The Aesthetics of Waste: Michel Tournier, Agnes Varda, Sabine Macher

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Abstract
In this dissertation, I engage with authors and works that sweep waste to the center, destabilizing our expectations of what waste is, and what it does. They do so through an aesthetics of waste that foregrounds waste as a major theme and mode of artistic creation. By waste, I refer to the wide material and metaphorical implications of the word – from trash, refuse and excrement, to textual debris that would typically be discarded from a finished work of art.

My corpus is composed of contemporary French works and spans the genres of novel, film and poetic notebook. It begins with a trash-centered reading of Michel Tournier’s Les Morts (1975), before moving on to Agnès Varda’s documentary Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse (2000) and a selection of Sabine Macher’s poetic notebooks (1992 – 2005). Through these works, my dissertation interrogates the relationship between writing (criture and cinécriture) and waste. Tournier, Varda and Macher mount a critique of commodity culture and its values of standardization, homogenization, over-consumption and plastic perfection. At the same time, they locate waste as a subversive site for new artistic creation. Waste in these works thus functions as an alternative aesthetics and a social and ecological critique. Waste also emerges as an ambiguous concept, negatively figured as the by-product of our relentless production-consumption, and positively figured as a means of escaping such a system.

Each genre and work under study lends itself to its own blend of “waste making” or “waste management” techniques, including recycling, bricolage, gleaning and a poetics of lack. In self-conscious gestures, Tournier, Varda and Macher place themselves in their works to model their waste-making practices as trash aesthete-pickers, gleaners and bricoleurs. My dissertation thus approaches the issue of waste from a literary, artistic and aesthetic perspective, while incorporating discourses from the fields of eco-criticism, ethics, postmodernism and waste studies. Ultimately, I argue that waste is the ‘stuff’ that works of art are made of.

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THE AESTHETICS OF WASTE:  
MICHEL TOURNIER, AGNÈS VARDA, SABINE MACHER

Melissa DunLany

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MICHEL TOURNIER, AGNÈS VARDA, SABINE MACHER

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Writing Waste

(...) cet excès a nom: écriture.
--Roland Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola

These thoughts of mine that you are reading are all that has been salvaged from the scores of sheets of paper now crumpled up in the bin.
--Italo Calvino, “La Poubelle agréée.”

In June 2016, a prolonged trash strike in Paris left mounds of uncollected garbage piled high on the streets. Tourists snapped photos of the newly erected monuments – heaps of black trash bags, chock-full dumpsters and rows of municipal bins left uncollected. Garbage workers took to the streets and strikers blocked access to waste treatment centers in protest of labor law reforms that would reduce workers’ rights.

The unsightly spectacle of trash in the center of the city of lights provoked responses ranging from outrage to unease, and received international attention from the press. Shopkeepers complained that the stench was driving away business, and politicians warned of the economic consequences of the strike just days before the European championship soccer tournament.

1 Roland Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola, (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 16
This latest Parisian trash strike is revealing of the ways in which we conceptualize and relate to waste. As Michael Thompson states in *Rubbish Theory* (1979), trash is something that we actively conspire not to see.\(^3\) Waste is “bothersome,” and so we hide it and remove it from sight.\(^4\) We take it outside of our homes and outside of our cities. In some places, it forms a garbage-belt, a periphery delimiting the center from the margins. We burn it or bury it, or ship it to poor countries.

When, as in the case of garbage strikes, the centrifugal motion that takes trash from the center to the margins is blocked, we are confronted with what anthropologist Mary Douglass describes as “matter out of place.”\(^5\) In her seminal work *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas explores notions of purity and pollution, or dirt, across various cultures and religions. Our ideas of what constitutes dirt (and by extension, waste and other impurities) is part of a highly structured cultural system that seeks to maintain order among persons, things, and spaces. Douglas explains:

> Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. The idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity.\(^6\)

Trash disrupts when it is not in its proper place. Its half-identity – “unwanted bits of whatever it came from, hair or food or wrappings”—makes it ambiguous, dangerous

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6 Ibid, 44.
to the system. It is “a threat to good order, and so is regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away.” In Pouvoirs de l’horreur (1980), Julia Kristeva builds on Douglas’ ideas when theorizing the abject:

Ce n’est pas le manque de propreté ou de santé qui cause l’abjection, mais ce qui perturbe l’identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte.

The abject disrupts the boundaries between object and subject. Its out-of-placeness elicits reactions of disgust. However, Kristeva and Douglas also point to a more positive aspect of dirt and the abject. Citing the use of cow dung in Brahmin purification rituals, and of “St. Francis of Assisi rolling naked in the filth and welcoming his sister Death,” Douglas remarks that “dirt, which is normally destructive, sometimes becomes creative.” Kristeva states that although the abject repels, it also fascinates, solicits us:

Il y a, dans l’abjection, une de ces violentes et obscures révoltes de l’être contre ce qui le menace et qui lui paraît venir d’un dehors ou d’un dedans exorbitant, jeté à côté du possible, du tolérable, du pensable. C’est là, tout près mais inassimilable. Ça sollicite, inquiète, fascine le désir qui pourtant ne se laisse pas séduire. Apeuré, il se détourne. Ecœuré, il rejette. Un absolu le protège de l’opprobre, il en est fier, il y tient. Mais en même temps, quand même, cet élan, ce spasme, ce saut, est attiré vers un ailleurs aussi tentant que condamné. Inlassablement, comme un boomerang indomptable, un pôle d’appel et de répulsion met celui qui en est habité littéralement hors de lui.

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7 Ibid, 161.
8 Ibid.
10 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 180 and 159.
11 Kristeva, Pouvoirs de l’horreur, 9.
The compelling aspect of the abject can also be seen during the Paris trash strike, where visitors were drawn to the fascinating sight of waste in the streets and felt compelled to photograph it.

The trash strike also drew attention to the people who work with trash. As they occupied the city streets in protest, the garbage workers became just as visible as the piles of trash around them. As Elizabeth Spelman says in *Trash Talks: Revelations in the Rubbish* (2016), people who handle rubbish have long been among those treated like trash; their work is essential but they are regarded as “disposable.”

Likewise, in *In Trash: African Cinema from Below* (2013), Kenneth Harrow shows how trash is a constant trope in African films used to identify people with trash, *déchets humains*: “And trash, above all, applies to people who have been dismissed from the community, marginalized and forgotten.”

And in *Waste Matters: Urban Margins in Contemporary Literature*, Sarah Harrison identifies colonial discourses that disturbingly conflate waste with people:

> Across a range of contexts, historians have identified how colonisers systematically conflate indigenous populations with unwanted matter in order to help maintain their authority. By routinely pathologising supposedly ‘filthy natives’, imperial racism is bolstered by sanitary paranoia.

As these authors show, discourses of trash are often at work in acts of social and

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political exclusion. Trash is involved in defining what a person, or a nation, is not. This *not*, this other, whether object or human, is pushed out, exported, walled off, placed out of sight.

Waste also intervenes in economic discourses, as explored by Georges Bataille through the notion of waste as unproductive expenditure in *La Part maudite* and *La Notion de dépense*, among other texts. The excess that is waste stands in opposition to a restricted economy based on production and consumption, where everything is assigned a use-value. For a capitalist-consumerist society, waste is the *other*, against which value, profit and productivity are defined. The trash strike was disconcerting to government officials in part because it threatened a system of “restricted economy” by thwarting consumption in places that were inundated by trash. The uncollected trash spilling into the streets represented wasted money, wasted economic opportunity. The worker’s protest was a show of excess that replaced their normal productive work. According to Bataille, such shows of excess have subversive, even revolutionary potential.

**Works of Waste**

In this dissertation, I engage with authors and works that seek to make waste visible. They do so through an aesthetics of waste that both foregrounds waste as a major theme and a mode of artistic creation. Drawing from the etymology of the

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word “aesthetics” from the Greek *aisthētikos* (of sense perception) and *aisthanesthai* (to perceive), an aesthetics of waste seeks above all to make us notice waste. It is a gesture that sweeps waste to the center and forces us to reconsider it as something other than base and undesirable.

My corpus is composed of contemporary French works and spans the genres of novel, film and poetic notebook. It begins with a trash-centered reading of Michel Tournier’s *Les Météores* (1975) before moving on to Agnès Varda’s documentary *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (2000) and a selection of Sabine Macher’s poetic notebooks (1992 – 2005). Through these works, my dissertation interrogates the relationship between writing (*écriture* and *cinécriture*) and waste. Tournier, Varda and Macher mount a critique of commodity culture and its values of standardization, homogenization, over-consumption and plastic perfection. At the same time, these authors locate waste as a subversive site for new artistic creation. Waste in these works thus functions as an alternative aesthetics and, in the case of Tournier and Varda, a social and ecological critique. Waste also emerges as an ambiguous concept, negatively figured as the by-product of our relentless producing-consuming, and positively figured as a means of escaping that system. As exemplified by the quotations from Barthes and Calvino that open this Introduction, waste-writing is also figured as both an *excess* – a substance that leaks out, that erupts over the bounds of convention, and a *loss* – the work of pruning and cutting the text.

Each genre and work under study lends itself to its own blend of “waste making” or “waste management” techniques, including recycling, bricolage, gleaning and a poetics of lack. In self-conscious gestures, Tournier, Varda and Macher place
themselves in their works to model their waste-making practices as trash aesthete-pickers, gleaners and bricoleurs who either recuperate, reuse and recycle their own and others’ textual debris (Tournier and Varda) or create through fragmentation (Macher). My dissertation thus approaches the issue of waste from a literary, artistic and aesthetic perspective, while incorporating discourses from the fields of eco-criticism, ethics, postmodernism and waste studies.

*Towards an Aesthetics of Waste*

In addition to showing the complex ways in which these authors link waste and creative art-making, another aim of this dissertation is to develop a framework for an aesthetics of waste that articulates what it is, and what it does. Although a handful of scholars have engaged with the idea of trash or waste aesthetics, most notably in the last five years or so, they have done so in relation to their readings of individual works, and the concept as a whole remains largely undefined.

*What is Waste?*

In its broadest interpretation, waste can be anything. What constitutes waste is a highly subjective notion that varies from culture to culture, person to person, and century to century.\(^\text{16}\) My choice of the word “waste,” for the title of this

\(^{16}\)Even human waste, which is commonly thought to be offensive across all cultures, has been considered as ‘useful’ by agrarian societies that collect human feces and turn it into fertilizers. Likewise, “It was not uncommon in 15th-century France to use urine for the cleansing of draperies and cloths.” Amy Zhang, “Human waste” in *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage*. Vol. 1. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012), 400.
dissertation, rather than “trash” or “garbage,” is a deliberate one. First, waste encompasses the concepts of trash, garbage, refuse, and rubbish and reflects their meanings as something that has little or no value and something that has been cast off. Second, as a synonym for excreta, waste has a bodily dimension that trash and its cognates do not. Third, waste connotes the idea of surplus or the by-product of a process. Fourth, as a verb it evokes the idea of spending or using something recklessly, bringing it near to Bataille’s notion of expenditure. Although I employ “waste” and “aesthetics of waste” to describe my overall project, I also make use of related terms like trash, rubbish, debris, remains, garbage, refuse, etc., as appropriate to the particular context, and for aesthetic reasons of variation.

To get a better grasp on the slippery semantic dimensions of waste, it is useful to refer to Walter Moser’s outline of the five major dimensions of garbage, which are equally applicable to the category of waste.17 These aspects help define waste in terms of: 1) a system of inclusion and exclusion; 2) waste’s relation to the subject; 3) its material dimension; 4) its value dimension, which may be economical, affective and aesthetic; and 5) its temporal dimension. More often than not, these categories overlap and a combination of them is needed when describing a particular waste issue.

1. Through Douglas and Kristeva, we have already seen that waste can be understood as a part of a system of inclusion and exclusion, where waste (figured as dirt and the abject) is rejected, while at the same time it subverts and leads to the

2. We can also understand waste in relation to the subject—human waste, in the form of feces, urine, sweat, phlegm, menstrual blood, placenta, and tears; as well as hair, skin, nails, teeth or any other parts that fall off the body. Both Freud and Kristeva have investigated the relation between bodily waste and the formation of the subject.

3. Waste is also material – the vegetable peels, plastic wrap, cheese rinds, dental floss, etc. that makes up the contents of our trashcans. These are the objects we throw away and call garbage, trash, rubbish, refuse, waste, remains. In French, common words for waste are déchets, ordures, détritus, immondices and rebut.

4. Michael Thompson, who launched waste studies in 1979 with the publication of *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, considers the value dimension of waste to be the most important. According to Thompson, an object’s value is not absolute, but transient. An object moves from states of declining value to rubbish to valuable object again when it is “discovered by a creative individual and transferred into something deemed durable.”

5. Within the temporal dimension of waste, the ‘ruined’ object represents a trace of the past. Remains and ruins are often involved in the “dialectic between remembering and forgetting.”

To Moser’s five dimensions, I would add two: the conflation of humans with trash as discussed earlier; and a textual dimension—the identification of literary,

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18 Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, back cover.
filmic, and other artistic works as waste matter. Any work that has been ‘born’ or has fallen away from its author can be conceptualized as a déchet, from the Latin de-cadere, to fall away. These remains, whether in their entirety or in bits and fragments, lie in wait to be recuperated by another writer-artist as the material for new work. All texts are thus akin to waste, and made of waste. The works I have chosen to study all flaunt their status as waste-texts, whether through self-referential textual recycling, the use of ‘excessive’ writing like digression, or the inclusion of mistakes and accidents. These texts are sites of creative play and innovation at the same time that they subvert both mainstream and literary values of perfection and originality.

*French Literature in the “Garb-Age”*  

Waste is by no means a new phenomenon. As Moser states, “Waste is permanent and unavoidable, for there is no system – whether biological, technical, social or historical—that does not produce remnants, remains, scraps, leftovers, that does not leave certain parts to decay, that does not secrete or reject.” Nor are representations of waste new. Susan Morrison’s study of excrement in the literature of the Middle Ages focuses on the waste matter that she says criticism tends to gloss over or “deodorize.” She cites as one example the doodles of defecating humans and

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20 The German *Abfall*, trash, also literally means “to fall from.”

21 Susan Morrison uses this and other puns (which she describes as language excess) in her work on Chaucer’s fecopoetics; including “litter-ature” and “waste is litter-al.” *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer’s Fecopoetics.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

animals that were commonplace in medieval marginalia, even in the most luxurious and expensive manuscripts. Major waste works from the 16th century French canon include the scatological texts of Rabelais such as Pantagruel and Gargantua. Montaigne is also garrulous in his Essais as well as his Journal de voyage en Italie when it comes to his own bodily excretions, which include gallstones, flatulence and rheum. In the 18th century, Sade's violent scenes of libertine sexuality, involving coprophagia and scatology revolted readers, and for many critics, including Bataille, these subversive works embodied excrement and excess.

Starting in the 19th century, with the rise of industrialization and the proliferation of urban centers, representations of waste begin to focus more on the city, and less on the body, as major innovations in public hygiene radically changed how people interacted with their bodily waste. As Zhang states in the Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste:

More than any other development in the history of excretory experiences, the 19th-century sanitation movement and the developing discourses of hygiene and public health transformed people’s experience and relationship to human waste. Flush toilets and sewers in urban centers organized human waste disposal into a centralized system under public management, allowing human waste to be carried away by water, making excreta invisible in public places.

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24 Of Sade, Bataille wrote: "The life and works of D. A. F. de Sade would thus have no other use value than the common use value of excrement; in other words, for the most part, one most often only loves the rapid (and violent) pleasure of voiding this matter and no longer seeing it." See Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)," (1930), Trans. Allan Stoekl in Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, (Minneapolis: UMP, 1985).

This is also the main thesis of psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte's *Histoire de la merde* (1978), which suggests that sewage systems took human waste out of sight, and influenced the organization of cities, the development of capitalism and the French obsession with pure and proper language, “le propre, le bien dire.”

The new gutters and sewers of Paris inspired authors like Victor Hugo, whose *Les Miserables* (1862) features an iconic sewage passage, where the sewer is likened to the “conscience of the city.” As Jean Valjean carries the wounded Marius through the sewers in an effort to save him, Hugo describes the underground world of waste matter as a site that reveals the truth of Parisian life.

L’égout c’est la conscience de la ville. Tout y converge et s’y confronte. Dans ce lieu livide, il y a les ténèbres, mais il y a plus de secrets. Chaque chose a sa forme vraie, ou du moins sa forme définitive. Le tas d’ordures a cela pour lui qu’il n’est pas menteur.

Hugo also decries the excess symbolized by the sewer, as it washes away tons of human excrement that could be put to good use as fertilizer to produce food for those in need.

De sorte qu’on peut dire que la grande prodigalité de Paris, sa fête merveilleuse, sa folie Beaujon, son orgie, son ruissellement d’or à pleines mains, son faste, son luxe, sa magnificence, c’est son égout.

Both of these ideas – that the waste site is a privileged perspective from below where the truth of things is revealed, and that it represents the nauseating excess produced by an over-consuming society – can be found in the contemporary works on waste that I examine in this thesis. As Tina Kendall says in *Making Waste*:

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27 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), 1286.
28 Ibid, 1287.
Disposable Culture and the Cultural Politics of Consumption, 19th century concerns of consumption and waste in literature are carried into the 20th century, where they remain relevant. She pairs a reading of Honoré de Balzac’s La Peau de Chagrin (1831) with Maurice Roche’s novel Compact (1965) to show how the problematic nature of consumption in a disposable culture is carried across the centuries. Emile Zola’s Le Ventre de Paris (1873) is paired with Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro’s film Delicatessen (1991) to illustrate the continuation of the metaphor of the consuming and excreting body. The nineteenth century thus marked the beginning of a modern wave of waste literature that reflected the anxieties brought on by the advent of industrialization. It also prompted thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire to reflect on the relationship between artistic production and trash. In his poem “Le Vin de chiffoniers” from Les Fleurs du Mal (1857), Baudelaire depicts a ragpicker staggering drunkenly along a Parisian street, bent over as he carries on his back a load of trash – the jumbled vomit of Paris. He likens this marginalized figure to the poet who captures the awful sights and sounds of the modern city and recycles them into an aesthetic product, a poem:

“Le Vin de chiffoniers”
Souvent à la clarté rouge d’un réverbère
Dont le vent bat la flamme et tourmente le verre,
Au coeur d’un vieux faubourg, labyrinthe fangeux
Où l’humanité grouille en ferment orageux,
On voit un chiffonnier qui vient, hochant la tête,

Butant, et se cognant aux murs comme un poète,
Et, sans prendre souci des mouchards, ses sujets,
Epanche tout son cœur en glorieux projets.

Il prête des serments, dicte des lois sublimes,
Terrasse les méchants, relève les victimes,
Et sous le firmament comme un dais suspendu
S’enivre des splendeurs de sa propre vertu.

Oui, ces gens harcelés de chagrins de ménage
Moulus par le travail et tourmentés par l’âge
Ereintés et pliant sous un tas de débris,
Vomissement confus de l’énorme Paris, [...]30

A symbol of modernity, the ragpicker, like the poet, gleans all that its age has
deemed useless, turning trash into something of value. Both figures live on the
margins, and champion others who are marginalized (“Terrasse les méchants,
relève les victimes”). Baudelaire’s essay, “Du Vin et du haschisch” (1851) also
focuses on the fraternity between the poet and the ragpicker:

Voici un homme chargé de ramasser les débris d’une journée de la
capitale. Tout ce que la grande cité a rejeté, tout ce qu’elle a perdu,
tout ce qu’elle a dédaigné, tout ce qu’elle a brisé, il le catalogue, il le
collectionne. Il compulse les archives de la débauche, le capharnaüm
des rebuts. Il fait un triage, un choix intelligent; il ramasse, comme un
avare du trésor, les ordures qui, remâchées par la divinité de
l’Industrie, deviendront des objets d’utilité ou de jouissance. [...] Il
arrive hochant la tête et butant sur les pavés, comme les jeunes poètes
qui passent toutes leurs journées à errer et à chercher des rimes.31

The work of the poet consists not in creating from nothing, but in recuperating
fragments of the rejected, the lost, the despised and the broken as the material for

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31 Charles Baudelaire, "Du Vin et du haschisch, comparés comme moyens de multiplication de
the poem. It is the poet’s discerning eye that sets him or her apart from others, an idea that is also espoused by the trash collector-writers in Tournier and Varda’s works. We can also locate here the traces of Tournier, Varda, and Macher’s aesthetics of waste with Baudelaire’s emphasis on the found object, the act of wandering, fragmentation, lack of order and the artistic inspiration that is drawn from the vulgar, the low and the everyday.

Walter Benjamin takes up this same figure in his *Arcades Project* (1927-40), comparing the Lumpensammler’s work to that of the cultural historian. The *Arcades Project* critically evaluated 19th century conceptions of modernity and history, and used trash to contest notions of history based on narratives of progress. It took as its inspiration items of detritus left to decay in ruined shopping arcades of 19th-century Paris. For Benjamin, “derelict objects could offer a radical critique of history’s myth of universal progress, illuminating the way history becomes stagnant and derelict when driven by the supposedly innovative power of capitalism and technology.” In describing his friend Siegfried Kracauer’s book *The Employee* (*Die Angestellten*, 1930), Benjamin extends the metaphor of the ragpicker to apply to writers as well:

> And if we want to visualize him [Kracauer] just for himself, in the solitude of his craft and his endeavor, we see: a ragpicker at daybreak, lancing with his stick scraps of language and tatters of speech in order to throw them in his cart, grumbling, stubbornly, somewhat the worse

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for drink.\textsuperscript{34}

With their analogies of the trash picker to the poet, Baudelaire and Benjamin begin to envision modern writing as one that necessarily looks to waste for its inspiration. They plant the seeds for an aesthetics of waste where waste-sites are the grounds for creative renewal. They also point to the less negative, and more ambivalent relationship between waste and culture that emerged in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and that is reflected in the waste texts of today.

\textit{Waste Studies}

Literature is not the only field that has seen a peak of interest in waste in recent years. The new and thriving field of waste studies is evidence of waste’s increasing visibility in a number of current discourses. Its field of enquiry is “waste and wasting, broadly defined.”\textsuperscript{35} Its interdisciplinary approach encompasses the study of waste in the diverse fields of sociology, cultural anthropology, archaeology, garbology, history, art history, environmental studies, and literature, among others. As stated on the Discard Studies website, waste is not just considered a material problem, but a social, political and cultural one as well:

A growing number of researchers from all of these disciplines are asking questions about waste, not just as an ecological problem, but as a process, category, mentality, judgment, an infrastructural and economic challenge, and as a site for power struggles.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} “Discard Studies,” Website, https://discardstudies.com/about/.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
With a focus on literary and filmic representations of waste in contemporary French works, my dissertation shares many of the same preoccupations as waste studies in general, in particular the conviction that:

[Waste] is not automatically disgusting, harmful, or morally offensive, but that both the materials of discards and their meanings are part of wider sociocultural-economic systems. Our task is to interrogate these systems for how waste comes to be, and our work is often to offer critical alternatives to popular and normative notions of waste.37

As Sarah Harrison has pointed out, most studies on waste in literature thus far have been concentrated on American literature.38 My study builds upon research on waste and artistic creation in recent decades and addresses an area in need of critical attention: the place of waste in contemporary French literature and film, specifically in the genres of the novel, film and poetic notebook.

Chapter 2 focuses on waste in Les Météores through a close reading of the chapters of the novel that are narrated by Alexandre, le dandy des gadoues who oversees six municipal dumps in France and Casablanca. Although many critics consider identical twins Jean and Paul to be the main characters of Les Météores, I show how Alexandre and his trash-loving flamboyance hijack the novel through excessive, provocative and queer digressions on waste.

