

RESEÑA

Amago, Samuel

***Basura: Cultures of Waste in
Contemporary Spain***

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Trash is a capacious term, both in the sense that it is a word that could realistically be applied at one point or another to almost any material item that exists, and in the sense that the term itself can be deployed far beyond the literal domain that brings to mind things like litter or landfills. Everything has the potential to end up in a trash heap once its user no longer sees it as a thing of value, and the notion of trash as a signifier for what is lacking in value enables the metaphors we use to pass judgment on people, places, and cultural products. But trash is less of an ontological label than a shorthand way of referring to a complex set of relations. Nothing is ever simply, purely, or inherently trash. Instead, whether or not something is trash is a question of contingency. Given the wide-ranging applicability of trash as a signifier and its ability to foreground the fundamental contingency of notions of value and usefulness, it is an ideal material for framing cultural analyses, especially ones whose aim is to take seriously both the discursive and material dimensions of culture. Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain* does just that. In an effort to answer questions about urbanization, democracy, the crises of capitalism, memory politics, and more in post-Franco Spain, Amago puts trash, waste, and disposal front and center as he analyzes an impressive array of cultural expressions (novels, films, photography, comics, journalism, social media) that is as varied as the material we might find in a landfill.

In the book's preface, Amago admits that readers may be unsatisfied with the eclecticism of his methodological approach, but as he makes clear in his wide-ranging, informative introduction, trash is a flexible sort of material that both enables and calls for diverse forms of thinking. In addition to sketching out the importance of waste in terms of its ecological and social impacts and its key role in a number of modes of aesthetic expression (both in and out of Spain) over the last century or so, Amago draws readers' attention to two ideas from the field of archaeology that inform his multidisciplinary approach to the study of contemporary Spanish culture. The first is Spanish archaeologist Alfredo González-Ruibal's contention that the study of art and archaeology go hand in hand because they "both share an aesthetic regime, working visually and materially to stage and make things visible" (Amago 5). The sense of the inextricable relationship between the aesthetic and the material and the ways we apprehend both is what Amago gains from González-Ruibal's work, which he returns to throughout the book. This idea serves to set the stage for the delicate balance between reading trash metaphorically and literally in the subsequent chapters. The other key notion that Amago develops in the introduction is Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen's combinatory theoretical bricolage, a strategy for addressing the resistance of objects to any single theory or philosophy. Together, these ideas inform what Amago calls his cultural archaeology of Spanish culture, an approach that focuses on discards and the act of discarding from a variety of disciplinary angles, in order to discover what those materials and processes can tell us about meaning and value.

Amago undertakes his cultural archaeology by delving into six case studies that are grouped into two parts. The first part, "Waste Matters," explores how humans are enmeshed with the objects they produce and discard. Chapter 1 examines trash's role in projections of urban space by tracking filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's response to the project undertaken by Madrid's political elite in the 1980s for transforming Spain's capital into fertile ground for architectural innovation and capital investment. Besides providing lucid readings of films like *Pepi, Luci, Bom, y otras chicas del montón* and *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, this chapter clearly lays out the material stakes of the Spanish Transition by showing how municipal and regional waste management policies participated in the drive to make Madrid transcend its Francoist past and transform itself into a gleaming, sanitized cosmopolitan center. But this drive toward renewal cannot be

understood simply as a story of cleaning up rubbish; instead, as Amago points out, Madrid's revitalization entailed the production of waste as well, particularly in the form of construction debris. This provides a key point of entry into Almodóvar's films, whose plots and set designs often feature architectural models, construction debris, and discarded objects falling out of buildings. As Amago moves through Almodóvar's films, he argues convincingly that the discards featuring prominently in his works from the 1980s, which do a great deal of work structuring characters' emotional lives and physical environments, are harder to spot in more recent films like *La piel que habito*. In this sense, Almodóvar's trajectory echoes the push made by Madrid's political elite to transform the city into an antiseptic, ahistorical space.

In chapter 2, Amago turns to the 2013 sanitation workers' strike in Madrid and the role of social media and digital journalism in reflecting on how trash reveals the nature of multinational capital's political and economic power. After briefly analyzing how the forces of capital investment, urban renewal, and visual representations of space combine to foment the reproduction of capital (in the form of, for example, the generation of regional brand identities that help structure the Spanish tourism industry), he notes how coverage of the sanitation workers' strike emphasized the bad optics of garbage left uncollected throughout the city, especially in terms of Madrid's image as a welcoming place for tourists. But the story told by all that uncollected trash is not merely one of the losses of potential revenue. By analyzing numerous examples of guerrilla art and photos that circulated on social media, Amago shows that the message many citizens received from the trash piling up in the streets was that their own consumption habits had put their city under siege and that potential solutions to the garbage problem should be sought outside the logic of neoliberalism.

