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Waste: An introduction

Alexandra Schneider and Wanda Strauven

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Abstract

With this special section we do not endeavour to synthesise the on-going debate. We rather aim at adding something to it by concentrating on the less obvious or hidden side (or ‘hidden agenda’) of waste, both from a contemporary and a historical perspective.

Keywords: introduction, media, waste



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It all started with a documentary photo-project commissioned to Dorothee Wenner, filmmaker, curator, and delegate for India and Sub-Saharan Africa for the Berlinale. However, unfortunately, what appeared to be a perfect opening for this thematic section – a photographic essay on obsolete film machinery in the non-Western world – had to be abandoned. A series of mishaps and copyright issues resulted in a contribution that could not be written. What remains from this unaccomplished project is a ‘randomly taken snap’ and a very telling story, a story about waste that must stay hidden. In a letter to us, Wenner vividly, almost photographically, recalls the huge piles of outdated film equipment in the various production houses, schools, and archives that she visited in India and West Africa. She writes:

When taken from one office to the next, from a studio hall to the postproduction facilities, I remember walking by those small ‘hills’ where VHS recorders, monitors, U-matic editing devices, and other machines of the ‘analog era’ are piled up. Usually they are neatly arranged on top of the heavier machine park of the previous celluloid era – Steenbeck editing tables make solid foundations of these technical altars, forming geologically precise waste layers for film scholars.

She also conjectures on why these old machines are kept there: ‘in the first place as back-up options, later overseen and thereby forgotten in their very presence’. Despite their bulkiness they have become invisible, or rather over-visible and therefore over-seen. Their materiality seemed to have dissipated together with their performability, although in strictly ecological terms (from the Greek *oikos*: ‘house’) they are filling the building, literally occupying space.

Convinced to have taken many pictures of those media ecological/archaeological sites, Wenner accepted our invitation to contribute to this special section, only to find out that her photographic database contained ‘but one single “matching” item: a randomly taken snap from an institute ... somewhere in West Africa’. Realising that the other ‘pics’ must have existed in her mind only, she decided to shoot more on her next trips. Here follows her ‘sad’ report:

The first trip was to an African country. I was happy when I found exactly what I was looking for: a ‘fenced-in’ outdoor shack full of technical waste from the 1950s onward, reminding me of a chicken shelter. But my host asked me to understand that he could not give me permission to shoot; he was afraid of consequences and ‘concerns’ from the Western donors and

sponsors of that particular school, should they come across [the NECSUS journal]. These pictures would be used as an example to show what happens with equipment they were given as a donation. On the second trip to India, I was more successful when asking ‘my man’ for permission by explaining the concept of the journal issue. He gave me that subtle ‘you-crazy-Westerners’-smile, understandingly benevolent, and said he would disappear for a few minutes. Under one condition: not to mention where those pictures originate from. Dutifully, I agreed and took the pictures. But then a strange mishap occurred and my computer ‘ate’ that little series when I uploaded it from my camera. ... So, I’m contributing this one sad picture, which I remember I also took without permission. Therefore I have to keep a secret about where and when.

If we recount the circumstances of this failed mission here in our introduction, it is because we believe it offers ‘anecdotal evidence’ of the complexity of the waste issue today.¹ The story somehow counters the recent emergence of waste as the ‘new’ correct (or even fashionable) concern, insofar that it asks us to take a step back. We all know that we should engage with waste if we want to save our planet, but things are not that simple. Wenner’s experience points to the ambivalent aspect of waste as a problem: we might want to take care of it, but waste does not always easily allow us to do so – because it is imperceptible, inaccessible, indestructible, or simply kept well-hidden (and, like in the case of Wenner’s project, censored from public awareness).