In addition to a dandy garbage man, Alexandre is also a writer, and his essay entitled “L’esthétique du déchet” is a celebration of trash that posits the ‘inferior’ copy (the industrial imitation, junk) as superior to the original. As I show, Alexandre

37 Ibid.
38 Waste Matters, 4.
espouses the same aesthetics of waste that Tournier puts into action throughout his entire oeuvre through his incessant copying, recycling and flaunting of intertexts. I argue that Alexandre and Tournier see waste as positively representing all that is “different, unexpected and creative” – in literature and in sexuality, as Alexandre’s queer theorizing reveals.

In Chapter 3, I show how Varda’s documentary film *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* is just as much an exposition of Varda’s filmmaking practices as it is about the social reality of gleaning, or recuperating, in France. Varda gleans along with the subjects she films, and in addition to misshaped potatoes and clocks with missing hands, she gleans flawed footage that would typically not have made the cut. The film is decentered, fragmentary and polyphonic, with a constant sense of digression and return: moving from real-life images of gleaning food in the fields and city markets to famous works of art depicting gleaning. The viewer is repeatedly confronted with aesthetic representations of gleaning and waste – whether through Jules Breton’s *La Glaneuse*, the canvas of growing mold on Varda’s damp ceiling, or Varda’s self-reflexive gestures of filming herself filming, and filming her aging body. Through a feminist subversion of aesthetics, Varda deconstructs patriarchal methods of representation to reveal alternate ways of looking at trash.

Chapter 4 looks at the aesthetics of waste articulated by Sabine Macher in her poetic notebooks. Her choice to use the fragmented, unfinished form of the poetic notebook, to write in her non-maternal language, and to thematize the material waste of her writing through frequent references to her recycled paper and textual “by-products,” messy ink bleeds and pen scribbles, all point to her unique aesthetics
of waste. To this, Macher adds the notion of waste as a way of marking ownership, of leaving a human trace, or signature, to an otherwise sterile world. As with Varda, we can discern a distinctly feminine voice in Macher’s aesthetics of waste, colored in these notes as a discourse of maternal lack, loss and failure.

In the chapters that follow, the works of the waste corpus that I have chosen are discussed in isolation in order to sketch out each author’s unique practice of aesthetic waste making. In the Chapter 5, I bring these disparate works, authors, and genres together to highlight the differences in their dealings with waste and to begin defining the contours of an aesthetics of waste.
Chapter 2

Tales of Trash:
Les Météores and Tournier’s Textual Recycling

With the destruction of ordinary household waste by fire, the heterosexual society makes a great leap forward towards uniformity, leveling, the elimination of everything that is different, unexpected, creator.

--Michel Tournier, Les Météores

Michel Tournier’s third novel, Les Météores (1975), is often summarized as a story of twinship that explores a panoply of dualities—heterosexuality and homosexuality, time and weather (le temps), physical and spiritual love, Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the center and the margins, to name but a few.39 The novel begins and ends with the story of identical twins Jean and Paul, whose resemblance is so great that their own father can’t tell them apart, resulting in the twins’ shared name, Jean-Paul. As children, the twins enfold themselves in the mystical wrap of twinship—a cellule gémellaire with a language and games intelligible only to themselves. Their fusion is complete when they engage in the incestuous act of “oval loving.” As adolescents and adults, Jean and Paul’s perfect bond begins to rip when Jean strays, first by finding a fiancée, and then by fleeing France and travelling

around the globe. Paul pursues his brother in Italy, Tunisia, Iceland, Japan, Canada and Germany, before he returns to France, alone and maimed.

Buried beneath the family saga of Jean, Paul, their father Edouard and mother Maria-Barbara, however, a second narrative strand erupts—that of the twins’ uncle Alexandre. Alexandre’s story is Tournier’s story of trash—and although this flamboyant, swashbuckling character disappears midway through the novel and is narratively contained by the twins’ presumably more important storyline, Alexandre and his garbage empire threaten to overtake Les Météores. Indeed, as David Gascoigne has pointed out, Alexandre enjoys more control over his story than the twins. He is the sole narrator of his life, unlike the twins, whose escapades are occasionally recounted by a third-person narrator. Tournier has described this upstaging of the twins’ story as “le déséquilibre en faveur d’Alexandre,” and Alexandre’s bold, cynical voice lends a vibrancy to his chapters that is sorely missed after his death. While there are thematic connections between the twins’ story and their uncle’s, there is minimal interaction between the characters at the level of the plot, clearly setting apart Alexandre’s text as the “other,” competing narrative.

His story begins as an awakening into the world of trash, a quasi-religious experience that leads to Alexandre’s complete identification with the garbage dump

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41 There is a total of six first-person narrators in Les Météores, in addition to an impersonal third-person narrator. The twins’ story is partly told by themselves, and partly by this third-person narrator. See David Gascoigne for a thorough analysis of the narrative structure of Les Météores. (Michel Tournier. Oxford: Berg, 1996), 17.
and its contents. Alexandre thus opens a window onto trash as a major theme of Tournier’s novel, and marks a preoccupation with waste that is present in Tournier’s oeuvre as a whole. Tournier himself has admitted as much:

> Il y a un niveau orduer dans chacun de mes romans: la souille dans *Vendredi*, la défécation dans *Le Roi des aulnes*, les ordures ménagères dans *Les Météores*. Ensuite, on décolle et on va au ciel. Rien de tel, il est vrai, que l’ordure pour lester le mythe et l’obliger à toucher terre. J’obéis à une esthétique du merveilleux sordide.\(^{44}\)

Tournier’s interest in waste is a part of the author’s penchant for inversion, whereby oppositions such as sacred and profane, spiritual and material, sublime and grotesque, and treasure and trash, become reversed and inseparable. His aesthetic of the “sordid marvelous” echoes Georges Bataille’s championing of unproductive expenditure, a celebration of everything ‘heterogeneous’ abhorred by mainstream society, including waste and excess. Such an economy of transgression strips objects of their exchange values, allowing them to access the sublime.\(^ {45}\)

Tournier’s aesthetic of the “sordid marvelous” is, I would argue, nowhere more glaring than in *Les Météores*. The novel not only approaches the idea of the sublime in trash on the level of theme, but it also develops a trash aesthetics that celebrates garbage as an endlessly renewable material for literary creation. Through Alexandre, Tournier shows us that trash is the stuff books are made of.


Les Météores (1975) was published in the wake of the success of Le Roi des Aulnes (1970) and Vendredi ou les limbes du pacifique (1967). Vendredi, a rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, met with immediate critical and popular acclaim, and won the Grand Prix du roman de l’Académie française. Three years later, Tournier was unanimously awarded the most prestigious French literary award, the Prix Goncourt, for Le Roi des Aulnes, the story of a self-professed ogre in the years before and during World War II. Tournier’s early works also garnered attention abroad, with a critic from the New York Times Book Review hailing Le Roi des Aulnes as “the most important novel to appear in France since Proust.”

In 1972, Tournier was elected into the Académie Goncourt, solidifying his place as a major figure in the French literary scene. Until his death in 2016, the author continued to steadily add to his oeuvre, publishing a total of nine novels, numerous essays and works of literary criticism, autobiographical texts, short stories, children’s books, a one-act play, and works on travel and photography.

Today, Michel Tournier is recognized as one of the most influential French writers to have emerged in the post-war period. His first three novels, considered a trilogy by some, hit the literary scene when the moment was ripe. Readers were beginning to tire of the nouveau roman and its banishment of storytelling, distaste

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47 William Cloonan was the first to call Vendredi ou les limbes du pacifique, Le Roi des Aulnes and Les Météores a trilogy, pointing out that the works share similar themes and form. In Michel Tournier, (Boston: Twayne, 1985). The three novels were also published together in a single tome by Gallimard in 1989.
for character development, and propensity for cold, detached descriptions. The
distinctively Tournerian blend of mythology and philosophy hooked readers with its
odd inversions of familiar stories and full-bodied, eccentric characters who read the
world through the filter of hyper-rational philosophies. Tournier’s writing clearly
signaled a return to the story; albeit the unusual story. As the author stated in his
autobiographical work, *Le Vent Paraclet* (1977), his objective as a novelist was to
merge unconventional content with traditional form: “faire passer dans une forme
aussi traditionnelle, préservée et rassurante que possible une matière ne possédant
aucune de ces qualités” (195). Some of this unconventional content – which has
been variously described as deviant, scandalous, and provocative – has its origins in
Tournier’s fascination for the excluded or marginalized, for all types of *rejecta,*
whether it be Robinson’s bestial wallowing in the mud, defecation in *Le Roi des
Aulnes*, or garbage in *Les Météores*, as mentioned above. Christopher Rivers
remarked in an article published in 1988 that Tournier’s propensity for such subject
matters might turn off some readers:

> Tournier’s use of vivid, detailed, neonaturalist description technique
to provide readers with memorable images of coprophilia, scatology,
necrophilia, pedophilia, vampirism, nazism, bestiality, incest and
garbage (to name but a few favorite themes) is a literary gesture not
appreciated by all readers.⁴⁸

Concerning *Les Météores* in particular, several reviewers questioned the ‘trashiness’
of the 625-page tome. “Creux et plein d’ordures” (“Hollow and full of trash”) was the

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title chosen by Robert Kanters for his review of the novel, published in the *Figaro littéraire*. Kanters commented:

Au début, à la suite de la rupture d’une grue, un personnage meurt écrasé sous trois tonnes d’ordures. Au collège, dans la crypte de la chapelle, un garçon se livre à des obscénités en étreignant une statue du Christ. Un jeune débile mental s’échappe une nuit de l’asile et emmène huit petites mongoliennes dans une barque qui ira infailliblement s’écraser sur des récifs. Le personnage principal passe un bon moment avec un jeune gardien du muséum de Vincennes dans une sorte d’étable dont l’air est embrumé et empuanti par les défécations des éléphants voisins. Un père emmène ses jumeaux dans la baraque foraine où ils pourront étudier des cas particulièrement horribles de siamois.

Il y a une page sur les rapports de la constipation et de la sexualité que je ne pourrai citer tant que ce journal ne sera pas imprimé sur papier hygiénique. Mais vous trouverez sans peine l’évocation du jeune cadavre au sexe dévoré par les rats ou l’épisode à la Malaparte du train de trente-cinq wagons emplis des cadavres des chiens abandonnés à Paris au moment de l’exode.

[...] mais l’abominable, c’est la complaisance pour l’ordure, la jouissance sensible de l’écrivain dont le talent redouble dès qu’il s’enfonce dans la boue.49

Kanters was certainly right in his observation that Tournier’s talent shines when he writes about trash. But rather than declaring this “abominable,” I would contend that such an inclusion of waste in a canonical work of literature is a large part of what makes Tournier’s writing so appealing. Tournier makes his readers think about ‘waste matter’ differently, placing marginal figures and taboo subject matters at the center of their own narratives, and appropriating forms of ‘waste management’ such as recuperation and recycling in the composition of his texts.

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This chapter is structured in two main parts. The first part deals with trash as a theme in *Les Météores* – what and who is defined as trash, what trash signifies and how it is linked to the sublime and to literature. This part focuses on Alexandre and a string of other outsiders in the novel, who identify with, or are identified as trash. Part II considers Alexandre’s “copy of the copy” trash aesthetics as a version of Tournier’s own aesthetics, which include techniques such as recuperation, bricolage and recycling. Finally, the role of the author and reader within such a trash aesthetics framework will be examined through some of Tournier’s own reflections in his 1977 intellectual autobiography *Le Vent Paraclet*.

**Part 1. Waste as Theme**

The theme of waste in *Les Météores* is most flagrant in passages devoted to the twins’ Uncle Alexandre, the self-proclaimed “dandy des gadoues” who oversees six municipal dumps, five in France and one in Casablanca. But garbage spills over into the rest of the novel as well—namely, through Tournier’s presentation of nearly every character as an outsider of some sort who has been spit out by society—rejected due to perceived abnormalities, deformities, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. In addition to Alexandre, doubly tainted by his homosexuality and occupation in the refuse industry, Tournier’s “rejecta” include protagonists Jean and Paul, labeled “circus freaks” and “monsters;” as well as minor characters like the “Innocents,” mentally and physically handicapped children who live in an institution not far from the twins’ home. Other characters explicitly depicted as society’s trash
include ‘the poor’, immigrant workers, refuse workers, criminals, Jews, and homosexuals. As I will show, Tournier bestows a special status on his trash characters (both here and in his other novels)\(^{50}\) by endowing them with a spiritual superiority that springs from the very ‘defect’ that makes them marginal figures in the first place. Trash in Les Météores—whether via trash-objects or trash-people—is used to critique mainstream ideals of plastic perfection and uniformity, while simultaneously symbolizing the ultimate source of artistic creation.

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\(^{50}\) Jean-Bernard Vray has written that all of Tournier’s heroes are monsters, marginal figures, and perverts. (‘De l’Usage des monstres et des pervers,’ \textit{Sud} 61, (1986), 108). See also Michael Worton, “De la Perversion et de la sublimation tournériennes, ou comment aimer si on n’est pas pervers?” \textit{Revue des sciences humaines} 232, (1993), 119-131.
workers in France, “homme-tombeliers et femmes-baleyouses, le petit peuple des 
jailloux.” (35). Significantly, it is through the reading of a text that Alexandre is 
drawn into the underground world of trash. Alexandre compares his awakening to 
Pascal’s mystical conversion to Christianity: “Mais que n’ai-je pas appris dans cette 
nuit du 26 au 27 septembre 1934 qui ne peut se comparer qu’à celle de l’extase 
noytme du grand Pascal!” (35). Alexandre is seduced by the very name of SEDOMU, 
which associates sodomy with trash, and its negative, inverted aspect that allows 
him to take over “from below”:

Peu à peu j’étais séduit par l’aspect négatif, je dirai presque inverti, de 
cette industrie. C’était un empire certes qui s’étalait dans les rues des 
villes et qui possédait aussi ses terres campagnardes – les décharges – 
mais il plongeait également dans l’intimité la plus secrète des êtres 
puisque chaque acte, chaque geste lui livrait sa trace, la preuve 
irréfutable qu’il avait été accompli – mégot, lettre déchirée, épiluchure, 
serviette hygiénique, etc. Il s’agissait en somme d’une prise de 
possession totale de toute une population, et cela par-derrière, sur un 
mode retourné, inversé, nocturne (36).

Through trash, Alexandre finds a way to exploit his marginal position and overturn 
the established order. Before this fateful night, Alexandre was the black sheep of the 
family, living with his mother and sponging off the income of his older brothers. 
Overseeing the municipal dumps, however, gives Alexandre the power and 
authority to become a ‘reader’ of trash. The cigarette butts, torn letters and other 
thrown away items in Alexandre’s dumps are signs that only he has the privilege 
and intelligence to decipher. To signal his newfound status as ‘emperor’ of his trash 
kingdom, Alexandre transforms himself into a refuse reliquary. He has a set of

51 Pary Pezechkian-Weinberg also notes, “…si pour Abel Tiffauges la révélation de sa vocation passait 
par l’écriture, pour Alexandre, elle passera par la lecture.” Michel Tournier: Marginalité et Création, 
(New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 68.
embroidered silk waistcoats made in Paris that contain six fob pockets, three on each side. In the pockets, he places six custom-made gold medallions bearing the name of the cities whose refuse he oversees—Rennes, Deauville, Paris, Marseille, Roanne and Casablanca. Within the medallions, Alexandre places a compressed sample of trash from each city: “Et c’est ainsi, bardé de reliques, métamorphosé en châsse ordurière, muni du sextuple sceau de son empire secret que l’empereur des gadoues s’en irait en pavane de par le monde!” (36-37).

The Abject and Erotic

After telling of his conversion to trash, Alexandre recounts the story of another awakening—his initiation into Les Fleurets, a club of gay boys at the Collège du Thabor. His burgeoning sexuality is described in the same spiritual terms as his calling to trash—making a positive link between homosexuality and trash that persists throughout the novel, where both are used to question established systems of dominance and value. Alexandre declares that garbage and homosexuals share a similar marginal status: “Une société se définit par ce qu’elle rejette – et qui devient aussitôt un absolu—homosexuels et ordures ménagères notamment” (236). But this marginal position, like the occupation of refuse manager, has its advantages. Because he is gay, Alexandre says he is the only one of his brothers who was visited by the light of the Holy Spirit at Thabor. According to Alexandre, the heterosexual boys live in a gray world devoid of sexual stimulus, completely unaware of the majestic atmosphere “saturated with dawning virility” that surrounds them (42). Forging a link between spirituality and homosexuality, the Fleurets interpret Bible
verses as condemnations of heterosexuals, such as in Psalms 113: “They have feet, but they do not walk. They have eyes, but they do not see. They have hands, but they do not feel. They have noses, but they do not smell.” In contrast to the heterosexual students, Alexandre and the other gay boys at Thabor know how to fully exploit all of their God-given senses:

Nous autres, marcheurs, voyeurs, palpeurs et flaireurs, nous clamions cet insolent réquisitoire en caressant des yeux les dos et les croupes des camarades placés devant nous, tous ces jeunes veaux élevés pour des usages domestiques et donc paralysés, aveugles, insensibles et sans odorat (51).

These same superior senses, in particular Alexandre’s ‘intelligent’ sense of smell, allow him to decipher the individual odors emanating from the garbage heap:

La gadoue n’est pas – comme on croit – une puanteur massive, indifférenciée et globalement pénible. C’est un grimoire infiniment complexe que ma narine n’en finit pas de déchiffrer. Elle m’énumère le caoutchouc brûlé du vieux pneu, les remugles fuligineux d’une caque de harengs, les lourdes émanations d’une brassée de lilas fanés, la fadeur sucrée du rat crevé et le fifre acidulé de son urine, l’odeur de vieux cellier normand d’une camionnée de pommes suries, l’exhalaison grasse d’une peau de vache que des bataillons d’asticots soulèvent en vagues péristaltiques, et tout cela brassé par le vent, traversé de stridences ammoniaquées et de bouffées de musc oriental. Comment s’ennuyer dans un pareil étalage de richesses, comment être assez grossier pour les repousser en bloc parce que malodorantes ? (98-99).

Alexandre’s disdain for heterosexuals is echoed in his contempt for the masses who are unable to distinguish the individual odors layered in the garbage dump.

Alexandre’s identity as a refuse manager is deeply anchored in his identity as a homosexual, to the point that the two are inseparable, as exemplified by Alexandre’s
self-classification as the “dandy des gadoues.” In this role, Alexandre exults in his cultural and epistemological superiority as a trash aesthete and an expert cruiser.

*An Idol in the Dump*

The inseparability of trash and homoerotic desire is also repeatedly reinforced through the use of two symbolic spiritual figures, the elephant and the rat. It is through Raphaël Ganeça, one of the leaders of the Fleurettes, that Alexandre is introduced to the Hindu elephant-headed god Ganesh. As his nickname Ganeça (French for Ganesh) indicates, Raphaël is obsessed with the deity, who exemplifies a pagan spirituality, “orientale, opulente et bariolée” (51). Raphaël interprets Ganesh’s trunk as a deification of the sexual organ, remarking that every boy is like a temple to his god, a trunk concealed within the sanctuary of his clothes, to whom he burns to render homage (51). Ganesh, who is always accompanied by a rat, his totem animal, also becomes Alexandre’s god, uniting a spiritual-sexual desire (represented by the phallic elephant god) and trash (represented by the rat). As Lawrence Schehr has pointed out, Alexandre’s last name, Surin, also harks back to elephants: Surin is a town in Thailand famous for its elephant parades and festivals.52 In one memorable scene, Alexandre describes how Ganesh and his rat contributed to his sexual gratification with a zookeeper in the Bois de Vincennes. The erotic encounter was accompanied by the loud trumpeting of an elephant in heat, followed by the sound and smell of elephants defecating:

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Un éléphant, l'idole à trompe de Raphaël dans son énormité littérale! Voilà donc la gigantesque plaisanterie que me réservait le destin! [...] Le vacarme a cessé d'un seul coup. Encore deux ou trois glapissements. Puis des bruits humides, des claques molles, une avalanche limoneuse qui nous arrive en même temps qu'une vapeur melleuse nous emplit les narines.

Au cœur de la nuit, dans la solitude du bois de Vincennes, j'étais porté en triomphe par Ganeça, l'idole éléphantine, ayant toujours à ses pieds un rat, symbole des oms [ordures ménagères], –et elle barrissait furieusement pour célébrer ma gloire (131).

For Alexandre, Ganesh and his rat come to incarnate a sublime state that results from the combination of trash and homoerotic experiences. Further emphasizing his homoerotic vision of trash, Alexandre fantasizes about the ideal waste-disposal machine, which would have a penis-like trunk and be ‘self-sodomizing’:

Il faudrait créer une benne à trompe. Elle s’en servirait pour cueillir les poubelles et les vider dans son arrière-train. Mais il faudrait aussi que cette trompe affecte la forme d’un pénis. Alors plus besoin de poubelles. Le pénis s’enfoncerait dans l’arrière-train pour son propre compte. Autosodomisation (137).

Alexandre also notes that although it was Raphaël who revealed the homoerotic symbolism behind the elephant, it is Alexandre who will reveal the meaning of the elephant’s totem animal, the rat:

Quant au rat-totem, sa signification demeurait énigmatique aux yeux des orientalistes les plus sagaces, et Raphaël était loin de se douter qu’il appartiendrait au petit Alexandre Surin, dit Fleurette, d’en découvrir le secret (51).

The ‘secret’ is revealed by Alexandre in Chapter 9, “Le poil et la plume,” which chronicles the cutthroat battle between the rats (le poil) and gulls (la plume) at the
Miramas landfill outside of Marseilles. Figures of dread and carriers of disease, rats come to symbolize Alexandre’s trash universe, to the point that Alexandre and the landfill workers begin to identify themselves with this detested rodent. Despite the hordes of rats that swarm the landfill at night, Alexandre chooses to sleep amongst them in an abandoned rail car. This act signifies Alexandre’s increasing identification with and transformation into trash: “C’est une expérience nouvelle pour moi, et un pas de plus vers mon engloutissement dans les gadoues” (291). The landfill workers see the rats as one of their own, integral members of the dump’s ecosystem who help to ‘clean’ it. They look down upon efforts by Marseille’s sanitation workers to poison the rats:

Mais le vrai, c’est que les trimards se sentent solidaires de cette faune et ressentent l’action des agents marseillais comme une atteinte à leur domaine. Comme les projets d’usine d’incinération à Roanne, les efforts de désinfection de services marseillais prennent l’aspect d’une agression des centraux contre les marginaux (293).

The rat-infested dump at Miramas is also where Alexandre’s young lover Daniel meets his demise in a horrifying scene of mutilation. When Daniel ventures out to visit Alexandre one evening, he is attacked by rats that devour his genitals, leaving a gaping wound that kills him. Alexandre sees Daniel amongst the swarming rats, his body in the form of a crucifix: “…une forme humaine, étendue sur le ventre, les bras en croix” (302). Daniel’s death again reunites the themes of trash, homoerotic desire and spirituality. As Alexandre contemplates Daniel’s corpse, he ruminates on this gruesome display of the Holy Spirit, represented by the wind and the birds:

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53 Daniel also incarnates Alexandre’s theoretical yearning for “the copy of the copy,” as he was already the lover of another of Alexandre’s lovers, Eustache. This will be explored in section 2 of this chapter on Alexandre’s trash aesthetics.
La ruah... Le vent chargé d’esprit... Le vent des ailes de la blanche colombe symbole du sexe et de la parole... Pourquoi faut-il que la Verité ne se présente jamais à moi que sous un déguisement hideux et grotesque? (304)

Alexandre then watches as Daniel’s death is replicated when a gull attacks the very rat that may have devoured Daniel’s genitals:

Depuis quelques secondes j’observais un gros rat blanc qui s’essoufflait à remonter la pente du cratère. Est-ce pour avoir dévoré le sexe de Daniel qu’il était devenu si lourd ? Qui parlait de pure et symbolique colombe ? Un météore de plumes et de griffes vient de fondre sur le gros rat. [...] Le rat s’agite sur le sol, la nuque tranchée net. La même mort que Daniel. (305).

