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**The Cinema of Disposal: Max Ophuls and Accumulation in America**  
**Karl Schoonover**

Most people's lives, what are they but trails of debris?  
 Each day more debris, more debris.  
 Long, long trails of debris with nothing to clean it all up but death.  
 — Katharine Hepburn as Violet Venable  
Suddenly, Last Summer  
 (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, dir. 1959)

Details, details, details! The most insignificant, the most unobtrusive of them are often the most evocative, characteristic and even decisive.  
 -- Max Ophuls<sup>1</sup> (Beylie)

*Dedicated to Victor Perkins*

In Max Ophuls's 1949 women's noir The Reckless Moment, the film's protagonist Lucia Harper, played by Hollywood stalwart Joan Bennett, indulges a quick gesture: she scraps her cigarette and tosses the butt on the ground. In the language of hard-boiled fiction, she "kills" it.<sup>2</sup> This gesture reflects a moment of impulsiveness for an otherwise overly-measured character (her tense demeanour carries the weight of her situation as an abandoned spouse, single mother of two teenagers, and a person who must resolve mounting family debts) and anticipates a more transgressive gesture of disposal that follows soon after. She discards her cigarette butt only seconds before she discovers the corpse of her teenage daughter's adult male lover and hides the corpse to protect her daughter from scandal. This strategy quickly becomes cumbersome (a body is awkward to dump) and then backfires as Lucia is blackmailed by people who possess a batch of love letters between her daughter's lover and her daughter.

It is tempting to over-read this abandoned cigarette as significant in a way that than audiences of late 1940s, many of whom smoked, presumably did not. However, this film makes much of smoking—elsewhere, too, but especially here. Lucia's routine act connects disposal and

death.<sup>3</sup> In this way, this scene enacts the film's persistent interest in American subjects faced with the durable visibility of refuse in this period, a post-war moment of apparent prosperity and planned obsolescence. Standard accounts of mid-century America describe a shift in public consciousness about the lifespan of everyday objects during precisely this period. In her popular history of garbage, Heather Rogers argues that by the 1950s, old modes of reuse had been made defunct and a new, radically expanded scale of waste production emerged. Household waste, once a source of vital reusable materials for factory production, was no longer making its way to industry. "Consumer wastes were reused far less than in the past" (106). Given the end of such transfers and the lack of any other infrastructure for recycling, Rogers sees this period as crucial to the "formation of today's high-waste system" (106-7). In his iconic bestseller 1960 *The Waste Makers*, Vance Packard quotes Dorothy Sayers to introduce his thesis on post-war America, "A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste." (1) Packard is credited with popularizing the idea that "planned obsolescence" ushered in a massive depletion of resources and a glut of waste. Films, like those of Ophuls in this period, stage the moral conflicts of their narratives against a significant backdrop of people taking disposability for granted.

The Reckless Moment depicts the female head of a bourgeois family as a more fragile and vulnerable than we might expect to see living at the epicenter of mid-century plentitude: the American suburb. The film also suggests that Lucia's weakness derives from her inability to fully get rid of things. She is repeatedly denied the privilege of forgetting that discarding promises, and in this sense, her dilemma figures a retort to the reassurances that reassured midcentury subjects that disposability was both available and unending. In The Reckless Moment, obsolescence, planned or otherwise, and infinite disposability have no traction. Instead,

this film depicts throwing things away as a futile exercise: the material world remains intractable and thus outside of containment; matters get messy and order falls quickly out of place. In other words, the film interrupts a historical consensus that this period does not engage the problem of waste and disposal. The Reckless Moment is not self-evidently an environmental film. Its story of the burdensome persistence of things, though, not only complicates how we conceive of the era's commodity consumerism and hubristic approach to waste disposal. It also challenges the presumption that this period was fully detached from the question of ecology and unaware of the Anthropocene and its consequences.

From an anthropocentric perspective, garbage names stuff that has lost its value. Released from human systems of worth, garbage acquires a steadfastness all its own. Its stubbornly accumulates and contaminates, it corrodes and it seeps into things(Douglas). Around this phenomenon of tenacious waste, modernity has erected prophylactic infrastructures. These infrastructures are both physical and ideological. They work to contain, to discipline, or to reform, even while they quietly admit that complete disposal remains unattainable. We hardly ever get rid of waste. It is never really gone. Take, for example, garbage incineration: the amount of space rubbish occupies diminishes in inverse proportion to the increased expansion of its toxic scope, such as when incinerating heavy metals and dioxins disperses nanoparticles into the air. It is only when they are fully defunct, or "dead" to the world of human usefulness, that objects seem to gain a will of their own. In what would otherwise be named an expiration or final demise, things thrown away come to life.

A central polemic of object-oriented ontology is that things have agency. For the new materialists and vitalist ontologists, one of the primary examples of this is the odd vitality of modern refuse—how a plastic bottle lives beyond its disposal, how dioxins multiple their effect

with their dispersal, or how pollution morphs into something other than itself (Bennett). In the contamination of refuse, object and surroundings converge. For the new materialists, things can exert a will of their own when discarded and in the space those dumped things consume. This seems particularly apparent in late modernity, when things achieve a vitalism as their usefulness expires. If the modern dilemma of waste, raises the question of whether things can die, then both the new materialists and The Reckless Moment answer “no.” I should point out here that I am more interested in the vitality of objects and of stuff as a historical fact or effect than I am in thinking of that vitality as an ontological property. Ophuls's film helps to clarify how this might be the case by diagnosing a particular period of US culture and showing how stuff can persist in a consequential way, but also how this apparent vitality is bestowed upon stuff rather than inherent to it.

### Stuff

The worlds made by films often conflate discarded things and the end of human lives, or at least confuse their disposal, as my epigraph from the 1959 film Suddenly, Last Summer suggests. Frequently in films where human life becomes debris, stuff comes to find a life of its own. Is it possible that cinema tells us something about the unusual materiality of waste in modernity? The discussion that follows plays with this possibility, arguing that cinema, and a certain period of cinema, in particular, often encourages a slippage between the ontology of humans and stuff not only as a metaphor for death, the loss of humanity, or the corruption of morals. Cinema has, at key junctures in the development of twentieth-century anthropocentrism, through its rendering of materiality, also intervened into the question of stuff in a capitalist world. It has advised us that if capitalism animates the inanimate world through commodity

exchange, as Marx tells us, then with overproduction and overconsumption, things refuse to die, they emerge as the tenacious undead of that system.

A survey of undead objects in cinema might include the mounting detritus that accumulates at the end of The Conversation (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) in the aftermath of Harry's realization of a murder's repressed truth. It could also be found in the symbolic burdening of groceries smashed on the floor of a bungalow's kitchen in Chinatown (Roman Polanski, 1974), a film eager to equate natural resource management with a Noir-ish sublime of deep violence. A menacing pile-up of consumer goods appears undead in Poltergeist (Steven Spielberg, 1982), where the slapdash waste disposal schemes of greedy suburban real-estate investors trigger an attack by violent apparitions hell-bent on reclaiming the American Indian burial sites now occupied by a middle-class housing development. In all three films, the security of the home is overcome by the menacing specter of its own seemingly innocent contents; its creature comforts turn on the home's occupants and become creatures themselves. Objects that are otherwise dead to human use, expelled from systems of valuation, turn out to be the very objects that are most 'alive,' in the sense of agential, in the world. As the repressed return, stuff strikes back.

