

Not So Beautiful After All: Lucy Walker's *Waste Land*

Author's Statement

Some days, we read grim and disappointing political news. Resisting nihilism, some of us turn to art, but not always for escapism. Effective artwork can convey a powerful human rights message. Art's illustrative and demonstrative power can document social problems with such humanity, depth, and forceful veracity that art starts to become action. It can empower, enlighten, and transform. We tell ourselves these things.

While I consider myself consistently critical of the monied and powerful, I used to take a blind eye to fine arts. Surely, artists and fans were the "good guys" whose beautiful constructions could only fail to enlighten, but never do harm. My essay, however, suggests otherwise.

I initially wrote this essay for 82-299: Human Rights and Film in Latin America. Each student chose a film and analysed how it advanced human rights causes through frameworks discussed in class. Professor Anne Lambright tasked us to "Watch the film again. And again. Take notes. Pay attention. Think. Then think harder." That was crucial.

As a reader, I challenge you to reconsider binary judgments like "good" and "bad" contributions to social progress. We must remain critical while appreciating artwork. Criticism is necessary for our society, for our peers, and most importantly, for ourselves.

Anand

Introduction

Art has the power to shape perceptions and imagination about a variety of topics. It is often, therefore, cast as a social or political tool, as a means of accomplishing change, a force for better. The film *Waste Land* (2010), directed by Lucy Walker, seems to fit this narrative. It follows the acclaimed artist Vik Muniz on his journey to catalogue the lives of Brazilian garbage sifters through a series of mixed-media portraits, and the consequent rise of Muniz and his subjects to international renown. Muniz depicts a kind of beauty and humanity which, as we are led to believe, art has the power to create.

The story of *Waste Land* begins in the world's then-largest garbage dump, Jardim Gramacho, outside bustling Rio de Janeiro (see figure 1). In Jardim Gramacho, mountains of consumed materials arrive every day, set upon by the *catadores*: the pickers who separate recyclable materials from the rest of the pile. Their lives are precarious, their pay little and unstable. In one scene, robbers arrive to steal a month's pay. The work is a resort among still worse alternatives. Yet the labor of the *catadores* is essential: to reuse what can be recycled, to show that not all trash is trash. Vik Muniz, seizing on this theme, uses the same recyclable materials collected at the dump to form intricate pictures of characters Tião, Suelem, Irma, and others – his hand-picked cast of stars from Jardim Gramacho. The powerful portraits move mountains, launching Muniz and his coterie of *catadores* to the world art stage, where they receive fame, recognition, and riches as a result.



Figure 1. Waste Land poster from Park, Hongjun; “쓰레기로 만든 희망, 정말 감동적이다

[Hope made from trash is truly inspiring]”; *OhMyStar*; OhMyNews, 28 Mar. 2014.

The Empathy Trap

At first glance, *Waste Land* is an uplifting tale about the transformative power of artwork in individuals’ lives. Artwork is wonderful: it is beautiful, moving, and inspiring. Indeed, a *New York Times* review reads “From a Universe of Trash, Recycling Art and Hope.” How lovely. On the contrary, *Waste Land* is better viewed as a critique of both the high arts and media industries, a critique that arguably extends to Muniz himself, for their tendency to commercialize and appropriate human experiences as objects of marvel. This criticism is best understood according to a framework developed by Megan Boler documenting the “risks of empathy” (253).

Having empathy is often viewed as benign within social and political discourse. It may even be considered a necessary element of social change. However, feeling by itself is

insufficient to provoke action and may even do harm, depending on the artwork. Boler argues that “passive empathy” reinforces entrenched hierarchies between viewer and subject (253). The comfortable viewer and the suffering subject create an alienating imbalance that, while it evokes pity and empathy, prevents a viewer’s identification with the subject.

Works void of context, but with plenty of empathy, are most subject to Boler’s criticism. These works may generate a strong emotional reaction but, by failing to require action of the viewer, they stir nothing beyond. Nonetheless, by satisfying a need for emotional entertainment, such works enable viewers to abdicate responsibility. As Boler writes:

This palatable permission of pleasure motivates no consequent reflection or action, either about the production of meaning, or about one's complicit responsibility within historical and social conditions. Let off the hook, we are free to move on to the next consumption. (261)

The risks of empathy, as explained by Boler, constitute a tendency to *consume* artistic content as emotional entertainment and with privilege over the subject. A crescendo of empathetic feeling – say, at the end of a film, or upon viewing an artwork – can make the audience cry and lament, but it may not provoke them to action. Detached from context, an artwork succumbs to having its subjects viewed as foreign objects of curiosity, while the empathy felt absolves the viewer of guilty feelings. Hence, the empathy trap.



Figure 2. Auctioning “Marat Sebastião” from Walker, Lucy (1:17:04); *Waste Land*; 2010.

Subjects as Objects in Muniz’s Artwork

Passive empathy manifests itself in creations which objectify their subjects. Muniz’s artwork, I argue, falls prey to this empathy trap. It portrays subjects in a distanced manner comfortable for the viewer. Moreover, a deficiency of context creates a one-sided view of the *catadores* which does not challenge the audience. Muniz’s artwork, therefore, is an ineffectual human rights message. These shortcomings are cleverly exposed in Walker’s film, an act of documenting that makes the film itself an effective artwork, even if Muniz’s portraiture is not.

