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# Trash, dirt, glitch: The imperfect turn

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## Abstract

'Trash, dirt, glitch' offers an introduction to a cluster devoted to trash, dirt and glitch – concepts that, in aesthetic and artistic domains, firmly merit joint exploration. In fashion and urban design, music, art and other aesthetic practices, the trashy, the dirty and the glitchy interconnect in complex choreographies, in discourses and practices where they are framed as benefit rather than bother. For this cluster, the authors asked four scholars in media, design and fashion to examine the interconnections between trash, dirt and glitch as affirmatively charged categories. They do so through in-depth studies of 'dirt(y)' and glitch-based sound-making practices and media art in Australia (Caleb Kelly); German electronic and glitch music (Jakko Kemper); dirt and trash aesthetics in sneaker fashion and (especially but not only) US-based grunge subcultures (Ekaterina Kulinicheva); and discourses of dirt and disorder in the creative industry in Russia (Margarita Kuleva). This introduction contextualizes their findings and offers tools to theorize the present-day interest in dirt-, trash-, and glitch-based aesthetics as an imperfect turn. This turn we envision not as an unprecedented shift, but as the latest in a series of socio-technologically motivated historical imperfect turns. The imperfect turn that we witness today is not without its flaws – but, as we argue below, it *can* facilitate important social interventions.

## Keywords

Aesthetics, art, design, dirt, glitch, imperfection, trash

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## Introduction

In aesthetic and artistic domains, trash, dirt and glitch firmly merit joint exploration. In fashion and urban design, music, art and other aesthetic practices, the trashy, the dirty and the glitchy interconnect in complex choreographies, in discourses and practices where they are framed as benefit rather than bother. For this cluster, we asked four scholars in media, design and fashion to examine the interconnections between trash, dirt and glitch as affirmatively charged categories. They do so through in-depth studies of, first, ‘dirt(y)’ and glitch-based sound-making practices and media art in Australia (Caleb Kelly); second, German electronic and glitch music (Jakko Kemper); third, dirt and trash aesthetics in sneaker fashion and (especially but not only) US-based grunge subcultures (Ekaterina Kulinicheva); and, fourth, discourses of dirt and disorder in the creative industry in Russia (Margarita Kuleva). In this introduction, we contextualize their findings and offer tools to theorize the present-day interest in dirt-, trash-, and glitch-based aesthetics as an imperfect turn. This turn we envision not as an unprecedented shift, but as the latest in a series of socio-technologically motivated historical imperfect turns. The imperfect turn that we witness today is not without its flaws – but, as we argue below, it *can* facilitate important social interventions.

## Trash, dirt, glitch: popular usage

The notions of trash, dirt and glitch boast a number of parallels and interconnections. Some are self-evident – or so a bird’s-eye view of their semantic histories and connotations in popular language tells us.

- In modern societies, the term *trash(y)* historically refers to (broken, torn, or valueless) material surplus that elaborates institutional systems and devices clear from public space (think of household trash, plastic trash or trash barrels). In metaphorical constructions, trash can also indicate an undesired or underprivileged social status (white trash, trashy clothes) (Humes, 2013; Rogers, 2005). In the phrase ‘trash culture’, it stands for entertainment that is quickly consumed and discarded (Simon, 1997).
- The noun and adjective *dirt(y)* *can* acquire positive functions (think of dirt cures, or of the fertile dirt used in farming and gardening) – but in popular language, it often refers to valueless material waste that needs to be cleaned or cleared from view (a dirty dress, dirty dishes). Its association with the low ground renders dirt a source of humiliation or insult (‘eat dirt!’), and when used in symbolic terms, dirt can also stand for problematic or unethical conduct (as in the metaphorical ‘dirty hands’). Dirt thus reveals itself as something materially or metaphorically sticky, which infiltrates what should supposedly stay clean or pure (Douglas, 2001; Logan, 2007).
- The substantially newer term *glitch* was introduced in the 1940s to denote machinic bugs and flaws (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001–2017). Today glitches stand both for small, usually temporary and surmountable problems

(glitches in transcultural communication) and for faults in electronic and digital systems (glitches in soundtracks, new Windows versions) (Menkman, 2011). In metaphorical usage, the glitch – as an intrinsic rather than external systemic disruption – can extend to any kind of system, including the body and the brain (see Russell, 2013 for an example).

In these popular semantic histories, each of the three concepts can be identified as an undesired interruption or disturbance in the everyday. In traditional language, dirt, trash and glitch each stand for something that becomes visible, audible, smelly or even tactile when these sensory effects are unwanted.