American cinema had already interrogated the problem of wasted matter, however, by the time of Coppola's Antonioni-esque dystopias, Polanski's cynical infrastructures, and Spielberg's ectoplasmic abjection of the American suburbs. It did so, moreover, in the period preceding the mainstream environmentalism of the late twentieth century epitomized by Rachel Carson's popular tract on pollution, The Silent Spring, in 1962. Various forms of detritus haunt Hollywood films in the decade after WWII, a period of US history otherwise recognized for its unprecedented economic prosperity. In fact, postwar cinema manages the appearance and

reappearance of trash, I want to propose, in a manner that questions the apparent plentitude of the period, as well as to renegotiate the broader politics of cultural value, production, and reproduction. It does so in ways that later ecologically-themed films, such as the recent run of eco-docs, seem unable to express.<sup>4</sup> These films play out how waste challenged a dominant sense of materiality and popular conceptions of boundaries separating the human from her world. We find Carson's preoccupation with toxins compromising nature's order, for example, anticipated in science-fiction monster films such as The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms (Eugène Lourié, 1953), Them (Gordon Douglas, 1954), and The Blob (Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr., 1958). These and films of other genres, including films noir, such as Kiss Me Deadly (Robert Aldrich, 1955), constitute a mid-twentieth-century cinema of impending toxic doom that captures an abiding apprehension about how a world dominated by an overabundance of things endangers human relations, the lived environment, and even political sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> Redefining postwar American abundance as a kind of littering or spillage, these films suggest that waste itself erodes distinctions between manmade objects and living organisms, between the material and the intangible, and between the permanent and the ephemeral.

Although modern forms of waste (radioactive contamination, chemical poisoning) were already present in everyday life by the middle of the century, conventional cultural histories of the postwar period suggest a lag between two moments: the growing desire for heavily packaged goods, the increased use of plastics, the promotion of disposability as a key feature in mass market commodities, and the advent of planned obsolescence, on one hand, and environmental concern and an awareness of the ecological impact of escalating rubbish, on the other (Packard, Rogers [Chapters 5 (103-128) and 6 (129-154)], Strasser, chapter 7, 265-293)). Mira Engler, for example, labels the period from 1940 to 1970, "out of sight, out of mind" because of the

“obliviousness” Americans displayed towards waste despite the dramatic upsurge of household and industrial waste (64-6). The period when US municipalities proliferated wide-scale use of the landfill, a specific landscape architecture for managing the blighting of the landscape from garbage dumps by condensing post-consumer waste and burying it, saw garbage made invisible to the American subject. According to Engler’s account of the period, “waste itself passed under people’s eyes virtually unnoticed.” Literary scholar John Beck borrows from Engler to suggest that garbage’s invisibility was endemic to the Cold War period’s containment culture (233). The American psyche wouldn’t break from this culture’s repressive hold, the argument goes, until the environmental crises and consciousness-raising of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The dominance of these standard accounts necessitates a closer look at Hollywood films from the late 1940s onward, films in which, I will argue, a consciousness of accumulated detritus emerges and persists. It is my sense that the cinema of mid-century America registers an alternate picture of capitalist modernity’s relation to waste. Troubling the periodization of an emergent waste-(un)consciousness suggested by earlier scholars, cinema of this period does not always fulfil its supposed historical destiny as one more example of the period’s many (ideological) containment technologies. A number of key films instead refuse to blind their viewers to the material aftermath of middle-class family life in the way we have been taught to expect. These refusals interrupt the landfill mentality we are told dominates public waste management initiatives and all areas of life. These films depict the ubiquity and obduracy of trash in ways that draw attention to an infrastructure (actual and imaginary) that has not considered the potential dangers of overproduction and overdevelopment. In doing so, they offer a theory of how refuse comes to life. At times, films of the period appear to be overtly aware of questions of sustainability, such as in the fraught entanglements of nature and plastic in Douglas

Sirk's All That Heaven Allows (1955) or the imbrication of petroleum dependency and impotency in the same director's next film, Written on the Wind (1956). At other times, when such themes are less overt, a film might be unable to resist tracking a shift in relations towards objects deemed destined for disposal. Garbage appears in these films as the unavoidable destiny of mass consumption, a more certain outcome of American-style late capitalism than lasting plenitude. The unavoidable aftereffects of disposal threaten the sanctity of the middle-class subject. It is not a stretch to say that these films reveal how the reckless mismanagement of things endangers the sustainability of life.

One set of films that fit this latter description are those made by Max Ophuls during his brief sojourn in Hollywood during the late 1940s, where he directed, over the course of a short period of time, not only The Reckless Moment but also The Exile (1947), Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948), and Caught (1949). These four will be the focus of the following discussion, with particular attention paid to The Reckless Moment. Ophuls's work has been a key for the arguments of canonical film theory. For Kaja Silverman, Ophuls stands as a key illustration of suture, while for Mary Ann Doane he offers a self-conscious definition of maternal melodrama. He is also central to her description of the systemization of sexual difference in the Hollywood text, which includes one of her earliest unpackings of dead time. For Andrew Sarris, a revision of romanticism can be found in Ophuls's temporality. Victor Perkins held out Ophuls as a key justification for studying film aesthetics in the first place, suggesting Ophuls's use of movement and repetition demonstrated more than any other director the potential for complexity in the image. More recently, Ophuls's image is crucial to John Belton's reworking of his earlier accounts of wide-screen aesthetics, while for Laura Mulvey the director's "cinema of surface" provides a means of investigating the relationship

between stillness and spectacle. In this context, my analysis may appear somewhat idiosyncratic in its focus, but I hope to demonstrate that without a full accounting of stuff we cannot grasp how the image operates in Ophuls's work. These films grant attention as much to the gestures of stuff's accumulation as they do to the frustrating impossibility of complete disposal. They depict throwing things away as an anxious activity with unstable parameters that threatens human agency and subjectivity. In the narrative space of these films, the burden of the material world on human life can be felt. In that space of feeling, these films gain a political—even ecological—inflexion.

The moral comparisons upon which Ophuls's Hollywood narratives depend are sustained, I argue, through characters' treatment of scattered objects and the relative clutter of those characters' lives. In a certain sense my analysis of the inanimate details of these films' material worlds could be seen as a polemic towards an attention towards the image's excesses. The interplay between narrative and the aesthetics of waste in this film requires a manner of investigation builds on but remains somewhat distinct from Kristin Thompson's famous call to read films for excess. Thompson proposes a critical practice of repeat viewings that allows a loosening of our attention to story while enabling the formal excesses of a film come to the fore—a practice seemingly suited to understanding stuff left behind. To seek excess is “to invite the partial disintegration of a coherent reading,” but is also a means by which we can “look beyond narrative” to discover “the underlying principles of the film” (523). However, to read excess as “counternarrative” in Ophuls risks misunderstanding how excess circulates in the economy of his films.

The Reckless Moment is a Noir-esque domestic melodrama that echoes the woman's picture, as it follows Lucia's efforts to protect her teenage daughter, Bea (Geraldine Brooks).

She first tries get rid of the corpse, which she mistakenly believes is the body of a man who was her daughter's victim. She then tries to raise funds to pay off the blackmailers. On his regular visits to the Harper household, one of the blackmailers, Martin Donnelly (James Mason), begins to fall in love with Lucia. Donnelly becomes less of a menace and more a protector of Lucia, who will eventually reciprocate his care and concern. Throughout the film, the tensions (romantic and otherwise) between Lucia and Donnelly create an Ophulian network of criss-crossing values and missed chances that by the film's end have been narrationally scrambled. In other words, in exploring the affections of Lucia and Donnelly, the film injects the seeming purity of middle-class suburban life into the grim underworld of the city. Redemption drives the film's structuring suspense, but by its conclusions, we come to learn that redemption requires a kind of re-sorting of the world (its people and its things) that no possible waste management system could accomplish. As it builds this narrative tension, the film uses several narrative elements that trigger the need to dispose of something, whether letters, payoffs, debts, or corpses. This allows the film to ask whether, after discarding of something, we are ever really free of it.

