

Emptying the trash bin is today, above all, a symbolic gesture. It stages a disappearance without remainder that is never fully achieved, whether in the analogue or the digital realm. When computer files are deleted, they may remain on the storage medium as residue until they are overwritten, and can be rendered legible again by forensic means. The same holds for what is discarded into physical waste bins, which does not simply vanish. What is thrown away is merely shifted out of view: carried off by infrastructures, reprocessed, fed into new cycles of value creation, or provisionally deposited elsewhere. The cultural practice of discarding thus proves to be an operation that does not simply make things disappear, but itself produces residues.

As a conceptual problem, the residue becomes pressing in the nineteenth century, in the wake of industrialization and urban modernization. From this point on, what is left over or excluded is to be systematically removed or put to use; the world itself is declared a project of organization without remainder (Krajewski 2006). Against the backdrop of the ecological crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, the residue can no longer be regarded solely as a problem of management. Precisely where residues fall below or exceed the threshold of human perception, they move to the center of ecological and media-theoretical questions. They appear across several registers: as waste matter distributed across the planet; as the built relics of industrial modernity; as *imperial debris* (Stoler 2013); as the growing holdings of cultural artifacts in museums, archives, and depots; and as the data traces of everyday digital cultures. Cutting across these spatial registers runs the temporal signature of the residue: it is what remains *after* something, and it often takes effect belatedly – in the mode of latency, afterlife, and return.

Cultural-studies engagements with residues have gained momentum since the 2000s, mainly from sociological, literary, historical, and artistic perspectives. Media studies, too, has turned to what is left over, though largely through the lens of technological obsolescence. Work on *residual media* (Acland 2007; Gabrys 2011; Parikka 2015; Jucan/Parikka/Schneider 2018) attends to obsolete, discarded, or surviving technologies. This special issue proposes to shift that line of inquiry. The residue should be not merely an object of media representation and administration, but a starting point for theory: one from which to rethink basic concepts of the medial such as trace, storage, transmission, milieu, and aesthetic form. That the residue takes many forms in the process – as residuum, relic, remainder, or carry-over – we understand not as conceptual vagueness but as program: the differences among these terms, as well as their relation to the category of the trace (Krämer/Kogge/Grube 2007), can themselves become a subject of the contributions.

This special issue invites contributors to pursue these phenomena through concrete case studies and to develop the concept of the residue in media-theoretical terms. Contributions may orient themselves along three lines of inquiry.

1. Media as Producers of Residues

A first set of questions concerns the relation of media to their residues. If media appear not as neutral stores but as operators and instances of selection whose performance is often measured by efficiency, then where do the residues go that every transmission, filtering, and compression leaves behind? Is inefficiency here a defect to be corrected, or rather – as the figure of the parasite and the noise of information theory suggest (Serres 1980) – a condition of the medial itself? Can the residue, in the sense of a carry over, itself be thought of as a *carrier* of media processes? Such a figuration also calls up the social figures that gather around residues today. Might other figures show a prominence comparable to that of the forensic analyst (Kirschenbaum 2008), from the nineteenth-century ragpicker (Baudelaire, Benjamin) to the *gleaner*, *cleaner*, or *hoarder*?

2. Residues as Media

A second set of questions addresses the medial potential proper to material remnants. To what extent do physical residues themselves function as media that store, transmit, or mediate? What does it mean when residues shape entire environments, for instance at sites of extractivist economies and ongoing ecocoloniality? What are these residues made of; how and where do they concretely appear? Which methods from disciplines neighboring media studies – geography, geology, or anthropology – can be made productive for analyzing such residual deposits? What knowledge is laid down in them that no other medium holds in the same way? This also concerns artistic practices that read residues as media, expose the bodies of knowledge stored within them, and carry them over into new contexts of action.

3. Aesthetics of the Residue

A third set of questions turns to the aesthetic dimension of the residue. How does what is left over appear to the senses, and how does it withdraw from perception? We propose to describe the residue as spectral in a double sense: as the ghostly return of what has been only incompletely removed (Derrida 1993; Gordon 1997; Tsing et al. 2017), and as an object of technical visualization – as where microplastics or particulate matter become perceptible only through spectroscopic procedures. The spectral thus binds aesthetic and forensic questions together. That such perceptibility is not itself neutrally distributed has recently been sharpened by Rizvana Bradley through the concept of the *black residuum* (Bradley 2023). Here, the excluded residue stands not for the margin but for the disavowed ground of the prevailing aesthetic order. How the residue appears determines not only what becomes visible, but also which affects it mobilizes – from disgust and revulsion through nostalgia and melancholy to fascination or indifference. Beyond *junk art* and *trash*, the concern is less the residue as motif than the question of what about it becomes perceptible at all, for whom, and at what price.

We welcome proposals with a strong media-theoretical orientation from across interdisciplinary fields of research. Please submit substantive abstracts (approx. 300 words), together with a short biographical note, by **2 October 2026** to franziska.barth@kwi-nrw.de, henriette.gunkel@ruhr-uni-bochum.de, and felix.hasebrink@ruhr-uni-bochum.de. Submissions may be made in German or English.

Notifications of accepted abstracts will be sent by **31 October 2026**. Final texts (approx. 35,000 characters including spaces, footnotes, and bibliography) are due by **5 February 2027**. The issue will appear in autumn 2027.

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