Hanna Baumann, Adriana Massidda, Bassem Saad, Elizabeth Saleh, and Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins

Film and the Toxic Politics of Waste: A Roundtable

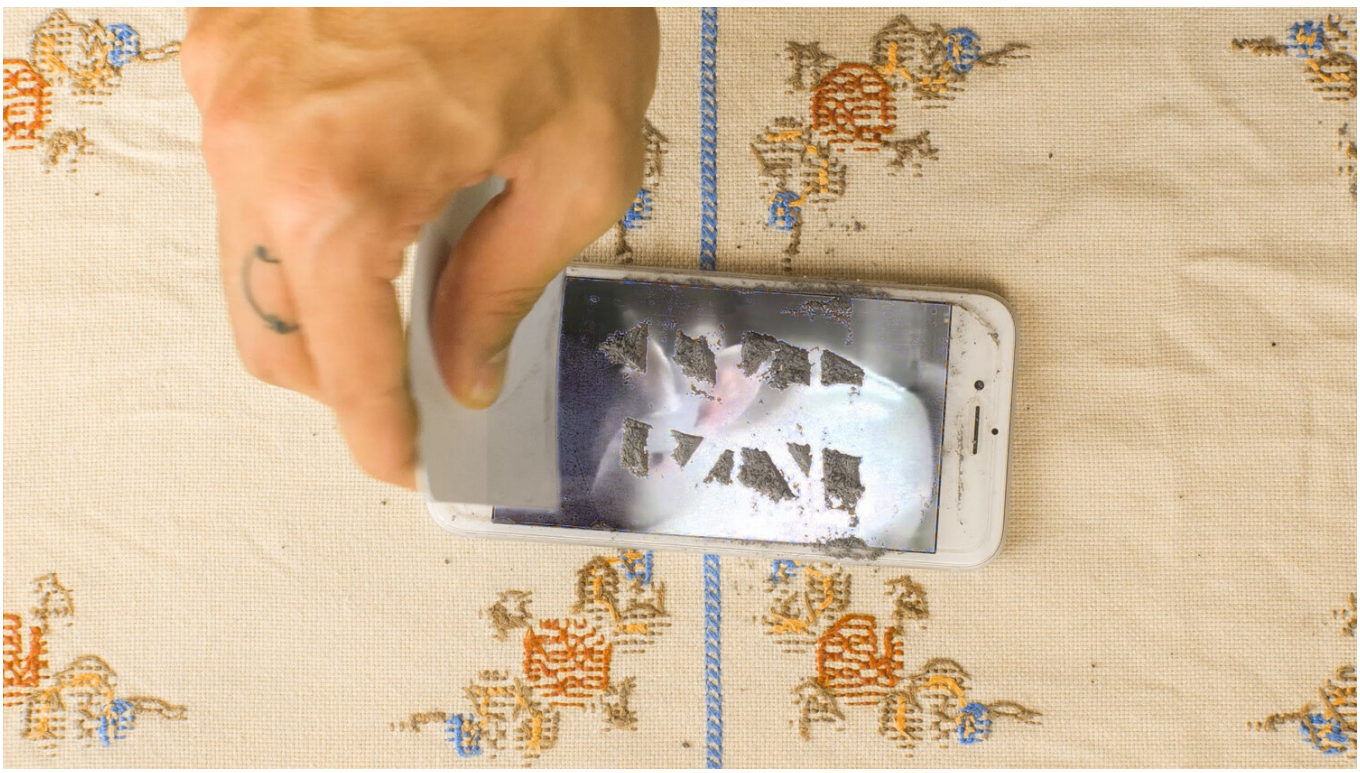
This group discussion explores how politics, toxicity, and subjectivities intersect, and highlights the role of film as a medium for approaching these subjects. The management of waste and the experiences of its toxic afterlives are riddled with uncertainty. How can we make sense of toxicity's different temporalities and the entanglements of human and nonhuman entities it creates? More specifically, how can different forms of art and knowledge-production account for the often invisible trajectories of waste, its slow and difficult-to-trace effects, and the complexity of the political forces at play?