## Trash, dirt, glitch as aesthetic categories

The same three concepts boast a different but, again, closely intertwined status in aesthetic domains. Among artists, designers and theorists, the trend to embrace rather than shun the dirty, the trashy and the glitchy has a long and rich history – even if some critics stubbornly continued to proclaim the practices themselves rubbish. In 15th-century Japanese tea ceremonies, tea masters already responded to ‘the prevailing taste for opulence and luxury’ with an ‘aesthetics of imperfection’ (Saito, 1997, 2017); – one in which blemishes, mud and trashy-looking tea utensils and tea rooms were idolized so avidly that one critic spoke of an ‘unspeakably disgusting custom’ with ‘filthy and damaged old bowls’ (Shundai cited in Varley, 1989: 171). Rembrandt van Rijn later similarly celebrated an aesthetics that historian Simon Schama calls a ‘poetry of imperfection’. At a time when masters taught their art pupils to opt for polished surfaces and smooth curves, the Dutch painter was, in Schama’s words, ‘powerfully drawn to’ their opposite: ‘the pits and pocks . . . [t]he piebald, the scrofulous, the stained, and the encrusted’, and the dust, dirt and debris of a

decomposing wall, coming apart in discrete layers, each with its own pleasingly distinct texture: the risen, curling skin of the limewash; the broken crust of the chalky plaster, and the dusty brick beneath; the minute crevices gathering dark ridges of grunge. (Schama, 1999)

Rembrandt and the Japanese tea masters are mere examples from a much longer list of cultural and social practices that ascribed aesthetic value to trash, dirt and objects that ranked as flawed at the given time and place. With time, artists also started literally integrating dirt and trash into their work. German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer has famously amalgamated dirt and waste in the texture of his canvases from the late 1970s onwards, as part of his aesthetic reflections on the traumas of 20th-century history. More recently, US-based artist Zoe Leonard carefully stitched together again the skins of over 300 pieces of dried and faded fruit in her installation *Strange Fruit* (1992–1997) – a symbolic gesture of trash preservation in response to the AIDS crisis during which the queer body was seen as dirty and as waste. In a yet more recent past, (fashion) designers started weaving glitches into textiles and wooden objects, in designs that simultaneously build on digital tools *and* demonstrate a heightened interest in craft and tactility (for examples, see Openshaw 2015).

To these and many other cultural professionals, the undesired material and/or social status that the semantic categories of dirt, trash and glitch traditionally boast becomes a plus rather than a problem – and in some cases, we witness a downright romanticization of dirt, trash or systemic glitches (on the problematic dimensions of this romanticization, see Whiteley, 2010).

We are not the first to point to this historical and recent preoccupation with the non-clean and the non-smooth. Existing theorizations (by, among others, Douglas, 2001; Twemlow, 2017; Vergine 2007; Whiteley, 2010) demonstrate that this preoccupation is both old and persistent. The same preoccupation *is*, however, gaining new urgency today – and so is the complex interconnection between trash, dirt and glitch logic.

In recent decades, media, art and culture theorists and practitioners have harboured an insistent interest in

- ‘dirt[y] media’ practices, which – so media theoretician Caleb Kelly argues in this cluster – highlight that media is ‘material’, rather than ‘pristine, pure and immaterial’, as traditional takes on media materialities argue, ‘and being so, is able to become dirty’.
- ‘dirty art’; as (un)defined by designer Jerszy Seymour (n.d.) (for definitions seem to be at odds with his notion of ‘dirty art’ itself), this term refers to a heady mixture of art, design and pedagogy that ‘seeks to reject the division between the pure and the applied’, opening up to spaces of cross-pollination and contamination;
- a ‘politics of trash’ – art historian Gillian Whiteley’s (2010) phrase for capturing the ‘appropriation of junk’ within an ‘eco-conscious and globalized culture’;
- ‘trash culture’ – the term that literary historian David LaGuardia (2008) uses to examine ‘how people structure their identities in relation to’ everyday cultural objects that are traditionally considered valueless, including, among other things, ‘popular music, cars, travelling, tourism, television shows, clothes, fashion, trends, and pop culture icons’;
- ‘glitch studies’, artist-theoretician Rosa Menkman’s (2011) term for a field of study that promotes ‘the critical trans-media aesthetics of glitch artifacts’ and that sees ‘bends and breaks as metaphors for différance’ and ‘the glitch as an exoskeleton for progress’;
- ‘glitch aesthetics’, as interaction designer Iman Moradi calls ‘the practice of creating or capturing visual manifestations of Glitches in today’s highly signal perfect media and pixel perfect computer interfaces’ (Moradi et al., 2009); and
- ‘glitch art’ – Michael Betancourt’s (2017) term for glitch practices as they take shape in visual arts within the ‘contemporary digital political economy’.