As we will explore in section 2 of this chapter, the replication of Daniel’s grotesque death through the rat is one of the many doublings in the novel that feed into Alexandre’s aesthetics of waste, of the copy of the copy. Daniel’s death also prefigures Alexandre’s own violent death in the docks of Casablanca a few chapters later, and signals the collapse of Alexandre’s homoerotic trash empire.

In Chapter 13, “La mort d’un chasseur,” Alexandre confides that his zest for life is waning, as neither sex nor trash excites him anymore. For Alexandre, these two pursuits are synonymous with a life worth living:

Je sais maintenant prendre ma température par le goûit qui me reste des garçons. Pour moi, aimer la vie, c’est aimer les garçons. Or depuis deux ans, c’est indéniable, je les aime moins. [...] Et en même temps que des garçons, je me détache des oms. [...] La succession providentielle de mon frère Gustave m’a donné un royaume, les blanches plaines de Saint-Escobille, les collines argentées de Miramas, la substance grise de Roanne, le tertre noir d’Aïn-Diab et quelques autres territoires, tous en abomination aux gens comme il faut, tous superficiels jusque dans leurs plus intimes profondeurs, composées
As I have shown, homoeroticism and trash go hand-in-hand for Alexandre, in his life and his death. We can look to the writings of Bataille, whom André Breton dubbed the “excrement-philosopher,” to help to elucidate Alexandre’s twin pursuits of trash and erotic desire. For Bataille, eroticism signifies excess (waste) and transgression, and is therefore sacred, even the most sacred of all experiences.\(^{54}\) As Nadine Hartmann states, for Bataille, “the sacred unfolds itself in all its ambivalence in erotic experience with those aspects that are considered low and animalistic.”\(^{55}\) Such reasoning goes counter to Christian ideas that the sacred is the realm of the pure, the clean and the divine. Christianity tries to limit the excessive, transgressive nature of the erotic by limiting sex to its ‘useful’ function of reproduction within the bounds of marriage. Sexuality is therefore confined to the realm of the profane, the world of usefulness and productivity. Alexandre, like Bataille, seeks to reverse this association through a vision of eroticism as non-productive, ‘trashy,’ and sublime.

**Trash Art**

Trash, for Alexandre, is a living, moving, aromatic form of art, far superior to the sterile paintings on museum walls. When the refuse workers in Roanne go on strike, Alexandre is delighted to see the city decked out with garbage “statues” in

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.
front of every home. He describes the strike as a sort of religious celebration, a
carnivalesque reversal of the established order of things:

Depuis trois jours maintenant la grève des éboueurs étale ses fastes
dans toutes les rues de Roanne. On se demande pour quelle fête on a
dressé devant chaque maison un reposoir multicolore et tourmenté (...). C’est une Fête-Dieu d’un genre nouveau, Fête-Ganeça, l’idole à
trompe dont l’animal totem est le rat. (208)

During the strike, refuse workers strut about in the center of town during the day,
and rats invade the city by night. Garbage sculptures overtake the cityscape while
the “heterosexual middle class” cowers in fear. The trash and trash workers went
unnoticed before, but now they are visible, or matter “out of place,” in Mary
Douglass’ words, and inspire horror. The centrifugal motion driving refuse to the
peripheries, along with “an entire fringe society” has been reversed as trash, and
trash workers, clog the city streets. Alexandre derives aesthetic satisfaction from
seeing trash in the center, in its virgin state, not yet crushed and disembodied by the
trash compressors: “Pour la première fois grâce à cette grève, il m’est donné de voir
et de louanger les oms dans leur fraîcheur primesautière et naïve, déployant sans
contrainte tous leurs falbalas” (209). Alexandre delights in the exuberance of this
living trash, a “riot of colors and shapes” (209). In his opinion, the odorous, moving
trash sculptures should replace the dreary stone statues in the town square:

...nous faisons des petites stations admiratives devant certains
monceaux d’ordures particulièrement réussis, sculptures concrètes,
toutes chaleureuses encore en bonodorantes de la vie quotidienne
dont elles ont jailli, et qui remplacer auraient avantageusement sur les
places et dans les squares la triste statuaire officielle (209).

The beauty of trash does not escape Alexandre outside of the city either. His
description of the trashescape surrounding the dump near Marseilles allows the reader to view trash in a different light:

Il faut avoir l’œil pour repérer de très loin la première feuille de papier souillé tremblant au vent dans les branches d’un maigre platane. Mais cette frondaison du genre ordurier devient particulièrement luxuriante dans ce pays de mistral. A mesure qu’on avance, les arbres – de plus en plus rares, il est vrai – se chargent de frisons, de serpents, de mousse de verre, de cartons ondulés, de tortillons de paille, de flocons de kapok, de perruques de crin. Ensuite toute végétation disparaît – comme en montagne au-dessus d’une certaine altitude – quand on entre dans le pays des cent collines blanches. Car ici, les gadoues sont blanches, oui, et le comprimé que contient mon médaillon aux armes de Marseille ressemble à un petit bloc de neige. Blanches et éclatantes, singulièrement au soleil couchant, en vertu sans doute des tessons de bouteilles, des carcasses de celluloïd, des éclats de galalithe et des lamelles de verre dont elles sont pailletées (290).

Alexandre’s artistic vision of trash is part of his efforts to redeem detritus and promote an alternative aesthetics that questions how art is defined.

**Reading and Writing the Garbage Dump**

In *Les Météores*, trash is not only akin to works of visual art, but to the written word as well. Garbage dumps are mirrors of society, a jumble of signs and signatures—empty containers, tubes, shells, skins — waiting to be read and filled with meaning. As Alexandre explains, trash is nothing but empty forms:

La substance des choses – pulpe des fruits, chair, pâtes, produits d’entretien ou de toilette, etc. – s’est évanouie, consommée, absorbée, dissoute par la cité. La gadoue—cette anti-cité—amoncelle les peaux. La matière ayant fondu, la forme devient elle-même matière. D’où la richesse incomparable de cette pseudo-matière qui n’est qu’un amas
de formes. Les pâtes et les liquides ayant disparu, il ne reste qu'une accumulation d'un luxe inépuisable de membranes, pellicules, capsules, boîtes, caques, paniers, autres, sacs, bissacs et havresacs, marmites, dames-jeannes, cages, casiers et cageots, sans parler des guenilles, cadres, toiles, bâches et papiers (347).

According to Alexandre, the superficiality of the dump serves two purposes. The first is to limit, define and encapsulate, thus making the garbage a collection of signatures, *griffes*. The second is a celebration, as the signatures are "bavardes, et même prolixes, déclamatoires, exaltantes" (347). Since the thing is no longer there, this possession encloses emptiness, and bursts upon a void, becoming absolute and absurd. For Alexandre, the signs in the trash pile are also a mirror of the world, a reflection of society. In Roanne, he is delighted to find an entire shelf of books crowning the trash heap, and marvels at the wealth and wisdom of a book-filled dump.

La matière grise. L’expression est tombée tout naturellement de ma plume pour évoquer les ordures roannaises, et je m’enchanté du rapprochement qu’elle suggère... Roanne, la ville aux gadoues cérébrales ! ... (Les livres) sont la flore obligée de ce fumier intelligent, ces grimoires, ils ont poussé sur lui comme des champignons, ils en sont l’émanation sublimée (99).

Books sprouting like mushrooms on the trash heap symbolize the vast knowledge buried in the dumps, waiting to be read. Alexandre sees himself as a revolutionary trash archeologist, rummaging through the discarded debris in order to learn about the world. Reading the trash gives Alexandre insights into the status of his cities and their populations. He boasts that he can calculate the exact number of inhabitants in Roanne based on the weight of its daily refuse: “Roanne rejette par jour en moyenne
30,773 kilos d’ordures ménagères. J’en conclus que cette ville doit avoir exactement 38 467 habitants” (89). Trash volume is also an indicator of a town’s economic status. The trash of the poor is dense, packed with vegetable peels, jam pots and buckets of coal ash. In contrast, the trash of the rich is light and airy, consisting of “ses emballages sophistiqués, ses bouchons de bouteilles de champagne, ses mégots de cigarettes à bout doré, ses carcasses de langoustes vides, ses bouquets d’asperagus, ses chaussons de danseuse, ses lanternes vénitiennes à demi brûlées. Rebut bouffant, voluble, brillant, léger et volumineux...” (90-91).

Emboldened by his newfound role of trash reader, Alexandre begins to write a series of essays, some autobiographical (“Portrait d’un chasseur” and “De la masturbation”), and others theoretical and sociological (“Esthétique du dandy des gadoues,” “Psychosociologie du pauvre”). Whereas in the previous chapter narrated by Alexandre, he merely gave a retrospective history of his introduction to the worlds of trash and homosexuality, in the second of Alexandre’s chapters (Chapter IV, “La Proie de la proie”), his authority, grounded in trash, propels him to become an essayist and journal writer in the same vein as other Tournerian heros like Robinson and Abel Tiffauges. In a journal entry from June 1940, Alexandre writes about going to the trash to “read” the news: “Juin 1940. Chaque matin, dès que mes trente-cinq wagons sont repartis après avoir fait basculer leur contenu pittoresque au bord de la voie, je fais ma tournée d’inspection. Je vais aux nouvelles” (334). Everything concerning Parisian life is inscribed within this trash, “depuis le premier mégot du président de la République jusqu’à la capote anglaise de la dernière passe de Sapho de Montparnasse” (335).
Significantly, the trash also informs Alexandre of the events of the Second World War. One day, a shipment of 35 train wagons filled with hundreds of thousands of dead dogs arrives. These were the dogs left behind when the Parisians fled their city during the Exodus. The starving, abandoned animals had become dangerous, leading town officials to exterminate them. In subsequent weeks, Alexandre recounts that the trash wagons are filled with the rotting contents of butcher’s, delicatessen, pastry, vegetable and dairy shops, as the city’s inhabitants have returned and shopkeepers began to dispose of food that had been left rotting for weeks. Alexandre clings to the assurance that in the midst of this great “débâcle,” by virtue of his occupation and sexual habits, both equally abhorred by the “racaille” mobs, he has the unique privilege of remaining at his post of “observateur lucide et de liquidateur de la société” (346).

The Crematorium, or Hitler’s Trash

For city officials in Roanne, a trash incineration plant represents their bourgeois dream of purification, of an existence with zero waste. For the refuse workers, however, the rumors of an incinerator being built in their city are revolting. Not only would it be the end of “cent petits métiers” related to recuperation, but it would signify the desire of the ruling class to eradicate les restes, ridding the world of “irregular bodies and souls”:

C’est une agression brutale, mortelle contre la substance même de la biffe, agression non seulement matérielle, mais morale, car le feu des usines d’incinération a de l’affinité avec le feu de l’Inquisition. Nul
doute, à nos yeux, c'est notre corps et notre âme irréguliers que l'on compiete de jeter à la flamme (119).

Alexandre likens the use of incinerators to the burning of heretics during the Inquisition, before comparing it to Hitler's efforts to purify the human race.

Au moment même où l'on parle de brûler les oms, des bruits sinistres parviennent d'Allemagne qu'Adolf Hitler est en train d'aménager à son idée. Les homosexuels sont arrêtés en masse, et—en dehors de toute action judiciaire—enfermés dans des camps de concentration où on les fait mourir à force de mauvais traitements (120).

If homosexuals are the first victims of Hitler's purification attempts, they will certainly not be the last, says Alexandre. He condemns heterosexuals for remaining silent in the face of the persecution of homosexuals, and warns that another elite minority will be Hitler's next victims:

Bien entendu la racaille hétérosexuelle ne pipe mot sur ce crime collectif. Stupides salauds ! Comment pouvez-vous ignorer que ce premier pas franchi, le tyran s’attaquera à une autre élite minoritaire, et enverra à l’équarrissage les prêtres, les universitaires, les écrivains, les juifs, les chefs syndicalistes, que sais-je ? (120)

For Alexandre, the horror of the incineration plant lies in its will to eliminate all difference, just as Hitler, “L’Hétérosexuel Majeur,” would like to do with people. In a reversal of values, Alexandre sees trash as positively associated with all that is different, unexpected, life-giving and creative, whereas purity is negatively associated with death, sterility and genocide: “Avec la destruction des oms par le feu, la société hétérosexuelle fait un grand pas en avant vers l’uniformisation, le nivellement, l’élimination de tout qui est différent, inattendu, créateur” (140).
When Alexandre visits an incineration plant at Issy-les-Moulineaux at the request of the officials in Roanne, he describes the experience as a “descent into Hell,” to see a diabolic work of destruction. He depicts the trash objects tumbling into the flames as though they were people, with personalities, memories, and words:

Ils glissent dans les flammes avec leur personnalité, leurs souvenirs, leurs paroles, leurs teintes et demi-teintes, leurs goûts et leurs dégoûts. C’est un anéantissement rageur et indistinct de toutes les finesse, de toutes les nuances, de tout ce qu’il y a d’inimitable et d’irremplaçable dans l’être (139).

For Alexandre, a world without trash, without difference, without deviance, is a world not worth living in.

**Human Rejecta**

It is no coincidence that Alexandre’s invented abbreviation for household waste, *ordures ménagères*, is *oms*, a homonym of *homme*, man. The equation of people with trash, “les rebuts de la société” is a phenomenon that extends to many of Tournier’s works, where figures of scandal, marginality and monstrosity abound. Petr Kyloušek claims that all of Tournier’s protagonists are marginals in some form:

Tous les protagonistes de Michel Tournier – Robinson, Abel Tiffauges, Paul, Jean, Alexandre, Taor, Gilles de Rais, Idriss, Eléazar, portent en effet le sceau de la marginalité: membres de la communauté des

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hommes, ils évoluent en marge, se situant souvent en dehors de la société et parfois se posant contre elle. La marginalité peut se concrétiser sous l’aspect géographique (Robinson, Taor), social (Abel, Idriss), religieux (Eléazar), mais dans la plupart des cas elle découle d’une déviation psychique, psycho-sociale ou assimilée comme telle: homosexualité, pédophilie, coprophilie, sadisme, etc. (Kyloušek, 2004: 112).

Looking beyond Alexandre and his trash empire, I will now focus on other characters in the novel that are also depicted as disposable, including the “Innocents,” and the twin protagonists Jean and Paul.

**The Innocents**

Chapter III is entitled “La colline des Innocents,” and gives an account of the handicapped and deformed children living at St. Brigitte’s, an institute run by nuns. The Institute consists of some 60 children and a staff of 20, and is part of the Pierres Sonnantes, a small community on the Breton coast that includes a textile factory and La Cassine, the home of the twins and their family. The little community mingles together easily, and the twins often encounter boarders from St. Brigitte’s wandering around the factory or on the family estate. This chapter reads as a stinging critique of society’s rejection of its handicapped and disabled members who do not conform to its standards of normalcy. Such children once had their place in rural communities, where they were accepted and even respected in their roles performing small jobs in the fields and gardens. In modern times, however, they are immediately detected as ‘inferior’ by the system and swiftly kicked out:
Il y a peu d’années encore, ils auraient trouvé leur place dans une communauté rurale où le « bétion » était un personnage traditionnel, accepté, voire respecté, rendant des petits services aux champs ou dans les jardins. L’élévation du niveau de vie économique et culturelle faisait d’eux désormais des rebuts, immédiatement détectés par la scolarité généralisée, aussitôt rejettés de la communauté, enfoncés dans leur misère par le vide créé autour d’eux. Il ne leur restait qu’à opposer leurs grognements, trépignements, dandinements, ricanements, regards torves et incontinences de salive, d’urine ou de matières fécales à une société administrée, rationalisée, motorisée et agressive qu’ils niaient autant qu’elle les rebutait (57).

The modern obsession with standardization has resulted in the complete isolation of these children, their disintegration from society. Moreover, the image of the disabled children using their grunts, cries and bodily dejections—saliva, urine and feces—to contest a bureaucratic, rationalized, mechanized and aggressive society can be seen as a metaphor for the novel’s conception of waste matter as a pungent excess opposing a closed, restrictive, rationalized economy. As with his other marginal, ‘trash’ characters, Tournier inverts the notion that the handicapped children are inferior through the musings of Sister Béatrice and Sister Gotama, who believe that their charges are spiritually superior beings. Through the Innocents, Tournier once again questions standards of normalcy and exposes society’s wholesale rejection of the imperfect.

According to Sister Béatrice, who looks after the children with mental disabilities, her charges are wholly innocent, incapable of sin and therefore closer to God than other mortals. She is fascinated in the presence of these children, who besides having a cruel curse inflicted on them, have also been gifted with an original
pureness, loftier than the virtue she has attained through years of religious devotion. These children, endowed with spiritual knowledge inaccessible to others, are nonetheless unable to communicate. Béatrice dreams of a “Pentecôte des Innocents,” a day when the Holy Spirit will descend and loosen the tongues of her charges. When a doctor of linguistics and phonology studies the children’s grunts and noises, and concludes that they are capable of voicing all of the phonemes needed for any possible language, Béatrice interprets this as proof that the unvoiced language of her children is the original, universal language, the language of Adam and Eve: “il s’agissait peut-être, pensait-elle, de la langue originelle, celle que parlaient entre eux au Paradis terrestre Adam, Eve, le Serpent et Jéhovah” (61).

The Innocents also illustrate the great diversity that exists in nature, to be celebrated rather than eliminated. Sister Gotama, a Nepalese nun, takes care of children with gross physical handicaps and deformities: some of her past charges have included ‘monsters’ who seem to come straight out of myths, including a cyclops and a mermaid child with fused legs. In the hybrid forms of the children, Sister Gotama sees alternate prototypes of humans that God designed in the beginnings of Creation. The children’s deformities are evidence of the great and wonderful variety of nature, where body parts are like letters than can be assembled in many different ways:

Cette idée des parties du corps considérées comme une sorte d’alphabet anatomique pouvant s’assembler diversement – comme le montre la variété infinie des animaux—avait un rapport évident avec l’hypothèse du docteur Larouet faisant des divers grognements des débiles profonds les atomes sonores de toutes les langues possibles (66).
Just as there is no one correct way to assemble letters, to make words, neither is there one correct way to assemble the human form. Both Sister Gotama and Sister Béatrice create unorthodox narratives and inversely interpret a myth of origins in order to redeem the handicapped children, seen as disposable by society. In so doing, the nuns—outsiders themselves, aware that their unusual ideas would be considered crazy by others—echo Tournier’s concern with the plight of the world’s rejects. When nine of the children from the Institute drown after escaping on a boat, Paul realizes that no one cares about these pieces of “human trash”:

S’il s’était agi d’enfants normaux, quels cris n’auraient pas retenti dans toute la France! Mais pour des débiles mentaux, pour ces déchets humains qu’on maintenait en vie par un scrupule maniaque? Ce genre d’accident n’était-il pas au fond le bienvenu? (162).

Later, Paul comes to realize that he and his twin brother belong in the same group as the marginalized Innocents:

A l’époque, le contraste entre l’ampleur du drame que nous avons vécu heure par heure, et l’indifférence dans laquelle il tomba à l’extérieur de notre petite communauté ne m’apparut évidemment pas. Mais j’en ai pris conscience plus tard, rétrospectivement, et j’en ai été fortifié dans l’idée que nous formions—les jumeaux, comme les innocents, comme par extension tous les habitants de Pierres Sonnantes—une tribu à part, obéissant à d’autres lois que les autres hommes, et par suite redoutés, méprisés et détestés par eux (162-63).

Paul recognizes that what linked the twins to Franz (their childhood friend and one of the drowning victims) and the other Innocents was their monstrosity.
The Jean-Paul Freak Show

Although twins Jean and Paul are purportedly the novel’s main characters, the first chapter dedicated solely to them comes only in Chapter 6, “Les Frères-pareils.” Their Uncle Alexandre, in contrast, has already narrated several chapters, including Chapter 2, “Le Sacre d’Alexandre,” Chapter 4, “La Proie de la Proie,” and Chapter 5, “Le Ciel et l’Enfer.” Although the twins’ narration takes over the second half of the novel, this delay seems to muddle the boundaries between main and secondary characters, between the center and the margins. In addition, this first real introduction to the novel’s main characters depicts them as marginals. The entire first half of chapter 6 exposes the theme of the twins’ monstrosity, which becomes part of an extended discourse on trash—human and material—that began in Chapter 2 and ends in Chapter 7, before being picked up again with Alexandre in chapters 9, 11 and 13.

As Paul recounts, others see the twins in the same way they see the Innocents, as monsters:

Au demeurant la complicité profonde et silencieuse qui unissait Jean-Paul à Franz —et à travers lui aux soixante innocents de Sainte-Brigitte—ne s’expliquait entièrement ni par l’âge, ni par la proximité géographique. Que nous fussons des monstres, mon frère-pareil et moi, c’est une vérité que j’ai pu me dissimuler longtemps... (163).

Ironically, the twins’ sameness is the cause of the difference that results in their marginalization. Due to their uncanny resemblance, the twins are treated as “freaks” from an early age and made to perform their “circus” for family friends (164). The circus show would begin with exclamations of surprise at how alike the
two boys were, and then go on to games of comparing, substituting and confusing them. As Paul informs us, the word “monster” comes from the Latin _monstrare_, to show. “Un monstre est un être que l’on montre, que l’on exhibe au cirque, dans les foires, etc., et nous ne devions pas échapper à cette fatalité” (165). Jean-Paul’s most public display as monsters came when the twins were coerced into acting in a television commercial for binoculars (_jumelles_), whose brand name was “JUMO”. According to Paul, these film sessions somehow set the seal on their monstrosity. Just as Alexandre theorizes the superiority of his marginal position, Paul realizes that the commercial was a part of their destiny and revealed the twins to be “the possessors of a superior visionary power,” having deeper insight, better knowledge, possession and penetration of the world than non-twins (171).

In another significant episode, Jean and Paul go to the fair with their father, where a collection of mummified corpses of the most fantastic Siamese twins in history is on display:

On pouvait ainsi admirer les xiphopages soudés par le sternum, les pyropages, attachés par les fesses, les meiopages, réunis par le front, les céphalopages collés ensemble par la nuque, et la revue culminait avec les célèbres Tocci, dérodymes italiens ayant sur un tronc unique deux têtes, deux jambes et quatre bras (189).

Paul believes that the Siamese exhibit planted the seed that twinship was a disability, a deformity, and caused Jean to want to break away. At the fair, the twins also have a surprise encounter with another Tournerian monster and marginal protagonist, Abel Tiffauges from _Les Roi des Aulnes_. Abel’s gigantesque stature and grotesque hands lead Paul to theorize that Abel reflects everything that is opposed to twinship—total ruthless individuality and solitude (195). Paul imagines that
every conception begins with two fetuses, but the stronger one will not tolerate the presence of a sibling with whom he will have to share everything. The stronger fetus strangles the weaker one in utero, eats him, and then comes into the world, “stained by his crime doomed to solitariness” (196). These ogres like Tiffauges, with strangling hands and cannibal teeth, roam the world unleashed a torrent of crime and violence. Although others may call the twins monsters, for Paul, twins are the only innocent humans on earth: “Nous seuls, tu m’entends, nous sommes innocents. Nous seuls nous sommes venus au monde la main dans la main, et le sourire fraternel aux lèvres” (196). Paul thus reclaims the twin’s monstrosity, turning their marginality into a positive trait, and mimicking Tournier’s inversions of trash elsewhere in the novel.

