

WASTING*

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Photographs by Susanne Ewert

Waste is a word with complex connotations. As in T.S.Eliot's famous poem "The Waste Land" from a war-torn Europe of 1922, it may include the double meaning that signifies both "deserted" and "rubbish". Then there is wasting away, as in disappearing or losing strength, wasting as squandering or destroying, wasted as in consumed. We may talk about a wasted life, a waster, a wasteful activity or a waste product. But what happens when you use cultural phenomena like waste disposal and the production of refuse as an entrance into a world of overlooked or underdeveloped types of cultural processes? My starting point is an ongoing project concerning refuse, *The Universe of Waste: On Culture and Decomposition*.¹

Refuse or waste has to do with cultural order – and disorder. Everyday sorting and classification is a natural expression of such ordering. We are constantly "sorting things out", redefining some objects, activities, people as waste or just wasted. It seems fruitful to look at the ways, in which such redefinitions occur, to take a closer look at the transformation, the moment of wasting.

Sorting Things Out

Such loaded moments can be observed at public refuse collecting centres. In a small local refuse station, voluntarily staffed a few hours a week by representatives of an athletic association, twelve containers stand neatly lined up. Here you can leave your ordinary sorted refuse – plastic, metal, wood, glass, old refrigerators, and so on – along with unsorted



waste, medicines and hazardous chemical waste like leftover paint. It costs 50 kronor for a car and 100 kronor for a trailer, to get rid of your refuse. In this small locality, most people know each other, and it happens that someone who is leaving junk will encourage the attendant for the day to ask whether anyone else might want a good used silencer or something else that is too good just to throw out. People

also often ask which container things are supposed to be left in. But if they don't, the rule is not to meddle in the doings of other refuse-leavers. Until the person who is leaving refuse initiates the conversation him-or-herself, or until it is time to pay, the attendant stays discreetly in the background, near the shed that gives shelter from the wind and weather. The rules of the public sanitation department for the person who is supervising the little refuse station are very clear as regards the relation to the person who is leaving refuse. "Remember," read the instructions, "never to get into a dispute with the refuse-leavers. Refer complaints to the utility's sanitation section." The attendant is also reminded never to "make comments about the leaver's refuse, such as medicines." In spite of this discretion, some people prefer to leave some rubbish in the more anonymous refuse station in the city. There, private secrets blend and disappear more easily into the crowd.

Refuse sorting becomes an invocation in which the consumer's bad conscience is assuaged. Without really knowing the actual facts with regard to recycling and what is best for the environment, many people still sort their waste because it feels good and is morally right. In some way it works as a disciplining task.

Worthless – Valuable. A Round Trip

Another perspective on waste and scrap considers their capacity to be transformed; to become something else, such as art, exhibited at well-reputed gal-



leries and museums, or available to Internet shoppers, where an abundance of artists now advertise their products. One example is www.nycgarbage.com where you can buy cubes of Plexiglas, guaranteed airtight and odourless and filled with genuine refuse from the streets of New York. A concertina-like coffee mug from Starbucks, discarded chewing gum and old banana skins are transformed into art. While junk art is nothing new, the public has to be tempted by greater challenges if the artists are to be heard above the noise of the metal crushers and attract people's attention. An example of this is when the artist Michael Landy invited twelve people to destroy everything he owned. A total of 7,006 things were destroyed in front of prospective onlookers in rented premises in Oxford Street in central London (Yaeger 2003).² To what extent scrap art actually finds its way to the homes of art buyers is a question that remains to be answered. The public's fascination with junk art seems to be mixed with anger and disgust, and the eternal question on what art really is. Art made of rubbish challenge the concepts of aesthetics and beauty, and nourishes the fascination with the secrets of waste and its possible transformations.

