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Special section: Thinking through ruination: theoretical and empirical approaches to the ruins of the Anthropocene

The decaying stuff of the Anthropocene: exploring contemporary trashscapes through ruination

Olli Pyyhtinen

Tampere University

Stylios Zavos

Tampere University

Alma Onali

Tampere University

Ulla-Maija Sutinen

Tampere University

Niina Uusitalo

Tampere University

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Abstract

In this article, we take the notion of ruination beyond crumbling built structures and use it to explore contemporary trashscapes. With the waste produced by humanity scaling up to encompass the entire planet, we examine life with and in the ruins of the Anthropocene, where there is no Away to which the rejectamenta could be expelled and thus set apart from humans. On the one hand, we scrutinise waste as matter in a ruined state, subject to and resulting from a process of ruination; waste is a trace of an anterior presence that remains and continues to haunt us. On the other hand, we argue that collective wastage is turning the natural environment itself into ruins and landscapes into trashscapes. Towards the end of the article, we also stress the disruptive qualities of ruination and decay and discuss the renewed sensibilities evoked by waste. A life with waste in a world of Anthropocenic ruination amounts to a life that is not in complete control of itself but rather is inextricably entangled with otherness.

Keywords

Anthropocene; decay; ruination; trashscape; waste; Wasteocene

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The decaying stuff of the Anthropocene: exploring contemporary trashscapes through ruination

Las cosas en descomposición del Antropoceno: explorar los paisajes de basura contemporáneos a través de la ruina

Resumen

En este artículo llevamos la noción de ruina más allá del desmoronamiento de las estructuras construidas y la utilizamos para explorar los paisajes de basura contemporáneos. Con los residuos producidos por la humanidad en aumento hasta abarcar todo el planeta, examinamos la vida con y en las ruinas del Antropoceno, donde no hay un Lejos al que se puedan expulsar los desechos y, por lo tanto, apartarlos de los humanos. Por un lado, examinamos los residuos como materia en estado ruinoso, sujeta a un proceso de ruina y resultado de este; los residuos son la huella de una presencia anterior que permanece y sigue acechándonos. Por otro lado, sostenemos que el despilfarro colectivo está convirtiendo el propio entorno natural en ruinas y los paisajes, en paisajes de basura. Hacia el final del artículo, también destacamos las cualidades perturbadoras de la ruina y la decadencia, y analizamos las sensibilidades renovadas que evocan los residuos. Una vida con residuos en un mundo de ruina antropocénica equivale a una vida que no es totalmente dueña de sí misma, sino que está inextricablemente enredada con la otredad.

Palabras clave

Antropoceno; descomposición; ruina; paisaje de basura; residuos; Desechoceno

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Introduction

The topical and widely circulated notion of the Anthropocene suggests that human actions have an increasingly destructive effect on landscapes and ecologies, to the extent that humanity has become a geological force affecting the entire planet. Scientists have discovered, for example, that by the year 2020, human-made mass exceeded all global living biomass (Elhacham *et al.*, 2020). It has thus become commonplace to argue that we are witnessing the end of the Holocene and the start of a new geological era: the age of humans. Not only has the Anthropocene narrative gained significant traction in academia, but a variety of -cenes have spun off from it, such as “Capitalocene” (Moore, 2016), “Plantationocene” (Tsing, 2015), “Technocene” (Hornborg, 2015), “Econocene” (Norgaard, 2013), “Cthulucene” (Haraway, 2016), and “Anthroscene” (Parikka, 2015). The term *Wasteocene*, coined by environmental humanities scholar Marco Armiero (2021) partly in an effort to accommodate the usual critiques launched against the Anthropocene narrative (see Malm & Hornborg, 2014; Angus, 2016; Moore, 2016; Nixon, 2019),¹ is yet another alternative framing of the present socio-ecological crisis and the impact of humans on Earth’s geology and ecosystem. What is distinctive about the notion is that it places waste at the core of the Anthropocene, highlighting waste as “the planetary mark of our new epoch” (Armiero, 2021, p. 2). It suggests that the generation of waste has been instrumental in bringing about the Anthropocene, and therefore in order to understand how the Anthropocene has come about, we must attend to how wasting and polluting have been institutionalized and normalized on a large scale (Corvellec, 2021).

Armiero insists that the Wasteocene primarily relates not to waste as material stuff, but to “the socio-ecological relationships making someone/something disposable” (Armiero, 2021, p. 11). While we agree that it is important to pay regard to such relations,

we would also argue that, in addition to asking what has brought us here, it is crucial to pay attention to the affective and material registers of waste to be able to grasp what it is like to *live* in the Wasteocene. Life in the Wasteocene amounts to living with waste in complex patterns of economic, ecological, political, and corporeal entanglements because no matter how hard we try to obliterate waste, it refuses to disappear. For us, the focus on the materiality of waste and our “trashscapes” (Thill, 2015, p. 4) also has the advantage of stressing the experience of living in the Anthropocene, thus bringing the otherwise rather distant notion closer to our lifeworld. Waste makes its presence and overflows felt in a very visceral and disturbing manner. Overall, for us, waste is not passive, dead matter, but is active and capable of exerting effects. However, we do not subscribe to any essentialist understanding of waste but rather commence from the nowadays fairly commonly shared idea among social scientific waste scholars (see Moore, 2012) that nothing is inherently waste, but that things become waste in situated practices, processes and relations. We approach waste as relational, constituted in its entanglements with humans and other things and materials.