Waste seems to have become the new buzzword of this decade. Waste is on everyone’s agenda, from ‘upcycling’ artists and anti-consumerist activists to scholars of very diverging disciplines, from underground practices to mainstream aesthetics, from politicians to industries. If we consider all the technologies and services related to waste management, we have to conclude that it has also become an important economical drive. Most disturbing in this general trend is the aesthetic value that waste has acquired over the past few years. This aestheticisation of waste (and related issues such as decay and obsolescence) is particularly present in the field of visual media and can be placed in the broader context of a pre-digital nostalgia or vintage craze. Think of the huge success of Instagram’s retro filters, or the fetishism (especially among youth) for obsolete media, which is commercially exploited by means of all kinds of gadgets, such as the cassette tape cases and covers for the iPhone. It is the look of old media that seems to appeal; anyone, with or without (historical) photography expertise, can admire the beautifully-decayed daguerreotypes selected from the Library of Congress and displayed online in *The Public Domain Review*;² or remain

touched by the ‘unique beauty of deterioration’ of a nitrate print;³ or be equally charmed by the title sequence of the television series *Treme*, which combines old film footage of New Orleans’ jazz culture with contemporary images of the water damage caused by Hurricane Katrina on walls and photo albums. These latter images, ‘which are photographed to resemble abstract expressionist works of art’, recall the process of decaying pre-digital photography.⁴

We could also mention here our own awe for the deserted Japanese island Hashima as mediatised (and restaged, recreated) by the latest James Bond movie, *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012); and, similarly, for the magnificent pictures of abandoned film sets in North Africa taken by the Italian visual artist and filmmaker R  di Marino.⁵ Where Wenner failed, di Marino succeeded; she brought these incredibly huge cinematographic ‘leftovers’ into the picture and even decided to re-use them for a new film, a new aestheticisation, with local actors: *Petite histoire des plateaux abandonn s* (Short History of Abandoned Sets, 2012).⁶ However, this is not what this special section is about. Its main focus is not the aesthetics of waste, or the filmic (or photographic) representation of it. Nor will we be dealing with waste as cult (or camp) value, as for instance in the so-called trash cinema of John Waters or the Brazilian B-movies from the late 1960s and the 1970s, to which the International Film Festival Rotterdam rendered homage in 2012 with a retrospective entitled *The Mouth of Garbage*.⁷

In light of all these film references, we almost feel obliged to give a brief nod to Agn s Varda’s documentary about discarded produce and garbage pickers, *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (The Gleaners and I, 2000), which was pioneering in creating public awareness about the use of re-use and the need to recycle (and in having a particular eye for the beauty of waste, with its famous heart-shaped potatoes). However, we are also not so much concerned with issues of recycling. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how many (well-intended, albeit often na ve) initiatives related to the issue of waste are surfacing these days. To mention a couple, there is the *Goedzak* (‘good bag’) designed by the Dutch Waarmakers, which is a half-transparent, half-yellow garbage bag for items that are still useable but that you want to discard. Put on display in this special see-through bag, these products are given a ‘second chance’ if picked up from the street by another (more sustainable) user.⁸ Another example is the ingenious concept of an ecological mobile phone with replaceable blocks, the so-called *Phonebloks*, which would permit us to continuously update or remodel our mobile phone instead of being forced to buy a new one every other year – a nice attempt to fight the

planned obsolescence of today's technological devices, even if it is probably doomed to fail (given the expected lack of support from big business).⁹

These efforts are symptomatic of the vastness and urgency of waste as a problem. Also, in academic terms, the awareness is growing steadily. One indication is the increasing number of conferences and seminars organised around the topic of waste and other related notions, such as trash, garbage, debris, and obsolescence.¹⁰ A starting point for treating waste as a cultural (and aesthetic) object was the international conference *The Aesthetics of Trash: Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective*, organised by University College Dublin in September 2008, with proceedings published in 2010.¹¹ During the last couple of years more academic initiatives followed. To name just a few, in September 2012 a post-graduate conference entitled TRASH took place at the University of Sussex; in June 2013 there were two major international conferences – one at Goldsmiths, University of London titled *Media Archaeology & Technological Debris*, the other at the University of Göttingen called *Cultures of Obsolescence in North America: Aesthetics, Materiality, History*. Forthcoming in June 2014 is the international conference *Global Garbage: Excess, Waste, and Abandonment in the Contemporary City* that will take place at the Centre for the Study of European and North African Relations (SENAR), University of London Institute in Paris.

