

Waste Not Want Not: Garbage and the Philosopher of the Dump (*Waste Land* and *Estamira*)

The form of commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit. (Sohn-Rethel, 1977: 19)

All of creation is abstract. (Estamira in Prado, 2004)

Garbage, Ethics and the Commodity Form

In his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, Karl Marx gave pride of place to what he termed, with a little irony, the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” that abound in the commodity form (1976: 163). He endowed the commodity form, this bastard offspring of the coupling of dead capital and living labour, with a strangely animist half-life, for when a raw material such as wood, “an ordinary sensuous thing”, is transformed into a manufactured object such as a table, “it not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (1976: 163–64). Once set loose in the marketplace, these promiscuous dancing commodities, “ready to exchange not only soul, but body, with each and every other commodity, be it more repulsive than Maritornes herself” (179), appear to take on a life of their own, independent of the human labour that originally animated them. For on the economic stage, Marx says, “persons exist for one another merely as representatives and hence owners, of commodities [...]; it is as the bearers [*Träger*] of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other” (178-79). Social interaction is thus delegated to the relations between commodities, and the more lively becomes the movement of the commodities, the more human actions are reduced to those of automata, Golems mindlessly driven by commodity exchange, and the more we witness “the conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things [*Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Personen*]” (209).

But what of the afterlife of these oddly animate craftings of sensuous matter? What happens when the commodities, as it were, stop dancing, and fall out of the spheres of both exchange value and use value? Of course, Marx’s dancing tables were already presages of such an afterlife, since the analogy referred to the “turning tables” used in séances during the spiritualist craze that spread through German upper-class society in the 1850s (Brookhenkel, 2009). And it was

this line of thinking – the mystical and spiritual investment in commodity production and exchange at the heart of bourgeois society – that to some extent determined Marx’s application of the derogatory, primitivist vocabulary of “fetishism” to the commodity form in *Capital*. Yet, other than the waste and devastation produced by capitalist crisis, Marx himself had little to say about the actual death (or spectral afterlife) of commodities, or about the places designated as their graveyards: the rubbish dumps or garbage heaps where commodities are sent once they are broken, or once their exchange value, even as raw material, falls below the perceived value of a new replacement.

Other thinkers in the Marxian tradition have partially explored this theoretical gap, albeit mostly in allegorical terms. Famously, Walter Benjamin developed a materialist aesthetics of the ragpicker (*chiffonnier*) out of Baudelaire’s own fascination with the figure (Benjamin, 2006: 52–54), recovering these members of the *Lumpenproletariat* from the historical dustbin to which Marx had confined them in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where they were lumped together with vagabonds, jailbirds, swindlers, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, organ-grinders, tinkers, beggars and other such reactionary layabouts (1975: 75). And just before his death, in 1940, Benjamin gives a Messianic force to “the pile of debris” that the appalled Angel of History sees growing skyward as he rides the shockwave of that storm called capitalist “progress” (1992: 249). The Angel would like to “stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed”, if it were not for the fact that his wings are hopelessly caught in the storm’s ferocious gale. All he can do is contemplate, with a melancholy gaze, the growing pile of “wreckage upon wreckage [hurled] in front of his feet”. Benjamin’s recuperation of refuse and of its collectors was also predicated on the surrealist penchant for cracking open the homogenous, empty time of the present with objects found in flea markets, ready-mades, or the exploration of the abandoned spaces of the city, and belongs to a tradition that assigns a subversive/redemptive quality to the bric-à-brac left behind by the crisis-ridden dreadnought of (urban) capitalist development and expansion.

Of course waste and garbage, or trash, are not quite the same thing: the affective and ethical attributes attached to these words are of different conceptual orders. Trash is what has been trashed, ruined, or refused and needs to be removed, rendered invisible, as quickly as possible. There is little of an ethical dimension to refuse; rather, the act of refusal is the ground zero of ethics, the black hole into which ethics is swallowed, and to which Marx himself seemed blind as suggested above. The act of designating other people as trash (whether it be the “Lumpen” or the “disposables” of Latin America’s mega-cities) is better understood as pre-ethical, as something operating at the level of affect, or in an older vocabulary, libido, than at the level of an ethical regime. But waste is a whole different story. As the proverb in my title suggests, “waste not want

not", the concept of waste, of a scarce resource that is irresponsibly deployed, is an ethical category par excellence, erecting the entire edifice of morality, from the virtues of thrift to religious injunction, passing through Marxist Messianism, our Angel of the garbage tip, and ending perhaps in the threat of an ecological Apocalypse.