The Reckless Moment's noir-ish dilemma of what to do with a dead body unleashes moral uncertainty that infects inanimate material. The film considers this problem narratively while scrutinizing the formal gestures of throwing things away, or, phrased in American vernacular, of tossing things out. The stubbornly heavy corpse of Bea's boyfriend narrationally contaminates the surety of interpersonal ethics (bad choices are easy to make), but it also draws our attention to the mistreatment of things, the consequent almost vengeful will of objects, and the penetration of human life with thing-ness. The disposal of an unwieldy corpse doesn't shift the status of things in the film; it simply extends an awkwardness already caused by the

stubborn materiality of stuff that occupies the film's mise-en-scene. In the context of seeming postwar plentitude and a culture of increased consumer demand on resources, this film asks over and over again: Can we kill things for good? If the disposal of things qualifies as a form of death, how can we make things die faster and cleaner? When these films mobilize such structures of anxiety, they do not simply underscore the moral stakes of interpersonal drama and demonstrate how poor moral choices endanger self-determination; they also encourage a sense of worry over accumulation and consumer capitalism's consequences for the subject. The Reckless Moment makes palpable (even melodramatically present) a sense that the middle-class America's material surroundings, including the comforts of domestic life, have begun to crowd the subject out. In this way, these films offer a useful retort to the idea that postwar American culture remained unaware that increased consumption leads to hazardous accumulation. These films register what it means when consumption outpaces disposal.

### Accumulation

Lucia's family home is an awkward conglomeration of spaces that appears diegetically cumbersome to navigate. These interiors are also oddly inconvenient to our visual orientation as viewers, since various architectural features often obstruct our clear view of the house's scale and our ability to map its layout. The house is also over-occupied by stuff, but not by the kitschy glut of Victoriana familiar from other films or the ostentatious potlatch found in the excesses of melodrama. The interiors of the Harper home are decidedly American, but they are also un-Hollywood. There is a preponderance of rooms that feel cramped with things, hemmed in by a low ceiling moulding that often hovers along the top of the image's frame. Our view onto a scene is also often barricaded from the bottom with a bannister, railing, or the kitchen counter

blocking the bottom quarter of the frame. While not overtly filthy, the home's rooms betray a dinginess regularly caught in glimpses. Nearly every door frame is marked by a collection of smudges. Upholstery sags on furniture as if it is the wrong size, a sofa's throw pillows droop, and the carpets are buckled and bunched with neglect. A bathroom mirror shows thick corrosion around its edges. Other examples of dinginess can be found in the somewhat scrappy kitchen: we see cheerful curtains dishevelled and tangled with wrinkled laundry, large swathes of cabinetry pocked with the knots found in cheap plywood, a stovetop littered with lids and used pans, the front of the oven marred with greasy fingerprints, the windows to the pantry filled with smudges.

The film's characters comment on cleanliness, drawing our attention to the dingy details of their surroundings. Lucia's teenage son, David, is an aspiring auto-mechanic, and when he comes to bed, his roommate-grandfather comments, "you smell like a garage!" In this scene, a viewer might notice that the ceiling is grungy with oddly overt waste, and its surfaces mottled with neglect, wear, accumulated soot, pollution. The grandfather's words cue viewers to catch these details. In his Hollywood films, Ophuls's camera is drawn to dinginess, like the stained walls in Lisa's childhood apartment building in Letter from an Unknown Woman, or the plaster spilling out from behind torn wallpaper where a phone was ripped off the wall in Caught, or the deeply soiled desk blotter in another scene of The Reckless Moment.

If, for Mulvey, Ophuls's films constitute a "cinema of surface," when we come to actually engage with those surfaces we find them to be dirty, worn down by neglect, repositories of stains, dust, and other accumulations. This grime allows for a kind of surface tension to develop over various shots in The Reckless Moment. One surface speaks to the others via their collective grubbiness: the mantel of a fireplace soiled in soot might connect its middle-class parlor to the stained walls of the pantry or a crumpled carpet and worn floorboards in the family

room. This network of grime works against the over moral binaries of good and bad characters, safe and un-safe spaces. Take the film's attention to a soiled doorframe in the Harper home and how that dinginess connects to other instances of marred surfaces and detritus in subsequent shots, including during a climatic sequence in which the film's moral and narrative crises come to a head. This doorframe appears overtly as Lucia leaves her house at night to meet the blackmailing boss-man, Nagel, in the boathouse at the back of her property. That marred surface is one otherwise anomalous in the Hollywood vision of a middle-class home and one that echoes chipped and scratched doorframe at the seedy bar that Darby, Nagel, and Donnelly haunt. In this scene of confronting Nagel, the Harper doorframe will be graphically matched to the boathouse itself, where the front of the building looks muddled by the shadows of trees or perhaps by dirt. Inside the boathouse, Lucia confronts Nagel, who has revealed he is in possession of the love letters that link her daughter to the corpse Lucia has dumped. In the shots showing Lucia, she is surrounded by clutter again; old things that have seemingly lost their use crowd her figure in the frame and underscore an anxiety about the inability to manage the potent remnants of a past that was not properly dealt with. The distinctions between middle-class comfort and underworld danger become less distinct as her body is incorporated into the boathouse's jumble of empty picture frames, deteriorating rope, a deflated punching bag, and rotting wicker furniture. In one shot, an overturned stool leers over Lucia's shoulder much in the way that piled up chairs in the seedy bar at the beginning of the film packed the space around her.

Noting these features is not to pick out the incidental qualities of the profilmic unintentionally bleeding into the diegesis nor is it to read against the grain of the film. These details are neither extras nor supplements to the main project of the film. To understand their

significance, we can return to Thompson's account of excess as systemic anomaly: "A film displays a struggle by the unifying structures to 'contain' the diverse elements that make up its whole system. Motivation is the primary tool by which the work makes its own devices seem reasonable. At the point where motivation fails, excess begins" (517). To treat waste and grime as excess is to ignore their systemic role in this film's ecology. They do not exceed the system; they are part and parcel with it.

In *Caught*, a cigarette that we have seen casually thrown on the floor of an office building in one scene reappears when the narrative later returns to that same hallway. Perhaps this suggests an especially skilled observation of the continuity editor responsible for attending to the consistency of objects and appearances across shots and scenes. However, the cigarette's attendant presence also reminds us how our things remain on in the world without us and without us noticing. As with *The Reckless Moment*, the mise-en-scene of *Caught* is object-heavy and object obsessed; in the long run, stuff gets in the way. *Caught* explores its larger ethical dilemmas not simply by narratively demonstrating the costs of living only for financial security and the dangerous trappings of wealth, but also in its imagery's anxious attentiveness to stuff: the cigarette too easily forgotten but re-seen by us, a shabby fly swatter, or how mouldings and trinkets obstruct our view of characters.

This clutter is also consistent with Ophuls's legend. The director was famous for being intensely detailed-oriented. The production documents for *The Exile* tell of how Ophuls arrived on set one day and expressed his dissatisfaction with how clean it appeared. Anyone who has seen the film knows that it doesn't ever pose as particularly naturalist. Every scene, including a significant one in tulip fields, is unmistakably shot in a studio. But on this day on set, Ophuls insisted that the set be made to look dirtier. For Ophuls, the realism of the acting and

camerawork was being compromised by how tidy the mise-en-scene looked. “Ophuls was bothered by its shiny, unused look” (Lutz, 101). So he demanded the set be soiled: ““He had the guys spray a lot of charcoal soot on all the tiles [...] and he said, ‘That’s the only way you get reality, you see’” (ibid.). Just a year or two later, and perhaps with a greater creative license, Ophuls approached The Reckless Moment as a film that would pick up its stylistic cues from a new mode of realism gaining a great deal of attention on the world scene and finding audiences in America. For Ophuls, this new realism was characterizing the work of Italian Neorealist directors such as Rossellini and DeSica as well as “hard-boiled” Hollywood films such as The Naked City (Jules Dassin, 1948) (ibid, 266). Producer Walter Wanger shared these aesthetic predilections, encouraging Ophuls to think about the realist look of recent British films and Greg Toland’s cinematography for *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) (ibid, 276).