In the final chapter of *Les Météores*, Paul has returned to his family’s home in Brittany. In trying to escape from East Berlin to West Berlin through an underground tunnel, his body was crushed, necessitating the amputation of his left arm and leg. Once again, Paul interprets a monstrosity – his mutilated body – as an advantage, as it opens him up to a new mode of being as a “dispaired twin.” Just as twinship had its own special language, *la cryptophasie*, “dispaired twinship” has *la cryptophasie dépariée*: “Ce qui pour le sans-pareil n’est que rumeur de sang, battement de cœur, râle, flatulence et borborygme devient chant du monde pour le cryptophone déparié. (...) Ce qu’il y avait de plus intime devient universel. Le chuchotement s’élève à la puissance divine” (623-624). As a dispaired, mutilated twin, Paul’s existence takes on a new, sacred meaning: “Après les mutilations
rituelles de Berlin, je ne suis plus ce profane, et le vide a fait place à une magnifique surabondance” (614).

Tournier uses the theme of monstrosity in the same critical way he uses the theme of trash. However outlandish and parodic the world views of Tournier’s protagonists may be, they give voice to a critique of mainstream values of normalcy and aesthetic ideals of perfection. At the same time, the twins’ monstrosity, like Alexandre’s trash, opens them up to novel ways of seeing, feeling, and creating. Referring to the two separate stories (Alexandre and the twins) that make up Les Météores, Lawrence Schehr remarks that “the reader reflexively comes to learn that the novel itself is monstrous, in that it consists of two anomalous parts that will never come together. The story of Alexandre is the story that does not seek to exile monstrosity but to bring it back.”57

Part 2. Tournier’s Story-making, from Recycling to Bricolage

Tournier is a master textual recycler, an incessant rewriter. He scavenges well-known stories, myths, philosophical texts and his own writings as source material and blends them into the products that become his published novels. The publication history of Tournier’s first novel illustrates the extent to which the author engages in “waste management” techniques through the recycling of his own and others’ texts. Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique (1967) is Tournier’s retelling of

Daniel Defoe’s classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*, described by Gérard Genette as an example of “transvaluation” that reverses the values of the original text.\(^{58}\)

Dissatisfied with the novel despite its success, Tournier rewrote *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* into a shorter and simpler form that was marketed for children and young adults, *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* (1971).\(^{59}\) In 1972, Tournier published a revised version of *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* that incorporated some of the new material from the children’s version, and it was this version that became the standard edition of the novel.\(^{60}\) *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* was also adapted into a play and a TV film series.\(^{61}\) In 1984, Tournier continued his Robinsonades in *Sept Contes*, a collection of short stories for children. The story “La fin de Robinson Crusoé,” is a depressing account of Robinson as a drunkard in England who regrets having left the island 40 years prior. In a typically Tournerian hypertextual twist, this story is not based on Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, but takes Saint-John Perse’s *Images à Crusoé* as its model.\(^{62}\) As Michael Tilby states, "For Tournier, writing can only ever be rewriting, not just the rewriting of key myths but also conscious and unconscious inter-textuality. The rewriting of Friday for children is merely the most obvious example of a compulsion to rework his fictional narratives."\(^{63}\) In a similar vein, Joseph Garreau has dubbed Michel Tournier “l’écrivain de la double et même


\(^{59}\)Petit, Michel Tournier’s Metaphysical Fictions, 1.

\(^{60}\)However, the English translation (Friday) by Norman Denny was published in 1969 and is based on Tournier’s 1967 version of *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*.


de la triple réécriture.”64 In addition to Vendredi, Tournier also rewrote his fourth novel, Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar (1980) into a more concise form for a younger audience (Les Rois mages, 1983). Although never realized, Tournier indicated his desire to rewrite Le Roi des Aulnes and Les Météores for children.65 Tournier insisted that his leaner, tauter rewritings were not just adaptations for children, but the evolution of his writing towards a more distilled form that was superior to the originals and palatable for readers of all ages: “Fini le charabia. Voici mon vrai style destiné aux enfants de douze ans. Et tant mieux si ça plaît aux adultes. Le premier Vendredi était un brouillon, le second est le propre.”66

**The Copy of the Copy: Tournier and Alexandre’s Aesthetics of Waste**

Like Tournier, Alexandre sings the virtues of the second and third degrees, of the “copy of the copy.” In an essay entitled “Esthétique du dandy des gadoues,” Alexandre sets forth a theoretical argument in favor of the ‘copy’ as a superior, amplified version of the original – one that has been rethought, re-conceptualized, and even “spiritualized.” Imitations are necessarily richer, as they always contain and add to the originals:

**ESTHÉTIQUE DU DANDY DES GADOUES**

L’idée est plus que la chose et l’idée de l’idée plus que l’idée. En vertu de quoi l’imitation est plus que la chose imitée, car elle est cette chose plus l’effort d’imitation, lequel contient en lui-même la possibilité de se reproduire, et donc d’ajouter la quantité à la qualité.

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C'est pourquoi en fait de meubles et d'objets d'art, je préfère toujours les imitations aux originaux, l'imitation étant l'original cerné, possédé, intégré, éventuellement multiplié, bref pensé, spiritualisé. Que l'imitation n'intéresse pas la tourbe des amateurs et des collectionneurs, qu'en outre elle soit d'une valeur commerciale très inférieure à celle de l'originale, voilà qui est à mes yeux un mérite supplémentaire. Elle est par là même irrécupérable par la société, vouée au rebut et donc destinée à tomber entre mes mains (101).

Alexandre goes on to describe the garbage dump as a sort of museum showcase of objects that have been replicated to an infinite degree, a result of modern production and serialization:

Au demeurant, qu'est-ce que la gadoue, sinon le grand conservatoire des objets portés par la production de série à une puissance infinie ? Le goût des collections d'objets originaux est absolument réactionnaire, intempestif (102).

Mass-produced replications become forms of art for Alexandre, whereas originals are associated with stagnancy and stifling conservative values. Seeing the trash as precious cultural artifacts, as copies of the copies of the copies, Alexandre assumes the role of their guardian:

Ces éléments, il m'appartient par la méthode de la décharge contrôlée de leur assurer une conservation indénfinie de ces objets produits en masse – et donc copies de copies de copies de copies de copies de copies, etc. (103).

Alexandre thus equates trash with copies, superior to his eyes, but scorned by society. As one might expect, Alexandre’s essay on the aesthetics of the copy is itself a copy of sorts, based on the ideas of Gilles Deleuze in *Différence et répétition* (1968). Deleuze and Tournier were close friends and philosophy students together at the Sorbonne, where they studied with Foucault under Jean Hyppolite and Georges
According to Mairi Maclean, Tournier’s idea of the copy of the copy is based on Deleuze’s theory that the imitation improves upon the original: “Imitation, in Deleuze’s terms, may enhance and embellish the original, so that the reproduction does not impoverish or prostitute the artifact but on the contrary adds to it with each repetition, what is of interest being the difference in the repetition.”

Similar to Alexandre’s musings on the subject, Deleuze writes, “Le simulacre n’est pas une copie dégradée, il recèle une puissance positive qui nie et l’original et la copie, et le modèle et la reproduction.”

It is also significant to note that Chapter 4, in which Alexandre’s trash dandy aesthetics appears, is the chapter that establishes Alexandre as a writer—suggesting that in many ways, Alexandre is Tournier’s porte-parole. This chapter, entitled “La Proie de la proie,” intersperses Alexandre’s narrative voice with a series of philosophical essays written by him on subjects ranging from masturbation to the poor to himself to his trash aesthetic, as discussed earlier.

Alexandre applies his aesthetic of the copy not only to trash, but also to his desiring practices. He romantically pursues Eustache, a refuse worker, who in turn is pursuing Daniel, a younger refuse worker (the “prey’s prey” referred to by the

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Alexandre attempts to turn Daniel into a miniature dandy garbage man in his own image:

Je ne m’imaginais pas que mes terrains de chasse dans leur sublime et surprenante abondance livreraient l’équivalent érotique de l’idée de l’idée, de la copie de la copie: la proie de la proie. Et j’y trouvais un subtil rapport avec le portrait ordurier de Roanne, cette substance grise si riche d’abstractions que les livres y poussent comme champignons (108).

It is in Roanne, the dump filled with self-propagating copies of copies of books, that Alexandre meets his erotic “copies.” There are countless other manifestations of Alexandre’s aesthetic preference for imitations in Les Météores. He adopts a gay dog, Sam (Samedi, a wink to Tournier’s Vendredi), after witnessing Sam mount a male dog who was in the process of copulating with a female dog, thus illustrating “a commentary on the problem of la proie de la proie.” Then there is Fabienne, an aristocratic lesbian who is also involved in the waste industry, and makes a brief appearance as Alexandre’s female ‘copy.’ Copying, of course, also ties into the novel’s larger theme of twinship. In the sections that follow, we will see how copying is not only part of Alexandre’s aesthetics and a major theme in the novel, but also how Tournier has copied copies of copies through acts of recycling and bricolage in the making of Les Météores.

**Piecing Together Les Météores**

Tournier’s very visible reuse of previous texts makes intertextuality a defining characteristic of his fiction. In addition to wholesale rewriting of his and
others’ texts, as exemplified by *Vendredi*, most Tournerian novels and short stories are patch-works woven from multiple sources. Intertexts of *Le Roi des Aulnes*, for example, include Goethe’s famous ballade *Der Erlkönig*, the legend of Saint Christopher (the Christ-bearer who inspired the novel’s main motif of *phoria*), Charles Perrault’s *Le Petit Poucet*, Alain Fournier’s novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Flaubert’s entire oeuvre, and in particular “La Légende de Saint Julien l’Hospitalier,” and *The Tin Drum* by Günther Grass. As for *Les Météores*, Martin Roberts has identified a variety of references and intertexts:

*[Les Météores]* includes a multitude of references which are diverse even by Tournier’s usual eclectic standards. The novel’s referents variously include figures and episodes from Christian mythology (Adam and Eve, Babel, Noah’s Ark, the apostle Thomas, Pentecost) and from Greek mythology (the Lotus-eaters episode in Homer’s *Odyssey*), Berlioz’s *symphonie dramatique*, *Roméo et Juliette*, Honoré d’Urfé’s seventeenth-century novel, *L’Astrée*, the memoirs of Casanova, Jules Verne’s *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours*, and Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*.

Roberts also highlights the fact that in *Les Météores*, Tournier’s bricolage extends outside of Western cultural mythology, with references to the Hindu deity, Ganesha. Pary Pezechkian-Weinburg points to several more intertexts not mentioned by Roberts:

Le titre de ce roman rappelle Aristote tandis que son introduction est quasiment un plagiat de *L’homme sans qualités* de Robert Musil. Le récit est influencé par les recherches du psychologue René Zazzo qui s’intéresse de près au problème de jumeaux.

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73 Ibid.
When approaching the question of intertextuality, it is important to acknowledge that the term encompasses different practices for different scholars. For critics like Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida and Sollers, all texts are inherently intertextual, and all writing is rewriting. Other scholars, such as Genette, hold a more limited view of intertextuality that restricts it to the interplay of identifiable texts. In addition, some see the use of intertextuality as an ahistorical, universal process of imitation, whereas others view it as a marker of the postmodern text. As Christian Moraru explains:

One could break up critics of intertextuality into two groups: those who deem intertextuality, including ‘limited’ intertextuality, a universal, perennial discursive staple, as present in Montaigne as in Tournier; and those who believe that writers like Tournier illustrate a new, characteristically postmodern brand of intertextuality, and conversely, that intertextuality can help us understand what is unique about post-modernism. The former include classical scholars, ‘universalists’ and reading theorists [...] who sometimes tend to assimilate limited intertextuality to an ahistorical notion of ‘imitation’ and ‘influence’ (Broiche 1997: 249-50).

The latter insist that postmodernism foregrounds, more extensively and more conspicuously than classicism or modernism, intertextuality as the condition of all textuality, speaking to a post-structuralist philosophy of textuality. What is more, the same critics also specify that a) postmodern narrative makes limited intertextuality its foremost genetic principle; b) such narrative thematises, reveals as its ‘structural metaphor’ (Ricardou 1967), places en abyme (Dählenbach 1989) and otherwise lays bare, quite self-consciously, this principle, in passages that have been variously identified as ‘self-apparent’ (Klinkowitz 1984), metalinguistic, metaliterary, metanarrative – or ‘typically’ postmodern.75

As I will show, in *Les Météores*, Tournier flaunts his intertexts, exposing the seams of his patchwork novel in typically postmodern fashion. He both thematizes textual borrowing (through Alexandre’s aesthetics of the copy of the copy, and his discourse on trash in general) and makes it a structural metaphor of his work. One of the main ways Tournier does this is through what Martin Roberts calls auto-bricolage, which involves recuperating elements from his previous works and incorporating them into new ones.\(^76\) In fleshing out the differences between the two overlapping terms of “intertextuality” and “bricolage,” Roberts states that the two concepts have much in common at first sight:

In its broadest sense, intertextuality may be defined as the very condition of signification, whereby any given text, from a novel to an individual word, is dependent for its meaning on reference to an existing network of texts. Bricolage could be seen in similarly all-encompassing terms, as occurring not just at the macro-level of literature but at the micro-level also: any instance of language-use, it could be argued, necessarily involves bricolage, a re-use of the previously existing debris of previous users.\(^77\)

The difference, however, lies in the agency and intentionality present in the act of bricolage:

Bricolage implies a notion of agency which is absent from the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality is, in a sense, an effect of signification, bricolage an activity or practice which necessarily posits the existence of a subject: the bricoleur (significantly, intertextuality has no such implied subject, only an object: the intertext). Unlike intertextuality, bricolage does not just “happen”; it is performed by someone.\(^78\)

\(^76\) Both Martin Roberts and Mairi Maclean describe Tournier’s practice of auto-bricolage, although neither of them refers to auto-bricolage in *Les Météores*.


\(^78\) Ibid, 14.
Although I would argue that deliberate use of intertexts also involves agency and an active subject, the metaphor of bricolage and its associations with craft, skill, constructing and arranging, is a useful way of conceptualizing Tournier’s story-making practices.

Another related, and useful concept is that of recycling. I see recycling as an umbrella term for the act of taking up material that already exists and making it into something new. As a cyclical process, recycling denies claims of originality and new beginnings. Within such a model, texts are constantly in movement, never finished, feeding into one another. I see bricolage as a type of recycling that lays particular emphasis on the art of arranging, tinkering with texts until they fit together. The bricoleur takes fragments of texts (intertexts) and overlaps them, lays them side-by-side, and repositions them to make a new work of art. The textual pieces may remain visible to the reader, or blend into the whole of the work unnoticed.

Whereas recycling may conjure up images of an industrialized process, bricolage is handiwork and demands expert skills in seeing and reframing. In general, I refer to recycling when speaking of Tournier’s more wholesale rewritings (such as the *Vendredis* and Tournier’s rewritings for children), and to bricolage when speaking of the specific way in which Tournier pieces together patchwork texts like *Les Météores*. 
**Auto-bricolage**

*Les Météores* is not only striking for Tournier’s use of bricolage, or “re-use of the previously existing debris of previous users,”79 but also for its auto-bricolage. For his third novel, Tournier rummages through the debris of his previous two novels and salvages ideas, characters and scenes that he reuses and reframes in *Les Météores*. In the examples below, I will focus on the most blatant instances of auto-bricolage that show the extent to which Tournier sought to expose his narrative architecture.

There are three passages that openly ‘copy’ or refer the reader back to *Vendredi* in *Les Météores*. The first such passage invites the reader to identify the character of Alexandre with that of Robinson:

J’ai un chien. Il faut lui trouver un nom. Robinson avait appelé son nègre Vendredi, parce que c’était un vendredi qu’il l’avait adopté. Nous sommes aujourd’hui samedi. Mon chien s’appellera Sam. J’appelle Sam! et aussitôt il lève vers moi sa tête hirsute où brillent deux yeux marron. J’ai un chien, un ami cynique qui me scandalise en allant plus loin que moi dans mon propre sens, qui m’édifie… (226).

This scene mimics the passage from *Vendredi* where Robinson names his newly found savage “Vendredi” in commemoration of the day he was saved. Sam relieves Alexandre of his solitude, just as Vendredi brings companionship to Robinson. Tournier thus prods the reader to interpret the character of Alexandre through the filter of Robinson, and reveals that his composition of *Les Météores* borrows pieces of *Vendredi*, in a copy of the copy style. In addition, within the plot of *Les Météores*, Sam also represents Alexandre’s theoretical yearning for the copy of the copy, as

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explained earlier. When Sam later disappears in the trash dump, Alexandre prays that God will send him a rat to rescue him from his loneliness and again evokes Vendredi:

Mais, Seigneur, un rat? Si j’approvisais un rat – le rat de l’idole à trompe – pour peupler ma solitude, me l’accorderiez-vous? Non, sans doute! Comme l’île déserte de Robinson Crusoé était accueillante et grouillante de présences amies en comparaison de mon désert ordurier! (336)

Here, Alexandre compares his isolation in the refuse desert to Robinson’s loneliness on his island. As it turns out, Alexandre is not the only character in Les Météores whom Tournier advertises as a ‘version’ of Robinson. In a passage where Paul speaks of his solitude and the role of the Other in grounding his perception of the world, Tournier imitates a similar passage from Vendredi. Rather than leave these parallel passages to be discovered by the astute critic, Tournier flags the passage as a copy by including a footnote at the bottom of the page telling the reader to compare it to Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique:

[Paul:] Chaque homme a besoin de ses semblables pour percevoir le monde extérieur dans sa totalité. Autrui lui donne l’échelle des choses éloignées et l’avertit que chaque objet possède une face qu’il ne peut voir de l’endroit où il se trouve, mais qui existe puisqu’elle apparaît à des témoins éloignés de lui. Il en va jusqu’à l’existence même du monde extérieur qui n’a pour garantie que la confirmation que nos voisins nous en apportent. Ce qui disqualifie les prétentions de mes rêves à se faire passer pour réalités, c’est qu’ils n’ont que moi pour témoin. La vision qu’aurait du monde un solitaire — sa pauvreté, son inconsistance sont proprement imaginables. Cet homme ne vivrait pas sa vie, il la rêverait, il n’en aurait qu’un rêve impalpable, effiloché, évanescent1 (421).
Heeding Tournier’s instructions, it is not hard to locate the corresponding passage in *Vendredi* that describes how the presence of others is necessary to ground ourselves and distinguish fantasy from reality:

Lorsqu’un peintre ou un graveur introduit des personnages dans un paysage ou à proximité d’un monument, ce n’est pas par goût de l’accessoire. *Les personnages donnent l’échelle* et, ce qui importe davantage encore, ils constituent des points de vue possibles, qui ajoutent au point de vue réel de l’observateur d’indispensables virtualités.

A Speranza, il n’y a qu’un point de vue, le mien, dépouillé de toute virtualité. [...] Contre l’illusion d’optique, le mirage, l’hallucination, le rêve éveillé, le fantasme, le délire, le trouble de l’audition… le rempart le plus sûr, c’est notre frère, notre voisin, notre ami ou notre ennemi, mais quelqu’un, grands dieux, quelqu’un!80

Typically reserved for scholarly texts, the footnote is somewhat of a rarity in works of fiction, making its use here conspicuous. As a textual appendage, a fragment set apart at the bottom of the page, it draws the reader’s attention to the construction of the novel. The note causes us to question whether it comes from the narrator (Paul) or Tournier. It transforms a character and/or an author into literary critic (who dutifully provides the genre of the referenced work) and asks the reader to take part in the meaning-construction game. At the same time that the note asks the reader to construct meaning, it also guides the reader’s interpretation of the text.

In addition to *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, there is a significant chunk of text – 13 pages – devoted to *Le Roi des Aulnes* protagonist Abel Tiffauges in *Les Météores*. Again, Tournier exposes his auto-bricolage via a footnote.

Paul


1 Cf. le roman *Le Roi des Aulnes*.

Paul and Jean’s encounter with Tiffauges is an essential part of their story, for it is this encounter that first signaled Jean’s desire to break out of the twin’s closed cell. When they met Tiffauges, the twins were just eight years old. Paul says that while he was immediately repulsed by Tiffauges, Jean was drawn to him. After leaving the garage, the twins and their father decide to visit a local fair. In this carnavalesque atmosphere, Jean and Paul are not only confronted with their own monstrosity
through a grotesque exhibit on Siamese twins, but they also encounter the ogre Tiffauges once again. During a Gravitron-type amusement ride, Paul is horrified as he witnesses Tiffauges take Jean and carry him in an act of *phoria* that reenacts the many acts of *phoria* in *Le Roi des Aulnes*. In writing this scene, it is clear that Tournier copied and reinserted many of the details (setting, time period, garage name, etc.), themes (monstrosity, pedophilia, *phoria*) and characters from his previous novel. In *Le Roi des Aulnes*, Abel's first act of carrying a child even involves a boy named “Jeannot,” a move that prompts the reader not only to read *Les Météores* in light of *Le Roi des Aulnes*, but also the inverse.

Tournier not only transposes the leading men of his first two novels into *Les Météores*, but also inserts himself as a character reading Aristotle's *Meteorology* or *Météores* in French:

> A 17h19 un souffle d’ouest-sud-ouest découvrit le jupon de la vieille Henriette Puysoux qui ramassait des pommes de terre dans son champ, fit claquer le store du Café des Amis de Plancoët, rabattait brutalement l’un des volets de la maison du docteur Bottereau en bordure du bois de la Hunaudaie, tourna huit pages des *Météores* d’Aristote que lisait Michel Tournier sur la plage de Saint-Jacut […] (9)

This self-inscription, which occurs in the second sentence of the novel, can be seen as a sort of performance of inverted doubling. The author becomes a character who is reading a book with the same title. This scene also exposes Tournier-author ‘doing his homework,’ reading a text that would become a major intertext for his novel with its motifs of time, weather, and astrology. The reference to Aristotle also introduces the theme of the imitation or the copy, as Aristotle famously posited that art forms such as poetry, tragedy and comedy were inherently imitative. Aristotle
viewed imitation in a positive light and maintained that imitation was one of mankind’s advantages over animals.81

As these examples show, Tournier wants the reader to take notice of how his novels are pieced together. Tournier not only uses the material of others as the structuring blocks of his novels, he also uses his own past material and flaunts it before the reader’s eyes. Through his novels, his copies of copies, Tournier exposes the open-endedness that is central to his project and to the notion of an aesthetics of waste. The publication of a novel signals neither its end nor its perfection. Writing, for Tournier, is a never-ending process of recycling and bricolage.

Author-recuperator

Placing Tournier’s writing practices within a model of recycling and bricolage allows us to envision the role of the author in several ways. First, the author is cast as a recuperator, whose distinguishing eye sees the value in what others deem worthless. We have seen Alexandre in this role, as he contemplates the beauty and the meaning imparted by his various trash dumps. The same idea is more explicitly doubled in Les Météores through the minor character Shonîn, a Japanese gardener who enlightens Paul on the delicate composition of zen gardens. Shonîn’s vision of artistic creation is not one of making and destroying, but rather of seeing and arranging:

Pourquoi sculpter avec un marteau, un ciseau ou une scie ? Pourquoi faire souffrir la pierre et mettre son âme au désespoir ? L’artiste est un contemplateur. L’artiste sculpte avec son regard… (514).