In societies based on commodity exchange, garbage is intimately related to the commodity form, being both its inevitable corollary and its antithesis as a mystified and abstract condensation of social relationships. To use another Benjaminian metaphor, we might say that *garbage is the commodity stripped of its "aura"*. It is a thoroughly defetishized object that has fallen out of the realms of desire, exchange and use, and has thus, in some sense, fallen outside of the realm of History, if we understand History as the product of a dialectic that has its origins in the division between intellectual and manual labour. For Marx, as is well known, the motor of history is class struggle, but the division of society into social classes is nothing other than the division between these different modes of labour – labour of the hand and labour of the head. Such a division is, however, only possible in a society where intellectual work can be exchanged for (the products of) manual work, and hence the division presupposes, and in large measure can be said to arise out of, the abstractions produced in and through the exchange of commodities. (This is the central insight of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's work, which will be discussed further below.) To say that garbage is a commodity that has fallen outside of the realm of History in the Marxist sense is not to deny the archaeological historicity of garbage, its role as a spectral record or remainder, nor the fact that renewed labour (such as that of the ragpickers) can reinsert garbage into the commodity cycle of exchange and use. But it is precisely as this spectral, indeterminate object lying at the ground zero of ethics, outside of the dialectic of history, that garbage can have a revelatory function, for Baudelaire, for Benjamin, for the Angel of History and, as we shall see, for the ragpickers themselves, even as the act of refusing refuse conforms to the logic of disavowal that supports the entire realm of commodity fetishism.

Extraordinary (Global) Garbage¹

What I really want to do is to be able to change the lives of a group of people with the same materials that they deal with every day. (Muniz in Walker, 2010: 0:06:20)

For poetry makes nothing happen. (W.H. Auden)

The Brazilian artist and photographer Vik Muniz has become something of a celebrity due to his

¹ I would like to thank my former PhD student, Alice Allen, for introducing me to the wide variety of Brazilian

penchant for recreating famous or iconic images with everyday or found objects (which he subsequently photographs). He is perhaps best known for his use of this technique in Rio de Janeiro's former landfill site, Jardim Gramacho (then the largest in the world), where in 2007-2008 he organized groups of *catadores* or garbage sifters to make copies of the Grand Masters out of items of rubbish found in the landfill. He subsequently auctioned one of the photographs on the international art market in London, with profits returned to the Associação dos Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho (Allen, 2013b: 55–56), and sold others via galleries, thus “recycling” garbage on a global scale through its transformation, at least at the level of the image, into “art”. His projects have benefited from wide international dissemination in the art world, and the *catadores* project was the subject of a film documenting the process, *Waste Land (Lixo Extraordinário)*, made by a UK production team, which appeared in 2010. (The Brazilian title means “Extraordinary Garbage”, a play on the wording that appears on some of the municipal refuse trucks.)



Figure 1 Resolving garbage into art: the trope of distance in *Waste Land*

Intriguing and controversial, Muniz's work ultimately relies on an underlying trope of distance, despite the artist ostensibly disavowing the privileged aerial master gaze of his helicopter

films dealing with landfill sites and their inhabitants, and in particular *Estamira*. Apart from her work cited in the bibliography, on which I draw, my ideas have benefited from many hours of discussion of this material with her.

ride over the vast landfill near the beginning of the film. By this I mean that, no matter how large the “blow up” portraits of individual refuse workers that result, the emphasis is ultimately on a process of transformation which, as with an optical illusion that requires the viewer to stand at a fixed and distant vantage point to resolve it (one frequently adopted by Muniz in the film), the “mess” of garbage is miraculously converted into art when seen (and photographed) from the “correct” perspective (see Figure 1). It is true that often the filmmakers of *Waste Land*, Lucy Walker, João Jardim and Karen Harley, seem concerned, as Allen suggests, “to neutralise the master gaze of the artist” (2013b: 60) by “play[ing] on contrasts between proximity and distance” (58), moving in and out of the groups of *catadores*. Walker claims as much, vis-à-vis Muniz’s aesthetic, in the film’s official press notes:

Vik, as an artist, plays between these levels of proximity and distance, between showing the viewer the material and showing them the idea, revealing the relationship between the paintstrokes and the scene depicted by the paint. (Muniz and Walker, 2010: 7)

However, the aesthetic conversion at work in the photographs is ultimately one-way: despite superficial appearances, art is not here disrupted by garbage, in the form of Dadaist shock or the readymade; rather, garbage is resolved, transcended or purified in art, and for this reason the work is ultimately normalizing. Dissonance becomes order, poverty is transformed, Midas-like, through the artist’s touch, and the Schillerian plot of the *Aesthetic Education of Man*, inaugurating what Jacques Rancière terms the “Aesthetic Regime” of art (2010a: 116ff), is ultimately reaffirmed by way of a blandly positive answer to Muniz’s question “Can [art] change people?” (Walker, 2010: 0:08:17).

The legacy of such charitable hopes that art (especially film) might change the lives of the poor in Latin America, is hardly unproblematic, as Allen points out (2013b: 61), and in a number of cases has ended rather badly, even when it was not an express aim. The most frequently cited example is Héctor Babenco’s classic fiction film, *Pixote: A Lei do Mais Fraco* (1982), whose protagonist actor, Fernando Ramos da Silva, semi-orphaned and from a poor lottery-ticket-selling family, was killed in a police shootout after he returned to life on the streets, having failed to make his way as a film/television actor in the aftermath of his lead role in *Pixote*. (In Colombia, Leidy Tabares, the protagonist actor of *La vendedora de rosas* [*The Rose Seller*, dir Víctor Gaviria, 1998] about the lives of street girls in Medellín, whose hopes of an acting career were likewise dashed, was subsequently imprisoned for the murder of a taxi driver in a real-life version of a sequence enacted in the film itself. Back in Brazil, *favela* residents who acted in the 2002 blockbuster *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*] had mixed fortunes, with some, such as Alice Braga, going on to star in Hollywood films, and others arrested for petty thievery, interned in a drug rehabilitation centre, and/or missing, presumed dead [see the 2013 documentary *Cidade de Deus: 10 Anos Depois*].) Walker claims in her

