trope of all twentieth-century fiction, the central trope of countercultural fiction intent upon resisting capitalism's enveloping of language and art."
- 6 In a sense, it shouldn't be surprising to discover that waste preoccupies countercultural novelists interested in dissecting capitalism. As Dini puts it, capitalism is "contingent upon extreme efficiency on the side of production and extreme inefficiency on the side of consumption." In other words, waste is at the very core of the capitalist system,

being “predicated on the finite lifespan of objects and the creation of new needs and desires.” More surprising, perhaps, is the similarity of these authors’ responses to the subject of waste. Rather than simply alluding to our mass production of unwanted stuff in order to challenge and oppose current levels of excess, Dini sets out to demonstrate the diverse ways in which each of these authors perversely celebrate “the radical potential of waste,” building on Surrealist antecedents. She argues that in doing so they allow waste to signify “active resistance to commodification”—in particular by highlighting the arbitrariness of our assignments of value.

- 7 Dini’s study demonstrates that there are diverse ways in which waste’s radical potential has been harnessed by twentieth century novelists keen to uncover “the tenuousness of capitalism’s ascriptions of worth.” For instance, in a reading of Donald Barthelme’s brilliant (and neglected) surreal novella *Snow White*, Dini draws our attention to a passage in which one of the novel’s central characters creates a work of art that is immediately dismissed for having “the quality of poorness.” Rather than throwing it away, the character’s response is to “hurl it into the marketplace.” Dini suggests that by presenting the marketplace as equivalent to “a giant dustbin,” Barthelme’s intention is to parody “the marketplace in late capitalism”—indicating that it too is awash with objects that are “financially valuable but frequently void of aesthetic or semantic worth.”
- 8 In her analysis of Beckett’s major novels and dramatic texts, Dini provides an example of a very different approach to writing about waste, in which rather than its recuperation being used to parody aspects of capitalist culture, waste is used as the basis for determining entire new systems for assigning worth. When analysing a passage from *Waiting for Godot* in which Estragon tells Vladimir “We always find something [...] to give us the impression we exist,” Dini argues:
- 9 The flippant sarcasm of Vladimir’s retort, “Yes yes we’re magicians,” is deceptive. It is precisely on such apparently menial recuperative efforts, or what de Certeau, after Lévi-Strauss, terms “making do” (the direct translation of *bricolage*), that tactics gain their strength.
- 10 Dini contends that when “scavenging sticks and hats and mouldy food,” or “contemplating their own bodily emissions,” Beckett’s characters—far from being pity-inducing or somehow emblematic of humanity’s failures, as they are often seen to be—indicate “the radical potential of resisting use-putting and the radical potential of dwelling in waste—what we might term a poetics not of re-use, but of immersion.” On this basis she presents refreshingly unambiguous and materially-minded readings of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnameable*, *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is*—describing how in these works a “world of commodities is replaced by a world of unusable, perished goods,” with the consequence that “time, divested of the need to work or consume, is devoted to idleness.”
- 11 Dini’s reading of Beckett’s characters as semi-heroic is both against the grain and compelling. This pattern is echoed in her interpretation of J.G. Ballard’s novel *Crash*—which similarly inverts standard readings of the novel by refusing to ascribe an abstract, metaphorical value to its central motif. Instead, Dini reads *Crash* at face value as a novel about car wrecks: though this doesn’t stop her from interrogating Ballard’s decision to concentrate on this theme. Dini writes: “a car crash both accelerates the process of obsolescence and goes against the dictum that one look after one’s investment.” Pursuing this line of thought, she develops a reading of Ballard’s novel

according to which he is seen to be “simultaneously literalising the consumerist ethos, and providing a radical alternative to it.” By fetishising the valueless, destroyed remainders of cars, Ballard can be seen to be challenging the basis upon which society chooses to value certain objects above others, whilst at the same time parodying our voyeurism and appetite-driven behaviour. By presenting characters who find value in sucking stones and crushed chassis, authors like Beckett and Ballard not only prove how arbitrary the system for determining worth is when operating within a capitalist framework, but also indicate how easily the current system for ascribing value to objects can be challenged and replaced. Their novels both mimic existing methods for randomly assigning worth to certain objects and activities, and in their peculiar inversions of these cultural norms suggest that other formulae for determining value are available.

- 12 In many ways, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction* feels like it is just the beginning of a whole new field of critical inquiry. As Dini herself admits: “an exhaustive study of [waste] would amount to an account of the entire Western canon.” Reading this study, it’s impossible not to be distracted by thoughts about its inevitable omissions, and the diverse ways in which it could be expanded. For instance, I found myself asking how the same trends in fiction can be seen to be paralleled or contradicted by patterns in late twentieth century visual art: be it Gustav Metzger’s auto-destructive art, Jean Dubuffet’s outsider art, or Michael Landy’s more recent conceptual explorations of waste and value. Another obvious direction this study could take would be to think about how the cultural outputs of non-Western cultures recently assimilated into the globalisation project could also be taken into account. Dini’s refusal to get sidetracked by such questions isn’t a sign of her study’s shortcomings: it’s more an indication of how widely relevant and vital her subject matter turns out to be.
- 13 Given the unprecedented challenges we currently face—with spiraling inequality, increasingly limited resources, the threat of climate change, a migrant crisis and a continually expanding global population—*Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction* is a timely and important intervention. Its nuanced readings of literary classics not only suggest the continuing relevance of the works it explores, but also the vital importance of what they set out to do: to define how our lives are shaped by capitalism and to try and to imagine ways in which we might escape its grasp. At times, the analysis in this study performs the miraculous feat of suggesting the fallibility of that terrifying and oft quoted dictum that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.

AUTHOR

LUKE DAVIES

University of Tübingen