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Sound of the Apocalypse

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Bone Machine is Tom Waits' 12th studio album and was a return to studio material for Waits after five years' break, releasing only a live album and a soundtrack. It won a Grammy in 1992 for Best Independent Album and it is graced by the haunting presences of Les Claypool (of Primus) and Keith Richards (Rolling Stones). It is an album that follows in the vein of *Rain Dogs* and *Swordfishtrombones* but with an even gloomier side, its lyric content focusing on death and murder and the music being recorded in a basement room of Prairie Sun Recording studios.

As a result, Tom Waits' album *Bone Machine* sounds like an apocalyptic vision, the clattering of percussion sounds like a dance of skeletons, while Waits' gravelly voice sounds like a necromancer conjuring ghosts of both past and future in a dance macabre of images that haunt America. The album is itself a bone machine, a thing stitched together with all the scars showing and so the monstrosity of Wait's album articulates the specters that surround an imminent apocalypse. *Bone Machine* starts with the Earth dying, then moves across a Gothic landscape of barns, empty highways to the allure of the west coast and ends with a plea to never grow up in this terrible world.

My argument in the following paper is that Waits' album undertakes an apocalyptic journey across the US, revealing and reveling in the ghosts it finds – ghosts that, in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's phrase "interrupt the presentness of the present, and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events." (5) I will trace this aural apocalypse in two ways: the first will be the monstrous media of the album itself, how Waits' recording techniques create an aural monster. Second, I will delve into the spectral subject of the album's lyrics – a Gothic version of the US, a view from the basement,

as it were, from the dark, damp and dank underground, a view that reveals an apocalypse but also a potential way out of this apocalypse.

Monstrous Media: A Bone Machine

The *Bone Machine* album was made in a basement room with nothing but a cement floor and a water heater, chosen because “it’s got some good echo.” (Montandon 146) This addition of echo is typical of Waits’ musical style since the 80s, when he moved away from the jazzy symphonic harmonies and turned to a more bluesy vaudevillian tradition; from recording in basements, rickety barns to placing the microphone inside the piano to catch as much of the piano incidental sound as possible, the addition of noise has featured prominently in Waits’ music. It seems as if Waits is intent on revealing and utilizing as much of the recording process as possible – making sure that the production actually becomes part of the production itself. This process can in many ways be considered a Frankensteinian aesthetics of stitching art together from disparate sources, of contaminating the recording with the ghosts that are usually exorcised in the name of pure sound. *Bone Machine* can thus be considered a haunted media in both Jeffrey Sconce’s and Marina Warner’s understanding – Waits invites ghosts into his music in the form of noise, but these ghosts begin to tell an interesting tale, so let us listen to them.

Noise

Noises, as Torben Sangild points out in his *The Aesthetics of Noise*, are “sounds that are impure and irregular, neither tones nor rhythm – roaring, peeling, blurry sounds with a lot of simultaneous frequencies, as opposed to a rounded sound with a basic frequency and its related overtones.” (Sangild 5) These noises may come from anywhere, any kind of source and is most often encountered today in the case of guitar distortion and feedback. For Waits,

though, we have already seen how he seeks noises in his recording environment – the echo of a cement floor, the creaking of an old barn, etc – but this does not make the noises any less integral to his music. Indeed, Waits has even developed his own types of percussion instruments such as the conundrum, described by Waits as:

it's really... It's just a metal configuration, like a metal cross. It looks a little bit like a Chinese torture device. It's a simple thing, but it makes... It give you access to these alternative sound sources. Hit 'em with a hammer. Sounds like a jail door. Closing. Behind you. I like it. You end up with bloody knuckles, when you play it. You just, you hit it with a hammer until you just, you can't hit it any more. ("Percussion Instruments")

These noises and irregular instruments do challenge the standard conventions of rock music but certainly no more than many other independent artists such as Sonic Youth, Jane's Addiction, etc and can in fact be said to be conventional in itself, adhering to a different set of conventions. What should not be ignored, however, is the sound that the conundrum makes in songs such as "The Ocean Doesn't Want Me" and "Let Me Get Up On It", where it adds a distinctive haunting noise, certainly not unlike that of a rack or other torture device. In addition to this instrument, Bone Machine also features the sounds of sticks played by Kathleen Brennan, Joe Marquez and Waits himself, named "The Boners":

