Of Rutherford Dust:

The Allegory of Dirt and the End of Terroir

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The world grounds itself on the earth and the earth juts through the world. ... As self-opening, the world cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. (Heidegger 47)

Dirt

comes to life in wine culture. From the noise of its mixed compounds a signal is transmitted. In it, the sensitive taster is said to recognize wine's heritage and meaning. Through it, wine becomes a medium of what is called *goût de terroir*, an etymologically French phrase, but now a global expression for the influences the typicality of place bestows on agricultural products. While these influences are commonly indexed to include the local climate, ecology, geology and even the local cultural practices of grape growers and winemakers, dirt is central. It forms the basis of terroir's materiality while figuratively holding together the diverse components of a wine's geographical claim. Dirt is the *ground* of terroir, its foundation and organizing principle. It embraces the connotation of nativity expressed in the word *soil* and adds a sense of practicality, honesty, and sovereignty found in the so-called *dirt farmer*, the one who works the land one owns. Dirt claims both origin and originality. The exceptionality accorded to it in the school of terroir legitimates a theory of winemaking which seeks to allow the potential of viticultural conditions to flourish. It justifies a natural winemaking, free of pretention and respectful of the providence of birthright.

In wine consumption, dirt organizes a similar authenticity. Sommeliers and connoisseurs often report they can sense its qualities in the flavor profile of wine. Dirt takes shape as minerality, wet slate, chalk, crushed oyster shells or forest floor. In these tasting notes, the signal of dirt is relayed as a sensuous meme, as an aroma turned visual trope, one capable of evoking chains of emotion and memory. The suspicion of dirt in wine is not a corruption or pollution of the wine, but a rare gift imparted by the earth. Its recognition as such, draws a line between the place of production and the sensory aspects experienced by the taster. Alongside vintage, the un-concealment of dirt in taste charts the timespace of wine, and helps construct a narrative in which the taster and the wine are co-participants. By our sense of terroir, our travels are set in relation to the journey of wine along its commodity chain, back to wine's ultimate source, rooted in the inimitable distinctiveness of the land.

This participation, a dance of earth and world, is set in motion by a heightened focus to one's senses. To identify terroir one must call forth an acute awareness, an attention to where the nose and tongue, those nerve dangling protrusions of the self, extend to meet the object of the external environment. In this

performance, dirt appears as a guest, as an apparition which takes stage on the threshold of one's sense of self. The presence of dirt commands a reception. It inscribes the limits of the body and, in doing so, shapes the contour of the external world. Dirt has become, in the theater of wine, the messenger of the inorganic, the quintessential other. It makes its presence on the doorsill of our senses and demands we come to terms with that which is different, foreign, and distant, even that which is ancient. By innervating the full faculties of our discernment over the exterior, dirt calls the human, as a sensual and intellectual animal, into being.

The identification of dirt in wine, this anchor of terroir, thus binds us to the nature of wine, its lifeworld and flows, just as it throws us from it, allowing us to stand in its judgment, apart and above its churn. It forces us to locate our experience of wine within the promise of our own sovereign ability to taste, while inviting us to reflect on wine's definitive beginning, its alien home in the primordial concoction of its soil. In wine, dirt provides a delicate filament. It tethers our intellect to a foundational mutuality rooted in the increasingly remote physical world. It challenges us to rise above our own material determinacy even as it reminds us of our origin and destiny, from ashes to ashes, from dust to dust.

A Sense of Dust

A better understanding of the profundity of dirt can be had by examining its reception in the wines from the Rutherford appellation, a parcel of dirt about halfway up the Napa Valley between the Macayama and the Vaca mountains in the California coastal range. The town of Rutherford is little more than a dot on the map with a population of less than one hundred seventy people, but it gives its name to a wine growing region that has become legendary for the production of world class cabernet sauvignon. Together with its southern neighbor Oakville, the Rutherford American Viticulture Area (or AVA, a certified geographic district) is home to historically important wine producers, including Beaulieu Vineyard and the Inglenook Winery (now incorporated in the Rubicon Estate) as well as a host of other prominent producers. Today about thirty-seven wineries and forty grape growers claim provenance in the Rutherford AVA, an area of about twenty-seven square kilometers that is among the most expensive agricultural land in the world. The dirt they till and tend is, in fact, holy. It is consecrated by the fables and tribute it collects in wine history, by the acclaim and accolades it gathers from wine critics, and through the salutations and honors to it that ring out across the tables where it flows.

The Rutherford AVA designation on the label of a bottle of wine certifies that at least eighty-five percent of its content is made from Rutherford AVA sourced grapes. The Rutherford name returns a premium. It has become a sign of excellence to wine enthusiasts who celebrate the distinction of wines born of Rutherford dirt. Upon tasting the cabernet sauvignon's of Rutherford some

sommeliers, critics and enthusiasts even hail a mysterious and elusive presence in the wine, the taste of what they call Rutherford Dust.

