

Waste and Garbage as Time Travel

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Abstract

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For waste and garbage to become suitable vehicles for time travel, some characteristics need to be highlighted, and some to be played down. This paper focuses on the capacity of waste to transform and slide along a grading scale of worthless – valuable – invaluable. It will also be argued that it makes sense to distinguish between clean and unclean waste, and that the later can be transformed into the first via ritual practices.

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Worthless – valuable; a round trip

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 waste can also undergo transformation, a change from waste to value, and become the starting point of time travel connecting past with present. One transforming option is to become art, displayed at well-known galleries and museums, or to be available to Internet shoppers, where a lot of artists now advertise their products. One example is www.nycgarbage.com. Here you can buy cubes of Plexiglas, guaranteed airtight and odourless and filled with genuine refuse from the streets of New York, such as a concertina-like coffee mug from Starbucks, discarded chewing gum and old banana skins. All are transformed into art and take you on

board a journey in time to a recent past and the pulse of the big city.

A critique of consumer society combined with a travel in the personal past was shown by the artist Michael Landy. He invited twelve people to destroy everything he owned. A total of 7,006 things (including a car) were destroyed in front of prospective onlookers in rented premises in Oxford Street in central London (Yaeger 2003). The artist carefully kept records of each and every thing that disappeared. One of the items most difficult to get rid of was an inherited leather jacket that had belonged to his father, a jacket linking the artist's personal present with his personal past.

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 and recycling

was considered a way to keep the tradition of thrifty housekeeping alive. Clothes were passed on from older to younger family members, food leftovers were transformed into new suppers, and new tools were made from old ones. These ways of recycling are now reincarnated in other, high-tech products. 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. Slag from incinerated refuse and rubber clippings from old tyres can be used as road construction material. In those cases, however, when things are totally transformed into something else, the time travel becomes invisible.

In other forms of recycling the visibility of time travel is the main point. This happens when waste and wastelands become tourist destinations. One example is the "shock tourism" that is nourished by the allure of misery and misfortune. Shanty towns and slum areas can thus be experienced and scrutinized from the safety of sightseeing bus windows. 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 broke 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. The old wrecks immediately take you on board a journey in time to the 1940s and forwards.

Social systems that are removed to ideo-

logical refuse tips can also be resurrected as both unpleasant memories and nostalgic scenery. In Lithuania, for example, you find Stalin World. This is 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 may then be recycled again. They make use of an emotional charge that can be reused to gain new value. That is why a statue of Lenin now is 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; Hetherington 2004). 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 desires. Things can always be re-charged and acquire new meanings (Kopytoff 1986; Gregson 2007). 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 for example – may build on the foundation of waste and refuse. In that sense, waste is also a perfect foundation of time travel.

Clean and unclean waste

For waste to become suitable vehicles for travellers in time, some characteristics need to be highlighted, and some to be played down. In this sense it can be useful to distinguish between clean and unclean waste. Refuse can be categorized according to several different

principles. Empirically, refuse tips can be categorized according to content. They can also be classified in terms of refuse that can be converted into energy in the shape of heat or fertilizer, refuse that can be recycled, or that which is dangerous and must be locked away. It can be 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 (Åkesson 2003).

Clean refuse is waste suitable for time travel. Clean refuse can be composed of things, places and buildings. Clean refuse consists of discarded objects that can be reused and acquire new meaning and new aesthetics in another context. Castle ruins give nourishment to imagination and visions of noble knights and royal soldiers in medieval times. Abandoned farms and cottages in the 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 relentlessly 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, including the old school's outhouse. Clean refuse has a high nostalgia factor and easily lends itself to time travelling.

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 some disgust. This is waste that does not very easily transform itself into nostalgia or time travel.

But there are possibilities. Dead animal carcasses, like dead people's bodies, can 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 (Åkesson 2005).

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; Åkes-

son 1996). This kind of transformation also opens for time travel, of course. Skeletons as well as tombs are fascinating vehicles for time travel.

Waste, whether clean or unclean, disgusting, rotten or just messy – things we want to keep hidden – seems to haunt us, and 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. Waste is 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 is significant rubbish, “a mess with a message”. This also makes waste and garbage very suitable instruments for time travelling.

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