### Disposal

Routines of cleaning are not marginalized by The Reckless Moment, as they would be in most Hollywood films, where such activities are kept off-screen and/or magically absorbed by elliptical editing. At their most visible, cleaning procedures (and those who are tasked with completing them) are by and large banished to the marginal spaces within the frame. In this film, there are dishes to wash and pots to scrub, their lids thrown asunder. Beds are left not only unmade but in a shamble, with tangled sheets occupying the center of the screen.

Otherwise clean pillows are revealed to be off-screen and thrown on the floor. In one of Bea’s first humbled confessions to her mother, after many scenes of peevish denial, a large dust pan mounted on the wall monopolizes the space between the two women in the two-shot.

Like many middle-class family homes in Hollywood films of this period, most of the

cleaning falls to a Black domestic worker. Housekeeper Sybil (Frances E. Williams) remains a compromised and flat character whose undying faith to sacrifice her own safety and identity in service of the white family goes unquestioned. The film's interest in debris and its abatement means, though, that The Reckless Moment cannot spatially marginalize Sybil and her labor with quite the same rigor as other Hollywoods. Sybil is often found at the center of shots. As Lucia receives disturbing news over the telephone, for example, Sybil interrupts her dusting of the piano to move into the center of the frame.

As Ewa Mazierska points out, cleaners are the exemplary capitalist precariat in that they lack their own workspace and must find ways of doing their job around the work of others. Understood as secondary to apparently more productive forms of labor, their labor remains structurally in-between and invisible to systems of value. Even Williams herself goes uncredited for her work on the film. Mazierska argues that Fassbinder's Ali Fear Eats the Soul makes this point by staging the scene of the cleaners eating in the awkward angles of a stairwell. Although it lacks the overtly leftist politics of Fassbinder, The Reckless Moment makes the labor of cleaning awkwardly present in similarly spatial terms. In an early scene that establishes the spatiality of the film's domestic interior, Sybil's vacuuming interrupts the flow of movement as Lucia walks through the house. The noise of that vacuuming bleeds over into other spaces and continues for several minutes. This form of acoustic overage bleeds into and infects the clarity of other sounds such as dialogue, footsteps, and ambient room tone. A malfunctioning car horn in a later scene blares on and on in a similarly formally audaciousness way. Even as the image track leaves Sybil and the vacuum behind, the polluting sound of the vacuum continues to take up space on the sound track, echoing in the halls of the house. It even remains as the backdrop for the family argument that is narratively key to setting dynamics

between characters. The film implies here that vacuuming is never finished, forever remaining partially complete no matter how thoroughly or frequently it is done. Rather than a cleaning technique, vacuuming is an activity that stirs up and distributes precisely the debris that it is meant to banish. This reminds us of how Victor Perkins talks about Ophuls's formal project of making the settled seem radically unsettled (Perkins, 2003, n.p.).

In a related fashion, The Reckless Moment turns our attention to small bits of paper: crumpled lists, a garland used to decorate a party now over, a forgotten ticket from the pawnshop, a pile of unpaid bills. In each instance, stuff resists being inventoried, as if records are only there to deem themselves inadequate in the accounting of what is spent and of what is acquired. The mise-en-scene presumes a past that is an accumulative one, and the present seems always mortgaged to this past accumulation. This is thematized as well through debts, discussions of collateral, and the double-blackmailing plot. The past ends up represented by stuff that remains stubbornly present in the world. This stuff often gets in the way of characters, both literally blocking their movement through space and figuratively appearing when their agency is revealed to be compromised. Stuff stands in the way as debris, clutter, scraps, neglected collections of things.

For example, there is the continuous flow of the three long takes of Lucia coming home with a collection of packages. Her arrival home is initiated by a fascinating composition: a shot from inside looking outward at the arrival of Lucia carrying a pile of packages. As if to complement the pile she is bringing in, there's already a pile of stuff untidily mounded on the table between her and us. As the sequence of long takes continues, we find ourselves swept up in the movement and at the same time feel the difficulties of maneuvering the space. Lucia's body and the camera lead us, but our access to her is sometimes blocked. We are with her but

also made aware of her as detached from us. Would we live in such a space? Leave it the way it is? How would it feel to work in such a space as a cleaner and cook?

### Callousness

An obstructed line of sight is typical of the camerawork of Ophuls's films, as many critics have noted (Morgan, Paul, Perkins). In The Reckless Moment, however, such visual clutter is tied to the weight of past events and to an inability to let go. In this sense, the film visualizes the futility of thinking we can move beyond our stuff or, in the words of the film, our ability to "come clean."<sup>6</sup> The film urges the viewer to want this stuff gone. Through the jumble of accumulation, the grimness of surfaces, the clutter of used-up stuff, and the hassle of forgotten personal effects (keys, lists, etc.), the film seems to force on the viewer what Jane Bennett describes as the "intractability" of things and the "material recalcitrance" of stuff. Ophuls's films are always highly self-conscious of their status as representations, often taking on the question of representation itself. As a highly-constructed work on fiction, then, the object world of The Reckless Moment should be understood as a *mise-en-scene* and not an ontology. The stubborn force of material objects explored by this film is less a philosophical statement on materiality and more a registration of a particular historical effect.

Although the narrative asks us to invest in the hiding of the corpse and the precarious nature of its complete disposal, the image prompts compositional cravings for removal. It also asks us to reflect on these urges and to see them as impulses of heedlessness, triggers for rash actions. Accumulation brings with it an anxious heaviness that must be gotten rid of; it originates from and prompts gestures of recklessness. The film's aesthetic draws together thematic, narrative, and formal systems around the need for disposal and its ultimate futility.

Bosley Crowther concludes his early review of The Reckless Moment for The New York Times as follows: “Although it is rather well staged, with credible location settings in Balboa and Los Angeles, it is a feeble and listless drama with a shamelessly callous attitude. The heroine gets away with folly, but we don't think this picture will.” Crowther’s snide commentary attempts to turn the recklessness of the film’s title back on the film itself. This critic’s reaction documents a certain spectatorial conundrum prompted by the film itself (a conundrum triggered here, we should note, by a tension between the knowing “we” and the film’s realist mise-en-scene). His dissatisfaction with the film’s ethical tenor—its callousness—stems from his inability to occupy any ethical point-of-view other than that of the film’s characters. Yet the film encourages its audiences to adopt a less empathic point of view. If the film exposes the “folly” of disposal, it only does so in the context of scenarios in which we are asked to identify with the powerful catharsis of throwing things away. In other words, by exploring gestures of disposing of stuff, the film reveals the hubris of a callous and shamelessly wasteful subjectivity. Giving a space to these gestures, the film offers a counter to the hegemony of a world made disposable.

The thrills of getting rid of stuff are limited and fleeting, the film instructs. It makes us feel how “shameless” that “callous[ed] attitude” of disposal remains. Early on in the film, Lucia composes a letter to her husband. The activity of letter-writing is, of course, of major narrative significance, since her daughter Bea’s letters to her lover are used to blackmail Lucia at the end. The existence of these letters indicates a past that refuses to go away. Here, though, Lucia is penning a more innocuous letter. Even so, she seems to have trouble expressing herself in words and crosses out part of what she has written and crumples the entire letter, tossing it away. The film then cuts back to a close-up of the paper tablet on which she’s writing. An otherwise blank

sheet of paper is marred by the vestiges left by her earlier draft. There is a similar moment in North by Northwest (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), but in that film, the traces of an earlier note provide evidence that is noticed diegetically and that comes to carry significant narrative weight. By contrast, in The Reckless Moment, we, the viewers, are asked to note nothing more than what is left behind and the fact that it *is* left behind. We are asked to be conscious of the leftovers. These remnants, vestiges, soiled surfaces are not then metaphors or allegories. They are there in the image to be experienced as a refusal of disposal and a reminder of the naivety of believing disposal is possible.