The expression is commonly attributed to André Tchelistcheff, winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyard from 1938 to 1973. The wine historian James Conway wrote

Back in the thirties, André Tchelistcheff had described a taste found in certain Beaulieu Vineyard Cabernets as 'Rutherford Dust.' He was not discussing what blew across Highway 29 during harvest in and around the town of Rutherford, but the sensory impression left by a mouthful of Cabernet Sauvignon produced between the southern boundary of Oakville and Zinfandel Lane to the north, east of the Macayama range and west of Highway 29. (Conaway 293)

Others dispute the account. Joel Atkins the current winemaker at Beaulieu Vineyard says Tchelistcheff originally heard it from his colleague, the wine scientist and connoisseur Maynard Amerine. (Swan)

The term however, sticks to Tchelistcheff who is widely recognized as the “dean of American winemaking” (Tchelistcheff) and one of the people responsible for raising the quality of California wines after prohibition. Most notably he directed California’s most consistently honored wine, Beaulieu’s Reserve, renamed the Georges de Latour Reserve ever since the death of Beaulieu’s former legendary winemaker Georges de Latour in the 1940. This is the wine that regularly competed favorably in international competitions, even against the Grand Cru of Bordeaux. In deference to Tchelistcheff knowledge of wine and his celebrated palate, many today insist Rutherford wines exact the rare and fleeting, yet singular and remarkable sensation of dust. It is apprehended as a sensuous substance that makes its way from the soil through the vines into the grapes and into the wine. Some characterize it as finely polished tannins that influence the mouthfeel of wine. For others it arrives as an earthy flavor which takes shape as minerality or a note of cocoa dust, others sense it in the aromatic residue of the volcanic remnants in the Rutherford’s alluvial soil, and still others say it defies description, but affirm its existence as an uncommon magical experience, an indication of the wine’s heritage in the soils making up the Rutherford AVA.

The existence of Rutherford Dust in the wine has not, however, been universally accepted. One powerful critique against its appearance in wine has been waged by biologists who dispute the contention that dirt directly influences taste. They argue that the scientific literature does not support the claim that rocks, minerals, or soils can make their way through the vine roots of grape plants and eventually into the glass of wine that is set before the taster. (Styger et al; Michael) The sense of dust in a cabernet from Rutherford or the taste of flint in a glass of Sancerre, these scientists maintain, has nothing to do with the high levels of the minerals in the vineyard. Science writer Harold McGee and Daniel Patterson relay the thoughts of a plant physiologist, Mark Matthews, on the topic: “Plants ‘don’t absorb whatever’s there in the soil and send it to the fruit. If they did, fruits would taste like dirt.’ ...‘Any minerals from the solid rock that vine roots do absorb — sodium, potassium, calcium, magnesium, iron, a handful of

others — have to be dissolved first in the soil moisture.” (McGee & Patterson) The complex sensations of aromas and flavors are not direct referents to the soil, the argument goes, but attributes of taste that arise from the winemaking process. McGee and Patterson continue,

Most of the earthy and mineral aromas and flavors that we detect in wine actually come from the interaction of the grape and yeast. ...The list of evocative yeast products includes an organic sulfur molecule that can give sauvignon blancs a “flinty” aroma. And there are minor yeasts that create molecules called volatile phenols, whose earthy, smoky flavors have nothing to do with the soil but are suggestive of it... (McGee & Patterson)

The understanding that dust directly influences the flavor profile of Rutherford wine suffers a similar critique. Some proponents of the term, however, say that Rutherford Dust was never meant to be a tasting note or an endorsement of a mysterious presence. Instead, they explain that it was originally coined as a testimonial about the area’s overall influence on its wines. Tchelistcheff, they point out, is most commonly quoted as saying, “it takes Rutherford Dust to grow a great cabernet sauvignon”. (Doerper et al 394) Grape farmer, Andy Beckstoffer insists this is clearly a statement about the compatibility between the grape and the total growing conditions at Rutherford, the soil, yes, but also the climate, temperature and light. (Swan) Wine writer Gerald Boyd explains further, Rutherford Dust is “a term that is associated today more with an abstract connection to the Rutherford soils than to a dusty or earthy sensory nuance found in the local wines.” (Boyd)

In addition, many critics don’t even taste the so-called dust, and instead find the distinctive appeal of Rutherford wine to be a lively expression of cherry. A neighbor of Beaulieu Vineyard, Charles J. Wagner of Caymus discredited Conaway’s history in an interview by revealing that Tchelistcheff spoke of dust as a beneficial component in wine simply as an excuse for kicking up dirt on the vines when driving too fast on the valleys dirt roads. “Andre would always go out there and drive fast to make a lot of dust.” Wagner recalled, “He’d rationalize this by saying that there was a Rutherford dust component; the dust was good to a point.” (Wagner & Wagner 45) Perhaps this was overheard by Legh Knowles, Beaulieu Vineyard’s national sales manager, and later chief executive officer. He would have recognized the term made great copy. Knowles was a marketing genius whose influence on American wine is too often understated, and he may well be responsible for the promotion of the phrase Rutherford Dust. He was, in fact, the first to name a wine, “Rutherford”. (Knowles) It was his name for Beaulieu’s second tier label long before there was a designated AVA. Rutherford Dust did appear on advertisements for Beaulieu as a tasting note in the 1980s and it is today still showcased today at Beaulieu.

[Tchelistcheff’s] highly trained palate led him to identify the superior Rutherford fruit quality—with the distinctive character he called ‘Rutherford Dust’—that became the hallmark of

Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. (Beaulieu Vineyard)

Whatever the original connotation was, and in spite of the experts who seek to restrict its use, Rutherford Dust remains firmly established in the wine vocabulary, even if its recognition is rare and its source of its affect is obscure. It has taken on a life of its own. According to wine critic Mike Dunne, who recently reported from a tasting staged by the Rutherford Dust Society, an association of wineries and growers who have banded to promote the appellation and its dust,

Rutherford Dust has acquired magical and romantic interpretations well beyond Tchelistcheff's straight forward and self-serving observation. Today, Rutherford Dust has come to represent...such attributes as tannins as fine and fleeting as dust, a savory flavor suggestive of dry soil, and a spiciness akin to pie spices, all of which might be news to Tchelistcheff. (Dunne)

The sense that Rutherford Dust resides in wine, and in turn, in those who part take of it, may be a form of misrecognition, but the attribution of the sensation of dirt as a message is very real. The call of the soil, and the wider cultural turn towards terroir has become an important cultural theme. Its influence has spread beyond the discourse of wine, to other vegetables and even animal products, such as cheese or meat. (Trubek) It is even used to legitimate arguments concerning the influence of place on art, literature, architecture and other cultural artifacts. (Tomasik) Dirt, this simple sign of materiality is increasingly converted to a spirit by contemporary political and economic pressures as it is made responsible for the enchantment of large sectors of consumer society.