## Trash, dirt, glitch and social transition

These and analogous recent theorizations of trash, dirt and glitch are drastically diverse – but together, they lucidly demonstrate that the present-day preoccupation with the three notions does not come out of nowhere. Each ascribes value to practices and objects that traditionally rank as problematic, faulty or valueless. And each does so in response to a

set of drastic and tightly interwoven social transitions that took place between roughly the late 1980s and today in more than one world locality.

First, some of the artists and other ‘makers’ who foreground a logic of trash, dirt or glitch actively engage with a neopopulist or neonationalist turn in politics and media. They promote what sociologist Alexis Shotwell (2016) calls a ‘politics of imperfection’ – one that responds to a revival of ‘the racist, nativist, and eugenicist right’ whose call for purity ‘demobilizes us’ by taking responsibility and ‘listening well to the people, beings and ecosystems most vulnerable to devastation’ (Shotwell, 2016). Margarita Kuleva’s contribution to this cluster, for example, analyses how ‘creatives’ navigate the cultural field in Russia through a direct appeal to the ‘dirty’ and ‘trashy’ in order to set themselves apart from a state-supported, purity-promoting ‘high culture’. Trash, dirt and glitch aesthetics cannot be understood outside this and related social and political dynamics which insist on pureness and wholeness.

The same aesthetics cannot be isolated either from climate change or other pressing ecological issues – issues that confront us with plastic accumulating in the sea (Alaimo, 2016), overflowing landfills (Yaeger, 2008) and other sites of dirt and pollution that are part and parcel of everyday life (Sullivan, 2012). Simultaneously, the infrastructures of waste move alongside cash flows, compelling processes of tracing what Arjun Appadurai (1988) has called ‘the social life of things’. Indeed, trash is a beloved medium for ecologically minded artists who wish to comment on capitalist histories of industrialization and mass consumption that will leave their traces on ecosystems for centuries to come (Boetzkes, 2019). Meanwhile, designers are exploring sustainable ways to recycle objects which display glitches or which have otherwise been considered worthless within traditional aesthetic hierarchies (Harper, 2017; Hosey, 2012). Within this cluster, Caleb Kelly persuasively demonstrates how environmental crises can and should impact on aesthetic choices. As he explains, alternative practices of ‘dirt(y)’ media-making become especially pertinent in an age in which the continued dependence on fossil fuels can no longer be taken for granted.

Apart from political and ecological concerns, the practices that we study in this cluster are driven by economic anxieties. Trash, dirt and glitch aesthetics resonate with force in an economic reality that insists on (aesthetic and affective) experience and emotions (Gilmore and Pine, 1999; Illouz, 2007; Lipovetsky, 2015). As Ekaterina Kulinicheva demonstrates in her contribution, hi-end fashion houses today turn to so-called ‘distressed sneaker design’ – sneakers with dirt or trash effects or other visible blemishes – as a marketing strategy. Kulinicheva tracks how the distressed-sneaker aesthetic, borrowed from 1990s grunge culture, oozes an aura of rebellion and resistance that contemporary consumers both embrace and (in response to topdown appropriations of the same aesthetic) distrust. She links their distrust to increasingly influential calls for consumer and capitalist criticism.

Finally, the makers and speakers whom we examine respond to mediatization, and digitization in particular. Glitch, trash and dirt can function to flag the decentralization of human agency in a digital age, for instance. Glitchy phones and the refusal of e-waste to simply melt away compel us to reckon with forces beyond our control (Grossman, 2006). In his analysis of German glitch music, Jakko Kemper analyses how the increasing invisibility of new technologies affects our everyday aesthetic preferences. As he illustrates,

the materiality of new technologies mattered hard to early glitch musicians and artists, whereas today, they primarily engage with ‘our own shifting status in the face of our opaque technologies’.

