



Trash Culture

Objects and Obsolescence in Cultural Perspective

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Introduction: Trash as Cultural Category

Context

Throughout history, the practice of waste management and disposal has been central to the organisation and structure of human societies. However, the rapid development of industrialisation and consumer culture, particularly as they gain in intensity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gives rise to an increased preoccupation with waste, trash and the obsolete (see Strasser 1999). The phenomenon of waste comes clearly into focus not merely as a by-product of manufacturing processes, but rather as an integral element in cycles of production and consumption. Alongside the ideals of industrial society, according to which the 'minimising of waste in the interest of efficiency is regarded as evidence of an effective economy: industrial, moral and psychic', dawns a heightened awareness that 'being wasteful in the ways we live is encouraged, expected and in many instances impossible to avoid' (Hawkins 2006: x). In the late twentieth century, in the context of increasing environmental awareness, this consciousness has altered yet again, and waste has 'been revalued and recoded from rubbish to recyclable resource, it has moved from the bin to the compost heap, it has insinuated itself into our lives in different ways and with different effects' (Hawkins 2006: 5).

It is hardly surprising then that over the last decades much attention has been devoted to the sociological and anthropological study of our relationship to waste. In her seminal study *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas illuminated the centrality of waste practices in the construction and maintenance of social relationships, while Michael Thompson's 1979 study *Rubbish Theory* elaborated an understanding of rubbish as part of a flexible and shifting system of value construction, underlying notions of

innovation, creativity and social status. At the heart of studies in material culture in the last decades of the twentieth century the work of archaeologists such as William Rathje and Cullen Murphy has offered significant insights into the relationship between archaeological artefacts and garbage, exploring the function of trash as a resource for understanding cultural and social practice. At the same time, thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Giorgio Agamben have shed light on the fate of the human being as a wasted or discarded element in discourses of socio-political hygiene.

In the context of a 'revaluing' and 'recoding' of trash, this book aims to offer a timely insight into its significance for representations of social, personal and cultural identity. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which our relationship to trash have influenced, and are also influenced by, cultural products such as films, visual art, museum exhibits and literature. The individual chapters in this volume therefore build not only on scholarship in cultural theory, sociology and anthropology which suggests how social and personal experience is embedded in material culture, but also on an awareness of the significance of trash as an aesthetic resource, not only since the beginning of the twentieth century, but also in earlier times. In so doing they aim to offer another perspective on a category, which, as Hawkins observes, has come to be dominated by the environmentalist movement (2006: 7).

Emerging from theories of trash in the twentieth century are two main strands of thought which, intertwined as they are, manifest themselves in various constellations throughout the essays in this volume. The first is the significance of the obsolete, outmoded and discarded as carriers of memory. In his reflections on the potency of objects against the backdrop of burgeoning consumer capitalism, Walter Benjamin described the 'immense force of "atmosphere"' contained in the outmoded, revealing 'revolutionary energies' emanating from the past (Benjamin 1999: 210). Benjamin's notion of the value of the rags and scraps of society as evidence of another, alternative, history, lies at the heart of debates about the place of material things in our understanding of time, and the relationship between memory and forgetting. In an age of post-memory (Hirsch 1997), characterised by ever-increasing consumption, both of material goods and information, the role played by things in remembering – and forgetting – takes on increased

significance. This reflects a shift in attitudes towards material culture in the late twentieth century and a renewed engagement with the complex relationships between subjects and objects which, no longer seen as antagonists in the formation of identities, give way to the concept of networks of interrelationships between humans and non-humans. Outlining the potential of things as memory banks, Bruno Latour observes that '[E]ven in our grandmother's attics, in the flea market, in town dumps, in scrap heaps, in rusted factories, in the Smithsonian Institution, objects still appear quite full of use, of memories, of instructions' (Latour in Graves-Brown 2000: 10). One of the concerns of this volume is to consider what role the outmoded or obsolete object may assume in this context. We ask what role trash might play in the representation of memory and forgetting, functioning as it does as the point of intersection between institutionalised and private memory, between the forgotten and retained, visible and invisible.