I like the "Earth Died Screaming". We have a pygmy percussion unit on there called the Boners that we formed during the making of it and we recorded outside. Took the microphone outside onto the dirt and put it up and had everybody play sticks on the sidewalk cause we couldn't get the same sound in the studio. It's too resonant. ("Percussion Instruments")

These noises and many more added with obscure and outdated instruments (such as a proto-synthesizer known as the chamberlain) add a distinctive layer of sound to Waits' recordings,

and can certainly be classified as much as noise as part of the music. As Sangild goes on to argue

[w]hen you reverse a disturbance into a part of the music itself, it is not smoothly integrated but infuses the music with a tension. There is still a play on the formerly negative relation between noise and signal when a noise is legitimated. This tension is an important part of the musical power of noise.

(Sangild 6)

So, even though Waits definitely adds these unusual sounds to his music as part of its aural soundscape, we still experience these sounds as uncanny – as a disruption of the pure sound we have otherwise come to expect from a century dedicated to higher and higher sound recording fidelity. Using noise and crackle forces the listener to pay attention and the noise also works as a way to disrupt expected systems of coherence. Noise occupies a particularly significant place in our contemporary soundscape, paradoxically being both a positive and negative occurrence. A soundscape is, according to Emily Thompson, an “auditory or aural landscape,” and a soundscape’s

... cultural aspects incorporate scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener’s relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what. A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change. (Thompson 1-2)

This construction and change is expressed very clearly in the way that noise has changed its meaning in our industrial societies. On the one hand, noise was associated with progress and prosperity, because it is an indexical sign of industrial machinery and so signified production with its connotations of wealth and affluence. And as Karin Bijsterveld argues “[i]n many ways the loudness of technology continued to be associated with strength in early twentieth-

century Western culture.” (Bijsterveld 2008, 36) On the other hand, noise was also regarded as highly problematic, disturbing and in the end wasteful because it produced errors and was constructed as inefficient. Thompson claims that

[t]he inefficiency of noise had been a compelling problem earlier in the century, but the numbers now associated with it—errors per hour, percent decrease in productivity, dollars lost per day—increased the gravity of the problem. Further, the concept of efficiency itself was transformed in the 1920s in ways that invested it with an even greater cultural significance. Efficiency not only stood for the economical and moral values of productivity and prosperity, but now further constituted an aesthetic style that represented everything modern. This stylistic turn allowed the concept of efficiency to migrate into fields far removed from its technical origins in the management of industrial labor. (Thompson 156-157)

We get here a historical understanding of why and how noise became anathema in music; not only was it morally wrong but it was also not modern to be noisy. It is hardly a coincidence that sound fidelity arose at the same time, with Thomas Edison claiming that his phonographic cylinder was a perfect reproduction of the concert hall – the high-tech modernity of the phonographic record was ensured by its – by contemporary standards – flawless reproduction. There is, however, also another aspect to consider and that is the authoritative status of silence; the power to silence a discussion or a struggle is indeed the sound of authority, as Peter Bailey points out. (Bailey 1996, 53) And sure enough, noise was

... compared to smoke, and campaigns for noise abatement were clearly inspired by earlier efforts toward the abatement of smoke. In these campaigns, the popular perception of smoke had been transformed from an indicator of industrial prosperity to a sign of industrial waste, untapped resources, and

poorly designed processes. The same rhetorical strategies were employed in the fight against noise. (Thompson 122)

Just as nothing was more dirty and filthy than the unwashed masses of the working class, so too was there nothing more noisy. Consider, briefly, Gustave Le Bon's description of the masses in his 'sociological' study *The Crowd* from 1895, where he argues that "[i]n consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies." (Le Bon 2006, 10) Yet his argument is too revelatory – there is strength and power in noise. While it is true that noise is subjectively constructed, we do find that in most cases certain sounds are coded as excessive and transgressive and are thus to be avoided. We know this because our culture provides, in advance "some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And above all, it has authority, since each is induced to assent because of the assent of others" (Douglas 48).

