The Movie Business as Waste Management Industry

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Abstract:

This essay examines two instances of “waste management” in the movie industry. First, it compares Blockbuster Video to Waste Management Inc., as both companies were run by Wayne Huizenga and similarly capitalized on economies of scale and geographic scope, centralized ownership, and standardization. Second, it draws from personal interviews with archive workers at a major Hollywood studio. Although these workers are tasked with saving and maintaining media materials, they cannot keep everything. What they save has value, what they discard does not, and in making the decisions about which is which, these people provide a critical understanding of how garbage is imagined within this company. Together, these two case studies illustrate how the media industry follows a number of different “garbage logics” of waste management.

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Among all the impressive essays that appeared in the inaugural volume of *Media Industries*, two appeared to speak to one another in an especially provocative way. In his contribution, Charles Acland called for media industry studies to engage more thoroughly in what he calls “dirt research.”² Following a methodology proposed by Harold Innis, Acland states that such research would examine “the minute and localized aspects of extraction, transportation, refinement, and distribution stages of the economy.”³ Acland asserts that such a research program “helps us expand the boundaries of media industries studies to encompass some of the foundational resource requirements and implications of the production and distribution of media works.”⁴ For him, this means tracing backward to grasp the material basis of media production and circulation.

From the opposite end of media’s life cycle, Richard Maxwell’s essay called for media industry studies to engage concertedly with issues of ecology and sustainability. He prompts scholars to take up an “eco-materialist” perspective toward media that would study “the chemistry associated with the production, use, and disposal of media technologies,” among other topics.⁵ Maxwell thus appears to echo, redirect, and in some ways complete Acland’s proposal, as though the two scholars had worked together. More properly, these two essays demonstrate a shared interest in materialist analyses of the media industries as well as in analyses of how media infrastructures intersect, often problematically, with other social and material systems

and environments. And although Maxwell's call for media industry studies to take up an eco-materialist perspective is broadly conceived and not focused exclusively on the material waste produced by the media industries, this essay and his other publications on the topic point to the importance of understanding media garbage.⁶ In this respect, we might say that his essay, combined with Acland's, suggests the need for dirt research of media garbage.

My interest in this issue derives, at least in part, as a result of my previous work on home video. In *Videoland*, I examine the cultural and industrial aspects of video rental stores, from their inception in the late 1970s to their widespread, although incomplete, demise in the 2010s.⁷ The last chapter ruminates on where all the VHS tapes and DVDs might go after these stores had closed for business, and I note that the great majority of these commodities likely sit in landfills across the country. Yet in my research I discovered that the recent transformation of videos into garbage has an ironic history. Wayne Huizenga, the man who ran Blockbuster Video from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, was actually in the garbage transportation business prior to working at Blockbuster.⁸ He was attracted to the video business because he felt that he could improve it much in the way he had improved the waste transport business.⁹ This fact would suggest that there might be some essential kinship between media and garbage. And indeed, before Huizenga took over, Blockbuster founder and CEO David Cook anticipated this move, stating, "the model we wanted to follow was the garbage business."¹⁰

Inspired by Acland and Maxwell, this essay takes David Cook at his word and explores the intimate relationship between media and garbage. While it is true that all forms of industry produce some waste, and thus entail some level of waste management, there has been a remarkable lack of analysis of the waste produced by the media industries in particular.¹¹ This essay therefore aims to shine a light on a little-considered aspect of the media industries by calling attention to some of the ways in which waste is intrinsic to media production. As Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz, among others, have noted, overproduction is a defining characteristic of the media business,¹² and overproduction necessarily means the production of waste. For the moment, however, I am less interested in how the media industries are "wasteful," in the sense that artists and companies do not operate with enough efficiency, although this phenomenon is strongly related and merits attention among ecologically minded film and media scholars. Rather, I am interested in waste as garbage, for which I will provisionally take up a definition acknowledged by Elizabeth Mazzolini and Stephanie Foote, who state, "Garbage might be best understood not as an object but rather as a category, and it comes into being only at the moment when it is thrown away, when no other apparent use can be found for it."¹³ Inevitably, media companies make things that get completely devalued and consequently thrown away. As a rule, as an inherent industrial logic, they make garbage.