Hanna Baumann, Adriana Massidda, and Elizabeth Saleh were joined by the makers of two short films. Waste Underground *(15', 2017), by anthropologist Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins and cinematographer Ali al-Deek, explores a landfill in the West Bank as underground storage space through the lens of Palestinian futurity.* Kink Retrograde *(19', 2019), by artist and writer Bassem Saad, is set on a landfill on the Lebanese coast in the midst of the country's ongoing waste crisis. Due to the places where these films are situated, the discussion focuses on questions of waste in Palestine and Lebanon, but also considers these particular situations in the context of global circulations and broader questions around the politics of toxicity.*

Hanna Baumann: Sophia, Bassem – both of your films are set in landfills, and both of the landfills are filled to the brim at this point. While *Waste Underground* was filmed at a subterranean landfill in the West Bank, *Kink Retrograde* is set on the coast just outside Beirut, where the rubbish is piled up and extends into the sea. What was your intention in showing these kinds of spaces that are often quite invisibilized – spaces we think of as very separate from our everyday lives? What do they tell us about the wider infrastructural situations within Palestine and Lebanon?

Bassem Saad: The landfill where I shot *Kink Retrograde* is located to the northeast of Beirut, near the Armenian suburb of Bourj Hammoud. It was created in 2015 as a makeshift response to the waste crisis and it's been filled up since then, several times. Its shelf life is being extended, and the way this extension happens is vertically; each time they continue to add further height across the surface area of the landfill. I was drawn to it because it's such a fascinating space; waste is being dumped there, simultaneously reclaiming land from the sea. This is land that will become extremely profitable and exploitable. In Beirut, there have previously been examples of this, such as the Normandy site, which was a landfill during the Civil War and during the reconstruction and redevelopment. It is now referred to as the Beirut Waterfront, though it

Film still from Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins' (with videographer Ali Al-Deek) *Waste Underground* (2017). 14:40 minutes, HD video. Courtesy of Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins.



Film still from Bassem Saad's *Kink Retrograde* (2019). Courtesy of Bassem Saad.

can't support high-rise buildings because the ground is unstable as it's made up of decomposing waste. However, up until recently there were a lot of nightclubs and other entertainment venues made up of light metal structures on it. It's obviously very expensive land, so I was intrigued by this similar space in Bourj Hammoud that in the future will become prime real estate but in the present is just this strange layering of toxic leachate with a lot of blooming plants. I was kind of enchanted by it.

HB: What about you, Sophia, how did you arrive at "your" landfill?

Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins: This site was important for my research because it was the first formal sanitary landfill built by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank. You mentioned visibility. Most Palestinians wouldn't necessarily know that it's there or where it is. It's fifteen minutes south of Jenin, which is the northernmost West Bank city. I think the placement of it was partly because Jenin's surrounding villages are treated as a less important area than others. The important thing to say, which I don't mention in the film, is that the Israeli military had actually expropriated that land for a landfill in the 1980s when it was planning waste management on the two sides of the Green Line as a single system. That was a moment when Israel was treating the whole territory in a singular fashion from an environmental-management perspective. And then after the Oslo Accords, when the Palestinian Authority was established in the 1990s, the PA sort of recycled that plan, so it didn't have to make as big an effort to get that land because it was already held by an Israeli military expropriation order. It's quite shocking – right? – to think that the Palestinian Authority is using the tools of the occupation to build a landfill and then to perform statehood, which is something I speak more about in my book, *Waste Siege*.

This landfill is highly protected. It's got a gate that is guarded, so it wouldn't have been possible for me to make a film in the way that you did, Bassem, to hang out there. I had to do a lot to get access to it for the research. But for the PA bureaucrats, it is a special site that is quite visible and accessible to donors and to the Israeli military, as they kind of used it as an advertisement for what it is possible to build. At the same time, it's disturbingly not under PA control. There have been reports that Israeli settlers have been able to dump their waste there as well. As I mentioned in the film, it had the same kind of shelf-life problem that Bassem is describing, where they had planned it for thirty years, which was part of state performance. If you can plan that far ahead, that means something about your ability to govern a territory and a population. But it shrunk down to almost ten years and filled up. And they don't expand landfills vertically in Palestine, probably partly because the Israelis prohibit certain kinds of building upward by Palestinians, because it's considered a security issue. So the landfill is always taking land rather than generating it. And I think that's an interesting comparison.