But breaking the categories thus disrupts the pattern and cultural order. This is the strength of noise, even as we regard it as problematic as "sound out of place," as Bailey puts it (Bailey 50). Depending on this standardized understanding of noise, we can see that noise is a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of categorization in order to make our cultural order cohere. In this way, noise is what Bataille referred to as the accursed share – that excessive, transgressive part which we attempt to control and remove but which also partakes in some forms of religious ecstasy. We certainly associate this note of the accursed share with Tom Waits' voice.

Voice

One of the characteristic features of Tom Waits' music has always been his gravelly voice, at first said to be a feigned performance but soon, after several years of drinking,

smoking and touring, a marker of authenticity for the life of a rock'n'roll lifestyle. Jacob Smith, in his book *Vocal Tracks*, distinguishes between two main vocal performances. One is the bel canto (clear vocal performance) and the other, of greater interest here, is that of the rasp. As a performance, “a raspy vocal timbre is created by loose glottal closure, a raised larynx, and relatively less resonance in the cavities of the head.” (Smith 134) but what is more significant for us, is the encoding the rasp comes with. On the one hand, it is an index of ‘bad living’ and so connotes a certain outlaw authenticity (Smith 146), while on the other it has become “increasingly freighted with cultural meaning for male singers over the course of the century; it indicated blackness, class conflict, masculinity, and catharsis.” (Smith 117)

Also, the rasp developed as part of a black musical aesthetics, an underbelly of the accepted vocal performances if you will, or perhaps even a monstrous version of the bel canto, but with the advent of rock'n'roll, white singer began emulating the black rasp and incorporated it into their own styles, so much so that the rasp changed its cultural meaning and became indicative of a certain masculine style of singing, rather than a particularly black. Furthermore, and this is certainly so in Tom Waits' case, the rasp also carries a connotation of suffering and melancholy with it. Popularized by Louis Armstrong, one may even argue that Waits' gravelly rasp has become the antithesis to Armstrong's “What A Wonderful World” - Waits instead chants in his tortured voice “We're all gonna be just / Dirt in the ground”.

We need to keep in mind that throughout the album, Waits employs a number of different vocal performances – from the doomladen incantation of “Earth Died Screaming”, the tortured falsetto whine of “Dirt In The Ground”, a melancholic dirge on “Whistle Down the Wind” to the rambunctious rocking of “Goin' Out West”. Waits' moaning, shrieking and shouting adds another layer to the sound of the album and works as a master of ceremony, inviting all the ghosts of noise and other strange sounds into the mix. But there is more to his voice than that; Waits' voice is mediated in all these different instances – different recording

techniques are used to emphasize the crackle of his voice (consider his solo duet on “All Stripped Down” or the strange echo (there’s the echo again) on “The Ocean Doesn’t Want Me”). In many ways, we listen to the grain of his voice rather than his voice itself. In this way, Waits’ voice becomes a medium in two ways.

First is the technological meaning of the word ‘medium’, one described by Friedrich Kittler as

the voice [...] that sings the song, the voice referred to by the song, or maybe the voice of the listener who makes no sound and is nonetheless supposed to sing once all the conditions of magic have been met. An unimaginable closeness of of sound technology and self-awareness, a simulacrum of a feedback loop relaying sender and receiver. (Kittler 37)

There is indeed magic at work here – the magic of sound technology and no amount of ‘high fidelity’ can ever reproduce Waits’ actual voice, but that is precisely the point – Waits’ voice becomes a multitude of ghosts through the use of technology, allowing him to perform things that were otherwise impossible. Waits is thus loose glottal closure, raised larynx, microphone and speaker all at once – his vocal performance exists only in the spectral mediated space, we cannot isolate Waits’ performance in any of these places because it belongs to the in-between, the interstitial or liminal: a haunting, in other words.

