

## Estamira – cure through fiction

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### *Braulio Tavares*

Was born in Campina Grande (Paraíba) and has lived in Rio de Janeiro since 1982. He is a writer, composer and journalist.  
[btavares13@terra.com.br](mailto:btavares13@terra.com.br)

*Megalomania had notable examples. The most notable was a poor devil, a peddler's son, who told the walls (because he never looked at anyone) his whole genealogy, which was this:*

*-- God created an egg, the egg created a sword, the sword created David, David created purple, purple created the duke, the duke created the marquis, the marquis created the duke, which is I.*

*He would smack his forehead, snap his fingers and repeat five, six times in a row:*

*-- God created an egg, etc.*

(Machado de Assis, *The Psychiatrist*)

Psychologists and psychiatrists are usually careful about using the term “madness”, which has become stigmatized in scientific texts. Even so, it is a commonly-used word in journalism and everyday language, to include all the mental dysfunction phenomena which people go through.

Estamira is a woman who lives from gathering trash in Rio de Janeiro, in what is considered Latin America's biggest sanitary landfill. When he was filming a news report about the landfill, Marcos Prado met her, became interested in her way of speaking and the stories she told and from that point onwards spent four years filming her at the landfill and in her home.

Estamira is healthy enough to be authorized to live alone in a shack, work, go to the health center by herself and self-medicate. Her “madness” is in fact a sum of various factors: lack of connection or meaning in her verbal speech; her apparent belief in imaginary and unrealistic situations; her occasional loss of emotional control, resulting in bouts of



#### Technical data

**Estamira**

**Direction and Photography: Marcos Prado.**

**Executive production: Marcos Prado e José Padilha.**

**Zazen Produções Cinematográficas.**

**[Rio de Janeiro: Europa Filmes], 2007.**

**DVD (127 min.).**

aggressiveness or depression. In isolation, none of these symptoms would be enough to classify her as a mental patient. Put together, they have enough weight to push her towards the penumbra where all those who “have a screw loose” are situated.

**00:05:50 (localização no DVD) (\*)**

*My mission, apart from being Estamira, is to reveal the truth, only the truth. Whether it is a lie, or capturing the lie and throwing [sic] it in the face, or teaching to show what they don't know. The innocent. There are no more innocents. There are none. There are shrewd people, on the contrary.*

Estamira seems to belong to a group of mad people that we find every now and then: people who are aware enough to recognize their own unstable condition, but who create a kind of permanent, deliberate performance on top of it, as if that way they felt more comfortable with themselves than if they tried to belong to the world of “normal” people.

**01:38:20**

*Well... I think mental disability is something that those who are worthless have, right... Those who have mental problems, well, they are disturbances too, right? Disturbances, then I have been thinking... they are disturbances too, but not disability, right? Disturbances are disturbances. Anyone can be disturbed..*

Estamira is a fiction of herself, a character invented to solve the problems of a real person, or at least to balance scales that are clearly tipped against her (the emotional and social existence of a woman called Estamira). The way that she refers to herself in the third person, spontaneously making a distinction between the voice that speaks and the character it refers to, is telling.

There is a curious scene where Estamira, framed up close by the camera, picks up from the trash an object resembling a broken cordless telephone, puts it to her ear and begins to “chat”. She says some unintelligible words, grunts, pretends she is listening, pretends she agrees, pretends she disagrees and pretends to be arguing with the “interlocutor” on the other side, all with incomprehensible words, as if she was imitating a person speaking English. It is a notable scene that lies exactly on the dividing line between a disturbed person talking to someone who does not exist and a person who pretends to say something picturesque because she knows she’s being filmed, because she knows she is someone’s center of attention and improvises a little “number”, like an exhibitionist

child who makes up a little scene out of nothing to have fun and reward the attention she receives from adults.

**01:52:53**

*Everything imaginable exists. Did you know that everything imaginable exists and is? That's right.*

Marcos Prado’s film becomes, curiously, a film about a real woman who invented a character with the same name as her and the documentary registers the comings and goings of this creator, who randomly incorporates her creature. This creature serves not only as a mortar for her to recompose and glue together a fragmented personality, but also for her to reunite with society, the world and the cosmos itself.

**00:00:17**

*There is the eternal, there is the infinite, there is the beyond, there is the Beyond the Beyond. You haven't seen the Beyond the Beyond yet. No scientist has seen the Beyond the Beyond.*

**00:20:09**

*The Beyond the Beyond is an overflow. Do you know what an overflow is? Well, anything that fills up, overflows. So the real superior power, superior nature, surrounds everything over there, in that place, like the reserves, there are reserves. On the edge, you know how it is? – on the edge, nobody can, men, can go there. And those stars, horrible, unrecoverable, all go there, never leave. To this place I'm talking about. Beyond the Beyond.*

When Estamira makes a speech – vehement, outspoken, full of histrionics – among mountain ranges of trash and the flight of vultures, the first impression is of a human mind struggling with itself to give meaning to the surreal world around her (the environment she lives in, the path of her life). And on the other hand, there is a sense of the camera’s importance as a silent audience, catalyzing this speech by someone who, for better or worse, has something to say, things that are essential for her. There are definitions, parameters, cartographic features that she establishes – here is the world, here am I. And the camera is the witness of this process of self-healing craftsmanship, of someone picking up from her own trash the part of herself that is alive and can be recycled.