By focusing on waste as the (decaying) stuff of the Anthropocene, in this theoretical article, we craft a story that is somewhat different from the usual Anthropocene narrative. It is not a unilinear origin story, but rather explores our present moment and way of life with and in the ruins produced by capitalism and the normalized, institutionalized wasting that is integral to it. We are interested in “the ordinary Anthropocene”, in contrast to the epochal and the spectacular (Fredriksen, 2021, p. 532), and attend to the nature-cultural entanglements with our quotidian, less-than-spectacular rubbish through which the Wasteocene is sensed and lived. We are not, of course, the first to pay attention to contemporary life in ruins. For example, Anna Tsing (2015) has written about the topic by following the matsutake mushroom within capitalist ruins, Mia Bennett (2021) has discussed Anthropocenic Arctic ruins and their

1. The main critique levelled against the Anthropocene narratives relates to their universalism: they tend to remain blind to socioeconomical, geographical, ethnic, gender and historical differences (Armiero, 2021, p. 6). As Robert Nixon (2019, p. 8) put it: “We may all be in the Anthropocene, but we’re not all in it in the same way”.

aesthetic potential to inspire action on climate change, and Leah Zani (2019) has explored the everyday life of people living in the ruins of war and conflict. Furthermore, scholars have addressed the future where earthly beings will have to find their way living in the ruins produced by destructive capitalistic practices (Stoler, 2013; Latour *et al.*, 2018). While discussing these contributions, we simultaneously stretch the notion of ruination beyond crumbling architectural structures and spaces and provide new insights, exploring the Anthropocene-ruination nexus from the perspective of waste. On the one hand, we examine waste items and materials as remains, relics, or ruins of our society and wasteful human actions. Insofar as waste is something that affects everyone everywhere, we all are already living with and in ruins. On the other hand, we argue that collective wasting is transforming the natural environment itself into trashscape-ruins. By turning our attention to the mounting masses of waste generated by our contemporary mode of life, we wish to stress the pervasiveness of quotidian ruination. These newly-created waste realities have become our second nature; we have colonized the world with our waste.

In the article, we also expand the effort of thinking through ruination to the mode of writing in order to disrupt conventional forms and narrative structures of academic writing: throughout the text, the reader will encounter – indented and in italics – scattered fragments, *textual ruins* of sorts. Like the main body of text alongside which they can be found, they tell stories of the Wastocene and its ruins, yet as they zoom in to particular observations, situations and objects, these stories are concrete and empirical rather than abstract and theoretical.² The fragmentary vignettes do not form a coherent, unified whole but rather an open-ended assemblage; they present varying patches of ruination. They resemble or mimic physical ruins, in that a ruin, too, is a fragmented structure: a piece of a whole that no longer exists. Yet, while both textual fragments and physical ruins evince a paradoxical state of presence and absence, their difference lies in the fact that unlike the latter, the former may refer not only to a whole that has been destroyed, but also to a whole that has never existed, that does not yet exist, or that exists only as a potentiality. All in all, we think that besides entailing disruptive potential, the fragmentary style – ruination writing – also contains the promise of more inclusive breadth. Perhaps, for now, there may even be no better way to grasp the whole of the Wastocene than through glimpses, fragments that subsequent scholarship could successfully connect to one another into a meshwork as they grow in scope.³

Our argument is laid out as follows. First, we turn to some of the existing work on ruination and the ruins of the Anthropocene and delineate our insight into them. After that, we examine Anthropocenic ruination in relation to waste. In the section, we focus especially on the spatial scales of the Wastocene through the case of plastics. Next, we focus on the inextricable entanglement of humans and waste. We examine how the elimination of waste is bound to remain imperfect; as a result, humans are never separate from waste, and it always returns to haunt us. Then, we move on to discussing the disruptive qualities of ruination and decay: processes to which all matter is subject to and which turn things into waste. Here, we also

draw from Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of *response-ability* and address the renewed sensibilities evoked by waste. Finally, we summarize the main contributions of the paper.

1. Anthropocenic ruination

By following wild matsutake mushrooms that live in forests damaged by humans, Anna Tsing (2015) has examined the possibilities of co-existence and survival under precarious conditions within environmental disturbance. As it renders people and things into assets by alienating them from their living-space entanglements, capitalism is bound to produce “ruins” or “spaces of abandonment”: when a place's assets have been exhausted, the search resumes elsewhere (Tsing, 2015, pp. 5-6). Crucial to our own insight, Tsing's study embodies in many ways a significant departure from the romanticism and melancholic gaze of modern ruin aesthetics. Firstly, the romanticized view emphasized the interference of nature. For example, in his influential essay titled “The Ruin” (1959, p. 259; orig. “Die Ruine” [1911]), philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel considers ruination a process that disrupts the unique balance established by architecture between nature and culture. In the ruin, natural forces have gained an upper hand over the human-made product; “what gives [the ruin] its present appearance is the brute, down-ward dragging, corroding, crumbling power of nature” (Simmel, 1959, p. 261). For Simmel, ruination thus involves a form of passivity, of not-doing on the part of humans – it is to let a building decay (*ibid.*, p. 261). Anthropocenic ruination, by contrast, suggests active human intervention. It is a result of the extraction and appropriation of natural resources transformed into products and goods that are abandoned as leftovers and useless excesses once they are used up.