Basura's first section draws to a close with another chapter on visual culture: the work of photographers Óscar Carrasco and Jordi Bernardó. The photographs that Amago analyzes portray what Rem Koolhaas has famously called "Junkspace": spaces that have been used up and abandoned by processes of capitalist improvement. With their cameras, Carrasco and Bernardó show us that such spaces abound in Spain: we see images of empty hostels, abandoned homes full of junk, a defunct prison whose walls are covered in graffiti, a market stall full of piles of trash. Amago usefully develops Koolhaas's Junkspace by putting it in dialogue with Neil Brenner's notion of "operational landscapes." This concept is understood as the spatial configurations that, while not properly urban, are essential components of neoliberal urbanization. This allows Amago to place the images of these discrete locations in a larger context: the web of capitalist development (and the waste it inevitably produces) stretching beyond urban centers and touching virtually every space. As an aside, I should note that the quality of the images reproduced in this chapter and throughout the book is excellent; they are all in full color, and the University of Virginia Press should be commended for its attention to this detail.

In the book's second part, "Waste Humanism," Amago shifts focus from the ways humans are entangled in the material world to how notions of use, value, and disposability frame, produce, and limit the concept of the human itself. Chapter 4 brings those notions to bear on Spanish historical fiction that deals with the legacy of violence and silence of the Franco regime, with a particular focus on Benjamín Prado's novel *Mala gente que camina*, in which a professor of Spanish literature comes across the testimony of a woman loyal to the Republican cause whose child was stolen and given away for adoption by a Francoist family. Beyond analyzing the novel, Amago mobilizes the archaeological elements of his framework to great effect in this chapter, arguing that archaeology's temporal and material porosity—it uncovers the past in the present—offers a profoundly ethical approach to salvaging the stories and discourses that Franco sought to discard like so much trash.

Chapter 5 continues the consideration of how the act of discarding undergirds certain social relations by examining the theme of social exclusion in comics by Isaac Rosa and Cristina Bueno (*Aquí vivió: Historia de un desahucio*) and Jorge Carrión and Sagar Forniés (*Barcelona: Los vagabundos de la chatarra*). Here Amago follows the thread from chapters 1 and 2 that detail the politics of neoliberal urbanization, but he shifts the focus toward the humanitarian problems occasioned by the logic of disposal and cleanup that go hand in hand with those politics. In particular, the two comics he analyzes tell the tale of people affected by the post-2008 housing crisis in Spain, giving nuanced portrayals of the affective and material tolls of phenomena like forced evictions and squatting and, through the particular strengths of the comic medium, bringing those discarded populations back into civic life.

Chapter 6, the book's final case study, zooms in on the human body and investigates how time, aging, decay, and mortality can best be understood in relation to the material processes and flows of waste that the book presents as a whole. Amago finds this dynamic to be particularly salient in the fiction of Rosa Montero, who, in novels like *La hija del canibal* and *La carne*, deploys metafictional techniques in her exploration of how the notion of the human is located in the tensions between consciousness and material decay. What Amago gleans from Montero's fiction is not that the language we use to articulate consciousness and tell stories persists in spite of our body's trajectory toward decay, but rather that it is precisely the realization and acceptance of our status as junk that undergirds the stories we leave behind, the residue of our conscious selves.

Basura is an outstanding, invigorating book that manages to make important interventions in a number of arenas: Spanish cultural studies, discard studies, the environmental humanities, visual cultures, film studies, comics studies, literary studies, and more. It is to Amago's credit as both an academic and a writer that the book does not buckle under the weight of all of the theoretical tools, objects of analysis, and historical context that litter its pages. Rather, he brings all those elements together with the necessary intellectual rigor to position his arguments within broader disciplinary conversations and a delightful, engaging prose style that makes the book a great pleasure to read. In fact, there were several moments when Amago managed to capture the relationship between the human condition and the trash we produce that I found quite moving (I would point readers to the book's brief conclusion, for instance). But what is perhaps *Basura's* most important achievement is that it manages to show how waste and its attending discourses are at the center of our individual and social lives. Understanding this is a pressing matter in Spain and everywhere else, and Amago's book can help us think through more ethical ways to deal with the trash we make.