The second broad area of concern emerging from key debates relates to the question of trash as an integral factor in the construction of value systems. Building on historical materialist conceptions of the construction of social values, and also on structuralist notions of order and hierarchy as well as on more recent developments in material culture studies which reflect the role of material things in the development of ideological and social value systems, the wide-ranging works of Georges Bataille, Mary Douglas, Michael Thompson, Jean Baudrillard, Boris Groys and Bruno Latour, to name but a few, have shown that concepts of value do not simply derive from our binary relationship to that which we discard, but that the profane realm of waste actually offers an important source of potential value itself. Just as Benjamin's conception of the 'immense force' of the obsolete is unthinkable without a Freudian understanding of repression, this notion of value, too, hinges on an awareness of a psychic economy (see for example Freud 1957). The idea of the 'invisible', transitory realm of rubbish seems even more pertinent at a time of apparently unprecedented crisis in capitalism when notions of value have become increasingly virtual and globalised, often reaching proportions that are no longer readily intelligible to the layperson. The essays in this book ask how representations of the defunct and discarded may be employed as a means of critiquing or exploring the construction of value systems.

Trash as Cultural Category

The discarded and the outmoded have a longstanding function as a means of rehearsing the fundamental questions that frame human life, questions of a theological, philosophical and psychoanalytic nature encompassing themes of knowledge, *vanitas* and redemption. If the Baroque *memento mori* signals to man that he is as transitory as the man-made thing which has no value beyond the human world, then in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries our relationship to things intensifies, coming to underpin our uncertain and ambivalent origins. Psychoanalytically, this means a notion of origin which relies partly on the marking of difference from other identified objects – objects for which our desires might necessarily be wasted and recycled in an economy of repression and sublimation. Philosophically and sociologically, the turn away from theological models of ontology means an increasing reliance on our knowledge and experience of a material world, thus shifting – and even levelling – hierarchical relationships between humans and non-humans (see Latour 1993).

This complex investment in the material thing and the concern with the question of durability is played out in the aesthetic realm with particular intensity in the twentieth century, but has its modern origins at least as early as the eighteenth century. The ancient ruin as a portal linking past and future civilisations; the craft object as authentic connection to pre-industrial heritage; the modernist design object as the acme of apparently ahistorical functionality; the current preoccupation with sustainability and recycling – these are some of the guises in which material things, their origins, form and function, have appeared as part of wider efforts to address the question of rupture and continuity in the industrial world (see Lindner 2003, Mao 1998 and Outka 2009 on commodity culture and aesthetics). This intense preoccupation with the relationship between the thing, its origin and its function is part of a broad attempt to negotiate the underlying anxiety concerning the fate of the human being in industrialised society. In particular, thinking through the role of the craftsman or artist and the relationship between discarding and creating has constituted a means of approaching the constant, though ever-shifting and -changing, anxiety in

the face of the threatened obsolescence of human beings as productive and creative entities.

At least since the early twentieth century, the concern with discarded things and materials has been a recurring theme in art. Duchamp's famous urinal exhibit *Fountain* (1917) or Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* collages, for example, point to the discarded as an aesthetic resource which derives its potency from the apparent otherness of obsolete things. Such experiments with waste draw on the aura of the thing as a carrier of memory and forgetting, its potential as a 'trace' of existence possibly otherwise unrepresentable. Having resisted the 'tooth of time' ['Zahn der Zeit'] (Assmann 1999: 383), having continued to exist despite having outlived its functional life, the discarded thing appears to make the past, or at least the potential past, visible in the present. At the same time however, it also denies access to that past precisely because it has lost its function and value: it connotes absence, forgetting and loss and gives expression to melancholy (Assmann: 383–413). The obsolete thing draws its potency precisely from its ability to harbour a dual perspective on the past. As Peter Fritzsche shows in his discussion of the changing attitude towards ruins in Europe in the wake of the French revolution, the significance of the broken and dilapidated building shifts from an aesthetic view of the ruin and a concomitant melancholy recognition of 'the power of nature and the subordination of all worldly things to the cycle of death and birth, degeneration and regeneration' to a historical view of the ruin as 'evidence for abrupt endings and new beginnings, for rupture' (Fritzsche 2004: 99). My argument here is that the potential of the obsolete or discarded lies precisely in its ability to invoke the potential of both of these aspects simultaneously. On the one hand, the obsolete thing invites an ahistorical, aesthetic perspective and suggests the idea of cyclical processes (whether natural or economic). In this aspect it allows for the identification of self-sameness and the projection of private histories, invoking melancholy. On the other hand, the presence of the discarded also draws attention in the other direction, towards the historical. Even if its origins are unknown, the discarded thing is acknowledged as having been torn from some specific time and place, as holding a specific biography, the knowledge of which might unlock an understanding of an-other existence.