For Dan Morgan, a politic resides in Ophuls's camerawork. The "ethical content" of an Ophuls's film, Morgan writes, "is expressed by—a specific kind of camera movement, one that responds to both the states of mind of characters and the social world they inhabit. (It does not, that is, create a straightforward identification with characters)" (131). Here, we see precisely what Crowther misses. Morgan continues,

Ophuls's camera, in other words, provides a moral perspective on the world, a perspective those inside it [i.e., characters in the film] are often unable or incapable of taking. What I've been calling its dual attunement is the condition for the expression of the films' ethical content. If the camera cannot, on its own, effect the changes implicitly demanded by characters in the films, it nonetheless functions as a surrogate viewer of sorts, a fine-tuned way to process the moral status of the world through aesthetic means.

Ophuls uses camera movements to provide an aesthetic articulation of a moral attitude for the audience. (162)

Following Morgan, it comes as no surprise that Ophuls's films register their ethical stance towards capitalist modernity's accumulative materiality in more than just their mise-en-scene.

The camerawork and frame compositions of these films activate off-screen space in a manner that draws attention to the relationship between the compulsion to accumulate and the frisson of easy disposal. As much as we see people bring stuff into the frame, the camera also grants attention to objects tossed away, left behind, apparently forgotten. A narrative space consequently opens up for the viewer that rests somewhere between the obduracy of those things and their status for the lives on screen as used up and exhausted of value.

Susan Sontag famously proposed a critical practice that would facilitate the recognition of the surplus, obdurate materiality we otherwise ignore, but allow it to exist textually without function or interpretation. Returning to her classic essay “Against Interpretation” in the context of the present discussion, one cannot help but notice several references to modern waste that are seldom acknowledged. As she makes her polemical argument for shifting how we approach the work of art, she draws together various forms of pollution resulting from an egregious modernity:

the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment [...] bombard our senses. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life—its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness—conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in the light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed. What is important now is to recover our senses.

We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. (13-14)

Conventional modes of engaging with art such as interpretation appear to be both old-fashioned and a nasty byproduct of modernity:

Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban

atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Evading the implication that capitalism defines our epoch, she remarks that this is a time when “the thick encrustations of interpretation have taken hold” (8). Using highly figurative language, Sontag describes how interpretation clouds our vision of the surface. This is a metaphor of accumulation or of callousing. For Sontag, good engagement with the artwork comes when the artwork is taken as a “brute object” and when we attempt to account for its “immediate sensory equivalent” (9-10). While Sontag is not interested in putting her proposed practice to the service of a critique of capitalism, it is nevertheless true that without the attentiveness she describes, we might miss how the film is trying to produce an alternate relationship to the world. In other words, an irreverent appropriation of Sontag could help acclimate us to a reading practice that revels in the experiential, in thingness, and in the surface in a manner that clarifies the ethics of Ophuls’s camera. The ethics develops from the jarring, jolting reorientation.

Ophuls’s endpoint, however, is not the pure modernist artwork that Sontag advocated. The Reckless Moment is not naïve. The complex tensions found in its narration of vision suggest that simply noticing the garbage to which we are otherwise blinded is not the solution. This alone won’t change our ways. The callous formed by modernity can’t be so easily scraped away. Waste keeps coming back. A callous is not just a disposition; it is an encrustation that has formed between us and the world. A callous involves growing a thicker skin, a kind of automatic compensatory barrier that numbs our interaction with what is external to us. Calloused sight would signal a habituated routine of elimination from vision. Ophuls’s use of

the obstructiveness of the inanimate experiments with invoking and rejecting simultaneously this type of callousing.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than depicting disposal as the cure for over-acquisition, the former as the antidote to the latter, these films see these two activities as mutually productive: the catharsis of throwing things away both alleviates the menacing threat of overabundance and produces it. As elsewhere in The Reckless Moment, the activity of throwing things away comes with a kinaesthetics of release. In other words, it acquires an almost erotic charge, one that registers kinetically on the mise-en-scene and its bodies, but one that also carries vestiges of what was discarded. In its narration, the film also cues the viewer that disposal is never complete, during a period associated with anxious expanding of the parameters of obsolescence. The film thus oscillates between objects as things to be gotten rid of and those that refuse to get out of our way. For this reason, in order to question postwar commodity capitalism and its insolent disposal, these films play with the viewer's relation to objects. On the one hand, and as we have seen, The Reckless Moment shows us stuff that is ordinarily left out of images in a Hollywood film. This is stuff that won't leave the field of vision, or stuff that returns to our vision or blocks our view, getting in the way of our identification with the narrative elements in the image. On the other hand, this film withholds certain objects, drawing attention to things that are just off-screen or forgotten by everyone else. This uncomfortable dialectic between obstinate on screen presence and nagging absence adds a politics of anti-callousness to the "dual attunement" that Morgan associates with Ophuls's visual narration. As theorist Maurzia Boscaglia puts it in a different context, "The encounter with the discarded object makes visible how much both subject and object are co-implicated in the networks that produce each of them" (229).

A comparison of The Reckless Moment to a later adaptation of the same story makes

clear how Ophuls's staging of the gaze interrupts the reigning subjective relations to the object world. The Deep End (Scott McGehee) is a 2001 remake starring Tilda Swinton in the role of the mother, here named not Lucia Harper but Margaret Hall. This later film borrows The Reckless Moment's concern for laundry and cleaning rituals, but it articulates space in quite different terms. Not much is dingy in the Hall household, but more important to what I am arguing here, The Deep End is relatively straightforward in its articulation of vision and seeing. So much so that Robin Wood declared that the later film "knows nothing of the subversions" of The Reckless Moment (19). Further, I would argue that it carries no "dual attunement." When the mother disposes of the body in The Deep End, we see clearly where it is left behind. Nothing of the body's disposal is left out of the image. By contrast, in the parallel sequence in The Reckless Moment, Ophuls's narration intricately interweaves the seen and unseen. The sequence refuses to show the disposal of the body. We don't see where the body ends up. In the Ophuls film, the most reckless moment is never depicted, as though the film refuses any of the catharsis that this radical gesture of (attempted) disposal might offer to the viewer. This omission is particularly striking in comparison to Lucia's discovery and removal of the corpse. The older film offers what feels like a real-time account when depicting Lucia's excruciating efforts to get the heavy corpse clumsily onto her boat. The procedure lasts over two minutes of screen time, during which the film cuts its musical score. In relative silence and with no commentary, the film methodically narrates the awkward dragging of the corpse. Then after this excruciating dilation of procedural narration, Lucia's labor to dump the dead body is obscured in an editing ellipsis.