In this essay, I will not be contesting the scientific evidence for or against the influence of terroir on the taste of wine. Instead, I will engage the evidence that points to an aesthetic turn towards the soil across consumer culture. My concern is to better understand how this lowly substance came to occupy a position of heightened cultural intensity. And to uncover what the contemporary consecration of dirt means to our assessment of the beautiful in a consumer driven culture. Why has dirt become the touchstone of taste in today's marketplace? How does it serve to both frame and ground the contemporary consumer phantasmagoria of the senses? And how does the alleged detection of dirt in wine both validate and problematize the intimate aesthetic sensitivity that has come to be cherished in consumer society?

Terroir as an Aesthetic Movement

Rutherford Dust cannot be pinned down as a tasting note, but neither can it be dispensed with as a simple illusion. As the global economy expands the distant between producer and consumer, the image of the noble peasant staged by terroir is called upon with greater urgency. It is summoned to sooth the rupture of alienated labor and to cultivate the affective sensibility of the new global consumer. As increased social mobility, transnational labor flows, and the

replication of non-distinct places erode traditional forms of placemaking, dirt is evoked as a magnet tying us to the land, one that plays between our imagination and the confrontation our senses. It has come to form a promise of home trapped within the commodity form of wine. To better understand the way this promise emerges as an ideal within taste, it is necessary to look at how the aesthetic of terroir relates to current politico-economic conditions.

Fine wine, like art, aims to produce the experience of beauty. And wine, like art, is also entangled in the dialectic between commodity and craft. Wine finds itself, as Sven-Olov Wallenstein argues in his essay about the art object and the commodity, caught in a “charged relation to the economy”, (Wallerstein) a dynamic relation developed over-time in respect to different social and economic forces. Wallenstein illustrates this by describing the strategies used by the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century to harness the alluring power of the commodity without being dominated by its logic of interchangeability. (Wallerstein) Following his description of Dada’s playful reorientation of the art-commodity relation in an age of mass production, Wallenstein recounts the tactics deployed by conceptual artists in the late 1960s and 1970s to radically embrace the spirit of the art object over its materiality, that is, their strategy to uphold the aura of art by differentiating themselves from the products that populate consumer society. By insisting art was everywhere, in a thought, in action, or in a transient experience, artists like Joseph Kosuth, Mary Kelly, or Robert Smithson sought a means to counter the devaluation of art through its use as status marker.

Wallerstein follows notable theorists of modern art, such as Clement Greenberg, T.J. Clark, and Lucy Lippard when he arguing that conceptual art was driven into abstraction as a means to preserve art from an economy of self-interest and kitsch. All have similarly sought to explain the dialectical relation between the art’s formal characteristics and the socioeconomic forces which challenge its independence. If fine wine is indeed an art, as its public claims it to be, it ought then to be possible to trace its history in a similar manner. Not simply to outlay its many forms or record its advances as most wine texts do, but to see in the story of wine the development of a unique historically based attempt by winemakers to realize in their wines an expression of beauty adequate to their own time. If wine is a fine art, the story of its expression in relation to its social life then constitutes a unique account of the human experience, one only wine can tell. This approach to wine history is made possible today by a recent shift in wine appreciation, from a celebration of bold and heroic winemaking to a preference for the sensitive craft performed by the stewards of terroir. It is a transition that represents more than a change in wine styles. It constitutes a shift in wine’s avant-garde, and as such, a redirection of aesthetic strategies in the expression of the beautiful.

Jacques Mourrain’s 1993 dissertation, *Fluid Commodities: The Case of Wine* (Mourrain) points in the direction of this type of Wine History writing, as opposed to the more common chronologies of wine. He developed a persuasive critique of California wine in the 1980s by tying the emergence of ‘big,’ fruit-

forward, high alcohol, and heavily oaked wines, the wines said to be celebrated by the critic Robert M. Parker, to their location in the aesthetics of post-industrial economy. Mourrain explained how wine was forced during this period into an intensified competition to stand out among other status symbols. He contended that the language used by winemakers, critics and connoisseurs eventually overtook more subdued markers of taste, and even argued that the sign-value of wine eclipsed its use-value in the determination of good taste.

Mourrain's attributed the rise of big flavored wines to the development of a postmodern aesthetic. In the years since his critique, he was joined by others who condemned the artificiality of so called *auteur* wines, or *wines of strength* as doctored wine or Frankenwine. By the end of the 1990s wine culture had turned to the praise of *terroir*, and it contextualized this turn as a return to traditional practices. Jancis Robinson, Alice Feiring and Jonathan Nossiter (the creator of the film, *Mondovino*) are among the voices advocating the so-called natural or authentic methods in wine. In Mourrain's periodization of the big wines, and in the subsequent emergence of the *terroirists* or anti-Parkerization critics one can, however, track more than a return to traditional wine customs. The two phases, instead, can be seen as a progressive transition, one that makes it possible to speak formally of a movement in Wine History, one organized by an emergent reverence to dirt.