The potential of the discarded thing also relies on its status as a thing approaching a 'zero point' of value. In other words, it has reached a point in transition between the world of the functioning, the useful and visible, and the realm of the invisible, the non-functioning and empty. As Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory* suggests, at its nadir in a cycle of consumption and production, rubbish is both ready for disappearance and yet ripe for reinvestment, reinterpretation or revaluing. Furthermore, in this transitional state, operating apparently outside the world of the useful, functioning or valued, the discarded thing may appear as autonomous, existing in and for itself. Moreover: whilst systems of order and classification depend precisely upon practices of disposal and discarding, when a mixture of wasted things of many different types and states of decay or disrepair become visible, this can begin to undermine categories of order and classification, becoming in the process threatening or even subversive. By suggesting possible combinations and mergers not foreseen by human design, by crossing the boundaries of classification, such things may appear dangerously unstable, perhaps threatening contamination and contagion, evoking the powerful emotion of disgust. This is true both in a literal and in an abstract sense, revealing the moral and political dimensions of waste. Today, our focus on separating, sorting and recycling and the environmentalist mantra of sustainability is a precarious moral highground below which lie far-reaching anxieties about the boundaries between individual and collective identities and the impact of consumption practices, both in an environmental and existential sense. More than ever, we are aware that although the wasted may be pushed to the periphery of our vision, it may nevertheless return to 'cut our feet' ['unsere Füße [...] zerschneiden'] (Flusser 2003: 22).

At the same time, however, the apparently radical independence of wasted things is tempered by an awareness that trash may also serve to reveal the opposite aspect of material things: that their existence is entirely dependent on us, that they are in a sense, 'without power of resistance to man' (Marx 1996: 94). This dependency manifests itself particularly in processes of waste disposal and, for Barry Allen, is epitomised by the trash of high consumer capitalism – such as food packaging for example – which is design-intensive, rendered quickly obsolete but yet is often difficult to dispose of (Allen in Knechtel 2007: 198). For Allen this marks the 'limits

of our ingenuity' (206). This has, of course, been interpreted by environmentalists as the key to our moral fall from grace – our failure to match the powers of our invention in creating ever more ingenious things, with a moral sense of responsibility for their ultimate fate in the landfill.

Finally, the ambiguous status of the discarded thing as the carrier of (obscure) meaning, as representative of potentially 'independent' systems of value and yet passively expectant of, and vulnerable to, human intervention, might also be seen to mark it out as an important source of authenticity in late consumer capitalism. The fact of its discarding confers on it a biography, though at least partially forgotten, which connects it to real, lived life, whilst its status as found thing may empower the finder who takes it upon him or herself to determine a new status, function and value for the thing. This status of trash as simultaneously present yet absent, empty and yet replete with potential, is what makes it especially attractive against a background of anxieties about durability and order and the relationship between self and other, present and past. Each chapter in this volume sheds light on the way in which trash, as a flexible, ambiguous category is invoked in cultural negotiations of these fields of anxiety.

Overview of Contents

In his opening chapter Kevin Hetherington explores the notion of the museum as a 'conduit of disposal', arguing that in order to function as trace, remainders must be contextualised. The transformation from remainder into trace, argues Hetherington, lies at the heart of culture itself. In response to a recent resurgence of interest in the ruin and the remaindered, he explores how we use objects in order to (re)construct a historical narrative. Building on Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the obsolete, he asks how, when wrested from their original context, remaindered items may be able to 'function as a focal point for a moment of recognition'. In so doing, Hetherington explores how trash may be employed to heighten our awareness of the tension between (historical) process and the singular moment.

