

## Wasting Away: (De)Composing Trash in the Contemporary Brazilian Documentary

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**Abstract.** This essay examines the metaphor of garbage in contemporary Brazilian documentary to problematize issues of race, class, and gender, focusing especially on Marcos Prado's feature-length *Estamira* (2004). Utilizing the postmodern decomposition of *antropofagia* (*coprofagia*), theorized by Brazilian poet and cultural critic Glauco Mattoso as well as considerations of recent feminist thought, this essay will examine how the motif of *lixo* in recent Brazilian film serves to critique contemporary Brazilian social and economic policies by revealing a society that discovers itself—and ironically, its own value and values—through the garbage it produces.

In the preface to his recent philosophical essay on the ontology of trash, Greg Kennedy examines waste from the perspective of life in a so-called “throw-away society,” arguing the following: “If we look at trash from the right angle, we start to see something more than a dirty collection of processed fibers, minerals, petroleum, and food scraps. Images of ourselves begin to emerge, uncanny images we could not otherwise behold except through this outside medium. By virtue of its sheer volume, trash now offers us the single greatest means for observing ourselves” (*Ontology of Trash* x).

Recent Brazilian films have focused, somewhat obsessively, on *lixo* (“trash”) in its relationship to Brazilian society and, by extension, to the development

of social and political inequalities. While not a documentary per se, Heitor Dhália's *O cheiro do ralo* (2006) articulates a complex if sardonic philosophical theory of garbage in relation to humankind. One of the most compelling scenes in Sergio Bianchi's *Cronicamente inviável* (2000) is a two-minute clip that illustrates man's inhumanity to man by depicting an elegant restaurant staff member physically driving away starving beggars who are attempting to open the lids of the garbage cans outside the establishment in search of food. In a biting sarcastic revision of the scene, which follows immediately, the staff member offers the same scraps of wasted food to a couple of wild dogs. The brilliant eleven-minute short piece *Ilha das Flores* (1989) uses and abuses the traditional technique of documentary narration to provide a scathing criticism of excessive waste and subsequent social injustice in the city of Porto Alegre, where, according to the film, approximately one million citizens produce some 500 tons of garbage on a daily basis. The film criticizes the tendency to transport garbage far away from the urban centers in which it is produced, making it geographically invisible in a futile attempt to erase its existence (and the consequences of its use and misuse) from our collective consciousness, where it only accumulates and causes serious problems: "[O] lixo é levado para determinados lugares bem longe onde possa livremente sujar, cheirar mal, e atrair doenças." The final scenes of the film show the emaciated and sickly residents of ironically named Ilha das Flores, who nurture themselves by consuming the garbage, the only sustenance at their disposal.

Winner of thirty-three film awards internationally, mostly for best documentary in 2004, 2005, and 2006, the film *Estamira* recreates the life story of its namesake, a 63-year-old woman who has lived and worked for over 20 years in the Aterro Sanitário de Jardim Gramacho, which receives more than 8,000 tons of garbage daily from the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro. Through 2005, the *lixão* of Jardim Gramacho, located in the municipality of Duque de Caxias and surrounded by a small favela plagued with drug trafficking, the site occupied an area of more than 1,200,000 square meters. It is here that about 85 percent of urban trash produced in Rio was deposited every day over a course of more than 25 years.

The director, Marcos Prado, shadowed and observed Estamira for a period of two years. In a fascinating interview, Prado states what he had learned as a result of his two-year journey, relating that: "Aprendi mais tarde que o contingente humano do Aterro funcionava como um termômetro social. Ex-trafficantes, ex-presidiários, ex-domésticas, ex-trabalhadores, velhos e jovens

desempregados: todos juntos se misturavam ali em busca do sustento vindo do lixo e, muitas vezes, em busca do alimento que ali encontravam.” This observation raises a number of interesting questions, perhaps the most distressing and disturbing of which is the following: Upon the impending closure of Gramacho, more than 15,000 inhabitants who work with recycled goods will no longer be able to support themselves, an interesting and sobering twist on the idea of dependency upon trash, rather than dependency on consumerism via material goods in pre-consumption status. In fact, some sociologists estimate that, in Brazil, there are two million people who base their livelihood primarily on the collection and recycling of aluminum cans. Framed in another way, the inevitable and ironic question becomes: What will happen to the inhabitants of the Gramacho when they are deprived of their livelihood of nurturing or nourishing themselves on its waste? This concern brings up a larger question of social disparity or inequality: These invisible (or worse, rejected, or rather e-jected) Brazilian citizens, without access to basic human rights and services, have become dependent on consuming, both metaphorically and literally, the waste that the overall “legitimized” society at large has produced. Therefore, we cannot overlook a very complex economics of the circulation and the consumption of trash that accompanies equally important concerns about the role of creative and consistent recycling in a heavily polluted and contaminated environment.