blog from the landfill that *Pixote* is one of her favourite movies, noting that her soundman's father was the scriptwriter of the original film (her soundman was José Moreau Louzeiro, and the book *Infância dos Mortos* ["Childhood of the Dead", 1977] by the writer José Louzeiro senior was the basis of the script of *Pixote*). Nevertheless, there seems to be little dialogue with, for example, *Pixote's* active *disruption* of the false televisual "cleansing" of urban violence, drugs, childhood exploitation and prostitution, or rather of their conversion into spectacle. *Pixote* is in fact framed by televisual spectacle: it begins with a scene of horrendous Hollywood violence being watched by a group of young street boys detained in a police station, while in one of the closing sequences,

the young boy [Pixote] vomits while staring transfixed at the *television screen* he and his now dead friends had bought with the proceeds of their crimes: what remains of their lives is now a flat televisual surface, and his vomit is the accumulation of all that somehow does not fit within the sanitized screens of Brazilian society. (Kantaris, 2003: 188)

Waste Land and its underlying photographic project inadvertently provide something of a caricature of this critique. The film is, likewise, framed by televisual spectacle – a TV chat show – but the effects of this framing could not be more different from that found in *Pixote*. Muniz's story, the film we are watching, is given to us as his response to a question from the chat show host. Coupled with the rise to stardom of one of the *catadores*, Sebastião (Tião) Santos, depicted on the same chat show at the end of the film, the effect of this is to propel the entire documentary towards the genre of Reality TV and its production of minor celebrities as the transubstantiation of life into spectacle, perhaps the quintessential contemporary form of the commodity fetish. Muniz's own "rags to riches story" (Allen, 2013b: 56), which he wishes to replicate with the *catadores*, plays explicitly to the twin global markets of art and film, and provides too facile a repackaging and recommodification of garbage, and of those whose lives revolve around it. This is in fact one version of "the end of art", where aesthetics finally embraces the full commodification of life, and it is indeed, for Rancière, one of the ways in which Schiller's promise – that "the art of the beautiful" will transform "the art of living" – can achieve its full postmodern realization (Rancière, 2010a: 116).

In fact there is in Brazil a long and sophisticated tradition of filmic and photographic representations of marginal urban spaces such as the *favela* and landfill sites, together with those who inhabit them, which provides a substantial body of (visual) thought on the representational issues at stake, largely ignored by *Waste Land*. Roberto Stam lists some of these in his essay on the representation of garbage in Brazil, starting with the *Udigruði* (underground) filmmakers of the 1960s who coined the term *estética do lixo* (aesthetics of garbage) and whose manifesto film was *O Bandido da Luz Vermelha* (*Red Light Bandit*, Sganzerla, 1968). As Stam notes,

For the underground filmmakers, the garbage metaphor captured the sense of marginality,

of being condemned to survive within scarcity, of being the dumping ground for transnational capitalism, of being obliged to recycle the materials of the dominant culture. (1999: 70)

A related photographic project from the 1970s by Regina Weter played on the minute lexical difference between the Portuguese words for luxury and garbage, with its title, *Luxo/Lixo*, insisting on the structural interdependency of the two apparently antithetical spheres.

But it is in the 1980s and 1990s that filmmakers turn their attention to what the growing piles of garbage produced by Brazil's mega-cities reveal about the mechanisms that produce inequality on both a national and a global scale. Jorge Furtado's famous 13-minute documentary short, *Ilha das Flores (Isle of Flowers, 1989)*, follows the voyages of a tomato, as an allegory of the circulation of food-as-commodity, from the vines of a Japanese tomato farmer (in Brazil), via a local supermarket, a housewife's kitchen, her rubbish bin (because the tomato has spoiled), and a refuse truck, to a pig pen, and finally, after the pigs have rejected it, to the women and children scavenging for food on the garbage heaps of Porto Alegre. The allegory does not claim to represent the truth accurately – indeed the film insists in its end credits that it has falsified the place (it is not Ilha das Flores, but Ilha dos Marinheiros), has changed the names of the characters, and it is obvious that the scavenging sessions are staged (although not invented). Nevertheless, the film showed the systemic relationship of garbage to the commodity form and became an instant worldwide success.