Secondly, while the traditional conception of ruins entails a romanticized nostalgia for the past and aesthetic adoration of decay, or is optimistic that the naturecultural traces of the past might inform better futures, Anthropocenic ruination does the exact opposite: humanity assumes such a catastrophic mastery over nature that better futures are only envisioned through the partial reversal of past, present, and future planetary crises. The ruins of the Anthropocene have a lot in common with dark and dystopic futures, and nothing in common with Stonehenge or the Parthenon. They create a past-present-future vision of a world analogous to the story of Midas, but rather than gold, that which is touched turns into ruins and decaying matter: into the “imperial effects” of “the ‘rot’ that remains” (Stoler, 2013, p. 2). Relics of the recent past become affirmations of practices and ontological commitments of ghostly presents and haunting futures (Gan *et al.*, 2017) where the human-made imperium tames, dominates and colonizes its othered surroundings. In a way, ruination is the process that defines the Anthropocene; it is the incessant and pervasive outcome of the cosmic imperium of the Anthropos.

Thirdly, the ruins of the Anthropocene entail a crucial difference in scale compared to their romanticized counterparts in the

2. We mostly draw from our ongoing fieldwork following waste flows and waste management practices in Finland across various sites, from producers and the retail sector to households, recycling centres and waste incineration plants.

3. This effort is, to some extent, inspired by how Georg Simmel fathoms and justifies his use of disparate themes in his masterwork *Soziologie* ([1908] GSG 11: 31 n. 1).

built environment. Bennett (2021, p. 928) suggests that, in the Anthropocene, ruination “is scaling up to encompass the planet”. The ruins of the Anthropocene are not limited to decaying centuries-old buildings (Abramson, 2017) or deserted industrial landscapes (Apel, 2015), but rather encompass the volumetric territory and enclosure of Gaia envisioned as rapidly crumbling (Clarke, 2020; Latour, 2017). The ruins of the Anthropocene are not patches of human action abandoned to the forces of nature; they are forceful, imperial and dominating events of human interference gone and going viral in the most literal sense. It is, therefore, this complete inversion that distinguishes the concept of the ruin with its unavoidable romanticized and optimistic connotation of natural and often aesthetically fulfilling decay from the notion of Anthropocenic ruination: while the ruin is left to nature, Anthropocenic ruination is taken up by the human.

The once-natural matter of oil becomes decaying man-made objects when it is transformed into plastics such as polystyrene. Styrene is extracted from petroleum products by processes of fractional distillation. It evaporates in approximately four hours, but once it is polymerized to create polystyrene, the connections between the carbon molecules become solid. Polystyrene in its foamed form (EPS) is used to manufacture containers, cups, packaging material, and insulation boards for construction. Polystyrene objects do not decompose, but human and natural influences nevertheless destroy them. Polystyrene can be dissolved into acetone and through this process it becomes recyclable matter. Outdoors, it shrinks as an effect of sunlight, crumples up, and finally becomes undetectable to the bare eye. However, small particles of dispersed polystyrene remain as microplastics. Thus, ruination in the Anthropocene is manifest not merely in the act of throwing away a Styrofoam container; already the processes of distilling, polymerizing, dissolving, and finally detecting the effects of polystyrene through chemical analysis of different materials or even pathological analysis of animal intestines attest to it.

But what exactly is ruination, and how do we employ and qualify this notion? Focusing on imperial debris, Ann Stoler (2013, p. 11, emphasis in original) sheds some light on the ambiguity surrounding the notion and asserts that besides being “an act perpetrated, a condition to which one is subject, and a cause of loss”, ruination “is also a political project that lays waste to certain peoples, relations, and things that accumulate in specific places”. While we share Stoler’s emphasis on ruination as an active process, we also wish to expand on her account in three ways, in line with the ruination-Anthropocene nexus mentioned above. First, we conceive “imperialism” through an inter- and multispecies lens: colonizing and violently appropriating human imperial practices have far further-reaching and more complex effects than “shattered peoples and polluted places” (Stoler, 2013, p. 13). When delimited to the production of loss and inequalities among humans alone, the notion of ruination remains too anthropocentric. We, therefore, suggest a more-than-human analytics to diversify this viewpoint. Second, we

propose a different scale of analysis and think of ruination more as a planetary event than as a political process, with the former encompassing and conditioning the latter. Third, we expand the notions of both ruination and waste by attending to their nexus. Objects, materials and things are subject to a process of ruination, which turns them into relics, detritus, leftovers and excess. From the perspective of waste, Brian Thill (2015, p. 8) has referred to this process by suggesting that “[w]aste is every object, plus time”: all things will ultimately end up as waste, in an annihilated state. And when something becomes waste, it is no longer the thing it used to be or represent, as happens for instance when the material form of a thing begins to deteriorate visibly and/or when it loses its function (Kirby, 2019) or value (Thompson, 1979). Waste is matter in a ruined state, subject to and resulting from a process of ruination.⁴

2. New waste realities of the Anthropocene: the case of plastic

A hill of abandoned TV remote controllers which are of no use to anyone any longer. Tilted old plastic mannequins, leaning to each other in a trolley and no longer showcasing the latest clothing trends for window shoppers. Abandoned things everywhere: on the shelf, white plastic containers loaded with versatile synthetic household items; in the corridor, shopping carts filled to the brim with baby dolls and plastic bead jars. All the plastic items in the vast recycling centre potentially carry a story of their own, but there is no one to tell it. They are just waiting to be sorted out; the staff will go through them and decide whether they are still worth selling or even giving away for free. Some of them are just waste.