Another set of completely different quick-changes transform refuse into musical instruments, tools, houses and other serviceable artefacts. Some people literally live on refuse tips or rummage among street refuse, like "los cartoneros" of Buenos Aires, Mexico's "los pepenadores" or the homeless in today's Sweden on the hunt for copper cables that can be sold to scrap-dealers. Only a few decades ago, the art of remodelling hand-me-down clothes from older to younger family members, turning food leftovers into tasty suppers, or making new tools from old, was considered a way to keep the tradition of thrifty housekeeping alive; these vestiges of recycling are now reincarnated in other, high-tech guises. The western world's growing mountains of refuse have, like necessity itself, become the mothers of invention. Discarded plastic bottles can be turned into material for making fleece jackets, specific bacteria can be used for cleaning up contaminated environments, waste paint can be transformed into compos-

ite material and the slag from incinerated refuse and rubber clippings from old tyres can be used as road building material. In Japan, researchers are looking into converting compostable domestic waste into electricity. Building waste can also be recycled into new constructions.

But there are other forms of recycling. In the Experience Economy waste and wastelands can become a tourist destination. There is so-called shock-tourism that is nourished by the allure of misery and misfortune. Shanty towns and slum areas can thus be experienced and scrutinised from the safety of sightseeing bus windows, or outings can be taken to landscapes devastated by chemicals and poisons. Time can also transform an old rubbish dump into a cultural heritage site. One Swedish example of such a development is *Kyrkö mosse*, a bog- and woodland area, used for decades to dump old car wrecks. When the man who ran the dump finally became too old to remain in business and moved out, a heated discussion burst out about whether to remove or to save the remains of the old cars. The later alternative won, and *Kyrkö mosse* is now a valued attraction. Visitors from all of Europe find their way to the bog where the wrecks slowly decompose, covered with rust and moss.

Social systems that are removed to ideological refuse tips can also be resurrected as both unpleasant memories and nostalgic scenery. In former Eastern Germany, with its high unemployment and bitterness at the price of unification, there are plans to create an amusement park with the theme of the DDR. Lithuania already has *Stalin World*, a theme park that has been designed as a Soviet concentration camp and filled with statues from Communist times. Monuments representing a particular time period and its significant personalities are converted to refuse and then may be recycled again. They make use of an emotional charge that can be re-used to gain new value (see Jonas Frykman's contribution in this issue) like the statue of Lenin now standing outside a McDonald's restaurant in Dallas, Texas, furnished with a sign proclaiming "America won" (Burström 2003).

Recycling tells us about the constantly changing

relationship between waste and value (Hawkins & Muecke 2003). It says that what is worthwhile can only be understood in the light of what at a given time is defined as worthless. Refuse is never constant. It is transformed and slides along a grading scale of worthless → valuable → invaluable. What someone discards, someone else covets. Things can always be re-charged and acquire new meanings (Kopytoff 1986). Refuse thrown away can become someone else's desirable property. Bargain hunting continues at flea-markets, in second-hand shops and on refuse tips. Whole sciences – like archaeology – may build on the foundation of waste and refuse.

Clean and Unclean Waste



Refuse can be categorised according to several different principles. Empirically, refuse tips can be categorised according to content. They can also be classified in terms of refuse that can be converted into energy in the shape of heat or fertiliser, refuse that can be recycled, or that which is dangerous and must be locked away, rendered harmless or stored for the foreseeable future. Another way of regarding the diversity of refuse is to see it as being either clean or unclean.

Clean refuse can be composed of things, places and buildings consisting of discarded objects that can be reused and acquire new meaning and new aesthetics in another context. Castle ruins gave free rein to the imagination and nourishment to visions of noble knights and royal soldiers. Abandoned farms and cottages in process of being enveloped by the landscape raise questions about the people

who once lived there, their living conditions, their reasons for rejoicing and their hardships. Think of a small foundry that closed its doors for the last time in the 1950s, where the workers went home but the machines remained. Old agricultural tools sinking into oblivion, large unused silos or entire industrial complexes all bear witness to times gone by. Or an old school with its classrooms restored by the local folklore society: the teacher's elevated desk, wall charts representing the agricultural seasons, biblical quotations and school benches in straight lines. The schoolhouse accommodates a past with its ideas, values, norms and perceptions of authority that have inexorably landed on the ideological refuse tip. Even terrible places like extermination camps or battle grounds are washed clean by time and liberated from their nauseating stench and unbearable visual impressions. Clean refuse generally allows itself to be touched and visited, the old school's outhouse included. Clean refuse has a high nostalgia factor.