An artwork’s context of exhibition rivals in importance the content itself. *Waste Land* illustrates a privileged and wealthy arts industry. Artistic patronage can purchase the luxurious makeover of individuals’ entire lives, replete with trips to the finest, most glamorous cities in the world, on a creative whim. In one room, the auction hall, rests more money and power than the *catadores* have ever seen (see figure 2). Art may be transformative, but it is literally so; rich aficionados decide the destinies of artists and

subjects alike. *Waste Land* therefore demonstrates an ironic hypocrisy at the core of the art world which so often claims to advance social progress. This is hardly the optimistic message envisioned in the statement “art is uplifting.”

Is Muniz exempt from these charges of exploitation and artistic extraction?

Throughout the documentary we hear Muniz’s reflections on his own artwork and the broader art world. He claims to have moved away from fine arts (6:38) and reminds us that classism is “the most poisonous thing” in Brazil (11:00). Yet we do not require an investigation into Muniz’s personal motivations to discuss the film’s message with respect to extractive artwork. Perhaps Muniz considers himself a participant in advancing human rights, but whether his artwork indeed accomplishes this aim is another question.



Figure 3. Suelem depicted with her children from Walker, Lucy (58:20); *Waste Land*; 2010.

The Fruits of Patronage

Muniz’s artwork results in a series of portraits utilizing recyclable material as means of representation. Some of the imagery is idealized, such as Suelem with her children evoking

the Virgin Mary (figure 3). Some of it is slightly exotic, such as Irma carrying a basket, especially in the context of a posh museum.

Few traits of character or background, however, are communicated in the portraits. For example, Tião's self-made education, exhibited profusely throughout the film, is barely noticeable in the art. Tião is reduced to a reference to Marat, a creative choice by Muniz which, when viewed in the Museum of Modern Art, calls more attention to the original "The Death of Marat" by Jacques-Louis David than to Tião or his background (see figure 4).

These artistic choices matter. The risk of empathy is an identification with the subject as a pitiful object of sympathy, rather than a human being worthy of respect. The prevailing narrative in the news coverage and entertainment reels holds that the *catadores* have been uplifted, out of squalor and into prosperity, by the transformative power of art. Muniz's artwork does not challenge this narrative. Many onlookers in the art world might be surprised to hear that Tião, in fact, possessed a scholar's education on the classics. Or that Irma returned to Gramacho despite having the opportunity to live elsewhere in Brazil or somewhere in the western world. Tião, Irma, and the other *catadores* are not simply passive or pitiful objects, but rather agents who think and act for themselves.

The film tells the full story. Muniz and his chosen *catadores* are swept up in the media storm surrounding the beautiful power of the artwork, which, if anything, reinforces the objectification of the *catadores*. To his credit, Muniz seems to appreciate their humanity, and he says: "I'm being helped more than they are. Even if everything went wrong, you could still be like them. And they're beautiful. They're great people" (1:29:50). Nonetheless, the artist's view does not equate to the audience's perception. The artwork appears as a simplified and privileged view of the *catadores*, ineffective at communicating a human rights message.

The artwork is also ambiguous with respect to its environmental message. Jardim Gramacho wrought vast environmental damage in the region, and the site, before its closure in 2012, had health and safety implications for the *catadores* employed at it. Muniz's portraits make no demands of the audience in this regard. The works do not ask us to consider our collective responsibility to the environment, or the socially emergent nature of the issue. The recyclable materials used in the artwork hardly seem connected to human rights, despite their real-world importance to the pickers of Jardim Gramacho.

The sale of Muniz's portraiture for extravagant sums may not be driving social change in Brazil or Jardim Gramacho, but *Waste Land* offers us a movement that can. The pickers' association, known as the ACAMJG, demands better wages and living conditions for the inhabitants of Jardim Gramacho. Tião becomes the leader of the ACAMJG through which the pickers, by a collective effort, strive for change. None of this is communicated through Muniz's artwork where, instead, Tião is reduced to a lifeless-looking body in a bathtub surrounded by discarded materials (figure 4).



Figure 4. Tião's portrayal like Marat from Walker, Lucy (1:01:53); *Waste Land*; 2010.

Conclusion

Vik Muniz's portraits, exoticized and empathetic, evoke passive empathy and reinforce the objectification of the *catadores*. It is *Waste Land*, rather, which humanizes them – the film challenges us to reconsider the media narrative of the transformative power of art. Within the context of a patronized art world, the process of “uplifting” subjects is better characterized as appropriating them. Muniz's artwork falls in line with the art world's privileged worldview by considering the *catadores* as objects of marvel, whereas these people have varied backgrounds, self-made educations, and life choices, as seen in the film. From a human rights perspective, the artwork's social and environmental messaging is best evaluated as weak.

The artwork has at least one message, however. Vik Muniz's artwork embellishes the dirty to make it beautiful. The use of recyclable materials contends that even the discarded is valuable: that the worthless and the ugly can be uplifted and transformed into the rich and beautiful. If this is truly the analogous message that viewers see in the “Pictures of Garbage” portraits, then Walker's film is a scathing criticism of the both of them.



Figure 5. Muniz filming at the dump from Walker, Lucy (15:42); *Waste Land*; 2010.

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