Accordingly, this essay examines two instances where there has been a particularly close industrial and logical relation between waste and the movie industry. Moreover, and also in line with Mezzolini and Foote, I acknowledge that "garbage" and "waste" can be defined differently by different individuals and groups. Thus, this essay demonstrates how "waste" has been defined differently in two specific industrial contexts, particularly in relation to "value." First, I examine the extent to which Blockbuster Video was modeled on the waste transportation business that Wayne Huizenga had previously operated, Waste Management Inc. The history of this company indicates that, like Blockbuster Video in particular and the movie business more generally, the garbage industry rewards economies of scale and geographic scope, centralized ownership, and standardization. Just as important, both companies capitalized on the distribution of physical material, and Waste Management Inc. did so to the extent that it

temporarily reversed the previously determined nonvalue of garbage. Second, I examine how waste management operates within the media archives of a Hollywood studio. This section draws from personal interviews with technology managers and archivists at a major movie distributor, workers that are tasked with attaining, storing, and maintaining materials generated within the media production process. Although these workers are, in many ways, in the antigarbage business, they inevitably discard some materials. What they keep has value, what they discard does not, and in making the decisions about which is which, these people provide a critical understanding of how garbage is imagined within this company. Together, these two case studies illustrate how, in an effort to generate value, the media industry follows a number of different logics of waste management.

The Waste Management Inc. Model For Economic Growth

Although the history of Blockbuster Video is well documented,¹⁴ it merits a quick refresher so as to better understand how Waste Management Inc. resembled and presaged the success of this company. From the late 1980s until the 2000s, Blockbuster was the industrial giant in the field of video rental, at one point having more than five thousand stores in the United States and many more internationally.¹⁵ The company was founded by David Cook in 1985, a moment when the rental business was rapidly expanding and undergoing a wave of consolidation into regional and even national franchises and chains.¹⁶ With Blockbuster, Cook innovated the video rental business in two ways. First, the stores were designed to be clean, to be large, and to offer a large selection, with each location holding around eight thousand videos apiece.¹⁷ Second, he developed Blockbuster as a chain that would grow in part through franchising, making the Blockbuster brand and business model open to other participating entrepreneurs.¹⁸ At this moment in the mid-1980s, Wayne Huizenga was an independent investor, and a former colleague contacted him about Blockbuster and encouraged him to invest in the company.¹⁹ Although he was reluctant at first, Huizenga visited a store, studied the rental business, and became incredibly enthusiastic.²⁰ After investing in a number of Blockbuster locations in 1987, Huizenga grew so confident in the Blockbuster model that he purchased the company outright later that year.²¹

It was under Huizenga's leadership that Blockbuster expanded rapidly and became the industrial behemoth of the video rental business. There were nineteen Blockbuster stores when he bought the company in 1987, over twenty-one hundred by 1992,²² and more than thirty-four hundred stores when Huizenga sold the company to Sumner Redstone for \$8.5 billion in 1994.²³ Although some of the company's growth resulted from entrepreneurs opening Blockbuster franchise locations, Huizenga was not a fan of franchising, so the more important way in which the company expanded was through opening corporate-owned stores in strategic markets and regions.²⁴ According to Huizenga, the primary criterion for choosing the location of a new store was population density, and so Blockbuster stores rapidly appeared in many suburban areas throughout the United States and, after 1990, in many other countries as well.²⁵ This expansion through building was greatly augmented by an aggressive campaign of acquisitions. Blockbuster consistently bought smaller stores and regional chains throughout this period, significantly consolidating the video rental business and saturating the landscape with cookie-cutter retail spaces.²⁶

Because of the way Blockbuster simultaneously expanded and standardized the video rental industry, the company has commonly been compared to McDonald's.²⁷ This comparison is not without merit, as at least one member of Blockbuster's senior management team had worked

previously for the fast-food chain.²⁸ But the truth is that Huizenga had developed business tactics in the waste transportation and management business similar to those employed by Blockbuster, suggesting that Waste Management Inc. provides a better point of comparison. Although the two companies traded in different materials, they treated these materials in analogous ways, ultimately suggesting that both garbage and media—in this case, movies on tape—can be made subject to extremely similar business practices.

