





# Behind the Pristine City...

Rio de Janeiro.  
(Photo by Rodrigo Soldon.)







## CINE LATINO

About 1,400 trash pickers are given access to Jardim Gramacho's spoils.

# Rubbish People

by Nancy Scheper-Hughes

When I first lived on a rocky cliff of the Alto do Cruzeiro, a hillside shantytown in the sugar plantation zone of Brazil in the mid-1960s, sharing a tiny wattle and daub hut with a railroad worker and his wife, we had to make do sans electricity, running water, sanitation, sewers — without any amenities to speak of. I marveled how, through the torrid heat of summer and the torrential rains of winter, the 5,000 odd squatters living cheek by jowl did not stink. Not badly, anyway. Nor did their huts stink. To be sure, the few outdoor pit latrines stank to high heaven, and necessary nocturnal

visits to the pits were softened with the help of lemons and guava fruit split in half and worn like a clown's nose. But most offensive to the keen olfactory sensibilities of the people of the Alto was the giant mound of garbage dumped at the bottom of the hill awaiting weekly pick up. By Sunday night, the dump crawled with rats, giant cockroaches and the ominous gathering tribes of *urubu* or black vultures. The birds circled overhead, adding their odiferous scent, the *catinga-de-urubu* to the mix. The primitive viaducts that carried waste water from the Alto to the local river also



reeked, but not nearly as badly as the stench that oozed from street drains in the most elegant sections of Recife, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and São Paulo.

Human detritus, like death, is a great social equalizer.

Those born and raised in shantytowns, shack cities and squatter's camps the world over (but especially in Brazil) develop a magnificent economy of the body. They learn to exist and move about in a compact fashion that makes community life enduring. In the Alto do Cruzeiro, the economic care of the self, care of the body, was raised to an art form. My neighbors taught me how to take daily baths from a one-liter can of water. Water was, next to food, the most precious commodity as it had to be collected from the public water spigot and carried up the hillside in two gallon cans on the heads of women and children. Water equals life itself, and a common graffito painted on the walls of the drought-plagued *município* was a reference to

the words of Jesus dying on the cross: “*Estou com sede!*” — “I thirst.” What a liter of water couldn't resolve was taken care of with a few dabs of inexpensive cologne — “Miss France” was a favorite among women of the Alto. [“You smell like my maid,” a son of a sugar plantation owner once told me as we danced the *frevo* during Carnival celebrations at the local Sport Club.]

## Trash/Waste

According to the Brazilian Census Bureau or IBGE, Brazil produces some 125,281 tons of household waste every day. The majority of Brazil's 5,500 municipalities dispose of their city's domestic waste in public dumps, many of them landfills. Another IBGE survey found that one in every thousand Brazilians is a garbage picker. Some work in the same municipal dump; others roam from city to city as urban scavengers/hustlers/dumpster

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Film still courtesy of Omega Projects and O2 Filmes.

Suelem stands in the alleyway between the trash pickers' shacks.

divers. Some are self-employed independents, while others are employed by junkyard dealers. “*Você é lixo!*” (You are garbage!), or worse, “Your mother is a rag picker!” are some of the cruel taunts that Brazil’s tens of thousands of *catadores* have to live and sometimes to die with. The struggle to shake off and to resist the stigma-by-association with trash (“We are not pickers; we are actually recyclers.”) is no easy task. The association of the pickers with the hated vultures that also circle the giant garbage dumps is too immediate, too obvious.

Garbage is the shadow side of production/productivity. “Two kinds of trucks leave the factory yards every day — one kind of truck proceeds to the warehouses and department stores, and the other one goes to the rubbish heap,” observes Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. We, the discriminating consumers of the former and the proud producers of the latter, prefer to be oblivious to our quotidian ecological mindlessness. Public dumps reveal what is normally hidden: our slovenly, wastrel habits. The garbage producers of the world, those of us who live far from the dumps, are not privy to the daily scenes of giant bulldozers spewing out their indiscriminate cargo of our domestic waste — plastics and paper; foodstuffs: raw, cooked and rotten; toxins: electronic and human.