Lucia drives a boat out onto the harbor, and the openness of the water in this sequence offers a stylistic reminder of the bleak and morbid opening of the Po river segment of Roberto

Rossellini's 1946 realist war saga Paisa, which was renowned internationally in this period. In both films, the bright flat shimmering surface of the water creates a field of blankness in the image, prompting an un-anchoring of space and time for the viewer. In The Reckless Moment, the water's stillness, when considered alongside the lack of any musical score, produces radically sparse image and music sound tracks, so minimal that both would stand out as anomalous or even deficient in Hollywood narration. At this narratively consequential juncture from which there's no turning back and from which the film gets its title, The Reckless Moment introduces a crisis for the viewer. Do we identify with this moment as the ultimate sacrifice of maternal protection or as a lapse of judgement, a bad choice that will endanger all that is good and right? Left not knowing how to view this scene, the viewer must also negotiate a tension between what is shown and not shown, what remains seen and what taken from view. Therefore, ethics are staged not purely in the image itself but also in what the film holds back from our gaze, what it refuses to reveal, allows to be obscured, or leaves aside. The film insists on what has been there and is no longer in view but persists nonetheless. This formal lacuna -- this lapse of the visible -- speaks of something left aside (narratively speaking, the dead body), but simultaneously of its persistence off screen. This lacuna thus unleashes an unknowing that negates any possibility of satisfying elimination. It not only accentuates the total failure of this dumping; it also enacts it through the frustration of our narrational privilege as viewers. Disposal is futile. Having already acquainted us with the oppressive obstinacy of the physical world, the film now withholds the promise of liberation from past events. A careless stance is no foil for the consequence of this decisive moment, the film warns. As a result, a weightiness hangs over the film. Of course, this is explored narratively in a plot containing bribes, clandestine meetings, and cover-ups, but it also forms the film's formal

system, particularly how it understands what an image contains and how the viewer is orientated to that image, all the while never reconciling the dissonance caused by the juxtaposition of cumbersome presences and pestering lacunae. In other words, Ophuls doesn't remind us of this heaviness in obvious ways. There are no guilt-triggered delusions, for example, produced for the viewer by composite shots or the other cinematic effects that characterize a film such as Sunrise (F.W. Murnau, 1927). Instead, his visual narration raises the ethical baggage of disposability in two distinct ways. First, as we have been exploring, reminding us of those complications through refusing to banish the discarded from view, and granting a prominence to worn objects, soiled surfaces, and strewn stuff. Second, disposability is challenged by the framing and absences in the image, through a constant prompting of our attention toward how our view is obstructed, how things forgotten and passed over by others. The question of what remains visible and what obscured from view integral to politics of refuse in the mid-century America. In fact, architectural historian Mira Engler goes so far as to say that during this period "waste itself passed under people's eyes virtually unnoticed."

That said, the cluttered disarray, smudged facades, and ephemera tossed aside are not exactly indexical traces of a life lived as they would be in a documentary film such as Grey Gardens (Albert and David Maysles et al., 1975) or even in a realist classic such as Wanda (Barbara Loden, 1970). They are instead reverberations and refractions of a particular time and place in the history of life organized around the commodity. In this context, the image in Ophuls's cinema of disposal itself functions as a vestige, an example itself of the spectral persistence of waste, that refuses to reconcile the material either to the realm of appearance or of disappearance. The film deploys this idea of vestige politically, and such a politics of the visual was perhaps what triggered Crowther to see the film predominated by a "shamelessly

callous attitude.” The film foregrounds what is used up, extra, or neglected and makes the surfaces of such unwanted stuff prominent in the image in a way that makes the “shamelessly callous attitude” of humans toward disposal apparent to us—or rather, felt by us. Through that same visual narration, the film then asks us to feel ourselves standing at a remove from those feelings and instead to feel the durability of waste. Through a particular use of the cinematic image (its narration of materiality as present and absent), the film reminds us that waste doesn’t go away. Cinema is used here to provide an experience that asks the viewer to notice a significant shift in the landscape of things, a new world populated with leftovers and haunted by the impossibility of complete disposal.

#### Dust

One of the first shots of, Letter from an Unknown Woman, another of Ophuls’s Hollywood films, is of the backside of a moving-man’s trousers covered with dust. This dust dominates the frame for a few seconds, anticipating the flurry of activity as a new tenant, Stefan, comes to live in the protagonist Lisa’s apartment building. In this sequence, we are also shown how the walls of this building’s corridors and stairwell are streaked with either water damage, a long history of soot accumulation, or both. Another early sequence fixates on air-born dirt. Thursdays, Lisa explains, is the day occupants have their rugs beaten. This sequence in the back-garden space of the apartment building shows how the building’s domestic laborers and children beat dwellers’ carpets. In two fairly long takes, the camera follows Lisa’s movements as she first beats a large oriental carpet, and then runs across the garden to her friend, and then finally helps carry Stefan’s rug out of the garden and up the outdoor stairs. As the camera guides us into and out of the scene, translucent clouds of dust swirl across the

frame. This exploration of dust is narratively key to the film, marking the first time that Lisa enters the intimate spaces of her obsession, Stefan. Previously, only his music spilled into her space, but now she flows into his. Dust signals both a key milestone (marking a possible transcendence of boundaries separating them) and a key theme (the connection of their relationship to the materiality of the left behind). When Lisa attempts physically to transcend Stefan's unawareness of her, the obstacles are often marred with the residual presences of others, such as dust or its aural equivalent noise. When, after the carpet beating, she explores his apartment for the first time alone, she only discovers his inner sanctum, his music room, after passing through an etched glass door. The camera shoots her face peering into the music room through the door's glass, and at its center there is a scratch or grease smudge that creates a glare on her face. Remnants of the presence of others in the past populate many of the spaces that Stefan and Lisa visit on their first and only romantic date a bit later in the film. Snow paths filled with footprints suggest their walk in the park follows well-trodden routes now empty. As they dance later in the same sequence, their moving embrace is surrounded by scuffmarks of the dance hall's earlier couples, who have also left behind refuse on the tables that border the dance floor. A couple out of synch such as this one appears to find intimacy in spaces vacated but not completely emptied.

Dust reappears in various guises throughout the narrative. The film makes dust's swirls structurally akin to other cloudy substances: a burning cigar left behind by the mother's fiancé spills smoke from the bottom right of the frame as she tells Lisa they will move from Vienna; dirt on the walls of their vacated apartment; the invasive steam vapors produced by departing trains that envelop those figures who are left behind on the platform. These obscuring swirls make a point: this is the nebulous materiality holding narrative questions in play. At the end of

the film, Stefan's sudden realization of his past with Lisa comes in a flood of memories, flashbacks to earlier scenes montaged and framed by churning diaphanous clouds. These are the clouds of imagination or even a fog about to clear. These clouds, it would appear from the larger context of the film, should be understood as a kind of residue of the particulate in the image. We are never quite sure if Stefan remembers with the same consequence that we do or as Lisa might. In fact, his butler must further jog his memory after the memory clouds depart. Dust provides both the sign and compensation for the limits of memory, for various kinds of loss. Dust becomes a purely cinematic effect in these final moments that propose cinema and its viewing as a kind of aesthetic reward or at least compensation for the pain and abandonment that otherwise preoccupies the film.

This cloudy particulate matter comes together with ideas of longing and the specificity of the cinematic image at the beginning of the German/Swiss arthouse documentary Staub / Dust (Hartmut Bitomsky, 2007). The film's first images and voice-over narration set the terms for its meditative, structural analysis of dust in the built world. In its initial images, the film shows us a sandstorm sequence from an old Western film. The images on screen (the pro-filmic clouds of swirling particles) merge with the poor quality of the print, which contains current dust on the film strip, photographed dust caught in an earlier printing of the film, and scratches to the image from earlier projects. What the image has captured and what it has lost become one. Meanwhile, the narrator declares dust as central to cinema's medium specificity: "Dust is the smallest object that a film can deal with...It's the smallest visual unit in which the film stock itself becomes visible...film material is nothing but dust attaching itself to transparent film base." Whether it appears on the emulsion exposed in camera during shooting or it pollutes the exhibition print in the projector, the dust that clings to the substrate constitutes

the cinematic image: its textured depth, its trembling evanescence, and even its basic depictive capacity.

While this is never articulated as directly as in Staub, Letter nevertheless offers a theory of the cinematic as a particulate aesthetic. Dust appears in Ophuls's film as not only a key textured aesthetic register, but also as a force that moves the film along. In this sense it is not unlike Ophuls's famous sweeping long takes or his use of mobile camerawork. Dust encircles emotional questions of reciprocation, accountability, obligation. It gives an aesthetic substance to the difficult predicament of possessing and being possessed. It refuses to be present while never allowing a space to be totally vacant either. It floods space without either filling it up or leaving it emptied out. Dust reminds us that in the human world, emptiness is no longer possible. Where there are humans, there is dust. It accumulates regardless of how much or little we fill our lives.