One might write an essay entirely devoted to the cinematographic techniques in the film, for they are quite interesting and complex. In the beginning of the movie, the viewer sees grainy textured images produced by a Super-8 camera. These Super-8 images alternate with 35 mm images in black and white and finally with 35 mm images in color. In essence, the viewer is exposed to several levels or layers of photography, used rather strategically, as we shall see, throughout the film, alternating from frames of a grainy texture to spotty, rather messy shades of black and white, mimicking the appearance of the antique reels of film characterizing the old black-and-white documentary genre, to a far more lucid and uncluttered black and white, to full color. While it is not within the scope of this essay to examine specific cinematographic techniques, it is interesting to note that this variance of perception, while serving as a metaphor for the need to perceive differently, also challenges traditional notions of “objectivity” surrounding documentary film and is perhaps somewhat deceptive (and most certainly biased) in its attempt to literally “color” the life of Estamira in ways that may or may not be realistic

or even honest. When she talks about herself and her life, for example, the camera filters the scene from grainy to a dull black and white and finally to a vivid and clear black and white.

Estamira, the assumed product of accumulated trash, is elevated in status to become the queen or even the diva of trash. I argue that Estamira is essentially “trashed” in every way possible—she is used, abused, “jogada,” “jogada fora,” rejected (twice in marriage), and is transformed into trash and ultimately incarnates the queen of trash, where she becomes empowered to assume a leadership role in her community of *catadores* (“trash collectors”). It seems, therefore, that there is a semi-carnavalesque quality merging with the sublime sense of abject(ion).

Who is Estamira and for whom does she speak? Estamira represents, on one hand and quite literally, wasted human potential. Journalist Ana Lucia Prado argues that Estamira’s actions as well as her philosophical viewpoints are reflections of the rejected/dejected/ejected parts of ourselves that we refuse to confront or to claim, writing: “Em suas andanças, [Estamira] segue vagando em pedaços que deixamos de nós, daquilo que desfazemos, que ensacamos e expelimos, do que rejeitamos, mergulha nessa negação e vê o mundo ao contrário. Ao contrário do que não vemos ou não queremos ver. Ela junta os nossos restos e nos devolve em metáforas.” For me, this evaluation clearly mirrors cultural *coprofagia* à la Glauco Mattoso. The idea of wasted potential is revealed by Estamira to the consumers who have deposited their so-called trash to be transformed, somewhat anthropophagically, at the hands of a nurturing woman like Estamira, who reinscribes these discarded products with concrete value, or one may even say, concrete values, in the plural. The reference to anthropophagy is quite clear, as is the allusion to coprophagy. In Glauco Mattoso’s “Manifesto Coprofágico,” the reader is (mis)treated to a post-modern rendition of Oswaldian anthropophagy. To appropriate and subvert this modernist literary strategy, Mattoso engages in a parodic re-working of Oswald’s already satirical “Manifesto Antropófago,” which was presented on a single page in a journal, the *Revista de Antropofagia*, itself reflecting the visual presentation of a large-scale mainstream newspaper. To reiterate, Oswaldian anthropophagy essentially involves a devouring of First World culture, after which a process of selective digestion occurs, in which some of the colonizer’s culture becomes integrated into Brazilian culture. This cultural residue subsequently combines with other elements to transform itself into something new and distinct and, in the final product, uniquely Brazilian. The



undesirable traits of the devoured and digested culture, for their lack of application or relevance to Brazilian society, are spit out—discarded rather than appropriated, and Mattoso, a self-acknowledged “sub-product” of Oswald de Andrade, and a few generations removed, has created a manifesto to treat the residue, the by-products, so to speak, of Oswaldian anthropophagy. Taking up one of Brazilian Modernism’s most subversive aesthetic projects with irony and humor, Mattoso’s preoccupations begin where Oswald’s end: If the anthropophagist has eaten somebody, our cannibal will undoubtedly experience a bowel movement. Mattoso’s multiple poetic voices receive the waste deposits of culture with a hearty appetite, eating the feces, or metaphorically ingesting “undesirable” or perhaps “un-in-corporable” cultural elements that have been consumed and rejected (or ejected). In a postmodern anti-aesthetic re-working of Oswaldian anthropophagy, Mattoso proudly and angrily—but with tongue-in-cheek—identifies himself as a revolted member of the colonized Third World (Butterman, *Perversions on Parade* 119–20).