## “Waste Land” — The Film

“*Lixo Extraordinário*” — misleadingly translated as “Waste Land” rather than the more accurate “Spectacular Trash” — is a majestic and breathtaking full-length documentary film co-directed by Lucy Walker, Karen Harley and João Jardim.

Released in the United States just in time for the 2010 Thanksgiving weekend, it premiered at a special event hosted by UC Berkeley’s Center for Latin American Studies. The audience was stunned, and at its close, there was that moment of suspended silence before a thundering applause. “Waste Land” arrived trailing clouds of glory, including several international film festival awards; rave reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice* and *The Hollywood Reporter*; and many insider bets on an Oscar nomination for best documentary film of 2010.

“Waste Land” is a visual and narrative extravaganza, filling the big screen with incredibly beautiful, wide-angle views of monster dumpsters and monstrous vultures circling Jardim Gramacho, a dump on the outskirts of Duque de Caxias, a rough working-class town just north of Rio de Janeiro, constantly replenished with migrants from Brazil’s impoverished Northeast. Many of my anthropological informants’ children from Timbauba and the Alto do Cruzeiro now live in Duque de Caxias, and several of the

characters in the documentary speak with the distinctive accent of Northeast Brazil.

Jardim Gramacho is Latin America's largest municipal dump. Viewed from above, it is transformed into an obscenely beautiful anthill invaded by a constant parade of tiny figures climbing and descending the mound, each carrying a treasure trove of recyclables. Each picker has his or her specialization — colored glass, carnival regalia, pipes, electronic parts, clothing, torn and discarded books. It is an orderly and mannered ritual of salvage, rebirth and renewal. That the scene of so much daily struggle is so seamlessly transformed by the filmmakers into a beautiful human ballet is a bit disconcerting, even for Vik Muniz, the photographer at the center of the film, who awkwardly refers to his living, breathing, passionate and heart-breaking subjects as “the human factor,” as if they were a somewhat resistant, amazing, inscrutable and unpredictable clump of clay in the sculptor's hands. “Waste Land” is built around two settings — the cosmopolitan world of artists, their patrons, collectors, galleries, museums and auctions in Rio, New York and London and the everyday life of the garbage pickers of Gramacho, who, when they are not scavenging in the dump, live in a nearby workers' compound of shacks made from scrap materials.

The film opens with Muniz, a Brazilian photographer and visual artist, whose artistic mediums had been

mundane found objects — sugar, chocolate syrup, electrical outlets, arrows, magnifying glasses, peanut butter — explaining his new obsession with garbage. There are early clips of the artist as a young man, recently escaped from his tough working-class neighborhood in the periphery of greater São Paulo. His flight to New York City followed a close call with a bullet meant for someone else. He drops his pants to show the scar. “And that's why I am here today,” he says of himself, his art and this film.

Now, moderately successful and moderately well off, Muniz is ready to return to Brazil to pursue his dream of exploring the infinite possibilities for material, human and artistic transformation. His vision is to launch an artistic and social experiment around garbage and the lives of those who make a living from it, and along the way to “*mudar a vida*,” to change the lives of the pickers. Muniz says he wants “to give something back” to Brazil and to give the pickers a glimpse of another life — a shinier, cleaner life — beyond the dump. The hubris of the artist to have it all is evident — art, fame and a revolutionary or at least a revolutionizing politic. Humans, like the garbage, are there to be transformed.

Muniz is the vehicle for filmmaker Lucy Walker, who accompanies the artist to Gramacho to discover what the pickers are all about. And because Brazil is Brazil and because “*Deus é Brasileiro*” (God is Brazilian), we are not

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Below: Muniz compares Magna's photo and portrait.  
Following page: “The Gypsy Magna.” (Photo by Vik Muniz.)



Film still courtesy of Almega Projects and O2 Filmes.











too surprised by the richness of the “human factor” that the artist stumbles upon. Through Muniz, we meet the real artists in this film — hunger artists, survival artists, balancing artists. We meet the likes of Isis, Zumbi, Tião, Valter, Irmã, Magna and Suelem, all of them graceful, beautiful, articulate, high minded and as bright as our average undergraduate students. What are these people doing shoveling through smoldering and toxic waste in a dump that resembles a scene from Dante’s *Purgatory*? What professor wouldn’t give a fortune to have Zumbi or Tião in a graduate seminar? To observe them lapping up not just the trashed and trashy books recovered from the dump alongside the odd copy of a classic — Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, its cover torn off, many of its pages missing — but also Machado de Assis, Gabriel Márquez, Giorgio Agamben or maybe a bit of Foucault, Deluze or Derrida. You know that they’d devour what parts of it they could get and tell you point blank whether they thought it was bullshit or not. These survival artists are full of dignity and honor, despite the constant reminders of their shame, as when Isis turns up her nose to imitate the bus passengers who dare to notice the faint whiff of the dump on her body.