That is the second part of how Waits voice functions as a medium – the spectral space of Waits’ vocal performance conjures up ghosts and make their absence present. As Jacques Derrida points out, a conjuration brings forth “what is not there at the present moment of the appeal” (*Specters* 50) but at the same time a conjuration is also “a matter of neutralizing a hegemony or overturning some power.” (*Specters* 58) This overturning happens precisely by conjuring up what is not there. It is in bringing these hidden phantoms to the fore that we may overturn the cultural order by the productive introduction of Waits’ rasp. So, before we turn to

the matter of Waits' resistance to cultural order, let us listen closer to his spectral sounds.

Echo

It seems no coincidence that Waits wanted a recording studio with plenty of echo – echo in itself is an integral part of disrupting the symbolic order of music. The echo functions as part of the noise which fuels Waits' music, adding an overall mood to the album but also a specific aesthetic to some of the songs. Consider, for instance, “Jesus Gonna Be Here” which very much sounds like Tom Waits singing in a big, empty room with the twang of the guitar placed far away from the microphone, adding that same echoey, hollow sound to it. To finish it all off, we hear Waits coughing at the end of the track, clearly having strained his vocal chords from the falsetto rasp he employs for this song. Keeping this cough is obviously a deliberate choice, since it could easily have been removed from the final mix; keeping it in, however, adds the crackle and fizz that characterizes Waits' musical production, and it also adds a degree of authenticity to the vocal performance – the grain of the voice become the strain of the voice, revealing the actual performance that goes into it, rather than smoothing the performance through technical means, such as ProTools or similar software.

The echoes, crackles, scratches, hisses and sparks force us to listen in a different way to the music; it strains against our ear but it also has the effect of creating a distinctive co-presence – as Sangild said, there is always tension between music and noise and so we do not fully integrate the noise into the musical performance, but instead the echo creates a particular kind of effect; a co-presence of a ‘now’ point with a ‘just-past’ point takes on what Don Ihde calls a “harmonic echo” (Ihde 63). Certainly, for Waits' music, we need not refer to the effect as a ‘harmonious’ echo, but the point remains the same: “... the echo reverberation is distinguished from the oncoming sounds but also remains as a fringe effect.” (Ihde 63)

It is this fringe effect that we may refer to as an order of spectrality, an effect from the

reproduction of the noise and echo of Waits' voice, the instruments used and any incidental sounds that are (deliberately and undeliberately) picked up by the microphone inside or outside the recording studio. The reverberational echo Ihde speaks of disrupts the time of the music, because are we meant to pay attention to the 'now' point or the 'just-past' point of the twanging guitar of "Jesus Gonna Be Here"? Which of these points is the 'correct', original point. Echo and noise thus disrupts presence and instead spreads the presence out between the absence and the presence and the medial space that occurs in-between. Again, we are back to the in-between, the fading moment, that which haunts Waits' album. As Ihde points out, "... if I try to imagine and perceive the same sounds at the same time, I find the same resistance previously noted." (Ihde 63) This resistance comes from what Derrida refers to as a "spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents." (*Specters* xix) Instead, the echo moves in the in-between of time, yet this particular album has a different relationship to time; the eschatological moment of the apocalypse.

Not only time but also space is disrupted through the use of echo and reverberation

Reverberation, the lingering over time of residual sound in a space, had always been a direct result of the architecture that created it, a function of both the size of a room and the materials that constituted its surfaces. As such, it sounded the acoustic signature of each particular place, representing the unique character (for better or worse) of the space in which it was heard. With the rise of the modern soundscape this would no longer be the case.

Reverberation now became just another kind of noise, unnecessary and best eliminated. (Ihde 3)

Here we can see how the wastefulness of reverberation must be eliminated, because it is an uncontrolled sound not because echo and reverberation cannot be useful and productive, but

when it is uncontrolled and chaotic, it becomes wasteful

Finally, it was modern because it was perceived to demonstrate man's technical mastery over his physical environment, and it did so in a way that transformed traditional relationships between sound, space, and time. Technical mastery over nature and the annihilation of time and space have long been recognized as definitive aspects of modern culture. (Ihde 3-4)

I will argue that this apocalyptic moment is the spectral subject of the album. Let us turn to this spectral moment of Waits' album.