The artist is above all a beholder, who creates with his eyes to gather the best stones for his work: “Le sculpteur-poète n’est pas un casseur de cailloux. C’est un ramasseur de cailloux” (515). According to Shonin, the skill of creating through seeing has been lost through the ages:


Shonin is a minor enough character in Les Météores to be called miniscule. He appears only once in this episode with Paul, and plays no important role at the level of the plot. Despite this, Tournier allows Shonin to speak in the first-person, a privilege that more ‘important’ characters like Edouard and Maria-Barbara (the twins’ parents) do not enjoy. In light of this choice, we can interpret Shonin’s intervention as one that doubles Alexandre’s discourse of creation and exposes Tournier’s own writing practices. This interpretation is validated by Tournier’s words when speaking about his craft. He describes writing as a process of gathering bits of material here and there and stirring them around until a book emerges:

Je suis comme la pie voleuse. Je ramasse à droite et à gauche tout ce qui me plaît, pour l’entasser dans mon nid. Le problème, c’est de remuer toutes ces choses hétéroclites jusqu’à ce qu’il en sorte un livre.82

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Like the sculptor-poet described by Shonin, Tournier’s ‘thieving magpie’ image of the author consists of gathering elements – stories, myths, ideas – that have been used elsewhere, and shuffling them together in a novel way. Such a description also calls to mind the work of the *bricoleur*, as Martin Roberts has noted:

Tournier has, it would seem, been a bricoleur from the very start of his literary career. His initial problem of transposing metaphysical truths into fictional form, for example, is conceptualized essentially as a problem of *bricolage*.\(^{83}\)

**Author-Waste Matter**

In Tournier’s intellectual biography *Le Vent Paraclet*, Tournier provides additional metaphors to describe the author’s role. As more bits and fragments are added to a work, the author becomes a servant to a monstrous text. Increasingly subsumed by his text, the author ends up as its waste product:

Au bout de peu de temps mon livre est doué d’un nombre plus grand de pièces, organes, éléments de transmission, réservoirs, soupapes et bielles que je n’en puis concevoir en même temps. Il échappe à ma maîtrise, et se prend à vivre d’une vie propre. J’en deviens alors le jardinier, le serviteur, pire encore le sous-produit, ce que l’œuvre fait sous elle en se faisant. Je vis dans la servitude d’un monstre naissant, croissant, multipliant, aux exigences péremptoires [...] Et quand elle me lâche, quand gorgée de ma substance, elle commence à rouler de par le monde, je gis exsangue, vidé, écœuré, épuisé, hanté par des idées de mort.\(^{84}\)

Such a vision inverses ideas of production and consumption, as the text-maker is consumed and then excreted by his work. Susan Petit points out that Tournier’s

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authorial identification with the excremental is emphasized by the fact that he considered taking his maternal grandmother’s maiden name “Anus” as his pen name. Having assembled his work from ‘trash’ – textual detritus, buried myths, taboo themes, unoriginal ideas, queerness, copies of copies – the author, like Alexandre, is consumed by his trash universe, until he becomes a waste product himself. Resisting stability, both Tournier and his works are recycled in an endless process of textual renewal.

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Chapter 3

Varda’s Gleaning, Framed

“J’aime filmer des pourritures, des restes, des débris, des moisissures et des déchets. Mais je n’oublie pas, pas du tout, qu’après le marché, il y en a qui font leur marché dans les déchets.”

-- Agnès Varda, Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse

Agnès Varda’s celebrated documentary Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse (2000) is an exploration of the politics and poetics of gleaning. It is as much a socially engaged film about those who make use of the leftovers of a wasteful society as it is a meditation on art and filmmaking. Gleaning, as it is defined in the opening sequence, is the ancient practice of gathering leftover grains after the harvest. As the film progresses, Varda expands this definition to include modern-day recuperation of all types of waste – vegetables left on the ground after markets, abandoned appliances, unshapely potatoes that exceed supermarket norms, and even filmic images that would typically be left on the cutting room floor. As she travels across France interviewing gleaners (apple pickers, refrigerator salvagers, dumpster divers, artists and others), Varda continuously draws our attention to works of art (paintings and modern trash art) and to her own art making, digital camera in hand. In scene after scene, the act of gleaning waste is confronted, interpenetrated and framed by art. The documentary begins by introducing the concept of gleaning through two
famous 19th-century paintings of gleaners reprinted in the *Larousse illustre* dictionary, and ends with Varda’s unearthing of another painting of gleaners from the basement of a museum in Villefranche-sur-Saône. In the space in between these painterly bookends, footage of ‘real’ gleaners is intercut with shots of painted gleaners, trips to museums are juxtaposed with footage of food waste in city centers, interviews with artists who use trash to create are scattered among the accounts of those who glean to feed themselves, and Varda likens her unique filmmaking practices to gleaning.

In one of the rare negative appraisals of *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Silke Panse decries Varda’s “equation of the materiality of gleaning” with the “aesthetic act of the filmmaker,” claiming that it downplays the important social and environmental issues connected to gleaning:

> Not to state the obvious, but there is a difference between vegetables and images. The potatoes have been dumped as waste before they have been gleaned. Varda’s images have not been discarded footage before they were found by her. [. . .] The filmmaker metaphorically appropriates the protagonists’ manual work as her own aesthetic work.\(^{86}\)

However, far from appropriating or masking the tension that arises from the comparison between those who glean as a means to survive and those who glean for artistic pleasure, Varda calls attention to it. In one scene, Varda films children making art from recuperated bottles, paper and bits of wire in an event called “Poubelle, ma belle.” It is clear that the children did not dirty their hands or

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rummage through the garbage to find their trash material. It was cleaned and ‘packaged’ for them, its trash origins obscured. As Varda remarks on how “cute, clean and colorful” the recuperated material appears, she wonders if the children have ever noticed the trash being swept on the streets, or if they’ve ever shaken hands with a garbage man: “On se demande si les enfants ont vu une seule fois ce que balayent les balais et s’ils ont jamais serré la main d’un éboueur.” Varda seems to imply that the significance and subversive power of waste is lost on the children, as they were not active participants in its recuperation. During this same sequence, Varda critiques the commercialization of trendy trash art as she contemplates the work of American artist Sarah Sze, who makes grandiose mobiles of found objects and trash: “La récup ménagère est entrée dans le marché de l’art. Et quand je dis marché, je ne dis pas bon marché.” As a cleaned-up or coveted commodity, Varda intimates that trash loses its critical potential.

In addressing more specifically her own project, Varda is careful to remind viewers that, although she gleans for aesthetic pleasure, this in no way displaces those who look to the trash for their food: “J’aime filmer des pourritures, des restes, des débris, des moisissures et des déchets. Mais je n’oublie pas, pas du tout, qu’après le marché, il y en a qui font leur marché dans les déchets.” In the Director’s Note in the English DVD release, Varda reiterates that although she allowed herself digressions from the gleaners, she always came back to them:

[...] trying to win their confidence, listen to them, converse with them rather than interview them, and film them. [...] Little by little, I found the right balance between self-referential moments (the gleaner who films one of her hands with the other) and moments focused on those
whose reality and behavior I found so striking. I managed to approach them, to bring them out of their anonymity. I discovered their generosity.\textsuperscript{87}

Through this structure of digressions and returns, the materiality of waste and the social reality of the gleaners never remain out of sight or mind.\textsuperscript{88} Moreover, as its title indicates, the film is focused on the human aspect of gleaning – the people Varda interviews and films, as well as herself, the \textit{glaneuse}. And unlike the children in the trash art workshop, Varda engages in the manual and material work of gleaning, carrying this over into her aesthetic gleaning. As I will show in this chapter, Varda’s artistic performance of filmic gleaning does not detract from the social, political and ecological import of the film, but rather augments it. Instead of segregating art (representation, fiction) from the real (the material, the documentary), Varda joins them together through the concept of gleaning. In the process, she explores an alternative documentary form, one whose striking contrast of the aesthetic and the real delights the viewer. As Maurizia Boscagli remarks, “Art for her is never a world of abstract beauty separated from the everyday: on the contrary, pleasure and surprise occur when these two realms, which bourgeois aesthetics keep apart, collude.”\textsuperscript{89} It is precisely this sense of play and discovery that sets the film apart from more conventional social documentaries that carry a heavy or solemn tone. At the same time, Varda’s \textit{cinéglanage} becomes a form of ethical,

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hands-on engagement for the filmmaker:90 “Chacun doit savoir qu’il est responsable de son voisin. Je crois beaucoup en l’engagement personnel. Par mon travail de cinéaste, je m’engage personnellement. Je suis une résistante!”91 Varda’s aesthetics of gleaning seeks to recuperate that which is excluded or negatively valued, from gleaners on the fringes to flawed footage that was mistakenly filmed. Gleaning thus becomes a gesture of contestation and of inclusion; a site of resistance and a positive recuperation of waste connecting us to others in a generous act.92 Gleaning, for Varda, is also a feminist act. Historically, the work of gleaning the fields after the harvest fell to women, and although the majority of modern-day gleaners Varda meets are male, she reclaims gleaning as an anti-patriarchal method of filmmaking in what can be described as an “eco-feminist subversion of aesthetics.”93

Varda’s unique style of documentary filmmaking enacts gleaning from the start to finish of Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse. Her gleaning encompasses what the filmmaker stumbles upon while shooting (the chance discovery, the found object), the things and people she chooses to film (the images and voices she gleans that may be overlooked by others) and the re-gleaning and editing of that footage. It is thus not only what Varda films, but how she films it and assembles it into her mosaic composition that gives shape to her aesthetics of gleaning.

A close analysis of the first six minutes of the film provides an excellent introduction to Varda’s aesthetics of gleaning, specifically how it bridges the material and conceptual, the socially engaged and the playful, the politics and poetics of glanage. In my discussion of Varda’s filmmaking, I will use the richly layered first six minutes of the film as a springboard to jump to other related moments in this and Varda’s other works, mimicking the structure of digression and return enacted in Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse. To clearly mark my cuts and jumps, I include the start time codes for shots in the heading of each section of my analysis of the opening scenes of Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse.

00:22. Gleaning: Defined, Painted, Photographed, Filmed, Enacted

Following the film’s title in the opening credits, the camera lingers on the leather-bound spines of several volumes of the illustrated Larousse dictionary. The black-and-white pages inside flip to the entry “gleaning.” We see the dictionary’s small reproduction of Jean-François Millet’s painting Les glaneuses (1857) and hear Varda’s off-screen voice reading: “‘G’ comme glanage. Glaner, c’est ramasser après la moisson. Glaneur, glaneuse, celui ou celle qui glane.” The camera pulls back to show the entire page, including another famous painting of gleaning, Jules Breton’s La Glaneuse (1877). A cat rubs its ears on the corners of the dictionary as Varda’s off-screen voice tells us that in times past, gleaners were women: “Autrefois, il s’agissait toujours de glaneuses et les plus célèbres, peintes par Millet, étaient reproduites dans le dictionnaire. L’original est au musée d’Orsay.” The scene cuts to
an establishing shot of the Musée d'Orsay’s emblematic gold-framed clock. Next, in time-lapse photography we watch as visitors contemplate, stroll past and snap photos of Millet’s painting with its own oversized gold frame that fills the screen. We hear the click of a museumgoer’s camera before the scene cuts from Millet’s painting to Varda’s first interview with a ‘real’ gleaner.

Figure 1. Gleaning, definitions and reproductions
Figure 2. A museum visitor poses with Les Glaneuses

Figure 3. A performance of gleaning
Although the film appears to have transitioned from artistic to real portrayals of gleaning, we soon realize that Varda’s interviewee is putting on a performance of sorts as she demonstrates how she used to glean. Standing in a field, the woman remarks that the era of gleaning is by-gone; today’s machines are too efficient to make gleaning worthwhile. She says she used to gather the leftover rice and wheat with her (female) neighbors, and then demonstrates, bending down and gathering stray sheaves of wheat in her apron in what is clearly a staged moment (Figure 3). In her gesture and her dress, the woman recalls the paintings of gleaners.
we have just seen, and life seemingly copies—or is—art. As she reminisces about the long days working in the sun, the scene cuts to black-and-white footage of women gleaning from Dovzhenk’s 1930 silent film *Earth* on the plight of Ukranian farmers (Figure 4). The voice-over narration continues as the scene cuts to another painting of gleaners, Breton’s *Le rappel des glaneuses* (1859), which is never formally introduced by Varda or mentioned as such. The camera pans slowly up a black-and-white reproduction of the painting (connecting it to the black-and-white film excerpt that preceded) showing a group of women with armfuls of wheat, before cutting to a close-up of another scene from the same painting in color. At the same time, we hear the woman’s voice: “Le soir, on était fourbus et on rentrait avec nos sacs, nos tabliers … euh … et après, c’était une bonne partie de rire, de boire du café, du … vous voyez, et voilà!” The woman pauses, and gestures in the direction of her house. A seemingly superfluous exchange takes place between Varda and the gleaner and concludes the scene:

Gleaner: *Je suis née là dans ce mas. J’y mourrai!*
Varda (off-screen): *Pas tout de suite! Allez! Vous pouvez y retourner,* *Madame.*
Gleaner: *Merci à tous messieurs dames!*
Varda (off-screen): *Merci à vous!*
Gleaner (flustered, trying to leave): *Je suis confuse parce que vraiment vous m’avez eue! Eh!*

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94 The film *Earth*, which is not identified as such by Varda, focuses on the plight of Ukranian farmers and is particularly known for its lyrical and poetic depictions, suggesting a link to Varda’s own poetic, socio-critical project.
These first two minutes are illustrative of how gleaning is conceptualized and enacted throughout the rest of the film. First, gleaning is presented through overlapping layers of representational spaces—text, painting, photography, film, and theatrical elements are all juxtaposed in a multimedia opening montage. Each representational space enlarges our idea of gleaning, allowing us to see it from a slightly different angle. In addition to the layering that results from Varda’s editing practices, layers of representation are also heavily foregrounded in the museum scene. There is the painting with its enormous gold frame, which is then photographed by the visitors, who are in turn filmed by Varda. This focus on representation upon representation also brings us back to the dialectic of the copy and the original that we saw in Tournier’s *Les Météores*. The copies here not only precede the original (mini black-and-white dictionary reproductions precede the original paintings which precede an ‘original’ gleaner), but the very idea of the ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ is called into question by the staged mise-en-scène of Varda’s first interviewee. Later, Varda does include more authentic footage of gleaners, but her democratic editing style prevents any sort of hierarchy from emerging.

It is also significant, and surprising for a documentary, that Varda chose to introduce gleaning via artistic mediums before proceeding to the real. In so doing, she highlights the role of art as an impetus to engage with the world. The viewer follows Varda’s own voyage of discovery that begins with a dictionary definition that prompts her to travel to the Musée d’Orsay to see the ‘real’ painting, and then to seek out ‘real’ gleaners. Art pushes Varda into the world, rather than out of it, as the signifiers foster a desire to see the signified.
**Digressions: The Gleaners**

The conclusion of the scene with the gleaner of yore is also characteristic of Varda’s aesthetics of gleaning. The dialog between the woman and Varda, as transcribed above, amounts to filmic waste—excess footage that is unnecessary and wastes precious screen time. The dialog is essentially an exchange of formalities; the gleaner and Varda thank each other and say goodbye. Most filmmakers would probably not have hesitated to cut this scene. But Varda includes it, and upon second thought, we can see that this waste does actually do something for the film.

First, the theatrical element is again brought to light by an exit scene, where the performer thanks the director and the film crew, and confusedly tries to leave the stage. The camera remains statically fixed as the woman turns around and walks out of the shot’s frame, leaving an empty field behind her, reminding us again of the blurred line between the real and the represented. At the same time, this scene is clearly not staged – it is an endearing moment that paints a warmer, more human portrait of this gleaner. We can imagine this glaneuse, whom Varda does not name, as emblematic of the intermingling of representation (her imitation of the gesture in the paintings, her performance, her status as a past gleaner) and the real (the candid moment of confusion as she exits, her present existence as a witness of gleaning).

The scene also reminds us of Varda’s presence behind the camera and foreshadows her own mise-en-scène as the gleaner of the film’s title.

Throughout her conversations with gleaners in the rest of the film, Varda continues to include such moments of excess that are unrelated to the topic of gleaning but that focus our attention on the personal quirks and stories of the
gleaners. In several instances, Varda asks couples to explain how they met. One couple of café owners is interviewed for three minutes about how they met at the local town dance, and how the woman couldn’t miss noticing the man because he was wearing a red hat, a green shirt, mustard yellow pants and a multi-colored belt. When Varda asks how the woman was dressed, the man chuckles and says he doesn’t remember. The woman had previously been interviewed about her experience gleaning, but in this particular scene there is no link to the film’s topic. In other cases, the gleaners’ stories allow us to learn what brought the people featured in the film to gleaning. Claude, who Varda spots gleaning potatoes, explains that he lost his job as a truck driver to alcoholism and hasn’t seen his children in years. He lives among a group of gypsies who tell Varda that the government has relegated them to live in a remote rural ghetto. Varda also devotes considerable time to documenting the life of another gleaner, Alain F., who has elected to live off the market leftovers that he gleans for economical and ethical reasons. We see Alain as he picks up fruits and vegetables from the pavement, and as he sells newspapers near the métro and teaches French to immigrants as a volunteer in the evenings. Although some of these digressions seem excessive and take the viewer away from gleaning, they in fact bring us closer to the gleaners by painting a fuller portrait of them. The dozen or so eclectic portraits of gleaners in the film—immigrants, artists, the homeless, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, a Michelin chef, and those with little means—inform us not only about what gleaning is, but about the people who do it. Like their digressions, spilling out of the normal boundaries of filmic conventions, they show that gleaning is a transgressive act that involves stepping over property
lines, crossing into fields that are not their own. As Allan Stoekl argues, gleaning is a concept that surpasses the boundaries maintained by an economy of consumption and production that works to overcome exclusion “by affirming a community that goes beyond limits such as mainstream and marginal.” For this reason, says Stoekl, it is beside the point to criticize Varda for downplaying the harsh reality of the ‘excluded’ by juxtaposing their experiences with comparatively well-off gleaners like chefs and artists. Varda’s inclusion of various types of gleaners is an effort to nullify the boundaries of “in” and “out,” and to foster a community through the act of salvaging, akin to the act of giving.

02:43 Marginal Music: Rap de recup’

Returning now to the opening sequence, after the first featured gleaner makes her exit, Varda cuts to an interview with a middle-aged owner of a café, who says that she used to glean, but that today people don't need to glean to eat anymore, although some continue to do so. The shot changes from the woman to show footage of real gleaners in fields, and then a close-up of gleaners from Millet’s painting, as the first chords of a rap song about gleaning begin. Varda narrates as we see shots of people scavenging in the impressive landscape of food waste of Paris’ markets. Varda’s narration is a half-rhyming prelude to the rap song that she had commissioned specifically for Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse:

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Si le glanage est d’un autre âge,
le geste est inchangé dans notre société
qui mange à satiété
glaneurs agricoles ou urbains
ils se baissent pour ramasser
y’a pas de honte,
y’a du tracas
du désarroi

The montage of market gleaners set to the soundtrack of the “rap de récup” signals a shift in how Varda has framed gleaning up until this point. Gleaning is now presented from a social angle, using rap as the voice of protest of a minority group. 

*Rap politique* or *rap conscient* is a well-known subgenre of music in France that calls attention to social issues facing French youth, from life in the suburbs to racial profiling, poverty and Islamophobia. As Agnès Calatayud states, rap is a sort of socially-aware “street poetry” that Varda uses to expose the precarious situation of some of the film’s gleaners:

[Rap] is a means of expression commonly linked with an inner-city world of deprivation and marginalization, in other words, the kind of environment from which the gleaners come themselves. Rap is “poésie de la rue” (Lemahieu), “l’outil privilégié grâce auquel la sublimation du quotidien devient possible (Béthune 47).

The ‘rap with a conscience’ in Varda’s film also brings attention to society’s excessive wasting and the reality of the poor and the hungry in France. Its lyrics spotlight the modern city gleaner and proffer a critique of a society that produces

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too much, yet does not give enough to those in need.

Figure 5. Urban market gleaning

Se baisser
mais heureusement pas s'abaisser
mais je dois t'avouer
que quand je les vois se pencher
j'ai le cœur blessé
ça me fait mal de les voir récupérer
pour se nourrir
obligés de ramasser de la nourriture
même en train de pourrir
courir dans les marchés
pour manger
ce que les gens jettent
ils guettent
ce qui peut encore rester
et même les restes
ils récupèrent
ce qui à nos yeux n'a plus de valeur
et ramassent par terre
avant les balayeurs
pour nous un rien
peut être pour eux beaucoup
ils font le tour des quartiers
pour assouvir leur faim
lorsqu’ils en ont besoin
hier comme aujourd’hui
et encore pour demain
les gestes seront les mêmes
les restes seront leurs gains…

In this sequence, we do not see the faces of the anonymous gleaners whom Varda films, only their bodies bent over to pick up the thrown-away food. This is the first of two rap songs that make up part of the film’s soundtrack, the second of which, “le glanage de l’an 2000 avec rap,” features Varda rapping along with the musicians, adding her voice of protest to theirs. We can see the rap music as another layer of representational space that adds a social dimension to the concept of gleaning.
Alternative Forms: The Film Essay

Varda’s engagement with political and social issues is not a new one, but one that spans the length of her sixty-year career as a filmmaker, beginning with *La Pointe Courte* in 1955, which juxtaposed the poverty of a fishing village with the story of a couple in crisis. She has made overtly political films such as *Salut les Cubains* (1963) and *Black Panthers* (1968) and feminist works like *Réponse de femmes* (1975) and *L’une chante, l’autre pas* (1977). With its depiction of gleaners on the margins of a consumption-based society, and its blending of the personal and the political, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* ‘gleans’ many of the same concerns raised in her past films.\(^97\) Varda’s activism is also a defining feature of her involvement with Left Bank filmmakers like Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, whose documentary productions feature strong sociopolitical dimensions and a “socialism of a broadly humanist kind.”\(^98\) A subgroup of French New Wave filmmakers, the Left Bankers emerged in the 1950s and 60s as a handful of directors interested in documentary practices, political themes, and the incorporation of other art forms in their films. As Richard Roud states, these directors shared a “passionate concern about political and social problems and a conviction that these problems have their place in the realm of art.”\(^99\) According to Roud, the Left Bank embodies a French avant-garde aesthetic that is deeply interested in problems of form. The hybrid genre of the film essay, which draws upon both feature film and documentary techniques, was often

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\(^97\) For a discussion of the intertextual links to Varda’s earlier films, see Ruth Cruickshank, “The Work of Art in the Age of Global Consumption: Agnès Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse.*” *L’esprit créateur* 47.3 (Fall 2007), 128.


the chosen space used by these directors to explore form. Hans Richter, a German avant-garde director, was the first to theorize this emerging form in 1940 in an article entitled “The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film.” The film essay frees the filmmaker who is no longer limited to presenting facts, information, and reality, but can give his or her aesthetic imagination free range.\textsuperscript{100} Like the written essay, which exceeds the bounds of literary genres, the film essay has the potential to be critical and playful, as in \textit{Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse}. With its collage-like composition and digressive structure, the film follows “the seemingly haphazard and associative ways of many essays.”\textsuperscript{101} Several of Varda’s other film projects, both fictional and documentary, have also been described as film essays, including \textit{L’Opéra mouffe} (1958), an exploration of a neighborhood in Paris as seen through the eyes of a pregnant woman; \textit{Jacquot de Nantes} (1991), a tribute to Varda’s husband, Jacques Demy that fictionally reconstructs his childhood; and most recently, \textit{Les Plages d’Agnès} (2008), a self-portrait of the filmmaker. In these and other acclaimed films like \textit{Cléo de 5 à 7} (1961) and \textit{Sans toit ni loi} (1985), Varda’s essayistic filmmaking positions itself in the overlap between fiction and nonfiction, the personal and the public/political.

Varda’s Cinécriture

Building upon Richter's theorization of the essay film, Alexandre Astruc developed the idea of a caméra-stylo as a means of cinematic writing, “just as flexible and subtle as written language.” 102 The director thus becomes an author, implicated in every step of making a film. Varda has famously branded her own style of auteur filmmaking as cinécriture, a cinematic writing that encompasses all aspects of the craft—“from script, location casting, editing, soundtrack, lens and lighting to marketing material.” 103 Varda herself has provided ample explanation of this approach, which involves a comprehensive consideration of every detail:

Un film bien écrit est également bien tourné, les acteurs sont bien choisis, les lieux aussi. Le découpage, les mouvements, les points de vue, le rythme du tournage et du montage ont été sentis et pensés comme les choix d’un écrivain, phrases denses ou pas, types de mots, fréquences des adverbes, alinéas, parenthèses, chapitres continuant le sens du récit ou le contrariant, etc.

