What is rubbish? Taken in its common-sense meaning, the term “rubbish” refers to something we discard or repudiate because it is worthless or undesirable. Understood in this way, this term is not only used in regard to physical objects but also functions as a cultural category: the label “rubbish” may, for instance, apply to both a bad poem and the piece of paper on which this poem is written. More importantly, however, this definition of rubbish points to the fact that rubbish always functions within the framework of inclusion and exclusion – that is, that a designation of an object as rubbish results from differentiation between things which belong and those which do not.

This course is designed to examine the category of rubbish in both its material and figurative incarnations. We will explore a broad applicability of this category to unravel its aesthetic, social, moral, and metaphysical dimensions, and investigate the conceptual contexts within which this category operates (ordering, exclusion, otherness, transgression, and excess). As we go through the semester, the question “What is rubbish?” will open up a space for a series of discussions, during which we will explore the margins of culture and civilization, the margins of society, and the margins of reality. At the same time, we will critically examine a set of concepts and distinctions that guide our understanding of rubbish, including the distinctions between center and periphery, order and lawlessness, the useful and the useless, and the meaningful and the meaningless.