

Call for Abstracts for Issue 17 (Autumn 2024)

Trash: Cycles of the Im_Material

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With the 17th issue of *On_Culture*, we seek to address the question of how trash haunts the different material, societal, and cultural realms from which it has once been discarded. The concept of trash is highly polysemous: on the one hand, trash is intimately tied to the materiality of waste, garbage, recycling, overproduction, and disposal (Moisi 2016; 2020). Yet, trash proliferates in the realms of aesthetics, communication, and media and it is also undeniably associated with social and economic spheres. Read as an epistemic concept, the notion of trash carries heuristic potential as an analytical tool for the study of culture. By this logic, it may also uncover ideological demarcations and processes of exclusion which do not affect only the discarded objects, but also marginalized groups living in geographical and societal peripheries (Nixon 2011).

Trash usually denotes the material traces of excess and overflow. This is based on the underlying belief that the material basis for (re)production is no longer an issue. Plastic, for instance, has become almost synonymous with the pervasiveness of trash (Davis 2022). The cyclical nature of trash represents a consistent challenge for societies as well as local communities and neighborhoods, especially in terms of recycling systems, landfill sites, and overall waste management practices. As these cycles become more and more globalized, new inequalities arise (Laser and Schlitz 2022). In its materiality as in its implication in socio-economic inequality, trash has different impacts on marginalized spaces (Quintanilla 2020; Squire 2014). At the same time, trash itself can be conceptualized as a nonhuman agent entering into entanglements with significant and wide-ranging influence (Armiero 2021, Bennett 2010).

Examining the relationship between material culture and trash provides new perspectives on how cultural values and attitudes towards objects change over time. Trash, in fact, is a historically specific category and by no means an anthropological constant (Laguardia 2008). Things classified as 'trash' have no other task than to become invisible in the spheres of civilized living—they are thrown out. However, trash does not always submit to these processes but instead subverts expectations. Trash re-emerges as kitsch in aesthetic contexts, re-circulating within the realm of commercial or popular taste through reworked media artifacts, thereby complicating the notion of invisibility by never disappearing in the first place. This form of re-emerging can also assume the form of re-evaluation which can result in attempts of commodification of discarded objects as valuable artifacts for mass consumption (Thompson 2017).

As scholars in the field of Discard Studies have recently pointed out, the connotations of unwanted visibility are not limited to material things, but are also used to classify cultural practices, places, and even humans (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). Occasionally, groups of people are labeled with the derogatory term 'trash' in everyday conversations and even political discourses. People who are referred to in such a way are excluded from the official 'division of the sensible' (Rancière 2004), making their appearance in the realm of visibility a nuisance. These acts of labeling may unearth intersectional issues of class as well as race: people of lower income groups are labeled as 'trash' in discriminatory discourses and marginalized within the aesthetic order of things (Isenberg 2016). The dynamics of marginalization,

especially visible at the borders, turns the concept of trash into an analytical angle for the study of liminal spaces. This practice of exclusion operates on two levels: not only are people classified and (de)valued on a specific scale that usually refers to the realm of objects (dehumanization); but also the proposed reasons for devaluation (uselessness, uncleanliness, malignity) are constructed as stemming from their very nature (naturalization). Analogous to throwaway production, the identities of these people are constructed in order to exclude them.

The objects, practices, devaluing categorizations that are thus produced or constructed have the innate ability to haunt the very society that threw them away. Whereas in terms of materiality the huge amount of wasted products is constantly challenging our communities and recycling systems, trash also points to a 'return of the repressed' (Freud) by echoing remnants of past cultural artifacts. From this perspective, the phenomenon of trash lends itself to be thought of in connection with the notion of hauntology (Derrida 1993, Gordon 2008, Fischer 2014). The resurfacing of material trash haunts modern societies in a myriad ways: from radioactive waste to microplastics, trash might not be visible, but is no less omnipresent and threatens pollution of bodies and whole ecosystems.

Focusing on the cyclic nature of trash, this issue invites contributions on the material entanglements of trash, the haunting presence of waste and plastic, and trash's capacity of re-emerging in the immaterial realms of culture. Keeping these considerations in mind, possible questions to address would be: How does the concept of trash challenge the notion of cultural value and visibility, both in relation to material objects and marginalized groups in society? Can the notion of trash be used as a reflective, epistemological category for the wider field of cultural studies?

Contributions can address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Trash as a threat and its impact on cultural practices
- The social construction of trash and its socio-metabolic reconfigurations
- Trash as an active participant in human/non-human entanglement
- Trash as/vs. kitsch in (contemporary) art
- Plastic matter and embodiment
- Trash Media
- Ethnographies of trash: following the routes of re-cycling and re-surfacing
- (Re-)Commodification of trash
- Ethical and ecological dimensions of trash and waste
- Trash as a category of identity formation
- Diachronic perspectives on the role of trash
- Material and immaterial reproduction of capitalist society
- Acts of valuing, routines of perception, and their history
- Trash as a force of (re-)organization: infrastructures, landfills, heterotopias, urban landscapes
- Microplastics in cultural discourses

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Please note: *On_Culture* also features *_Perspectives*, a section devoted to shorter, creative pieces pertaining to each issue topic. These can be interviews, essays, opinion pieces, reviews of exhibitions, analyses of cultural artifacts and events, photo galleries, videos, works of art... and more! These

contributions are uploaded on a rolling basis and can be connected to every one of *On_Culture's* issues. Interested in contributing? Send your ideas to the Editorial Team at any time: content@on-culture.org

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On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture (ISSN: 2366-4142) is a biannual, Open Access peer-reviewed scholar-led journal edited by doctoral researchers, postdocs, and professors working at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) at Justus Liebig University Giessen. It provides a forum for reflecting on the study of culture. It investigates, problematizes, and develops key concepts and methods in the field by means of a collaborative and collective process. *On_Culture* is dedicated to fostering such engagements as well as the cultural dynamics at work in thinking about and reflecting on culture.

The journal consists of three sections: peer-reviewed academic *_Articles*, as well as *_Essays*, and the aforementioned *_Perspectives*. *On_Culture* brings new approaches and emerging topics in the (trans)national study of culture 'on the line' and, in so doing, fills the gap__ between 'on' and 'culture.' There are numerous ways of filling the gap, and a plurality of approaches is something for which the journal strives with each new issue.

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