There have certainly been many transitions in winemaking over the centuries, but this transition in style, from *auteur* wines to wines of *terroir*, is important because it is both stark and uniquely intentioned. It marks a change in aesthetic dispositions, one that is neither influenced solely by changes in the sociocultural status or ethnicity of the winemakers, nor by technology advances alone. These two styles represent two ideas of beautiful wine. Both are contingent on historical and economic conditions, but both can also be understood as aesthetic responses to their unique historical and economic conjectures, both as attempts to save the purpose of wine as art. Understanding the turn towards *terroir* as a redirection of the *avant-garde* in fine wine, rather than an example of one style among others, allows one to rethink how wine history is studied and told. Wine aesthetics, under this light comes to embody its own definite and concrete historical path. Just as conceptual art was said by Wallerstein to be a strategy pressed into service as a means to rescue art from its incorporation as a status ornament, the call of dirt in recent wine writing and winemaking can be understood as a response to the unique conditions of art in our time. Today's proponents of the *terroir* school of winemaking may foreground the material dimension of their art, unlike the conceptual artists, but their embrace of the soil affects a similar end. It is the historically determined means to counter capitalism's drive to commodify the sensual effects of wine, its color, aroma and flavor. Against the factory production of scent and texture wine has in recent years, turned to dirt to offer its public the experience of radical difference and natural origin. Dirt is activated as counter to the universal magnitude of value, whether it is found in Robert M. Parker scores or the marketer's price points. Today one finds *terroirists* claiming this same *avant-garde* position Wallerstein

argued that conceptual art sought a formal advantage that might “break with the commodity form of art.” (Wallerstein)

The promise of this claim helps to explain the growth of writing on terroir, as well as the growing popularity of wine in recent years. The assurance of rootedness in the intransient, if vicarious experience of the grape, gathers mass appeal today, especially as the dream of sovereignty and self-esteem based on real estate evaporates in the foreclosure crisis, and as the digital revolution effects new forms of estrangement and the forfeiture of public space. It is attractive and alluring, precisely because of its negation of interchangeability of land and labor, its negation of surplus value, and its repudiation of what Zygmunt Bauman has called “liquid modernity”. (Bauman) The anti-Mondovino banner of terroir, its ‘somewhereness’ as critic Matt Kramer calls it, (Fletcher) offers a healing communion in the face of *mondialisation*.

The Economics of Dust

The story of conceptual art, however, ought to give the terroirist some pause. Wallerstein and others such as Blake Stimson (Alberro & Stimson) have argued that the strategy of dematerialization in conceptual art prefigured our contemporary commodification of ephemeral substances just as it plotted its own remove from the political sphere. Wallerstein argues that, “in retrospect we can see that what” conceptual art “really achieved was...the limitless expansion of the commodity logic” (Wallerstein) rather than the freeing of art from it. He contends that in asserting that everything can be art conceptual art simply showed how even non-artistic objects could be bought and sold. Stimson records how the movement’s central figures came to agonize about the efficacy of conceptual art, doubting it achieved the autonomy it sought. He relates Robert Smithson’s argument that

conceptual art served the business needs of galleries and collectors in the wake of the 1960s boom of the art market: ‘Because galleries and museums have been victims of ‘cutbacks’...they need a cheaper product—objects are thus reduced to ideas, and as a result we get ‘Conceptual Art.’ Compared to isolated objects, isolated ideas in the metaphysical context of the gallery offer...an aesthetic bargain. (Alberro & Stimson xliii)

This critique of the strategy to dematerialize art as means of restructuring the focus and context of art in society is relevant to the aesthetic turn towards dirt one sees in contemporary wine aesthetics. Rather than transcending the sphere of economic value relations and presenting a different form of value, an autonomous aesthetic value which might be placed in relation to economics, science and politics as a guide, the critique of conceptual art recasts the movement as a function of the economic order. In spite of its emancipatory pretensions, conceptual art was, this critique contends, a response to the falling rate of profit, one that functioned to open a new frontier in a saturated art

market, and one that reduced the labor value of art. In light of this critique, we might also ask, what the emergent terroir aesthetic can tell us about the use and meaning of dirt in relation to value. Is the economy still driving wine's idea of beauty, just as the critics claimed in the era of big wine? If so, what economic force points us back to the land, to this immutable substance, back to dirt?

One explanation is found by extrapolating the structural forces that drove the critique of big wine. The critique of the auteur theory of winemaking centered on a gap opened between the figure of the winemaker as artistic director or craftsman and the winemaker as the operator of expert systems. As the price of craft production passed the ability of firms to recoup value, the wine industry looked to a variety of systemic solutions, including making wine on a larger scale, aiming wine characteristics to hit consumer benchmarks, and deploying industrial-style production management systems. These interventions increased profitability, and many argue positively influenced overall wine quality, (Amerine & Singleton; Jackisch) but along the way these techniques damaged the claim to artisanal authority. The imagined wine auteur was replaced by the remote director, a fly-in winemaker, consultant or scientist who altered local wine to meet preconceived authoritative palates, or market niche price points. Eventually, even the image of travelling genius falls asunder as the agency of the winemaking gave way to more formulaic and computerized production processes executed by batteries of technicians or cybernetic controls. While technological innovations are the acceptable means of reducing labor costs and extending profit in most industries, the wine world reacted negatively to this economy of scale—and demanded craftwork, even as craftwork was unprofitable. The problem was two-fold. Wine needed a way to solve its labor problem while escaping the logic of mass production. It needed to find a way to solve the problem of its declining profit without destroying the image that wine was natural, traditional, and somewhat mythic product, a product of art rather than science, a product of craft rather than faceless labor.