The above overview demonstrates not only *why* we witness a particularly insistent infatuation with the notions of trash, dirt and glitch today. They also illustrate that in aesthetic practices, these notions can slip smoothly *into each other’s realms*. Glitches can have a decidedly material origin, and the (post-)digital sphere enables new and playful metaphorical configurations of the trashy and dirty. The art work *Earthboot* (2014) by Martin Howse, discussed in Kelly’s article, uses literal dirt to boot up a computer, creating a glitchy start-up procedure that puts the computer into a dialogue with the earth from which it came in the first place. The German electronic collective Oval, as Kemper explains, attain the noisy sound that typifies glitch music by reconfiguring ‘detritus’ and ‘digital trash’. Kuleva demonstrates how the visual presence of dirt in creative spaces can act as a signal for visitors: this institution adopts a trashy aesthetics and defies the ‘high-culture’ dynamics of state-owned museums. Mud smears, stains or signs of wear can function as similar signals for adepts of ‘contemporary fashion that aestheticizes trash’, so Kulinicheva argues in her analysis. As she demonstrates, consumers and producers of this aesthetic both fetishize dirt by design and dirt by usage: while Gucci purportedly pre-dirties their ‘Screener Sneakers’, the authors of grunge styleguides advise sneaker wearers to ‘go stamp around in dirt/mud in them’.

These and other interrelations between positive assessments of trash, dirt and glitch are the object of joint exploration in this cluster. What its authors examine is a selection of social practices whose makers and consumers use (a logic of) trash, dirt and glitch to critically interrogate social conventions and transitions.

## Disclaimers

The analyses that follow merit three disclaimers.

The first disclaimer pertains to different readings of the same concepts. Although many of the examples mentioned in this work are characterized by a recognizable aesthetic, what qualifies as dirt, trash or glitch is in the eye of the beholder. The three concepts, put differently, are susceptible to constant reinterpretation. In her, by now, canonical study of dirt, Mary Douglas (2001) argues that ‘dirt’, rather than ‘a unique, isolated event’, is ‘the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements’. The notions of trash and glitch are similarly slippery concepts: what ranks as a system bug for one laptop owner is a poetic intervention for the other, and what belongs in a trash can for one consumer is an object of aesthetic admiration for the other.

The second disclaimer is that there is a tension at work between the critical potential that trash, dirt and glitch aesthetics hold, on the one hand, and their ability to fold into capitalist logic, on the other. As we argued earlier, praising the trashy, dirty and glitchy can be a smart commercial choice in an economic system that insists on aesthetic and affective experiences – and trash, dirt and glitch aesthetics resonate louder among the haves than among the havenots (buyers of Martin Margiela’s ‘Dirty Treatment’ sneakers, at \$885 a pair, can also afford picture-perfect footwear). In this cluster, we are sensitive to problems of

privilege – but rather than resolving the tension between critical potential and commodification, we want to highlight their interconnection throughout the different analyses.

The final disclaimer pertains to location and our transnational approach to the objects of study in this publication. In this cluster, we juxtapose and jointly theorize Russian, Australian, German and American empirical materials, alongside case studies by Czech and Japanese cultural producers, among others; for further research, analyses from the global south would be a welcome addition. Our choice to combine these materials from different world locations is our way of taking issue with an ongoing anglocentric bias in studies of visual culture, arts and media. Despite repeated pleas to take these scholarly domains beyond anglophone and ‘western’ paradigms (see Abbas and Nguyet Erni, 2004; Groseclose and Wierich, 2009; Herdin et al., 2018; Mishra and Kern-Stone, 2019; Thussu, 2009, among others), many scholars continue to limit themselves exclusively to English-speaking sources without acknowledging that linguo-cultural demarcation. The analyses in this cluster exchange the deterritorialized anglophone gaze for a so-called ‘transcultural approach’. In the words of media scholars Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (who apply the concept to media studies), ‘transcultural’ studies examine practices that are ‘not “placed” at a defined locality but rearticulated through disembedded communicative processes, while still being related to a greater or lesser number of localities within or beyond particular national or regional boundaries’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2009: 32). The analysis below exchanges both strictly nation-bound and universalist lenses for this more finegrained transcultural approach.

## Conclusion: the imperfect turn

Imperfection: at this point, this term has repeatedly surfaced in this introduction. That persistence is not coincidental, and we conclude this introduction by theorizing the practices that our authors scrutinize as manifestations of an imperfect turn.

Rather than framing the present-day interest in dirt, trash and glitch as three isolated preoccupations that occasionally blend and overlap, we envision them as part of a larger infatuation with objects and practices that, within the normative social contexts in which they arise, rank as ‘imperfect’. In a dialogue with existing reflection on a persistence of ‘the negative’ (Noys, 2010) and on ‘apophatic thinking’ (Galloway, 2016) in art and theory, we understand this infatuation as an imperfect turn. We use that term to highlight how, between the late 1980s and today, producers and consumers across various disciplines and world localities have increasingly shared:

1. A fascination for objects or systems that they or others present as deviations from ‘perfection’, and which are subjected to decay, destruction, deformation or incompleteness (think, apart from the objects of study in this cluster, of deliberately wonkily crafted design objects; torn jeans; rickety-looking bars and shops; ‘shaky cam’ film or photography; or the pleas against perfection in how-to-live-well manuals (see Brown, 2010 for an example); and
2. A habit of framing this purported imperfection as an asset (as a token for authenticity, a hallmark for well-being, or as a gateway to sublime aesthetic experiences, for instance), in times of technological and socioeconomic transition.