Capitalist extraction and mass consumption are at the core of the upscaled and accelerating Anthropocenic ruination of the natural environment. They are also bound to generate waste: an unavoidable outcome of accumulative capitalist processes. Capitalist production largely operates according to the linear model of take-make-waste, taking in raw materials at one end and expelling waste at the other. At the same time, consumerism has taught us to waste, as we have bought into the idea of “replacing the old, the broken, the out of fashion with the new” (Hawkins, 2001, p. 9; see also Campbell, 1987; Strasser, 1999; Edensor, 2005). Disposability is already “built into” some materials, such as plastic packaging and cutlery, which are explicitly “made to be disposed of” (Hawkins, 2017, p. 18).

In this section, we examine the new waste realities of the Anthropocene through plastic. As it is “woven into and enacted through social, cultural, political, technoscientific, ecological, and economic practices”, plastic stands as an “archetypical material” of our time (Gabrys, Hawkins & Michael, 2013, pp. 2-3). Plastic merits a much more thorough and detailed analysis in itself, but here we use it primarily to illustrate the multiple spatial scales of the

4. This is not to say that all ruins amount to waste. Unlike waste, architectural ruins not only tend to be aesthetically adored but, as Tim Edensor (2015: 317) suggests, “[w]here rubbish heaps might be off limits, ruinous matter has not been consigned to burial or erasure, and still bears the vague traces of its previous use and context, however opaque”.

Wasteocene, which range from the tiniest grains of existence, such as microplastics, all the way to the planetary scale. We argue that, ultimately, the Wasteocene is made out of those tiny and seemingly insignificant materials as much as it is made of power relations, infrastructures and institutions.

As materials, plastics do not just remain and be, but they become: they are leaky and unpredictable, vagabond and in ongoing variation (see also Gregson & Crang, 2010, p. 1028). Trisia Farrelly and colleagues (2021, p. 13) suggest that “[p]lastics act in and with the world in often indeterminate ways and with no end in sight as they become implicated in other things to create novel and often surprising ecologies”. In plastics, life and prosperity conjoin with death and decay, as bacteria, microbes and other organisms take ocean debris as their living platforms. Plastics are also able to travel great distances due to their light and often hollow composition, which means that they often end up somewhere completely different from where they were consumed.

Small black-and-white clownfish swim back and forth across the TV screen. They are searching for shelter for an alpha female clownfish to lay her eggs in. Finding a suitable object is not an easy task. First, a shell appears next to the fish nest, but it is too heavy and already occupied by a hermit crab. Next, a plastic bottle drifts along the sandy ocean floor. It is already covered with organic growth, something oceanic plastic researchers call a “plastisphere”, an inseparable entanglement of synthetic and organic matter, life springing from a petrochemical platform (Bergmann, 2021; De Wolff, 2017). A clownfish pushes the bottle with its nose. The bottle, however, is too light for the purpose. The plastic container carries on. Finally, a coconut shell appears. It fits perfectly to the task. The fishes team up to push the hollow shell to their nest, where the alpha female lays her eggs on top of it. This clip from the wildly popular Blue Planet II documentary series breaks with the tradition of nature documentaries, which have a tendency to leave out the signs of human interference. However, in today’s world, this is becoming increasingly difficult, as there is no place without plastics on this planet anymore. In Sir David Attenborough’s documentary, always so intent on showing the marvels and mysteries of planet Earth, a plastic bottle appears as if it was a part of the natural habitat of the fish. A glimpse into marine life in the Wasteocene.

Given that the deepest trenches of the oceans and the very orbit around the planet are littered with plastics, it is safe to say that plastic pollution is a global phenomenon. Plastic waste no longer remains local but has become what philosopher Michel Serres (1995) calls a “worldobject”: it has one or more dimensions compatible with one of the world’s physical dimensions. Microplastics have been discovered all the way from the Arctic to Antarctica. They have found their way to our food chain too; there is a wealth of research into how plastics seep into our bodies, producing possibly toxic effects (Adkins, 2021; Thompson, 2013; Crawford & Quinn, 2017). There is no escape from plastics. The “smaller plastics become, the more they become inseparable from the surrounding environment”

(Bergmann, 2021, p. 80). Even if we stopped producing them today, the plastics brought into the world so far will linger on, ground into ever smaller pieces, generating unknown effects that might manifest only after decades. Microplastics are the ruins of the Plastic Age that defy the “natural” processes of ruination and putrefaction and will remain and persist even after the Plastic Man, the human entangled with plastic, has gone.

