

\* **New writings and mediations in health**

## **A camera as a character, scriptwriter and logbook**

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### **Technical Features**

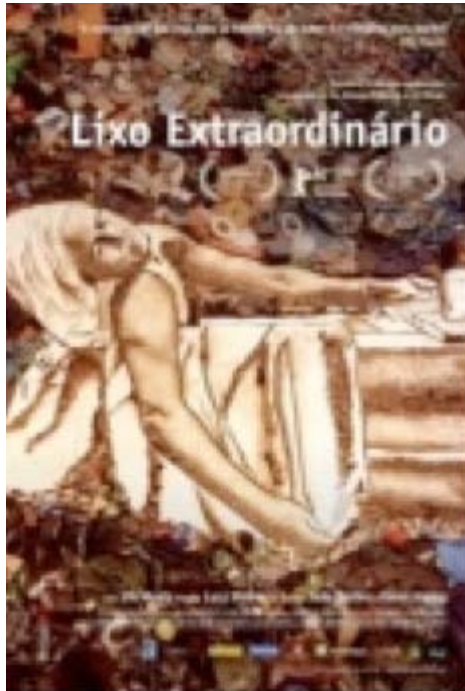
Documentary, now showing

LIXO EXTRAORDINÁRIO (*Waste Land*). Brazil / United Kingdom: 2010.

Director: Lucy Walker. Co-directors: João Jardim and Karen Harley.

Production: Almega Projects and O2 Filmes.

99 minutes



*Waste Land*, original title of the award-winning documentary *Lixo Extraordinário* (\*) deserves to be seen again, not only because of its Oscar nomination or because of the numerous awards from international film festivals, but because of its proximity to the ethnographical film concept that has the engineer Jean Rouch is an “unavoidable reference”, according to the professor José da Silva Ribeiro (2007) from the Visual Anthropology Laboratory of the Portuguese Open University. In an article about two conversations he had with the ethnologist Rouch in meetings during the first half of the 1990s, Ribeiro explains that the tendency to apply methods – exposure and exploration – of ethnographic cinema is associated with different theoretical traditions. While in films of exposure the script precedes realization, films of exploration use cinema as a method of research. However, according to the professor, both are based on fundamental principals such as long study periods in the field, non-directive attitude based on reciprocal trust, appreciation and use of the words of those involved, descriptive concern based on thorough observation and listening regardless of the roles, structures, values and meanings that they describe, as well as the appropriation of local sonorities in the composition of soundtracks (Ribeiro, 2007).

Although some of the principles of ethnographic cinema are used to a greater or lesser degree, *Waste land* is introduced to the spectator as if he/she were in front of a television set, lying down lazily on the living room couch watching an interview on the “Programa do Jô” TV Globo show, which seems to

be a strategy used to attract the common spectator. After speaking highly of the interviewee, Jô Soares asks Vik Muniz "how did you come up with the idea of using trash materials", which is a link for the film to return to the first and main character of this personal appropriation of the proceedings, a characteristic of performatic modernity (Silverstone, 2005), to actually start describing the trajectory of the Brazilian in the United States.

Slow cut to images of Muniz who looks amazed as he watches the parade of the samba schools of the Carioca carnival, like any Brazilian or "gringo", followed by a cut to the costumes abandoned in the streets by the participants, and to a lecture given by the artist in the USA in 1998, where he describes how he arrived in the country. He was driving his car in São Paulo when he came across a fight and stopped the car to try to end it. When he returns to his car, he is mistaken for one of the people involved in the fight, and is shot. Muniz asks for permission to show the lecture audience - and now of the documentary - the scar caused by the bullet on his leg. "Luckily he (the shooter) was very rich. He gave me some money and that is how I paid for my ticket to come to the United States in 1983, that is how I got where I am now", explains Muniz, in a scene from the past that was introduced to justify the artist's "need" to "try to change people's lives".

Taken to the supermarket where he started to work in the USA, Muniz talks about the difference of the technology available in the 1980s, when there were no mechanisms used to attach one shopping cart to the other. The artist walks around the supermarket parking lot talking into the camera: "one of my jobs was to clean out the trashcans. The trashcans used for meat. I would spend the entire day dumping the worst possible material, organic waste, into the back of a truck." The scene presents the long insertion of the artist in the studied field, one of the principles of ethnographic cinema (Ribeiro, 2007).

Cut to trashcans and to walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), in 2007. Then to the artist's name, to his works shown at the museum; cut to a scene of Muniz's *Monalisa* and to a detail of the work made from jam or peanut butter. And the spectator is able to read what MoMA says about the artist's work on the museum walls. New cut to some of the artist's works shown at the museum until reaching the "*Crianças de Açúcar*" (Sugar Children), which is, in his own words the "most important" work in his entire career. It portrays the daughters of sugar field workers from the Caribbean island of Saint Kitts, followed by an explanation of these works by Muniz himself.