The chapters by Sonja Windmüller, by Lee Stickells and Nicole Sully, and by Kathleen James-Chakraborty all consider various manifestations of trash as museum exhibit. Sonja Windmüller's chapter confirms the twentieth century's fascination with the redeemed object in an exploration of the phenomenon of the trash museum. Discussing the many trash museums which have sprung up in Germany in the twentieth century, Windmüller shows how such museums operate as border zones between intentional and unintentional history, fascination and disgust. For Windmüller, by engaging actively with disposal practice in both its private and public faces, the trash museum may play an important role in exploring and counterbalancing the anxiety engendered by the increasing pace of consumer capitalism and its accelerated production of waste. In their chapter, Stickells and Sully explore the significance of the discarded neon signs of Las Vegas and look at their status in the ongoing narrative of a city which often connotes transience and virtuality. They explore the relationship between the trashed signs of the Las Vegas strip, their resurrection as an outdoor museum and the city itself as a form of living museum, where ancient monuments (pyramids, castles) are reincarnated as palaces of kitsch. Kathleen James-Chakraborty considers the case of the Meiderich steelworks in Duisburg, Germany, whose ruins were recycled into a world-renowned public park. Her chapter illuminates the ways in which city landscape, museum and wasteland coincide. She explores the intertwining of ecological imperatives, modernist aesthetics and the socio-historical heritage of the contested industrial heartland of Germany, the Ruhrgebiet, in the 'redemption' of industrial architecture as cathedrals of industry.

The chapters by Tahl Kaminer and Douglas Smith both look, in different ways, at the relationship between production, waste and excess and the tension between cultural productivity and the creation of rubbish. Tahl Kaminer approaches the issue of trash from the perspective of (post-) industrial production and consumption, which he argues is defined by its integration of the concept of excess. Taking as a yardstick modernism's ideal of fully integrating functionality and design and its concomitant criticism of the kitsch item as one which displays superfluous ornamentation, Kaminer shows how, in late consumer capitalism, art itself, the 'insignificant' element which defies use value in its traditional sense, is a

form of trash. Arguing with Baudrillard that, since at least the late twentieth century, consumer culture is defined by its use of branding and design features in order to distinguish items which are otherwise functionally identical, Kaminer invokes Rem Koolhaas's description of our contemporary environment as a 'junkspace', which is predominantly defined by the superfluous and insignificant. Here, Kaminer identifies junk not as the by-product of contemporary post-industrial society, but as its most significant outcome. In conclusion, he considers how contemporary architecture has attempted to use the notion of the excess element to destroy value and resist the occupation of space with junk. Douglas Smith's chapter also examines the question of excess and the proximity of culture and waste, by exploring the way in which these issues are reflected in the work of Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille. Smith explores how, in the figure of the ragpicker, two seemingly diametrically opposed concepts of culture meet. He shows how Benjamin's concept of a history pieced together from rags and scraps, offers a 'redemptive' view of trash, as a source of creativity and alternative history. At the same time Bataille's concept of culture as excess, as activity which operates beyond the boundaries of mere utility, suggests that the subversive potential of trash lies in its 'anti-redemptive' tendency, its refusal to be integrated into the sphere of the (strictly) productive. As Smith's chapter shows, such apparently opposing views of trash are in fact intertwined. Both, however, demonstrate not only the ambiguity of the concept itself, its 'intractable' nature, but also the increasing identification between people and things. If Marx and Napoleon are concerned with the Lumpenproletariat as 'the whole indefinite, unsorted mass', a potentially subversive, heterogeneous body, then the function of the artist and historian (as the 'ragpicker') is to shape cultural products by means of creating, or conversely curating, waste.

Both Wim Peeters and Uwe Steiner consider the literary employment of the discarded and outmoded as a means of exploring anxieties of personal identity in late consumer capitalism. Uwe Steiner's chapter takes as its starting point the complex relationship between people and things, showing how this is illuminated by the category of trash. In particular, as items that are defined by their relegation from the functioning world and often placed beyond our reach, trash objects acquire an autonomy which

illustrates the hidden truth of the agency of things in general. In his analysis of the seventeenth-century text *Simplicissimus*, Steiner's chapter shows that an interest in the agency of things by far predates modern capitalism and is already a potent category in the Baroque. Turning to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Steiner reveals how in the novel's portrayal of twentieth-century US society, DeLillo employs the (discarded) thing as the 'ultimate allegorical reference to death', thus exposing the the complicity between humans and non-humans and suggesting that trash incorporates the non-human which is not external to, but rather lies within, human reality. Also exploring the interrelationships between man and things, Wim Peeters's discussion of contemporary German literature takes as its point of departure the cultural activity of waste control as it affects human beings themselves. His discussion of three recent German novels looks at the extension of waste management systems to people. His analysis illustrates not only the commodification of human life in capitalist societies, but also – in the attempted musealisation of the belongings of a compulsive hoarder, or in the self-marketing processes the long-term unemployed are forced to endure before they are 'disposed of' by being sent abroad – the complicity of the aesthetic in such ordering processes.