Things are quite different when it comes to unclean waste: fermenting, rotting, stinking biological waste, exhaust and chemical pollution, hospitals' hazardous waste, waste from slaughterhouses and radioactive waste. Just like a subterranean mycelium, the communal sewage system connects people with each other. Bodily secretions and slops find their way towards the sewage treatment plant. Sewers are the motorways of separation, carrying what has become untouchable and hidden after leaving the body and the sink, tub or shower. The remains of the delicious meal starting to smell in the refuse bin, a piece of mouldy melon in the fridge, or potatoes that have rotted and now leak their stinking and disgustingly messy liquid into a plastic bag in the pantry. This is waste that must be touched, but quickly and with a certain disgust.

Dead animal carcasses can, like dead people's bodies, be transformed from unclean to clean waste by ritual techniques. Animal crematoriums take care of dead pets at set prices. Domestic pets can also be buried in special animal cemeteries, in collective memorial areas, or in their own separate graves. It is quite obvious that animal owners who pay extra for an individual cremation and burial place for their

dead pets regard the animal's body as something more than an impure carcass.

For us humans, the rituals that accompany a death, when the dead body is washed and clothed and undergoes a funeral ceremony, with or without a religious element, mean that a dead body is something other than a rotting cadaver. In this context even time lends a helping hand. Time has picked at the bones of animals and people and the complete skeletons or skull collections in museums clean of their disintegrating flesh. Carcasses have been transformed into relics through ritual practices (Bell 1997; Bloch & Parry 1989; Åkesson 1996).

There is a grey zone between clean and unclean, a fluid area that accommodates the possibility of movement between both categories, that can be both symbolic and material. Symbolic uncleanness or impurity can, for example, attach to certain foods or certain people on cultural, traditional or religious grounds, rather than because of actual inedibility or infection and filth. From this perspective, the fixation on the best-before-date displayed on modern food packages (which means that perfectly edible food is thrown away), is comparable with ancient religious food taboos. In both cases, the idea of inedibility overshadows the food itself. In a general process of secularisation, a religiously conditioned impurity is replaced by a scientific one.

A Secret Life

The grey zone of waste has other dimensions as well. The transformation from unclean to clean often marginalises the very people that handle refuse or dead bodies. These workmen and women concerned with waste management have often been reduced to untouchables on society's fringe. Although this stigma is not attached to today's professional refuse collectors, the location of the refuse tip on the city outskirts also implies that the job of refuse collecting has a certain air of mystery and uncontrollability attached to it. For example, in the popular TV series, *The Sopranos*, the mafia boss Tony Soprano assumes a waste handling company as an outward façade, diffuse enough to allow all kinds of activities to shelter behind it. In Sweden, the connection between scrap



dealing and criminality, where tax enforcers were not always informed about what was going on, goes back to gypsy trading and is hard to eradicate.

The secretive element also has connections to things other than shady dealings. Domestic waste is private and belongs to the personal sphere. That someone else should ferret around in one's own dustbin is an insult to personal integrity. It is hardly surprising that famous people unwittingly subjected to their waste being emptied and exposed to TV audiences react very negatively.³ Refuse is revealing and ought to be kept secret.

The desire to conceal and hide, combined with discovery, revelation and the keen gaze, provide grist for the story mill in whodunits, detective stories and what might be called documentary reconstructions of violent crimes. Similar things also appear on refuse tips, where skilful experts root about in the refuse of those under suspicion – likewise in their homes or cars – in search of evidence that can either

prove their innocence or guilt. In reality, refuse tips are dramatic settings of enormous machinery, cranes and metal crushers. The drama is enhanced by the waste's personal roots, coupled to specific people, dreams and actions. Finding conclusive evidence in gigantic refuse heaps is like looking for a proverbial needle in a haystack. It is an enormous challenge.

Both the hidden and the secretive are forceful literary themes. There is both a tempting mystery and the repulsion of something that we absolutely don't want to know anything about; that which the eye turns away from. Guy Hawkins talks about the "the force of the hidden", what we don't want to see or concern ourselves with. It takes up space, seeks control, and becomes an important tool in the preservation of social order and political authority (Hawkins 2003). A similar perspective is presented in Dominique Laporte's intriguing book *History of Shit* (2000). Laporte shows that the will of the state (i.e. the king) to take control and make value out of the latrine in the 15th century France was embedded in claims to power and forces of repression.