New cut to Muniz, now in his studio where he explains his creation process and his involvement with *The Sugar Children*: "I imagined the transformation of these beautiful and incredible children into adults that were equally happy, because they were in paradise. But their parents were sad and tired", says the artist while the spectators view images that show him playing with the children on a beach that were probably extracted from another documentary about the creation process of the "most important Brazilian artist based in the USA", as praised by the Brazilian interviewer. For Muniz, it was sugar that separated happiness from those children and from their parents. "The sweetness has been taken away from those children", he concludes. The image associates the artist's work to the concern he has for social issues.

Front of Vik Muniz's Studio in Brooklin, New York. The artist's hands works on an American flag. "What I really want to do is to be able to change the life of a group of people using the same material that they handle every day." Cut to Muniz carrying bags of trash while the spectator hears his voice: "The idea for my next series is to work with trash. When we talk about transformation, this is what it is about, its about transforming materials into ideas", justifies Muniz. The camera focuses of the bags of trash on the sidewalk. Vik Muniz continues: "I don't know. This is the start of an idea. All I need is the material. And I have to go out and find an image."

But it will not only involve material as you will see in due course; as it was not only material in the construction of *The Sugar Children* referred to by the artist, neither in the construction of *The Kiss*, a work of art ordered by the Department of STD, Aids and Viral Hepatitis of the Ministry of Health, for the advisory campaign of World Aids Day of 2009, when 600 people "living and getting along" with the HIV virus got together in a sports gym in Guarulhos, in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, where they were photographed on the bleachers holding plaques that when held together formed an enlarged photograph of two people kissing. In the making of the event produced by the AIDS Department, Vik Muniz said that he accepted the job because he wanted to pay homage to a friend who died of AIDS during the beginning of the epidemic, as he was unable to kiss him goodbye when visiting him just before his death.

Ethnographic cut. Fragments of a logbook at six minutes and fifty-six seconds of exhibition. In his New York studio, the artist is sitting in front of the computer screen where he sees, and is seen talking in English with the director of his office in Rio de Janeiro: "Hey Fabio! Have you had the opportunity to take a look at that trash?" Asks Vik. "I have, take a look at the link I sent you.

YouTube has a video filmed at a location called Gramacho. Jardim Gramacho, Rio's largest landfill. They receive waste from all over Rio", answers Fábio. "What are the risks related to working in a place like this?", asks the artist. A location surrounded by slums dominated by drug gangs, the interlocutor firstly relies. "I believe it's the stability of these people, because they are all excluded from society. Some of them spend the entire night, or week there. It won't be easy", concludes the director of the artist's office in Rio. "So, do you think it's going to be very difficult?", asks Muniz. "No, I believe that it would be harder to think that we cannot change the lives of these people. I think we can do it, it's worth a try." The dialog states that the human being and social insertion – or lack of it – are the fundamental materials for Muniz's artistic expression.

Once again turned to the camera, the artist says that his "experience with the fusion of art with a social project is the main thing, to take people away from where they are, even if it is just for a few moments. To show them another world, another place. Even if it's a place where they can see where they are. This changes everything. It would be an experience about how art can change people, as art itself can also change. Can this be done? And what would be the effect? The effects of the artist's intervention do not appear in the film.

However, the attempt to transform trash into art is not new. In 1989, the carnival organizer Joãosinho Trinta took his revolutionary theme entitled "*Ratos e urubus larguem minha fantasia*" (*Rats and vultures, leave my consume alone*) to the main parade of the Rio carnival. This theme caused great perplexity as this samba school, which traditionally presents great luxury, this time paraded with trash. Beija-Flor de Nilópolis started its parade with a "comissão de frente" (front commission, the first group of participants) composed of beggars, a group dressed in rags and the first float was covered in plastic bags used to cover a reproduction of the Christ statue that had been banned by the Catholic Church just a few days before the parade. The image is still so strong today that it is nearly innate to those who were just leaving their adolescence at the end of the 1980s.

Muniz and his wife Janaina play with their daughter in what seems to be the family house when the camera cuts once again back to the artist's studio. The couple reappears sitting in front of the computer. Vik says to Janaina in English that that is where he would be for the next two years of his life. The camera follows her face as she turns towards her husband expressing a mixture of tenderness and disbelief. Janaina and the camera then turn back to the computer that is presenting an image of vultures flying low over a mountain of trash. "You will produce images of trash", she affirms. He nods his head affirmatively. She asks him if he is going to give jobs to the people that work and live in that place. Once again, he nods his head. "What will be the health issues if you work with them? It's not safe to do this", she asks. "It's not an issue for these people. That is where they get their food from" he replies. "But this must be an issue for us", replies his wife and mother of their daughter with an expression of fear and terror.

With each inquiry, after each question she asks, he furthers his argument, justifying his objective: "We cannot simply evaluate the situation using Google Earth. We must go there in order to find out what they need", "the iconography will develop as a result of my interaction with them. I want to find out what is important to them, what they think makes a great image, what they want to show. It might not be at all important to them.", "These must be the most indelicate people ever seen. They are junkies, they are...the end of the world.", "Take a look at the geography of this area." And as he points at the entrance of the landfill shown on Google Earth, he once again says that that place is the end of the world. "That is where all things that are not good end up, including people. The type of people who work there, in Brazilian society, do not differ from trash."