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to give an extensive literature review of all the waste-related publications that appeared during the last decade.¹² We would rather like to draw attention to some historical precedents in our field of media studies related to the three key notions of waste, trash, and obsolescence. When Cuban film director Julio Garcia Espinosa reflected, after 15 years, on his 1969 text 'For an Imperfect Cinema' – a classic manifesto for revolutionary filmmaking (turning cinema into an engaged and 'imperfect' activity) – he pointed out that one of the biggest obstacles for the realisation of this type of committed cinema was the so-called 'economy of waste, basically created above all by the great countries of developed capitalism, which try to incite us to unnecessary consumption'. He also encouraged art and cultural analysts to focus on the 'question of up to what point a work of art contributes towards eliminating the culture of waste'.¹³ In other words, already in 1985, there was a call for a counter-movement, a protest against cinema (or, more generally, art) as waste-producing medium.¹⁴

Trash is, historically speaking, probably the most common notion of waste in media studies, often used as a derogative denominator in the field of television studies (or as an articulation of guilty pleasure). Trash television

has been on scholarly agendas, at least in Europe, since the liberalisation and privatisation of television. In this particular context, in 2000, German media scholar Lorenz Engell published a thought-provoking article wherein he argued explicitly against the camp or cult take on the notion of trash and instead advocated for a notion of waste in relation to television that engages with its literal sense as something undefined, non-systematic, and meaningless.¹⁵

Obsolescence is a central notion in the discipline of media archaeology, as it originated within (early) cinema studies and is now emerging within the field of new media studies.¹⁶ Media archaeology is (often) closely connected to the practice of collecting old and/or obsolete media devices, which was epitomised in 1995 by Bruce Sterling's launching of the Dead Media Project.¹⁷ Other important collector-media archaeologists are Laurent Mannoni, Erkki Huhtamo, and Werner Nekes.

Apart from collecting media waste, media scholars have also become important media waste producers – especially since the advent of electronic online publishing, social networking, YouTube, and other online media channels. As media *prosumers* and *produsers*, we are all responsible for the increasing media waste. This special section is also adding to this electronic dump. Three years ago, the *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture* already dedicated a special issue to the notion of waste. They collected various case studies about the representation of waste and the different sensory or bodily reactions to it. The general focus was more on the culture of waste than on media as waste or waste-producing, which is the key argument of our special section. Still, in their editorial, Kirsten Seale and Caroline Hamilton insist on the resistance of waste – that is, its resistance against our efforts to render it invisible or remove it; they refer to *Purity and Danger* (1966), a seminal book on dirt by Mary Douglas, who observed the following: '[t]hat which is negated is not thereby removed.'¹⁸ As the contributions in this special section demonstrate, the problem starts before; negating might not even be an issue, because waste tends to remain hidden, invisible, or indestructible, and also because waste is essential to some media instalments.

With this special section we do not endeavour to synthesise the on-going debate. We rather aim at adding something to it by concentrating on the less obvious or hidden side (or 'hidden agenda') of waste, both from a contemporary and a historical perspective. The section opens with Lisa Parks' short essay on 'Orbital ruins', which gives the recent discussion on media waste a new twist. Not only does she engage with a still under-theorised, overlooked, and rather invisible object of media studies – the satellite – but

her critical engagement with orbital debris and satellite failures also offers an intriguing take on the (non)-totality of capitalism. Moreover, Parks scrutinises the visualisations of satellite ruins, which ‘reverberate symbolically with the desert explosions in the finale of Antonioni’s 1970 film *Zabriskie Point*, during which capital accumulations ... beautifully implode against a smoky blue sky of unforgettable pyrotechnic display’. It is precisely this scene that Matilde Nardelli takes as a starting point for her contribution entitled ‘“The Sprawl of Entropy”: Cinema, waste, and obsolescence in the 1960s and 1970s’. Nardelli revisits Antonioni’s film – particularly the finale – by re-contextualising its discursive location in the late 1960s and early 1970s in connection to articulations of entropy in the writings of Robert Smithson and Hollis Frampton. In a more general sense, she is interested in presenting cinema itself as a kind of waste, an alignment that is ‘not specific or exclusive to the present moment’.