Similarly, throughout the progressive development of Estamira’s character and the presentation of her eccentric insights, the spectator begins to see (and gradually cannot but see) that Estamira represents the human potential and determination to survive by blending and mixing rejected or ejected objects (even if abject) to create new significations and propose alternate uses that could not be conceived prior to these products having undergone decomposition. I see this process as a somewhat postmodern metaphor for reconstituting subjectivities on the basis of fragments of fixed identities that have been recycled into new (or better, renewed) possibilities.

*Estamira* provokes the viewer to reflect on the clichéd maxim: “You are what you eat,” which, in the case of this film, is appropriately replaced with “You are what you waste.” Both the main character and, it seems, the perspective of the filmmakers of *Estamira* theorize that a society becomes most acquainted with itself through the trash, garbage, waste that it produces. The detritus is inscribed with those ingredients that are devalued in society or even relegated to the status of filth, and consequently perceived as anti-hygienic. As Stallybrass and White contend in their classic piece, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*: “Disgust always bears the imprint of desire [...]. [L]ow domains, apparently expelled as ‘Other,’ return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination” (191). Similarly, the discarded is always inscribed with the mark of the cherished, the valued, the abundant, since the item in question was used (and sometimes abused) to the (usually grossly incomplete)

end. The residual waste and its destiny are what become personified as Estamira. I agree with critics like Liane Barros who view Estamira exclusively as an outsider, as among the world's *esquecidos*, writing: "Estamira é uma outsider, faz parte da comunidade dos que vivem do lado de fora, os esquecidos do mundo, vivendo às custas dos restos e descuidos de uma civilização, que deles nada quer saber." However, I believe that Estamira also reflects precisely the opposite: Metaphorically, she is an "insider" in the most intimate of terms because she has ultimately studied and transformed the products of the intestines (or perhaps the internal workings) of the Brazilian body. However, in this light, I would like to argue that *Estamira* successfully fragments or slices through the detritus to reformulate a politics and a philosophy of "incorporation" (which I would like to now slice and dissect into its three constitutive parts): *in-corporation*. What is not rationed is wasted and becomes *integrated into* the Brazilian physical body and, by extension, its psyche. In this sense, Estamira does not allow us to forget the material literally at our disposal nor the remnants we choose to dispose of, as she reintroduces them with new meanings and even constitutes her own existence, her own survival, on the foundation of this so-called "waste."

Scatological analysis has played an important role in feminist thought through the 1980s and 1990s, figuring prominently in the works of writers like Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and Iris M. Young. In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva conceptualizes excrement—or that which has been discharged from the body—as indicative of the body's boundaries; that is, the body's definition of elements internal and external to itself. The discharge comes to represent, then, the construction of an "Other" (3–4, 71). Yet it is important to realize, as Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, that the contents that have been ejected from the body are undergoing a process of transformation that reconceives "something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (133). As such, elements at one time in-corporated and imbued with subjective identification have become alienated from the subject's perception of itself. Iris M. Young, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, applies Kristeva's theories of abjection to notions of sexism, homophobia, and racism, viewing the body's sex, sexuality, or color as elements to be ejected; then, once differentiated and therefore autonomous from the subject's bodily boundary, these expelled identities can be conceived with disgust. While Young portrays the repulsed viewer as one who owns a hegemonic identity, I believe this process may also be

psychoanalytically extended to encompass a projection of the self in its denunciation and therefore compulsion to expel its own “abject” qualities. Internalized homophobia, or self-censorship on a more general level, may be examples that are symptomatic of the self’s perhaps unconscious role in its own detachment from characteristics that define it, aspects that society has labeled as foreign to the cleanliness of the body and therefore relegated to the status of filth.

Judith Butler concisely summarizes the notion of bodily boundaries that establish acceptable elements of identity and that exclude, for the ultimate purpose of domination, facets deemed to be alien:

What constitutes through division the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit. For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability [...]. This sealing of its surfaces would constitute the seamless boundary of the subject; but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that excremental filth that it fears. (134)

Ultimately, in this perspective, the threat of contamination by difference or “Otherness” is not only a powerful one but a reality that transcends any of the subject’s vain attempts to construct a boundary to prevent reincorporation into its subjectivity. The security of a cleansed “inner” world that has temporarily succeeded in expelling abject qualities is a false one that will not be able to permanently uphold its artificial borders and will have to ultimately accept the difference that terrifies it, or, to reiterate Butler’s metaphor, risk destruction by explosion. Mattoso’s insistence on eating the *cagada* is enhanced by his acknowledgment that the supposedly rejected remnants have the potential to provide a feast of difference, a veritable banquet of societally rejected truths with which the author is attempting to re-nourish Brazilian, and by extension, post-modern consciousness.