Standing by his wife as they are both in front of the camera, the artist says that that the most pernicious thing about Brazilian culture and society is the division of society into classes. "It's horrible how people really believe this is true. I'm talking about educated people, they actually believe that they are better than others". Then he appears alone, sitting in the seat of an airplane. Next, images from the airplane show a slum complex and the character generator announces Rio de Janeiro as the plane flies over the left arm of the Christ statue allowing the spectator to view the Lagoa, the beaches of Ipanema and Leblon and the Guanabara Bay, an airplane landing on a runway, and another slum in the background. The artist is on a beach and enters the ocean. Another cut shows the sunset at Ipanema beach and a Moby soundtrack is used and becomes more present as the artists arrives in Rio and will mark even more tensely and beautifully the images about the stories that will be seen.

After eleven minutes and eighteen seconds of film, Muniz and the Director of his Rio Office reach Jardim Gramacho in their car. Muniz locates himself on a map in the landfill office and then presents himself to the staff. Back in the car, he comments that he was very impressed "and we must highlight the fact that this is the biggest landfill in the world". He looks at the camera and repeats these words. And a third person, probably from the landfill management adds: "in terms of the amount of waste

received every day, it is the largest landfill in the world". As the car drives away with the eyes of the camera and the nearly inaudible comment about the soft sensation produced by the unpaved ground, this new interlocutor explains the route. "Imagine this is a plate of jelly and a weight is placed on top of it, if you don't know how to organize this, it will surely swerve to one side". The attentive spectator is immediately reminded of the tragedy that happened in Niteroi, at the Bumba slum that came down as a result of heavy rainfall in April 2010, leaving the country perplexed when it was revealed that the entire community was constructed on a mountain of trash from an extinct landfill.

*Waste Land* starts at twelve minutes and fifty seconds, when the spectator is faced with a screen dotted with people scavenging, trucks unloading and vultures flying over the trash. It is at this moment, when the artist enters the landfill that the ethnographer approaches his object and is surprised by it. And the sleepy spectator who thought he was watching another Jô Soares interview is blown away by such a sight and wakes up frightened and impotent. Not because of the fact that trash is used as raw material to produce a work of art, since he is already aware of his objective, but because of those human beings that work at the landfill, in the midst of the trash searching for recyclable materials, because "trash cannot be reused", as would be said further on at distinct moments by two important characters.

Once again, it is as from this moment that the spectator start to 'feel' and learn that the Jardim Gramacho landfill has an association of trash collectors, that their president is the young Tião (Sebastião Carlos dos Santos), whose library has been growing since he was 11 years old when he began collecting books found amongst the trash; that the Vice-president Valter (dos Santos) died a few days after they started filming at the landfill; they will also meet Zumbi (José Carlos da Silva Bala Lopes), Isis (Rodrigues Garros), Suelem (Pereira Dias), Irma (Leide Laurentina da Silva) and Magna (de França Santos). The spectator will capture the culture, manners, dreams, reactions, life stories and life itself of all these people, with the exception of Valter.

It is from this moment on that the film begins to transmit the artist's participative insertion in the studied environment. Although somewhat directive, since it intends to create a work of art, it captures the wink, the traditions, the (determinant) social health conditions; everything is captured, part is captured, the whole for part and vice-versa. It presents that which permeates the daily lives of those people within that specific context of life, how they agree on their norms and how they establish rules to get along with one another. It is from this moment on that, as described by Geertz (2208), a "dense description" comes about because it is only as from this moment that relationships are established, the informers (characters) are selected, the text (images) are transcribed (selected, edited) and the field is mapped.

Citing Claudine de France, Ribeiro (2007) affirms that ever since the creation of cinema itself by the Lumière brothers in 1898, regardless of the intention, purpose or research device, "images show and describe that which is underlying". According to the author, after the Second World War, ethnographic cinema, as well as anthropology, sociology and social sciences changed their centers of interest from foreign countries, the distant and exotic, for an interest in the cities of the world, the migratory phenomena and storms, in addition to "other subjects of the so-called complex societies". If ethnographic cinema can be considered a subgenus of the documentary, or a specialized area of anthropology (Weinburger, 1994 *apud* Ribeiro, 2007), *Waste land* is successful in fulfilling its role despite the fact that on its own, it does not possess all the characteristics of this genre.

◆ Ever since it took part in the Sundance Film Festival (USA) in January 2010 and when it won the Audience Award for Best World Cinema Documentary, *Waste land* has won dozens of other prizes at film festivals all over the world. At the Berlin Festival, in addition to the Audience Award, it won the Amnesty International Award for Human Rights, that it once again received in Durban. In São Paulo, it was awarded the prize that takes the name of the heart of Brazilian diplomacy, the Itamaraty. However, audience awards account for the majority of prizes at festivals where it was presented. With this curriculum, nomination for the most important prize of North America's film industry does not seem to have been too difficult, which might have surprised the big audiences that are unaware of the *via crucis* of a documentary film that follows the world circuit of festivals until perhaps reaching the awards of the Hollywood Academy of Cinema.

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## **Note**

1 Zumbi is one of the authors of *Jardim Gramacho* (2007), whose link Vik Muniz watches with his wife on YouTube.