#### Waste management

Like other modern waste management systems, the cinematic text never achieves complete disposal. Dust is but one obstacle to absolute imagistic purity. Conventional conceptions of cinema as a narrative system suggest it organizes itself around the impossibility of a completely uncluttered image, despite its continued striving for the ultimate serviceable image of complete semantic clarity, one filled only with narratively motivated features. Cinema's keenest mid-century commentators regarded the total excision of irrelevant details as impossible and even undesirable. These random extras (left by the profilmic world that produced the image) were considered highly consequential. Siegfried Kracauer saw in these excesses the essence of the film image and evidence of its redemptive destiny. He posited the

waste-laden world as a perfect subject for the camera's potential for revelation. Under the heading "The Refuse," he writes: "Most people turn their backs on garbage cans, the dirt underfoot, the waste they leave behind. Films have no such inhibitions; on the contrary, what we ordinarily prefer to ignore proves attractive to them precisely because of this common neglect." Already apparent in Kracauer's brief commentary on refuse is an acknowledgement that modernity's waste culture not only leads to an omnipresence of debris. It also fosters a mode of vision that enables a denial of the presence of debris in the world. The word "refuse" names stuff we don't want to see anymore; it is what we refuse. Kracauer's vision for cinema as a tool to access and bolster truer realms of physical reality included the medium's unique capacity for undoing that refusal of refuse and for exposing the new forms of materiality that mark and mar capitalist modernity.

Kracauer believed that film images are at their truest when they retain and convey the materiality of the world. Cinema "manifests itself in letting nature in and penetrating it"; it "acquaints us with the physical origins" of the world. He imagines cinema as not simply an investigation but also a reengagement with materiality. On the one hand, he says that cinema "seems to come into its own when it clings to the surface of things," but he also states that cinema "leads us through the thicket of material life." Kracauer declares his interest in how the excesses of the image can be used by directors to underscore a film's larger themes. The Reckless Moment appears to take up Kracauer's challenge.

However, the photographic image's capacity for automatic and random representation – its openness to contingency – interests Ophuls less than it does Kracauer. In terms of realism, then, what interests me is how the deliberateness of the Ophuls image, rather than its openness to the accidental, speaks to the culture disposal and overconsumption. Take for example, our

reencounter with the cigarette butt in Caught mentioned above. Or the return of another kind of disposal found in The Reckless Moment that occurs when the film shows us the same view of Darby's dead corpse in two scenes, the second of which is a photograph printed on the cover of the next day's newspaper. (Figure??) [insert figure ??] Like the cigarette butt, the remarkable similarity of these two views of Darby's corpse demonstrates the particular role that Ophuls grants to photographic representation in his realism. In both cases, photography captures the obstinacy of things in the face of the human desire for their removal.

If films like Ophuls's operate as an alternate system of waste management, then, complete removal is not their primary mission. There are too moments in The Reckless Moment when the camera's gaze will only yield stuff. In one scene, the contents of a cluttered storage room are revealed by the frantic searching beam of Lucia's flashlight. Object after object is shown in a shot/reverse-shot interplay with Lucia, as if taunting her. These are things whose value has been forgotten, evidence corroborating a different story. In fairly routine sequences such as this one The Reckless Moment registers a desire to kill things, to make the useless dead, to put the material substance of that which is leftover firmly behind us. This is not solely a feature of the film's narrative or mise-en-scene. The film gives that desire an experiential dimension; it makes the viewer feel that desire in and through narrational patterns, the image's attention to certain gestures, and a sensitivity to the image's particular passages, flows, or stagnations. If The Reckless Moment redeems physical reality, in Kracauer's sense, then it does so by producing a conflict between the desire to see stuff gone and the stubborn persistence of that stuff.

Ophuls's films elicit a desire to remove things from view, and they make us aware of feeling that desire. Their triggers are like those stimuli that may motivate one to vacuum: a

worry about our sociality erupts from an observational anomaly (raking light revealing dust or a door opening to a new foul odor). If, however, like vacuuming, all cleaning routines contain the seeds of their own impermanence and incompleteness, what keeps people cleaning? What compensates for this nagging awareness of the impossibility of perfect hygiene? Ophuls tells us that it is the neurotic belief in our capacity to throw things away and in the comforting (if false) decidability that accompanies the gesture of disposal.

### Conclusion

There's a moment in the first twenty minutes of the film when the camera moves with Lucia through her bathroom, and for a moment, a crumpled and soiled towel can be seen in the left-hand corner of the screen. Lucia's back is toward the camera and there's nothing else in the frame but the window and a shower stall in the background. The white triangular shape of the messy towel casts a long shadow on the right side of the frame. There's an easy narrative motivation for the towel: it is a detail supporting the story and filling out its characters. It quietly signals how Bea's mistakes are coming to dominate and complicate Lucia's life. Bea has only moments before come to her mother agitated and crying. Lucia goes to the bathroom to fill a hot water bottle to comfort her daughter. But even without Bea's onscreen presence, Lucia encounters her daughter's character flaws in the image of the towel: her sloppiness, her uncaring, her middle-class privilege, her impudence. The towel as an object encourages the observant spectator to identify with Lucia and her annoyance at her daughter's habit of using Lucia's bathroom rather than her own.

The soiled towel nevertheless remains an odd anomaly when read against other Hollywood middle-class interiors. It does stand in for the narrative elements just named, but it

does not do so in a particularly brazen way. The camera doesn't linger on the towel. The towel is neither a continuity oversight nor simply a set decoration to be looked past. It represents neither accidental inclusion nor symbolic flourish. Instead, it betrays something about how Ophuls practiced an odd realism and something of what he saw in Italian neorealist directors he often mentioned in interviews, such as Rossellini.

The soiled towel consolidates something that Ophuls's style, the intervention of this film, and the more sensitive films of the period share: a disallowance of the psychological release provided by the gesture of tossing stuff aside. The Reckless Moment keys into the messiness that persists even when seemingly more consequential things are removed from view. The film's odd realism can make us aware of what the presence of those remainders feels like. This approach to mise-en-scene retroactively forecloses on the catharsis promised by late capitalism's gesture of disposal. Of particular consequence to debates around realism and the cinematic image is the fact that for Ophuls, this negotiation happens not through the indexicality of the image (i.e., its automatic registration of the unintentional stuff that is caught unaware in the frame), but through a kind of practiced (though never explicitly self-referential) style. Ophuls was famous for his hyper-detailed shooting plans and his involvement in the art direction of his films: his images are all highly controlled and constructed. His is not a realism that overtly opens up a space in the image (or editing suite) for contingency, the accidental, random generation, or what André Bazin would identify as the essential and critical "ambiguity" of the cinematic image emerging from the obdurate thing-ness of profilmic objects.

Moreover, and this is crucial, Ophuls is not giving over to the dichotomy of the random versus the constructed image upon which the most famous celebrations of the cinematic image's

realism, such as those of Bazin and Kracauer, have been built. The towel and the other images of detritus in The Reckless Moment suggest an aesthetic that refuses to binarize the film image as either discriminating/filtering or automatic/contingent. It shows what we would otherwise filter out, but this leftover is not a photographic fluke. It has been put there. These films are not documentaries of the agency of things. Nor does their most searing lesson about material life emanate from the purely unplanned profilmic intrusion of stuff. Instead, stuff has been made to take up space compositionally and narratively in these films.