The solution was to highlight terroir. The focus on place effectively shifted the loci of artisanal work. Terroir transferred its endangered studio, threatened as it was by the encroachment of remote rationality of science and the processes of mass production, to the hermetic workshop of the soil. This lowered the potential labor cost by replacing the hand of the winemaker with the natural artistry of nature, it also helped to mask de-facto strategies used by some wineries to benefit from an economy of scale. The real economic advantage of terroir, however, was to decrease the wine industries' reliance on productive labor as a means to recover surplus value. Rather than relying on value extracted by squeezing work teams or mechanizing production, the shift of focus to terroir allowed wineries to extract value from rent. By charging royalties for the experience of place, the price of wine was disconnected from the cost of production. In some cases it rose or sank in accord with reputation of the geographic designation, but in general price became inversely related to the size of the wines spatial sign, that is, the narrower the geographical region, the more special the wine, and the higher the price. Drawing on the infinite divisibility and infinite diversity of dirt, winemakers manipulated supply to attract a demand for

specialty while appearing to aid consumers in their campaign against mass production. By exploiting a seemingly endless appetite for wines from increasingly narrow geographical subdivisions the implementation of the rent model offered winemakers a strategy that was more elastic and extensible than the auteur model could provide.

In a recent essay on the role the organic label plays in the economics of consumption, Julie Guthman argues appellations on food labels serve as an “aesthetic illusion” (Guthman 236) created to close a “gap between the commodity’s (physical) use value and its imputed use value”, (Guthman 236) “one that “depends upon the construction and maintenance of quasi-monopoly conditions to give it market meaning.” (Guthman 237) In other words, it functions as a kind of brand name, but in the case of the organic label and the geographic designation in wine, one that is not wholly constructed by the producer. Guthman goes on to outline the network of professional associations, legal mechanisms, and consumer groups necessary to structure these monopolies in the construction of the organic label. All considered, an incredible amount of social labor is involved. The monopoly is maintained by an alliance of consumers and producers who have a mutual interest in maintaining the allegedly indestructible character of the monopoly value, be it for sustainable agriculture, sovereign dirt, or simply higher rents. In this alliance, where the quest for profit strikes a bargain with morally motivated, sustainable commodity consumption, it inevitably does so by setting a limit on the consumer’s intended moral intervention. It exacts a price, geared to maintain an economic system that rewards profit and punishes losses. And when the maintenance of this system is no longer viable, the market for consumer expression vanishes along with the goods that served as the vehicle for their expression.

The possibility that this type of economic logic operates behind the turn towards dirt in wine aesthetics is supported by a recent empirical study by wine economists who attempted to locate the most important variables influencing a consumer preference for wines from particular places. The study, by Robin Cross, Andrew Plantinga and Robert Stavins, (2011) examined a host of variables, such as soil, elevation, aspect and vine density, and found that none of these intrinsic variables guided consumer preferences as significantly as the extrinsic measures of price and appellation name. This study supports the contention that the turn toward terroir is at its root a means of structuring a string of exclusive clubs designed to attract both buyers and their social capital through the marketing of memberships. The resulting committed consumption, in turn, leads to the consumers / members taking on a greater role in building demand and structuring the quasi-monopoly rents. By contributing to products their high-end status, and distributing brand information through conspicuous consumption, blogs or the more traditional means, such as word of mouth companies further offset the crisis of production value. The economics of club membership was, of course, available in the auteur model, and it was, in fact, a key force driving it. But basing membership on an association with an ever-prolific designer runs into limitations, described above. At some point, the image of craft-maker becomes

the vacate director of mass production. The club membership model, based an association with prized dirt, however, offers infinite granularity.

That an underlying economic logic drives the turn towards dirt, in production and in consumption, is devastating to the ambition of *terroir*. Like the critique of conceptual art briefly outlined above, economic determinism subverts both the aesthetic and the political dimensions of the movement, negating the autonomy of art, while restraining the political agency of the consumer/taster. It suggests that the subject of wine appreciation, the consumer or the taster, has been duped again. And this time it is not simply a case of a mistaken of attribution, one that substitutes the influence of winemaking for the attributes of dirt. With the economic dislocation of the senses, the very apparatus which had been elevated in aesthetics to the sovereign position of judgment is demoted to a kind of service role. Our sense of taste is reduced to validating brand name choices constructed to attract status group niches. Just as wine science refutes the direct influence of soil minerals in the taste of wine, the social science of economic determinism interrupts the symbolic communion between the wine taster and the life of the vine, a connection so valued in the school of *terroir*. The vicarious possession of place in the imagination of the taster is replaced by a rent relationship. The change in dynamics means that the more *terroir* is enlisted as a salve for the indignities of modern alienation, and the more dirt is sought as a balm for the disconnectedness contemporary life inflicts, the further one is from developing the roots one seeks. The consumption of place through *terroir* is, at best, a tourist-like relation, a fleeting, transient encounter, quite distinct from the promise of home offered by *terroir*. At worst, the pursuit of place through consumption is exploitive, in that it empowers the very sources responsible for the consumer's dislocation.

Is this all there is to dirt? Is Rutherford Dust merely a smokescreen? Given the economics compelling the turn towards *terroir*, is its grasp at the mantle of the avant-garde simply illusionary, that is, simply an alibi for economic necessity? Is the dust of Rutherford a reference to that which obscures, a cloud used to conceal the prestidigitation of the commodity fetish, a mist used to hide the sleight of hand, that invisible hand of the market? Is this a dust that lulls us into a dreamscape, one where the production of value takes shape as an unmediated extension of the land?