Subsequently, the renowned documentarist Eduardo Coutinho turned his attention to the Jardim Gramacho landfill in his 1992 film *Boca de Lixo (The Scavengers)*, but the title means “Mouth of Garbage”, playing again on *Luxo/Lixo*. In this film, with its close-up shots of crowds of pickers looking for food and other useable items in amongst freshly delivered truckloads of garbage, there is a clear focus on the ethics of filming these subjects, for they argue with the filmmakers and are often reticent to appear on camera until trust has been gained and the human backstory of a number of the pickers is presented. There is, however, no process of filmic sanitization, and the film presents a “dirty” and uncomfortable image along with a devastated landscape of smoking mountains of rubbish that seem to extend filmically out towards the *favela*-studded slopes of the distant *morros* surrounding Rio de Janeiro:

Here we see the end point of an all-permeating logic of commodification, logical telos of the consumer society and its ethos of planned obsolescence. Garbage becomes the morning after of the romance of the new. [...] In the dump's squalid phantasmagoria, the same commodities that had been fetishized by advertising, dynamized by montage, and haloed through backlighting are stripped of their aura of charismatic power. We are confronted with the seamy underside of globalization and its facile discourse of one world under a consumerist groove. The world of transnational capitalism [...] we see, is more than ever a

world of constant, daily immiseration. (Stam, 1999: 72–73)

If garbage is, in these films, linked to the end points of globalized consumerism, it is because the afterlife of the commodity bears the traces of, and is inextricably bound up with, profound mutations in the spatio-temporal coordinates of capitalist production, perhaps at its most intense in global mega-cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Marx was the first to identify the tendency in capitalism to overcome spatial obstacles to the free flow of commodities through an increase in the speed of transportation, information flows, logistical organization and turnover. By its very nature, capitalism “drives beyond every spatial barrier”, and the “extraordinary necessity” it has to overcome distance by increasing the velocity of production, transport and communication, leads to what he famously termed “the annihilation of space by time” (Marx, 1993: 524). Later spatial theorists, and in particular the Marxist urban geographer David Harvey, call this process “time-space compression” (1989: 260-307) and identify it as a fundamental force at work within both urbanization (which shortens the distance between production and consumption) and, later, globalization (which drives beyond the spatial barriers represented by the nation-state system and its fragmented national markets). The megalopolis, which Manuel Castells famously defines as being “globally connected and locally disconnected, physically and socially” (Castells, 1996: 404), in fact condenses both the urban and the global dimensions of time-space compression. Garbage, therefore, does not merely represent the annihilation of a physical commodity, the disaggregation of the raw materials from which it is constructed, the dissipation of the labour locked within its auratic shell and which provided its surplus value, or the final destruction of the commodity’s exchange value. As the telos of a form that both condenses and impels the socio-economic state changes through which it passes, it also embodies *the annihilation of space itself*. The apocalyptic dimensions of the garbage dump, as a synecdoche of global ecological devastation, are ample testament in all of these films to the spatio-temporal implosions that the death of the commodity both represents and enacts.

Such perspectives, more or less directly enunciated in the genealogy of films related to garbage outlined above, are the direct precursors of the powerful and complex visions and voices that emerge in what must be the culmination of the Brazilian philosophy of garbage: the film *Estamira* (2004) directed by the photographer Marcos Prado, and enunciated through the hallucinatory and haunting voice of a woman who lived and worked for 24 years in the Gramacho landfill, Estamira Gomes de Sousa.

Estamira: The Philosopher of the Dump

If commodities could speak, they would say this...
(Marx, 1976: 176)

From 1993, the photographer and filmmaker Marcos Prado began to frequent the Jardim Gramacho landfill to photograph (in black and white) the site and the *catadores*, a project not published in book form until 2004, but for which he received a national photography prize in 1996 (Allen, 2013b: 39). Of the choice of black-and-white photography in these still photographs, Allen argues the following: “In addition to the expansive gesture harboured in the allusion to earlier traditions and values, using black and white also conversely performs a limiting and abstracting function” (42). As she goes on to explain, this abstraction, unlike the occasional recourse to aerial photography and high-angled shots in the more famous depictions of charcoal labourers by Sebastião Salgado, does not imply dehumanization, for

Prado’s rubbish pickers, even when gathered together, are always photographed so as to remain distinctly human. Using a telephoto lens in some instances the effect is to bring more distant figures closer, to compress in-between spaces rather than further miniaturise its occupants. This in itself may be said to constitute an ethical decision. (42)



Figure 2 Estamira (middle left) and companions working in Jardim Gramacho (colour original, from the film)

Instead, here, the use of black and white points self-consciously to a fundamental absence at the heart of photographic representation of the dump and its inhabitants (colour, and perhaps more

obviously, smell), and is thus “a constant reminder of the distance between the image we contemplate and any notion of its capacity to fully capture a certain ‘authentic’ reality” (42).

In 2000, seven years after he first began photography at the landfill, Prado happened to approach one particular refuse picker, a woman in her 60s called Estamira, to ask for her permission to photograph her (Santos and Fux, 2011: 128). She not only gave him permission, but told him that she had a vision she wanted to impart to other people: “She told me she had a mission in life: to reveal and demand the truth [*revelar e cobrar a verdade*]” (Prado cit. Santos and Fux, 2011; all translations my own).² Thus began a four-year collaborative project with Estamira to film her vision, her philosophy born of the unique perspective of life from the dump, and her life story as told by herself and her closest relatives. The feature-length documentary *Estamira* appeared in 2004, gaining worldwide recognition through festivals and prizes, and a cinema audience of 22,000 people in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília after its commercial release in Brazil in 2006 (Almeida, 2006). The film is shot with a mixture of digital (DV) and Super-8, interspersing rich colour shots with heavily grained black-and-white, with the frequent switching between these formats preventing the naturalization of either mode and propelling the spectator at times into a spectral world of forms and shapes that are, to use Estamira’s own vocabulary, “disincarnate”, and at other times into extreme close-ups of her body, actions and environment that force us to come to terms with an obstinate material and corporeal world.