En écriture, c’est le style. Au cinéma, le style c’est le cinécriture. 104

Alluding to Varda’s distinctive cinécriture, Alison Smith notes that the filmmaker’s scenes are often so dense in meaning that they require several viewings to unravel, as every element is “chosen with a view to an intended effect, message, meaning.” 105 In Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse, Varda’s meticulous editing provides a counterbalance to the loose elements of wandering and chance encounters that are implied by

gleaning as both a social and artistic practice. Her cinematic writing becomes a sort of cinematic gleaning, recovering images that would be cut or shunned by mainstream practices, as we will see further in the following sections.

03:37. *La Glaneuse: A Self-portrait*

Following the *rap de la récup*, Varda’s voice-over transitions us back from the city to the country, where we see a lone woman gleaning onions in a vast field:

> A la ville comme à la compagne, hier comme aujourd’hui, c’est toujours le même geste modeste de glaner. Mais de nos jours, il n’y a pas que des glaneuses. Il y a des glaneurs. Ce que j’ai remarqué en les filmant, c’est que chacun glane seul, contrairement aux peintures d’autrefois où on voyait toujours des groupes, rarement une glaneuse.

To illustrate her point, Varda returns to a shot of Breton’s *Le rappel des glaneuses*, whose community of women returning from gleaning contrasts with the footage of the solitary onion gleaner. In addition, the gendered aspect of gleaning is once again brought to the forefront. Varda’s narration here establishes two poles of opposition related to gleaning. On the one hand, gleaning in the historical past was a collective activity, gendered as feminine. On the other hand, gleaning in the historical present is a solitary act that is gendered as masculine. In one of the most symbolic scenes of the film that follows, Varda will conflate these oppositions in her dramatic mise-en-scène as a filmic gleaner.

After observing that most of the gleaners depicted in the past were part of groups, Varda concedes that there is one famous solitary gleaner represented in painting: Breton’s *La Glaneuse*. The shot returns to the dictionary page with the
black-and-white reproduction of the painting. In a movement of repetition, Varda sets off on a road trip to see the painting in person, just as she did for Millet’s *Les glaneuses*. The viewer is included as a passenger on this journey. From her car, Varda films the trucks passing by and intimates that she will return to the subject of the moving vehicles later: “Il y avait des grands camions. Mais ça, mais ça je vais y revenir plus tard.” Once arrived in the town of Arras, she introduces us to its square and museum before pointing her camera on the famous painting that she travelled to see. We see a close-up of the top half of the painting, bordered by a thick gold frame, and the strong, proud gaze of the gleaner, one hand on her hip, and the other arm crossing her body to hoist a bundle of wheat on her shoulder.

![Figure 7. Breton’s *La Glaneuse* in the Musée d’Arras](image)
In a long shot, Varda adopts the pose of Breton’s gleaner, standing alongside the painting and balancing a bale of wheat over her shoulder, which she releases dramatically to pick up her digital camera. In a voiceover, she identifies herself as the female gleaner of the film’s title: “L’autre glaneuse, celle du titre de ce documentaire, c’est moi. Je laisse volontiers tomber les épis de blé pour prendre la caméra.” In so doing, Varda symbolically replaces both the male painters and their painted female gleaners, becoming at once the subject and object of her film. She films, and is filmed; she gleans, and is the body that is gleaned. To highlight the scene’s staging, as well as the gender reversal from male painter to female camera artist, two men in suits stand atop stools and hold a tapestry behind Varda, creating the frame and background of her portrait. Such staging again points to the fictional
in the documentary, and adds a ludic touch to the scene.

In the sequence that follows, Varda expands on her self-portrait as a gleaner-artist, experimenting with her modern paintbrush, one of the key instruments of her *cinécriture*—her hand-held digital camera. Varda’s voice, set to the haunting chords of a violin, narrates the wonders of this tiny machine as she turns the camera on herself. We see a detailed shot of Varda’s pixilated eye, and then a hand mirror that turns to show Varda’s face, before the camera slowly pans across the pages of the camera’s manual, its diagrams and explanations: “Ces nouvelles petites caméras, elles sont numériques, fantastiques, elles permettent des effets stroboscopiques, des effets narcissiques et même hyperréalistiques.” Next, a camera not held by Varda makes a blurred sweep in slow motion across a room, eventually settling on Varda, reclined on a couch. Varda thrusts out her hand to cover the camera’s lens and prevent herself from being filmed. A surreal series of superimposed close-ups of Varda’s face set against a black screen ensues. In the next shot, Varda combs her thinning hair in a decentered close-up of the top half of her head, exposing the areas where it is balding and gray. Her off-screen voice narrates:

Non, non, ce n’est pas ‘O rage.’ Non, ce n’est pas ‘O désespoir.’ Ce n’est pas vieillesse, ennemi. Ce serait peut-être même vieillesse, mon amie. Mais tout de même, il y a mes cheveux et mes mains qui me disent que c’est bientôt la fin.

The violin music continues as the shot shifts to an extreme close-up of Varda’s wrinkled, spotted hand in the car on the way to Beauce, which signals an end to the film’s six-minute introduction and initiates the next long sequence on potato gleaning.
Figure 9. Self-portrait with a digital camera

Figure 10. The filmmaker's hand
A Feminist Aesthetics of Gleaning

Varda’s self-portrait of herself as a filmmaker and an aging woman may appear as an intrusion at first, but is in fact an integral part of the film’s project and key to understanding how Varda colors gleaning as a feminist act. As mentioned above, Varda usurps the place held by the male artists of 19th-century gleaning and presents herself as a 21st-century female filmmaker, digital camera in hand. An artist and its subject, Varda is both behind and in front of the camera, and joins the cast of the (primarily) male gleaners that she films—Claude, Alain, Francois, the psychotherapist, the chef, Charlie, Salomon, the Russian doll artist, and Louis Pons. Through her participation in the film alongside other gleaners, Varda reinjects a feminine presence in an activity that traditionally belonged to women. Varda thus doubly reclaims the feminine space of gleaning, as an artist of and a participant in gleaning. The film’s title, Les Glaneurs and la glaneuse, clearly acknowledges this, accenting Varda’s marked feminine presence in the film.

In addition, Varda’s choice to film her aging body, in particular through off-centered, extreme close-ups of her eyes, hair and hands, can be seen as an act of contestation against dominant modes of representation of female bodies as passive, young, beautiful and consumable objects of desire. Just as the rest of the film asks us to think differently about waste and rot, the interludes where Varda, at age 72, candidly exposes her wrinkles, thinning hair and age spots prompt us to reflect on how women, and their bodies, are represented in films. Adopting Laura Mulvey’s
terms, these images challenge the viewer’s visual pleasure by breaking down the patriarchal “voyeuristic-scopophilic gaze.” In her voice-over narration, Varda embraces her old age as a friend, but says that her aging body is a reminder that her life is nearing its end. In the same way that Varda recuperates images of ceiling mold, misshapen, rotting potatoes and expired dumpster food, she gleans ‘decomposing’ fragments of her body. Like with much of her other waste footage, Varda aestheticizes the self-filmed shots of her body through voice-over narration, music, and camera/editing effects that transform the images into curious new terrains. In one such instance that occurs midway through the film, Varda transitions from filming souvenirs gleaned from a trip to Japan to filming her body. As she zooms in on details of Rembrandt’s portrait of Saskia on a postcard, she notices her hand: “Saskia en détail . . . et puis, et puis ma main en détail.” As the camera slowly moves over the crevices in her hand, Varda announces, “C’est ça mon projet: filmer d’une main mon autre main. Entrer dans l’horreur. Je trouve ça extraordinaire. C’est pire. Je suis une bête que je ne connais pas.” With a mix of wonder and horror, of identification and alienation, Varda’s films her hand so closely that it ceases to resemble a hand, becoming an abstract work of art, the proof of the self becoming an other.

As justification for the inclusion of her self-portrait, Varda has said that as she asked the gleaners to share so much about themselves, she felt it was only fair to reciprocate and reveal part of herself as well. According to Varda, it was the discovery of the digital camera that allowed her the freedom to represent herself in

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the film. Varda shows this in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* in the first self-portrait sequence when she pushes out her hand to block a camera (held by someone else) from filming her. After she blocks the gaze of the other, she turns her own camera on herself. In an interview with Melissa Anderson, Varda explains:

> The third reason – which pushed me to begin and continue this film—was the discovery of the digital camera. I picked the more sophisticated of the amateur models (*the Sony DV CAM DSR 300*). I had the feeling that this is the camera that would bring me back to the early short films I made in 1957 and 1958. I felt free at that time. With the new digital camera, I felt I could film myself, get involved as a filmmaker. It ended up that I did film myself more, and it did involve me in the film. Later on, I felt that I was asking so much of these people to reveal themselves, to speak to me, to be honest with me, that I should reveal something of myself too.107

Varda frequently foregrounds the camera and its accessories in the film, even when they make their way into the shot accidentally. After filming a gleaning scene in a vineyard, Varda left the camera running by mistake. The lens is pointed at the grass and leaves on the ground, and the lens cap swings energetically into the shot as the camera moves. Varda’s voice announces that this is the “danse du bouchon de l’objectif” and sets the one-minute clip to a soundtrack of upbeat jazz that mimics the frenetic dance of the lens cap. This sequence not only highlights the tools of Varda’s trade, but it also brings us back to a meditation on gleaning as an artistic choice to include, and not eliminate, the mistakes that happen along the way. As in her self-portrait, Varda’s aesthetics of gleaning highlights imperfections and forces us to reconceptualize and revalorize them.

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Another aspect of Varda’s feminist aesthetics of gleaning not to be overlooked is her approach to filmmaking as a deconstruction of authoritative methods of representation. Throughout her career, it has been a concern of Varda’s to not impose pre-conceived conceptions of a film before it was made. In an article from 1975, Varda touched on this challenge in the making of her documentary *Daguerréotypes*:

> Enfin troisième point de ce documentaire, du point de vue féministe: comment peut-on faire un film qui ne soit pas un viol? Le terme de viol est peut-être un peu fort. Mais enfin il y a toute une race de documentaristes que je qualifierais volontiers d’agressifs.\(^{108}\)

Rather than adopt an authoritative stance, Varda presents a plurality of gleaners’ voices, among which figures her own, avoiding a “rape” of the matter of the film. Varda’s affinity for the alternative form of the film essay, replete with fragmentations, digressions, and unexpected juxtapositions, also plays a role in her refusal of ‘aggressive’ filmmaking practices.

Not only does Varda present a plurality of voices on gleaning, but she also travels around France in a wandering road documentary, traversing the country from the north to La Beauce, through the Jura, Provence, the Parisian suburbs and the Montreuil flea market in Paris. The theme of travel, of a journey of discovery, is emphasized repeatedly through the footage Varda takes of the road while travelling to the next site of gleaning. With her hand-held camera, she captures the road in front of her, playfully ‘catching’ the trucks passing beside her in her hand.

These travelling shots can be seen as another type of “wasted footage” that does little to advance the exploration of gleaning. But they underscore that the essay film is just as much (if not more) about the journey than the destination. As Sarah Cooper remarks, Varda lets herself be led by her subject, “revealing the extent to which she is finding out about things she did not know about those she films and about herself.”

The objects in the film call to her, Varda declares, after stumbling upon a pastiche painting of gleaners that combines both Breton and Millet’s figures at a roadside brocante. In Varda’s film, there is little linear narrative, but a constant sense of discovery and surprise.

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The emphasis on movement and its relation to a distinctly female subjectivity is present in several of Varda’s other films, most notably in *Cléo de 5 à 7* and *Sans toit ni loi*, where ambulatory female protagonists either come into their own (Cléo) or resist being pinned down by the male gaze (Mona) through their peregrinations in the city and countryside. Through her representations of women in movement in these films as well as in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Varda deconstructs authoritative, patriarchal methods of representations: Cléo evolves from object of desire to looking subject, Mona’s contradictory, fragmented, and elusive representation resists categorization and objectification, and Varda’s self-portrait proposes alternative ways of looking at and thinking about the female body. Commenting on Varda’s depiction of Mona in *Sans toit ni loi*, Susan Hayward aptly states, “We cannot fix the film any more than we can fix Mona, and it is in this de-fetishization of the text as well as the body-female that Varda asserts her own brand of feminist film-making practices.”110 The same can be said of *Les Glaneurs*, whose form (documentary, essay film, road movie, self-portrait) moves in-between genres, and whose female protagonist stages a transformation from the static-painted-gleaner of the past to the travelling, camera-wielding artist of the present.

One other way in which Varda deflects a patriarchal-authoritative stance is through the cultivation of a playful tone. Most notable in this respect are the scenes involving a lawyer or a judge in full regalia presents the laws on gleaning. Rather than interview these officials in their offices, Varda cultivates a quirky mise-en-

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scène of authority, hinting that the viewer should not take these figures of law too seriously, nor value their words more than those of the gleaners she interviews. In the first of such scenes, a lawyer dressed in an elaborate robe walks through a cabbage field and expounds upon the laws of gleaning, reading aloud 16th-century edict that authorizes gleaning on French soil between dawn and sundown. The lawyer’s scripted speech and overt dramatization contrasts with the candid portraits of the gleaners that surround it.

Figure 12. The Laws of Gleaning

Later, another lawyer stands next to city dumpsters and cites an edict that permits the destitute to glean. When Varda asks what the law says about gleaning for pleasure, the lawyer responds that as pleasure is a necessity, gleaning for pleasure is
legal. Items that are thrown away have no lawful owner, and therefore cannot be stolen. In reality, however, these legal provisions for gleaning have little force. As Varda shows, it is often the landowner who decides to allow or forbid gleaning after the harvest, and some supermarket owners protect their discarded food by pouring bleach into the dumpsters. Through her staging of costumed authority figures clearly performing, Varda prevents the viewer from assigning too much weight to their words, and they become one of the characters among the numerous cast of gleaning commentators in the film.

These scenes also show that gleaning exists in a legal gray zone, one that challenges and troubles our ideas of ownership and control. As Stoekl remarks,

> It’s no coincidence that the legal question comes up so often in this film: is it legal to glean in fields? Is it legal to salvage discarded objects in city streets? Is it legal to dumpster dive? Is it legal to protest against a store manager that douses discarded food with bleach so that it cannot be reclaimed? By posing and meditating on such questions, Varda’s film indicates the central question of consumer culture: what is the status of the purchased item after it has lost its initial desirability? When it becomes “waste”? Is it still “owned”? What is the status of its “disposal”?111

One particular vineyard owner states that in order to maintain the privileged status of their wine, the excess grapes must be wasted. Through juxtaposing portraits of gleaners with property-minded owners, Varda voices a critique of the distorted values of those who would rather let food go to waste than share with others.

111 Allan Stoekl, “Agnès Varda and the Limits of Gleaning,” 1
Art-Activism: A Potato, and Deux ans après

As I have outlined in this chapter, Varda’s cinéglanage is not only aesthetic, but bridges the ethical and political as well. As a social, environmental and cultural practice, gleaning offers us an alternative way of looking at waste as something to be recuperated rather than rejected, whether it be filmic waste, food waste, or the body wasting away. In the sequence that follows her first self-portrait, Varda points to the inseparability of aesthetic gleaning and activist gleaning as she participates in the gleaning of potatoes. She films as the potatoes are harvested from the earth by machines and then mechanically sorted on conveyor belts. Potatoes that are above or below the desired size for supermarket packages are systematically sorted out, resulting in about 24 tons of reject potatoes that are dumped back into the fields to rot. The location of the dumped potatoes is not made public, although some gleaners in-the-know trail the dump trucks and inform their friends. As Varda films a gleaner loading up his car with 150 kilos of potatoes, he points out a heart-shaped potato in the pile. Varda immediately says that she wants it, and reaches out her hand from behind the camera to take it. Varda begins to collect a bag of heart-shaped tubers to take home, and tells us that she is filming her hand as she gleans. Contemplating the potatoes at home, Varda has the idea to contact the Restos du Coeur, a charity that provides food for those in need. Volunteers and recipients of meals from the charity come to recuperate piles of potatoes. Later in the film, Varda films the potatoes that are sprouting and rotting and have become a treasured part of her home décor.
Since the release of *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, Varda’s heart-shaped potatoes have not only become an emblem for the film, but for Varda and her work as an artist as well. The potatoes she gleaned for her film in 2000 are featured on the cover of its 2002 follow-up film, *Deux ans après*. In Varda’s subsequent work, notably in her début exhibition as a gallery artist at the 2003 Venice Biennale, she gives a prominent place to potatoes. Her work “Patatutopia” features a triptych of screens playing footage of misshapen potatoes in the process of decay, surrounded by tons of real potatoes that were laid out on the gallery floor. Varda even greeted visitors to the exhibit dressed as a potato, footage of which can be seen in her latest project, *Les Plages d’Agnès* (2008).

On one level, the misshapen potato gleaned by Varda represents the deformities and abnormalities shunned by a society obsessed with standardization
and profit. It is the reject of an economic system that values only potatoes of a regular shape and size that can be efficiently packaged for supermarkets, abandoning the rest to waste and rot. Varda’s gesture to recuperate the non-conform potato is an act that opposes these consumerist, capitalist values. The potato’s heart shape in turn suggests the inclusiveness and generosity inherent to the act of gleaning, a gesture of caring for others and caring for the earth. Varda initially collects the potatoes as aesthetic objects, but their heart shape triggers her to think of calling the *Restos du coeur*, implicating herself in the material gleaning of this waste as well. Artistically- and socially-motivated gleaning are thus intertwined in Varda’s *patates coeurs*. As organic matter that withers and decays over time, as Varda shows in *Deux ans après*, the potatoes also draw obvious parallels to Varda’s aging body in her filmic self-portrait. In recent interviews, Varda has said that the heart-shaped potatoes she gleaned and later received as gifts from fans of the film became essential to her own comprehension of her work. She became fascinated by the various ways in which the potatoes aged and decayed, yet continued to produce sprouts, creating new life. Varda asserts that the germination of the potatoes launched her third career as a visual artist (her first career was as a photographer, and her second a filmmaker), prompting her to photograph and film the potatoes in what would become her submission to the Biennale: “C’est comme ça que je suis passée à un autre métier.” In “Patatutopia,” which has now been shown in numerous galleries and museums across the world, Varda said she sought

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to approach the beauty that is in waste, in things that have been abandoned and forgotten. As the potato decomposes, it germinates, providing the hope of regeneration from what was once deemed waste.

These same cyclical, regenerative properties of the potato can also be seen at work in Varda’s decision to spawn a second film from her first one, which she was unable to leave behind and declare finished. In part because of the outpouring of letters and awards that Varda received, and in part because she was curious about the gleaners she met that had left a deep impression on her, Varda sets off across France with her camera once more. Many of the elements from the first film remain the same: the soundtrack, the travelling shots on the road, interviews with gleaners and suggestive montages. Varda opens up the dialogic space of the film even further in the sequel by visiting some of the viewers who wrote letters or sent gifts, in addition to visiting many of the main ‘characters’ from the first film. The network of actants from the first film sprouts and diverges as new conversations encourage new trips of discovery, as Varda attentively listens to what her spectators have gleaned from the film.

Whereas Les Glaneurs et la glaneuses concludes with an act of artistic gleaning—Varda’s unearthing of Hédouin’s painting Les Glaneuses fuyant l’orage (1852) from a museum’s basement, the sequel ends on a decidedly more political note. Varda tells us that she is wrapping up the sequel on May 1, 2002, a day of celebration of laborers and the working classes. “Et quel premier mai!” exclaims

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Varda, “celui d’une marche contre le Front national, contre l’extrême droite de Le Pen.” One minute of footage of the demonstration against France’s extreme right-wing party follows. The young demonstrators are energetic and the mood is upbeat as drums roll and protesters chant, “nous sommes tous des enfants d’immigrés” while holding signs that read “non au racisme” and “non au fascisme.” Provocatively, this footage is couched between two poetic interludes where Varda explores the contours of a deeply creviced, sprouting potato in close detail with her camera, until the credits begin to roll. With the exception of her introductory remarks on the protest, Varda provides no further voice-over commentary on either the potatoes or the march, but her intent is clear. These protestors are part of the community of gleaners, fighting against exclusion, against the rejection and marginality of people who have been designated as trash by at least a part of French society. The march is an image of connection; of a community coming together that brings us back to Varda’s focus on people. The concept of gleaning dilates as Varda suggests that the protestors, film viewers, and any who have a non-conform heart for difference are gleaners.
Chapter 4

The Poetic Notebooks of Sabine Macher

Je reste dans la douceur du reste.

--Sabine Macher, Rien ne manque au manque

Sabine Macher is the author of a dozen poetic notebooks, the first of which, *Le lit très bas*, was published in 1992. In Macher’s writing, the objects we tend not to notice in daily life surge into focus. It is a writing in and of the present, the quotidian, the prosaic, where the poetic finds its place as Macher (re)marks the unremarkable. Her writing is both intimate and distant, poignant and understated as she notes her days, her writing time, the posture of her body writing, and the paper, pen, ink and other instruments of her handiwork.