We might summarize our understanding of the Ophuls image in relation to realism and its position towards reality materiality in the motto “stuff doesn’t just happen.” In The Reckless Moment and the other films Ophuls made in Hollywood, it feels as if stuff has been made to take up space for the viewer. It lingers palpably both on-screen and off, and refuses to be left behind. This stubbornness could be mistaken for a commentary on the ontology of things, as an insistence that objects carry an agency. However, the Ophuls image never anthropomorphizes or animates stuff. Instead, the stubbornness of stuff operates narratively, as a reflection of narrative choices and politics. In doing so, it should also be read as arguing against the tide of consumerism, and against consumerism’s growing investment in both shortening the life of commodities value and promoting careful disposal. That said, Ophuls is not an environmentalist in the later sense of that word. He wasn’t arguing for recycling or reforming garbage production. However, the way these films utilize the subject’s wasteful ways and register this subject’s indiscriminate relation to stuff proposes something important about human choices. It is moreover crucial to acknowledge what it registers about America, a resistance of which we may have otherwise lost sight.

In conventional histories of the growth of environmental consciousness over the course

of late twentieth century, the late 1940s and 1950s are seen as the pinnacle of unawareness: this is commodity consumption without consciousness. The other side of this was, of course, an unthinking relationship to waste. As a social history of waste puts it, “disposability was a kind of convenience, and a metaphor for freedom. It could liberate...offered deliverance from the obligation to care for things, the stewardship of objects...” (Strasser, 269). Disposal offers no such liberation for The Reckless Moment, and it offers a counterweight to what Packard describes as “the throwaway age,” an era defined by “systematic efforts being made to encourage citizens to be more careless and extravagant with their nation’s resources...presses that make us more wasteful, imprudent, and carefree in our consuming habits” (7-9).

William Paul argues that the realism of The Reckless Moment carries a “sociological density” that engages the intensification of automobile production and consumption in the late 1940s and an infusion of “Cold War urgency.”

But even these historical particulars return us, I would argue, to the question of disposal. Lucia’s husband is missing from the family because he is a contractor for a large post-war redevelopment scheme in Europe (building bridges in Berlin). Thus, the film posits US foreign policy and its efforts to clean up Europe as a wider context for the messiness of The Reckless Moment’s household matters. The film’s treatise on America’s brazen investment in disposability cannot be detached from the vectors of mid-century US imperialism.<sup>8</sup> During a period known for the expansion of US intervention (militaristic, governmental, financial, and infrastructural) into other nations, this film hints at the imposition of a new world order centered upon nothing more than sustaining the American middle class.

At the end of The Reckless Moment, Donnelly takes the blame for killing Darbey. He makes a false confession to the police moments before he dies at the site of a car crash.

Moments earlier, he explains to Lucia how sacrificing his liberty would redeem his life because it would preserve the middle class respectability of Lucia, her daughter Bea, and the rest of the Harpers. The film asks us then to read his final confession as an act of love, sacrifice, and attempted redemption. In one sense his sacrifice is successful and suggests a resolution for the film. No Harper will be implicated in Darby or Nagel's death. In a way that insulates the Harpers from criminal action, it appears loose ends are tied up. But are those loose ends tied up for the viewer?

Repeat viewers of The Reckless Moment often point out that we never know what happens to Nagel's car. If Ophuls was so sensitive to detail and continuity, often opting to *show* an element of the narrative in place of using a spoken line in the script to do this work, then could he have really forgotten Nagel's car? Perhaps he left the car hanging on purpose, as it remains still floating out in the diegetic world, a vestige that haunts us by refusing to be reconciled or dealt with diegetically.<sup>9</sup> This is a half-hearted happy ending, a noir-ish dystopic conclusion in which bad choices linger in the air. The film's final scene offers little ecstatic release, instead holding onto compromise, exhaustion, and the shabbiness of middle-class life. Even a positive response to this ending will not remove what has come before. In her monograph on Ophuls, Susan White offers an intriguing observation that 'Donnelly is linked to the nefarious world of unproductive circulation' (104). By the end, Lucia's world has been revealed as more similar to Donnelly's than at first appeared to be the case. Throughout the story, the film tries to break down disparities between these two worlds, and as I have suggested, it does so through the mutual surfaces of shabbiness, the persistence of forgotten things, and frustrated attempts at disposal. The film's erosion of the distinction between underworld and middle-class home throughout the film is visible in the smudged surfaces of the

latter, refusing everyone the possibility of complete redemption. Nothing can be truly thrown away.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Armes, French Cinema Since 1946, vol. 1. The Great Tradition, A. Zwemmer and A. S. Barnes, London and New Jersey, 1966, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Idiomatically in English, we often “kill” objects. For example, as mentioned above in 1930s detective fiction, people often killed a cigarette and a favorite bumper sticker of liberal-leaning Americans of 1970s urged tailgaters: “kill your TV”. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of the verb “kill” give prominence to actions taken on objects such as “To cast off or throw out; to clear out.” (1., b.); “To destroy, break up, or ruin anything,” (3., a.); “To consume...to empty (a bottle of liquor) colloq. (orig. U.S.), (3., d.); to extinguish (a cigarette). colloq., 1942.” In fact, as an example of 3, d, cited in the preceding note, the OED, quotes a sentence from Raymond Chandler’s 1943 novel High Window, “xix. 135 She killed her cigarette in Morny’s copper goldfish bowl, speared the crushed stub absently with the letter opener and dropped it into the waste-basket. (3., h.)” Another common American colloquial imperative is “Kill the lights.”

<sup>3</sup> As the plot progresses, the film continues to flirt with the polluting potential of smoking alongside its drama of moral messiness. Unexpectedly, a relationship of sexual attraction and mutual compassion grows between her and her blackmailer Donnelly (James Mason). In one of his early gestures of carrying for Lucia, Donnelly comments on her cigarette habit, “That’s bad for your health. You smoke too much.” And then in the next scene, he buys her a cigarette filter as gift which we are shown in an extreme close-up: “Dr. Stark’s Sifto: Less nicotine – Less Tobacco Stain”. While purchasing, Donnelly asks, “Do you sell many of these?” To which the shopkeeper responds, “Tons of them.” And then Donnelly says, “It would be simpler if you didn’t sell the cigarettes.”

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<sup>4</sup> Here we might think of films such as *Trashed* (Candida Brady, 2012) or *The 11th Hour* (Leila Connors and Nadia Connors, 2007). For more on these films and how they attempt to negotiate the materiality accumulated population, see my essay “Documentaries without Documents: Ecocinema and Toxins” (Schoonover).

<sup>5</sup> See Fay here.

<sup>6</sup> Across various essays, Victor Perkins reads The Reckless Moment (Orson Welles, 1942) as a parable of a kind of permanence that is too durable, burdensome in its inescapability. One of his examples is the stubborn presence of objects as things impossible to shrug off or dispose, such as the weight of Lucia’s fur coat (not so easily pawned or lent) (1981). He finds another example staged in the scene where a woman in the bar demands the same song be played over and over on a juke box. In a moment otherwise ripe with the possibility of transcendence, this scenario, according to Perkins, reminds of that “what seemed settled is about to be cast back into jeopardy” (2003).

<sup>7</sup> The callous elimination methods are not unlike Freud’s mechanisms of repression. Willemsen also uses the language of psychoanalysis to describe the key features of the Ophuls text, a text that “inscribes simultaneously a breakthrough of excess, the transgression of a ‘rigid and merciless discipline’ . . . , and the strategies to contain and recover, to neutralize through re-inscription or repetition what the Law had to expel, to repress in order for it to come into existence. In that sense, Ophuls’ cinema can be seen as the dramatization of repression, where the repressed returns and imprints its mark on the representation, undermining and at times overwhelming that manifestation of secondary elaboration called a ‘coherent scenario.’” (73)

<sup>8</sup> The Reckless Moment was based upon “The Blank Wall” by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, a long story published in *The Ladies’s Home Journal* and later published as a novella. While mostly faithful to the story, there are a few key details that have been changed. “The Blank Wall” uses a similar backdrop of domestic anxieties to punctuate its moral crises. With the Holding’s story, however, the cause of those anxieties is wartime shortages and rations.

<sup>9</sup> Again the case of The Deep End provides crucial contrast since that later film shows us exactly what happens to the car, and the mother’s tense attempt to hide it.