According to the legend, which Huizenga himself has been quick to promote, he entered the waste transport business in 1962, when he bought a single garbage truck with money he borrowed from his father-in-law.²⁹ Located in south Florida, where the population was growing quickly,³⁰ Huizenga expanded the company in the early and mid-1960s by acquiring other companies' trucks and routes in the area.³¹ Huizenga commonly financed these acquisitions by attaining loans from banks as well as from family members.³² By the late 1960s, the company had grown to over forty trucks. Looking to expand farther, Huizenga partnered with two other companies to form Waste Management Inc. in 1968; one of these companies operated in the Chicago area and was run by Dean Buntrock, who was related to Huizenga by marriage.³³ All of those involved intended for Waste Management to expand quickly and consolidate the growing private waste disposal industry, and Huizenga was made specifically responsible for "spearheading Waste Management's acquisition drive" during its initial years.³⁴

The company grew at an incredible pace throughout the 1970s, drawing upon a mixture of debt financing, a strategy Huizenga had used previously, and intermittent stock offerings. When Waste Management made its initial public offering of stock in 1971, the company operated only in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Florida.³⁵ This IPO raised over \$5 million,³⁶ and from there the company went about aggressively buying competing firms in numerous locations. In 1972 alone, Waste Management bought three companies in the Chicago area,³⁷ then nine more companies in such places as Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Colorado,³⁸ then a company in California,³⁹ and then approximately thirty-six more companies in a variety of locations.⁴⁰ By the end of that year, Waste Management Inc. operated in nineteen states as well as in Canada,⁴¹ and the company was estimated to be the second-largest waste management company in the USA.⁴² Importantly, Waste Management paid for many of these acquisitions not through the company's finances, but rather with stock in the company itself.⁴³ In this scenario, the company expanded in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, it grew practically by buying other companies, often with stock in the company. Second, it grew in terms of stock value, which went up as a result of the company's increasing real-world size following the acquisitions. All told, Waste Management acquired over one hundred firms in its first two years.⁴⁴

This expansion happened in two particular contexts: namely, following the growth of the environmentalist movement in the United States and as the process of waste collection, disposal, and management became increasingly privatized. The first Earth Day was observed across the country in 1970 and the US government established the Environmental Protection Agency later that year, the year before Waste Management went public.⁴⁵ In 1975, a report indicated that private waste management companies handled about 73 percent of all garbage, including half of all municipal garbage, and 90 percent of all industrial waste.⁴⁶ At the time, private waste management firms were viewed by some as beneficial, as they could ostensibly deal with trash "more cheaply and with less trouble" than municipalities;⁴⁷ further, there were arguments that such firms could conform more rapidly and easily to new government regulations regarding waste management.⁴⁸

Thus, Waste Management continued to expand throughout the decade, despite recurrent government scrutiny into the company's business practices.⁴⁹ By 1977, the company operated in twenty-seven states and earned \$179 million in revenues.⁵⁰ This same year, the company got a contract to operate in Saudi Arabia in a deal that was worth over \$200 million,⁵¹ and it would later expand into Argentina,⁵² Australia,⁵³ and Venezuela.⁵⁴ It continued to make new stock offerings, all of which sold quickly, in order to finance acquisitions and to reduce debt overall.⁵⁵ In 1980, Waste Management had sales of \$560 million, and the company was assessed to be "the strongest and most impressive in its industry."⁵⁶ In this same year, however, Wayne Huizenga resigned as president and chief operating officer but stayed on as vice chairman.⁵⁷ Eventually, in 1984, Huizenga retired from Waste Management entirely, at which point the company had revenues of \$1 billion,⁵⁸ as well as nearly eight thousand employees.⁵⁹ It handled waste transport and disposal in 168 different cities in thirty different states, and also owned and managed seventy landfills and other waste handling sites.⁶⁰

