



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S39. The Politics of Waste

Tuesday 29 August: 2.00-4.00pm

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This seminar will examine the politics of “waste” in Western, multicultural and capitalist communities and hopes to look into the following: waste, environmentalism, consumerism; waste, social class (the “unproductive” in global capitalism), gender (e.g. women in white-flesh slave trade), race (e.g. “white trash”); refugees and immigrants as the waste of the West; bare life as the waste-product of contemporary Western societies (Agamben, Baudrillard); terrorism and suicide bombing as wasting the only available resources; corporeality and waste (food, excrement, vomit etc); contemporary body art performances as ritualized abjections of the flesh; “dirt” as material and ideological waste; “noise” as sonic waste.

Their Eyes Were Watching God: Hurricane Katrina, Human Waste, and the Rhetoric of Displacement

Sally Gomaa (Salve Regina University, USA)

Hurricane Katrina seems to have claimed mainly the lives of the poor and the black populations of New Orleans. This combination of race and class points to systems of disadvantage that persist in capitalist, multi-cultural societies. Yet, many of the initial responses indicated shock at the very idea that a catastrophe of this magnitude should have happened in a country like the United States. This presentation will trace in the trajectory of Hurricane Katrina the emergence of a discourse of displacement that by conceptualizing the disaster in terms of its foreignness covers the main reasons for why it happened precisely in the US.

Menstruant Economics in the Emergence of Waste: Menstrual Narrative at the Coming of Kotex

Andrew Shail (St Anne’s College, Oxford)

This essay will argue that the coming of the mass-produced disposable sanitary towel and its advertising in 1921 precipitated a subtle but important change in the conditions of intelligibility of femaleness in the West. The dramatic re-situation of the concept of waste in consumer society - a matrix of movements in which objects and bodies are validated in terms of flow-through rather than

accumulation - saw waste become “the site of production of values” (Baudrillard) and consequently a new problematic of femaleness was thrown up by the re-description of the female body as menstrual not because it was female but because it was “leaky”, the new ideal body.

Waste Paper: Writing, Time and Abjection from Modernism to Postmodernism

Matthew Wraith (University of London, London Consortium)

I would like to explore the links between Waste and History in the wake of modernism. It will be my contention that modernism’s fascination with the idea of a pure present, an atomic moment, brings about the imperative to cathartically expel both the past and the future in a manner similar to the ‘pollution behaviour’ identified and theorised by anthropologists like Mary Douglas. The discarded traces of past and future recur throughout the literature of modernism. Postmodernism has theorised itself as having transcended and moved away from this conception of time. The will to propel oneself through history by expelling the past has now subsided into a state where many different modes and eras can coexist contemporaneously. I would like to explore some features of late 20th-century culture with a view to questioning this idea.

The Assimilated Waste of the Banquet and the Impossible Digestion of Cannibalism

Apostolos Lampropoulos (University of Cyprus)

This paper examines the question of waste in the light of texts such as Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, Derrida’s “Eating Well”, and Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*; it also focuses on the relevant filmography. My starting point is the idea that the ‘eating situation’ is a case of *mise en relation*, eventually leading to cannibalism which attempts to construct a sovereign sphere in which the bareness of the other’s life would permit its inconsequential appropriation. However, the cannibal subject can only confront the non-depoliticizable bios of the devoured object: this obligation may explain the fact that cannibalism is unavoidably viewed as a crime. Therefore, excreting and vomiting can be regarded as the trace and by-product of unsatisfied cannibalistic bulimia or of total indigestibility; the (non-)production of waste might be thought of not so much as an outcome, but rather as a way of (de-)legitimizing its ethical and political consequences.

Christian Enzensberger and the Dirty Object

Adam Jasper Smith (University of Sydney)

The concept of “dirt”, unlike the term “waste”, cannot be univocally or unequivocally defined. The object's qualities, the context in which it is found and the culture of the observer all contribute to whether or not it will be perceived as dirty. Thus, debates over the nature of dirt have a degree of complexity similar to debates over questions of aesthetics. Does dirtiness then belong to the realm of aesthetic theory? Or anthropology? Or rather psychology? This paper examines dirt from a range of different philosophical positions, with a central focus on the pioneering work of Christian Enzensberger, whose out of print text *Smut: An Anatomy of Dirt* created a furore when first published in Germany in 1968. Enzensberger's multivocal approach proves especially fertile for

describing a phenomenon that, while amorphous, is undeniably real.