In addition to writing, Macher has made a career in dance since the 1980s, and has also worked as a choreographer, theatre actor, photographer, translator, and, most recently, a soundscape and sound installation artist. Born in West Germany in 1955, Macher spent part of her childhood in the United States and has lived since 1976 in France, where she came to stay for a year abroad and then decided to settle. Although her mother tongue is German, Macher writes in French, a decision she says was motivated by political, personal, and aesthetic reasons. As she

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115 Her piece on Raymond Roussel’s novel *La Doublure*, a novel in verse, was featured at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2013.
reveals in an interview with Valérie Rouzeau and Jean-Pascal Dubost, her first attempts to write in French led her to renounce the idea of writing in a foreign language altogether: “J’étais impressionnée par cette montagne de français, j’acceptais l’idée qu’aucune langue ne peut s’apprendre assez bien pour écrire en elle, à part celle qu’on a apprise ‘sans le vouloir.’”116 She came to see writing in German while living in France as a means of protecting it, keeping it a secret from prying eyes, even when left in full view. Her thoughts on this changed during a trip to Germany “en pleine hystérie badermeinhof,” when her car was searched and police officers thumbed through her journal.117 This violation, she says, was possible because she shared something as intimate as language with the officers, although she felt that they scarcely belonged to the same species as herself.118 Her decision to begin writing in French was thus in part a choice to distance herself from German culture and open herself to the culture and language of the present that she had chosen as her own: “le secret qui m’avait d’abord protégée m’est apparu comme un enfermement; j’ai eu envie de me faire comprendre par les gens avec qui je partageais le présent, la langue d’origine était devenue la langue du passé.”119 A second reason that Macher began writing in French, seven years after her arrival in France, was a chagrin d’amour, a desire to send a sort of anonymous missive to a man she loved through the detour of literature. Macher’s third stated reason for writing in a language other than her mother tongue was one that she discovered in

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117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
the process of writing—the corporal foreignness of the words, and the delightful lack of mastery she felt in handling a language that seemed to extend beyond her grasp. This foreignness allowed her both an “agreeable distance” between herself and the text, at the same time that it awakened her perception of the “bodies” of words, their contours and shapes:

J’étais dans la pauvreté que j’aimais, mais encore “sans le vouloir,” j’avais peu de choix et aucune chance de virtuosité, je sentais une distance inéluctable et agréable avec les mots, je sentais leur corps, je savais qu’ils me dépassaient, que je maniais quelque chose que je ne maitrisais pas, et cela m’a plu, ce mélange de cran et d’impuissance.\textsuperscript{120}

As Macher intimates, her coming-into-being as a writer originates from a place of lack, a paucity of words, a disavowal of perfection and mastery. The understated, distinct otherness of Macher’s voice is, in part, precisely what makes her writing stand out as original, “singular,” “sui generis.”\textsuperscript{121} The sense of something vaguely askew lurks in her notes, lending a poignancy, a poetry, to her fragments of the ordinary.\textsuperscript{122} Not only do Macher’s notes take root in impoverished soil, in a “\textit{pauvreté},” but they are also dirtied, contaminated by the unconscious grafting of one language onto another. Speaking to this, Macher has said that while others have remarked the influence of German on her writing, this is a blind spot that is of no particular concern to her: “L’influence que l’allemand peut avoir dans mon français,

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{122} In the same vein, Met likens Sabine Macher to a Miles Davis constantly on the verge of hitting the wrong note (\textit{la fausse note}). Ibid, 76.
c'est plutôt vous qui pouvez la déceler, on me fait parfois des remarques dans ce sens, mais cela reste dans un point aveugle et ce point ne me soucie pas."\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{The Poetic Notebook}

It is fitting that Macher should choose the unpolished form of the poetic notebook as her preferred genre of expression. The \textit{carnet poétique}, once mainly conceived of as the preparatory notes or drafts to be refined and reworked into a more finished form, has in more recent times been conceptualized as a publishable text in its own right. In his article, "Fausses notes: pour une poétique du carnet," Philippe Met lays out a history and a contextualization of the poetics of the notebook, a practice and a domain that can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the beginnings of modernity.\textsuperscript{124} Met points to the emergence of the form in Baudelaire's \textit{Fusées} and \textit{Mon coeur mis à nu}, Rimbaud's \textit{Une saison en enfer}, Valéry's \textit{Cahiers} and Reverdy's \textit{En vrac}, \textit{Le Gant de crin}, and \textit{Le livre de mon bord}. These early formations were part of a more general trend towards fragmented, hybrid forms like the prose poem, as Dominique Combe has observed:

\begin{quote}
Autour du fragment et du poème en prose gravitent au XIXe siècle une nébuleuse de ‘petits’ genres incertains et indécis, qui renvoient tous peu ou prou à des ‘formes brèves’ en prose—’rhapsodies,’ ‘fantaisies,’ ‘caprices,’ récits de rêve ou d’opium, ekphrasis, carnets poétiques, etc.—, qui sont le plus souvent recueillis dans des ouvrages au statut hybride.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Sept Questions}, 11.
\textsuperscript{125} Dominique Combe, \textit{Poésies. Une saison en enfer. Illuminations d’Arthur Rimbaud} (Paris: Gallimard,
According to Met, the second half of the 20th century, and the turn of the 21st century in particular, saw a surge in published poetic notebooks in France. In designating the relatively new corpus of poetic notebooks and their practitioners, Met includes such well-known names as Francis Ponge, René Char, Joë Bousquet, Philippe Jaccottet, Lorand Gaspar, Henri Thomas, Georges Perros, Pierre-Albert Jourdan, and André du Bouchet. Among the “younger generation” of notebook poets, he lists Christian Hubin, Jean-Michel Maulpoix, Gil Jouanard, Sabine Macher, Yves Charnet, Gérard Haller, Yves Leclair, Daniel Leuwers, Olivier Barbarant, and Antoine Emaz. Among this group of writers, says Met, two main paradigms dominate poetic notebook practices and theories. The first, of which Jaccottet is the spokesman, sees the note as the brute, “unclean” state that must be refined, transcended, in order to arrive at the more valuable, polished poem: “Mais comment passer de certaines notes poétiques au poème?” interrogates the poet in La Semaison. Ponge, on the other hand, sees notes, and other ‘waste matter’ surrounding the text (variants, drafts, sketches, discards and mistakes) on equal footing with the text proper, which is always itself in a constant state of mutation. For Ponge, the genesis of a work is the work, and deserves to be valued, or published, as such.

Interestingly, both of these paradigms point to the waste matter or waste making that is inherent to the poetic notebook as a genre and practice. In Jaccottet’s view, notes are waste products of writing that must eventually be discarded

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126 Philippe Jaccottet, La Semaison (Paris, Gallimard, 1984), 47.
completely; they are what must be necessarily taken away, scrubbed off, in order to arrive at the poem, sparkling and pure. Ponge, however, celebrates the waste-making that inevitably occurs with writing, and argues for the inclusion and revaluation of these textual by-products.

Macher, the only poetess among the cohort of poetic notebook writers designated by Met, remains aloof when it comes to engaging in metapoetic reflections or theorizations of the generic divides, although she does once interrogate the literary status of her notes as “writing”: “je devais arrêter de penser que ce que j’écris dans ce journal deviendra de l’écriture, mais je le pense toujours.”\(^{128}\) She stands apart from the literary sphere, or at least doesn’t frequently comment on it in her writing, which is generally devoid of allusions, or cultural references of any sort. In the Ponge/Jacottet divide, she clearly belongs on the side of the Pongeans, as almost her entire oeuvre consists of published notes. However, one can question the rawness, or unrefined ‘trashiness’ of Macher and other poets’ notes. It is clear that Macher does not publish her notes in their rawest of states (an illusion in any case), without reworking or reediting them in some way or another. In several of her notebooks, Macher even highlights her manipulation of the notes. For example, in Rien ne manque au manque, she numbers her note fragments, cuts them into separate pieces, scatters them and puts them back together in the order in which she collects them. She gives fictional names to her daughter, whom she calls by varying, sometimes unpronounceable names in different notebooks – xol, alixe, xerù, lou. Moreover, Macher frequently writes of writing her notebooks with ink

\(^{128}\) Un temps à se jeter, (Montrouge: Maeght Editeur, 1995), 46.
pens, and draws attention to the blots, smears and leaks of the ink on the page. The book that the reader holds in her hands, however, is quite obviously (and necessarily) a cleaned-up, typed and printed copy that constitutes an act of literary polishing. In an interview, Macher admits as much, stating that her published works have been reworked, primarily through cuts and montage: “La matière brute des trois premiers livres était mon journal, mes ‘écrits’ en sont une forme retravaillée, essentiellement par des coupes et du montage.”

Despite this tension between the illusion of the note as the first, unworked thought jotted down, and the reality that textual manipulation and refinement does take place between the time of writing and publication, it is clear that Macher’s choice to use fragmented form of the poetic notebook is a gesture that places value on the unperfected and the unfinished, the mistakes (“je fais des ratures”) or the waste that other authors might discard in favor of a more final product. In the pages that follow, I will trace the aesthetics of waste in Sabine Macher’s notebooks, from her thematization of the materials, by-products, and process of writing as organic waste, to waste as a way of leaving one’s mark, to notes that figure waste as works of art. As with Varda, we can discern a distinctly feminine voice in Macher’s aesthetics of waste, colored in these notes as a discourse of maternal lack, loss and failure, a rejection of the idealized narrative of the plenitude of motherhood.

\textit{Macher’s oeuvre}

Before delving into Macher’s aesthetics of waste, I will first provide a brief

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{129} “Sept questions,” 12.
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Rien ne manque au manque}, (Paris: Denoël, 1999), 44.
overview and introduction to the notebooks that I have chosen to discuss in this chapter, at times drawing attention to their waste-content, and at other times sketching some of the other themes that run through Macher’s work. A ‘minor’ poet, Macher is little known outside of the small world of contemporary French poetry, although her work has been well received in the handful of published reviews it has received. There are only two full-length articles on her work, both by Philippe Met, one interview, and several short, 1-3 page articles published in poetry reviews and newspapers, in addition to the stray snippets on her work found online. In 2014, *Le carnet d’a* was translated into English by Eleni Sikelianos and published as *The L Notebook*. Macher was also among one of the 18 poets whose work was featured and translated in the 2016 anthology *Writing the Real: A Bilingual Anthology of Contemporary French Poetry*, a sign that her work is gaining in visibility in the Anglophone sphere.

Macher has published regularly, and prolifically, since *Le lit très bas* (Maeght) in 1992. Her works include *Ne pas toucher ne pas fondre* (Maeght, 1993); *Un temps à se jeter* (Maeght, 1995); *Une mouche gracieuse de profil* (Maeght, 1997); *Rien ne manque au manque* (Denoël, 1999); *Adieu les langues de chat* (Seghers, 2002); *Le poisson d’encre dans ma bouche n’est pas à sa place*, (1 :1, 2003); *Portraits inconnus* (Melville, 2003); *himmel und erde*, suivi du *carnet d’a.*, (Théâtre Typographique, 2005); *deux coussins pour Norbert* (Le bleu du ciel, 2009); *résidence absolue* (Isabelle Sauvage, 2011).

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Each of Macher’s works is written in variations of fragmented forms, from the short, minimalist lines of *carnet d’a* to the more dense paragraph islands in *Le lit très bas*. Macher eschews capitalization in most of her notebooks (the exceptions being *Rien ne manque au manque, Une mouche gracieuse de profil* and *Portraits inconnus*), reflecting her commitment to a writing of the low, the small, the everyday.133 Not to be confused with the diary, Macher’s notebooks are non-chronological and obscure, rather than adhere to, any sense of linear temporality. Macher specifies that her notes are not self-portraiture, not about her as a subject, but rather that the notes reflect what passes through her, taking on her traits.134 To highlight the most pertinent examples of Macher’s aesthetics of waste, I have contained my analysis to just five of her works, briefly summarized below: *Le lit très bas, Ne pas toucher ne pas fondre, Rien ne manque au manque, Adieu les langues de chat* and *carnet d’a*.

**Le lit très bas**

Unlike in her subsequent notebooks, the fragments in Macher’s début work are organized into titled sections. In the first half, Macher inhabits various spaces as she travels, not chronicling the journey (no travel log), but noting the particularities of her changing environs. In the process, Macher figures trash as a way to leave her trace, to mark a space and make it her own. Trash and mess, like the ink that bleeds

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133 Macher describes her penchant for the small things: “Je suis attirée par le petit, par la vision de près, j’aime m’approcher. Je pense en termes de particules, de microbes, d’insectes, de molécules, de cellules, d’atomes, de poussière.” (“Sept questions,” 13). Macher’s banishment of capitalized words might also be interpreted as a turning away from her native language, German.
134 “Sept questions,” 11.
through her papers, comes to signify a uniquely personal imprint. In this notebook, Macher also photographs trash and messes, reframing the waste as beautiful, poetic. *Le lit très bas* is at the same time deeply anchored in the maternal, and its last two sections, “grosses journées” and “à plat ventre” designate Macher’s ante- and post-partum states surrounding the birth of her first child. These titles, however, do not dictate or dominate the content of the notes placed under them. References to her pregnancy and daughter’s birth slip in and out almost unnoticed, in between Macher’s detached observations of sounds and the weather:

> dans la maison les rideaux à mouche font un
> bruit de personnes
> les gens passent au ras du muret
> l’enfant trouve un prénom

> le vent est mon ennemi
> toujours à cause des feuilles
> le temps change et mon humeur

> il pleut il faut fermer la fenêtre pour le froid
> je lis ensuite je regarde longtemps la trame
> du pull-over gris

*Le lit très bas* knits tight connections between maternity, writing, and a state of lack, loss and failure, implicating herself (not having enough milk to feed her child), Macher’s mother (“je lis le journal de ma mère sur ses enfants petits, dont moi.”)¹³⁶, her maternal tongue (“j’écris dans une autre langue que ma langue maternelle”)¹³⁷, and her grandmother, whose pen she writes with and whose death occurs just before the birth of her daughter. Macher’s grandmother and daughter also figure in many of Macher’s subsequent works.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 144.
¹³⁷ Ibid, 150.
**Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre**

In Macher’s second publication, she continues to foreground the waste that she encounters, remarking on, photographing, and otherwise conserving waste, including broken plates and animal excrement. Macher also continues to paint mises-en-scène of herself in the act of writing, always remarking on the *hors-texte*, the waste matter of scribbles or ink stains; the pen that is blocked or catches in the paper. Macher’s daughter is here too, often in confessions of maternal deficiency: “alixe hurle la nuit, j’ai peur de ne pas être assez sa mère.”138 Her grandmother’s presence resurfaces as a maternal link to Macher’s writing; cockroaches are seen in the kitchen:

j’écris avec la porte-plume de ma grand-mère, j’imagine ma mère comprenant que j’écris avec la plume de sa mère dans la lettre que je lui écrirai tout à l’heure.139

[...] 

sous ma feuille les autres feuilles, écrites à la plume de ma grand-mère, en transparence sous le calque.

[...] 

j’ai la peau qui tire, mes yeux sont fatigués, comme si je pleurais des larmes sèches. alixe s’est réveillée en pleurant, je l’ai recouchée en lui disant qu’il était trop tôt, elle pleurait fort,

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138 Ibid, 51.
139 Ibid, 50.
je suis sortie, j’ai fermé la porte. Ulrich est allé après, je ne sais pas ce qu’ils ont fait, mais elle ne pleurait plus.

j’ai ouvert le stylo pour voir ce qu’il y avait dans le ventre et l’encre de chine a coulé sur mes doigts et sur la feuille de calque.¹⁴⁰

Rien ne manque au manque

The premise of *Rien ne manque au manque* is a game of fragmentation and reconstruction that implicates both the author and the reader. The notes, numbered, dated and often time-stamped, are cut, gathered, and thrown into the air. Macher collects the ‘ruins’ and places the now randomly-ordered notes into the book to be published: “Je suis la femme du papier, je le coupe et le touche, je l’envoie dans le monde, tout part, je reste, en haut de l’immeuble sans ascenseur.”¹⁴¹ An attempt to rearrange the fragments in chronological order is a confounding task—there are multiples of some numbers, with conflicting dates (multiple notebooks?), and on one occasion, she notes that she fabricates the time:

J’imagine le père nu, un corps sans espace, je tourne la page, je regarde l’heure, elle est dépassée, j’arrête et je remets le capuchon et la date et l’heure et le temps, j’invente le temps.

dix minutes le 19/3/97 de 14 h 25 à 14 h 35¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ *Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre*, 40-41.
¹⁴² Ibid, 90.
Fake time, lost time, lost notebooks, notebooks that confuse the time ("c’est la deuxième fois que le cahier du matin doit contenir le soir. Il n’y a plus d’heure quand les pages manquent”143), notebooks in the trash (“Le carnet rose est perdu dans une poubelle depuis octobre, ou dans une chambre”144 55). —this is the void, the wasteland where Macher situates her writing. She occupies the space of loss, la manque, the space of words thrown away, writing, “je garde la perte”:

J’ai perdu le premier cahier du matin, il y a une semaine moins une heure.
Le soleil est une lueur ronde dans le ciel gris clair autour de lui.
C’était dans le train de liège. Je venais d’écrire sur le tatoueur dans le compartiment avec moi.
Je garde la perte. Je ne veux plus écrire le temps. Les plantes me regardent, les vertes.
Je change la cartouche de mon stylo qui s’est vidé de son encre dans l’avion.
Je sais et je ne sais pas. Ce carnet vient du japon, je ne sais plus via qui.
Derrière les genoux ça chauffe, à cause de la résille.
C’est midi, l’heure entre les heures et entre les carnets, celui-ci est à peine commençant, un chant.

le 14/10/96145

In addition to the themes of loss and time, the threads of motherhood, plant life, cockroaches, and writing utensils are also pulled through Rien ne manque au manque.
Adieu les langues de chat

Donning an electric pink cover, Adieu les langues de chat is the notebook that resulted from Macher’s commission to write erotic poetry. The notes she published constitute her refusal, or failure to do so, at least in a conventional way:

la commande d’un texte érotique ne l’est pas.

brrr trouve qu’il fait froid dans mon lit.

je n’ai pas honte de sa langue qui touche mes lèvres, mes dents, ma langue, ma double bouche, son unique dent, le pont qui s’ensuit, je ne veux pas écrire ces mots et je les écris.\footnote{146 Adieu les langues de chat, (Paris: Seghers, 2009). 9.}

In defiance of the conventions of the genre, Macher often makes it explicit that she is writing on demand, against her will: “je suis sûre qu’il faut refuser cette demande ridicule de texte érotique, mais je continue à écrire dans le carnet que j’ai cousu avec du fil gris.”\footnote{Ibid, 21.} Macher narrates her erotic encounters with the same detached tone she adopts to describe the mise-en-scène of her body while writing, hand on the pen, or manuscript on her thigh:

on change de sens, il fait une culbute de façon à inverser tête et pied dans le lit, il s’assoit sur les fesses, il déroule le dos en s’allongeant dans la longueur du lit, et moi, comme je ne le quitte pas, que son sexe reste dans le mien, je quitte le drap avec mon dos et me retrouve en l’air, la tête au-dessus de la tête de d’yzzbrkrurthbgxvs.\footnote{Ibid, 89.}
The silly, unpronounceable pseudonyms of her lovers—qlsur, kvxs, vxrs:n, ntrqgh, mdm—of which there are over 25, coupled with detached descriptions of the scene of love-making (mswlg a toujours des kleenex près de son lit pour essuyer le sperme\textsuperscript{149}), contributes to an anti-erotic poetics, but one that, in at least some fragments, finds its own intimacy and erotics despite itself. In the interdiction, “ne pas dire érotique ou poétique,”\textsuperscript{150} an erotic, poetic voice emerges:

qlsur crie quand il jouit, des cris courts qui en se rapprochant deviennent un seul cri sur une seule note, assez haute pour un homme.

des vaches se tiennent immobiles en troupeau, chacune regarde dans une autre direction que sa voisine, sur la terre claire, des vaches beiges.

c'est le premier homme que j'entends crier pour jouir.\textsuperscript{151}

As the desiring subject, who ruminates on which of her lovers in Paris she wants to sleep with, before deciding on both, Macher inverses the paradigm of dominant male and passive female. The identities of her lovers are indistinguishable and overlapping, part of the landscape of objects rather than subjects in their own right.\textsuperscript{152} Scattered among and within these (non-) erotic notes, Macher continues to figure her body at the scene of writing, as well as the waste, spills and messes of life:

je m’arrête pour regarder des papiers par terre, de plus en plus de bouts de papier pour faire des carnets, je laisse se lever une jambe en baissant le tronc pour toucher le papier par terre et au bout de la jambe le pied touche le bord du seau, le soulève.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, 52.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{152} In Macher’s other notebooks, her male companions are very often depicted as sleeping while she writes, painting them as present but passive bodies in her world.
The fragments of *carnet d’a* are more sparse than in Macher’s previously-discussed works, arranged in a poetry-like layout of single lines separated by white space. This minimalist notebook, which contains no page numbers, centers on the absence ("*carnet d’a d’absence*”) resulting from a painful romantic separation. It again underscores a state of lack, and runs back to the Macherian motifs of time and the body’s movement in writing:

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je pense à qui j’ai pensé en achetant ce carnet jaune dehors rouge dedans
à l’ombre autour de ses yeux
l’ombre dans sa bouche
je ne connais pas bien ses mains
je suis sur la mezzanine avec une pâquerette dans un coquetier
je tourne la première page du carnet d’a
il y a des carnets de tout
la main gauche est posée les doigts en éventail
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153 Ibid, 98.
Macher’s Aesthetics of Waste

Having theorized Macher’s language and choice of genre as forms of waste, I now turn to a close reading of the theme of waste across a handful of her works. Waste, trash, and the related spills, breaks, and leaks foregrounded in Macher’s notes appear in many forms, from the very material of the recycled paper of peels she writes on, to photographic portraits of trash. In part a natural extension of Macher’s attention to the everyday objects of life, waste is also essential to Macher’s conception of her writing. It ties her writing to the organic, and brings it towards the bodily. In a more metaphoric way, a feminine aesthetics of waste is at work in Macher’s revelations of motherhood as a site of deficiency and lack. Taken as a whole, Macher’s writing inhabits a sort of wasteland, a space of lack and loss that becomes the spring, and mark, of her unique poetics.

154 himmel und erde, suivi du carnet d’á., (Courbevoie: Théâtre typographique, 2005), first page.
The Waste Material of the Notebook

As Macher frequently mentions, her notebooks are, quite literally, fabricated from waste. The paper of peels (“feuilles de pelure”) that she sews into handmade notebooks reflect not only the organic process of Macher’s writing of the everyday, but also the value she places on the leftover and the discarded. The sheets from recycled peels are of various vegetable origins (“papier pelure d’oignon”\textsuperscript{155}) and colors, as Macher remarks in the opening lines of \textit{Adieu les langues du chat}:

\begin{quote}
  sur papier pelure blanc la commande n’est pas érotique
  sur papier pelure orange l’orange l’est
  sur papier pelure bleu ciel ou pas\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

The evocation of peels also points to a writing of layers, a palimpsestic writing that is hinted at in Macher’s writing in a number of notes that portray her writing on other manuscripts or books, using these writings as a physical support for her own notebook, as in the following examples from \textit{Rien ne manque au manque}:\textsuperscript{157}

\begin{quote}
  Je regarde le livre qui supporte mon carnet, j’ai besoin d’un livre pour écrire sur mes genoux.\textsuperscript{158}

  […]

  j’écris en m’appuyant sur les textes que je vais lire ce soir.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Le lit très bas}, 154.
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Adieu les langues de chat}, 7.
\textsuperscript{157} For a more detailed look at the use of the palimpsest in Macher, see Philippe Met, “Autour de Sabine Macher et Gil Jouanard. Le Carnet poétique, repères et coordonnées,” \textit{Écritures contemporaines} 7 (2003), 236.
\textsuperscript{158} 53.
\textsuperscript{159} 72.
These peels, layers, and fragments constitute Macher's writing on trash, to imitate the author's own frequent exploitation of the dual meanings of sur in her mises-en-scène of writing (“j’écris sur mes cuisses”\textsuperscript{160}).

**Pen Scratches and Ink Bleeds: The Waste Products of Macher’s Writing**

In addition to this paper of peels, Macher also prizes the “by-products” of her writing, in the form of ink stains and pen scratches. She lingers on the sight of her pre-writing scribblings, as she unclogs her pen in *Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre*:

\begin{quote}
J’écris avec des traits toujours plus fins sur mon papier calque. avant de pouvoir écrire, je mets un moment à déboucher le canal de mon stylo. j’aime les petits gribouillis partout sur les enveloppes et les papiers autour de moi, ils proviennent de ce débouchage ; je mets le stylo verticalement et je le bouge sans appuyer dans tous les sens. au début ça gratte puis il y a des traces d’encre sèche puis l’encre de chine arrive,\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

Macher is equally fond of the towel covered in ink stains that she uses to wipe off her pen:

\begin{quote}
j’aime beaucoup le torchon blanc plein de taches d’encre avec lequel j’essuie la plume après avoir écrit. c’est un bout d’oreiller de la tante zis.\textsuperscript{162}
\end{quote}

Or again, “je prends le petit torchon . . . plein de taches d’encre. je le regarde, je le sens, j’y essuie ma plume parce que je m’arrête d’écrire.”\textsuperscript{163} This obsessive attention

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{160} Rien ne manque au manque, 7.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{97}.
\textsuperscript{162} Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre, 103.
and care not only to the by-products of writing, but also to her writing utensils, is what Met has described as Macher’s “fetishization” of the material objects of writing, which are often placed in direct contact with her body as she writes.¹⁶⁴

Macher’s writing is messy, it stains her fingers and bleeds onto other surfaces, necessitating the use of blotting paper to absorb the excess:

quand j’écris, je mets la feuille de buvard blanc sous mes feuilles de pelure.

puis le vent les envoie balader.¹⁶⁵

At the same time that Macher points to the excess of her writing, its leaking, bleeding, she also underscores the defectiveness of her tools, her pen that is clogged or that catches in the paper (“le stylo accroche dans la fibre du papier népalais”)¹⁶⁶, preventing her from writing (“j’ai réparé mon stylo fin, il n’avait plus d’encre”)¹⁶⁷. In this way, Macher figures waste in its opposing senses of both excess and faulty. In the last note of Le lit très bas, Macher’s writing literally comes to an end when her pen tears through the paper and leaks ink:

en écrivant, avec la plume, j’accroche la pointe dans le papier pelure d’oignon et elle passe l’encre de l’autre côté.¹⁶⁸

**Writing Maternal Lack**

Macher’s pens not only leak, they are also frequently lost, as are some of her notebooks. Macher’s thematization of loss is also intricately woven into the

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¹⁶³ Ibid, 119.
¹⁶⁵ Le Lit très bas, 45.
¹⁶⁶ Rien ne manque au manque, 20.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 30.
¹⁶⁸ 154.
conception of her writing as maternal, a theme that begins in *Le lit très bas* with the
death of her grandmother followed by the birth of her daughter a few weeks later:

grosses journées
aroser les plantes rincer les fleurs
humidifier les feuilles
ma grand-mère est morte
dire ma grand-mère est morte

mon enfant est toujours dedans

The figure of Macher’s grandmother haunts her notebooks after her death,
frequently through mentions of her grandmother’s pen. Macher’s representation of
herself becoming a mother is also colored by lack, notably her partial inability to
breastfeed:

d’autres me nourrissent, d’autres la nourrissent
mon ventre n’est plein ou vide que de nourriture
mes seins sont petits

elle pleurait sans qu’on sache pourquoi, on m’a dit que mon lait n’était pas assez nourrissant

In her notebooks, Macher paints a portrait of motherhood that, while not completely
devoid of positive emotions, is certainly more nuanced, rawer, than one might
expect: “c’est difficile d’avoir un enfant. parfois je regrette, je trouve que c’est trop
difficile.” In *Rien ne manque au manque*, she refers to her daughter neutrally as
“la fille” or “l’enfant,” and often remarks when her daughter interrupts her writing:

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169 118.
170 *Le lit très bas*, 123.
171 *Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre*, 47.
172 *Le lit très bas*, 147.
“la fille me demande à qui j’écris [...] je ne parle pas [...] Quand je dis que j’ai besoin d’écrire, elle me laisse.”\textsuperscript{173} At other times, Macher depicts herself in the role of the child, and her daughter as the parent: “La fille vient et me demande si j’ai mal au ventre. Elle me dit que je bois trop de thé.”\textsuperscript{174} Although Macher lovingly documents bathing her pen in \textit{Rien ne manque au manque}, (“je le lave et le baigne, l’essuie et lui change l’encre”)\textsuperscript{175} there is no such scene for her daughter, who remains a frequent, but distant presence. In a sense, Macher appears to be writing against an idealized discourse of motherhood as plenitude, pointing instead to the difficulties, regrets, inconveniences, and sense of lack, of not being “enough,” that comes with her role as a mother. By figuring the maternal as originating in a space of lack, Macher recuperates a less visible side of motherhood that is often excluded or repressed.