This narrative presents a certain similarity to the historical development of Blockbuster Video, at least until the 2000s, when the company succumbed to the competition presented by online streaming platforms and digital movie downloads. (By 2013, Blockbuster had declared bankruptcy and closed all its locations). As Frederick Wasser has asserted, "[Wayne Huizenga's] ambition in video rentals was focused strictly on the cash and stock value."⁶¹ Thus, like Blockbuster, Waste Management grew by building stock revenue in response to opening or acquiring new branches and outlets, and drew upon its corporate wealth to open these new locations. Once both companies developed this virtuous circle of economic growth, they each grew even bigger, leading to standardization and consolidation within their respective industries. The two companies showed that video rental and waste management were responsive to economies of scale. Although this process may sound like capitalism in general, and perhaps is not specific to these two companies or industries, this shared economic characteristic points to something important about waste, especially with regard to its relation to media. Both Waste Management and Blockbuster generated value by enticing investors with their growth, which is to say that both companies functioned as a result of speculative valuation. In this way, Waste Management developed a garbage logic of growth that Blockbuster followed.

Crucially, the growth of both companies entailed geographic expansion. But again, this similarity between video and garbage could simply result from basic capitalist processes, wherein wealth tends to become centralized at the same time that successful firms expand to new markets and spaces. Yet this geographic expansion suggests a different but related link between Waste Management and Blockbuster—namely, that they were both involved in distribution. Alisa Perren has noted that media distribution has gained an increasing amount of scholarly attention and, just as important, that the existing literature indicates that many different activities have been put under the umbrella term *distribution*.⁶² Blockbuster and Waste Management Inc. appear to fulfill a basic promise of the term, as they handled the movement of materials across space and time for economic gain. Indeed, it seems crucial that both companies traded in the movement of physical materials across space, controlling the flows of these materials in such ways as to make this movement valuable to a variety of customers and consumers. Although I recognize that Blockbuster is perhaps defined better as a retailer than as a distributor, the company was unquestionably responsible, in a practical way, for the movement of video commodities from producers to consumers and, further, for the general circulation of such commodities throughout public space. Like video rental stores in general,

Blockbuster was successful, at least partly, because it gave people geographically convenient access to movies, and in this respect they moved movies at the same time they dispersed them.⁶³

Waste Management distributed in the opposite direction. Rather than giving movies to people near where they lived, the company picked up the garbage that people did not want to live with. As noted, Waste Management owned numerous landfills across the country, in addition to trucks and dumpsters. These landfills were so important to the business that Wayne Huizenga stated that one “key criterion” for Waste Management purchasing a company “was whether or not the firm had its own disposal site”;⁶⁴ this recalls the fact that Blockbuster was able to open stores so rapidly during its early years because the company established regional distribution centers to serve these stores.⁶⁵ In comparing the strategies of these two companies, we might therefore reconceptualize Waste Management’s landfill sites as distribution centers in reverse, as collection centers that gather the garbage that people distribute themselves.

Indeed, Waste Management Inc. capitalized on the fact that all companies and households produce waste in a decentralized way and that people want this garbage taken out of sight. In doing so, the company indicates a certain relationship between waste and value, and indicates moreover that distributors, of various kinds, wield a special power in generating and even defining both waste and value. Waste Management did not create its own definition of garbage but, rather, inherited that material as already defined by the companies and individuals it served; these groups, it seems, upheld the commonsense definition provided above, that garbage “comes into being only at the moment when it is thrown away.”⁶⁶ But Waste Management Inc. did complicate this definition by generating value out of it. Specifically, this example demonstrates how garbage can and has been commodified, as a sort of commodified noncommodity, and as such can be treated as many other kinds of commodities, and like video commodities in particular. Waste Management Inc. endowed garbage with temporary value by *distributing* it; Blockbuster Video performed a similar service, albeit one more recognizable as distribution in a traditional sense.