BS: The funny thing is, I was never allowed into the landfill either. It was illegal for me to be there, so we got kicked out several times during the shoot. We would just have to respond to the security guard. But for me that was part of navigating access. What does it mean to be illegally present in a landfill that, at least from our standpoint, was illegally built and should not exist? Sophia, I found myself wondering about your access to the site, how you were able to manage it. What institutional bodies did you have to be in contact with to gain that access? I also wanted more of a description of its proximity to other towns and cities, to understand what its impact really is, practically.

SRR: This film came about in a strange way. I had access to the landfill site through the PA, but it was appointment-based access. I would say, "I'll meet you on such and such a day," and someone would pick me up at the road where the taxi van would drop me off. They had to build a special access road off of the main Nablus road between Jenin and Nablus. I would get picked up, and then I would get shown particular parts of the landfill, when that suited administrators. I was certainly not allowed to roam free. And this landfill is also a site for a lot of educational visits. So they host students all the time across age groups to show them what a modern landfill is, which is also kind of ironic, because they, the managers, know that this is not the ideal or most modern way to do things.

My collaborator, Ali al-Deek, later went to take the footage, which I actively avoided doing during my research, because I felt like it would inhibit my access to try to take photographs, because it was a sensitive site and there were people in the community who were concerned about it. This answers your second question: there are villages around the landfill that are very upset with its existence there. And there's a lot of talk about the fact that you can't have your windows open because of the smell. There are complaints about dogs, complaints about birds in the area. Ali had to argue a lot to get himself in there. He and I had never collaborated before and have never even met in person. We were just put together to make this film at a distance. I just was looking back at our early Facebook messages and he was saying, "I had a lot of problems. The administration wouldn't let me

film the administrative building. They wouldn't let me film." The leachate pool where the water goes, I think it's a more sensitive part of the landfill. It's also the place where the smell can be concentrated. I don't know if that was also your experience, Bassem?

BS: It was!

SSR: I just so enjoyed your film, Bassem, and its playfulness. At the same time you were taking very, very seriously this kind of frightening future-present. I was really struck by the phone and the dust, and I wondered if you could say a little bit about how you decided on that scene, and what that dust was.

BS: That was in fact cigarette ash. We had to smoke some cigarettes. But I think the reference is quite obvious: the ash looks like some sort of recreational drug, which is being split into lines on a phone screen. I wanted to have this very tactile material on top of the green screen that's being manipulated by the performer, my friend Rayyan Abdel Khalek. In that shot, the voice-over lists specific contracts or specific shelf lives, half-lives, life expectancies. The lines of black ash kind of look like an abacus. But in the end, with recreational drugs, you consent to some kind of risk. And so that was also how it tied into the idea of being risk-aware. At any moment, in exercising agency, whether for recreational purposes or for the purpose of any kind of political action, there is risk. It was a fun shot to take.

Elizabeth Saleh: I really enjoyed watching these films. Thank you to Sophia and Bassem for all the effort that went into making them. I learned so much. I should say that I watched the films in Beirut. It was only a month or two after the explosion at the port on August 4, 2020. There was rubble, scrap metal, and broken glass piling up all around me. It was therefore quite moving to think about toxic politics through an engagement with both films.

HB: It seems to me that in this kind of a situation – a shattered, broken present – how we deal with waste also reflects political visions for the future. Waste is so closely associated with the past in many ways. It's what's left over, it's the rubble, the remnants. I was struck by the fact that both films, maybe because they deal with the question of long-term waste storage, nevertheless point towards the future.

ES: I agree. To me, both films are about futurity. They seem to underline some of the ways contemporary methods of managing waste center on how futurity is not just practiced but lived. In Sophia's film, we learn about the contradictions of a waste-management system in the West Bank where a certain globalized sensibility of consumerism converges with the entrenchment of Israeli occupation. To me, it was almost as if the burial of waste in the West Bank had less to do with an absence of a planned vision and more to do with a cognizant awareness that a future cannot be planned as long as the occupation continues. In Bassem's film, life on top of landfill does in fact arrive. It is not entirely what we expected because the future is now in retrograde. This is because in the process of all the waste streams (medical, industrial, and household) flowing into the landfill, different things and bodies become muddled together. I found it striking how the idyllic imagery portrays this breaking down of form and even its ruination in our age of so-called late capitalism. I suppose, then, my first question is to Bassem. I would like to know if there were any contemporary events in Lebanon from which you drew inspiration to make this film?