Estamira Gomes de Sousa was born in 1941 and died of septicaemia in 2011 (a year before the closure of the Gramacho landfill) in the corridor of a public hospital, unable to get the medical treatment she needed. Although she first began to work at the landfill out of economic necessity, after her husband abandoned her and her children, later despite the economic support of her then grown-up children, she continued to spend long periods at the dump (Figure 2), partly because of the community she had built up with the other sifters there, partly because the activity, and work in general, gave meaning, as she saw it, to her life, and partly because the dump seemed to give her some profound insights into human nature and society which she saw as her mission to communicate to other people. Estamira uses the film to deliver her theories on society, sexuality, human folly, education, metaphysics, ecology and religion, with a ceaseless torrent of discourse that is both profound and paranoid in equal measure. Like many so-called paranoiacs, and famously like Freud’s Daniel Paul Schreber, she develops highly detailed, fully “reasoned” and coherent explanations of the workings of society, the universe and her connection to them. Yet the film does

² “Contou que [...] tinha uma missão na vida: revelar e cobrar a verdade” (Prado cit. Santos and Fux, 2011). Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

not attempt to judge Estamira, nor does it purport to change her life, nor to “psychoanalyse” her, although it does investigate her conflictive relationship with the meagre state-provided psychiatric service. It should be noted that at least two psychopathology papers have been written about her case, both of which were based on Estamira’s discourse in the film (not on direct contact with her), and both written by members of the Brazilian Congress of Fundamental Psychopathology. The first, “From Exclusion to the Construction of the World” (Carvalho de Ávila Jacintho, 2008) reads Estamira’s poetic discourse as a compensation and coping mechanism for the poverty of her material environment. The second, “Staging Psychosis” (Paes Henriques, 2008), a psychoanalytic paper in the Lacanian tradition, more subtly compares Estamira’s discourse to Freud’s study of Magistrate Schreber (whom Freud likewise never met), to Lacan’s *Aimée* case, and to the work of James Joyce, although still with the aim of establishing the parameters for a psychoanalytic (non-psychiatric) treatment.

The purpose of the film – Estamira’s purpose – is precisely the opposite of such attempts to frame her as an object of external knowledge, as she tells us in the first words spoken in the film:

My mission, as well as being Estamira, is to reveal ... the truth, only the truth. Whether it’s through the lie, by capturing the lie and rubbing it in your face [*tacar na cara*], or else by teaching how to see what they, the innocent ones, don’t know. Although there are no longer innocents. There are none. There are only “inexperts” [*espertos ao contrário*]. (0:06:40)³

Far from the film changing Estamira, as the charitable ethos of *Waste Land* would have it, Estamira wants instead to change us, her spectators, the not-so-innocent inexperts, by rubbing the lies in our face. As Allen puts it, “it is Estamira’s uncompromising judgement that is passed on to the rest of society through the camera rather than the reverse” (2013a: 88). This proposition immediately turns the tables on the entire problematic of “subaltern representation”, as surely as Marx’s animated table stands on its head and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas (see above). This does not of course exempt the film (or this essay) from the power dynamics of representation, or from the now over-rehearsed debates on testimonial literature and the intellectual construction of the subaltern witness through mediation. But Estamira’s violent image of rubbing the lies in our faces is one of contagion by the “dirt” of the rubbish dump, rather than the conventional politico-theatrical concept of representation within whose logic (and only if we accept the unilateral terms of that logic) the subaltern “cannot speak”. Even if we often find ourselves questioning the extent to which the film constructs and “performs” Estamira and her discourse (an inevitability to which we must of

³ “A minha missão, além de eu ser a Estamira, é revelar ... a verdade, somente a verdade. Seja mentira, seja capturar a mentira e tacar na cara, ou então ensinar a mostrar o que eles não sabem, os inocentes. Não tem mais inocentes. Não tem. Tem espertos ao contrário” (0:06:40).

course remain attentive), there is little doubt that Estamira's primary motive in "making" the film (and indeed her initial challenge to its future director, as cited above) is to invert the relationship of seeing and being seen, of speaking and listening. From the outset, she claims the ground of knowledge and language, and she estranges her spectators' presumed expertise in order to reveal the lies that sustain the existing order of things.

After the above statement, Estamira goes on to give us a synthesis of her philosophy, the unique perspective that living amongst the "remains" of civilization has given her. While we listen to her words, the camera roams across the devastated scenery of the vast landfill, picking out details, moving in and out from amongst the garbage pickers, peering at the haze through the flaming methane stacks, tracking Estamira shuffling amongst the huge delivery trucks, or raising our gaze to the vultures and myriad items of flying, storm-tossed rubbish in the skies:

Over there are the hills, the ranges, the mountains... Landscape and Estamira. Esta-sea [*Esta-mar*], Esta-range [*Esta-serra*], Esta-see [*Esta-mira*] is in all places. She is everywhere. Even my feelings see. The whole world sees Estamira. [...] This place here is a repository [*depósito*] ... of remains. Sometimes they are just remains. And sometimes you also see carelessness [*descuido*]. Remains and carelessness. The one who revealed mankind as the only conditional [*Quem revelou o homem como único condicional*], taught us to conserve things. And conserving things means to protect, wash, clean and re-use as much as possible. [...] Saving things is wonderful. For the person who saves, has. [...] But the Trickster [*O Trocadilo*] made things in such a way, that the less people really have, the more they undervalue things, the more they throw away. [...] I, Estamira, am the vision of each and every one of you [*sou a visão de cada um*]. (0:8:30-0:15:18)⁴