The hidden and the secretive seem to hunt us, and it constantly reminds us of what we want to forget. This perspective is used in the socially critical novel *Underworld* (1997) by Don DeLillo. DeLillo uses enormous amounts of refuse and landfill areas as backgrounds for repressed individual memories, the garbage of the mind and soul. In this way, as pointed out by Patricia Yaeger (2003), waste can be seen as an archive, a private or societal memory that bears witness to culturally relevant categories of order, management, production and consumption. That which is thrown away can also be seen as an archive of actions and preferences, time-bound truths and ideologies. It's significant rubbish, "a mess with a message".

The Moral Dimensions of Waste

As a result of culture-creating principles of order and segregation, the management of waste is impregnated with ethical value judgements, and with feelings of shame and guilt. What has been separated from the body, the dining table and the household, has also become symbolically unclean, disgusting,



repugnant and untouchable. This transformation has nothing to do with the laws of nature, however. Filth and repulsiveness vary according to time and place so that which is disgusting is also a powerful and often invisible upholder of cultural order. Disgust rapidly moves from the world of ideology to the body as a spontaneous gut feeling. The fact that different values or entire worldviews are the basis of the sense of the disgusting becomes visible only when value systems meet, collide, or change. Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren demonstrated this in *Culture Builders* (1987) with examples taken from the Swedish middle and peasant classes at the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s. People learned how to feel ashamed in accordance with bourgeois judgments about dirt and uncleanness.

Moral overtones and ideologies that lie behind the distinction of what is clean and what is unclean are, like everything else, easier to discern by looking through history's rear-view mirror. Today we are taught, with greater or lesser degrees of success, to be ashamed of the gigantic refuse tips formed by past consumption. But the absolutely essential work of reducing the amount of waste, of protecting land, water, air and also people from the dangers of refuse in all its diversity, doesn't escape appraisal today either. Morality and ethics are constant presences in the kingdom of waste.

Cultural Attrition

Waste follows in human tracks. Waste is about making decisions about saving or discarding, forgetting and remembering, ignoring or resurrecting. Waste is

handled, taken care of, transformed and overlooked. The universe of waste therefore offers an enriching panorama of investigation of the ways in which different types of attrition processes interact. How are ideas about cultural ageing coloured by metaphors and models of biodegradation or material fatigue failure? How are the discursive elements of material, cultural and bodily transience interwoven? How can we respond to questions regarding aesthetics, the critique of the civilisation process, the global divisions of labour, and nostalgia, recycling and regeneration? What kinds of culturally based decisions are we making as we stand in a moment of hesitation before we slip an object or an idea into the waste-bin or dump it on the refuse tip? The analysis of such moments may teach us how ideas of repugnance and the untouchable are constructed, but above all how sorting and segregation are basic cultural practices.

Returning to the general question, "why study wasting", we can address classic ethnological themes. Wasting can be used to shed light on processes of classification, ordering, transformation, and stigmatization. In my opinion, the secret dimensions of waste, the force of the hidden, is one of the most powerful themes to explore. Lots of cultural energy is used to keep the hidden and disgusting at distance. What becomes hidden and untouchable does not disappear, it lurks under the surface of the ground and the mind and demands cultural handling techniques. That ritual and religious practises are used to keep the disgusting things or thoughts in place, makes wasting an even more exciting topic.

Notes

- * Some of the ideas presented here have been published in *Axess* No. 7, 2003 (Åkesson 2003), and in *RIG* No. 3, 2005. Photographs by Susanne Ewert published (in colour) in *Axess* No. 7, 2003.
- 1 The project is financed by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and carried out at Lund University's Ethnology Department. The project also includes collaboration with Kulturen in Lund – which means that exhibition and research activities become mutually inspirational and enriching.
 - 2 Michael Landy has been working with the theme of refuse for quite a long time. The exhibition *Scrapheap Services* is an ironic reflection on the theme of humans who need to be thrown out and destroyed (Landy 1996).
 - 3 See also Rathje & Murphy (2001: 17f.) about a journalist's investigation into the refuse of people like Bob Dylan and Henry Kissinger.

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