In countries such as Finland, with well-developed waste management systems and high standards of recycling, the plastic problem is rarely visible to laypersons. However, no one can escape it entirely, even in the rich Global North. This does not mean that people, communities, and places are exposed to (plastic) waste to an equal extent or in the same way. While we all live in the Wasteocene, we are not “one-and-the-same”.⁵ The “we” of the waste-related Anthropocene should therefore be carefully reflected upon; it needs to accommodate difference (Farrelly, Taffel & Shaw, 2021, pp. 3-4). The risk-benefit balance of plastic relations is unequally distributed, as countries that produce plastics tend not to be those that ultimately face the aftermath of wasted plastics; for example, people living in the Global South and in indigenous communities are disproportionately exposed to plastic harms, while the profits of the production are often reaped in rich countries (Farrelly, Taffel & Shaw, 2021, p. 9).

Media imagery keenly juxtaposes pristine beaches or other “untouched” natural environments and plastic debris as dramatic proof of the destructive effects of our wasting on nature. While such juxtaposition is admittedly a powerful visual tool, living with waste nevertheless often assumes much more mundane forms. Our trashscapes are not limited to the places most severely contaminated by waste or those where waste makes its presence viscerally felt – the clean, smooth surfaces and ordered, aseptic spaces presented and idealized by the contemporary consumer culture are equally subjected to waste. These spaces have our collectively-produced mountains of waste as their reverse side, only temporarily removed from sight. To fully grasp the complexity of our economical, ecological, political, and bodily entanglement with plastic waste, analysis needs to attend to both “the plastics in the ocean” and “plastics in social life”, no matter how different and far apart those two spheres seem to be (Bergmann, 2021, p. 95).

3. Haunting: waste (as) remains

For us, it is its characteristic as matter that remains even after the destruction of a thing that waste has in common with ruination. Waste is a trace of an anterior presence; it embodies the absence of a past presence now present only as the trace of abandonment or disappearance. Waste is what remains of an object that used-to-be but is-no-more. After a thing has lost its value and is trashed, we have nothing else left of it but rubbish as its “degraded husk” (Scanlan, 2005, p. 16).

Perhaps like no other phenomenon, waste makes evident the urgency of the question of remains and ruins in the Anthropocene.

5. Rosi Braidotti (2019) makes the same claim about the Anthropocene.

The troubling thing about waste is that it does not go away. It can never be fully disposed of, only transformed into something else (see also Munro, 1998, p. 145; Strathern, 1999, p. 61; Hetherington, 2004, pp. 162-163). Therefore, its disposal and absence can only ever be provisional and temporary. The things that we throw away remain and keep returning “in uncanny loops”, “haunting” us (Doeland, 2020). Even when discarded things are moved elsewhere, they continue to have effects where they used to reside. Just think, for example, of the post-disposal ghostly presence of biowaste: how the rotting smell of mouldy, spoiled food tends to linger for a while in the house after taking it out to the bin (see also Munro, 1995, p. 318). Thereby, waste problematizes and challenges any simple binarism between present/absent, here/there, and inside/outside.

The photographs of environmental artist Chris Jordan display in a vivid, at times even shocking manner how the things that we discard because they no longer please us return and haunt us as uncanny, ghostly beings that accumulate infinitely. The Cell phone chargers, Atlanta, 2004⁶ is a photograph of a huge mass of cell phone chargers and their cords, like a surging sea of black cuboids and equally black clustering worms. These devices used to allow the flow of an electric current to run through the batteries of our mobile phones so that we could stay in contact with others and the outside world (a dead phone battery seems to cut us not only from conversation but from life itself, as it were, thus pushing us on the verge of anxiety and existential horror), but now they are just lying there abandoned and useless, detached from us. The image of the black, swelling mass unsettles our accustomed ideas of what counts as “big” and “small”: an isolated act of one person disposing of a mobile phone charger may seem of little consequence, but when tens or hundreds of millions of people perform the same seemingly small act, the accumulation radically transforms the scale. The same goes for mobile phones: in 2022, the International Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Forum estimated that 5,3 billion phones would be trashed globally that year. Jordan’s photograph depicts the becoming world of the discarded cell phone chargers. They paint the world in their colour, black on black, transforming our mundane landscape into an all-black trashscape.

Already, due to its sheer volume, waste can no longer be expelled to some vague imaginary “out there”, away from here. There is no “Away” to which it can be expelled in order for us to carry on our wilfully ignorant lives (Thill, 2015, p. 27, p. 109). Waste is ubiquitous. Living in the Wasteocene thus means living in trashscapes, in a world that is permanently polluted (Murphy, 2013; Liboiron, 2016; Liboiron et al., 2018): we have colonized the soil, the marine environment, and the air with our waste to the extent that there is no longer any untouched nature, “uncontaminated by human remains”, but “[t]rash becomes nature, nature becomes trash” (Yaeger, 2008, p. 332).