The Exchange of Dust

Rutherford wine promotional material from individual vintners and from their association, the Rutherford Dust Society invest in dust for the reasons Julie Guntham suggests, as an "aesthetic illusion," that is, to develop an exclusive story around Rutherford wines which create effective demand, or as Wolfgang Fritz Haug, the German theorist who coined the 'aesthetic illusion' informs "to stimulate in the onlooker the desire to possess and the impulse to buy." (Haug 8) But the dust is also generated in alliance with wine enthusiasts in an effort to endow the wine with value derived from the sociology of distinction, one that

has real, if differentiated, value in different communities. The dust is produced, shared, distributed and exchanged in the form of cultural capital. From this perspective, articulated most effectively by Pierre Bourdieu in his work *Distinction*, dust is a social relation that animates the wine as a status marker and allows it to play in the economy of signs. It may be acquired as an emblem of taste, or shunned as a taboo, depending on one's relative position. It may be used commensally, to bring communities together, or in boundary-work to push different classes apart. In these manners Rutherford Dust is converted once more to serve a different set of social economic functions. Its specter is conjured, not simply to conceal by way of aesthetic illusion, but to animate social relations and structure social classes. The spectacular sensation of dust serves as a kind of pixie dust that brings wine (and the specificity of dirt) to life as a form of social prestige.

The symbolic magic of dust as a totem, however, is conjured by a veiling its object. Dust as social symbol, as cultural capital, makes its appearances as an apparition, the false voiced messenger of the soil who speaks with the voice of a ghost, one we are compelled to follow. We fall under its sway and prop up its deception in order to direct its spirit, aura or social capital in one direction or another.

When one plays in this dust, however, no matter how satisfying or exhilarating the game may be, one willfully suspends the critical questions concerning the mode through which dirt is signified. Participation in the sublime game of status exchange through the discourse of terroir converts the material conditions of wine into forms which allow them to serve the economics of the sign, a conversion that, in the end, inverts the aesthetic claim of terroir, which promises an engagement with wine's foundational materiality. This play of dust renders that promise false. The foundational relation between taste and dirt is overturned and the symbolic reconciliation of land and craft is ruptured. The aesthetics of terroir, which promised communion, is reduced to a nostalgic longing for a fantastic past that never was.

The failure of terroir as a symbol allows us to think about how the image of dirt is mediated by social pressures. It also helps explain the lugubrious undertones in the rhetorical and visual culture of contemporary wine. Under the banner of Rutherford Dust, California wine culture stages a melancholic predilection for ancient and archaic motifs, and a fondness for picturesque ruins, images which promote wine as a timeless value that moves at the pace of natural history. Such prelapsarian images construct the myth of wine. They configure wine as naturally occurring substance, one which was wild and untamed before it entered into its enduring relationship with human kind, as a companion through the ages. The story portrays wine to be as old as dirt, as a truth that keeps pace on geologic time.

The history of wine, however, shows us that terroir takes its form in relation to contemporary human events and social forces. In my study on the Bordeaux wine trade I show how the recognition of terroir is linked to globalization and the rise of finance capitalism. (Michalski) Its historical contingency compels us to treat

Rutherford Dust and other wine myths, not as timeless symbols, but as allegories carefully constructed to respond to contemporary material and cultural conditions. Walter Benjamin, who, in his work, sought to elevate the commodity to the status of allegory is especially helpful in thinking about wine in this way. His critical perspective shows how terroir can be true even when the direct route towards the expression of that truth is distorted. Bainard Cowan described Benjamin's "allegorical way of seeing" in a 1981 essay in *New German Critique*, this way.

The affirmation of the existence of truth, then, is the first precondition for allegory; the second is the recognition of its absence. Allegory could not exist if truth were accessible: as a mode of expression it arises in perpetual response to the human condition of being exiled from the truth that it would embrace.
(Cowan 114)

This perception returns us to the elusive imaginary of Rutherford Dust. It places its representations in the context of an underlying liquidity set in motion by commodity culture, the overly administered regime of the senses regulated by class and status markets, and the horizon of manufactured seductions produced by the contemporary food and wine industry. Against the image of wine as an envoi of nature, the allegorical message it sends is one of a natural innocence endangered, made rare and diminished by a science and industry seeking profit first. Dust, apprehended as an allegory, no longer tethers us to the mysterious power of dirt. It strikes the senses as the settled remnants of a nature departed. The pixie magic that spirited the aura of art and the commodity fetish appears depleted as dust is transformed into an indicator of decay.

Benjamin addresses the allegorical image of dust in the *Arcades Project*, (Benjamin & Tiedemann) his masterwork on the prehistory of consumer culture in 19th century Paris, where it is alternatively figured as a deleterious clutter that stifles perspective and signals decomposition. His reading helps us recognize how Rutherford Dust comes to serve as both an aesthetic illusion and an index of a time passed in boredom of modern routine. In the *Arcades Project* he writes, "Under Louis Philippe dust settled even on the revolutions." (Benjamin & Tiedemann 102-3) And he records Paris' mid-nineteenth century penchant for plush upholstery in bourgeois interiors and long trains fashioned to women's dresses, as if these objects, which collected and stirred-up dust, were deployed to display a conspicuous affinity with collective boredom.

The Performance of Dust

Does Rutherford Dust also mark the absence of History, a history that one can participate in? It certainly communicates a place where time either stands still, or least is shaped in a manner apart from modern regularity. Unlike many of the new appellations in California, Rutherford really is home to ruins. Together with Oakville its, somewhat arbitrarily divided southern neighbor, it constitutes the historic epicenter of California wine. It is here that American wine took its most

definite shape, where its most influential enterprises rose and fell, whether destroyed by Prohibition or succumbed to the booms and busts of erratic business cycles and changing proclivities of modern taste. The two oldest names, Beaulieu Vineyard and Inglenook have gone through many changes. Yet today their histories are disciplined and organized to circulate as a reminder that a Rutherford tradition has continued undeterred. As wineries that survived Prohibition, they have been specially anointed. The rupture of that event is like the French Revolution in Bordeaux. To claim antecedent roots is to claim a kind of royal heritage.