There is a final, albeit minor point of comparison between Waste Management and Blockbuster. To a certain degree, both companies were in the rental business. In addition to making money by charging companies and individuals for waste collection, Waste Management also charged rent on the dumpsters they used. Thus, for all that the company expanded by acquiring new firms and through its increasing stock price, the rental of a commodity provided consistent revenue and constituted one of the practical foundations of this company. Huizenga himself likened Blockbuster to Waste Management due to their shared basis in rental, even comparing his ownership of the Florida Marlins and other sports teams to these other companies, saying that he was effectively “renting seats” to the people who attended games at the stadiums.⁶⁷ However we may look at it, Huizenga saw all these companies as similar and ran them similarly – as garbage companies.

Garbage Logic at the Corporate Media Archive

Blockbuster Video is an exceptional case of a media business with overt links to garbage. But waste management is intrinsic to all aspects of the media industry, just as it is to all other types of business and to our individual households as well. All industry involves waste management. Thus, in order to further elaborate and complicate the way in which this basic and universal process occurs within the media industries, I turn now to an area of the movie business that might otherwise appear opposed to waste. Specifically, this section examines the practices at the media archive at a major Hollywood studio, the archive that holds and maintains all the media

texts produced by this company. In principle, the workers at this archive are tasked with saving materials rather than throwing them away, ostensibly obeying a logic of preservation. In truth, these workers make critical decisions regarding the past, present, and potential future value of these materials and treat them accordingly, enacting another iteration of “garbage logic” in the movie industry.

This section draws from interviews I conducted in 2014 and 2015. I interviewed a handful of management-level, decision-making personnel at this studio, including the head of the archive and other workers tasked with technical systems and asset management strategies. The interviews were conducted over the phone, and some follow-up communication was conducted over email. For purposes of anonymity, I have changed the names of the interviewees and I will refer to the company, which is one of the six members of the Motion Picture Association of American, as “Studio A.”

The issue of film archival and preservation is entirely tied up in issues of value, which the growing literature on the topic makes clear.⁶⁸ Further, it is clear that the goals and practices of an archive at a Hollywood studio can differ considerably from those of, say, the Library of Congress or the UCLA Film and Television Archive. As Karen Gracy has written,

Film archives have long held film preservation to be their most important goal... it is their dedication to preservation that distinguishes film archives from film libraries, which focus primarily on film rental or licensing. The latter may participate in preservation activities on occasion, but their primary activities are largely commercial in nature.⁶⁹

Even so, the commercially oriented logic of preservation at a Hollywood studio can be mutable. Eric Hoyt, for instance, has described how in the 1930s Warner Bros. destroyed numerous silent films that did not present clear opportunities for being recirculated, remade, or used for stock footage following the advent of sync-sound technology; further, this company saved anything that was not owned by the studio itself for fear that the rights holders might reclaim the physical property.⁷⁰ These practices differ considerably from those in the present, suggesting that the exact ways in which films were valued, or devalued as trash, can be variable.

Although Hoyt’s work counters the idea that the Hollywood studios gained an appreciation for “old” films only after the invention of home video, individuals currently working in the archival department at Studio A indicate that the company altered its archival practices in response to this technological change. A management-level archive worker, whom I will refer to as “Scott,” stated that up until the mid-1980s, the studio would generally throw away all “positive trims,” or any footage that was not used in the final cut of a film. This changed with home video, he said, as certain films proved to have posttheatrical success through releases of different versions that used new or different footage. Following this, Scott stated, the studio began keeping “everything” that was submitted to them from a production team. He admitted that some material has been and continues to be discarded by a production crew, thereby indicating another garbage logic operating within the studio, but one that precedes the preservationist objectives of the company’s archival department. This studio’s archive, at first glance, is thus tasked with being comprehensive in its storage and maintenance of the company’s media products.