⁴ "Alá, os morros, as serras, as montanhas... Paisagem e Estamira. Esta-mar... Esta-serra... Estamira está em tudo quanto é canto. Em tudo quanto é lado, até meu sentimento mesmo vê. Todo mundo vê a Estamira. [...] Isso aqui é um depósito... dos restos. Às vezes é só resto. E às vezes vem também descuido. Resto e descuido. Quem revelou o homem como único condicional, ensinou ele a conservar as coisas. E conservar as coisas é proteger, lavar, limpar e usar mais o quanto pode. [...] Economizar as coisas é maravilhoso. Porque quem economiza, tem. [...] O Trocadilo fez duma tal maneira que, quanto menos as pessoas têm, mais eles menosprezam, mais eles jogam fora. [...] Eu, Estamira, sou a visão de cada um" (0:8:30-0:15:18).



Figure 3 Estamira, Angel of History? Summoning the gathering storm (black and white original)

On the sound track, Estamira's words are accompanied by a rising crescendo from a modern-classical score ("Valse") by Paolo Jobim, son of the renowned Brazilian popular musician Antônio Jobim, from the latter's album *Urubu*, the title of which means "vulture", or "turkey buzzard". While we may balk at the film's apparent aestheticization of Estamira's words, and at the "sublime" presentation of a post-apocalyptic landscape complete with swirling vultures, a Brazilian audience would recognize the ecological significance of Jobim's album from the 1970s (widely considered an early ecological statement) and its resonance with Estamira's powerful and purposeful message in this sequence.

Estamira's words and vision overlap in several ways with Benjamin's aforementioned allegory of the Angel of History: the pile of wreckage grows skyward; it is a repository of obsolete things and lives, a dire warning of what is left behind in the mad race of capitalist production, and of the apocalypse into which we are rushing headlong; while the collector and recycler is a guardian of broken worlds who would like to make whole what has been smashed, but whose wings are caught in, or perhaps are a manifestation of, the raging storm (Figure 3). They might also agree on an idea of profane revelation ("my mission is to reveal"), although Benjamin's understanding of the "profane illumination" contains a core of redemptive thought that takes its structure, its *form*, from religious belief. And this is where, I believe, they differ most clearly, for Estamira consistently refuses any Messianic meaning or promise of redemption. For her, there is no Messiah, whether figured as revolutionary time, as the *Jetztzeit* (Benjamin, 1992: 253), or otherwise. There is only the Trickster (*Trocadilo*), her characterization of (the Christian) god, who plays warped games with people,

confuses them and makes false, misleading promises. Estamira's mission is not a demand for redemption in a veiled theologico-political mode, or on behalf of kingdom-come (figured as communist revolution, Marxist Messianism, etc.); it is instead one of revelation in a distinctly profane sense, of lifting the veils that cloud people's minds in the present. She does discuss a concept of communism that she calls "*comunismo superior*", but this notion for her is as simple as it is radical: the practical realization of full human equality, not understood as homogenization, and not as an equality that is merely an empty or formal right (as declared in Article 5 of the Brazilian Constitution), but one that must be continually *activated* and verified in *practice*, in its *doing*:

All men must be equal, must be communist. Communism is equality [*igualdade, sic*]. It doesn't mean everyone has to do the same work, or that everyone must eat the same food. Equality is the supreme order [*ordenança*] given by the one who revealed mankind [as] the only conditional. And man is the only conditional, whatever his colour is. I am Estamira, I don't matter. I could be any colour. [...] But I cannot permit, and I dislike anyone offending against colour, or against beauty. This is important: beautiful is what you have done and what you do [*o que fez e o que faz*]. Ugly is what you have done and what you do. [...] Superior communism. The only communism. (1:22:00)⁵

Estamira's political theory is enunciated as she sits amongst the garbage she is recycling, caked in mud, while we are uncomfortably forced to look down from a position of power on a being who simply states human equality, not as one of the Rights of Man, but as the sum of our acts, what you have done and what you do (Figure 4). Humans are the "only conditional" because our identity, our being, is not given, but is conditional on our deeds, and the Prime Directive of that conditionality is a radical, *unconditional* equality. It should come as no surprise, then, that Estamira's ideas are consonant with those of Jacques Rancière, who insists that equality "is not [...] a founding ontological principle but a condition that only functions when it is put into action" (Rancière, 2004: 52). For Rancière develops his own concept precisely by listening to minor historical voices, such as Estamira's, voices that insisted on challenging, on verifying, formal equality against the myriad limit cases in which it is denied on a daily basis. In a passage that could stand as an elaboration of Estamira's words, he writes:

To be *intempestive* means at once that you do and do not belong to a time [...]. Being intempestive or a-topian communists means being thinkers and actors of the unconditional equality of anybody and everybody, but this can only happen in a world in which

⁵ "Todos os homens têm de ser iguais. Têm que ser comunistas. Comunismo é igualdade [*sic*]. Não é obrigado todo trabalhar num serviço só. Não é obrigado todos comer uma coisa só. Mas a igualdade é a ordenança que deu quem revelou o homem o único condicional. E o homem é o único condicional seja que cor for. Eu sou Estamira, eu não importo, eu podia ser da cor que fosse. [...] Mas eu não admito, eu não gosto que ninguém ofende cores, o nem formosura. O que importa: bonito é o que fez e o que faz. Feio é o que fez e o que faz. [...] Comunismo superior. O único comunismo" (1:22:00).

communism has no actuality bar the network framed by our communistic thoughts and actions themselves. (Rancière, 2010b: 82) – “*Comunismo superior. O único comunismo*”.



