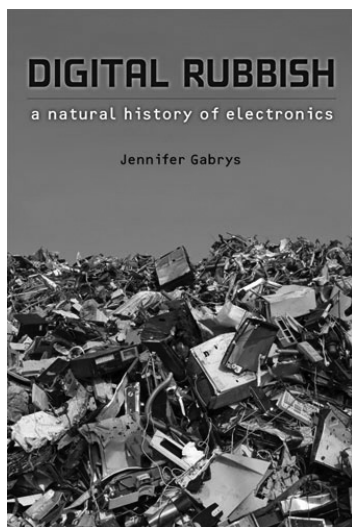


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Book Review: Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*



University of Michigan Press, 2011.

\$30.00 (paperback)

In *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*, Jennifer Gabrys proposes a Benjaminian model for analyzing the flow of electronics from development through production, use, storage, disposal, decay, and salvage. Discarded electronics are, for her, nothing less than semiotic treasure troves, vivid records of not only their original, instrumental purpose, but also the political, ecological, and economical frameworks to which they give rise and inhabit. Her inquiry flits back and forth between the empirical and the theoretical, lingering on a variety of sites and objects that are emblematic for the current global configuration of electronic production and waste cycles.

Landscapes that range from the now highly-polluted spaces of Silicon Valley to the dumps and landfills that swallow electronics after their primary life has been exhausted form new anthropic geographies, their natural habitats forever perturbed not only by the visible interventions, but also by chemicals seeping into the ground and new scavenging practices that attempt to squeeze a last remainder of use value from the detritus left

behind. Places like the NASDAQ floor, which instantiates within its architecture the conflict between the immaterial flows of information that give rise to market value and the monumental materiality of the stock ticker necessary to display and make comprehensible such an immaterial flow, make apparent the contrast between the narrative of technologically driven cleanliness and disembodiment and its necessary material infrastructure. Gabrys also considers the less obvious sites of electronics: the estimated 75% of unused electronics that are still stockpiled by their owners, and which would overwhelm our systems of waste disposal if they were to enter them at once, as well as the museums of technology that function as trackers of a linear history of progress and reminders of the cyclical hype that necessarily surrounds and fuels such histories. Similarly, she delves into the imaginary dimensions of trash, bringing up fictional locations that serve as proof of concept, like Italo Calvino's Leonia, a city that constantly disposes of its instantly obsolete products, dumping them to an "outside" that

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subsequently threatens the serene interior of the city, or Vance Packard's Cornucopia City, a place that builds all its goods from transient materials and bypasses consumption, sending them straight to the dump. Both are apt metaphors for the cycles of obsolescence imposed on consumer electronics by the self-fulfilling prophecy of Moore's law. Finally, Gabrys traces the global asymmetries that emerge vividly from images of cargo vessels hauling containers full of consumer electronics to Western shores, reload them with digital trash, and return them to disposal centers in the developing world. Many of these objects end up in dumps and landfills. Some are salvaged by workers in hazardous conditions who dip them in acid baths to remove the trace amounts of rare metals that still retain value even after the product has gone out of fashion.

Unfortunately, Gabrys's interpretation of these artifacts sometimes gives way to rather loose and jargon-ridden prose that rarely maps direct connections between the objects of study and the conclusions she draws. This is due in no small part to the Benjaminian heritage of the book. Gabrys seems to attempt to emulate his prose stylistics—what Susan Sontag aptly described as “freeze-frame baroque”—which rely on the reassertion of his analysis from a variety of often overlapping perspectives, almost every sentence containing the nucleus of his argument. Yet, she cannot approach the gnomic, evocative nature of Benjaminian prose, and the book reads as repetitive rather than exploratory at times. This is regrettable especially because she displays an aptitude for evocation in some descriptive and narrative passages that falls apart in the analytical ones.

The empirical aspects of Gabrys's inquiry are also hampered by her methodological allegiances. While Benjamin's historical consciousness sees through the illusion of linear time and recognizes the same cyclical patterns of consumption, exploitation, and

disposal throughout history, it also lacks any sense of scale or agency in its theoretical drive. The Angel of History, which Benjamin evokes in his interpretation of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in his *Theses on the Concept of History*, might be an apt metaphor for the prerequisite of critical thinking, historical perspective, but it is hardly a full roadmap for a contemporary study. *Digital Rubbish* would have been improved substantially by an applied focus on the quantitative aspects and individual and corporate agents in this complex global flow. Gabrys does cite the quantity of disposed units of consumer electronics (3 billion units in the US thus far, at a rate of 400 million a year), but she doesn't even historicize this basic figure. How does it compare to similar flows ten, twenty, or thirty years ago? What counts as a “unit?” How does this quantity/rate in consumer electronics compare to industrial and corporate flows of consumption and disposal? What is the maximum capacity of our current waste disposal networks, and what growth rates can be predicted in both production and disposal circuits? Who are the main industrial, regulatory, and non-profit actors in these networks, nationally and globally? The book implicitly points at these future areas of inquiry but never contributes to them substantially. Some of this information is publically available but never makes it into the far too general picture that Gabrys paints in *Digital Rubbish*. The story of trash isn't a new one; neither is the recognition that our society designs for obsolescence and is caught in cyclical, socially and geographically uneven patterns of hype and disposal. Gabrys knows quite well that the history of the recognition and reporting of such imbalances of power maps neatly onto the history of continental philosophy and Marxist thought. The challenge currently faced by the critical, historical consciousness with which she obviously aligns is more complicated: find a way to sufficiently ground that critique in the specifics of our current context, to the point where it can form the basis of a discussion for future policy.

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End Notes

Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011)