**00:11:05**

*This is a deposit of remains. Sometimes it is only remains. And sometimes neglect also comes. Remains – and neglect.*

Estamira was born in a middle class family and began to decline financially until she ended up practically in abject poverty. Her mother separated from her father after he was unfaithful; the same thing happened to her.

**00:19:57**

*My poor mother... more disturbed than me... Well, I am disturbed, but I am lucid and I can distinguish disturbance, you know how it is? And my poor mother could not. But no wonder – I am Estamira.*

Living alone, Estamira suffered two rapes. During one of them (she recounts), she was shouting out for God to help her and the rapist mocked her, saying that God would not save her. That is where her rage against God comes from, which is manifested at various points in the film and is one of the sources of conflict between her and her son, who is an Evangelical Christian and is deeply hurt by his mother's blasphemies.

One of the recurring terms in her speech is what she calls "The Pun" (in Portuguese, "trocadilho", which she pronounces "trocadilo"), a kind of malign higher entity, responsible for most of the wrongs in the world. Estamira refers to this sometimes as an abstract notion, sometimes as a personalized and conscious force.

**00:12:42**

*The Pun does it so that the more people have, the more they despise it, the more they throw away.*

Estamira's lot leads us to think about how society is unprepared to deal with its own exceptions. Firstly, because her marginalization results from a cumulative process in which society creates obstacles for her integration and she herself does not want to integrate. And then because cinema (seen as an art, or as documentary, or as a pretext for people to come together who would never meet without it) arises as an alternative channel for the reinterpretation of these people and their personal reintegration. They may not be reintegrated as individuals (Estamira is still marginalized, picking up trash), but at least they may count as a symbol and symptom of the enormous proliferation of exceptions in our social structure, the rules of which no longer hold everything that is generated by its own complexity.

**00:14:00**

*I, Estamira, am each person's vision. Nobody can live without me. Nobody can live without Estamira.*

Alternating color and black and white images, the director uses scrupulously realistic techniques to give us the sensation that we are

diving into the character's hallucinatory universe. Several scenes, filmed in Super-8 and black and white, are intensely grainy, transporting us to a universe where material things reveal the bubbling energy they consist of. Gigantic trucks that spill tsunamis of trash in front of the trash-pickers; black crows and white gulls that fly around them.

There is a magnificent scene at the dump, when a storm approaches in the horizon, a gigantic mass of clouds cut by lightning, like unmoving rain. The storm is preceded by a gale that drags away all the loose trash: plastic bags, tufts of grass, pieces of wood, small objects, all being swept away by a wind like the start of a hurricane, while Estamira, holding her ground against the gale, shouts and rants against the elements.

**00:14:55**

*All of creation is inhabited. All of space is inhabited. Water is inhabited. Fire is inhabited. Everything is inhabited! Estamira is also inhabited.*

Symmetrical to this scene is the final scene, where the director accompanies her to a deserted beach, where she walks peacefully, dives her bare feet in the sand, goes toward the sea, where the waves seem to feel her presence and grow, in walls of spray that rise 10 or 20 feet high and collapse in a deafening sound. A wave lunges powerfully and knocks over Estamira, who gets wet, rolls in the sand, regains her balance, laughs, starts ranting against the ocean again, with it being impossible to understand anything she says, as the din of the breakers is too loud. A memorable scene, pure cinema, where we see the smallness of mankind before the wild forces of his own unconscious.

In another scene (this one with a colored, clear image, which in a way corresponds to the outside eye, the filmmaker's and the viewer's eye), Estamira makes a monologue in the foreground:

**00:57:35**

*Now, for example. Sentimentally, visibly, invisibly formed, transparent as I told you already, I am in a faraway place. A faraway space. Estamira is far away. Estamira is everywhere. Estamira could be a sister, or daughter, or... wife. Of space, but she is not. [pause] Wait, I am coming down. . [a longer pause; and then we hear only the continuation of her voice, while her mouth remains shut:] Look over there, where I am. I'm here, and I'm there.*

Certain mental instability problems are resolved – or at least neutralized, stabilized – when the patient can project them into something different from himself, externalizing it somehow. That is what popular language expresses with the

phrase “I managed to get that problem out of my head”. Artistic or craft work seems to fulfill this role in cases such as the patients of Dr. Nise da Silveira, in the neighborhood of Engenho de Dentro (Fernando Diniz, Carlos Pertuis, etc.) and in the case of Arthur Bispo de Rosário.

In Marcos Prado’s film, we are left with the feeling that the frequent presence of a crew, filming her, recording her, occasionally asking her questions, helped Estamira to create a compensatory fantasy to outsource herself. She created a reflection-character, a Doppelgänger,

created with the somewhat childish megalomania of many paranoid-schizophrenics. A character that is able to blaspheme as God’s equal, to explain the universe, to rationalize (in her own terms) destiny itself. This latent “Estamira” may have had her birth stimulated by the presence of the camera, which began to signify the eyes and ears of a world that always treated her with indifference and ignored her. The moment the world deigned to turn its glass eye toward her and keep her company, Estamira created Estamira, and each one began to support the other.