Today these wineries marshal this heritage to validate the idea that there is a general continuity of spirit across wine cultures. And the historical legitimacy amassed at Beaulieu Vineyard and Inglenook is shared by their Rutherford neighbors. The Rutherford Dust Society is one of the formal mechanisms used to leverage Rutherford's cultural capital. Alongside their work marketing and lobbying, they contribute to various preservation efforts, constructing ecological and cultural heritage sites.

In Rutherford, old stone buildings have become treasured and the architects of many new buildings go to extremes to construct places capable of communicating an aristocratic patina. The Napa valley is filled with ersatz manors, chateaux and hacienda. Laird Durham, writing for the Napa Valley Wine Examiner (Durham) reports how in 2005 the Hall Winery imported eighteenth-century bricks from ruined Hapsburg Empire cathedrals, palaces or schools to complete their winery in Rutherford. In adjacent Oakville, the Nickel and Nickel winery moved an eighteenth-century barn in its entirety from the east coast. These extravagant efforts are aimed at separating the wine experience from the drudgery of the current economy. They contribute to a playful theater, where architectural tropes borrowed from history dance with the sensuous expressions of wine.

The developed wine tourism of Napa Valley now offers a myriad of 'total' experiences set to capture the fancy of a wine public that has come to demand seductive dioramas. The scene from the car as one drives north on Highway 29 quickens above Yountville. A parade of façades overlaying a multi-billion dollar tourist and hospitality industry greets the visitor. Sophisticated, heavily financed companies compete for attention along what might be called the wine strip between Oakville, Rutherford, St Helena and Calistoga. Displays include what first appear as a heterogeneous mix of signs, but despite their postmodern serendipity, a central theme organizes their narrative. From Robert Mondavi's Spanish-like Mission to Beringer's castle-like ramparts, to Clos Pegase's, pantheon-like temple to wine's classical age, property after property stages class privilege as if it were a natural attribute of the soil, while staging labor as if it were indentured and bonded to the dirt.

The Napa Valley is crowned by two tourist traps which betray the allegory at work in wine culture, even if at first glance they appear a bit out of synch with the wine industry's rush to radiate a patrician-like status upon its devotees. These are the attractions of The Petrified Forest and the Old Faithful Geyser of

California, both near Calistoga. Born in an era before wine consumption became a serious work, before the wine customer was saddled with the responsibility to contribute to a firm's value through passionate consumption, and before the wine enthusiast was compelled to interpellate his or her self through an allegiance with certain appellations or a particular constellation of brands, that is, before the disciplinary injunction of post-industrial wine drinking took effect in the 1980s and 1990s, these sites contributed to a wine tourism more in tune with a bygone era's inclination for the topsy-turvy carnivalesque. They share a history and affinity with other Northern California mid-century modern kitsch attractions, such as mystery spots and redwood tree drive-thrus, but they take on new meaning in contemporary wine culture. Although they were originally constructed to offer a release from the grind experienced by an emerging middle class, one that occupied bureaucratic stresses and privileges, today they offer an escape from the flux and anxieties associated with the destruction of those same social structures and positions. The Old Faithful Geyser of California and The Petrified Forest are monuments to the prehistoric. They appear to make right the postmodern inversion of the image as substance. They construct a theater wherein the earth itself functions as the central character. They offer a story of a deep structural history, a story before humankind, before factory farms, the prison industrial complex, before white settlers and the rationalization of agriculture. They perform a time and space where dirt is a subject.

The first attraction exhibits the endurance and monotony associated with this timespace. Like a clock, the Geyser spews steam regularly as if activated by a subterranean intelligence, timing its discharge at a primal level, a force, perhaps, rehearsed by the exhibition's so-called fainting goats, which fall asleep according to some same cosmic rhythm. The geologic cadence operating at the geyser legitimates a certain magnetism associated with terroir, but more directly it serves as a negation of History. Against the ongoing cataclysm capitalism effects on ecosystems it offers a geologic uniformitarianism, one that attempts to ameliorate our contemporary disaster by offering a post-historical perspective of natural continuity.

A similar natural history narrative is at work at The Petrified Forest, that "pure little isle of tourism among these solitary hills," (Stevenson) as Robert Louis Stevenson called it in 1883. There, ancient trees disinterred lie prostrate and turned to stone by the force of an ancient eruption. According to the site's brochure, over 3 million years ago,

Water laden with silicates in the ash seeped down into the gaps left behind by the decomposing tree fibers: replacing the wood cell by cell with crystalized silica until the entire tree became stone. Some of the silica has agatized into a colorful glass-like gem-stone. (Petrified Forest)

A catastrophe occurs. It spreads dust and suspends history. Plants absorb the dust and produce, by their will and at their own pace natural petroglyphs, gems of mysterious beauty.

Both these sites reinforce the popular message of wine in the era of terroir. They underpin the concept of geologic intentionality (or intelligent design) while valorizing ancient forces over modern interventions. Reading them allegorically, however, shows how these sites can also work to expose the dangers associated with the willful suspension of human history. The counter-narrative of the Petrified Forest is not the comfort of geologic time, but the shocking danger of perpetual slumber induced by the social upheaval of capitalism. In turn, the Calistoga geyser does not simply legitimate a natural basis for bourgeois temporality, it awakens one to the horror of being lulled to sleep like goats by the intoxicating mists of consumption. These counter-narratives are generated by the close juxtaposition of the prehistoric and the post-historic conditions. In their proximity they create a different form of wonder, one directed toward the future.