These were relatively inexpensive and straightforward procedures when celluloid was the primary technology for capturing images. For film assets, Scott stated, the company stores original negatives in a temperature-controlled vault in its corporate headquarters in the Los Angeles area. An immense amount of other film and video material is held in a salt mine in a Midwestern state that measures some one hundred fifty-thousand square feet. Scott stated there are also “multiple refrigerated sites across the country” that hold backup copies of these materials, all of which “are inside mountains or under the ground.” According to Scott, these locations require very little in the way of staff and the company spends mere “pennies” on storing material in these places.

At the time of this writing, Studio A officially maintains this “keep everything” policy. Yet the situation has grown trickier following the adoption of digital technology, as many people working in preservation have noted.⁷¹ Quite practically, these archivists are challenged by the sheer volume of material delivered to them. Scott estimated a 100-to-1 shooting ratio in the days of film, but he now sees ratios of 200 or 250 to 1 with digital. He also said that 90 to 95 percent of material submitted to the archive never makes it into the final film. These facts suggest that there are new forms of wastefulness occurring in media production and, further, that this wastefulness creates new burdens on those who aim to avoid waste. Further, Scott indicated that the studio stores such digital material within an “archive” entailing a large number of computer servers with enormous holding capacity, which is not a simple process. “‘Keep’ in the digital world,” he said, “means you have to archive it, have it monitored, and migrated.” Another studio archivist, “George,” indicated that maintaining this digital archive involves figuring out what all the files are, how they relate to each other, and maintaining those relationships, “like a big puzzle,” he said. This means that archivists at this studio, like librarians and archivists at numerous other institutions, have had to become data management experts.

Using digital technology for media archiving is expensive. One report published in 2007 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences stated, “Using current preservation methodology, the cost of storing 4K digital masters was found to be enormously higher—1,100% higher—than the cost of storing film masters.”⁷² Scott indicated that, as of 2015, his studio’s digital storage costs were even higher than this. In addition to labor, he said, “The largest expense is the hardware and the utilities to run and maintain it.” In fact, he stated that the studio found that it would be less expensive to have another institution actually keep and maintain the computer servers that hold the company’s digital files; although the archive was accessible by workers at Studio A, the computers are housed elsewhere. Further, the studio built two “mirrored” digital archives, one in the Los Angeles area and one on the East Coast. Thus, while it may cost the studio “pennies” to store film materials in a salt mine, the digital archive requires constant and costly upkeep. “This is where corporate gets involved,” Scott said, “and kind of freaks out at how much it costs.”

Given this economic situation, this company does not in fact “keep everything,” or at least does not treat all materials in the same manner. Scott indicated that media submitted to the archive gets one of two labels: “managed asset” or “perishable asset.” Managed assets are consistently and perpetually checked on, maintained, and migrated to new file formats as necessary. These materials “go into the archive and sort of live forever,” Scott said. When materials are submitted to the archive and deemed perishable, however, the archive workers do very little to maintain the integrity of the files. Scott said, “If it’s a perishable asset, we’ll keep the physical asset that it’s delivered on, but we’re not going to ingest the hi-res version of it. We’ll just have proxies.”

That is to say, although the carrier of the data, such as a tape or hard drive, is physically stored in the archive space, the data is not uploaded to the servers or maintained. This means that the relevant files and data likely become inaccessible in a short period of time. "The tape may last twenty-five years but the tape is not the issue. It's the data," Scott said. He estimated that digital assets have a seven- to ten-year life span and, following this period, are not expected to be retrievable. "Any longer than that," he said, "you might as well throw it away."

Scott and another archival worker, "Nancy," indicated that a number of criteria informed the decisions as to whether something was managed or perishable. First, how much money did the movie make? In this respect, the archive values materials that have already proved to have economic value. Second, has the film won any awards? Here, prestige determines the archival value of a film. This criterion aligns interestingly with Pierre Bourdieu's notions regarding "commercial" and "cultural" producers and distributors of cultural goods, where "commercial" firms typically release cultural products with large but rapidly diminishing economic appeal, while "cultural" firms often distribute a small number of well-respected products that make money over a longer period of time.⁷³ Certainly, this is a major studio that almost exclusively releases commercial media, yet its archival department treats cultural prestige as offering important long-term value.