BS: When I made the film in early 2019, four years after the Lebanese waste crisis of 2015, and despite the landfill, there was still no real solution. At some point in 2017, we were hearing a lot of reports of people getting sick, in different ways, through water, through the air quality; it felt like there were a lot of new manifestations of structural toxicity. And in 2019, there were these proposals to build a nationwide network of incinerators. The idea was that because the waste output of Lebanon doesn't have enough caloric value, it can't generate enough energy to actually power the incinerators, so they would incinerate waste from different Global North countries. That year, China banned the import of plastic waste. So there was this major worldwide debacle about where the waste should go. A lot of people realized that when authorities say, "This waste is being recycled," it's actually just being shipped off to China. At some point there were proposals to import waste to Lebanon, a country that is tiny and has a very high population density. It was completely untenable.

ES: It is fascinating to me that you create this retrograde future by drawing on the absurd waste policies in Lebanon. I think that living on top of a landfill is a very likely future. In fact, I would go so far as to say that in Beirut, we are already dwelling within a landfill – even a rubbish dump! That realistic aspect is what makes your film so visceral for me. I'd like to hear more about scenes in the film where constellations are mapped out on the back of a human body. The tattooed arrows representing reuse, recycle, and repair are portrayed like celestial movements of material that follow the tracks of industrial closed-loop circuits. A needle is used to trace this constellation on the skin, which seems to add a violent component, as well as an element of risk and perhaps even a kink in this map-making practice. How, if at all, does

violence and risk frame the new social contract that you envisage?

BS: When I was thinking of these new types of contracts I was thinking of risk and even advocating for an acknowledgement of the existing violence; it was an anticipation of a future contract. And, in retrospect that is kind of funny, because as soon as I finished editing the film, a month later, the October 2019 uprising started. When I look back on that film, I think of it as precipitating a violence of confrontation.

ES: I would like to ask Sophia about her film. Its focus on the underground is almost the antithesis of Bassem's celestial gaze. And yet, the two films speak to each other in profound ways. In *Waste Underground*, I was very struck by scenes of the dugout holes in the earth where subterranean infrastructures of lining and pipes facilitate the tight packing of discarded plastics and organic materials. I doubt that any of these discarded items will ever see the light of day. That is with the exception of liquids that evaporate under the hot sun. Toxic politics literally seep and ooze across the landscape. In many respects, underground waste seems to act as a specter in the West Bank. It's not always visible but still very much present. Its insidious presence is suggestive of the menaces that lay ahead. Sophia, would it be possible to say a bit more about the temporal modality with which waste in Palestine is buried underground?

SSR: I'd like to focus on this word "storage," which really came to me only when I was preparing for this film. It was after I did my research, during which I had been taking for granted the idea of disposal, even though I was focusing on the location where you send that which you dispose of. And I knew, because this was a big part of the realization of my research, that there is not a place where you can actually get rid of waste, including with incinerators. I've been speaking with engineers – that's one of the interesting elements of my research – and there's always some remnant from the processing of waste that then needs somewhere to go. But in my conversations with the curators of the Sharjah Biennial, who requested this project, I realized that "storage" was such a useful word for thinking about how a landfill not only sets the conditions for the future, but also creates an infrastructural permanence that is unusual for the Palestinian context. I say this because what we generally hear about is Israeli destruction of Palestinian homes and other infrastructure. And finding the remnants of homes is such an important practice in thinking about the Nakba. But here we have a kind of active storing for a future that isn't even really imagined by most people, where these objects will just stay and become part of the land. And I think both of our films are interested in that in some way. There will be toxicity that will be slow to emerge. Bassem, you mentioned people getting sick. Of course, people will get sick now, but people might be getting sick in thirty years and it may be very difficult to make the connection between this particular infrastructure and that particular disease. For me, the idea of storage makes me ask questions like: For what? For when? And what are the different scales of the future that will be affected in different ways by this landfill? It's very hard to imagine it being undone; it can't be undone in the way that humans are currently dealing with territory. So I thought that the question "storage for what?" was interesting, and the fact that it's beyond the control or even the imagination of the people who are planning these sites.