Since the elimination of waste is bound to remain imperfect and temporary, often through its mere relocation somewhere out of sight, we are not separate from waste. Rather, “garbage is a ghostly foe, a shadow of our supposedly cleansed reality” (Scanlan, 2005, p. 160). As it is we, humans who have created it, waste belongs to us, is “ours”, and bears our mark (or, rather, *is* our mark). Nevertheless, we confront it as an Other: as something alien to us due to this deliberate separation. This simultaneous distance and proximity, dissociation and association, qualifies waste as “uncanny”. The word uncanny refers to the strangely familiar or familiarly strange. Slavoj Žižek (2010, p. 309) suggests that “what makes the uncanny uncanny is its proximity, the fact that it is the coming-into-visibility of something too close to us”. Waste is closer to us than we would like it to be, with one of its most visceral manifestations dwelling in the eerie intimacy of the body and ingested microplastics. This uncanny⁷ proximity is at the heart of life in the Wasteocene and calls for the reconsideration of homeliness.

In the West, the homeliness of the abode exists within a human-made container (Alaimo, 2016), a demarcated and boundary-making space that separates the human from the nonhuman, culture from nature and the pure from the dirty. As for waste, it is usually excluded from the home or hidden in cupboards, piled up in attics and cellars, waiting to be thrown away and transported elsewhere. But what happens in the Wasteocene, when the inviolable immunity and homeliness of the home no longer exist, when the home is polluted, invaded by the Other? (How) can one feel at home with and amongst capitalist ruins?

In the Wasteocene, not only are we forced to face waste and the consequences of our actions, but we also need to find ways of cohabiting with the nonhuman, even the unwanted and nasty kind, such as waste, and learn to be at home in an unhomey world. In a world of living-with, it is no longer evident from the start whose home or world this is, who or what the host is and who or what the guest is, what should be preserved with care and what excluded, or who or what should be invited, who or what turned away (Doeland, 2019, p. 6).

In the glow of autumn sun, the moss that covers the grounds around Villa Mehu looks tempting, like an outdoor carpet. Located in a forest in Southern Finland, Villa Mehu is a collection of odd, quirky buildings, slowly being covered by organic growth and leaves, built from scraps and waste by the DIY artist, dancer, and naturalist Elis Sinistö (1912-2004). He collected abandoned materials from landfills or received them as donations and brought them to the isolated forest lot with his bike or by bus. It took several decades for Sinistö to build his fantasy world made of clutter and garbage. The buildings have names, such as the Sun sauna or the Hermit cottage. Sinistö lived in his buildings during the summers and invited visitors to stay in them too. The neighbours could tell that spring had come when Sinistö played his gramophone on the balcony of his home shack. His motto was: “La plus heureuse, c’est d’être heureuse”, the happiest is being happy. A home made of waste; where does the uncanny (unheimlich) stand in that? Instead

6. <https://www.artworksforchange.org/portfolio/chris-jordan/>

7. The English term *uncanny* is derived from the word *knowledge* (*un-knowable*), but in German, the word *unheimlich* refers to the *un-homey* or *un-homelike* (derived from *das Heim*, home) (see also Doeland, 2019).

of excluding the peculiar, messy and unfitting, Sinistö showed hospitality to it by making room for and giving place to it, but he also made the mess welcoming for others to arrive. Today, the dreamy buildings stand deserted and abandoned, many of them in a process of decay. The neighbours who bought the lot after Sinistö's decease want to preserve his realm and legacy, but it is difficult to fight against rot and erosion. Besides being eerie, the peculiar cottages and cabins also convey a sense of awe, building respect towards creativity and cohabitation. It seems that Sinistö lived with waste in a radical way, making himself a home out of things – and at home amongst things – that others had excluded and expelled from theirs.

4. Response-ability and the disruptive potential of ruination

For much of the historical times, *miasma*, “a contagious and dangerous pollution as due to transgression of a supernatural sanction, and more recently meaning an infectious or noxious emanation” (Tauszig, 2004, p. 175; see also Liboiron, 2013), was believed capable of being transferred by air through the putrefaction and decay of disposed-of substances. The discovery of microorganisms and microbes in the 19th century substituted the notion of *miasma* and secularized the preventative measures for the prosperity and control of human life, leading to the proliferation of infrastructures for public and individual hygiene. What has remained unaltered, however, is that disposed and disposable substances continue to be considered threatening to human health. Waste is perceived as a potent antonym of general hygiene; it is not ‘good’ to live with.

Waste disrupts the human senses and attains negative affective qualities. It is considered smelly, visually disturbing and not safe to consume as soon as decomposition commences. It also contributes to the proliferation of pest ecologies. Attributes like microbes, dirt, toxicity and decay reinforce the sense of the “miasmatic” qualities of waste, although quite frequently, this happens through inculcation since the aforementioned attributes cannot always be sensed – at least, not right away. Therefore, while waste accumulates in, around, and is pushed far from places of dense human population (though most often out of sight), it is strenuously sought to be kept apart from humans. Humans govern and confine waste and its associated ecologies by getting rid of it in volumetric enclosures, first inside or in the vicinity of their home, then transported to landfills and treatment plants that hardly anyone aspires to live in proximity to.