This habit of framing imperfection as benefit rather than bother has a rich history, upon which we briefly touched above. Rather than envisioning the contemporary imperfect turn as an unprecedented shift, we envision it as part of this history – or, put more pointedly, as the latest in a series of socio-technologically motivated historical imperfect turns. As one of us has argued elsewhere (Rutten, 2020), we witness a similarly disciplinary-transcending preoccupation with imperfect shapes, feelings and selves in the Romantic era and in the early 20th century (on the history and dynamics of the trend to celebrate imperfection see, apart from Rutten, Saito and Schama – whom we mentioned earlier – also Gioia (1988), Nemoianu (2006) and Sandel (2007).

Our age – which we defined here as the years between roughly the early 2020s and the late 2010s – is another historical era in which designers, art practitioners, media users and consumers share a particularly lively fascination with the imperfect. Practices in which trash, dirt and glitch rank as aesthetically valuable categories are part and parcel of this broader imperfect turn between the late 1980s and today. A study of these practices helps to unpack the current heightened interest in the non-perfected and its relation to drastic mediatization and digitization, the neopopulist/neonationalist trends and the local and global ecological and economic problems that we discussed earlier.

Our authors offer four different prisms on the imperfect turn. Before concluding, we briefly introduce these four different prisms.

Margarita Kuleva investigates the working lives and public perceptions of private and public cultural institutions in Russia's two largest cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg. She identifies two paradigms of cultural production – 'high culture' and 'creativity' – which not only co-exist in the hybrid economy of the Russian art world, but which compete with each other for resources of funding, public attention and legitimation. As Kuleva demonstrates, binaries of purity/dirt and order/disorder are utilized to develop organizational identities, work organization and community building, including interaction with the institutions' audiences.

Caleb Kelly addresses dirt media through media ecologies, by investigating how Australian media artists have made their work literally dirty. Kelly first addresses the notion of media as a material entity which can literally become dirty, and which is conceptualized in oppositions to 'the imagined' as pristine, pure and immaterial. Next, he offers a pre-history of dirt(y) media based on the work of Czech artist Milan Knížák and his Swiss-American colleague Christian Marclay, to then conclude by discussing a shift in the approach to contemporary media from digital studio towards analogue and physical practices.

Jakko Kemper examines how everyday life is affected by new technological conditions through an inquiry into the figure of the glitch. He draws on two concepts from cultural studies – spectrality and post-digital cultures – to demonstrate how the imperfection-oriented aesthetic of the glitch is today complicated by the technological tendency to bypass human awareness. Central to Kemper's argument is a close reading of a glitch album that has, with time, acquired a canonical status in the (modest but growing) domain of glitch-devoted studies: German electronic music group Oval's influential glitch-based record *94diskont* (1995).

Ekaterina Kulinicheva examines the controversial trend of pitching so-called 'distressed sneakers' – as said, this term is used for sneaker models that display visible

blemishes, mud streaks or other signs of wear – as a contemporary fashion product. She uses a genealogy to examine the meanings that distressed sneakers can acquire for their producers and consumers. First, Kulinicheva discusses the history of grunge and its importance to the trend; next, she demonstrates how 1990s grunge fan cultures impacted on the popularity of distressed sneakers in high-end fashion. The larger question on which her analysis focuses is: what can the emergence and flourishing of intentionally imperfect-looking sneakers as a trend tell us about contemporary consumerism?


As the cluster as a whole demonstrates, the imperfect turn that recent social transitions feed sparks an interest in trash, dirt and glitch aesthetics, as part of a broader preoccupation with material disintegration and concrete sensibility. This preoccupation goes beyond the privileged realm of the visual: glitches can be audible, while the trashy and dirty can take the form of olfactory or tangible disruptions.

With this introduction, we hope to have shown two things. First, the imperfect turn should neither be romanticized nor mistaken for an unprecedented aesthetic transition. But, second, by unpacking the aesthetic, and highly sensory, engagement with trash, dirt and glitch of the makers and consumers who populate the pages that follow, this cluster does offer tools for an informed, resilient approach to the present-day reality and its inevitable social frictions.

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