

and other large-scale structures."

Are such patternings of information really maps? The 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910) defined a map as "a representation, on a plane and a reduced scale, of part or the whole of the earth's surface." How far Hall has travelled from that definition is evident in the illustrated examples of his book, which resemble less "geographical" or even spatial representations than drug-induced hallucinations. Hall's cartographic metaphor does strain to include all recent scientific developments. Yet when Gregory Chudnovsky computed π out to the billionth digit—a figure which, if printed out by a computer, would require a stack of paper 12 stories high—he commented, "The usefulness of this information is only based on its physical, spatial correlations, *not* in this idiotic long sequential display of it." That remark, Hall believes, could serve as the coda to today's scientific world.

RUBBISH!: *The Archaeology of Garbage.* By William Rathje and Cullen Murphy. HarperCollins. 250 pp. \$23

The question of who we are has engaged the best minds of philosophy, literature, psychology, and . . . garbology? Yes, garbology. And the answer this new science offers is succinct: We are what we throw away.

The new science is, in most ways, not really that new. Archaeologists have analyzed garbage everywhere from the pyramids of Egypt to the lawns of Monticello for clues to the civilizations that produced it. The Garbage Project, founded at the University of Arizona in 1973, has simply adapted the investigative procedures of the older science to the study of contemporary trash. Since that year, teams of researchers have sifted through neighborhood trash cans and scoured landfills, braving smells and slime and scorning garbage disposers in order to sort and catalogue some 250,000 pounds of trash. As archaeologist Rathje, the Garbage Project's director, and Murphy, managing editor of *The*

Atlantic, relate, some of their discoveries have been startling.

The researchers found, for example, that the three big foes in the environmental wars—diapers, fast food packaging, and polystyrene foam—account for only three percent of landfill content. (One organization had earlier put the figure at over 70 percent.) The real enemy is paper, yard waste, and construction debris. Even plastic, the symbol into which "Americans seem to have distilled all of their guilt over the environmental degradation they have wrought," is less of a problem than previously thought. The cost-cutting practice of "lightweighting," by which manufacturers create the same product with less plastic (its use in milk jugs has been reduced by almost half), has dramatically lessened plastic's burden on landfills.

The Garbage Project found that many of the widespread myths about the disposal of our garbage were little more than rubbish. For example, millions of refrigerators, sofas, tables, chairs, and other household goods thrown away every year are recycled by scavengers. And contrary to common belief, the United States has plenty of room left for new landfills. If properly managed, full landfills can be employed in a range of other uses. In fact, as Murphy and Rathje remind us, many of our cities are already built on the garbage of the past, rising like Venice upon layers of buried trash. Large swaths of New York City and Boston's Back Bay neighborhood stand on covered dumps.

It seems that we never completely escape what we throw away. But in the end, according to the authors' shrewd and lively account, contemporary America, per capita, makes significantly no more garbage than other societies have—or do. (American households, on average, generate even less garbage than do households in Mexico City.) To be sure, many steps remain before Americans achieve "a truly rational garbage regime," but of the "ten commandments" the authors sensibly recommend, the first is that we abjure the notion that our garbage problems constitute a crisis.