If the IBGE stats are correct and one of every thousand Brazilians is a catador, maybe ten of every thousand pickers are as fascinating, compelling and photogenic as the characters that Muniz and company have rounded

up, capturing them both at ease and anxious, playful and sad, hopeful and literally down in the dumps. There is a confessional quality to the stories as the pickers share their dashed dreams, their love affairs gone awry, their wit and their wits. Muniz opens one kind of door for them, at least fleetingly transforming them through his photographic wizardry into kings, queens and dictators for a day. And so we see the hapless Suelem posed with her two children and turned into the image of a Renaissance Madonna. Zumbi is transformed into Millet’s “Sower.” And best of all, handsome Tião is posed languishing in a stained bathtub, producing a stunning facsimile of Jacques-Louis David’s “Death of Marat,” only this Marat is floating in a sea of plastic bottles and abandoned toilet seats.

Zumbi learns to read with books tossed away by Rio’s bourgeoisie, just as an earlier literary catador, Carolina Maria de Jesus, wrote her memoir *Quarto de Despejo* (*Child of the Dark*) in the 1950s on bits of scrap paper and newsprint she had gathered from São Paulo’s public dumps.

Irma feeds the pickers hearty rib stews and soup made from bones and bits of leftovers, spoiled meats and greens thrown out by the well-fed, a Brazilian version of the Russian fairy tale, “Stone Soup.” “No one here goes hungry because of me,” she says proudly. Nothing is wasted. But of course the pickers are perennially hungry. During a protest in front of city hall led by Zumbi, Tião and the pickers of Gramacho,

Preceding page: “Marat/Sebastião.” (Photo by Vik Muniz.)  
Below: Muniz photographs Tião as Marat.



Film still courtesy of Omega Projects and O2 Filmes.





Film still courtesy of Almega Projects and O2 Filmes.

The catadores work through the night.

someone calls for a hunger strike. “Yes, sure,” replies one of the other demonstrators, “but not until after I have my lunch at noon.”

Before the film ends, we are able to witness Tião’s improbable journey to London with Muniz where his portrait is sold at auction for a modest \$50,000, which is donated by the artist to Zumbi’s workers’ cooperative. And we get to vicariously experience the length and breadth of the visit across town, but also across submerged cultures and histories, as the garbage pickers attend the opening of Muniz’s exposition of his garbage project at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio. As the pickers, dressed in their somewhat tawdry finery, enter the museum to see the transformed images of themselves hanging on the walls, they are clearly delighted and proud. But Irma, for one, cannot always decipher herself in the photographs. Another one of the pickers comments: “Sometimes we see ourselves as so small, but people out there see us as so big, so beautiful.” Later, when Muniz delivers smaller prints to hang on the fragile walls of his subjects’ shacks, a few of them struggle to hide their disappointment. “How did I [my painting] become so small this time?” Irma comments as Muniz tries to bang a hole in the thin plywood wall of her home as the assembled children and/or grandchildren look on, not terribly impressed.

In the end, what can we say about Vik Muniz’s social project? Has he managed to “change poor peoples lives” through his engagement with a half-dozen garbage pickers?

Muniz’s former wife has one of the best and most soul-searching moments in the film when she raises her doubts. Can you really know what impact this project will have on people for whom you are, in a sense, lifting a curtain to a very different life outside? Can they really escape the dump, or will they have to confront, on a daily basis, everything that has had to be submerged to make life there minimally livable? Will they be able to retain their pride? Their vitality as they fight their way up the mountains of refuse, these disposables of the late-modern Brazilian miracle?

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Isis and Valeria.



Film still courtesy of Almega Projects and O2 Filmes.