Apocalypse

As a media monster, the album disrupts the its own present time of being (as it is being heard) with scrambling, clanking sounds that do not seem to fit, yet is part of the album's spectral sound. As a narrative monstrosity, it shambles along an apocalyptic path tearing at the foundations of America to reveal traces that are often covered up, the parts of America so rarely mentioned but which has been part of Tom Waits' career. I see this album as a hauntological and spectral album where Gothic media images are conjured up to provide a spectral America, and to show how much haunts, specters and ghosts have always been part of American national imagination, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues in the collection *Spectral America*.

'Apocalypse' means 'revelation at the end of an age,' but throughout the 20th century the apocalyptic imagination changed dramatically. Apocalyptic thought has moved from a utopian belief in progress, reason and technology to a far more dystopic view of social disintegration and violence. Historically, the US has moved through a variety of post-millennial movements emphasizing expansion, progress and moral idealism and waiting for the uplift which will occur after the the Second Coming. With the horrors of the 20th century,

however, emphasis has shifted to the turbulent and violent times just before the Second Coming. In either case, however, we can argue along with Frank Kermode that the apocalyptic is regarded as a fiction whose purpose is to ‘humanise time’ and provide us with the consolation of form. The significance here being that Waits’ menagerie of screeches, crackles and echoes is not a consolation of form but instead an enactment of apocalyptic turbulence, which renders our cultural categories shattered like his own soundscape.

I want to focus on a selection of the songs on the album and show first how they fit into a framework of what we may call an apocalyptic imagination, second how they fit in with the concept of a ‘spectral America’. The apocalyptic imagination is something which has been part of American culture ever since its founding and it has been expressed in many different ways and attitudes throughout its cultural history. However, what is typical of this apocalyptic imagination is the way that the apocalypse as narrative form, metaphor or very real threat works as a dividing line between those who will be saved – typically the carriers of the ‘official’ culture – and those who will not; and they are typically the ones whose culture must remain hidden or even removed (“Apocalyptic Tone” 84). The apocalyptic tone, as Derrida points out, reveals the truth but Derrida also goes on to indicate that this truth never actually arrives – it is always, already coming but since the end never comes the apocalyptic tone instead reveals how the transmission of truth – supposedly clear-cut – actually breaks down because of the constant deferral of the end.

Apocalypse is thus a future-to-come; the apocalypse (in whatever shape it takes) is a specter: “it is always to come, it presents itself as that which could come or come back” (*Specters* 48). There is no consolation of form here, only the comfort of repetition. As Kermode tells us; in imagining an end for the world we are simply categorizing a pattern on something which is not ordered – the flow of time – but which is turned into history through this categorization. This narrative understanding of the apocalypse provides security and

comfort because it controls our perception of time and makes sense of it as something which has a beginning, a middle and an end. Waits' hauntological album provides a narrative of the ending of the world; as we have already seen, this is enacted musically by his introduction of noise, crackle, echo and so forth. Lyrically, the album starts off in an apocalyptic tone with the song "Earth Died Screaming" which sets the mood for the rest of the album, conveying images that coincide with popular and religious images of the apocalypse:

There was thunder
There was lightning
Then the stars went out
And the moon fell from the sky
It rained mackerel
It rained trout
And the great day of wrath has come
And there's mud in your big red eye
The poker's in the fire
And the locusts take the sky
And the earth died screaming
While I lay dreaming of you (The Earth Died Screaming")

These images are clearly religious, recalling Revelations with fish falling from the sky, the stars turning black, swarms of locusts and the moon falling from the sky. At the same time, these images are also drawn from the popular imagination, citing the great day of wrath and a poker in the fire, conjuring images of the devil with a red-hot poker coming up from the ground to chase the sinners. What is also significant is that the earth dies screaming while the poetic voice lies dreaming.

On the one hand, this "dreaming of you" reminds us of a love song, except for the fact

that there are no other indications that this song is a love song. There are no other references to this 'you' and the music is certainly not romantic, either. Instead, the "dreaming of you" seems simply to be a reference to indicate a sense of loss and grief – since the speaker is dreaming of this person, said person must be lost, gone or dead. Considering the way the song starts, death seems to be the likely fact.