Allegory of Taste

Just back down the road in Rutherford these counter-images are abject. Acknowledging their power rehearses the volatile counter-performance staged by Rutherford Dust itself. The attention they bring to the seeming motionlessness of history in consumer society disrupts the settled character of Rutherford Dust. They awaken a culture petrified by its own detachment from events. Here the petroglyph of natural intransience is shattered. Its death-head, that emblem which aimed to attract nostalgic purchase by generating a disingenuous mourning for nature's lost craft, is pulverized and replaced by a cloud over the present. They present dialectical images capable of exposing the false synthesis of nature and history. Susan Buck Morss explains by drawing on Theodor Adorno's lecture on "The Idea of Natural History" in her work, *Dialectics of Seeing*. "Adorno employed nature and history as dialectically opposed concepts, each of which provided criticism of the other and of the reality each was supposed to identify." She quotes Adorno's lecture,

[...] the moments of nature and history do not disappear into each other, but break simultaneously out of each other and cross each other in such a way that what is natural emerges as a sign for history, and history, where it appears most historical, appears as a sign of nature. (Buck-Morss 59)

Buck Morss' reading of the critical project shared by Benjamin and Adorno is crucial to the allegorical reading of the commodity form of wine. With it, the natural basis of terroir can be rendered as a historical construction, and the tradition and heritage it presents, that is, terroir's view of history, is one where events are distributed and encased in natural processes.

The allegorical reading of dirt breaks this concealment. It shows that reality of Rutherford Dust resides not in its ability to disclose the character of the inorganic, but in the way it sparks a recall of the muscle memory of displacement. It is felt in the sense that the Dust Bowl, that immense dislocation that splintered families and spawned floating armies of marginalized workers in California in the nineteen-thirties, will return. It is detected in the sense that

larger dust storms caused by climate change are in our future. And that these will bring about a new era of refugees. It is the haunting sense that a much larger immigration is being propelled by systemic poverty in Mexico and other nations. According to the Economic Policy Institute a flood of subsidized, low-priced corn from the United States drove “between 1 million and 2 million Mexican farmers off the land and adding to the supply of desperate Mexicans looking for work.” (Faux) Their report was written to encourage political sympathy, but like Rutherford Dust, it can also evoke a panic, a xenophobic anxiety about “the growing tide of people driven north by poverty”. (Faux) The return of dust, in the intimate moment of taste, aggravates a hidden but growing sense of fragility caused by the recognition that the disorder waged abroad is now being felt at home in the form of outsourcing, the corporate restructuring of labor rights, and rampant real estate foreclosures. Beneath the suspicion of suffering and displacement associated with disenfranchised immigrant labor, there is in Rutherford Dust an underlying hint that the future for all will not only be entwined with a tangible condition of ecological collapse, but will also be largely be set in motion by economic necessities beyond our control.

Critical debate in the sociology of consumption is too often polarized between those who see taste as a function of status and class and those who see status and class as categories organized by lifestyle choices. In this essay, I have argued that both arguments, as well as many of the bargains they strike between the forces of agency and structure overlay a socioeconomic analysis over what can also be understood as an aesthetic event. The production, distribution and consumption of commodities, like wine, deploy labor. They extract, burn and redistribute resources. They move dirt. These economies also have far reaching and differentiated social, biological and psychological consequences for all those who participate in them. Collectively the enterprise of consumption, however, is not just about moving around matter, filling individualized functions, or directly satisfying physical and social needs. The production, distribution and consumption of commodities also produces our cultural world, a world of dreams and fantasies, seemingly disconnected from the material conditions which give them their shape. Here, I have argued that by reading collective consumer trends as constructive of allegory, by positing an allegorical consumption, an alternative and perhaps deeper sense of how collective desires take form can be had. By recognizing the commodity as more than a conflation of social and economic value, one sees how its fetishism or collective myths are often staged, not as a veiled form of support for economism, but in confrontation to it.

Wine, as our companion, does not render its message overtly, but condemned as it is to speak truth, it presents its signal in the frequency of a parable or riddle, one where its aura or spirit is expressed through the medium of dirt. The allegorical perception, according to Benjamin scholar Beatrice Hanssen, allows the critic “to release the philosophical truth content” of the work of art. (Hanssen 71) She explains, “Not until the veil of *Shein* had been rent and the work had been decomposed to the point where it revealed its allegorical, ruinous form could it actualize the salvific potential that lay embedded at its core.” (Hanssen 71) Unlike the false reconciliations staged by wine promoters or those embraced

by others driven to believe in wine's separation from the present, the allegory of Rutherford Dust gathers its concern based on a historically conditioned immediacy. Out of the ruins of a lost materiality, it is called on to reassemble a totality that is everywhere fragmented, but made present in the intimate yet social collectivities of taste. The allegorical reading of this spirit (as modernization, globalization, or Capital) blasts the emblem of wine fantasy to reconnect its composite of dead labor and animated nature to its material base in a new and potentially revolutionary way. It reminds us that wine does not demand that our senses conform to truth, but instead insists that philosophic truth resonate with the senses, that it ring true at the most intimately subjective level. The challenge of Rutherford Dust, to taste and appreciate dirt in wine, is rife with scientific and economic contradiction, but it is these historically formed contradictions that work to decompose the veil of semblance surrounding terroir. In working through them one returns the subjective concerns of wine culture back to the object of taste, the social form of wine as art. In this light, the turn towards terroir in wine culture is not the answer to a timeless ontological question, it is instead, the assembly of an aesthetic question, one appropriate to the survival of beauty in our time.

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Of Rutherford Dust: The Allegory of Dirt and the End of Terroir
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