\textit{The Signature in the Trash Can}

The attention given to leaked ink, ink stains, pen scratches and paper made of peels comprises part of a general fetishization of trash and waste found throughout Macher’s poetic notebooks. But Macher doesn’t only feature writerly waste in her works—she also notes trash in its most literal state, and down to the smallest detail, as in the following catalogue of discarded items in \textit{Adieu les langues de chat}:

\begin{center}
dans la poubelle je mets, par-dessus la branche d’orchidée, les roses jaunes de zklsjf cuites au soleil, deux bouts de pain dont un amené de Paris, des épluchures de carottes, de poivron rouge et d’oignon blanc,
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{173} 26.
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Rien ne manque au manque}, 85.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid, 73.
le sachet transparent de la verveine, des feuilles de thé kukicha, les fanes des carottes qui ont du goût, la peau orange d’un agrume qui s’appelle minola, le filtre à café rempli de marc d’il y a trois jours.176

By enumerating the contents of her trash bin, Macher provides us with a garbage archeology that reveals what she has done and eaten, and where she has been, and with whom. Whereas other writers might skip over such mundane details as what they toss into the trash, Macher carefully enumerates each item she discards, thereby according a unique, even poetic, value to her waste. Further, the details Macher provides—the provenance of her bread, the specific type of tea leaves thrown away, and that Marc made coffee three days ago—provide an intimate look into Macher’s life. In other passages, trash is a part of the background that surges into focus in the fragment-note:

Derrière moi le sachet en plastique qui sert de poubelle s’est mis à faire un bruit en bougeant, je me retourne pour le regarder et je vois juste encore le mouchoir en boule que j’avais jeté par-dessus, sur la cime du sac, il y a quelque temps, qui roule et tombe par terre à côté. le bruit très joli krrrchkrrrgrrch s’arrête.177 (AD 111).

In terms of her own trash, Macher is deliberate in what she allows to be seen: “j’ai laissé apparaitre dans la poubelle des pelures d’une orange de nelly que j’ai mangée.”178 She takes stock of what is in the trash, as though it were a cupboard:

je sais tout ce qu’il y a dans la poubelle personne d’autre n’y a jeté quoi que ce soit179

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176 103.
177 Adieu les langues de chat, 111.
178 Le lit très bas, 75.
179 Ibid, 112.
Macher is also possessive of her trash, and tries to leave the trash and clutter of others in place. During a stay at a rental house, Macher composes a mental “still life” of a small pile of clutter left by the previous inhabitants, and skims off only the top layer of trash that belongs to her, respectfully leaving the rest for the rightful owners to claim:

j’essaie de me souvenir d’une nature morte de vis, stylos, petits papiers, bouts de ficelle pour la reconstituer avant mon départ ;
dans une maison j’ai laissé la poubelle de la salle de bains, en enlevant seulement la couche supérieure qui m’appartenait, pour que la légitime retrouve ses déchets.
Avant de partir, je me concentre pour effacer les traces de mon passage, puis je mets en avant quelques dédicaces ; mots ; aliments achetés à l’intention de... vagues cadeaux.\(^{180}\)

In *Le Mal propre. Polluer pour s’approprier?* Michel Serres claims that we delimit our property by dirtying it, leaving our mark on it: “notre propre, c’est notre sale.”\(^{181}\)

Our dejections and trash are marks of ownership, as are our signatures:

Pour conserver quelque chose en propre, le corps sait y laisser quelque tache personnelle: sueur sous le vêtement, salive dans le mets ou pieds dans le plat, déchet dans l’espace, fumet, parfum ou déjection, toutes choses assez dures...mais aussi mon nom, imprimé en noir, à l’encre, sur la couverture de ce livre, dont la signature, innocente et douce, paraît n’avoir aucun rapport avec ces habitudes-là; et pourtant... D’où le théorème que l’on pourrait dire de droit naturel—j’entends ici par “naturel” une conduite générale chez les espèces vivantes— : le propre s’acquiert et se conserve par le sale.
Mieux: le propre, c’est le sale.

Serres draws a link between writing, dirtying, and ownership that Sabine Macher shares in her gesture of removing only her waste, and respectfully leaving the rest.

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\(^{180}\) *Le lit très bas*, 91-92.

In order to allow these traces of ownership to dissipate, Macher notes that she likes to leave a cushion of time between arriving at a home that some one else has just inhabited:

j’aime mieux ne pas venir tout de suite après le départ des vrais habitants ; j’aime mieux partir un jour avant leur retour. entre eux et moi, un certain ménage, aspirer leurs traces, toucher la face des surfaces.\textsuperscript{182}

Macher seems to indicate that although trash is a banal part of our lives, it is also an intimate part—it marks who we are, and is a trace of what we have done, in a similar way to writing in a notebook.

\textit{Photographing Waste}

Macher not only writes detailed inventories of her waste, but she also photographs it, elevating it to the status of a work of art. When she spills a dessert of yogurt and raspberries on the kitchen floor, rather than clean it up, she photographs the mess:

je tousse et je fume. vendredi j’ai acheté un kilo de framboises. j’ai essayé de faire une charlotte avec un yaourt et de la crème fraîche. tout est tombé par terre, sur le carrelage devant la cuisinière, blanc et éclaboussé comme un pot de peinture renversé. j’ai fait une photo polaroïd.

samedi matin, j’ai cassé une carafe en verre qui avait le même surnom que xol avant de naître. c’est le biberon qui a heurté le haut de la

\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Le lit très bas}, 87.
carafe et deux morceaux en forme de pétale sont partis. Le trou qui reste a la forme d’un cœur.\textsuperscript{183}

The description of the spilled yogurt, white and splattered like an overturned paint bucket, is revelatory of the aesthetic value Macher places on waste. In framing waste, Macher calls our attention to it, prompting us to look at it differently. The portrait of yogurt is followed by a fragment on a broken pitcher with a heart-shaped hole. Accidents, the spilled, the broken, are all reframed to show the beauty in the imperfect. In addition, Macher also reveals a real affinity for waste and broken things as cherished objects:

sur mon bureau des morceaux d’assiettes cassées, je les touche pendant que je téléphone, ou je les prenus entre mes doigts quand je n’écris pas. ce sont plus ou moins des triangles, je les tiens posés sur l’index et le majeur et je glisse mon pouce sur toute la surface et sur les bords. je regarde le détail du dessin sur chaque morceau et comment ils vont ensemble, le nouveau dessin que fait leur assemblage.\textsuperscript{184}

These broken plate pieces bring us back to the poetics of Macher’s notes, of her choice to write in a fragmented form, of the gesture of fragmenting and piecing together that is performed in her notebooks. Placing a double emphasis on loss and waste, Macher also muses about the waste she should have photographed, but never did because she forgot her camera:

j’aime les chutes de métal qui se roulent en boucles anglaises quand on les coupe. au début à paris, en bas d’un des studios de danse où je répétai, un artisan avait produit un grand tas d’anglaises en métal argenté. Il faisait un temps gris plomb sur les lames bouclées, parfois

\textsuperscript{183} Le lit très bas, 145.
\textsuperscript{184} Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre, 95.
un peu huilées et sur la pierre, des pavés sur lesquels tout reposait. Je contemplais le tas comme un miracle de beauté avant de monter les escaliers.

je voulais le prendre en photo, mais j’oubliais chaque fois l’appareil ; j’ai aussi voulu prendre en photo les pigeons écrasés, gris sur gris sur la chaussée, et les merdes de chiens, marron sur marron autour des arbres et les couples qui tiennent les triperies. J’ai photographié un couple de tripiers, mais ni pigeon ni merde de chien.185

This textual photo stands in for the photographs that were never taken of metal shavings, dead pigeons and dog excrement, providing us with a visual montage of the waste that escaped the camera.

_Bodily Waste_

Another aspect of waste not to be overlooked in Macher’s writings involves bodily waste, namely in the processes of consumption, digestion and excretion. As in the examples of material waste discussed earlier, where trash is given special signification, Macher valorizes the consuming body as a site of waste itself, and creates a parallel between bodily excretion and writing. In _carnet d’a_, Macher visits a monastery and abruptly transitions from telling the story of a nun’s punishment after burning down her convent, to announcing that she is writing on the toilet seats of monks:

j’écris sur le siège des toilettes des moines
combien de moines ont pu ici déféquer en pensant à dieu
moi je pense à eux

185 _Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre_, 89.
je suis assise à côté du trou

Macher’s use of the preposition *sur* makes it ambiguous here (as in other instances) as to whether she is actually writing onto the toilet seat or sitting on the toilet seat while writing. In any case, by choosing to focus on the toilets of the monks at a monastery, rather than her spiritual surroundings, Macher brings her writing, quite literally, down to earth. Macher continues her ruminations on the monks’ defecatory habits:

en dessous le siège est en pierre  
un rond taillé dans une dalle  
elle devait refroidir les fesses  
la merde une fois dans le trou  
je ne sais pas comment ils l’évacuaient de la pièce

In *Adieu les langues de chat*, writing is again linked to defecation. While in the previous example, Macher is writing on waste, in *Adieu les langues de chat* she compares her own waste (and that of a friend) to a book. In this series of notes, Macher begins by telling of an exchange she has with a friend after two missed phone calls, due to each being in the bathroom:

wou a passé le réveillon avec sa mère et sa sœur, il n’aime ni l’une ni l’autre. Il m’appelle, je suis aux toilettes, je le rappelle, il est aux toilettes, je lui propose de continuer son rituel fécal, il veut bien et me rappelle en disant : *j’ai même fait une notation*.  

A cryptic note follows, describing a stomach containing a book that is growing, becoming rectangular:

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186 no pagination
187 53.
Macher continues with the idea of a book forming in her bowels a few notes later:

le volume aux bords souples bouge, c'est dans mon ventre,
ça vogue, ça s'attache à un homme, il me regarde

This passage not only speaks to the organic, bodily process of writing for Macher, but also to the notion of waste as the book, the published volume – if one allows for such a finality. As in the citation above, where the book’s “supple borders” remain in process inside of Macher’s body, the always unfinished nature of her writing is highlighted in other notes: “ces pages aussi seront d’autres pages. jour pour jour. je n’arrive pas à finir.”

Consumption and Waste

What receives more frequent attention than bodily waste in Macher’s writings, however, is the food that she consumes. In one aspect, Macher’s allusions to digestion (“le chou travaille dans mon ventre”; “je mange des sucreries chinoises et je sens leur voyage en moi”) further reinforce the idea of an organic writing in constant transformation. Other passages, with their emphasis on the miniscule morsels of food Macher nibbles on, conform to what Met has dubbed “une poétique des traces,” a poetics of notes as traces linked to an organic, vegetal sense.

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188 54.
189 Ibid.
190 Ne pas toucher, ne pas fondre, 127.
191 Adieu les langues de chat, 81.
192 carnet d’a, no pagination.
of time and growth. Yet at other points in Macher’s notebooks (and especially in *Adieu les langues de chat*), Macher notes the insatiable need to always have something in her mouth, and even the desire to gorge her body with as much food as possible. In the former case, this need translates into an oral fixation, as in the passage below from *Himmel und Erde* (2005):

> il faut tout le temps quelque chose
> toujours dans la bouche
> du thé du café de l’eau
> de la fumée

In *Adieu les langues de chat*, Macher also contemplates everything she might stuff in her mouth: “à la table après la pluie je pense aux cerises, au café, à la cigarette, à tout ce que je pourrais fourrer dans ma bouche.” However, this desire to cram everything in is not just an oral fixation, but a more general desire to fill up her entire body: "j’ai envie de mettre des choses dedans, je le fais sans témoins, des réserves, je me prends pour un cellier." Macher compares herself to a storage room for food, and later notes that she is ‘again’ nothing but a stomach: “aujourd’hui à nouveau je suis un ventre.” In other instances, Macher depicts her body as being ‘gorged’ with food (“je suis là avec mon corps gorgé de fruits et de gâteaux”), or portrays herself in the act of quickly consuming several items (“dans

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193 “Soit, dans le cas de Macher, une poétique des traces, dans le même temps portée à et par une rêverie ancrée dans le réel du quotidien, à la fois physiologique, cinesthésique et organique, fréquemment liée à une croissance et une temporalité quasi végétales.” In *Autour de Sabine Macher et Gil Jouanard*, 235.
194 Ibid, 19.
195 *Adieu les langues de chat*, 36.
196 Ibid, 16.
197 Ibid, 49.
198 *Carnet d’a*, no pagination.
le même mouvement j’avale un melon une pêche et un abricot.”199). This type of consumption brings us back to the centrality of waste, and lack, in Macher’s writings, for the all-consuming body becomes a cellar, a stomach, a trash receptacle to be filled up: “je suis après la poubelle le récipient le plus performant à faire disparaître le tout du tout doit disparaître.”200 Macher’s desire to fill her empty body is analogous to her practice of continuous journal writing, her constant need to put pen to paper (“je pense sans arrêt à choses à écrire, à décrire”) or, to ‘drink ink’: “je suis buvarde d’encre, de la salive des stylos.”201

Further reemphasizing the link between consumption and waste is Macher’s account of eating worm-infested food in the closing pages of Adieu les langues de chat. Rather than throwing away the nuts that were infested by fat, white worms, Macher eats them, noting that the ‘worm descendants’ will die in her stomach: “je finis les noisettes et les amandes afin que les éventuels descendants meurent dans mon ventre” (130). In portraying her body as a receptacle for trash, and even for rotten, worm-infested food, Macher reinforces the link between her body, writing and waste. Her body, her notebook become trash receptacles, waste sites. Far from being barren, Macher’s wastelands of lack, loss and imperfection prove to be fertile ground for her singular poetic voice.

199 Adieu les langues de chat, 106.
200 Ibid, 128.
201 Adieu les langues de chat, 41.
Chapter 5

Conclusion: Taking out the Trash

Je dirai pour ma part que [les intellectuels] sont plutôt le déchet de la société. Le déchet au sens strict, c’est-à-dire ce qui ne sert à rien, à moins qu’on ne le récupère.

-- Roland Barthes

Scanning the expanse of the waste works of Michel Tournier, Agnès Varda and Sabine Macher, a number of common threads appear in their handling of waste. First, all three authors liken their writing to waste, whether through intertextual recycling in a work composed of (inferior) copies (Tournier), cinematic gleaning of waste and inclusion of trash footage (Varda), or leaking pens, lost notebooks and fragmentation (Macher). The site of waste is figured as a teeming source of artistic creation and inspiration. It is also a place of resistance – to literary norms, consumerist values, and social exclusion. The act of recuperating waste, or inhabiting it, is figured positively in all of the works. For Alexandre, embracing trash is linked to sexual ecstasy and a sublime transcendence. For Varda, gleaning is an act of social solidarity, one of kindness and generosity. For Macher, embracing the lack

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203 For the sake of succinctness, I include Varda as an author and refer to her filmmaking as writing, which is not unreasonable as she is an auteur de cinéma and describes her filmmaking as cinécriture.
inherent in writing in one’s non-native language, and the non-literary of the
minutiae of the everyday culminate in her coming into being as a poet.

A second, and related common thread is that of waste writing as a process—one that is open-ended, always in a state of movement and renewal. For Tournier, this takes the form of textual renewal, such as his endless variations of *Vendredi*, while Varda takes care to place emphasis on the journey of her gleaning adventures. She also opens up her first film to a sequel, which in turn inspires her to become la “dame patate” and adopt the ever-sprouting potato as an emblem of her filmmaking. Macher’s choice of the open form of the poetic notebook and her palimpsestic writing speak to this as well. For Varda and Macher, the hybrid, *métissé* forms of the film essay and the poetic notebook are fitting forms for an exploration of waste. Both of them also expose the behind-the-scenes of the waste-writing process in postmodern fashion, Varda by showing us her camera, its accessories and new capabilities, in addition to showing herself on screen; and Macher, by her frequent returns to the scene of writing, her bodily posture and movements while writer, and the paper, pens and writing supports that she foregrounds.

Third, all of the works point to the beauty of waste, namely through visual works of trash art. We can think of the passage from *Les Météores* where Alexandre describes the waste sculptures during the trash strike, Varda’s framing of the mold on her ceiling into well-known works of modern art, or Macher’s photographic portraits of spills and broken plates. Such an aestheticization of waste arises from

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204 “ces pages aussi seront d’autres pages, jour pour jour, je n’arrive pas à finir” writes Macher in *Rien ne manqué au manque*, 127.
the ability to see waste differently, and emphasizes the importance of rejecting trained responses to waste as something disgusting, and nothing more.

In terms of difference, the most remarkable divide in these works is the large social and political dimension that waste takes on in Tournier and Varda’s works that is absent in Macher’s work. With the former two, we see how discourses of inclusion and exclusion apply to people, often through racist and xenophobic actions that label the “other” as trash to be thrown out. Set against the backdrop of World War II, Tournier ties Alexandre’s theorizing of trash to Hitler’s treatment of Jews and homosexuals, in addition to revealing the otherness, the perceived monstrosity, of nearly all of his other characters. Varda makes it a major point of her film to focus on the people who glean, and in so doing exposes the reality of those who must live off the waste of others, despite living in a prosperous society. Macher stays more in the realm of the aesthetic, which is more in tune with her writing of small things, of bringing into focus the objects, sounds, colors and textures that surround us but that we tend not to notice. Tournier and Varda also indicate the modern nature of society’s waste problems, where massive industrial production not only results in a surplus of goods, but also imposes values of normativity and uniform perfection.

Another slight difference can be seen in the portrayal of trash as a heap of markers and signifiers that serve as traces of human behavior, telling a story about what we have done. Varda does not explicitly dwell on this idea (her potato could be seen as a marker, but it is more a symbol of her art than a witness of it), but both Macher and Tournier return to it through a portrayal discards as texts that reveal a
certain truth of who we are. In Macher's writing, trash is intimate, something to be hidden from others' prying eyes, whereas in Tournier, trash tells the news, informing Alexandre what is happening during the exodus in Paris.

And finally, there is a suggestive thread that runs across all of these works linking waste to alternative sexualities and gendered representations. In Les Météores, waste is explicitly located in a queer discourse. Alexandre shows how the marginal position of homosexuals, who have been repressed and shoved out, use their location “from below” as a site of resistance. Alexandre’s queer location in the trash dump allows him a critical vantage point to see, to smell, and to read society better than anyone; he reigns over all as the “empereur des gadoues.” Macher and Varda also situate their identities as women in a space of waste—Varda, by showing what is often occluded from (or is even the antithesis of) representations of female bodies in films; and Macher, by including the other side of motherhood in her notes, where maternity is exposed as a state of lack and loss, like Macher’s writing.

The Stakes of Waste Aesthetics

In Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse, Varda brought to light some of the dangers inherent in aestheticizing waste, namely that once trash is framed or removed far from its origins, it loses its power to disrupt. Barthes alludes to this in Sade, Fourier and Loyola, when he states that representing waste dissipates some of its visceral force: “Language has this property of denying, ignoring, dissociating reality: When
written, shit does not have an odor.”

Another risk is brought to light by Varda’s implicit comparison between those who glean for food, to survive, and those who glean as an artistic activity. An aestheticization of waste may risk trivializing or even exploiting the challenges of marginal existence.

In addition, trash has become trendy in recent years, and not just in the world of modern art. It is cool to shop vintage, to wear ripped jeans, to buy expensive bags made from repurposed truck tires. Tainted by its popularity, trash ceases to hold the same critical potential.

Varda’s film addresses some of these worries and partially answers them by figuring gleaning as an inclusive act, not one that compares artists to the poor, but that includes them as all taking part in the same positive action of recuperation.

Less related to the aesthetics of waste and more to its conceptualization, waste also poses problems due to the vast semantic and metaphoric field that it covers. Waste appears to be in everything everywhere, its shape shifts as values change, making its contours difficult to define.

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205 Barthes, Sade, Fourier, Loyola, 137.
Notes on an Aesthetics of Waste

As one of the aims of this dissertation was to sketch out a definition of an aesthetics of waste, below I offer my notes – incomplete and imperfect, no doubt – that seek to delimit this concept further:

An aesthetics of waste values the leftover, the discarded, the imperfect. It is an aesthetics that highlights the need for disorder, digression and chance. It denies the idea of the ‘finished’ product, the perfect work, the end. It undermines concepts of authenticity and originality. It is an aesthetic of the margins and the marginalized. It fights against mainstream ideals of beauty, and recuperates the beauty of waste. It resists standardization and measures of normalcy. It engages with failure, and leaves space for mistakes. It advocates for difference, messiness, hybridity. It celebrates excess. It is a gesture of inclusion.

Future Digressions

This dissertation only begins to assemble some of the fragments of the waste works of French literature and film from the past fifty years. Traces of waste, whether slight or glaring, mark many other notable French works, calling for further investigation. In my role as a bricoleur, I have gathered and assembled the

206 Promising waste works to investigate include Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, which tells the story of a slum and its slum-dwellers in Martinique; Samuel Beckett's *Fin de partie*, whose protagonists live in garbage cans; Marie Cardinal's autobiographical novel *Les mots pour le dire* which tells of the constant menstrual bleeding that she names “la chose,” and is linked to mental illness; and Marie
fragments of waste found in Michel Tournier, Agnès Varda and Sabine Macher’s works to show how waste is inseparable from artistic creation across the genres of the novel, the documentary film essay, and the poetic notebook. I hope that my omissions and shortcomings in this regard will be seen through the positive lens of an aesthetics of waste, as the sites for further inquiry and fruitful study.

Redonnet’s *Splendid Hôtel*, a novel about a hotel in ruin whose toilets are constantly blocked.
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