HB: When you say "for what?" you're saying that how we store excess waste reflects what we value, right? That's interesting, because if you think about real estate value, which Bassem alluded to before, in Palestine land is obviously central to political questions of occupation and sovereignty. The way you described the landfill, Sophia, is that it reduces the amount of land available by taking up space and by making the land too toxic for agriculture. Whereas these coastal landfills in Beirut are actually turning shit into gold, if you will – using trash to create land which generates profit through expensive seafront real estate.

SSR: But that is also happening. There is both disruption and generation. For the PA, this *is* the turning of shit into gold.[1] They're trading little bits of land for a certain kind of performance; they're hoping to cash in on a little bit more sovereignty, or a little step closer to sovereignty.

HB: That's interesting, because this shape-shifting quality of waste was also where I saw a tension between your two films. In your film, Sophia, it seems like waste is foreclosing the future, because there's no imagination of anything other than the status quo, no imagination of the occupation ending, of refugees returning. Whereas your film, Bassem, even though it's from a prerevolution moment, as you were saying, imagines new forms of life – through the imagery but also through this new social contract, a modification of life-forms and relations. I wonder how much toxicity plays into that, in terms of either foreclosing possibilities by disrupting and destroying life, or altering life-forms and thereby allowing new things to happen. Is that relevant to either of your thinking?

BS: Yes, at one point I read an article, I think it was in *The Guardian*, which said that the way

the waste is being treated in Lebanon is almost medieval. At face value, yes, it looks medieval because you're dumping waste right next door. But if you really think about how this is being calculated in the long term, generating new land that becomes really expensive – it's a perfectly contemporary logic. There's nothing "backwards" about. It's actually very creative. I'm not saying that there's any sort of engineering ingenuity behind it, but despite its makeshift qualities, there's still immense profit being designed into land management. It's in line with this idea that political mobilization needs to be very speculative to catch up. We need to take risks because capital already takes a lot of risks. So this was also one way of tying it to the discourses of resilience and normalized crisis.

SSR: This is such an interesting thread. Hanna, I think you were alluding to the idea of mutant ecologies. In Bassem's film it comes out that toxicity gets enfolded into the generation of life and lifeworlds and in fact futurities are not foreclosed. They're just directed. If you imagine train tracks where you can choose to go this way and have a less toxic experience, or you can pull the lever and go that way to have a more toxic experience, I think the future is still unfolding. But what I saw in Palestine, and what I argue in my book, is that toxicity is now a part of every aspect of life. The landfill happens to be a site that is out of view for a lot of people in Palestine. Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank, live in proximity to waste and are unable to escape wastefulness, because they're plugged into a capitalist, highly consumerist economic system that is supported by the PA and the international community. So my interest is in the fact that we've already arrived at that toxic future. We live in the landfill already. Palestinians are an intense case of it, but I think you could say the same thing about a lot of places. What's interesting about this is that it can be kind of imperceptible. If I were making a fiction film about this, I would highlight the ways in which life actually feels quite normal in this toxic future that we already inhabit.

Adriana Massidda: Would you say that waste both as a concept and as a material condenses wider cultural and political issues?

SSR: Yes, that's a great way to talk about it. I like the verb "to condense." I also think that waste enables certain things. It has an interesting capacity to embody multiple meanings and valances at the same time as it makes new possibilities that do not necessarily correspond to those meanings and valances that it condenses. So I think it's a very interesting and kind of confusing material-semiotic composite to work with. I had a hard time writing my dissertation about it because I took a really long time to figure out what I thought waste was before moving forward. It's not the same as another substance where you can say, "This is ash." Once you say, "Ash is waste," you're making a value judgement and you're condensing a lot of meaning into that.

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This conversation took place in the context of the annual research theme "waste" at University College London's Institute for Advanced Studies and the UCL Urban Lab. This discussion followed a screening hosted by Bertha DocHouse (dochouse.org).

1
See Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit* (MIT Press, 2020).