Waste is also a tragic reminder of the fragility and transitoriness of the object-worlds we have built around us – and of ourselves. It testifies to the impossibility of escaping the eventual, unavoidable deterioration of all matter (see also Scanlan, 2005, p. 33). Despite our hopes and best efforts to the contrary, there can be no rescue from the annihilating effect of time. Our usage of the notion of ruination in connection with waste bears a close resemblance to decay (and putrefaction) as a process of gradual perishing to which living organisms are bound. Ruination is a process that points to the inevitable destruction of living matter and artefacts, be it immediate or slow and gradual. While decay and ruination are part of life, they are thus mostly employed “negatively as an index of

disintegration or spentness” (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014, p. 70) and tend to be associated with such affective registers as repulsion, horror and loss. Georges Bataille ([1976] 1991b, p. 79) identifies the “horror of death” and the “loathing of nothingness” at the root of the “loathing of decay”. He subsequently notes that, as humans, “[w]e have no greater aversion than the aversion we feel toward those unstable, fetid and lukewarm substances where life ferments ignobly. Those substances where the eggs, germs and maggots swarm not only make our hearts sink, but also turn our stomachs” (*ibid.*, p. 81).

The negativity of ruination and decay is troublesome for the economy as well, as they disturb the creation and perpetuation of value. Besides having a capacity for value, through its apparent ruination waste also resists the efforts of reappropriating it and translating it into a resource and profit (instead of just endlessly generating new economic possibilities). For us, ruination thinking bears a close resemblance to so-called “broken world thinking”, which ‘asks what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points’ (Jackson, 2013: 221). The emphasis on ruination, deterioration and decay disrupts the waste-as-resource paradigm characteristic of the circular economy, which has gained traction as the successor of the linear economy’s take-make-use-dispose model.

Ruination thus has the potential to initiate a radical critique of the generalized colonialist ideals of economic innovation, growth and progress. The accumulating piles of obsolete objects that cannot be reclaimed and turned into value or a source of profit disrupt the idea of a self-enclosed circle in which all waste is used up, and the trope of progress associated with it (see also Edensor, 2005; Tsing, 2015). Therefore, we see ruination also as a powerful metaphor and conceptual tool to critically confront the overly optimistic – and equally technocratic – circular economy ideal. By emphasizing decay and deterioration, ruination renders visible “leakages” (Hird, 2012; Olofsson, 2021; Lehtokunnas & Pyyhtinen, 2023) as integral – and not external – to the normal functioning of society and the (circular) economy.

The processes of decay and ruination do not imply only a “logic of loss” (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014, p. 70) but may also amount to creative forces affording and conditioning affective registers not through undoing or returning but through perpetual, variable and transformative becomings. As Neza Negarestani (2010) claims, decay has seldom been interrogated as a vital process on its own. He further qualifies the process of decay as one that:

“[...] builds new states of extensity, affect, magnitude and even integrity from and out of a system or formation without nullifying or reforming it. The decaying formation is dispossessed of its chances to die or to live wholesomely, to be abolished, reformed or delivered to its origin. For this reason, decay is an irresolute process of building that potentiates architectures which, whilst infinitely open to new syntheses and transformations, cannot undergo complete annulment or return to their original form.” (*ibid.*, p. 386)

Applying Negarestani’s ideas to waste, we could say that waste is not only associated with destruction and death but is also teeming with life. Decay, the process of ruination of waste matter, is neither positive nor negative; it rather becomes both through a process of limitropical subtraction that simultaneously effectuates an inward shrivelling and an outward flourishing (Negarestani, 2010). While, for example, waste and its ‘life’ and agency are typically seen as

dangerous, hazardous and unwanted rather than as something to be cherished, embraced or celebrated, composters and bokashi practitioners joyfully welcome the ways in which biowaste generates microbial life (Kinnunen & Duque, 2022).

As a result, and through its haunting presence, waste calls for renewed sensibilities that disrupt our current conceptions and situate waste as ruination within an affective register of “response-ability on a damaged earth” (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). As Donna Haraway (2016, p. 28) mentions, “[r]esponse-ability is about both absence and presence, killing and nurturing, living and dying – and remembering who lives and who dies and how in the string figures of naturalcultural history”. Living in a world where absence and presence are both taken into account affirms the multiple ghostly and haunting realities of waste as Anthropocenic ruination. While ruination can become a powerful metaphor, insofar as it is directly associated with registers of an affective nature (with bodies, human and more-than-human, affecting and becoming affected), learning to live with and in (waste as) ruination is by no means suggestive of identifying with ruination as such. A becoming devoid of desire cannot be prefigured for the human condition (see Negarestani, 2010, p. 381). Living with ruination rather entails accepting ruination and decay as a prerequisite for the possibility of flourishing, and a situated, response-able positionality of human living and dying within this context. Following Jacques Rancière’s (1999) elaboration on politics, this acceptance and response-ability entail a performative politics rooted in differentiated affective planes of everyday living, where living, dying and decaying matter for more-than-humanity. This is also where, for us, the disruptive political potential of ruination in affective registers ultimately lies.

Conclusive remarks

In this article, we have attended to waste as the decaying stuff of the Anthropocene and an inherent and inevitable part of contemporary life. By extending the notion of ruins and ruination beyond crumbling built structures to waste and its dynamics, we offer new perspectives on the Anthropocene-ruination nexus from the perspective of waste.