The song starts off with the rising sound of sticks clattering against each other in a shaky rhythm, beginning what we may call the skeleton dance of the entire album – literally a 'bone machine'. In a slow, menacing drawl, Waits' voice mixes with the sticks as the upright bass begins, after which the electric bass and guitar join in. Waits' voice changes timbre and pitch for the chorus ("And the earth died screaming / While I lay dreaming") becoming a high-pitched wail rather than a low drawl and adding an echo voice just behind the primary wail. Both voices belong to Waits but give the sensation of an uncanny chorus. It is also in the chorus that the percussion comes in and that the conundrum is used, adding more noise. As the song comes to an end, the instruments stop playing until we are left with only the sticks again, which fade out while a strange organ sound comes in – this is the chamberlain synthesizer, which in this case sounds like a wheezing church organ, pumping out the final notes before everything ends. And then it does, literally, as the song ends. Although the chamberlain is fading out we do hear an abrupt stop as it is cut off, indicating a rupture rather than a smooth fade-out.

This apocalyptic vision of the world ending is continued in the next song "Dirt In The Ground", which deals with mortality of the human race, both individually and collected, all cast in a vision of doomsday and still filled with popular-religious images:

'Cause hell is boiling over

And heaven is full

We're chained to world

And we all gotta pull

And we're all gonna be

...Just dirt in the ground (“Dirt In The Ground”)

The song paints a canvas of shared suffering and woe – we are all part of dragging the world along, but there is no reward or salvation coming. Instead “the blood writes the word” which could be seen as the word of God, considering the Biblical references that make up the song’s lyrics. Pairing it with the later passage of “Now Cain slew Abel / He killed him with a stone / The sky cracked open / And the thunder groaned” (“Dirt In The Ground”) the song evokes the bloodier parts of the Bible, yet does not offer the salvation that the Bible promises. Instead, the song paints a bleak picture of death:

Your spirit don’t leave knowing

Your face or your name

And the wind through your bones

Is all that remains (“Dirt In The Ground”)

While there seems to be an admittance of the existence of a spirit or soul (or should we perhaps instead call it a specter?), even this admission is filled with a bleak vision, since the spirit “don’t leave knowing” anything about the one it leaves behind. Instead, the wind will be blowing through our bones, maybe causing a mournful sound similar to that of the sax or clarinet used in the song. While to some extent there is a unity to be found in the lyrics – “We’re all gonna be the same place / When we die” (“Dirt In The Ground”) – this is not something which is celebrated. Rather, there is a world-weariness to the song, a defeatist attitude: “What does it matter, a dream of love / A dream of lies” (“Dirt In The Ground”). This defeatist attitude can also be heard in the song itself; a slow, mournful dirge based around reed instruments (alto and tenor sax and a bass clarinet) plus an upright bass, a faint piano plus the tolling of a bell in the background of the mix. Waits’ voice is a falsetto croak, a

high-pitched version of his typical rasp which adds a layer of grief to the song; a sense of loss is articulated in this near-whine.

The same kind of falsetto is used in the mock-spiritual “Jesus Gonna Be Here” where we hear from one of the saved, one of those who clearly do not expect to be killed by the pending apocalypse:

Well I’m just gonna wait here
I don’t have to shout
I have no reason and
I have no doubt
I’m gonna get myself
Unfurled from this mortal coiled up world
Because Jesus gonna be here
Be here soon (“Jesus Gonna Be Here”)

The poetic voice is eager for the apocalypse, which is clearly seen as a revelation, a chance to get unfurled from the mortal coil of the world – we can assume that this means that the poetic voice would thus no longer have to be chained to the world to pull it (as we heard in “Dirt In The Ground”), but would instead be among the free souls that will reap the benefits of being the chosen ones. As part of the faithful, this should be no problem, yet we can also see that a little doubt does creep in despite the original assurance that “I have no doubt”, but it seems that while the poetic voice is among the faithful, there has been a slight problem of abstinence:

Well I’ve been faithful
And I’ve been so good
Except for drinking
But he knew that I would (“Jesus Gonna Be Here”)

I do sense a slight irony here, in the absolution from sin based on the fact that “he knew that I would” because conceivably Jesus would know of everyone’s sins, so perhaps the poetic voice tries to assure us (and himself?) that drinking can hardly be considered a ‘real’ sin compared to all the good things that he has done; even though these good things are left unspecified. He did, however, “leave this place better / Than the way I found that it was” (“Jesus Gonna Be Here”), indicating that he has done his duty as a faithful.