Figure 4 The Rights of Man? Estamira talks political theory from the ground of the dump (colour original)

Although Estamira sees the phenomenal world of “odd and even people” (men and women) as a transitory state, and she regularly converses (and argues) with spirits from the “beyond of beyond” in her own unintelligible tongue, her mission is in no way predicated on a hereafter, whether revolutionary or transcendental: “I have sometimes wanted to disincarnate! Then I said to myself, ‘But if I disincarnate now, I will not fulfil my mission.’ My mission is to reveal, to whomsoever, no matter how much it hurts. And my head toils so much [*trabalha muito*]...” (1:42:32). (We shall return to this radical conflation of toil and thought in the final section.) The three phenomena she identifies as most responsible for the veiling or clouding of people’s minds are: the fetishism of possessions (possessions that people never really have, even when they think they do); schooling, which teaches people merely to “copy” and not to see the “lies”; and, most damningly in her eyes, religious belief, in particular belief in the Christian god. For the first critique, essentially of commodity fetishism and its attendant ecological devastation, she reserves her most haunting visions. For the second, of education, she feels pity. But for the final, religious critique, she reserves a deep anger and a powerful sense of outrage. Before returning to the first of these critiques by way of conclusion, let us hear her rage and hurt. This is in part driven by her son’s belief (as a Jehovah’s Witness) that she is possessed by demons and his attempts to have her confined to an institution, and in part by her principled objection to the “charlatan lies” promulgated by

Christianity:

I have overflowed with rage [*transbordei de raiva*]. I overflowed with rage at being invisible, at so much hypocrisy, at so many lies, at such perversity, at so much Trickster, I, Estamira! [...] They're [doing] the same as Pilate [*Pilatras*, sic] did to Jesus. They have beaten me with sticks to make me accept God. But this god, in this way, this god of theirs, this dirty god, this rapist god [*deus estuprador*], this god who attacks all over the place, everywhere, this god who breaks into people's houses, I will never accept this god. Even if they cut my flesh into a thousand pieces with a knife, with a blade, with anything, I cannot accept it, it's no use. I am the truth, I serve the truth [*Eu sou a verdade, eu sou da verdade*]. (1:43:00)⁶

If Garbage Could Speak...

In the innermost core of the commodity structure there [is] to be found the "transcendental subject".
(Sohn-Rethel, 1977: xiii)

At the end of the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx imagines what the commodities, which he animated at the beginning of the chapter, might say if they could speak:

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values. (Marx, 1976: 176–77)

If garbage is the commodity stripped of its aura, as suggested above, then we might be tempted to ask "*What would garbage say, if it could speak?*" Estamira, this subaltern, black, impoverished woman, speaks, constantly, unstopably, throughout the film. She speaks mostly on camera, sometimes in voice-over. She speaks softly and loudly, she shouts, she gesticulates, she swears, she threatens and she confides. She speaks in lucid Portuguese, she speaks in Cariocan slang, and she speaks in tongues. She speaks on behalf of garbage, for her world view has been shaped by garbage, by this radical perspective that lies beyond the commodity's aura, and by the equality of all things in the spectral afterworld of the dump. This is why the material world is not, for her, "real". Instead, she calls it "abstract", in a passage that conveys, I believe, one of her most profound insights:

The whole of creation is abstract. All of space is abstract. Water is abstract. Fire is abstract.

⁶ "Eu transbordei de raiva. Eu transbordei de ficar invisível, com tanta hipocrisia, com tanta mentira, com tanta perversidade, com tanto Trocadilo, eu Estamira! [0:31:15] [...] Eles estão igual Pilatras [*sic*] fez com Jesus. Já me bateram com pau pra mim aceitar Deus, mas esse deus desse jeito, esse deus deles, esse deus sujo, esse deus estuprador, esse deus assaltante de qualquer lugar, de tudo quanto é lugar, esse deus arrombador de casa, com esse deus, eu não aceito! Nem picadinha a carne, nem a minha carne picadinha de faca, de facão, de qualquer coisa, eu não aceito, não adianta. Eu sou a verdade, eu sou da verdade" (1:43:00).

Everything is abstract. Estamira is also abstract [*Estamira também é abstrata*]. [...] This was always what made me happy: to help people, to help a little creature [*bichinho*]. I have been working here for twenty years. I love it. What I love most is working. (0:16:12-0:18:15)⁷

In order to understand this hallucinatory vision, we must delve a little further into the constitutive role played by the exchange of commodities – the *sine qua non* of garbage – in the very genesis of abstract thought. As we have seen many times, Estamira insists that her mission is to reveal: to reveal a truth that is hidden and that the garbage has enabled her to see. If garbage is a defetishized commodity, what is it that is revealed once the commodity is stripped of its veil or aura?