Kim Knowles takes on the baton of cinema’s supposed obsolescence and discusses contemporary analogue experimental film practices in which bodily ‘waste’ is a constitutive component of the films. ‘Blood, sweat and tears: Bodily inscriptions in contemporary experimental film’ offers a revitalisation of experimental film theory in the realms of materialist practice. Even more precarious material constellations are the focus of Hanna Hölling’s ‘Transcending obsolescence in technological ruins? Questions of conservation and presentation in Nam June Paik’s *Something Pacific* and *Rembrandt Automatic*’. Similar (but ultimately different) to Nardelli’s argument, Hölling’s analysis points out that Nam June Paik’s ruin installations are also always a kind of waste. How to tackle the paradox when a ruin is decaying and the task is to preserve and conserve such works of art?

As mentioned before, moral and ethical positions are elusive when looking closer at issues of waste. This is also at stake in Karl Schoonover’s engagement with some recent eco-documentaries in ‘Documentaries without documents? Ecocinema and the toxic’. Taking up a cue from Siegfried Kracauer, that the most cinematic films make us look at things we otherwise avoid acknowledging, Schoonover actually engages with the kind of waste that escapes cinematic representation, what remains not only hidden but literally invisible: the toxic. As he argues, it is precisely ‘the toxic [that] shows us the limits of the cinematic image, and in doing so asks whether cinema can still redeem our physical world’. Equally thought-provoking is Casper Tybjerg’s article on the possible productivity of waste, ‘“The Sown and the Waste” – or, the psychedelic writing of film history’. He engages with the writings of the late J.H. Hexter, a specialist in Tudor and 17th century British history, who has argued for using the waste of academic research

as a productive source for a historian. Hexter uses a past understanding of waste from the middle ages, where it is not understood as the desert, but that what ‘may lie further away from the farm, beyond “the sown” – the carefully planted and cultivated fields – but it can be used for grazing, requires less labour to maintain, and will yield a bounty that – while not as systematic and predictable – is nonetheless well worth having’. For a historian, and also a film historian, as Tybjerg argues, ‘knowledge comes from personal life experience, from the very fact of being human; and that is the waste’.

The special section concludes with an article by Jussi Parikka that implicitly connects many of the issues that have been raised in the other articles. ‘Media zoology and waste management: Animal energies and medianatures’ proposes a media materialism that pursues ‘a connection to ecology and nature, [which] is not to abandon political questions of labour or politics’. In conclusion, following Parikka, past and present media waste are an ‘example of the connection to resources and natural energy, as well as one index of the most urging aesthetico-political question of our age: the eco-crisis’.

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Notes

1. On the importance of anecdotes for the disciplinary field of humanities, see Cubitt 2013.
2. <http://publicdomainreview.org/2013/01/08/decayed-daguerreotypes/>
3. Lameris 2005, p. 152. Lameris makes this observation in connection to the film *Mein Name ist Spiesecke* (Emile Albes, 1914) and its effects of crystallisation.
4. <http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/ccManager/clips/treme-title-sequence>
5. See for instance her photo series of *Star Wars* sets in the Tunisian desert: <http://petapixel.com/2013/05/12/photo-series-visits-abandoned-star-wars-film-sets-in-the-deserts-of-north-africa/>.
6. This eight-minute HD video can be watched at: <http://vimeo.com/66261554>.
7. For the programme, see <http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/iffr-2012/programme/signals/signals-the-mouth-of-garbage/>.
8. <http://waarmakers.nl/projects/goedzak/>
9. <http://www.phonebloks.com/>
10. It should be noted that equally important conferences on the topic of waste are organised outside of academia, for instance the e-Waste Management Summits and the TransWaste workshops.

11. Pye 2010.
12. Some of the recent waste-related publications to which this special section makes reference are Hawkins 2006, Acland 2007, Bennett 2010, Pye 2010, Gabrys 2011, and Parikka 2011.
13. Espinosa 1985, p. 94.
14. Espinosa's original notion of imperfect cinema is picked up again by Hito Steyerl in her manifesto 'In Defense of the Poor Image', which incites awareness for the very popular, digitally-deteriorated low res image: '[p]oor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images – their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism.' Steyerl 2009.
15. Engell 2000, pp. 11-22.
16. Strauven 2013, pp. 59-79.
17. Bak 1999. See also the Dead Media Project website: <http://www.deadmedia.org/>. Ironically enough, its mailing list died in the early 2000s.
18. Douglas 1966, p. 163; quoted in Seale & Hamilton 2010.

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