Catherine Bates and Nasser Hussain focus their attention on another area of human activity which is often subject to demands for purification: speech. Taking the cliché as a form of linguistic trash, they look at the work of Canadian poets bpNichol and Christopher Dewdney, who radicalise the attempt to find artistic value in everyday language by recycling the cliché and revealing it as a figure which, like the trash object, is both empty of and yet replete with significance. If, as Bates and Hussain observe, it doesn't really rain canine and feline animals when we say it rains cats and dogs, then on the one hand we are wasting expression, making use of a form which appears, like the sophisticated packaging of consumer objects, to be formally complex yet quickly redundant. At the same time, as the grease which allows the wheels of social relationships to turn, the cliché is revealed as having a full biography, being replete with the stuff of life which structures our interactions. Moreover, as found objects which appear, in literary terms at least, to be approaching a 'zero point' of value, clichés are shown to offer a profane and exciting creative resource for Nichol and Dewdney.

Randall van Schepen's discussion of Ilya Kabakov's work offers another perspective on rubbish as potential creative resource. This acquires particular significance against the cultural and political background of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. Van Schepen's chapter unravels the combination of influences which led to Kabakov's art installations, in which the artist's own garbage occupied centre stage. Van Schepen shows that Kabakov's art is a response to aesthetic criteria, such as modernist ideals of whiteness as purifying and sanctifying element and the ideals of production and universalism invoked in Constructivism. At the same time, he illustrates the way in which such aesthetic influences operate in tandem with Kabakov's experience of the (material) reality of Soviet society: the trash of the Soviet urban landscape, which he saw as an expression of a 'Soviet spiritual and economic vacuum' and the barriers to the productivity of the artist. Again, however, the appeal to the obscure, but intensely personal, biography of discarded things offers an important creative resource for the artist in his quest for individual identity in a totalitarian society.

The final two chapters in this volume both deal with the issue of obsolescence and, in particular, its employment in film. Joel Burges's contribution explores the potential of the obsolete as a potentially critical vantage point on capitalist modernity. Burges reconsiders Walter Benjamin's concept of the obsolete as a possible means of critiquing the notion of historical progress. This is seen in the light of contemporary concerns – articulated by, amongst others, Hal Foster and Andreas Huyssen – about the amnesiac nature of capitalist culture, in which obsolescence mimics historical time, becoming the defining feature of an ahistorical consciousness. In his discussion of Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows*, Burges argues for the critical potential of the outmoded, revealing how the film is structured by a story of obsolescence in which figurations of the outmoded project and reflect historical change on screen. Finally, Harvey O'Brien's chapter offers a different perspective on the value of the obsolete in contemporary film culture. O'Brien explores Tim Burton's redemption of Ed Wood in the eponymous 1994 film, showing how Burton recycles and redeems a director whose career was marked by the creation of outmoded, badly functioning films that were destined for speedy obsolescence in a cynical market; that were populated with props made of found objects; and that

often featured the broken actor, Bela Lugosi, who was himself 'wasted' on drink and drugs. In this exploration of Burton's recycling strategies, O'Brien raises questions about the status of cultural 'trash' as creative resource. In particular, in combining this with a focus on Burton's treatment of Ed Wood as transvestite and 'outsider' to 1950s Eisenhower America, O'Brien's contribution raises questions about the redemption of Ed Wood's trash biography in Burton's search for legitimation and authenticity: a search which reveals his own potential for obsolescence in a rapidly changing, and critically fickle industry.

A note on terminology: The chapters in this book feature a broad range of terms, reflecting the multifaceted and conceptually complex nature of the issue at hand. Many of these terms – such as 'trash', 'garbage' and 'rubbish' – are frequently used interchangeably. This is not least because the variety of terms reflects the variations in English and US vocabulary and thus all usages are retained as individual authors intended in order to reflect the international nature of this volume. Other related terms, such as 'ruins', 'obsolete', 'waste', 'discards' are used in a variety of contexts in each chapter. Again, these usages have been retained to reflect the focus of individual studies.

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