For Marx, as we know, the commodity effaces the alienated social relations that produce it. It is crystallized labour, but its beguiling appearance suggests the self-sufficiency of a magical object that begins and ends in itself and whose content is veiled. But as Slavoj Žižek suggests in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the secret of the commodity is not some content hidden by its form. The secret is the form itself, because it is the commodity form that lies at the heart of all social relations under capitalism (Žižek, 2008: 3). In fact, the commodity form is an example of what Marx, using a paradoxical phrase, calls a “real abstraction” [*Realabstraktion*], an abstraction that has material existence as well as material effects. As an object of exchange, it is intimately related to money as the ultimate abstraction that subjects all social relations to the logic of equivalence for the purposes of universal exchange. And for later commentators, in particular for Alfred Sohn-Rethel (discussed by Žižek), who devoted his life’s work to exploring this idea, the commodity form that arose through the adoption of coinage can be understood as the real abstraction on which *all* forms of logical abstraction, including most forms of human knowledge, depend.

The analysis of the “exchange abstraction”, of which the commodity form (and money) is the quintessential embodiment, holds the key “to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour, which came into existence with it” (Sohn-Rethel, 1977: 33). It is, in fact, impossible to imagine any separate sphere of intellectual activity without this primary division between intellectual and manual labour, the very basis of class division itself, which the exchange of goods enables and of which the exchange abstraction is the form. But – and here Sohn-Rethel allows us to understand perfectly Estamira’s vision of universal abstraction – the ramifications of the exchange abstraction are even greater, for

⁷ “A criação toda é abstrata. Os espaços inteiros é abstrato [*sic*]. A água é abstrata. O fogo é abstrato. Tudo é abstrato. Estamira também é abstrata. [...] O meu prazer sempre foi esse: ajudar alguém, ajudar um bichinho. Tem 20 anos que eu trabalho aqui. Eu adoro isso aqui. A coisa que eu mais adoro é trabalhar” (0:16:12-0:18:15).

they extend outwards to transform our entire experience of time and space as abstract entities:

Exchange empties time and space of their material contents and gives them contents of purely human significance connected with the social status of people and things. [...] Time and space rendered abstract under the impact of commodity exchange are marked by homogeneity, continuity and emptiness of all natural and material content, visible or invisible (e.g. air). The exchange abstraction excludes everything that makes up history, human and even natural history. The entire empirical reality of facts, events and description by which one moment and locality of time and space is distinguishable from another is wiped out. (1977: 48–49)

If garbage is the commodity stripped of its mystery and removed from the realm of social exchange, then it is, in some sense, the unthinkable and the unrepresentable, the brute rematerialization of the exchange abstraction as inert matter, and the abyss in which the seemingly never-ending chain of equivalences that structure the entire socio-economic realm founders. It is the end point of the logic of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1989), as discussed above, that begins with the exchange of commodities and expands through the urbanization, and now the globalization of capital.

It is, I think, clear now why the chaotic, terrifying and seemingly limitless commodity graveyard we see in *Estamira* evokes, and paradoxically takes on the qualities of, the sublime, not least for Estamira herself, who finds herself propelled, despite herself, into the spectral realm of the transcendental subject as the commodities pouring into the dump day after day from the surrounding city rematerialize from the virtual sphere of the exchange abstraction. Surprisingly, this space of absolute exclusion, at the bottom of the social heap, turns out to be one in which intellectual and manual labour, sundered in the act of exchange, become one in Estamira: as her head ceaselessly toils, so she repeatedly declares “What I love most is working”. For these are the immense forces that are concentrated in an urban waste land that becomes a synecdoche of the ecological devastation of the Earth itself at the hands of the exchange abstraction. In the vortex of the dump, these forces are transmitted, as through a lightning rod, into the fragile frame of an old woman sifting garbage and philosophizing in a forgotten corner of Rio de Janeiro:

The Earth said... for she used to speak, she did... but now she is dead. She said that she refused to be a witness to anything. And look what happened to her. [...] The Earth is helpless [*indefesa*]. My flesh, my blood, are helpless, like the Earth. [...] If they burn the whole of space, and I am in the midst, let it burn. [...] If they burn my feeling [*meu sentimento*], my flesh, my blood, if it was for the greater good, if it was for the truth, [...] for the lucidity of all beings, then they can do it right now, this very second [*pra mim pode ser*

agora, nesse segundo]. (01:45:00)⁸

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⁸ “A Terra disse... ela falava, ela... agora que já tá morta. Ela disse que então ela não seria testemunha de nada. Olha o que aconteceu com ela. [...] A Terra é indefesa. A minha carne, o sangue, é indefesa, como a Terra. [...] Se queimar os espaços todinho, e eu tô no meio, pode queimar. [...] Se queimar meu sentimento, minha carne, meu sangue, se for pra o bem, se for pra verdade, [...] pela lucidez de todos os seres, pra mim pode ser agora, nesse segundo” (01:45:00).

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