Third, does the studio own the full rights to this property, or was it a short-term acquisition ultimately owned by some other entity? This represents a complete reversal of the tendency in the 1930s for studios to keep other studios' properties, as noted by Hoyt.⁷⁴ Whereas previously a distributor might have feared that a rights holder would come looking for their property, now this studio assumes that rights holders will preserve their own material; in any case, this studio devalues such material because it cannot exploit it. Fourth, is there a talent relationship associated with this material? On this point, Nancy said, "If [a big-name and lucrative director] came to the studio and said 'I had some stuff from [a film I made for you] that I need to review because I am working on a new film,' what do you think he would say if we said, 'We trashed it?'" Timothy Corrigan noted in 1991 that the "auteur" can and often does function as a commercial entity, as a kind of social agency that regulates cinematic production, marketing, and audience reception.⁷⁵ This studio's archival practices indicate another strain of industrial auteurism, where the director holds sway over a film's archival value by virtue of his or her social agency and cultural status.

Fifth and finally, Scott said, "Does it have potential to be a cult-type film?" Notably, this Hollywood studio characteristically does not release "cult films" according to common usage of that phrase. Thus, although Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis note, "the 'cult movie' is an essentially elastic category," they also uphold the idea that this category largely operates in the realm of media reception and that the "cult" label is used by film fans in opposition to mainstream films and culture.⁷⁶ In this instance, however, a studio executive adopts this phrase to describe a different kind of movie. "Is it something that didn't make a lot of money," Scott said, "but potentially has long term value? A title that may be offbeat a little bit but in ten or fifteen years from now become a hit?" This worker thus defines *cult* firmly within the economic logic that guides the archival logic at the studio more broadly. Moreover, this use of the phrase *cult movie* indicates something about the relationship between "trash cinema" and cinema trash. "Cult," at this studio, however it may be defined, upholds the potential value of a film, while the opposite of this label consigns a movie to the trashcan.

In fact, we can reverse all these selection criteria so as to better understand how they implicate a garbage logic. Precisely what does this archive devalue? Theatrical losers, award losers, other people's property, films made by directors without good reputations, and, finally, movies that appear to offer no future promise. Not surprisingly, most of these criteria are formulated around a hope to make money in the future. So, while it may not appear economically efficient to store, all this digital material does serve the long-term interests of this company by offering *potential* income. Yet the garbage logic of this archive appears to contradict this logic of potentiality. Specifically, two of the criteria for deeming a movie a "managed asset" are based directly on its past and potential future earnings. These appear as circular logics and self-fulfilling prophecies, where a studio decides that a movie is garbage and thus ensures its fate as such. And, crucially, these decisions as to whether something is a managed or perishable asset are made by a committee that includes staff from multiple departments, including theatrical, home video, television, legal, and marketing, as well as the archive. In other words, this judgment aims to represent the interests of the studio more generally. It is an institutional garbage policy.

However, it is notable that this archive uses the category "perishable," which is distinct from "garbage" or even "perished." Just as a movie in the archive may not be a cult hit *yet*, so too are perishable materials *not quite yet* garbage. In this regard, this archive's garbage logic strangely resembles Michael Thompson's "rubbish theory."⁷⁷ Thompson notes that some objects are "durable," and "increase in value over time and have (ideally) infinite life-spans," while others are "transient" and "decrease in value over time and have finite life-spans."⁷⁸ Such objects, he states, are "located in the world of fixed assumptions" and people treat them accordingly; durable objects are cherished, while transient objects are disregarded.⁷⁹ Yet Thompson also identifies a third category, where the status of an object is unfixed, much in the way that the label "perishable" does not deliver a final judgment on the movie in question. In this "region of flexibility" we find "rubbish," according to Thompson.⁸⁰ He states:

[A] transient object gradually declining in value and in expected life-span may slide across into rubbish. In an ideal world, free from nature's negative attitude, an object would reach zero value and zero expected life span in the same instant . . . But, in reality, it usually does not do this: it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo where at some later date (if it has not by that time turned, or been made, into dust) it has the chance of being discovered.⁸¹

Along these lines, Scott stated that the committees at Studio A that decide such matters are regularly asked to look over and reevaluate "perishable" titles as they near their expiration dates. They examine whether the title has gained some cult following or if the reputation of the director has improved. "If it generates potential revenue or usage, we'll then pay to ingest the high-res version," Scott said. As long as the data can still be accessed, the archivists can make it a managed asset. To put it another way, they retrieve this material from an unemptied dustbin and, in the process, almost magically convert rubbish into a durable and potentially valuable good.

Conclusion: Sorting Out the Trash

Whereas Waste Management Inc. drew value from material that already had been determined as valueless by others, and whereas Blockbuster Video traded in video commodities with

fleeting but tangible value to moviegoers, Studio A overly engages in defining the value of various materials. In these cases, there appears to be a strong relationship between waste and value more generally. Yet Jonathan Sterne says the following regarding computer waste, which may also appear true of other forms of garbage as well:

A computer's social life might best be described as a kind of symbolic journey. It undergoes a series of symbolic transformations: it travels through categories from new, to useful, to obsolete, to unused, to trash . . . The production of computer trash is thus a fundamentally taxonomic process. A computer passes through several classifications in its lifetime and only some of them have to do with "value."⁸²

In the case of Waste Management, we see that the company did not so much create the taxonomic label for the materials they traded in, as this label was already provided by those who put the material into the trashcan. Waste Management, in fact, created value out of this waste by treating this material practically, not categorically. Alternatively, the practices at Studio A indicate yet another complicated relationship between waste and value. This studio's practice of labeling materials "managed" or "perishable" shows that categories can actually *confer* value (or not) and in doing so change the way these materials are treated. That is to say, garbage is not just a category but also a practice, and labeling an object can be precisely the means by which value is determined. Calling a thing garbage can make it so.

Thus it seems clear, based on the examples described above, that there are multiple and sometimes quite divergent garbage logics operating in various zones of the media business. Nevertheless, while the differences between Waste Management Inc., Blockbuster Video, and the archive at Studio A may appear more striking than their commonalities, it is important to note that these cases indicate how waste management entails value judgments and, just as important, how distributors, variously conceived, hold a special power in determining waste vis-à-vis value. While Waste Management and Blockbuster were distributors in the mundane sense that they moved materials across space, the core business of Studio A is distribution in a broader sense, as it produces movies, promotes movies, and brings movies to global markets. Its archive serves a crucial function in this regard, as it stores materials for distribution, either concretely in the near future or as some potentiality. It also, as indicated above, decides what materials will *not* get distributed to markets (but rather to the waste bin). All these companies thus wield or wielded control over the flow of materials across space and time, and they created value out of this strategic control.

Both the alignments as well as the differences among the cases detailed above should prompt media industry scholars to further investigate how media companies practice waste management, including moments in which they define waste itself, and engage in "wasteful" business practices. These garbage logics appear as the dialectical antitheses to the ways in which these companies make money in particular and value more generally, and consequently should be regarded as just as fundamental to media industry studies as any other topic. As Richard Maxwell indicates, these issues are not only elemental but existential and, he asserts, "The eco-crisis affects every organism on the planet . . . and this means the sub-discipline of media industry studies must venture out into the critique of the wider political economy and ask what kind of society we want to live in."⁸³ By showing some ways in which waste is intrinsic to the movie industry, I hope to have contributed to a bigger and necessary discussion

about how we might create logical, practical, and material solutions to the problem of media garbage in particular and the ecological impact of the media industries more generally.

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