So there is form of security here, that the world is ordered and properly in place, which means that the apocalypse really is the ultimate plot – our lives gain structure through our births and deaths as beginnings and endings, just as the world gains meaning through its creation and eventual destruction. We – as in our culture – imposes this order on time, attempting to overcome any form of disorganization through storytelling and this is how we humanize time. Yet Waits’ whole album has problematized time and shows no signs of integration or consolation in terms of its story, nor in its musical expression. *Bone Machine* is anything but ordered; instead, it shakes, shambles, scrambles and staggers in a helter-skelter fashion. There is no boundary; we have seen the fringe effect of the echo destroy that. There is no consolation in the reverberation either, for it only shows us that the apocalypse is always-to-come. We cannot mark off a section of time, much less the ‘age we live in,’ because everything is built from echoes.

Apocrypha

As Tom Waits says on *Bone Machine: Operator’s Manual*:

People say to me: “You always write about people down, people really down on their luck and ... you know ... about hookers, you always write about liquor.” And to that I say – you’re right. (*Bone Machine: Operator’s Manual*)

Waits’ songs – and not just on this album – center on those voices that we rarely hear in

official culture. Part of this is central to Waits' image as an old barfly who has seen the less savory aspects of the world, but it is also part of his larger aesthetic. I will say that bringing these voices – even though they are fictional – into play, represents a form of noise in itself. We may even call it a form of resistance – having to listen to both the official culture and the underground. These ghostly voices thus tell an untold story that questions the authority of received history.

We can see Waits' apocalyptic vision as a warning – in itself a typical part of the apocalyptic imagination – and an attempt at focusing on what would be the apocryphal part of an America in decay. Yet Waits' vision should not be seen as solely negative or doom-laden, for while the major part of the album is dedicated to apocalyptic visions, we do find a resistance to this apocalypse. First, we find a resistance to growing up, for becoming part of the authoritative cultural order:

How do you move in a world of fog
That's always changing place
Makes me wish that I could be a dog (“I Don't Wanna Grow Up”)

Here the poetic voice reveals the resistance to the authoritative culture, claiming it to be a mess of constantly changing rules. Instead, being a dog seems like an easier choice, reducing the choices and thereby escaping the constraints of official culture. This continues with a refusal to even engage in society:

And I don't wanna grow up
I'd rather stay here in my room
Nothin' out there but sad and gloom (“I Don't Wanna Grow Up”)

The culture order is cast as the darkness, in this case, reversing the roles typically assigned. Instead of casting the other, the downtrodden if you will, as the monster, Tom Waits casts the dominant culture as the monster, as the freakish, as the apocalyptic itself - “Nothin' out there

but sad and gloom”. It is more than just a child being scared of the dark, of being scared of growing up. Waits’ ambivalence, coming at the end of an apocalyptic journey, forces us to reconsider where and by what the shadows of modernity are cast. Policing the borders and boundaries is turned into the monstrous act and instead the ghosts that Tom Waits has conjured forth (through his music, through his voice, through his noise, through his stories) become the real, the normal, the desired state of affairs.

To put it another way, Waits’ echoes are the supplements that allow for modernity to exist in the first place and so insists that modernity is haunted by its shadows and its monsters, all things that are excessive, resistant to categorization and yet are all inherently part of modernity. Waits’ brilliance comes from materially employing the technique which he symbolically tries to break or resist. His monstrous and spectral album is filled with echoes that come back to haunt the listener, just as he insists that the underbelly of America comes back to haunt the cultural order. Yet this is a constant and even constitutive process of all cultural processes which attempt to define themselves by excluding something. In other words, modernity is revealed to be an echolalia effect – existing only because of its own repetition.

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