The main contributions of the article are threefold. First, we linked the Anthropocene to waste and provided insights into what it is like to live in and with the ruins of the Anthropocene by demonstrating the versatile, mundane entanglements of humans and waste through empirical vignettes. Second, our discussion on waste set out to illustrate the various scales of the Wasteocene, ranging from microscopic plastic particles to the biosphere. The Anthropocenic ruins and remains are scattered all around the Earth, as in the example of plastics, and they also shake our certainties about what counts as “small” or “large”; while the micro- and nanoplastics found in the oceans are in one sense remarkably tiny, in another they are quite large, being ubiquitous in the marine environment and acting on the life of oceans and the food chains of fish, sea birds and ourselves. Thirdly, we connected waste scholarship literature and the discussions and debates on ruins and ruination, addressing the potential theoretical value arising from combining these two streams of literature. On the one hand, we explored waste as matter in a ruined state, subject to and resulting from a process of ruination and, on

the other hand, we examined how wastage is transforming natural landscapes into ruins and trashscapes.

While the Wasteocene conditions the life of all humans today, we are definitely not all one-and-the-same. The ambiguity as regards how different people, communities and places are exposed to waste must not generate indifference (see Bergmann, 2021, p. 80); the question of whose life matters in the Wasteocene is a vital one, and has substantial ethico-political implications. Coming to terms with the Wasteocene perhaps entails the necessity to let go of dreams of unpolluted waters, accept the anthropogenic touch that has reached all over, and then form relations grounded on togetherness in the Wasteocene. For instance, plastics provide a thinking point “between risk and potential”: an opportunity to rethink hospitality relations and who is the host and who is the guest (Doeland, 2019; Bergmann, 2021, p. 91) and to strike a balance in that relationship in a way that would be responsible and just for humans and nonhumans alike.

Ultimately, we think that through the ruination-waste nexus, one can critically confront the seemingly self-evident and largely taken-for-granted authority of the economy in and over our lives. As it defies and disrupts complete enclosures and perfect loops, waste stands as a testimony to the fact that not all things can be reduced to the law of circulation of the economy, *oikonomos* (where *nomos* means law and *oikos* the return to the point of departure, the home), and not all things can be (re)appropriated and translated into a resource and value for profit. There always remains something in waste that does not circulate and cannot be recycled, reused and exploited. Following Bataille ([1949] 1991a), waste could perhaps be thus called the “accursed share” of society and the economy; when considered under the aspect of ruination and decay, it amounts to sheer purposelessness that does not submit to the principle of utility. Under no means do we propose to give up with the struggle of managing waste; the waste problem is not one to be ignored. Societies need to constantly take it into account and try to provide solutions to it. Nevertheless, we argue that to live with waste one needs to accept the useless, worthless and meaningless as a fact of life and as an integral, ineliminable part of society, the economy and our everyday environment alike. Living with waste in this sense may even broaden our thinking to include meanings and significance that transcend the human. A life with waste in a world of Anthropocenic ruination amounts to a life that is not in complete control of itself but rather is inextricably entangled with otherness. As both individual subjects and collectives, we are formed in multiple encounters with, and exposures to, that which is outside of ourselves.

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Olli Pyyhtinenolli.pyyhtinen@tuni.fi
Tampere University

Professor of Sociology and the founder of Relational Studies Hub (RS Hub) at Tampere University, Finland. His research intersects social theory, philosophically inclined fieldwork, STS, economic sociology, and the study of art, and he is the author of for example *More-than-Human Sociology* (Palgrave, 2015), *The Simmelian Legacy* (Palgrave, 2018), *The Gift and its Paradoxes* (Routledge, 2014), and *Simmel and 'the Social'* (Palgrave, 2010). Currently, Pyyhtinen is leading two projects on waste and the circular economy, WasteMatters (ERC Consolidator Grant, 2022-2027) and DECAY (Academy of Finland 2022-2026), and a project on contemporary gift practices (Kone Foundation, 2021-2024).

Stylios Zavosstylios.zavos@tuni.fi
Tampere University

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Tampere University working for the WasteMatters project. Prior to that, he was Research Associate at the University of Manchester. He co-edited the volume *Urban Infrastructuring: Reconfigurations, Transformations and Sustainability in the Global South* (2022). Stylios' background is in architectural and urban studies. His research is transdisciplinary: broadly situated within the social sciences and employing ethnographic methods, it borrows from contemporary philosophical currents and feminist technoscience.

Alma Onalialma.onali@tuni.fi
Tampere University

Doctoral researcher at Tampere University working for the WasteMatters project. She is interested in socio-material human-plastic relations and how these relations are currently re-negotiated. Prior to her academic endeavors, Onali worked as a journalist focusing on environmental and economic affairs. She draws from material culture studies, posthumanist theories, and more-than-human sociology.

Ulla-Maija Sutinenulla-maija.sutinen@tuni.fi
Tampere University

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Tampere University. She works as a member of the WasteMatters project team and, in her current work, she especially focuses on following households' waste streams connected to everyday practices. Ulla-Maija's background is in (social) marketing and consumer research and her research interests revolve around everyday practices, sustainable consumption and waste. She focuses on qualitative, interpretive methodologies.

Niina Uusitaloniina.uusitalo@tuni.fi
Tampere University

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Tampere University, currently working in the DECAY – Disrupted Waste Flows in a Broken World project. Uusitalo's background is in media and communication studies. In her post-doctoral project, Envisioning climate change (2019–2023), she studied the aesthetics of climate change images. Her theoretical interests lie in eco-philosophy, new materialism and visual studies.