The rejected elements, also known as waste, are ironically the best access to understanding the core values of any society, and Estamira’s role in this process of self-revelation is thus critical. It is not surprising that she would be

condemned to “Otherness” (in this case, perceived as insane) because of the threat that her dominion over trash represents to the collective unconscious, thus prompting her further marginalization and removal from perceived “normalcy.” As Kennedy contends:

Waste embarrasses and shames us because it confronts us with a reflection of our own shortcomings [...]. On the strength of this, we could make two plausible hypotheses. First, any society [...] that generates gross amounts of waste must have correspondingly gross inadequacies. Where the average person [in the US] creates nearly five pounds of garbage per day, the human failure must also be proportionately massive. Second, a society preoccupied with concealing its wastes must have, so to speak, something important to hide from itself. (4)

The notion of living among waste and constructing novelty out of the discarded reflects the fact that Estamira is quite aware of the fact that most of her surroundings have been relegated to the status of “waste” simply from lack of use, discontinued use, partial use, or even misuse, prompting her to remark: “Isto aqui é um depósito dos restos. Às vezes vem também descuido [...].” Estamira’s self-proclaimed mission is to reveal society to itself, and she consequently suffers the high price of marginalization and the medical diagnosis of schizophrenia. Nevertheless, it is important to remind ourselves that Estamira does not function exclusively as victim or victimized but rather has staked out and proudly adopted her role, adapting amazingly well to life in the dump and embracing its value. At one crucial and especially lucid moment in her interviews, she states: “Eu, Estamira, sou a visão de cada um [...]. Ninguém pode viver sem Estamira [...].”

It is interesting and relevant to examine the motif of relativity of (in)sanity: Estamira’s world is ironically more stable and controlled *inside* the trash dump than it would be in an institution or in mainstream society at large, where she is deemed to be invisible. I think the film also purports that both of these “microcosms”—inside or outside of the trash bin—are, quite frankly, crazy-making. The notion that Estamira is mentally disturbed, as the film relates at several points, and even suffers from schizophrenia, as we discover at another point, is indicative of another level of marginalization. One of the many criteria for social exclusion is the pronouncement and ultimately the diagnosis of *loucura*. In viewing and reviewing the film, I have found that the most compelling reason to explain why Estamira may be deemed psychotic



is the fact that she confuses *luxo* with *lixo*, romanticizing and re-envisioning the material value and wealth of the discarded goods that she subsequently revives with new life.

The film struggles to persuade the spectator to believe that Estamira's rejection of her family and her choosing to live in an enormous garbage dump over the possibility (despite repeated invitations and opportunities) of reuniting with family in a more "civilized home" setting is symptomatic of her psychosis. However, without meaning to romanticize the harshness and the cruelty of the life that Estamira leads, she states repeatedly, during many moments of the film, that she takes pride in making items relegated to garbage usable again. In the process of recomposition, Estamira reinvests herself with a critical utilitarian role within the community (read: family) she has chosen to adopt. As she provides an overall assessment of her life in Gramacho, Estamira relates: "Adoro isso aqui. A coisa que eu mais adoro é trabalhar." This comment powerfully subverts the notion that the *marginal* or the *marginalizadol marginalizada* is either not able to find or not willing to engage in fixed work, trashing, if you will, the prejudiced notion that the impoverished or the "formally" unemployed cannot or will not work for a living.

For Estamira and in *Estamira*, the economics of the circulation of trash becomes, then, a metaphor for living a richer, fuller life and a condemnation of wasted potentialities. One of the most salient observations Estamira makes is the following: "O homem está aqui para conservar, proteger, limpar, e usar mais [...] o quanto pode [...]. Economizar as coisas é maravilhoso. Porque quem economiza, tem. Então as pessoas têm que prestar atenção no que eles usam, no que eles têm [...]."

It is from this garbage that Estamira constructs her own home, staking out her own vocation in the world, with steadfast pride and total self-determination. As such, Estamira's plight can also be seen as *queer* in the sense that her struggle represents freedom from societal standards, norms and expectations, as the diva of the dump works laboriously and conscientiously to construct a new sense of place and a leadership position in an adopted community with no ties to her biological family, from whose members she has experienced repeated rejection and harsh judgment.

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